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THE ALCHEMY OF VIOLENCE IN JOHN UPDIKE'S NOVEL TERRORIST (2006): A STORY OF A BOY IN BETWEEN, AND A TERRORIST AT LAST

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Abstract: The present paper addresses the issue of America's domestic violence within a context of global concern over terrorism in John Updike's novel *Terrorist* (2006). The analysis considers elucidating the problematic dynamics of violence whose alchemy tells much of the uses of violence in American literature with a traditional literary and cultural tendency towards hegemonism. The main objective is to highlight the novel's tragic story of a boy's development going wrong whose tragedy is highly expressed through Ahmad's unfortunate lot, being "a boy in between" understood as the outgrowth of an enduring historical mutual misunderstanding between Christianity and Islam; and between the West as represented by Ahmad's mother and the Arab Muslim World as represented by Ahmad's absent father. Ahmad's *fatherlessness* and *rootlessness* along with his *American-lessness* is an allegory of unwilling compromise between two opposite and conflicting worlds, the West vs. the Orient. It is precisely this unsettling dilemma that ultimately gives full meaning to not simply what Ahmad is meant to be, but also to what the novel aims at: highlighting Ahmad's relentless commitment towards achieving his personal freedom as an American Muslim whose destiny through violence illustrates his willingness to become a man.

Keywords: Ahmed; Alchemy; America; American-lessness; fatherlessness; John Updike; rootlessness; Terrorist; Violence.

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1. Introduction

The gist of the present paper addresses the issue of violence within John Updike's novel *Terrorist* (2006). It also attempts to decipher the problematic of existing dynamic of violence whose alchemy tells much of the uses/instrumentalization of violence in American literature both to highlight/assert the American dominant position (role) as a world power along with sustaining its collective imaginary in building a mythical destiny whose hegemonism is unfortunately so manifest.

The core subject of the work focuses on how Updike's speculation on violence sustains a dynamic of literary endeavor to provide politics and policies with practical and useful tools by bringing personal as well as collective grievances to public attention. Also, it shades light on how personal experiences of/with violence can bring answers to how personal and communal destinies are built, and to what extent they (destinies) are profoundly political if not ideological with enduring impact on identities both personal and collective in a powerfully tragic manner.

Much ink has already been spilled on John Updike's novel *Terrorist (2003)*. Through outstanding papers and journal articles, many critics have tried to grasp the novel's deep meaning and political depth but to no avail. For example, Teresa Botelho (2018), Ulla Kriebernegg (2018), Peter C. Herman, Muhamed shahbaz Arif (2016), Maryam Salehnia (2012), Ahmed Hassan Mohamed Suliman (2020), and many others spent a great deal on themes such as representation of the 'other Muslim', orientalism, and neo-orientalism along with the emphasis on how America has successfully dealt with cases of extreme threats both foreign and domestic where its fundamental world interests and traditional values were often at stake. The successfulness can be easily discerned through a variety of literary works whose narratives such as Updike's *Terrorist* cannot be else than an attempt to translate universal concerns like violence and terror in an American language. For Teresa, Peter and Ulla, the novel revolves mainly around Ahmed as America's *other Muslim whose* representation cannot skip the necessity of establishing a link between Ahmed's eagerness/readiness for violence against America's fundamental concern with strategic response to that violence. The core response revolves around asserting both a deep understanding of the enemy's project though within, and its traditional need for preserving America's fundamental values, and mode of living. The three put much emphasis on America's new challenges in the light of 9/11 terrorist attacks. As for Muhamed, Maryam and Ahmad Hassan, the novel's portrayal of the main protagonist is a profound implicit representation of Islam as the new, both domestic and alien, threat to America's fundamental interests in the world. They all choose to approach the novel from the orientalist and neo-orientalist point of view.

Strikingly, all critics failed to apprehend the problematic of an existing alchemy of violence throughout the novel's literary horizon which Ahmed, the main protagonist, comes to epitomize. The failure can be explained somehow through the critics' excessive tendency in succumbing to the grammar of the post 9/11 context of both compliance, allegiance on one hand and defiance on the other; and the urgent need for narratives that convey a form of needless superficial significance that fit the public general desire for entertainment, and fascination for evil.

By Alchemy of violence, I refer primarily to that process that goes between Ahmad's quest for meaning and his eagerness and struggle to become a man. His violence should not be understood as a response but rather as his interpretation of the immediate as well as the far remote political, cultural and ideological environment. Ahmad's failure to become a man understood as his becoming a successful terrorist is his tragic attempt to "celebrate" a sort of secret path towards personal freedom, self-realization, and ultimately manhood. Therefore, his

quest for manhood is a violent attempt to make end to his fatal lot of "being nothing" (inexistent).

