

Muslim Representations in Two Post-September 2001 American Novels: A Contrapuntal Reading of *Terrorist* by John Updike and *Falling Man: A Novel* by Don DeLillo

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Abstract

Several novels have appeared after the September 11 attacks which deal directly or indirectly with the effect of the event on individuals, both inside and outside the United States. Though, the novels often claim to deal with the post-traumatic aftermath of the incident, the writers regularly use Orientalist stereotyping, and it seems that after September 11 these attitudes toward Muslims and Arabs have hardened and even strengthened the old Orientalist discourse. This paper shall focus on Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* and John Updike's *Terrorist* because both novels were *New York Times* bestsellers and both novelists are prominent figures in American literature. It attempts to examine the way in which the novelists have responded to the September 11, 2001 attacks and how Muslims and their ideologies are represented. The significant point is that though these novels have been written in the twenty-first century, where there has been an increase in contacts and information about Muslims, the writers often use the same clichés and stereotypes about Muslims that have existed since the Middle Ages.

Introduction

The September 11 attacks of 2001, and the so-called “War on Terror,” brought the Middle East and the old Orientalist discourse – with its binary division between “us” and “them” – into focus once more. The misperceptions of the West toward the East and more specifically the Muslim world are not a new phenomenon and have deep roots in the past. Since the Crusade, Islam was regarded and represented in a way that created and intensified xenophobic feelings in the Western psyche. The Western knowledge of the East was often constructed through different ways that dramatized, developed, and deepened such feelings. Literary texts and novels are one of most influential means that shapes people’s knowledge, attitude, and interest toward the Orient.¹ The impact is intensified as the Western audience is often largely uninformed about the basic tenets and practices of Islam, and such literary texts can play as a sort of primer, a guide book, or a sort of encyclopedia.

On the other hand, the literature of any period is a reflection of its historical context and social feelings. It situates texts in history and exposes the ways in which historical contexts influence the production of meaning within literary texts.² So when one reads Canto 28 of Dante’s *Inferno* – in which the writer describes the punishment for the Holy Prophet Moḥammad (ṢAAS) with such an extraordinary passionate tone – the reader realizes the extent of hostility toward Muslims in that era. The same applies to contemporary anti-Muslim literary texts and political or religious articles and statements.

We attempt to offer a contrapuntal reading of two novels, *Terrorist* by John Updike and *Falling Man* by Don DeLillo. Both novels are *New York Times* bestsellers, and both novelists are prominent canonical figures of contemporary American literature. The novels are of significance because both novelists have a reputation of authenticity with their audiences and are reviewed by critics. Both novelists attempt to render the distorted representation with an “aura of authenticity,” so that the reader would accept such constructs as a mirror-like representation of reality.

Using Edward Said’s “latent” and “manifest” Orientalism and discussing some common and traditional representations of the so-called Orientals and Muslims since the Middle Ages – and applying these ideas to these two post-September 2011 novels – we conclude that these works are merely a perpetuation of a traditional Orientalist discourse and its literature.

In the nineteenth century, “Oriental Studies” was an area of academic study through which the West had to create the East in order to justify and perpetuate its dominance over it. According to Said, Orientalism “can

create not only knowledge but also the very reality that they appear to describe.”³ Said asserts that Orientalism is more an indicator of the power the West holds over the Orient, than about the Orient itself.

In Said’s view, Orientalism is “a library or archive of information commonly and, in some of its aspects unanimously held. What bound the archive together was a family of ideas and a unifying set of values proven in various ways to be effective.”⁴ Such attitudes form a myth in which the prototypical “Orient” is represented as exotic, passive, barbaric, and inferior by nature and thus both a threat and at the same time conquerable. In *Orientalism*, Said contends that the Western constructed knowledge of the East was not often gained through a real encounter with the so-called Orientals. This knowledge was and still is based on constructed fictions, not facts, within the dominant discourse. The fictions produced about the Orient (mostly through translations of books such as *The Arabian Nights*, travelogues, and other writings), were mostly based on preexisting assumptions about the Oriental in the Western psyche – their exotic nature, their moral and sexual degeneracy, their backwardness and barbarity. The colonized cultural values and traditions – which in the colonizer’s mind are almost nonexistent – are considered to be the symptoms of their incivility from which they must be redeemed. The constructed image of the Orient for the Western audience is believable because the author is writing about something which is distant and unfamiliar.

