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Melodramatic Political Discourse in John Updike's *Terrorist*

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ABSTRACT

This article explores John Updike's Terrorist (2006) through the lens of the rhetoric of victimhood and the dynamics of melodramatic political discourse. Melodramatic political discourse frames politics within a moral economy that portrays the nation-state as the innocent victim of malevolent acts. This framework equates national suffering with virtue, attributes evil to adversaries, and casts acts of war and global dominance as demonstrations of heroism and moral righteousness. The analysis is conducted through a close textual examination, organised into two key constructs: "Victims," which examines the portrayal of American characters as potential victims and the implications of their victimisation, and "Aggressors," which investigates the representation of terrorists and their oppositional stance toward Americans. The study argues that the novel employs a melodramatic political discourse, emphasising the vulnerability of Americans and the malignancy of violence inflicted upon them. This narrative not only validates but also promotes a retaliatory response, including military action, as a means of safeguarding American lives.

Keywords: American novel; John Updike; melodramatic political discourse; victimhood; 9/11

INTRODUCTION

On 11 September 2001, the United States witnessed what appeared to be scenes from a Hollywood film. The attacks were, in fact, real, marking a significant turning point in American history. The United States and its citizens have experienced a considerable degree of violence on their own territory despite decades of living in peace and observing violence exclusively through the medium of the media. The images of the attacks were projected with great intensity and frequency, making it impossible for viewers to avoid seeing the horrific scenes (Frost, 2011). The attacks constituted one of the most pervasive and enduring images of the contemporary historical moment (Gregory, 2004). The experiences of the victims' families, survivors and traumatised individuals were repeatedly conveyed through a multitude of American media outlets based in various locations across the United States. The attacks and their ramifications were accorded a heightened degree of visibility (Gray, 2011; Gregory, 2004).

The literary milieu was in anticipation of a work of literature that might provide perspective on a significant yet largely surreal moment in modern history. Consequently, the publication of John Updike's *Terrorist* (2006) garnered significant scholarly interest, reflecting not only Updike's esteemed position as one of America's leading novelists but also the American literary community's desire for a novel that would engage with the events of 9/11 (Alosman et al., 2018c). Updike's work was commended for its successful integration of a terrorist's perspective and the courageous attempt to move beyond the pervasive cultural inclination to prioritise the concept of “trauma” in the analysis of 9/11 (Hartnell, 2011, p. 478). In Updike's novel, fear was constructed by portraying Islam and Muslims as antagonistic forces, thereby ascribing them to a status of urgency and fear, both internally and externally (Alosman et al., 2021). By portraying the principal Muslim

characters as participants in a terrorist plot in the context of 9/11, Updike served to reinforce the perception of an ongoing Islamic threat to the United States.

In order to gain insight into the parallel characterisation of the two characters in *Terrorist*, it was essential to situate the novel within a post-9/11 geopolitical and colonial context (Alosman et al., 2018b). While Updike addressed the cases of Palestine, Iraq and Afghanistan from a variety of viewpoints and through the experiences of several characters in his novel, the counter-colonial perspectives were conveyed through characters who were bigoted and whose rationality and objectivity are called into question throughout the narrative. Moreover, the recurrent depiction of Muslim figures as potential terrorists served to justify the American colonial wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, portraying them as acts of self-defence against the perceived "Islamic" threat.

Although previous studies have addressed certain aspects of the geopolitical and colonial representations in Updike's novel, the melodramatic political discourse present in the novel has not been sufficiently explored. This discourse is essential to an understanding of the means employed to build a melodramatic demonisation of the Other, with the objective of making him/her more enemy-like and initiating violence against their states. This study addresses the melodramatic political discourse present in *Terrorist* and examines the processes through which this discourse contributes to the construction of a justifiably attacked Other.

MELODRAMATIC POLITICAL DISCOURSE

The narrative surrounding the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 became a significant element of American political discourse, emphasising the idyllic nature of the day when the United States experienced a sudden and profound loss of innocence (Anker, 2014). American fathers and mothers, black and white friends, commenced the day in a routine manner, engaged in activities such as preparing breakfast, bidding farewell to loved ones, and commencing their work journeys. The individuals in question were not conscious of the fact that a small group of malevolent individuals, with the intention of annihilating freedom, were executing an evil plan. A considerable number of American casualties were recorded. The nation was profoundly affected by the pervasive violence, resulting in widespread suffering among all Americans, regardless of their individual circumstances.