Throughout the novel, violence is always an after violence. It should be understood in the constellation between the outer world and the inner one. In Updike's language, violence is historicized. It (violence) becomes historical as long as it is situated in every character's personal history of/ with violence. The violence that is deployed in the public sphere by the media must be understood as the interaction(s) between different personal as well as communal experience of violence. It is an interaction that goes wrong because as Hannah Arendt suggests: *"*Violence does not promote causes, neither history not revolution, neither progress nor reaction; but it can serve to dramatize grievances and bring them to public attention." (Arendt, *On Violence*, p. 79)

As for the present paper, its main target is to shed light into how Ahmed's American life-story going from innocence to culpability can illuminate further studies on the banality of evil, and how the danger can emerge both from individual psychology understood as one's attitudes towards one's immediate environment be it political or social, and a narrative surrounding those individual stories brought to the public realm through literary and media way station to ultimately constitute the gist of what commonly known as acts of terrorism and its impact on the construction of public opinions. Put in this way, this contribution aims at deciphering the problematic of violence through its alchemy, and hegemonism as its ultimate and fatal results which literature is its beholder and agent.

Therefore, I have decided to tackle the issue from three major issues in connection with the main protagonist's fatherlessness, rootlessness and American-lessness. The raison is twofold. First, I posit that Ahmad's story transcends the mere ideological concern with America's concern with power and hegemony; it is much more concerned with the politics of individual psychological growth and social condition of a boy. Secondly, I contend that any analytical approach should consider the idea of existing discrepancy between Ahmad's story, and novel's adherence to a grammar of American tradition of literary paradigm that often if not always comes to totalize American grievances in a language of universal concern.

John Updike's *Terrorist* is a controversial literary work whose controversy is threefold. First, the timing along with the historical/political context of its publication calls upon readers'-mainly critics-precautious reading and interpretations. Second, its language suggests a grammar which the author adopted in order to provide a sense of truism as well as a deep understanding of the subject of violence. Third, most critics along with the novel itself failed to (re)solve the problematic of hegemony that surrounds the narratives of literature and politics which violence, terrorism and terror come to constellate in two words: *war on terror*!

Firstly, the timing of the novel provides critical elements about the intentions of both the author as well as the literary work itself. Both suggest a narrative that goes from a mere historization of a little boy's life-story going wrong in connection to the totality of an ideological and political grammar of post 9/11 through which he, Ahmed, comes to discover his nothingness as a boy and his visibility as a man through violence ! Put this way, the novel can easily understood as an attempt to provide the American public opinion as well as the international one a sense of how terrorism can constitute a permanent threat and the urgency to fight against it both domestically as well as abroad.

Secondly, the grammar of the novel follows a certain linear evolution of violence from a simple mere rebellion against some critical social and political issues to more complex attitudes towards a totality of an ideological landscape in which the main character, Ahmad, though is a boy comes fatally to constellate a system of defense mechanism that goes from love to hatred, from the quest for self-identity to a more public visibility, and finally from

rebellion to terrorism as his ultimate and fatal choice. Ahmad's whole story from the beginning to the end represents a certain project of violence!

Thirdly, with regard to the *war on terror's* complex and critical context of the novel's publication, one can easily embark on a set of suggestions that convey a sense of an existing tendency towards literary political industry whose totality cannot escape the problematic of hegemonic psychological mechanism whose dynamics transcends the mere metaphorical literary endeavor but fully and tragically embracing violence in its most abhorrent/blatant way. Violence, then, becomes element if not instrument of an ideological project of sustaining a permanent state of psychological terror whose ramifications can easily found in a radical will of making of the world a permanent battlefield with fear as its cornerstone, and literature as its faithful servant!

It is upon these premises that this research paper emerges. My work explores the codes of the literary narratives that surround such an important, complex and mostly controversial theme as violence throughout a novel whose connection to a world already in turmoil in so manifest.

2. Ahmad's Fatherlessness

Ahmed's father is perhaps the most prominent absent figure of the whole novel. His absence is so significant that we constantly feel his presence through Ahmad's misfortune. Ahmad magnificently expresses his tragedy saying: *"*I am the product of a white American mother and an Egyptian exchange student" (Updike, p.20)

Through Ahmad's words we come to know how his father managed to come to America through a program of university exchange. His parents' encounter and later marriage instead of constituting a beautiful family history for a child seems to expose a serious problematic of *"child legitimacy"* for a boy whose only wrongness if not innocence is to be born in America, and the offspring of two individuals belonging to two ideological opposite conflicting worlds.

Ahmad's confession to Jack Levy, the Jewish school guidance counselor, expresses the boy's will to find answers to his born/torn identity. His doubts about the legitimacy of his birth go hand in hand with those surrounding his legitimate belonging to America. This is perhaps where the story begins its core tragic subject: the story of a boy in between with a dynamic violence from within!