Theoretical and Methodological Approach

In order to analyze an Orientalist text, one should take three significant key concepts of Orientalism into consideration: Foucault’s perception of knowledge and power, the concept of textual attitude, and Said’s latent and manifest Orientalism. The confluence of these three concepts would help in a contrapuntal reading of an Orientalist text.

Applying Foucault’s perspective on discourse regarding power/knowledge relationships,⁵ Said brings very diverse and distinct Western texts under the heading Orientalism. He elaborates on the power relations between the East and the West, which played an important role in intensifying the misrepresentation and presuppositions surrounding the Orient and Orientals.

Foucault’s main perspective involves a reconsideration of three central concepts, by going beyond structuralism and hermeneutics; they are discourse (which had traditionally been the province of structural linguistics), power (particularly as it was analyzed in Marxist philosophy); and knowledge (as the main focal point of the history of ideas).⁶ Foucault’s model of discourse illustrates the historically specific relations between

disciplines (defined as bodies of knowledge) and disciplinary practices (forms of social control and social possibility).⁷ From Foucault's perspective, knowledge gives rise to power and, at the same time, is produced by the operations of power. These discourses include certain kinds of texts or statements and exclude those that violate their set norms through types of encouragement and discouragement. In this way, knowledge is no longer considered to be innocent and neutral but has close relations with power and is determined by "the laws of a certain code of knowledge."⁸ Discourse can produce specific modes of representation that is in accordance with the dominant, official discourse. Though representation bases itself on the notion of being faithful to the original (a mirror-like reflection of reality), it often works within the dominant paradigms, because any discourse has the tendency to elicit forms of knowledge that conform to established paradigms and reinforces it.⁹

Using Foucault's concept, Said maintains that the Orient in Orientalism is not a free subject of thought or action. In his view, because of the power of the West over the East – particularly in the shape of colonialism – constructed knowledge is used for justification of Western dominance over the East. Though the produced knowledge of the West about the East has scientific claims, the constructed Orient is almost always negative and depicts Orientals as backward, degenerate, sensual, and violent with a sort of biological determinism.

Accordingly, Euro-American criteria and texts were considered to be an authentic measurement for the evaluation of normality and the naturalness of one side and the abnormality, terror, and lack on the other side. As Chris Tiffin and Alan Lawson maintain, "Colonialism then is an operation of discourses as well as, and as an operation of discourse it interpellates colonial subjects by incorporating them in a system of representation."¹⁰ Though Said accords a greater importance to individual authors, like Foucault, he connects the structure of thought to the workings of power.¹¹ Although later, he slowly steered away from what he saw as the relativist shortcomings of Foucauldian thought, which critics argued ran against meaningful resistance.

Textual attitude is another important concept that Said uses in order to explain how literary works can generate knowledge in the Foucauldian sense in which the schematic authority of a text is preferred to disorientations of direct encounters.¹² In Said's view, two situations favor textual attitude. One is when a human being confronts something relatively unknown and threatening and previously distant. In such cases, people, places, and experiences can always be described by a book, "so much so that the text acquires a greater authority, and use, even than the actuality it describes."¹³

The second situation that encourages textual attitude is the appearance of success. According to Said, the success of a book would encourage the reader to read more books by the same author; in addition to that, the author is believed to the extent that his description becomes the reader's experience of reality. On the other hand, a book which has gained fame and success among audiences can provoke the production of a series of such books.¹⁴ The constructed knowledge of such texts is not easily dismissed, as expertise is attributed to them – “most importantly such texts can create not only knowledge but also the very reality they appear to describe”¹⁵; so in case of travel books, “the traveler [supposing that he really had traveled] saw what he expected to see, and reported what his audience at home had been conditioned to expect, would be interested in and diverted by.”¹⁶ The constructed image of the Orient in such texts ignores what native inhabitants have to say about their own history, culture, religion, and experience.

In light of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Said's latent and manifest Orientalism becomes particularly illuminating. Said's concept of latent and manifest Orientalism (a Freudian term) makes a connection between the imaginative assumptions of Orientalism and its material effects. Latent Orientalism describes the dreams and fantasies about the Orient that remain relatively constant over time. Manifest Orientalism refers to the various examples of Orientalist knowledge produced at different historical periods. In this view, the manifestations of Orientalism will change over a period of time due to reasons of historical and individual specifics, but the latent or the foundation will remain intact – for example, continuum of these basic images, as in post-September 11 literature.¹⁷ In Orientalism, Said points out “the unanimity, stability and durability of latent Orientalism are more or less constant.”¹⁸ The changes in the knowledge of the Orient should be explored in manifest Orientalism, but changes and differences are more on personal styles than the underling content of such texts, and are in consistency with the needs of time. In this approach, Orientalists have a consensus and latent view of the inferiority of the Orientals. Orientalism, then, is profoundly self-preservative and has an internal repetitious consistency, which enables it to survive after centuries. Such internal consistency – which is not based on an “outward gaze” but an “inward reflection”¹⁹ as Sardar puts it – is represented with a highly authoritative tone. In this way, latent Orientalism is like an archive that makes statements about the so called “Orientals” that are represented as actual facts and essential truth, thus creating a monolithic entity, which includes millions of people who have lived over centuries.