While the Pearl Harbor attacks on the United States were not broadcast live on television, the 9/11 attacks were made to appear spectacular, viewed live on screens throughout the world (Anker, 2016). Anker (2016) argues that there is a crucial distinction in the political discourses employed to depict both events. The distinction between Bush and Franklin D. Roosevelt lies in their respective approaches to the use of melodrama in political discourse. In the latter half of the twentieth century, melodrama became a significant influence on American political discourse, establishing itself as one of the most pervasive genres in the field. The depiction of political events and the exercise of state power became increasingly characterised by the use of moral polarities, the portrayal of innocent victims, the dramatisation of “pain and suffering, race-to-the-rescue chases, grand gestures and astonishing feats of courage” (Anker, 2016, p. 221).

Melodramas narrate the plight of virtuous individuals grappling with the injustices of their circumstances, often depicted through sweeping portrayals of persecution (Anker, 2014). Melodrama remains the most apt and precise description of the profound narrative and emblematic work performed by American mass culture (Williams, 2001). “It is the best example of American culture's (often hypocritical) attempt to construct itself as the locus of innocence and virtue” (p.

17). The prevalence of melodrama in American culture serves to create a clear dichotomy between an idealised self and an antagonist, a distinction that plays an integral role in defining the American perspective on both self and others.

Melodramatic political discourse casts political policies "within a moral economy that identifies the nation-state as a virtuous and innocent victim of villainous action; it locates goodness in the suffering of the nation, evil in the cruelty of its antagonists, and heroism in sovereign acts" (Anker, 2016, p. 222). Melodramatic discourse is designed to evoke strong emotions in response to injustices against the nation-state. It requires the state to punish those who harm the nation. In melodrama, the United States is "both the feminised, virginal victim and the aggressive, masculinised hero of the story of freedom; it is the victim/hero of global politics" (Anker, 2016, p. 222). Melodramatic political discourse offers a rationale and a justification for the subsequent expansion of US state power in the late modern era.

Anker (2014) maintains that the most illustrative example of melodramatic political discourse is President George W. Bush's speech on the War in Afghanistan, delivered one month after the 9/11 attacks.

> On September 11th, great sorrow came to our country. And from that sorrow has come great resolve. Today, we are a nation awakened to the evil of terrorism and determined to destroy it. That work began the moment we were attacked, and it will continue until justice is delivered.
> [. . .] We will never forget all the innocent people killed by the hatred of a few.
> [. . .] The hijackers were instruments of evil who died in vain. Behind them is a cult of evil which seeks to harm the innocent and thrives on human suffering. Theirs is the worst kind of cruelty, the cruelty that is fed, not weakened, by tears. Theirs is the worst kind of violence, pure malice while daring to claim the authority of God. We cannot fully understand the designs and power of evil. It is enough to know that evil, like goodness, exists. And in the terrorists, evil has found a willing servant.
>
> (Bush, 2001)

Bush employs a melodramatic rhetoric to convey the profound impact of the 9/11 attacks on ordinary individuals, their families, and loved ones (Anker, 2014). He draws upon this pain to exemplify the virtue of Americans who experience sorrow over those injured or killed by terrorism. Bush underscores the brutality of the assaults by identifying the victims as ordinary individuals with whom the American public can readily identify. Their suffering becomes the suffering of all Americans. "Melodrama confers virtue upon innocent people who unjustly suffer from dominating power, and this is part of the genre's cultural work; in this deployment of melodrama, all Americans suffer from the attack, and thus all share in the nation's virtue" (p. 5). The anguish experienced by children who have lost their parents is linked to the country as a whole, with the children's innocence being associated with that of the nation. The nation is unified in its collective experience of terror. The speech emphasises the profound sense of injustice and fear evoked by the attacks, "American exceptionalism", and the "masculine" imperative to protect, which serve to unite people and validate the legitimacy of war (p. 5). The collective grief that unites the nation has already validated the use of melodramatic conventions, which are employed here to evoke the experience of war. As demonstrated in this speech, melodrama asserts that the emotional response of sorrow is tantamount to the endorsement of war.

