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## Jihadi fiction: radicalisation narratives in the contemporary novel

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### ABSTRACT

As Ulrich Beck suggests in *World at Risk*, fear of Islamist extremism has become a dominant strand in contemporary perceptions of risk. In the media, a set of ‘stock’ radicalisation narratives have emerged in which, typically, a misguided loner is brainwashed into embracing a violent perversion of Islam. In the background, the wider Muslim community is accused of a dangerous complicity and complacency. This essay explores some notable attempts in fiction to unpick such popular radicalisation narratives. In novels by John Updike and Sunjeev Sahota, the psychological and faith dimensions of suicide bombing are a key focus, attempting to explore from the inside, how an educated young Muslim might be impelled along the path to martyrdom. In texts by Mohsin Hamid and J.M. Coetzee, the ideological staging of ‘radicalisation’ and ‘fundamentalism’ themselves is brought into question. Current counterterrorist measures include indefinite detention of US citizens without trial, while in the UK, over two million public sector workers have been recruited to the largest surveillance exercise ever codified in British law. In this context, the essay shows how recent fiction has attempted to trouble the frames of representation through which a perpetual state-of-emergency is passed off as our ‘new normal’.

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Since 9/11, fear of Islamist violence has become increasingly dominant in Western projections of risk. In the US, the spectre of militant Islam may change form, from George W. Bush’s ‘axis of evil’<sup>1</sup> and Barack Obama’s ‘heart of darkness’,<sup>2</sup> but it has remained a constant presence in governmental rhetoric. ‘Risk does not mean catastrophe’, as Ulrich Beck says in *World at Risk*. ‘Risk means the *anticipation* of catastrophe. Risks are about staging the future in the present’. If in contemporary times the West finds itself confronting a frightening new uncertainty, he argues, it is impossible to understand this without turning to the question of representation. ‘Without

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techniques of visualization, without symbolic forms, without mass media, without art', he argues, 'risks are nothing at all'.<sup>3</sup>

Through the media, we have been made acutely familiar with our own precarity: a man falling to his death from the North Tower, body parts among the smashed carriages of commuter trains, a wall of flowers and candles outside a Paris café. The emergence of 'radicalisation' as the principal threat, however, took rather longer. Prior to the World Trade Centre attacks, as Elizabeth Poole and others have shown, the idea that Western Muslims might pose a special security threat surfaced very rarely in mainstream reporting.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, even in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, speculation on the risk of Islamist violence focused almost exclusively on the idea of foreign born sleeper cells waiting to inflict atrocities on Western cities. The bombing of the London Underground in July 2005, however, saw a major shift of attention towards the idea of the danger posed by home-grown extremists. Following that event, as Mike Featherstone and others have noted, reporting around Islamist extremism was forced to negotiate a major contradiction, especially in Britain. On the one hand, by 2005 there was an already-established tendency to reproduce the Manichean and absolutist terror discourse associated with the Bush White House. When it came to representing the idea of UK-born extremists, however, there was also a conflicting pressure, 'the need to present an idea of inclusion in post-MacPherson Britain'.<sup>5</sup> In one sense, the identification of 'radicalisation' as a target for corrective action can be seen as a response to this contradiction. Indeed, in their study *Radicalisation and Media*, Akil Awan, Andrew Hoskins and Ben O'Loughlin discuss the emergence of a 'radicalisation industry' in this period, comprising 'think tanks, academics, private security firms, religious clerics and various other experts',<sup>6</sup> whose commentary in response to successive terrorist incidents was to provide staple material for subsequent media coverage.<sup>7</sup> Out of this contradiction, one particular style of radicalisation narrative seems to have emerged as dominant. According to this account:

Malignant 'radicalisers' prey upon 'vulnerable' individuals who are already Muslim or might convert to Islam; if only the individuals' families, communities or the state had helped them to become more resilient and resistant to radicalizing influences, for instance by helping them realize that the radicalisers misrepresent Islam or that British values are compatible with and complementary to Islam.<sup>8</sup>

As Awan *et al.* note, even in the 'information-void' that often characterises the early phase of breaking news reporting around terrorist incidents, media stagings of the Islamist threat very rarely incorporated content produced by Islamists themselves, despite its availability via the web and social media. A notable exception to this was provided in 2014 by the emergence of Jihadi John, whose incongruous appearance in beheading videos, dressed as a ninja and with a vocal style borrowed from London rapper L. Jinny, did not fail to

provoke a frenzy of horrified excitement in the global media. In 2015, sensationalist reporting of British schoolgirls travelling to Islamic State armed with the epilators that would ready them for marriage to Jihadi warriors<sup>9</sup> deepened and intensified the focus on radicalisation, with the UK Parliament's Home Affairs Select Committee warning of the dangers to children, 'radicalized in their bedrooms', while parents looked on oblivious.<sup>10</sup> According to New South Wales Police Minister Troy Grant, 'groomers... do it in different ways. If they want something to happen, they'll sort of put extra resources into getting the kids to turn quickly. It can be as short as three days'.<sup>11</sup> Such anxieties have found rapid expression in policy. In Britain most recently, under the 'Prevent' duty established by the *Counter-Terrorism and Security Act* 2015, over two million public sector workers have been recruited to the largest surveillance and reporting exercise ever enshrined in UK law. Among the new requirements of the duty is that nursery nurses establish 'safeguarding arrangements to [...] prevent radicalisation and extremism' among children in the 0–5 age range.<sup>12</sup> According to David Cameron, UK Prime Minister at the time, the fight against Jihadism and its 'energising' lure to British young people has become 'the struggle of our generation'.<sup>13</sup>