Contrapuntal Reading of an Orientalist Text: a Counter-Narrative

A contrapuntal reading of an Orientalist text is a way of reading a text in order to reveal its deep implication in imperialism and the colonial process. This method is a responsive reading that provides a counterpoint to the text that enables the critic to reveal the implications of the Orientalist work, which may be hidden.²⁰ A contrapuntal reading of a text considers it to have “a simultaneous awareness both of the metropolitan history and of those other subjected and concealed histories against which the dominant discourse acts.”²¹ A contrapuntal reading becomes a counter-narrative that penetrates beneath the surface of a text to indicate the presence of the Orientalistic attitudes of the author in order to reveal the political worldliness of the text.²²

Falling Man

Don DeLillo’s post-September 11 novel *Falling Man* was published in 2007 and features a group of people who had survived the September 11 attacks. With shifts in the narrative of the story, the readers are exposed to parts of the mind of Hammad, one of the September 11 Muslim hijackers – his thoughts and motivations through stream of consciousness, memories from the past, his movement from Hamburg to Florida and his final moments in the jetliner. Through these fragments, the readers supposedly become familiar with the motivations of a supposedly authentic Muslim for carrying out a terrorist act as a Muslim.

Authority over Narration and Representation

In Orientalism, Edward Said discusses how an Orient is constructed and dealt with “by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it; in short, Orientalism is a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.”²³

A significant point in the contrapuntal reading of an Orientalist text is its mode of narration. The narrative can transfer complex knowledge,²⁴ construct identity,²⁵ and contribute to making sense of the world. The narrative also acts as a source of understanding.²⁶ It can be used as an instrument to construct and communicate meaning and knowledge; through narration, the writer is able to construct individual identities, promote certain values and beliefs, and set them as norm.

One of the important aspects of Orientalism is that the Orientalist often considers himself as a somehow omniscient narrator that speaks and repre-

sents the Orientals. The so-called Oriental is considered incapable of self-representation as Karl Marx puts it: “They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented.” The Orientalist is able to penetrate into the heart and mind of his subjects and reveal his or her intentions, motivations, will, and thoughts.

Don DeLillo takes the same approach through his use of a narrative mode; he speaks authoritatively and negatively about the Orient in essentialist terms. He also represents Muslim “Oriental” women, her mentality, intentions, aspirations, and concerns. This mode gives the writer the advantage of representing Muslim’s beliefs, values, and ideological stances – as well as their attitude toward people, events, and things as he wishes. As a result, the narrative of the story does not transmit a set of facts about the real world of the characters, rather it is constructed and produced as a result of writer’s preferences and within the dominant discourse.

Orientalist as an Objective Observer

In *Orientalism*, Ziauddin Sardar mentions that the new Orientalist scholarship, which unlike earlier polemics against Islam with its deliberate misrepresentation, aims to be more objective.²⁷ One of the methods used by modern Orientalists is taking the stance of guardians of Muslim tradition. The tradition is defined by them and then guarded against supposed Muslim heresies. This approach would produce more objectivity, so that the text would not look like propaganda but an objective study of the matter. In *Falling Man*, Martin takes the stance of a defender of Muslims. Martin (a false name for Ernest Hechinger) is a leftist German art dealer with a shadowy past who is somewhat sympathetic toward the hijackers. Later, the reader learns that he was once a member of a 1960s anti-fascist collective called Kommune, a German terrorist group that set off bombs. Ironically, the former leftist now is a wealthy art dealer, who finds commonality with Muslim jihādists and even defends them: “These people, these jihādists, he thinks they have something in common with the radicals of the sixties and seventies.”²⁸

Using Martin for defending the Muslim Salafi jihādist stance has an implication – the fact that a person whose reputation is marred by murder, bombing, and robbery is defending Muslims reveals that those who defend Muslims have some sort of commonality with them in their wrongdoings. For instance when another character Nina mentions that Islam is a system that justifies killing and violence,²⁹ Martin responds by saying, “But the system doesn’t justify this. Islam renounces this.”³⁰ The readers are again

reminded of Martin's hypocrisy as a "wealthy art dealer," who on the one hand, makes his living out of the capitalistic system, which he is apparently critical of, and on the other hand, because he had used terrorism and bombing as a leftist in his youth has an ironic status – and Nina wonders how he is making a living out of the same things that he is criticizing.