Updike catches this great moment saying:

> But how can the boy not cherish his ripened manhood, his lengthened limbs, the upright, dense, and wavy crown of his hair, his flawless dun skin, paler than his father's but not freckled, blotchy pink of his red-haired mother and of those peroxided blondes who in white-bread America are considered the acme of beauty? (Updike, p. 9)

This is perhaps the exact moment where Ahmad's tragedy begins. The tragedy sums up the constellation between his political awareness and his will to find significance to his belonging to a country with definite interests in the world. This country constitute indeed a world whose culture and values happen to be in complete opposition to what he both as a child as well as a full member of a religious community whose values and principles constitute at least at the level of his phantasmagorical existence, his ideological belonging and psychological religious grammar. Ahmad vehemently voices his idiosyncrasy saying: "…the college track exposed me to corrupting influences---bad philosophy and bad literature. Western culture is Godless."(Updike, p. 22).

Peter C. Herman catches this moment when Ahmad assumes his divorce and rupture with the totality of what America stands for. He says: "Throughout the novel, Ahmed reiterates his critique of America as vapid and godless, indeed, vapid because it is godless. The rampant sexuality of his fellow students disgusts him." (Herman, p. 700)

It is, indeed, this recurrent criticism that led Ahmad to embrace a certain form of radical political orientation towards violence. His loneliness and disgust along with a will to find substitute to a totality of decaying cultural landscape seems to find expression in Islam which by far constantly reminds Ahmad -and us- about his absent father who is no longer absent but always present through a religion though absent, itself, in the immediate surrounding environment represents a certain form of moral security, straightness, and above all the complete opposite to the dominant godless and "deviant" American culture. The marginality of Ahmad's religious moral codes reflects both his social marginality, and his dynamic psychological isolation from the totality of what constitutes his daily routine. His isolation would quickly become the cornerstone of his fundamental philosophical grammar for his commitment towards becoming what his father would have wished to see him to be. Thus, his commitment would soon be transformed into a codified violence that takes form of social isolation and revolt as Teresa Bertelho writes*:*

> Ahmad's sense of who he wants to be becomes grounded in self-cultivated isolation, where adolescent vanity finds expression in singularity against a world that, as he repeatedly stresses, wants to take away his God and therefore his only certainty. (Bertelho, p. 20)

Put this way, one may easily grasp the grammar of Ahmad's existence. From the beginning of the novel, his story is that of revolt and denial against a reality which is much difficult for him to digest. Revolt because everything that surrounds him, his school mates, his mother, and the daily American cultural landscape along with the political constitute sources of anguish and violence. As for denial, Updike gives significant reasons for Ahmad to feel constantly lonely and distant from the core guiding principles of the people with whom he comes to be in contact on daily basis. Perhaps the most prominent example for Ahmad's resentment is the way his mother constantly refused to *answer many questions about his father*. Indeed, Ahmad's longing for his father is so intense, sincere, and most of all poetically political. Updike metaphorically voices the boy saying: "Among my memories is a sweet smell, perhaps aftershave lotion, though with a hint of some spice in it, perhaps a Middle Eastern dish he had just consumed" (Updike, p. 20)

The boy's words go much beyond mere longing. They all bear witness to a profound suffering from within. This is a true psychological distress whose consequences are a constant sense of loneliness, rejection, insecurity, and ultimately violence. They[Ahmad's words] denote Ahmad's mythical understanding of the totality of what the *Orient* stands for culturally whose total ramifications in the boy's phantasmagorical psyche is so upholding and significant. The significance manifests itself in his continuous construction of a dynamic dialectic between his daily fatherlessness and his phantasmagorical *fatherhood-ness* that Islam as the supposed religion of his nostalgic father is the embodiment of all his frustrations, and social representations.

Beyond its poetic appeal, Updike's metaphor stands as a trivialization of the totality of what an ordinary innocent boy might long for. His association of a memory of one's father with that of the smell of *aftershave lotion*, or *spice* within a *Middle Eastern dish* denotes his orientalist and exotic background concerning the totality of his understanding of what his father's life was and what his existence would be if he had the opportunity to know him personally, and live with him. It is in this constellation of loneliness, nostalgia, longing and

frustrations that he finally comes to embrace his fatal development towards terrorism. Throughout the novel, this trivialization would play an important role in exposing Ahmad's story as a project of violence.

Indeed, from the first opening statement to the last one at the end of the novel, Ahmad expresses his most intimate thought. For him, his whole life both as a boy and a Muslim in America is simply corrupt and inacceptable from his religious moral standards. Ahmad voices his wrath and the opening statement of the novel is so telling: "Devils…These devils seek to take away my God." (Updike, p. 1)

Ahmad's wrath goes beyond America's taking away his God. The *"Devils"* as he pleases to qualify the totality of those who constitute his daily surrounding are taken fully responsible morally, socially and even politically for his *fatherless-ness*. For him, the "hypothetical presence" of his father constitutes everything that would have represented his natural psychological development in a world where the absence of God understood as the blatant proliferation of immorality inside the American society. Ahmad's reaction to his American world cannot be else than violent witness his incapacity to come to balance between his inner struggle for fatherhood-ness and an outer world which constantly reminds him of his father's moral codes and a mythical world that the *Orient(Islamic world)* incarnates often if not always in a language of defiance, resistance, and morally adequate. As such, Ahmad's language often takes a progressive path towards the materialization of his wrath into more active commitment and actions.