As Arun Kundnani suggests in *The Muslims are Coming!*, two dominant strands are discernible in the theories of radicalisation that underpin transatlantic counter-terrorism strategy. The first, allied to what Mahmood Mamdani calls 'culture talk',<sup>14</sup> characterises Islamic culture as a whole as pre-modern and resistant to change, with an ideological bent that is fundamentally antagonistic to the West. The second (ostensibly more liberal) strand concerns itself with drawing a distinction between good and bad Muslims. During the Twentieth Century, this latter account suggests, Islamic culture allowed itself to be twisted in some quarters into a dangerous 'totalitarian ideology – Islamism – on the models of communism and fascism',<sup>15</sup> and it is this perversion of Islam that needs to be defeated. As Kundnani argues, what these theories have in common is a desire, on the one hand, to locate the ongoing threat of terrorist violence entirely within the Muslim community itself, and on the other hand to elide or obscure the historical and political context within which anti-Western sentiment takes form. While the FBI and other security agencies focus on schematising the psychological processes that might lead young people into violent extremism, they determinedly ignore 'the ways in which Western states themselves have radicalized',<sup>16</sup> particularly in terms of the readiness with which they themselves resort to violence. Citing the FBI Counterterrorism Division's own handbook *The Radicalization Process: From Conversion to Jihad*, Kundnani says:

In the FBI's model, what they call 'jihadist' ideology is taken to be the driver that turns young men and women into terrorists. They pass through four stages: preradicalisation, identification, indoctrination, and action. In the second

stage, growing a beard, starting to wear traditional Islamic clothing, and becoming alienated from one's former life are listed as indicators; 'increased activity in a pro-Muslim social group or political cause' is a sign of stage three, one level away from becoming an active terrorist.<sup>17</sup>

Despite what might seem to be its flagrant reductionism, this approach to the psychological modelling of potential terrorists is reflected in a surprising amount of post-9/11 writing. Notable in this regard is Ed Husain's *The Islamist: Why I Became an Islamic Fundamentalist, What I Saw Inside, and Why I Left*, which tracks its protagonist from impressionable young Muslim to Hizb ut-Tahrir activist – only a step away, it is suggested, from a career in violent jihad. As in the FBI's account, the young person's journey into Islamism is framed in this text, almost entirely in terms of a teenager's naiveté and desire for special status, while the worsening political climate, including rising Islamophobia and Western tolerance and sponsorship of mass violence against Muslims, are for the most part peripheral. In other recent writing, however, both the contexts to radicalisation, and radicalisation's emergence as a primary risk in Western consciousness, are given much more serious consideration. The purpose of this essay is to explore some of that writing, looking at the ways in which, in novels by Mohsin Hamid, Sunjeev Sahota, John Updike and J.M. Coetzee, we are invited to question what we think we know about radicalisation, jihadis and the counterterrorist response to them.

### **'You guys have got some serious problems with fundamentalism'**

In Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* the one-sidedness of media discourse on jihadi terrorism is targeted in a particularly interesting way, through a Pakistani Muslim's uninterrupted monologue to an American, who is voiceless throughout. Its title, certainly, implies a particular kind of lure to the Western reader, with its implicit promise of insights into the mind-set of an extremist. What the novel actually delivers, however, is a much more thought-provoking exploration of the ways in which the jihadi 'risk' has taken form since 9/11, as projection and anticipated threat. The novel's setting (a Lahore café at evening) and what happens there (one man tells his life story to another) are, in one sense, innocuous enough. On the level of affect, however, the mood Hamid works to evoke from the outset is one of uneasy anticipation. The speaker, Changez, a bearded local with a suspiciously over-polite manner, is engaged in some manipulation that, unsettlingly, is kept obscure to the reader. He steers the American to an unfamiliar part of the old market: a hunt, or seduction of some kind is under way, yet its nature is left disturbingly unclear. 'I hope you will not mind my saying so', Changez says:

but the frequency and purposefulness with which you glance about – a steady tick-tick-tick seeming to beat in your head as you move your gaze from one point to the next – brings to mind the behaviour of an animal that has ventured too far from its lair and is now, in unfamiliar surroundings, uncertain whether it is predator or prey!<sup>18</sup>

Having established this tense narrative frame, Hamid then introduces a different kind of cross-cultural encounter, with Changez' back story as a Pakistani Muslim working his way to the heart of corporate America, who finds his life radically changed by 9/11. A bright and ambitious young man, this Muslim is offered a scholarship to Princeton and a training place at a top New York consultancy, and falls in love with an American girl. When Islamists strike the city, however, he finds himself a stranger again, and is forced to reassess himself and his priorities. At the end of the novel we see Changez back in Pakistan, reinvented as a radical teacher and activist: in the final scene, he leads the American out of the café and deeper into the old district. One of them may be about to carry out 'the bloodiest of tasks',<sup>19</sup> but the novel ends before we see what transpires.

