

“Us” versus “Them” Discourse in John Updike’s Novel, *Terrorist*

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Abstract

A major literary concern since September 11th, 2001 has been its preoccupation with the discourse of terrorism as writers attempt to comprehend the underlying reasons of terrorism. This paper looks at the “us” versus “them” discourse in John Updike’s novel *Terrorist*. Updike is an American novelist who has extensively engaged in the discourse of terrorism and Islam. The paper focuses on the presentation of the discourse between “Us” those of Western culture and non-Muslim versus “Them” perceived as against Western secular culture, Islam. The main objective of this paper is to bring into perspective the “us” versus “them” discourse as presented in the novel with a view of identifying ways the discourse can be shaped to promote national cohesion and integration. The paper is informed by reader response and psychoanalytic theories and employs qualitative research design that is based on textual content analysis as its methodology. The paper discusses the reasons behind terrorism and how Western discourse is filled with prejudice towards non-Western cultures and religions. Updike novel presents potential terrorists as Muslims against Western civilization and culture that is largely anchored on Christianity. The paper gives useful contribution by bringing into perspective the role literature plays in advancing a false narrative about other cultures perceived as antagonist to the Western culture. The contribution of religious institutions in promoting national cohesion and integration cannot be underestimated. The paper thus analyzes John Updike’s novel *Terrorist*’s presentation of this critical discourse and the role Islamic clergy and its institutions must play in countering terrorism to promote national cohesion and integration in the society.

Key Words: Cohesion, Discourse, Terrorism, Civilization, Culture, Islam, Prejudice.

Introduction

The “us” versus “them” is a discourse that has existed in literary presentation for long, it is based on such binaries as, the ruler and the subjects, masculinity and femininity, the haves and the have not, the natives and the foreigners, and in our very own political arena, the “hustlers” versus the “dynasties” etc. Using these binaries, the West, for the purpose of this paper will be referred as the “Us” engages with the “Them” who are not of Western culture. The image through presentation of the “them” is created and presented to aid the “Us” see itself as the superior “contrasting image, idea, personality, and experience” (Said, 2003, 2) of “them”. This kind of discourse always creates a feeling of inferiority among the “them” who are regarded as outsiders. One side, in this case the “Us”, sees itself superior, more civilized and rational as opposed to “them” who are inferior, uncivilized and irrational. And thus, the relationship of power is established, the West “us” want to control and dictate to the weaker “them”. For instance, introduction of their idea of democracy to them. Indeed, the discourses of Orientalism, Colonialism, Imperialism and terrorism are all grounded on such unfair power relations (Hegghammer and Peter, 2015). Where the West take advantage of the “them” under the excuse that they are bringing civilization to the uncivilized and irrational “them”. Postcolonial theorists agree with this idea of an unequal power relationship and the presence of “us” versus “them” discourse. Frantz Fanon, a critic of colonialism, is of the opinion that colonialism divided the world by using binaries to create the us versus them, the colonizer and the colonized, to “paint the native as a sort of quintessence of evil” (Fanon, 1963, 41) who must be colonized to make them civilized.

The “us” versus “them” has become more apparent in literary works after September, 11th for the war against terrorism continue to rely on the Western construction of terrorism as the war against the