Ahmad's development towards violence comes at the exact moment when his religious moral standards along with the mythification of his father's oriental and Islamic existence shifted to be political. His recurrent criticism of the American way of life conjugated with the racism he faced mainly at his college pushed him to seek alternatives. Perhaps, the most prominent figures of Ahmad's drift towards violence are Charlie Chehab in whom he sees a brother he never had, and Shaikh Rachid as a figure of fatherhood. The latter comes significantly to stand between Ahmad and the world of Islam understood as the mythical world of his absent father. Shaikh Rachid's teachings and advice along with the mosque stand as a straight path towards his father as Updike puts it clearly: "He [Ahmad] thought he might find in this religion a trace of the handsome father who had receded at the moment his memories were beginning." (Updike, p. 58)

Ahmad's quest for identity is similar to his quest for fatherhood. His eagerness to learn about Islam cannot be else than his willingness to know about his father. The latter though he receded but his memories stand as vivid as ever in the mind of a boy whose only refuge can be located somewhere between a mythical orient as represented by Islam, and a harsh daily godless American reality. Again Updike catches this great moment saying: "His [Ahmad] exploration of his Islamic identity ends at the mosque. The mosque took him in as a child of eleven; it let him be born again." (Updike, p. 58)

Ahmad's second birth that he comes to find in his father's religion expresses the existing alchemy between his willingness to give significance to his existence as a man, and his nostalgia and longing for a man, his father, in whom he still sees himself as a little boy. Put in this way, the totality of Ahmad's inclination towards violence is the expression of his desperate attempt to become fully[as] his father. This attempt though awkward and desperate constitute Ahmad's attitudes towards a totality of an American world in which he contemplates as, both religiously and humanly, immoral whose immorality has all along taken away his father.

Therefore, Ahmad's fatherless-ness as it goes from nostalgia and longing to violence may find expression in Friedrich Nietzsche's words when he concedes: "What was silent in the father speaks in the son; and often…the son unveiled secret of the father." (Nietzsche, 100)

The question, thus, can legitimately be formulated as follows: what was then *silent* in Ahmad's father that the boy would come to *unveil*? The answer, I suggest, to this question finds expression in the totality of what surrounds Ahmad's complex attitudes towards the problematic of his rootlessness or up-rootedness understood as his incapacity/unwillingness to embrace American way of life. Ahmad voices very poetically this silence when he says: "I would like, someday, to find him. Not to press any claim, or to impose any guilt, but simply to talk with him, as two Muslim men would talk." (Updike, p. 21)

Ahmad's words expresses the true terms of his fatherless-ness. The dramatization of his inner grievances cannot be brought to the public only in terms of violent attitudes and actions towards his social environment. Thus, the materialization of his violence takes a form of radical political opposition against political conditions that must be taken fully responsible both morally and ideologically for the loss of the opportunity for him to know his father. This loss cannot be else than Ahmad's rootlessness against the roots of his up-rootedness!

3. Ahmad's Rootlessness

Ahmad's tragic story is oddly enough a story of rootlessness. Throughout the novel, Ahmad is constantly torn between his American birth (belonging), and his Muslim Egyptian descent. His restless quest for his true identity both as a man and a citizen drives him to embrace radical social and political orientations. From his questioning surrounding his legitimacy as a child to his attempt to give significance to his mythical Muslim identity, we come to know a great deal about his inner psychological disorder and his evolution towards violence.

Similar to the opening statement, the last one is perhaps the most eloquent and revealing. Ahmad's sums up vigorously his whole existential being in America when he says: "These devils…have taken away my God" (Updike, p. 310). This statement opens up a variety of interpretations and speculations surrounding Ahmad's feeling of nothingness in the face of his daily American conditions both as a fatherless Muslim boy, and as a legally native born American. For Teresa Bertelho:

> Ahmad's search for a cohesive self is certainly beset by some of these same challenges. Although the pressures of family are blatantly absent…has left a gap in his personal story…His sense of apartness is not so much imposed by the gaze of others…as self - cultivated. (Bertelho, p. 19)