In interview in 2009 and 2010, Hamid described his narrative strategy in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* as a deliberate stylisation, creating a 'strain between a non-real formal structure and a realist narrative'.<sup>20</sup> In the 'non-real' café scenario, the effect of creating 'a conversation of which you hear only half', he suggests, is precisely to open a space of discomfort, 'a vacuum that the reader is invited to fill'.<sup>21</sup> Even in the 'realist' sections, however, Hamid's portrayal is unsettlingly lacking in transparency. The reader is unsure what to believe, firstly, because Changez' monologue repeatedly signals its own unreliability. 'But your expression, sir, tells me that you think something is amiss', he says to the American, 'I assure you [...] there is no reason why this incident would be more likely to be false than any of the others I have related to you'.<sup>22</sup> Secondly, in Hamid's approach to characterisation, it is clear that suspension-of-disbelief is not the desired effect. His principal actors: the American, broad-chested and buzz-cut, with a 'glint of metal'<sup>23</sup> under his jacket; Erica, the tragic and fragile lover and Changez himself, a bearded and duplicitous Muslim all seem – for a work of literary fiction – oddly stereotypical. Mirroring the one-sided dialogue they are, in a sense, half-characters, with the consequence that in each case the reader is set the task of 'flesh[ing] out what that character is'.<sup>24</sup> If in the author's words, the American is 'a belligerent crew cut killer', Changez is a 'fundamentalist' and Erica is of a 'mad-woman-by-guys school of writing', in other words, Hamid intentionally draws them in those unsatisfactory ways in order to draw out the reader's own assumptions.<sup>25</sup>

In its broad strokes, this metafictional strategy is easily recognisable from the work of such writers as Salman Rushdie. Its application to a 9/11 context, however, allows Hamid to play with the path-to-radicalisation narrative in

some interesting ways. In Changez' interactions with the American, as we have seen, the sense of risk he creates encourages us to anticipate some kind of 'fundamentalist' act and indeed, as we learn, there is a strand of extremism in Changez' past. As the narrative unfolds, however, that fundamentalism turns out to be of an unexpected type. He has indeed been inducted into a worldview that is violent and monological – in his apprenticeship at the city firm Underwood Samson. A willing functionary caught young by the organisation, he has been easily assimilated to the corporation's mind-set:

*Focus on the Fundamentals.* This was Underwood Samson's guiding principle, drilled into us since our first day at work. It mandated a single-minded attention to financial detail, teasing out the true nature of those drivers that determine an asset's value.<sup>26</sup>

As the company prepares weak targets for acquisition or downsizing, Changez has been schooled in the arts of pitilessness, 'headcount reduction' and the cutting of 'fat'.<sup>27</sup> The ideology he has swallowed may not be of an Islamist stripe, but he has been radicalised nevertheless.

The effect of this ironic reversal, clearly, is to place the idea of 'fundamentalism' in question for the reader. In Hamid's handling of 9/11 itself, moreover, there is an equally interesting provocation. In response to the attacks, the first emotion he gives Changez is pleasure. Despite his American degree, job and infatuation with an American girl, his protagonist cannot resist being 'caught up in the *symbolism* of it all, the fact that someone had so visibly brought America to its knees'.<sup>28</sup> In the affair with Erica, however, the symbolism is rearranged once again. Following the attacks on the towers Erica is, like New York as a whole, in the grip of an intense mourning. Overpowering her attempts to repel him, Changez exploits her febrile state of mind to get her into his bed and have sex with her. During the act of penetration Erica's vagina appears like an open wound to him, 'giving our sex a violent undertone' and as he is about to finish, we see her shuddering 'grievously, almost mortally'.<sup>29</sup> In order to bed her, Changez has also been forced to undergo a symbolic death, by taking on the role of Erica's dead boyfriend Chris. The 9/11 analogy is unmissable, but again Hamid inserts a striking reversal of expectations. Far from being a triumph or vindication, his moment of conquest brings a sense of loss, shame and humiliation. In an essay on the novel, Peter Morey offers an interesting commentary on Hamid's framing here:

Erica as a symbolic correlative of her country – Am/Erica so to speak – is forced upon the reader's attention, as are other heavily loaded correspondences: Changez' company, Underwood Samson, has the initials U.S.; and the Chris (t) with whom Erica becomes increasingly fixated is, for Changez, 'a religion that would not accept me as a convert'. Such over-determined symbolism at first seems like a flaw: a grossly simple foreclosing of the reading experience

forcing us to understand the novel as an allegory. However, viewed another way – and remembering the shifty nature of our focaliser – it can be read as consistent with the novel's constant attention to fiction-making: what Changez describes as 'the confession that implicates its audience'.<sup>30</sup>