irrational and uncivilized “them”. American literature in particular has embraced the task of serious engagement with terror and Islam because the events of September 11th opened up terrorism as a new thematic concern (Sarah and David, 2020). The literary discourse is also inspired by the world views, and in particular those from the West, who have developed a need to understand Islam, the Middle East, and their history and those of other forms of belief and culture (Adam, 2015). Literature therefore, becomes an effective tool to respond to the event and the ensuing conflicts. It is fair to say some literary writers, particularly those from the West, have contributed to the circulation of the reductive myths of “us” versus “them” discourse (Hodwitz, 2019). One such myth has been the incompatibility of the West and Islam being perceived as “them” or the other and the resultant clash between them. These literary texts have set the “us” and “them” in opposition with minimal chance of reconciliation. “Them” have been portrayed as having an inherent hatred for the West. This contrast is reinforced through many reductive myths and stereotypes. Through these myths the Islamic society is portrayed to promote violence, it’s against science and technology, democratic progress, individual freedom and human rights. In general, Islamic society is perceived as despotic, oppressive, stagnant, and defeated. The west sees Muslims as backward, irrational, displaced, disloyal, sensual and violent individuals who follow the collective ideals of their religion (Edis, 2016). On the other hand, Islam’s contrasting image is the West that portrays itself as technologically advanced, forward-looking, progressive, democratic, liberal and rational. Updike’s *Terrorist* draws on this clash of “us” versus “them” in the Western literary discourse in which Islam is portrayed as contrasting Western civilization and a threat of the West.

Islam and the West

Updike’s *Terrorist*, attempts to understand the psychology of the terrorist, Islam and its beliefs, and the reasons for Islam’s hatred against the West. The two sets of civilizations and ideologies are juxtaposed thus, as “us” being secular and capitalist oriented; and the “them” who are seen as an anti-West, uncivilized, irrational, and violent Islam. Updike portrays Muslims as being disloyal, irresponsible, fundamentalists. They hate and are ready to attack the West on the basis of Islamic theology from the Qur’an and the teachings of Prophet Muhammad. Be it as it may, it is important to note that *Terrorist* raises economic, political and historical issues from the Muslims’ perspective as a cause of terrorism (Jackson et al, 2018). However, these causes are suffocated by Updike’s portrayal of Islam where Muslims “fight for God against America” (Updike, 2007, 248).

Terrorist at the very beginning sets the tone of the conflict between Islam and the West when the omnipresent narrator mediates Islam and Muslim identity for a Western audience, unfortunately he mediates it through an “us” versus “them” perspective. Ahmad, inspired by a few weeks’ lessons in Islam by Shaikh Rashid, while observing lustful girls at Central High School, thinks, “These devils seek to take away my God” (Updike, 2007, 3). In the paragraph that follows, Islam is perceived in opposition to those devils. Western materialism, capitalism, consumerism and the indulgence of young boys and girls in sensual pleasures. Ahmad also believes that Christians and Jews are weak because they are careless about their religious teachings. Everything about Central High school, its teachers and students reek of waywardness and a life of less restraint and almost non-existent belief. Using the binaries of “us” and “them,” everything Western is depicted as despicable to Islam.

Islam and Muslims Resentment of the West

Islam resentment of the west is a common trope in Western literary texts (Sarah and David, 2020). The West perceives September 11th terror attack on American soil as the result of Islam’s hate for the West and its progressive culture. The West makes an attempt to explain the reasons behind this hatred, most of which try to look for reductive myths to justify the hate. The “us” versus “them” discourse, is a broader term, where “us” stands for America, Europe, modernity, science and technology, liberal democracy, secularism, rationality and advancement in other human efforts. In the “us” versus “them” discourse, opposition to any of these progressive ideas means opposition to the West. In Updike’s *Terrorist*, Islam’s opposition to the West is implied through Ahmed the main character. It is important to note that there exists an equivalent discourse in the “them” or Islam.

Unlike the “us” or Orientalism, it also castigates or stereotypes the West from its perspective. Buruma and Avishai (2004) call it Occidentalism, a discourse in which “opponents paint a dehumanizing picture of the West” (Buruma and Avishai, 2004, 5). According to them, these stereotypes are its “materialism, immorality, godlessness, love for life and fear of death”, (Buruma and Avishai, 2004, 49) and “arrogance due to its power and technological advancement”. (Buruma and Avishai, 2004, 5). Updike draws on “us” versus “them” discourse in *Terrorist*, stereotyping the West in the eyes of Islam. At the same time, he draws on Occidentalism as he creates a discourse in which Muslims are made to stereotype the West through Ahmed.