In the contemporary era, the concept of victimhood has become a prominent means of asserting one's voice in a public sphere that often fails to acknowledge the legitimacy of various forms of expression (Elsaesser, 2016). To illustrate, if we consider the public sphere of television, we can identify a space legitimately occupied by members of the public who can be described as victims or survivors. Victimhood "becomes a strong subject position when narratives of the self no longer make sense as either retrospective biographies or prospective life projects" (Elsaesser,

2016, p. 36). Nevertheless, the political aspect of victimhood encompasses the considerable disparities in the distribution of resources and essentials across the globe. Victimhood has become a subject position that is widely embraced in contemporary society. It serves to assuage feelings of guilt by indirectly acknowledging the facts of a situation, thereby representing a symbolic act of solidarity. Victimhood is a "compromise and thus also a compromised act" (Elsaesser, 2016, p. 37), enabling individuals to continue with their lives and avoid the burden of personal accountability. This is why melodrama in the present era serves as *a* placeholder "for all the asymmetries and imbalances, for all the excesses seeking appeasement, for all the outrages yearning for redress and all the injustices thirsting for retribution, for all the feelings of guilt that act as forms of empowerment" (Elsaesser, 2016, p. 37). In a certain Judeo-Christian framework, suffering and injury are seen as a form of deserved recompense (Williams, 2016). The injury itself, which prompts the recognition of the moral flaws of the perpetrator and the virtues of the victim, is the foundation of a form of moralism that is fundamentally resentful and pervasive in melodrama (Williams, 2016). This is evident in both mass entertainment action melodramas and the narratives that nations themselves construct about their own righteousness. The story of the conquest of the West and the story of the invasion of Iraq is an illustrative example. In the American popular imagination, there is a tendency to portray oneself as a victim of external aggression. The conviction that Americans are morally entitled to conquer and invade is predicated on the assumption that Americans have suffered. This is an illustration of the misguided melodramatic sense of justice that pervades our collective consciousness.

This article examines John Updike's *Terrorist* (2006), analysing its use of the rhetoric of victimhood and the dynamics of melodramatic political discourse. The analysis is conducted through a close textual examination, divided into two key constructs: The first construct, "Victims," examines the portrayal of American characters as potential victims and the implications of their victimisation. The second construct, "Aggressors," investigates the representation of terrorists and their oppositional stance toward Americans.

VICTIMS

In John Updike's *Terrorist*, it is challenging for Americans to grasp the rationale behind attacks on their citizens. They are the innocent victims of an enemy who hates Americans for reasons that are not apparent. The Secretary of Homeland Security, in the presence of his aide, Hermione, ponders, "[w]hy do they want to do these horrible things? Why do they hate us? What's to hate?" (Updike, 2006, p. 48). The absence of a discernible rationale, apart from an unjustified and blind hatred, leaves the perpetrators' intentions opaque. Updike establishes a distinction between "us," the American people, and "them," the terrorists, questioning the motivation behind the desire to harm Americans, suggesting that it must be driven by pure hatred. Such a dichotomy serves to accentuate the sense of virtue of Americans and to avoid any understanding of the geopolitical motives, let alone the humanity, of those adversaries (Herman, 2015).

A stark dichotomy is drawn between two diametrically opposed entities: those who espouse similar Western secular perspectives on life and religion and those who adhere tenaciously to their faith. The Secretary of the United States Department of Homeland Security thinks that:

> The enemy cannot believe that democracy and consumerism are fevers in the blood of Everyman, an outgrowth of each individual's instinctive optimism and desire for freedom. Even for a stout churchgoer like the Secretary, a will-of-God fatalism and a heavy bet on the next world has been left behind in the Dark Ages. Those who still hold to the bet have one thing going for them: they are eager to die.
>
> (Updike, 2006, pp. 47-48)

