

# Emotional Violence in John Updike's *Terrorist*

Ikhlas Muhammed Nati Al – Abdi<sup>1</sup>, Marwan Majeed Abd Fowzan<sup>2</sup>

Department of English Language and Literature, Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, College of Education for Human Sciences, Wasit University, Republic of Iraq

## 1. Introduction

Globally, thousands if not millions of people are victims of violence and abuse of variable types. Studies have stated that physical violence and sexual violence are the most dangerous kinds of violence because of their consequences on the health in general and the psychological state in particular. Recent evidences have showed that the emotional violence may also be deleterious to the health and the psychological state of someone. (Smith & Segal, 2014)

John Updike's novel represents one of the best examples of the emotional violence. The protagonist in the novel witnesses various emotional incidents that violated the construction of his character. The protagonist Ahmed Ashmawy Molly is the result of a marriage between an Egyptian man and catholic Irish - American woman. His father abandons the family when Ahmed was three years old. Living with a woman that cares only for herself and her own pleasures and benefits violated the young man emotionally. His mother used to create many sexual relationships with many men without paying any attention to the presence of her young son. The emotional violence is one among other types of violence that eventually transformed that innocent young man into a terrorist. The research focuses on the emotional situations and incidents that violated the protagonist.

Right from the first pages in the novel Joryleen crushed with Ahmad verbally and harmed his emotions after short conversation which was the beginning of Ahmad's misery with multiple kinds of violence in the American society he was living in. Joryleen harmed Ahmad emotionally by her words. She said "fuck you, Ahmad [...] you didn't care, you wouldn't pretty yourself up with a clean white shirt every day, like some preacher. How's your mother stand doing all that ironing" (Updike, 2006, p.10).

Another incident motivated Ahmad to face emotional violence with terrorism was a fight between him and Joryleen's boyfriend Tylenol Jones. Joryleen told her boyfriend that Ahmad disrespected her and hurt her feelings. Tylenol behaved in a racist way with Ahmad. He said "Hey, Arab, hear you been dissing Joryleen" (Updike, 2006, p.16). Tylenol harmed Ahmad physically as follow:

Tylenol takes the more slender boy's shoulder in his hand and digs his thumb into that sensitive place below the shoulder ball. "she say you disrespect her religion. " His thumb works deeper, into nerves that have been asleep all of Ahmad's life [...]his thumb is gouging into Ahmad's crisp white shirt; the taller boy makes an impatient motion to shrug off the hostile grip. (Updike, 2006, p.16)

Tylenol announced his hatred and violence towards Ahmad by saying that "Black Muslims I don't diss, but you not black, you not anything but a poor shithead. You no raghead, you a shithead" (Updike, 2006, p.17). The act of violence ended with Tylenol "gives Ahmad a sneak punch in the stomach that pops all of the air out of him" (Updike, 2006, p.18). The students showed no emotions towards Ahmad whose astonished, gulping expression made them laugh.

Charles Demers in his long essay *Terrorist' Offers Islam for Dummies* (2006) was very critical in his explanation when he said that all characters that Ahmad's world inhabited were uniformly caricatures in which "secular Jews were over - thinking and libidinous; African - American men were violent pimps with ridiculous names (specifically, in this case, Tylenol Jones) " (P.2). He added that "women were either pathetic spinster, obese and sexless food - obsessed cartoons, Intellectually inconsequential sluts or sex workers. " (p.2)

Ahmad suffered emotionally from the gazes of contempt and humiliation which were always making him feel insecure. The members of his security violated his emotions. One time he described how a woman looked to him. She looked to "Ahmad's face like a bug - eyed dog wondering if this human being is worth begging at" (Updike, 2006, p.60). Ahmad explained this problem in the American society of despising Arabic - Americans as a result of losing the sense of humanity as well as the fact that "they didn't have faith". (Updike, 2006, p.60)

Ahmad's mother Teresa affected the construction of her son's personality through her perspectives about Islam. She harmed her son's emotions by disrespecting his religion. In a chat between her and Mr. Levy, she showed her attitude about Islam though her husband was Muslim. She told Levy that "Islam meant nothing to me and less than nothing, to be accurate: it had a negative rating" (Updike, 2006, p.86). Not only striking his son's faith but Teresa also depicted Ahmad's father as loser in Ahmad's eyes. She told that "I have made it very clear to him what a loser his father was. An opportunistic, clueless loser, who hasn't sent us a postcard". (Updike, 2006, p.90).