Terrorist, portrays Islam as having no ideals of its own but only strives to destroy whatever the West stands for. According to Ahmad, Islam hates America because it has no God and is “obsessed with sex and luxury goods” (Updike, 2007, 38). The American way is the way of the infidels. America has become the “global Satan” (Updike, 2007, 36) in the eyes of the Imam due to its influence and power in the world. Ahmad believes that the economic system on which American imperialism is based is “rigged in favor of rich Christians” (Updike, 2007, 80), and a Godless government in Washington governs a Godless American society. Everything around Ahmad, from top to bottom, is corruption and immorality. As a Muslim and Arab American he is incapable of indulging in such worldly pleasures and Islam, as a religion and way of life is prohibits such way of life. Material possessions and everyday pleasures in the West are repugnant to him because these are insubstantial to him. Contrarily, real pleasure in life in Islam comes from pleasing God, which is the “only real guidance” (Updike, 2007, 18). Islam is against the West that has evolved into its current form due to enlightenment, tolerance, rationality and science. Ahmad, who was born and raised in America, believes that science, a symbol of Western modernity, is basically incompatible with Islam. He thinks that whatever science teaches is godless as it teaches godless capitalism that oppresses the vulnerable (Updike, 2007, 4). His Christian and Jewish teachers and fellow students are his enemies because they are morally weak, as they do not follow even the basic tenets of their religions. In one of his heated conversations with Joyleen Grant, he justifies his meeting with her as an act to “know the enemy” (Updike, 2007, 68). Ahmad also remembers that in one of their discussions, the imam had told him that all infidels are the enemy of Islam. He supports his prejudicial attitude to unbelievers with the saying of the prophet that “all infidels should be destroyed” (Updike, 2007, 68). Though Updike should provide necessary evidence in support of such claims, as he does in other situations, in this case, it’s just one baseless and biased interpretation by the Imam. The narrator, who has a bias reference of the scripture, might have found other prophet’s sayings to repute such a claim, but he does not. The prophet had pacts with Jews and Christians, and they were his subjects when he became the military, political and religious leader of Islam. More importantly, Islam even allows Muslim men to marry Jews and Christians (Edis, 2016).

Updike However, ignores all these. Said finds it unique in Western discourse of “us” versus “them” who make a biased generalization about Prophet Muhammad’s life and saying without supporting evidence or reference (Said, 1997). Updike goes a step further by ascribing statements against non-Muslims to the Prophet to project Islam negatively. *Terrorist*, has instances of out of context and incomplete quotations from the Qur’an and from the sayings of the prophet to paint Islam in a negative way. Ahmad in his fits of anti- Americanism finds verses attributed to God in the Qur’an. In one such instance, Ahmad tells Jack Levy, “Be ruthless to unbelievers. Burn them, crush them, because they have forgotten God” (Updike, 2007, 294). Neither the context nor the name or number of the verse is given as Updike has done in other instances in the text. Similarly, a wrong perception is created at the beginning of the novel when Shaikh Rashid and Ahmad discuss Hutama “Crushing Fire”, a chapter in the Quran. Before introducing the verses, the narrator talks about the Jews and Christians whom God is going to throw in hell. Then Updike introduces the verses, which say “And who shall teach thee what the Crushing Fire is? It is God’s kindled fire” (Updike, 2007, 6). The chapter has actually nine verses, but Updike omits the first four and starts with the fifth one. The first four verses read: “Woe to every slanderer, back-biter; who amasses wealth and hordes it; Does he think his wealth will abide forever with him; By no means, He will be thrown into Hutama” (Qur’an

104: 1-4). The chapter does not say Jews and Christians but Updike quotes the verses in such a context that these verses seem directed against them. The edicts about wives and women's uncleanliness are also out of context.