Indeed, Ahmad's further understanding of his apartness deepens his dynamic consciousness around the necessity for him to give significance to his nothingness as a man. His struggle against his fatal lot as a Muslim living in a dominant godless society reveal much about the roots of his violent materialization of that inner intimate will to be a truthful moral example for his surroundings. Throughout the novel, Ahmad is constantly struggling against being atomized and isolated. His conflicting relationships with his college mates reveal much about his factual identity. This factuality is well expressed in his restless search for alternatives for his absent father, and the roots of his father's moral grammar expressed, as he thinks, in Islam which holds God as its primary certainty against the superfluousness of an American society which has long become godless, sexually deviant, morally corrupt, and most all politically murderous. Jack Levy vehemently sounds this factuality saying:

> Kids like Ahmad need to have something they don't get from society any more. Society doesn't let them be innocent any more. The crazy Arabs are right-hedonism, nihilism, that's all we offer. Listen to the lyrics of these rock and rap stars-just kids themselves, with smart agents. Kids have to make more decisions than they used to, because adults can't tell them what to do. (Updike, p. 122)

Teresa is right when she speaks of an existing "gap in his [Ahmad's] personal story". Indeed, everything in Ahmad's immediate surroundings, be it his torn family, his college mates or the whole American cultural landscape, is a dynamic exacerbation of his rootlessness. His impossible rooting understood as his incapacity to find a ground for the grammar of his psychological misery is a dynamic up-rootedness from everything that may constitute for him a basis for his future becoming both as an American citizen, or simply a man. Through constant growing conscientization/awareness around his apartness, he goes on losing faith in everything that would naturally constitute the grammar of his cultural integration and becoming as he gains more and more faith in his Father's religion whose moral straightness offers him his unique comfort, significance, security, refuge and a fertile ground for his true self to be explored and exploited.

According to Jack Levy, like all new generation of Americans, Ahmad's loss of faith is a logical consequence of an existing crisis in authority within the American society. The absence of decency and morality along with the disintegration of traditional family codes is easily pushing *"kids"* like Ahmad to search for other forms of authority often in the most awkward if not disastrous way. Throughout Updike's novel, every single gleam of optimism surrounding Ahmad's growth towards natural becoming seems broken as if he is already destined for becoming a terrorist. From his strangeness as a fatherless kid deprived of parental authority and the absence of authority within the American society, to the authority of Shaikh Rachid's Islamic religious guidance, Ahmad's whole story is a dynamic preparation for the worst.

Hannah Arendt in her book *Between Past and future*, brilliantly expands on the this existing crisis in authority when she contends that:

> The authority that tells the individual child what to do and what not to do rests with the child group itself-and this produces, among other consequences, a situation in which the adult stand helpless before the individual child, and out of contact with him. He can only tell him to do what he likes and then prevent the worst from happening. The real and normal relations between children and adults, arising from the fact that people of all ages are always simultaneously together in the world, are thus broken. (Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, p. 181)

Here comes the truth about Ahmad's disillusionment as he finds himself torn between being fatherless without true family guidance, and a society that has long departed from decency to embrace nihilism, deviancy and strangeness. Such society cannot generate other than strangeness and strange people with strange attitudes and behavior. The absence of authority both in the family circle as well as in the public sphere denotes the disorientation of young new American generation who like *"crazy Arabs"* are searching for alternatives from outside sources whose moral authority is so intact and manifest. This search for substitutes cannot be else than, as Arendt suggests, a factual consequence of this existing rupture between old and new generations who happen to live the same period without being capable of establishing a common ground for assuring continuity for common destiny.

Indeed, the loss of authority in the modern American society has led kids like Ahmad to embrace, body and spirit, the religion of his absent father as a natural necessity for social visibility and survival. This led Ahmad, later on, to embrace violence as a substitute for authority. Thus, Ahmad's discovery of Islam stands for him as a rediscovery of his lost father. This rediscovery paved the way for him to rediscover a world other than the American reality which has long been deprived of authority. Because discovering his father's religion is for Ahmad, a form of reconstructing the roots of his father's world. As the mythical becomes reality, Ahmad celebrates his Islamic belonging as a triumph against oblivion and isolation as a man.

Throughout the novel, Ahmad constantly shows off forms of defiance, and openly manifests rebellious tendencies against a society which, he considers, no longer representing safety and adequacy for decency. This defiance in the face of his mother, school mates, school guiding counselor, and the totality of a social and educational system that he has long departed both morally and politically for he soon would come to associate his personal resentment to political and ideological issues engaging America's military interventions in the Arab Muslim world.

This resentment can be interpreted as Ahmad's quest for his true roots in the face of his growing rootlessness from the already rootless American society. Hermione grasps well this particular ongoing rootlessness when she says:

> They never knew structure. They don't imagine a life that goes beyond the next fix, the next binge, the next scrape with the cops or the bank or the INS. The poor kids, they've never had the luxury of being kids…The basic problem the way I see it is, society tries to be decent, and decency cuts no ice in the state of nature. No ice whatsoever. (Updike, pp. 81-82)

Hermione expresses well the dilemma of being an American kid in the context of the aftermath of September 11th, 2001. As a native born American, Ahmad's tragic rootless story is twofold. His fatherlessness on one hand and the ongoing rootlessness of the American society makes of him a case of extreme concern. The depth of Ahmad's rootlessness can be well measured upon his psychological chaos caused by the violence of a tearing war inside him that makes him feel constantly lonely, unsecure and homeless everywhere. His feeling of rejection is so manifest that he finally seeks and finds refuge in everything that reminds him of his lost father.