Though it seems DeLillo doesn't bother himself to look very impartial in his representation of Muslims, he seems to make an attempt to balance his distorted images of Muslims by giving a voice to Martin so the reader would feel that the author is providing his readers with an alternative voice that it is more or less objective. But it seems that this duty is given deliberately to the wrong person. Though at the end, Martin's race and nationality (even though he is European) seems to redeem him somewhat from the evil of Muslim terrorism and differentiate him from them when another character Lianne thinks "maybe he was a terrorist but he was one of ours . . . one of ours which meant godless, Western, white."³¹

Muslim Barbarity

Throughout the novel, Muslims are represented as savages and barbarians who kill with no differentiation and remorse: they kill Americans, Shī'ah boys in Iran, and children in Russia.³² When Hammad who was a rifleman in the Shatt al Arab during the Iran-Iraq war, remembers killing Shī'ah boys in waves and tells his Muslim friends about them, "they stared at him down, they talk him down. That was a long time ago and those were only boys, not worth the time it would take to be sorry for a single one."³³ Regardless of the credibility of such claim about Iranian soldiers (which will be discussed later), Hammad's Muslim friends are unmoved by their cruelty and dismiss the matter with no care.

Later, when Hammad asks Amir about the life of the others (referring to civilians) that they take with their terrorist actions he says that "there are no others. The others exist only to the degree that they feel the role we have designed for them . . . those who will die have no claim to their lives outside the useful fact of their dying."³⁴ Ironically, in Islam, human life is sacred and valuable and every effort must be made to protect it. In particular, according to Islam, no one should be exposed to injury or death either to oneself or to others and such acts are strictly forbidden:

You shall not kill yourselves. God is Merciful towards you. Anyone who commits these transgressions, maliciously and deliberately, we will condemn him to Hell. This is easy for God to do. ³⁵

And spend generously in the cause of God, and do not destroy yourselves by your own hands, and let your deeds be good and perfect for God loveth those who do good.³⁶

The Holy Book shows its high regards toward the life of all human beings and not just Muslims:

If anyone slew a person (except in lieu of murder or mischief on earth) it would be as if he slew the whole people, and if anyone saved a life it would be as if he saved the life of the whole people.³⁷

The depicted ruthlessness of Muslims is in contrast with the human approach of Americans in their relationships and affairs in the text. Most of the characters in *Falling Man* are Americans of different ethnic and religious affiliations. In addition to Muslim characters who are depicted as brutal terrorists, there are other characters of different nationalities: Russians with their “reassuring accent,”³⁸ the Greek neighbor who plays and listens to Middle-Eastern music, a black woman who suffers from and shares the pains of the event with the rest, a Latino kid that helps Keith walk to the hospital after he has survived the collapse of the towers as a result of the attacks. This diversity suggests that Americans are innocent receptors of all nationalities and that Muslims are enemies of peace and humanity – not just for white Americans but for the whole civilized world. In this way, DeLillo makes a sharp distinction between the Muslim and non-Muslim characters of the novel, and this hints that Americans are capable of embracing all people and nationalities as a part of their society – except for Muslims. Muslim strangeness and otherness is to the extent that makes it difficult to find a proper name for them. This can be seen when Anna states, “it means nothing to call them names,”³⁹ and Nina calls them a “viral infection, virus which reproduces itself.”⁴⁰

Muslims also generally have a profound eagerness for and obsession with death as DeLillo informs the reader; once Hammad is in Afghanistan he begins to realize that death is stronger than life. This is where the landscape consumed him – waterfalls frozen in space, a sky that never ended: “It was all Islam, the river and streams. Pick up a stone and hold it in your fist.”⁴¹

The suggested primitive nature of Afghanistan – the words such as stone and fist in the book are associated with Islam; they all reflect the inherent savagery and hardness of both Islam and Muslims. The barbarity seems to be intrinsic and deeply rooted in the region and highly contaminating.