Updike constantly uses words like kafir and kuffar "unbeliever" in reference to non-Muslims to portray Islam's contempt for them. In these instances, Updike is manipulating Islamic edicts to present an Anti-West Islam. Motivated by such misinterpretations, Ahmad believes that he is on the side of God against the armies of Satan. To please his God, he must fight ruthlessly against God's enemies and unbelievers in the West. His killings of Americans would please God, as well as Muslim around the world. He imagines Muslims dancing with joy at Americans' deaths in the streets of Damascus and Karachi. Scenes of destruction on CNN after the attacks will be "filling the Middle East with jubilation" (Updike, 2007, 281). Updike here is playing on a much used trope of pleasure in the Muslim world about the events of 9/11. A few examples were repeated in the media and literature to make it a collective statement about ethos in Islamic countries around the world. According to Said, such contradictory norms are used by the West for "the dominance" of their "crude power allied with simplistic contempt for dissents. (Said, 1997). Ahmad has resentment for American materialism due to his ascetic religion. This disgust is closely related to Islam's stereotyped dislike for worldly life and love of death in *Terrorist*, (2007). Whether expressed or implied, Islam, the "them" is portrayed as essentially different from the West or the "us".

Stereotyping West as Islam's Opposite

Updike considers Islam an "autocratic" religion, which controls almost all aspects of human life. Employing the "us" versus "them" strategy, *Terrorist* uses explicit vocabulary to describe this autocratic Islam. The narrator, as reflected in his in-text comments and explanations about Islam and Muslims, contributes to this discourse of hatred throughout the novel. Added to this are the pronouncements by characters representing the West. The most important and predominant voice among these is that of the highest authority responsible for securing America, the Secretary of Homeland Security. As Gray, (2011) and Elik, (2013) argue, the Secretary replaces Communism with the current enemy Islam because "The enemy's superstitious mentality" orchestrated the 9/11 attacks on capitalism's "headquarters" to bring it down by cutting off its head" (Updike, 2006, 47). He also thinks that the enemy does not believe in democracy and freedoms. He also believes in a conspiracy that the Arab League wants to take over the United States (Updike, 2006, p261). He is absolutely sure of the unequivocal hatred of Muslims for West and asks the nagging question of the time, "Why do they hate us?" Hermione, assistant to the Secretary and a responsible official of the government responds, "They hate the light. Like cockroaches. Like bats" (Updike, 2006, 48).

Updike propagates these collective and individual stereotypes in the sayings and lives of individual Muslim characters and Westerners' statements about the "them" Islam and Muslims. Muslims are perceived as a collectivity of irrational beings, devoid of any individuality, which might explode anytime as they accept a violent ideology without question. Islamic teachings derive their strength from the Qur'an and the sayings of the prophet as evidenced by Updike's quoting from them extensively. Muslims, inspired from these teachings, have been taught that the West, Jews, Christians and everyone outside the sphere of Islam is a kafir and thus worthy to be killed. As Islam is against these people, it's also against their ideals of freedoms, liberty, democracy and modernity. In "us" versus "them" discourse, Islam is always stereotyped as "antidemocratic" (Said, 2003, 150) as evidenced by the Secretary's views. Ahmad imbibes this hatred against everything Western from his religious teachings in only a few weeks. He is mostly ambivalent, but his perceived faith pulls him into a deadly certainty about the righteousness of his faith. During his interactions with the American public, he finds people to be mostly friendly, good and civil. Contrary to Charlie's assertions that the 9/11 victims were not innocent, Ahmad shows sympathy with the victims, especially those who jumped from the towers. Still, Updike makes him embark on a senseless plan to kill merely due to Islam. Ahmad's thoughts indicate thus, that while individual Muslims might be ambivalent sometimes, their religion always encourages negative feelings towards the West.