Read allegorically, as Morey suggests here, Changez' penetration of Erica seems to complicate, rather than clarify our understanding of his relationship to the US. As the narrative proceeds, his transition from corporate 'golden-haired boy'<sup>31</sup> to radical agitator is also riddled with ambiguity. He grows a beard, courting hostility from traumatised New Yorkers, but nevertheless remains ambivalent about his loyalties. 'I was not certain where I belonged – in New York, in Lahore, in both, in neither'.<sup>32</sup> As political and military tensions rise in Pakistan, his political awareness sharpens, but not as hostility towards American foreign policy so much as disappointment in its failure to stand against the old rival, India. Encouraged by a Chilean client, he begins to reflect on his 'janissary' status, as a foot soldier of Empire turned against his own people. Even when, back in Pakistan, we see him denouncing the US to the media, however, we are encouraged to see that his outcry is also a kind of love letter. 'I had, in my own manner, issued a firefly's glow bright enough to transcend the boundaries of continents and civilizations. If Erica was watching ...'<sup>33</sup> Back in the Lahore market, despite all of the veiled intimations, we do not know what Changez' position or intentions are. A grim-faced waiter follows down the dark street where he has led the American, but it could be a 'coincidence'.<sup>34</sup> A glint of metal underneath the American's jacket catches the light, but it could be 'the holder of [his] business cards'.<sup>35</sup> Changez hopes he will not 'resist',<sup>36</sup> but perhaps only a handshake is in the offing. One thing only remains clear: Hamid's teasing refusal to offer closure.

After 9/11, as Arun Kundnani suggests, the tenor of public discourse towards Muslims in the US and elsewhere in the West was often striking in its hostility and reductiveness. With distaste, he quotes Martin Amis who, discussing the 'Muslim problem' in *The Second Plane*, asserts that 'the impulse towards rational inquiry is by now very weak in the rank and file of the Muslim male'.<sup>37</sup> In this context, many readers picking up *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* will undoubtedly have chosen the novel expecting to find an opposing and balancing account, setting out a Muslim perspective on the attacks, on Islamic extremism and, perhaps, on the War on Terror. In fact, what Hamid delivers is an intervention of a different kind – an injunction to those readers to question their own assumptions, to think again about the complex relationship between Muslims and the US after 9/11. As he says in interview, 'I'm trying to create a Petri dish in which organisms interested in that question can flourish. [...] I really do believe that it is at least in part the job of the novelist to re-complicate what has been oversimplified'.<sup>38</sup>

This self-reflexive and metafictional approach in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* strikes an interesting contrast to other recent attempts to explore ideas of



risk and Islamic extremism through fiction. In *Ours are the Streets*, certainly, Sunjeev Sahota's approach sticks much more closely to the traditional novelistic virtues of psychological depth and realism, attempting to put a human face on the threat of jihadi violence. Sahota's novel takes the idea of 'the terrorist who lives among us', but by contrast to Hamid, meticulously avoids any suggestion of stereotyping. Instead of presenting (for example) a teenager radicalised in his bedroom, we are shown a well-integrated family man struggling with ambivalence about his intention to bomb a shopping centre. From the outset, the author is keen to humanise his protagonist, whose first person narrative – written for his white British wife and baby – is presented as 'rummaging about inside myself' to find 'what it really is I want to say'.<sup>39</sup> At least on one level, we are being invited to sympathise with a suicide bomber and the ethical and psychological challenges he faces in preparing to carry out his mission. When Imtiaz first sees the explosive vest he will be using, it is in a box under 'some shelves of kids' photos',<sup>40</sup> and when he surveys the intended bombing site – a well-known shopping centre that many readers will recognise – his account is filled with the innocent sights and sounds of humanity. We are introduced to co-conspirator Charag when they meet to discuss their plan of attack, and we see Charag weaving through the food court's crowds with his tray of pizza; the men's plotting is cut short by a pair of girls 'blowing bubbles down their straws' at the next table.<sup>41</sup> Neither man is presented as a monster, and martyrdom will not be an easy thing for them to accomplish.