In an Afghan camp with his bomb vest and black hood, Hammad begins to think about the basic difference between Muslims and non-Mus-

lms: “we [Muslims] are willing to die, they are not. This is our strength, to love death, to feel claim of armed martyrdom.”⁴² The same applies to the Shī‘ah boys of Iran: “The boys were sounding the cry of history, the story of ancient Shia defeat and the allegiance of the living to those who were dead and defeated.”⁴³ Reading these passages, the reader is convinced that all Muslims have a common heritage of living in the past and moving rapidly toward fundamentalism, which eventually leads to their own destruction and defeat, as well as that of others.

Sensual Orientals

In Orientalism, there is a constant and inseparable association between the Orient and sensuality. As Said pointed out, female Orientals are usually the creatures of a male power – of fantasy. “They express unlimited sensuality, they are more or less stupid, and above all they are willing and submissive.”⁴⁴ Don DeLillo’s depiction of an Oriental woman confirms almost exactly with what Said mentioned about the Oriental female as a sexual object; the only Muslim female represented in the novel has an Oriental body: “she had dark eyes and floppy body that liked contact,”⁴⁵ as well as sensuality – “she wanted him to know her whole presence, inside and out.”⁴⁶ She makes Hammad feel more intelligent in her presence by “asking questions or just being herself,”⁴⁷ which suggests that she is naturally stupid and there is no need for her to put that much effort to make him feel smart.

The Oriental male is equally sensual and has an undifferentiated sexual drive. Several times the novelist mentions Hammad’s sexual desire for passerby women⁴⁸ – a saleswoman in a supermarket,⁴⁹ and for her girlfriend’s roommate⁵⁰ besides herself. In this sense, Hammad is equally hypercritical as well as irrational; while he has an extramarital affair with a woman himself, he remembers a time when he hit another man for doing the same thing.

Sardar seems to provide a good interpretation of this attitude toward Muslims when he pointed out that “Symbolically, the violent and barbaric Muslim male and sensual, passive female, come together to represent the perfect Orient of the Western perception: they fuse together to produce a concrete image of sensuality and despotism and thus inferiority.”⁵¹

In *Falling Man*, the representation of Muslim male and female relationships are significant. The relationship between Lianne and Keith and Keith’s affair with Florence are portrayed in a parallel with Hammad’s relationship with women. The woman that Hammad has sexual affairs with

is “Syrian, German and a little Turkish.” Her identity and personality has no significance. Unlike the other female characters whose feelings and thoughts are represented, the only impression that readers get from her is that her whole presence is sexual and she is there for the sexual gratifications of Hammad. While Hammad is represented as an abnormal licentious man, he seems more normal compared to some of his Muslim friends – one of them “avoided contact with dogs and women.”⁵²

Flagrant Racist Orientalism

Discussing Rudyard Kipling’s *White Man’s Burden*, Said pointed out how the actual color of skin sets whites dramatically and reassuringly different from the other. Later, he mentions that “being a white man was a self-confirming business. One becomes a White Man because one was a White Man.”⁵³ So being a white man, means a certain way of being, thinking, and even feeling that makes the white person essentially different from and superior to the other.

In *Falling Man*, Lianne remembers her trip to Cairo as a graduation gift years ago, and the stark difference that she felt as a white person standing in the middle of a dense crowd of Muslims who have gathered for an Eid al-Fitr festival. Her self-consciousness that seems to be the result of her superior feelings toward herself and, probably that of the author, makes her think that she is at center of attention among Orientals: “she became whatever they sent back to her. She became her face and feature, her skin color, a white person, white her fundamental meaning . . . she was privileged, detached, self-involved, white.”⁵⁴ While she feels privileged as an individual among Muslim crowd, she thinks the opposite about them: “The crowd was gifted at being a crowd. This was their truth . . . in the wave of bodies, the compressed mass.”⁵⁵

The generalization of qualities and characteristics of Orientals is another important aspect of Orientalism. Muslims are regularly depicted as a prototype of the Other with no traces of individuality. They are all irrational, abnormal, backward, and sensual. They are like each other and think like each other: “they’re the ones who think alike, talk alike, eat the same food at the same time.”⁵⁶ According to the text, while Americans develop friendships for the sake of companionship and recreation or come together as volunteers for saving lives, Muslims come together and form groups for killing people: “They were strong-willed, determined to become one mind. Shed everything but the men you are with. Become each other’s running blood.”⁵⁷ They are also depicted as naive and weak people who are easily led by other Muslim villains and are convinced to kill others for no

good reason. Overgeneralization, dehumanizes and at the same time makes assumptions about race, a sort of biological determinism which ignores individual qualities – even though Muslims are not of one race. So the very possibility of development, transformation, human movement – in the deepest sense of the word – is denied the Orient and Oriental.⁵⁸