Terrorist depicts Islam as a religion of universal aspirations, which does not believe in boundaries between countries and nations. Charlie Chehab claims that Islamic faith is fruitless without absolute allegiance to the “ummah,” (Updike, 2007, 231) the bigger Islamic community or caliphate. Islam is depicted as a religion, which is monolithic, eternal and beyond time and space, and whose rules and injunctions are absolutist and therefore cannot be debated or evaluated critically. Even otherwise intelligent people like Ahmad do not dare to question an Islamic injunction even if they have qualms about it. The result is that all Muslims are the same without exceptions. In contrast, Updike treats characters belonging to other religions and ethnicities differently. Jack Levy is Jewish but has distanced himself from his religion. Beth Levy, Jack’s wife was a Lutheran who does not have any religious connections or views. Teresa, Ahmad’s mother is a Catholic, but lives a life free of religion. Tylenol Jones and Joryleen Grant are African Americans with no active religious leanings. Even the Secretary of Homeland Security, a “stout churchgoer,” has secularist views, having left the medieval superstitions of religion long ago (Updike, 2007, 48). Only Muslim characters are connected to their religion and ethnicity. Shaikh Rashid, the imam, is seen as absolute evil because nothing good comes out of his mouth. He thinks that Islam is always right against the wrongs of the West. The West is full of corrupting influence “bad philosophy and bad literature. Western culture is Godless” (Updike, 2007, 38). His Islamic teachings can be compared to the secular education promoted by Jack Levy at Central High. The imam pushes Ahmad towards terrorism by instigating hatred against the West on the basis of a religious ideology, whereas Jack persuades Ahmad to respect human life and abort his attack.

One exception to this general trend of stereotyping Muslims as irrational and violent individuals could have been Charlie Chehab, who has been raised “pure American” (Updike, 2007, 218). This seemingly pragmatic businessman has nothing Islamic about his character, morals or lifestyle. Still, as a Muslim, he expresses typical sentiments against the West, Capitalism, consumerism, media, the American empire and its invasion and occupation of Muslim countries. He thinks of the tactics used by Al-Qaeda and Hamas to be similar to those used by George Washington during the American revolution. He is inspired by that revolution, as it could teach much to the movement of jihad because both “waged the same kind of war” (Updike, 2007, 183). Strangely, this critic of American atrocities turns out to be a CIA operative who ensnares and traps other Muslims. Being a Muslim suits his act because he can easily play the stereotype. His character is so stereotypical that the reader believes him to be a genuine Muslim sympathizer. The stereotype is partial, as it focuses on its political aspect. Updike’s characterization of Charlie has conspiratorial repercussions as well. He transfers money to the Middle Eastern bomb makers and arranges transportation of explosive material to the workshop and then to the Lincoln Tunnel. It’s difficult to guess who floated the idea of bombing in the novel, but it’s Charlie who manages every step of the operation. The whole thing was a sting operation, which could have gone wrong if Ahmad had not changed his mind. Like other Muslim leaders who are named in the novel, Charlie is also stereotyped as a tool of America’s intelligence. Likewise, a Muslim husband as well as father is stereotyped as disloyal and irresponsible. Omar Ashmawy, Ahmad’s father, left the family without any reason when Ahmad was three. He has not visited or contacted them in fifteen years. The marriage between them was a compromise to achieve individual goals. Teresa married Omar to show “how liberal and liberate” she was, (Updike, 2007, 86). Omar marrying her was motivated by his desire to get American citizenship and nothing else.

Stereotyping Islam with Violence: Jihad

The very concept of jihad is controversial in Islam. Muslims across the world interpret it differently. For some, it’s the individual’s struggle against his own temptations. For others, it’s resisting injustice and evil. On a collective level, it’s a defensive war against aggression (Craiutu, 2017). Gerges. (2005) considers Jihad as a collective duty, not an individual one, according to the consensus among mainstream Islamic scholars. Even if it’s a collective duty to defend, Islam does not explain its parameters as to who will announce jihad or under what conditions. The intent in linking terrorists with the “them” Islam is to suggest that it is diametrically and absolutely opposed to the “us” West.