In Sahota's framing, the event that initiates Imtiaz's journey towards recruitment as a terrorist is the death of his father, necessitating a visit to the latter's home village near Lahore. In Pakistan, Imtiaz feels a sense of belonging which, as a Muslim, he had never felt in Britain. Sahota portrays the stages of his radicalisation with careful attention to psychological complexity. When the suggestion arises that some of the young men might make a trip to Kashmir, 'to learn about our history, in some of the places where it happened – a kind of field trip, I guess',<sup>42</sup> he is shown as amenable to the idea. Initially, the group are guided by an *Ustaad* from their own village, who attempts to help them understand the contemporary situation through stories of the Mughal kings. For some in the group, however, such teachings are too abstracted from the harsh realities of suffering in Palestine and under the War on Terror. Imtiaz remains detached, reserving his own position. As they move further north into Afghanistan, they are shown a propaganda video depicting Muslim suffering and the casual violence and arrogance of US soldiers but, echoing Imtiaz's own ambivalence, Sahota has him notice the divided reaction of its audience, some of whom 'looked almost bored' and 'had turned away from the screen'.<sup>43</sup> Imtiaz himself, as a Westerner, does not fail to see his own complicity in the abuses depicted, and is further troubled by that. Peer pressure keeps him close to the group, but when the

British are denounced by a local as 'shaitaans',<sup>44</sup> he finds himself struggling to contain his anger: 'I felt like turning round and launching a rock at him. I hated him for attacking my home, I hated myself for not defending it, but more for feeling that I should'.<sup>45</sup>

As all of this suggests, a great deal of narrative effort is invested by Sahota up to this point in attempting to build a sense of psychological complexity into Imtiaz's radicalisation story. Whether surprisingly or not, however, a problem the novel then struggles to overcome is how to narrate his transition from ambivalent fellow-traveller to suicide terrorist. In Afghanistan, we are given touristic glimpses of the mountain caves, long speculated on in the Western media as hiding places for Islamist militants. The boys are going to martyr themselves, it seems, and Imtiaz is introduced to a radical mentor, Abu Bhai, who sets about determining the order in which they will do so. Within minutes of their meeting – in a rapidly drawn and cartoonish passage – Imtiaz offers to 'take the struggle back' to the West.<sup>46</sup> Soon afterwards, the first of his friends is made to blow himself up in an attack on a US army jeep, as it delivers medical supplies to a local doctor. As the young man is reduced to a mess of 'bubbling lumpy grease', the reactions of his comrades waiting nearby, some of them vomiting at the carnage, vary from ambivalence to outright 'disgust'.<sup>47</sup> Among the other victims is a soldier, Mark, with whom Imtiaz has made an acquaintance. Back in England, his fellow *shahid* Charag soon admits that he volunteered as a suicide bomber for the forged papers that would get him to the UK, and has no intention of killing himself or anyone else. What then of Imtiaz's own commitment to the martyrdom he seems ill-fitted – either psychologically or ideologically – to embrace? In terms of Sahota's attempt to stage a human and convincingly psychologised path-to-radicalisation narrative, this final but necessary chapter of the story seems to present a real stumbling block. As the appointed day draws close, the concept is introduced that Imtiaz might be hallucinating, possibly about the whole thing. He meets a 'detective', Tarun, who might or might not be imaginary, who confirms some also-probably paranoid fears about his wife's infidelity. They meet in the shopping centre, which is 'clean empty of everything – people, tables, shops, the lot',<sup>48</sup> but at the same time thronging with crowds. The scene is deliberately disorientating, leaving the reader uncertain how to interpret the protagonist's state of mind. 'Image after image kept on swimming up and dissolving',<sup>49</sup> he tells us. The novel ends with a scene that might be from childhood, or might be the afterlife, in which Imtiaz asks his father to watch over him while he sleeps. His death, we are invited to infer, was the trauma that detached Imtiaz from his former, ordinary life. In what sense he has been radicalised, or has any real commitment to perpetrating mass murder, however, is left radically unclear. Like *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, the narrative ends on a note of ambiguity. In this case however – in the context of a project to

sympathetically explore the mind of a suicide bomber – this seems a significant lack. As a novelist grappling with the risk of jihadi terrorism, Sahota is able to take us some way down an imagined path to radicalisation, but in his focalisation, martyrdom itself remains fearfully unknowable.

## American Jihad

In John Updike's *Terrorist*, both radicalisation and its contexts are portrayed rather differently. Again, the focus of the novel is to explore the risk of a devastating suicide attack, but to do so through an individual, human story. This, however, is very much an American tale, in which the impulse towards extremism is seen as rising, at least in part, out of the bleakness and inanity of contemporary suburban life. Like Sahota, Updike begins by drawing a protagonist who is damaged and ripe for influence. No visit to Afghanistan is required for Ahmad: between the machinations of a local imam and those of a CIA agent, the manipulations all happen close to home, in an ordinary city modelled on Paterson, New Jersey. In Updike's portrayal, Ahmad is an impressionable and (somewhat cartoonishly) zealous American teenager, product of a broken home and in search of self-esteem. Raised non-religious after his Egyptian father abandoned him as a young child, he is described by his mother as 'trusting' and 'easily led'.<sup>50</sup> He has discovered Islam, but also struggles with sexual frustration and jealousy, as he gazes at the off-limits girls with their 'skintight hiphuggers almost low enough – less than a finger's breadth, he has estimated – to release into view the topmost fringe of their pubic curls'.<sup>51</sup> As the novel opens, Ahmad is nearing the end of his high school career. Disillusioned with the godless and neo-colonialist curriculum he is offered there, he has also been receiving instruction at a radical mosque downtown. In its low-key, near invisible premises above a nail salon, a suspect cleric, Shaikh Rashid, has installed himself as a surrogate father. The seeds of jihadi violence, we are invited to infer, may be everywhere. Under the noses of his mother and the staff at his school, Ahmad's radicalisation has been in progress for some time.