Oppositional Binary

Those who write about the Orient must locate themselves vis-a-vis the Orient; translated into their text, this location includes the kind of narrative voice they adopt, the type of structure they build, the kinds of images, themes, motifs that circulate in their text – all of which add up to deliberate ways of addressing the reader, containing the Orient, and finally, representing it or speaking on its behalf.⁵⁹

One of the most salient features of Orientalism is the oppositional binary between the so called Orient and Occident; while the Orient is depicted as place that lacks democracy, normality, and modernity, the Occident is represented as a cornerstone of normality and naturalness. Thus the “Orient” is constructed as a caricature inversion of Western culture and is considered to be everything that the West is not.⁶⁰

In *Falling Man*, the conversations among characters are used in order to compare the so called East and West and thus revealing Eastern – that is, Muslim – inferiority. Florence refers to Muslims and states that “those men who did this thing they are anti everything we stand for. But they believe in God.”⁶¹

In her conversations with Martin, Nina argues that “there are no goals they can hope to achieve. They are not liberating a people or casting out a dictator. Kill the innocent only that.”⁶² This seems to suggest that they are doing the opposite of what Americans are supposedly doing in Iraq; the American troops attempted to liberate the Iraqis and cast Saddam out. The Americans also kill large numbers of innocent people, but because they are superior, that is not morally equivalent because Americans set standards for the “other” nations and supposedly have legitimate and benign intentions.

Muslims are represented as incompatible with morally democratic values, civilization, and civil society. Nina refers to the essential difference between Muslims and Americans; she believes that the Muslims lack a civil society, they have a willingness to kill other, and they are inherently backward: “One side had the capital, the labor, the technology, the agencies, the cities, the laws, the police and the prisons. The other side has a few men willing to die.”⁶³ While the West is always dynamic in its scientific progress, the Orient is static, stuck in its past primitiveness.

The Orient is regarded as a timeless entity. The Oriental backwardness, degeneracy, and inequality with the West is most easily associated with ideas about the biological bases of racial inequality.⁶⁴ Hence the contemporary Arab is like the Arabs of centuries ago and equally uncivilized, abnormal, and irrational. Nina concludes: "It is not the history of Western interference that pulls down societies. It's their own history, their mentality. They live in a closed world, of choice, of necessity. They haven't advanced because they haven't wanted to or tried to."⁶⁵ Therefore the history of the East is not subject to an ordinary process of development and evolution; it is frozen in its past primitiveness and its inhabitants' mental degeneracy would eventually result in destruction.

Distortion of Reality

One of the most significant features of Orientalism is the distortion of reality; so that the Orientalist creates a version of Islam through a historical narrative and filters, as well as through prisms of local needs and interests which have nothing to do with reality. In this respect, an Orientalist feels no need for justifying his or his claim; it is taken for granted.

One of the misconceptions about Islam that was propagated since the Crusades was the idea that Islam opposed Christianity and Judaism and promulgates the killing of non-Muslims. In *Falling Man*, DeLillo takes the same approach by representing the same Muslim attitude toward Jews and Christians; Amir says, "Islam is the struggle against the enemy, near enemy and far, Jews first, for all things unjust and hateful, and then the Americans."⁶⁶ Elsewhere in the novel one reads "They sat around a table on day one and pledge to accept their duty, which was for each of them, in blood trust, to kill Americans."⁶⁷

Contrary to what is propagated and often believed by Westerners, nowhere in the Qur'ān or practice of the Prophet can or did Muslims wage war for converting people of other religions to Islam. The division which is often cited about the so-called "*Dar al-Harb* (the House of War)" and "*Dar al-Islam* (the Abode of Islam)" is nonexistent in the Qur'ān. The Holy Book gives a clear instruction on this matter by stating that, "There is no compulsion in religion."⁶⁸

Another misrepresentation is regarding the concept of jihād, which is considered to be one of the most negative symbols of Islam in Western eyes. The literal meaning of jihād is effort, and the Prophet Moḥammad explained that the greatest jihād is the struggle against evil desires and ambitions.⁶⁹ So what DeLillo mentions about the highest jihād in Islam is nonexistent: "Fight in the cause of God those who fight you, but do not

transgress limits; for God loveth not transgressors.”⁷⁰ However jihād also means fighting against the oppression of innocent people, terror, and unjust behavior – and in this sense, jihād becomes a compulsory act. The Islamic concept of jihād (considering verses of the holy Qur’ān and Prophet’s life) is a defensive act which is avoided unless it becomes inevitable. In Islamic teachings, a defensive war is never directed against civilians and non-combatants, and jihād is considered legitimate when it has the purpose of stopping aggression, protecting the oppressed, and defending religious freedom.⁷¹