The Secretary employs the word "cannot" to underscore the futility and impossibility of Muslims altering their circumstances, even if they aspire to do so. This is analogous to the Orientalist representation of the Orient as static (Said, 1979), whereby Muslims are rendered incapable of developing the significance and primacy of democracy. The text presents a contrasting view of the role of religion in the lives of Americans and their enemies. It illustrates that even a devout Christian, such as the Secretary of the US Department of Homeland Security, does not believe in the afterlife. Conversely, Muslims still adhere to beliefs that are perceived as being representative of more traditional "Dark Ages" beliefs (p. 48). The willingness of Muslims to die in order to gain entry to Paradise is juxtaposed with the lack of such willingness among non-Muslims, who do not rely on such beliefs. This simplistic portrayal of terrorism perpetrated by Muslims is further reinforced by the notion that death is viewed by them as a shortcut to Eden. Consequently, they are prepared to die and inflict death on their enemies through terrorist means in order to attain eternity in Paradise. Once again, terrorism is situated within a principally religious framework, while the political factors that contribute to its occurrence are ignored.

The novel presents a clear divergence between the American and Middle Eastern contexts, with the former serving to emphasise the latter's exceptionalism and innocence. Habib Chehab, a Lebanese-American who immigrated to the United States at an early age and subsequently achieved considerable success in business, attempts to persuade Ahmad that he is unable to comprehend the "hatred" that terrorists direct towards America. While the United States is characterised by a lack of violence and a strong sense of community, his "own country," Lebanon, is rife with hatred and tribal affiliations, where "everybody is in tribes" (Updike, 2006, p. 146). In the United States of America:

> Christian, Jew, Arab, indifferent, black, white, in between—everybody gets along. If you have something good to sell, people buy. If you have a job to do, people do it. Everything is clear on the surface. Makes business easy. From the beginning, no trouble. We thought in the Old World [Middle East] to set our prices high, then be bargained down. [. . .] We understand, and put on the furniture prices we expect getting—lower prices—and more come. I say to Maurice, 'This [America] is an honest and friendly country. We will have no problems.'
>
> (Updike, 2006, pp. 146-147)

In drawing comparisons between Lebanon and the United States, Updike attempts to delineate the contrasting characteristics of Arab and American societies. He highlights the prevalence of hatred, racism, and insecurity among Arabs, contrasting it with the perception of Americans as friendly, tolerant, and peaceful. Consequently, Habib is astonished by the fact that a country as benevolent as the United States is subjected to such hatred. Additionally, the ethical superiority of Americans, particularly in comparison to Lebanese and Arab individuals, is reinforced by highlighting the dishonest conduct observed in Lebanese trade practices, which contrasts with the ethical standards demonstrated by Americans. The differentiation between Americans and Lebanese is presented as an act of deflection, whereby the former is depicted as innocent and victims of unwarranted animosity. This portrayal serves to discredit the Arab-directed hatred, violence, and resentment that are often directed towards Americans.

In the context of a novel that explores terrorism perpetrated by Muslims, it is noteworthy that the Jewish character, as portrayed by Jack Levy, is depicted in stark contrast to the portrayal of Ahmad's character. Ahmad is a young, intolerant, all-hating, extremist student (Updike, 2006), whereas Jack is an old, tolerant, affectionate, moderate guidance counsellor. Ahmad, who subsequently drops out of school, attempts to bomb a tunnel and kill as many Americans as possible. Jack, in contrast, endeavours to persuade him to pursue the academic track and risks his life to prevent Ahmad from murdering those who are innocent of any wrongdoing.

The United States is a victim of its own commitment to freedom and globalisation, which has created a situation in which individuals with malevolent intentions have been able to gain access to the country and launch attacks against its citizens. In his capacity as an American citizen, Jack Levy offers a critique of the efficacy of American security policies in preventing attacks perpetrated by individuals or groups identifying as Islamic and motivated by a terrorist ideology. Accordingly, Levy cautions that:

> America is paved solid with fat and tar, a coast-to-coast tarbaby where we're all stuck. Even our vaunted freedom is nothing much to be proud of with the Commies out of the running; it just makes it easier for terrorists to move about, rent aeroplanes and vans and set up Web sites. Religious fanatics and computer geeks: the combination seems strange to his old-fashioned sense of the reason-versus-faith divide. Those creeps who flew the planes into the World Trade Center had good technical educations. The ringleader had a German degree in city planning; he should have redesigned New Prospect.
>
> (Updike, 2006, p. 27)

Levy asserts that terrorists have exploited the freedoms afforded to them in the United States to implement their terrorist schemes. Levy characterises religious extremists as a new threat to global stability, replacing the previously perceived adversaries, namely communism and "Commies." He warns that Americans must be vigilant to ensure that their freedoms do not facilitate attacks on American soil perpetrated by those fanatics. He asserts that when Arabs are presented with the opportunity to utilise technology, they will employ it for the purpose of terrorising innocent individuals rather than for the advancement and development of their countries.