This feeling of homelessness both at home and at the college has pushed him to embark on a project of restoring his father's world. To do so, Ahmad sets up his mind to embrace Islam as his religion so as to honor his father's memory. Therefore, the mosque with its moral symbolism soon becomes his refuge, and Shaikh Rachid his spiritual guide towards salvation understood as the restoration of his cultural and spiritual insight.

Islam, Shaikh Rachid, Charlie Chehab and the mosque would soon constitute his new factual world and the Arab Muslim world his ideological one. Thus, the more he becomes close to his father's moral grammar, the more he leaves away his factual American life. This is perhaps Ahmad's first achievement, that of constituting a home for his moral standards, and a world for his ideological insight.

To this must be added that Ahmad's cultural and ideological feeling of up-rootedness is that of a prevailing sentiment of loneliness. This sentiment has long been his true companion which bears witness to the depth of his psychological misery as a fatherless boy whose moral and cultural homelessness would settle in him a growing anger against his isolation, marginalization as a man. Updike voices this sentiment of loneliness saying: "God has secretly fled from behind his pale Yemeni eyes, the elusive gray-blue of a kafir woman's.

Ahmad's fatherless years with his blithely mother has grown accustomed to being Dod's sole custodian, the one to whom God is an invisible but palpable companion." (Updike, p. 23)

Again Hannah Arendt's words can explain the depth of Ahmad's critical case. She brilliantly writes:

> What we call isolation in the political sphere, is called loneliness in the sphere of social intercourse. Isolation and loneliness are not the same… I can be isolated- that is in a situation in which I cannot act, because there is nobody who will act with me- without being alone; and I can be lonely-that is in a situation in which I as a person feel myself deserted by all human companionship-without being isolated. Isolation is that impasse into which men are driven when the political sphere of their lives, where they act together in the pursuit of a common concern, is destroyed. (Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 519)

It is true that Ahmad's complex problem lies in his social intercourses. His obsessive feeling of loneliness has his fatherlessness as its roots, and the totality of the American political and cultural landscape as its rootlessness. Arendt speaks of *impasse* and *common concern* being *destroyed* for in the case of Ahmad everything in his surrounding be it familial, cultural or political seems naturally destroyed from the very beginning.

What is really interesting to note is that Updike's Novel offers no opportunity for compromise. Everything in the novel seems to indicate a state of fatal collapse, immediate catastrophe, and some readiness for violent confrontation. Indeed, Ahmad restlessly shows off readiness to die for what he thinks is right. Updike voices the boy, and his words are significantly clear: "…the world is too terrible to cherish, and I would not regret leaving it."(Updike, p. 42)

Besides, Ahmad's readiness to die comes as a natural consequence of his rootless condition within the American Cultural environment. Everything indicates his psychological maturity for final divorce with what would constitute his American-ness. Perhaps the most important example of this maturity is his final decision to quit his college and becoming a truck driver for the sake of his future jihad mission (death). Updike catches this moment when he writes: "For Ahmad there will be no return to school. Central High now seems, with all its menacing clatter and impious mockery, a toy like miniature casde, a childish place of safety and deferred decision." (Updike, p. 166)

The symbolism of Ahmad's school, Central High, as a prominent American institution where kids are supposed to be Americanized is of high significance. This denotes America's failure to bridge the gap between its ideals as a great nation with kids whose cultural and ideological orientations are manifestly opposite. Thus, Ahmad's divorce with his college and his family marks the beginning for his American-lessness.

4. Ahmad's American-lessness

Another important theme in Updike's *Terrorist* is that of American-lessness. Throughout the novel, Ahmad's orientation towards fundamentalism and terrorism is a logical consequence of his total divorce from everything that would constitute his American-ness. The constellation between his fatherlessness and his rootlessness along with his honest desire to reconstruct his father's world is self-determination to make of himself a man. This determination leads him to embrace radical positions both religiously and politically that would later definitively make of him physically and legally American but spiritually and ideologically an alien. Also, it would make of him an American *terrorist* but a Muslim *hero of Allah*. This dialectic is all what makes of Ahmad a complex and often a dialectical character as he progressively turns his inner conflict into an American national public concern.