The examination of the Prophet Moḥammad’s life reveals that in Islamic teachings war is for defensive purposes and the Holy Prophet never engaged in an offensive war.⁷² In case of a defensive war, Muslims are warned against the use of unnecessary violence: “Fight in the Way of God against those who fight you, but do not transgress limits. God does not love transgressors.”⁷³

One of the distorted images that DeLillo presents in his novel is his reference to the “plastic keys to paradise” and the use of “human wave attacks” allegedly carried out by Iranians during the Iran-Iraq war when he mentions: “this was a military tactic, ten thousand boys enacting the glory of self-sacrifice to divert Iraqi troops and equipment from the real army massing behind front lines.”⁷⁴ Don DeLillo’s description of Iranian soldiers as “mine jumpers” with keys around their necks who carried out so-called “human wave attacks” seems to be drawn from memoirs such as Azar Nafisi’s *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, in which she wrote about ten-to-sixteen-year-old Iranian soldiers, who she claimed had “keys to a heaven where they could finally enjoy all the pleasures from which they have abstained in life”⁷⁵ – or Afshin Molavi’s *Persian Pilgrimage*, in which he wrote, “the Basijis acted as human mine-clearing fields, a key to heaven wrapped around their necks as they ‘martyred’ themselves for this ‘holy war.’”⁷⁶ The point is that the credibility of such memories is strongly under question as these books have more of a political agenda than literary or cultural value, and both writers have more or less similar political affiliations. Another point which is worth taking into consideration is that such writers were either not present in Iran during the war or had no direct contact with those whom they represented. These claims, including the existence of “keys to heaven,” are completely rejected by Iranian veterans of war.⁷⁷

Terrorist

John Updike is considered one of the most visible, successful, and prolific writers of American literature. Updike won the National Book Award for

Fiction and the Pulitzer Prize as well as the National Book Critics' Circle Award. In a sense, *Terrorist* is quite an Updikean work, which deals with the personal turmoil of an individual, in this case a young Muslim jihādīst, religion, and sex.

The Qur'ān: Mistranslation, Selectivity, and Distortion

In his acknowledgements in *Terrorist*, Updike thanks, "Shady Nasser for his invaluable guidance and expertise concerning Arabic and the Koran." Nasser's guidance turns out to be just limited to merely an English transliteration of the Holy Book and not the interpretation or even translation of its content.⁷⁸ He also mentions that "the English quotations of the Koran are taken from translations by J. M. Rodwell in 1861 and N. J. Dawood in 1956." Significantly, N. J. Dawood is a Jewish Iraqi who is also famous for his translation of the *One Thousand and One Nights*. As Sardar pointed out, Dawood uses mistranslation to give an undertone of violence to the language of the Qur'ān. This is evident even in his translations of chapter titles. "Az-Zumar," which means "crowd," is translated as "The Hordes"; "As-Saff," which means "the ranks," is translated as "Battle Array" – and spouses become virgins.

Translators also used omission, distortion, and mistranslation to subvert the message and meaning of the Holy Book. Consider, for example, the most widely available translation in English by N. J. Dawood, the first edition of which was published by Penguin in 1956. This translation subverts the original in several ways. Often a single word is mistranslated in a verse to give it totally the opposite meaning . . . readers of Dawood's version – and most other popular translations of the Qur'an – have come away with the impression that the Holy Book sanctions violence or sexual oppression.⁷⁹

While some other credible translations of the Qur'ān are available, Updike's use of this infamous translation – and the extent to which he relies on Western sources for his materials about Islam and the fact that he does not quote one single Muslim source on the interpretation of the Qur'ān, or Hadith, and Sharī'ah – suggests that he may have knowingly misrepresented the reality of Islamic thoughts and teachings. Considering the representation of the Qur'ān, Updike takes two approaches for twisting its reality. He uses both the error of translation through using the distorted translations as well as selectivity with extensive use of abrupt quotes, random and incomplete verses. In this way, he often selects verses and chapters of the Qur'ān based on his denigrating purposes and without contextualization – ignoring the fact that to correctly interpret the Qur'ān requires knowledge

of when and under what circumstances different verses were revealed to the Prophet Muḥammad.