In two articles that offered a measured critique of *Terrorist*, Anna Hartnell insisted that, despite his denials and explanations to the contrary, Updike's chief aim in *Terrorist* was to "take on Islam in the wake of 9/11" (2012, p.135). Unfortunately, she failed, Updike's protagonist emerged as "Other" an example of "commonplace Orientalist stereotypes". (Hartnell, 2012, p.135)

Tylenol represented the main source of emotional violence in the novel. He treated Ahmad in a savage way eventually motivated Ahmad to think in revenging the whole society. He used to call him Arab not by his real name. In one action of violence, Tylenol asked Ahmad about his presence in the church. He stated to Ahmad that he is not allowed to go there. He said "you're an Arab. You don't go there. You was there under false pretenses". (Uupdike, 2006, p.98)

Using legal terminology, Mita Banerjee stated that people around Ahmed tried to violate him emotionally to make him abandon the school and the whole society. She concluded that the novel was "a racial prerequisite case trying - and ultimately rejecting - an Arab American's claim to whiteness and hence to cultural citizenship". (Banerjee, 2008, p.19)

The western people looked at Islam and the Arabs with full of religious and cultural prejudices as they come across the projection of Islam and Arabs. In his book *Orientalism*, Edward Said (1978) argued that "Of itself, in itself, as a set of beliefs, as a method of analysis, Orientalism cannot develop. Indeed, it was the doctrinal antithesis of development. Its central argument was the myth of the arrested development of the Semites" (Said, 1978, p.307). He added that "From this matrix other myths pour forth, each of them showing the Semite to be the opposite of the Westerner and irredeemably the victim of his own weaknesses" (Said, 1978, p.307). In Edward's opinion, to write about the Arab Oriental world, therefore, was to write with the authority of a nation, and not with the affirmation of a strident ideology but with the unquestioning certainty of absolute truth backed with absolute force. (Said, 1978, p.307)

Ahmad Ashmawy Mulloy was the protagonist of Updike's novel who has 18<sup>th</sup> years old. His father left him and the whole family when Ahmad was three years old. Because his mother was a working woman and lived busy in her profession of nursing and her love for painting, Ahmad was brought up and grew in isolation without proper care of parenting. He spent the early years of his life in loneliness and he faced aloofness. Sheikh Rashid represented the voice of terrorism and radicalism in the novel. He was the main motive behind transforming Ahmad's personality from high school student into a terrorist who was blindly planning to explode himself on innocent people. As Walter Grunzweig pointed out that Updike didn't discuss Islamic fundamentalism as a threat from the outside, but also as a phenomena linked to the religious growth of the United States in general. (2006, p.1)

## 2. Conclusion

From the very beginning, the half Arabian boy (Ahmed) suffered emotionally from different situations. He faced different people who gave him many insults because of his religion, nationality, color, and his personal attitudes towards something. The lonely guy tried to get rid of his miserable situation and live peacefully like other students but they kept harming him emotionally. The continual exposure to violence motivated the guy to think in revenge so he decided to be a terrorist to punish the whole racist society.

Finally, the wrong deeds specially from the well educated people should be respectable and of high morality. Some actions may make someone suffer on different levels or make him choose wrong ways like violence as a way of living to defend and protect the self. We should all respect each other's emotions and feelings in order not to destroy someone's future.

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