As Anna Hartnell suggests in an essay on the novel, one of the interesting features of *Terrorist* is the bold way in which Updike's portrayal challenges the 'presumption of American unity and innocence that has formed the popular horizon for understanding the 2001 attacks'.<sup>52</sup> Going further than that, however, Updike also makes Ahmad the mouthpiece for a caustic appraisal of the society around him. Everywhere our gaze follows his, we are invited to see evidence of moral exhaustion and directionlessness. He looks with loathing at his teachers, with their 'disorderly and wanton and self-indulgent' lives, 'full of lust and fear and infatuation with things that can be bought'.<sup>53</sup> He sees how his peers, godless and without discipline, deface property in a pathetic assertion of self-importance. Downtown, he watches African

Americans ‘whose paltry assets are all on view’ party their days away, with the air of those ‘with little to do and nowhere to go’.<sup>54</sup> In *Ours are the Streets*, as we saw earlier, Sahota invites us to sympathetically explore the psychology of a would-be terrorist. What Updike is attempting here is a little different from that. By comparison to Imtiaz, Ahmad is intolerant and fairly unsympathetic. What we are asked to witness through him, however, is an Islamist’s scathing, contemptuous view of the West. At school Ahmad shares a bond with an African American girl, Joryleen, and we see how easily she slides into prostitution. His rival for her affections, Tylenol, graduates equally easily from schoolyard bully to pimp. In the everyday lives of all around him, we are invited to see ‘the daily squalor, the wear and boredom [...] the silent stuffiness and hopelessness of lives without God as a close companion’.<sup>55</sup> In place of religion, we are shown the temples of consumerism:

*Devils* [...] these towering racks of today’s flimsy fashion, these shelves of chip-power expressed in murderous cartoons prodding the masses to buy, to consume while the world still had resources to consume, to gorge at the trough before death closed greedy mouths forever. In all this wooing of the needy into debt, death was the bottom line. Hurry, buy now, since the after-life’s pure and plain joys are an empty fable.<sup>56</sup>

In the context of the reductive and one-sided War-on-Terror discourse described by Kundnani and others, *Terrorist’s* attempt to voice such a vivid critique of contemporary US culture is certainly a bold one. Indeed, as Peter Herman argues in an essay on the novel, Updike took a serious reputational risk in taking on the project.

‘I guess I have stuck my neck out here in a number of ways,’ Updike told the *New York Times*, adding, ‘I sometimes think, “Why did I do this?” I’m delving into what can be a very sore subject for some people.’ And as the reaction to his novel shows, Updike rightly anticipated harsh responses.<sup>57</sup>

Amid the ubiquitous, sometimes racist and sometimes hysterical commentary on the ‘Arab menace’ in the US after 9/11, what he wanted was to attempt a balancing perspective. ‘I think I felt could understand the animosity and hatred which an Islamic believer would have for our system. Nobody’s trying to see it from that point of view’.<sup>58</sup>

In his handling of Ahmad himself, Updike takes a primarily psychologising approach. Traumatically affected by the loss of his father – like Sahota’s character Imtiaz – he is presented as a perfect target for grooming. As Ahmad is shepherded down the path to martyrdom, he comes under the influence of two handlers. In a meeting with his high school guidance counsellor Jack Levy, we learn that Shaikh Rashid is pressing Ahmad to drop his academic studies for the vocational track. Soon, Rashid will arrange a job for him driving trucks: one of these will eventually contain the four thousand kilos of fertiliser explosive with which he is intended to blow up the Lincoln

Tunnel into Manhattan. The imam is presented as shifty and ambivalent, and as the narrator goes so far as to inform us, ‘the boy knows he is being manipulated’, but nevertheless ‘accedes to the manipulation, since it draws from him a sacred potential’.<sup>59</sup> Rather later, we encounter Charlie Chehab, the trainer who will coach the boy in driving the truck, getting it to the target and triggering its payload. As the full nature of their roles gradually emerges, the presence of these two figures enables Updike to suggest a larger frame of political machination around the boy’s narrative. While teaching an apparently liberal Islam that stresses the need for interpretation rather than blind acceptance Rashid has, we are allowed to realise, long been engaged in conditioning Ahmad to be the sacrificial pawn in a game the boy knows nothing about. Charlie, who Ahmad meets when he starts work as a truck driver, will eventually be revealed as an undercover CIA operative for whom – once again – Ahmad’s own life is secondary and expendable. In this sense, while Updike’s novel begins by presenting us with an individual path-to-radicalisation narrative, what its various plot twists work to suggest is the embeddedness of that story in much larger political and ideological struggles.