In Updike's novel, Muslims are perceived as benevolent only to the extent that they are not influenced by Islamic teachings and have undergone a process of Westernisation. Chehab, a Muslim who is "very enamoured of George Washington" (Updike, 2006, p. 180) and not an "observant" Muslim (p. 165), assumes the role of an FBI undercover agent and ultimately meets his demise at the hands of terrorists just prior to the conclusion of the novel. Charlie jeopardises his own life for the benefit of the United States of America by playing a significant role in the exposure of the terrorist plot to detonate the Lincoln Tunnel. He is subsequently revealed to be an American hero who has "died for his country" (p. 291), yet only insofar as he has become less Muslim. Irrespective of their social status or role within the American socio-political structure, United States citizens are positioned as innocent casualties of an adversarial entity that exploits their liberty and receptivity to other religions.

AGGRESSORS

In contrast to the majority of post-9/11 novels, including Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* and Andre Dubus III's *The Garden of Last Days*, John Updike's *Terrorist* depicts an internal conspiracy that endangers the lives of Americans. The protagonist of Updike's novel, Ahmad Ashmawy, is an

American of Egyptian descent. His father is an Egyptian exchange student who disappeared long ago, while his mother is an American liberal. Despite having never been abroad, Ahmad is distinguished from other Americans by his religion, Islam, and the origin of his father, Egypt. He is compared to the season of spring; “Ahmad is eighteen. This is early April; again green sneaks, seed by seed, into die drab city's earthy crevices” (Updike, 2006, p. 4). Ahmad's presence in the United States can be seen as a metaphorical representation of the spread of terrorism. His father, an Egyptian exchange student, introduced him to the country by marrying Ahmad's mother, an American, and impregnating her with his seed. The narrator's warning to Americans about the dangers of Islam, symbolically represented as a green threat, highlights the potential for terrorism to insidiously take root and flourish within the American social fabric.

Ahmad's views become increasingly extreme, even exceeding those of his mentor, Shaikh Rashid. He criticises the latter's willingness to mitigate the strong influence of Islam's teachings. Ahmad denounces Shaikh Rashid for attempting to "soften the Prophet's words, to make them blend with human reason, but they were not meant to blend: they invade our human softness like a sword" (Updike, 2006, p. 7). For Ahmad, the words of the Prophet possess a compelling force that transcends reason, exerting influence upon humans without the necessity of rational inquiry. As the Prophet's words "invade" "like a sword", reason is not a prerequisite for understanding (p. 7). The use of the terms "sword" and "invade" serves to reinforce Western perspectives on Islam, suggesting that the religion has been spread by military force rather than through any reasonable basis.

Ahmad's humanity is contingent upon the absence of religious influence, which distinguishes him from others. Therefore, in the days preceding the plan to detonate explosives in the Lincoln Tunnel, Ahmad reflects on a dead insect in a “lordly fashion, feeling huge” (Updike, 2006, p. 253). However, “he shies from touching this mysterious fallen bit of life.” (p. 253). Though some other school boys "would simply crush this irritating presence with his foot, for Ahmad, the option does not exist" (p. 253). Ahmad, whose benevolent nature precludes him from causing harm to inanimate objects, is nevertheless inclined to engage in the deliberate destruction of numerous innocent human lives in other contexts. Updike's narrative elucidates that the Islam that prompts Ahmad's metamorphosis is the very same Islam that transforms ordinary individuals into radical extremists and terrorists. Islam is portrayed as the driving force behind the incongruity in Ahmad's character, as it incites him to perpetrate merciless actions. It is the wellspring of Muslim fanaticism and bigotry towards those of other faiths.