Ahmad's alienation from his American-ness cannot be other than his complete detachment from his American cultural reality. His progressive detachment corresponds to what may constitute his personal therapy. This therapy which consists of a series of progressive drift from innocence to maturity, from love to hatred, from a state of belief to that of a meta-belief (a belief about his belief), and also from passivity to action finally leads him to become more and more conscious about his position as a marginalized Muslim within the American cultural landscape which is completely opposite to everything he believes is right, and beyond all godly. This marks the beginning of his ongoing path towards self-affirmation through violence as a consequence of his religious fundamentalism.

In one of her dialogue with her child's school guiding counselor, Jack Levy, Ahmad's mom, Terry, expresses well her boy's inner willingness to give significance to his life. Terry says: "He [Ahmad] says to me, 'Mom, I need to see the world."(Updike, p. 56).Which world does Ahmad hint at? Is it a new world to discover where to live, or an already existing world to leave? Of course, Terry gives no answer, but only hints about what her fears are as a caring mother.

Throughout the novel, Terry is often portrayed as a passive mother whose only role is to bear the yoke of guiltiness surrounding Ahmad's unfortunate lot. She is also trivialized and silenced so as to put emphasis on her responsibility both as a failing mother and as an American woman. The implicit portrayal of her failure serves as a metaphor for America's failure to Americanize its youth. The absence of authority within the family circle often exacerbates its absence in the social American everyday life. This situation is more observed within the American mono-parental families like Ahmad's and among the new waves of immigrants who are primarily concerned with the policy of Americanization. These two categories are challenging the American cultural codes of life, and Ahmad is the most potent example as may witness his recurrent criticism over its immorality, deviancy, family disorder and mainly its godlessness. Updike's insistence over Ahmad's constant criticism of the American cultural environment is a subtle way to shed light on America's ongoing multiple crisis in education, authority and its incapacity to absorb frustrations which are becoming multicultural as the country becomes homeland for people from foreign cultural and ethnic background traditionally antagonists to it.

Similar to Ahmad's mother, Updike also remains silent as long as he continues relentlessly throughout the novel portraying the environmental conditions of Ahmad's progressive development towards religious radicalism, and final decision (attempt) to perpetuate a terrorist act to become perhaps a*"shahid"*. Perhaps the words of Shaikh Rachid are the most telling of Ahmad's development of a ground for terror. Speaking to Ahmad, Shaikh Rachid says: "Many study the book [Quran]; few die for it. Few are given your opportunity to prove its truth." (Updike, 140) to what Ahmad responds though he knows being manipulated: "...the mission is mine, though I feel shrunk to the size of a worm within it." (Updike, p. 140)

Though a child, Ahmad's words addressing his mother are of a greatest importance for understanding his future move. His desire to experience the world expresses primarily his desire de leave a world he firmly considers as godless, and in which he always feels his nothingness as a man through marginality, oblivion, exclusion and uselessness. It is, indeed, the constellation between the godlessness of the American society, and his uselessness as a man that gives Ahmad both objective and subjective reasons for his radical move towards religious fundamentalism in which he finds at least at the level of his phantasmagorical psyche the opportunity to be born again. But beyond all, it is his firm desire to (re)live the world of his father through the exploration of his father's cultural framework that gives him significance to what he would have been if he had the opportunity to be raised by his father.

Thus, reliving his father's world comes to provide significance to his existence as a man. As he progresses exploring his Islamic identity, Ahmad learns progressively to become less American. Updike catches this moment when he writes: "Sinking into the morass of godlessness, lost young men proclaim by means of property defacement, an identity." (Updike, 06)

On Ahmad's religious fundamentalism, Ulla Kriebernegg gives a great insight when she writes:

> The protagonist's identity crisis leads to a desperate search for structure and stability, and he finally encounters direction and guidance in Islamic fundamentalism ... Fundamentalism in this case is not seen as something religious but rather related to the feeling of 'belonging' in a post-modern world. Thus, the novel is actually not so much about the accurate depiction of Muslim-American identity but about what makes a young man radical in twenty-first-century America."(Kriebernegg, p. 157)

Ulla is right when she puts forward the idea of *"the protagonist's identity crisis"*. In fact, throughout the novel, Updike manages to put emphasis on nowadays American cultural potential to alienate youth through pushing it to embrace extremism, and radical political orientations. Besides the absence of authority, the American cultural environment offers no opportunity for people from foreign descent especially Muslims like Ahmad to live fully the cultural pluralism that makes the cornerstone of American traditional policy. Updike's depiction of some Islamic codes of thoughts and behavior is only intended to provide much visibility to the duality in which people like Ahmad are psychologically engaged in. Ahmad's serious commitment towards Islam can easily understood as his willingness to externalize his inner grievances and make them public by means of a terrorist act as Updike writes: "Later would come the headlines, the CNN reports filling the Middle East with jubilation, making the tyrants in their opulent Washington offices tremble. For now the tremble, the mission are still his secret, his task." (Updike, 168)

As such, Ahmad's whole story is that of a struggle against his fatal estranged-ness, and social exclusion understood as his deprivation from normality. His fatherlessness has largely exacerbated his constant feeling of superfluous-ness, and uselessness as a man within a society which is no longer offering him that certainty and feeling of security. Ahmad's alienation thus bears fully witness to his search for a lost identity both American and Muslim, and his exploration of Islamic codes of thoughts and behavior as his celebration of a lost father that he still longs for as a core of his psychological normal world.