For Ahmad himself, the primary struggle he undergoes is one of faith. Beginning with a learnt notion of jihad as violent strife, his journey through the novel sees him pursue that conception to its end point, and finally recognise its wrongfulness. In one sense, this is familiar enough. In post-9/11 political and media discourse on the Islamist risk, the opposition between Jihad as violent and warlike *versus* inner spiritual struggle has become a de facto orthodoxy, with the former typically seen as a perversion or ‘hijacking’ of true Islam.<sup>60</sup> As George W. Bush himself said in September 2001, ‘[t]he face of terror is not the true faith of Islam. That’s not what Islam is all about. Islam is peace’.<sup>61</sup> Read according to this rubric, Ahmad has been led astray, and needs to rediscover the light. For most of the novel, he has allowed himself to be led by the doctrines of his handlers. Even regarding ‘worldly Muslims’ he has accepted that ‘the concept of *jāhiliyya*, meaning the state of ignorance that existed before Mohammed [...] makes them legitimate targets for assassination’.<sup>62</sup> Eventually however, in the tunnel, as he reaches the point where the bomb will cause the most catastrophic damage and loss of life, he is engulfed in a realisation of divine truth:

The pattern of the wall tiles and of the exhaust-darkened tiles of the ceiling [...] explodes outward in Ahmad’s mind’s eye in the gigantic fiat of Creation, one concentric wave after another, each pushing the other farther and farther out from the initial point of nothingness, God having willed the great transition from non-being to being. This was the will of the Beneficent, the Merciful, *ar-Rahmān* and *ar-Rahīm*, the Living, the Patient, the Generous, the Perfect, the Light, the Guide. He does not want us to desecrate His creation by willing death. He wills life.<sup>63</sup>

Updike includes Qur'anic references, to suggest Ahmad's rediscovery of Islam. When we look at his formulation, however, it is not difficult to see the family resemblance between the epiphany depicted here and the idea of revelation celebrated by the author's own Barthian Christianity. At the moment of truth, Ahmad recognises the immanence of divine creation in the everyday – with the lapsed Jew Levy beside him and in the spectacle of the black children in the car in front, 'lovingly dressed and groomed by their parents, bathed and soothed every night'.<sup>64</sup> By submitting his own will to that of God, he has understood the true nature of 'sacrifice',<sup>65</sup> as Karl Barth describes it in *The Epistle to the Romans*. Sacrifice for Barth is 'not a human action whereby he who makes the sacrifice becomes thereby an instrument of God',<sup>66</sup> as Rashid has encouraged Ahmad to believe. Sacrifice lies in the humble acknowledgement of divine creation and in the effacement, rather than the assertion of will or ego. It is a 'return to His mercy and freedom'.<sup>67</sup>

This epiphany, in which Jew and Muslim, white and black are saved together in a Barthian revelation of Divine Love is clearly, in one sense, a self-consciously utopian gesture. How far it takes the novel forward in terms of elucidating either the psychology, or the political and ideological context to suicide bombing, however, is less clear. In the context of intensifying Islamophobia in US political discourse, Updike's attempt to voice not only an alternative Muslim perspective, but an Islamist's deep disgust with contemporary American society, is bold indeed. As with Sahota, however, it is interesting to see that, in the words of the *Wall Street Journal's* reviewer, 'Mr. Updike cannot quite make the turn from this confused boy to the life-destroyer that a terrorist must be'.<sup>68</sup>

## Conclusion: plague mentality

'What does the "reality" of risk mean?' asks Ulrich Beck in *World at Risk*.<sup>69</sup> In J.M. Coetzee's *Diary of a Bad Year*, a comparison is drawn between the perceived threat of Islamist terrorists in the early twenty-first century and that of imminent nuclear annihilation throughout the cold war. 'Why do our rulers, normally phlegmatic men, react with sudden hysteria to the pin-pricks of terrorism', its protagonist asks, 'when for decades they were able to go about their everyday business unruffled, in full awareness that somewhere in the Urals an enemy watched and waited with a finger on a button, ready if provoked to wipe them and their cities from the face of the earth?'<sup>70</sup> If Islamism in its global form were really capable of operating as commonly presented, as an efficient network of cells waiting ready to exploit any weakness or lapse in Western security, why has it not already 'poisoned water supplies all over the place, or shot down commercial aircraft, or spread noxious germs – acts of terrorism that are easy enough to bring off?'<sup>71</sup> Certainly, the West's reaction to the Jihadi risk has been a significant rolling back of democratic, legal and

human rights, with the normalisation of such practices as targeted assassination and indefinite detention without trial, and the exponential expansion of physical and electronic surveillance. If generating fear is the essence of terrorism, then this vast ongoing project of anticipation, projection and prevention is, in Beck's terms, the essence of risk. Expressed at its most extreme, he suggests, 'it is not the terrorist act, but the global staging of the act and the political anticipations, actions and reactions in response to the staging which are destroying the Western institutions of freedom and democracy'.<sup>72</sup> In Coetzee's novel, an ageing writer 'J.C.' who closely resembles the author himself, is commissioned by a German publisher to 'pronounce on what is wrong with today's world'<sup>73</sup> for a book to be entitled *Strong Opinions*. As he suggests, however, it is not only the opinionated who should be concerned about detention without trial, extrajudicial killing or the introduction of overt political censorship in purportedly liberal democracies. One need not be an apologist for terrorists, 'rigid, self-righteous young men who blow themselves up in order to kill people they define as enemies of the faith',<sup>74</sup> to fear the contempt for the rule of law implicit in the counter-terrorism measures transforming themselves into policy across the western world.