The same conclusion regarding the detrimental impact of Islam on its adherents can be drawn from the narrative's conclusion. As Ahmad drives the vehicle laden with explosives on the way to the Lincoln Tunnel, Jack Levy anticipates Ahmad's intentions, ascends the vehicle and assumes a position adjacent to him with the intention of dissuading him from carrying out his mission. However, Ahmad affirms to Levy that "God says, in the Qur'an, *Be ruthless to unbelievers*. Burn them, crush them, because they have forgotten God” [original emphasis] (Updike, 2006, p. 294). As demonstrated in the above example, when there is a lack of pertinent verses from the Quran or sayings attributed to Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) that substantiate the views of the Islamic antagonist, the novel instead relies on the interpretation of the Quran by Muslim characters in support of these views. Although the use of italics serves to distinguish the Quranic quotation from Ahmad's words, Ahmad offers an interpretation of the mistranslated verse, underscoring Islam's role in perpetuating the killing of non-believers.

Shaikh Rashid represents an example of the malevolent Arab individuals who exploit their residency in the United States to plot against it and attempt to inflict maximum destruction upon it. He is a Yemeni religious mentor of Ahamd who is responsible for instilling in him a profound hatred of the West and for recruiting him to perpetrate a terrorist attack in the United States. He informs Ahmad that there are numerous enthusiastic terrorists residing within the United States who are "eager for a glorious name and the assurance of eternal bliss" (Updike, 2006, p. 237). Rashid and his ilk appear to be prevalent and poised for a decisive action, which they anticipate will be a "blow from within" (p. 214). The portrayal of Arabs in this context suggests an exploitation of the country's welcoming policies towards outsiders for personal gain. The rights afforded to them in the United States are being used to attack a country that has tolerated their religion and permitted their presence and prosperity within its borders.

Both Ahmad and Sheikh Rashid perceive their existence as a "distraction" from the Day After (Updike, 2006, p. 109). It is evident that for both Muslim characters, life is perceived as a mere "distraction" from the higher form of existence striven for through jihad. In light of this, it can be posited that for those of the Muslim faith, this mortal life serves as a mere conduit to the next. Islam is presented here as a religion that espouses the annihilation of those who do not believe through jihad, with the objective of attaining a higher degree of being for its adherents. Consequently, Islam can, as previously stated, be considered a destructive ideology that is hostile towards those who do not share its belief system and, therefore, represents a genuine threat to all of humanity.

Ahmad is presented as humane only to illustrate the potentially negative impact of Islamic teachings on an individual's character and behaviour. Ahmad engages in a discussion with Shaikh Rashid regarding a Quranic verse, which states, "[l]et not the infidels deem that the length of days we give them is good for them! We only give them the length of days that they may increase their sins! And a shameful chastisement shall be their lot" [Author's italics] (Updike, 2006, p. 76). He inquires of Shaikh Rashid whether there is a "sadistic" element in the taunt and in the multitude of analogous verses (p. 76), to which Sheikh Rashid responds:

> The cockroaches that slither out from the baseboard and from beneath the sink—do you pity them? The flies that buzz around the food on the table, walking on it with dirty feet that have just danced on faeces and carrion—do you pity them?
>
> (p. 76)

Sheikh Rashid's comparison of non-Muslims to insects and his characterisation of their actions as "dirty" demonstrate his profound level of contempt, enmity and antagonism towards non-Muslims (p. 76). To ascribe greater weight to the negative interpretation of the Quranic verse in question, the character Sheikh Rashid, a Muslim cleric, is introduced with the aim of reinforcing the antagonist interpretation and underscoring its sadistic implications. This example serves to illustrate the notion that Islam is both the instigator and the catalyst for Muslims' antagonism towards non-Muslims.