Slavoj žižek offers an interesting view about alienation as he conceives it as a transposition of the individual into an 'other' alien being. The transposition marks an imaginative turn towards the internalization of alien potentials. He writes:

> This 'alienation', whose formal structure is clearly that of external reflection, does not consist simply in the fact that man- a creative being, externalizing his potentials in the world of objects- 'deifies' objectivity, conceiving the objective natural and social forces out of his control as manifestations of some supernatural being. 'Alienation' means something more precise: it means that man presupposes, perceives himself, his creative power, in the form of an external substantial Entity, it means that he 'projects', transposes his innermost essence into an alien Being ('God'). (*Žižek*, p. 257)

Žižek's words provide great insights into understanding Ahmad's psychological turn into an *'alien being'*. His self-detestation soon turns into self-determination to materialize his social anger. His detestation of everything in his immediate surroundings serves him as a phantasmagorical potential to finally take revenge. His frustrations soon become a potential of

violence ready to externalize its negativity so as to dramatize his personal grievances and those of his father's "victim world" and bring them to public attention worldwide. Ahmad's attitude marks his imaginative turn into psychological readiness for death. This readiness to (re)shape the [his] world comes as a consecration and devotion to what he considers as his divine mission. Ahmad finally resumes his energy through transposing himself in the aftermath of his alleged suicide-attack. Updike poetically voices Ahmad's psychological readiness when he writes:

> A certain simplicity does lay hold of Ahmad in the troughs between surges of terror and then of exaltation, collapsing back into impatience to be done with it. To have it behind him, whatever 'him' will then be. He exists in the neighborhood to the unimaginable. The world in its suns truck details, the minute scintillations of its interlocked workings, yawns all about him, a glistering bowl of busy emptiness, while within him a sodden black certainty weighs." (Updike, p. 152)

Updike's metaphorical language illustrates well the depth of Ahmad's alienation from within. The duality between *terror* and *exaltation*, between his readiness to act and his impatience to see the consequences of his action understood as him finally belonging to the high degree of divine satisfaction give great insight into the radical rupture between him and the world behind him. His attitude as a *'would-be terrorist'* as Teresa Bertelho calls him is a perfect illustration of America's failure to Americanize people like Ahmad with whom the country's definite interests in the world happen to be in complete opposition. This failure illustrates well America's successfulness to exacerbate tensions and frustrations in the minds and hearts of the new generation of native born Americans who no longer recognize themselves in the American traditional ideals and values. Their American-ness no longer constitutes any positive potential of creation but a considerable potential of destruction. It also constitutes the sum of negative potential of hatred, anger, social wrath, marginalization, isolation and individual atomization whose consequences are devastative to both the individuals and the country.

Therefore, Ahmad's divine mission through the manifestation of his constant readiness to die as a Muslim '*shahid*' comes to oppose radically America's manifest destiny. Both destinies aim at reshaping the world towards salvation. The duality existing between them can easily be apprehended through Ahmad's willingness to die as a Muslim martyrs, and his radical opposition to celebrate himself as an American hero. Throughout the novel, Ahmad's disgust with American cultural traditions cannot be else than the celebration of his American-lessness whose manifestation is his relentless effort to reconstruct his father's mythical world as his ideal true world, and the rediscovery of Islam which bears the core values of his idiosyncrasy as a man.

5. Conclusion

The novel is a tragic story of a boy's development going wrong. The wrongness is highly expressed through Ahmad's unfortunate lot, being "a boy in between" understood as the outgrowth of an enduring historical mutual misunderstanding between Christianity and Islam; and between the West and the Orient. Ahmad's fatherlessness is an allegory of an enduring inexistence of an Arab Muslim world which is ideological rather than a reality. As for his rootlessness, it exacerbates his feeling of loneliness and isolation from the American national community, and makes of his up-rootedness from his father's world his sense of belonging to a world, though mythical, provides him psychological certainty, comfort, and faith. And finally, his American-lessness is the expression of Ahmad's alienation from within, and his individual potential turning into a destructive violent perspective.

He unwillingly is an unsettling compromise and dilemma between two opposite and conflicting both factual and phantasmagorical worlds, the West and the Orient. Throughout the novel, Ahmad's conflicting relationship with his mother, his paradoxical friendship with his girl and his quest for fatherhood along with his daily psychological fight within himself and with his surrounding, and his attempt to become a terrorist is a relentless endeavor to become a real man. Put in this way, Ahmad was a boy and a terrorist, but never was he a man.

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