Updike perpetuates this jihadist stereotype by making Islam and Muslims absolute jihadists who desire to annihilate the “us” West. This message is conveyed in most unlikely manner. Islamic ideology is depicted in the novel as nothing more than an escape from the hard realities of this life into the fantasized promised after-life of eternal happiness. Glorifying words like a “good brave kid, a great hero and a faithful son of Islam” (Updike, 2007, 250) are employed to uplift and empower Ahmad. All these terms are designed to lure and prepare a weak individual like Ahmad to become a jihadi, a defender of Islam who has a “willingness to die for Jihad” (Updike, 2007, 233). Life for Ahmad is cumbersome and unlivable. Only jihad can help him get out of life. Similarly, an unlikely situation is created to reinforce the notoriety of jihad in the novel. Shaikh Rashid, the poisonous imam, is made to speak from the pulpit on the very sensitive topic of jihad to a predominantly American audience at the graduation ceremony at Central High School.

This can be seen as a calculated attempt to exacerbate the conflict between “them” Islam and the “us” West, to reinforce and stereotype Jihad and inflame Islamophobia. Representatives of three religions: Christianity, Judaism and Islam are invited to the ceremony, but it’s surprisingly the imam, whose “twist of Arabic” is like “sticking a dagger into the silent audience,” who is given a chance to speak (Updike, 2007, 111). Further, he is made to speak about Jihad. He translates from the Quran and jumps to the saying of the prophet about those who die in the way of God: “Say not of those who are slain on God’s path they are dead; nay, they are living” (Updike, 2007, 112). Updike perhaps should have known that it comes from the Quran, not the prophet. Unfortunately, jihad is a reductive myth in “us” versus “them” discourse, as it reduces controversial concepts to absolute truths. But once started, these myths take new forms. In the very same paragraph, Jack Levy is perturbed by the imam’s “belief system that not so many years ago managed the deaths of, among others, hundreds of commuters from northern New Jersey” (Updike, 2007, 112). There is no qualification here to separate the wrong ideologies and actions of a few stray individuals from their religion. Instead, their actions are connected with their religion to malign the whole community of Islamic believers. Ahmad does not have any fun in life as his individual live shows. He wants to get rid of life and jihad provides a convenient concept with which he can attain this goal.

Conclusion

While September 11th spurred the Western world to examine its complacency over its treatment of the East, the first impulse in literature by Western authors and in particular American authors to deal with the terrorism was “us” versus “them” perspective. This has been realized in Updike’s *Terrorist* standpoint. The novel portrays the fictional terrorists embedded in “us” versus “them” discourse, thus connecting “them” with Islam. There is not even a single instance about the possibilities of any meaningful engagement between the two civilizations. Instead, it emphasizes the message that such a possibility is delusional due to the fact that the two are essentially different and enemy towards each other. The collective religion is perceived to unequivocally condemn individuality. Islam is represented and contained as an irrational religion, which believes, and lives in a backward past whereas the rational West believes in modernity, progress, democracies, and liberties. Collective Islamic society is regarded as tyrannical and repressive, while Muslims are replicas of the same collectivity. These negative stereotypes are then set in opposition to the West’s advancement in science and technology, its futurity, progress, democracy, and liberalism. This discourse of hate against Islam and Muslims emanating from a “Clash of Civilization” mindset has significantly contributed to conflicts and the “us” versus “them” discourse.

The logical response of Westerners to stereotypical death loving Jihadist Muslims will be hate, anxiety, and fear. Under its influence, Muslims as well as people of other ethnicities have suffered discrimination, imprisonment, exile and torture in the post 9/11. The discourse has intensified as it grows and feeds on instances like 9/11, Ahmad in *Terrorist* could have been treated like any other individual with familial, social, sexual or financial problems, but he becomes a stereotype when his character is developed within a religious discourse of “us” versus “them”. His hostile feelings are portrayed as a mirror of Islam. It seems that individual ills and secular terminologies prove inefficient

to describe so much hate.. There are so many aspects to these characters and their past, but these have been completely avoided to make them stick to the stereotype. The manipulation of the religious script to find the reasons for their hate is unjustifiable. And the discourse of “us” versus “them” is biased and unbalanced as seen from Updike’s *Terrorist*.

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