Another Muslim character, depicted as leveraging American tolerance to propagate extremist rhetoric and incite terrorism, is the imam, who delivers a speech at Ahmad's school graduation ceremony. In this speech, he "twangs out a twist of Arabic as if sticking a dagger into the silent audience" (Updike, 2006, p. 111). He asserts that God is the "Conquering! [. . .] To those whom the Straight Path leads into danger, we repeat the words of the Prophet: 'Say not of those who are slain on God's path they are Dead; nay, they are Living!' (pp. 111-112). In his speech, the Iman reiterates the expansionist and aggressive nature of Islam, as well as its status as an enemy religion. He describes God as "the Conquering" and asserts that those who are killed while fighting

enemies will not truly die but rather will remain alive. Updike references a verse from the Quran and attributes it to the Prophet. Nevertheless, what is more striking is the incongruity of such a discourse of martyrdom at a high school graduation. Nevertheless, it serves to foreshadow the antagonist-based ideology that pervades Islamic thought and exerts a pervasive influence over Muslims, even in the context of an ostensibly inconsequential event. The content of the speech is more akin to rhetoric directed towards a combatant army than to an audience of graduating high school students. The novel's portrayal of the imam offering a benediction as a bribe to Muslims serves to criticise both those who facilitate such an opportunity for Muslims to deliver their speeches and the voices of Muslims themselves. In another instance within the novel, American freedom is critiqued for providing a conducive environment for 9/11 Muslim terrorists and facilitating their activities, thereby making it convenient for terrorists.

The narrative employs a juxtaposition between Jack and Ahmad at the graduation ceremony to illustrate Jack's innocence and to highlight Ahmad's anomalous position in the context of American society, which is characterised by a Judeo-Christian tradition of peace. Jack considers the plight of the Jewish people and becomes visibly emotional; he "begins to choke up. The docility of human beings, their basic willingness to please. Europe's Jews dressing up in their best clothes to be marched off to the death camps" (Updike, 2006, p. 111). A comparative analysis of Muslims and Jews reveals a significant divergence between the two groups. Jack is a peaceful Jew with a history of traumatic experiences, while Ahmad is a Muslim extremist driven to violence against non-Muslims. In the context of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, while verses from the Quran are employed to illustrate the aggressive nature of Islam and Muslims, this is set against the backdrop of Jack's peaceful and benevolent character, which is used to demonstrate the distinctiveness of Muslims in comparison to Jews and Christians. In Updike's *Terrorist* (2006), Islam is portrayed as the driving force behind terrorism perpetrated by Muslims, similar to Andre Dubus III's *The Garden of Last Days* (2009) (Alosman et al., 2018a). As a result, Islam is largely perceived as the antithesis of the values espoused by the West. It is presented as a disruptive force that fosters Muslims' animosity towards Western countries.

CONCLUSION

John Updike's *Terrorist* presents a dramatic account of the struggles of virtuous Americans confronted with the injustices of bigoted adversaries. Both Jack Levy and Charlie Chehab epitomise the archetypal American victims, willing to risk their own lives in order to protect the lives of their fellow Americans. While Chehab is executed by terrorists after being discovered as an American undercover agent for the FBI, Jack succeeds in dissuading Ahmad from executing his terrorist plan to explode a tunnel full of innocent Americans. These exemplary Americans endure and risk their lives for their benevolent homeland, which unwittingly permits a malevolent adversary within its borders. Both men demonstrate the American hero who confronts an immoral and cruel ideology and acts of terrorism and sacrifices his life for the betterment of their country.

The representation of the 'good' Americans is juxtaposed with that of the 'bad' Muslim characters, namely Ahmad and Sheikh Rashid. These figures characterise the antithesis of American values, including tolerance and acceptance of other races and religions. Both characters exhibit a relentless pursuit of inflicting death and destruction upon Americans, driven by a religiously motivated hatred and a strong desire to die in order to achieve Paradise. The novel employs a melodramatic political discourse, emphasising the vulnerability of Americans and the

malevolence of their adversaries' violence. This portrayal justifies and encourages a retaliatory response, including military action in order to protect Americans.

The present study reveals the underlying mechanics of melodramatic political discourse in Updike's novel, thereby elucidating its implications and rendering them susceptible to critical scrutiny. This, in turn, may serve to challenge and prevent such exploitative tactics, which are of paramount importance in light of the ongoing global conflicts. It is, therefore, imperative to undertake further research in this area, with a view to fostering greater awareness of the potential dangers inherent to the use of polarised rhetoric in times of strife. Further investigation is required in order to elucidate the impact of melodramatic representations on the formation of public opinion with respect to violent conflicts, with a view to identifying any potential implications for future political decision-making.

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