*Diary of Bad Year* is a rewriting of Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year*<sup>75</sup> and as such the analogy it sets up between the framing of the Jihadi risk in contemporary times and London's response to plague in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is a striking one. Defoe's *Journal* (1722), which was published as the Plague diary of a London saddler, was essentially a book of warning. Urging action to avoid a future catastrophe, it called for a systematic intensification of civil control. In Defoe's account, particular attention is paid to developments in 1665, when ideas about the catastrophic potential of the epidemic took hold among the London authorities. Fearful of 'locking in' – whereby houses suspected of harbouring plague were shut up with all inhabitants inside – it was common for families and communities to conceal evidence of infection among them. As Defoe records, such attempts risked frustrating the authority's attempts to control the contagion. He describes with approval, the institution of an unprecedented system of surveillance and intervention in this period, carried out by an army of compulsorily conscripted searchers, watchers and 'examiners of health', with ever more stringent procedures for dealing with suspect households and communities. In this sense, as Alan McKinlay argues in an essay on Foucault and Defoe,<sup>76</sup> one of the plague's most powerful legacies can be seen in the new forms of urban governance that developed in its wake. In his rewriting in *Diary of a Bad Year*, this is exactly what Coetzee is interested in exploring, but for sharply different reasons. While Defoe's text proselytises for ever more systematic policing in the name of public health, his concern is with the opposite: questioning the cost to democracy of the emergency measures put in place, allegedly to protect it. While preaching their own 'moderation',



the novel asks, how close are the nations among the ‘coalition of the willing’ from sliding into ‘the same condition as America, where on the basis of denunciations from informers (“sources”) people simply vanish or are vanished from society, and publicizing their disappearance qualifies as a crime in its own right?’<sup>77</sup> What recourse does the ordinary citizen have against the inexorable movement of an administration which, exceeding its democratic mandate, works systematically to subvert and circumvent the very rights and liberties it purports to uphold? With Guantánamo, he suggests, we are already treated to a fearful enough spectacle of the consequences for those who refuse to play according to the established rules of international conflict. Of what goes on further away from the reach of public scrutiny, however, he suggests an even grimmer reality:

The worst of their deeds we will never know: that we must be prepared to accept. To know the worst, we will have to extrapolate and use the imagination. The worst is likely to be whatever we think them capable of (capable of ordering, capable of turning a blind eye to); and what they are capable of is, all too plainly, anything.<sup>78</sup>

Though J.C.’s brief is to provide ‘strong opinions’, the point that he ultimately comes to is less of an opinion than an unanswered question. ‘In the present climate of whipped up fear’,<sup>79</sup> he asks, what possible effect can be expected from conventional political action – public meetings, petitions and other representations? In the spectacle of extraordinary rendition, detention without trial and extrajudicial killing, what burden of shame, what ethical responsibility, is conferred upon the citizen who looks on? In one sense, the attempts to explore radicalisation and Islamist violence I have discussed in this essay, by Hamid, Sahota, Updike and Coetzee himself, represent a possible range of response to that question. For Beck, part of the global ‘success story’<sup>80</sup> of Jihadi terrorism is the conviction, power and energy with which its reality and urgency continue to be projected by governments and the media in the West. In different ways, each of these novels places those projections in question. For the innocent victims of terrorist violence, as for the many innocents killed by drone strikes, of course the threat is real enough. ‘Does the “staging” of risk therefore mean that risks do not exist at all? Of course not’, Beck argues.<sup>81</sup> What that should not obscure, however, is that on a larger scale, it is cultural perception which determines which risks appear as manageable and which are assigned the status of urgent existential threat. As Beck suggests, in this sense ‘the risks which we believe we recognise and which fill us with fear are mirror images of ourselves’.<sup>82</sup> In an age of risk, what we need from novels and other imaginative arts is an interrogative approach. As the authors I have examined ask: after 9/11, what unexamined assumptions have come to define popular perceptions of Muslims and/in the West? What insights into radicalisation – and into ourselves – might we gain



by looking through an Islamist's own eyes? What price do we pay for giving unquestioning credence to the rhetoric of our leaders, or passive acceptance to the erosion of our rights? These are not easy questions, but these novels are not striving for the formulaic. In our 'climate of whipped up fear', and seemingly perpetual state of emergency, the effort of critical reflection they call for could hardly be more necessary.

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