This attitude is evident from the beginning of the novel when Sheikh Rashid and Ahmad are practicing a surah of the Holy Book, named “Humazah.” This surah is censuring slanderers (and means slanderer) who make fun of the others or dishonor people verbally or through their deeds; it also condemns those who amass wealth without helping others. Updike takes the text out of its context and begins it from the fifth verse (it includes nine verses) naming it “crushing fire,” without mentioning the name of the surah that could clarify those addressed in the verses (for example, slanderer), thus creating negative feelings in his reader’s mind. These verses of the Qur’ān which Updike refers to as “Prophet Words”⁸⁰ are presented in a way to seem so unreasonable that they make even the abnormal Sheikh to seek a way “to blend them with human reason, but they were not meant to blend: they invade our human softness like a sword.”⁸¹ At the same time, they provoke such violence that makes Ahmad feel a “desire to rise up and crush his teacher.”⁸²

Elsewhere in the novel, Updike uses omission and the misinterpretation of a verse to distort Islam’s position regarding one’s family. It mentions verse fourteen from the sixty-fourth surah when Sheikh Rashid asks Ahmad to translate its meaning, and Ahmad states: “it says that in your wives and children you have an enemy. Beware of them.”⁸³ So it makes over-generalization of an exception to all “wives and children.” The accurate translation says:

among your wives and children are some that are like enemies to yourselves: so beware of them! But if you forgive and overlook, and cover up their faults, verily God is Oft-forgiving and Most Merciful.⁸⁴

This verse is about those who encouraged their husbands for some wrongdoings such as killing and stealing for their own worldly benefit.⁸⁵

One should also consider the significant amount of attention which Updike gives to the Qur’ān’s Arabic transliteration and his extensive use of it. In an interview, Updike admits that he has no knowledge of Islam or Arabic, and he acknowledges that “My conscience was pricked by the notion that I was putting into the book something that I can’t pronounce.”⁸⁶ By using the Qur’ān’s Arabic transliteration, Updike creates an aura of authenticity by showing his reader how far he is the master of his subject – thus, the reader would assume it as a substantiated fact.

For instance, Sheikh Rashid and Ahmad are reading a verse of the Qur’ān, and the Arabic transliteration of a verse is presented to the reader: “*ta’fu wa tafahu wa taghfiru- afa and safaha*”; the text continues with saying that: “abstain and run away! Do without women of non-Heavenly

flesh, this earthly baggage, these unclean hostages to fortune! Travel light, straight in to paradise!”⁸⁷; the writer does not mention whether this is the meaning of those transliterated words which simply means “forgive and overlook, and cover up their faults,”⁸⁸ or the writer’s own interpretation. In fact, the representation of Islam’s view on women, which Updike tries to portray in these verses is more like that of Judeo-Christian’s than the Islamic perception in this regard. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, women are considered to be inferior and essentially different from men: “No wickedness comes anywhere near the wickedness of a woman. . . . Sin began with a woman and thanks to her we all must die”⁸⁹ or “the man is not of the woman; but the woman of the man. Neither was the man created for the woman; but the woman for the man.”⁹⁰ In the Qur’ān, women are not considered less than men in different aspects of religion, nor are they disrespected. As the holy book states, both men and women are created from one soul:

O humanity, be reverent to your Lord who created you from one soul and created its mate from it, and from these two disseminated many men and women.⁹¹

Another misrepresentation in regard to Islam’s attitude toward women is when Ahmad consults the Qur’ān for sexual advice and found that “it talked about uncleanness but only in regard to women, their menstruation, their suckling of infants.” Here, Updike uses a verse which is not related to such issues, and immediately after that he writes about a verse which calls women “pollution.” But in fact, there is no verse in the Holy Qur’ān that calls women unclean or pollution. The displacement of the verses makes it difficult for a non-Muslim reader to guess that the verse is referring to women’s menstruation. The source for this concept is Judeo-Christian, but Updike tries to associate it with Islam. It seems that he is more inspired in a verse about the same issue in Leviticus:

If a woman has a discharge, and the discharge from her body is blood, she shall be set apart seven days; and whoever touches her shall be unclean until evening. Everything that she lies on during her impurity shall be unclean; also everything that she sits on shall be unclean. Whoever touches her bed shall wash his clothes and bathe in water, and be unclean until evening. And whoever touches anything that she sat on shall wash his clothes and bathe in water, and be unclean until evening. If anything is on her bed or on anything on which she sits, when he touches it, he shall be unclean until evening. And if any man lies with her at all, so that her impurity is on him, he shall be unclean seven days; and every bed on which he lies shall be unclean.⁹²

Due to extreme views that existed among different pre-Islamic religions toward menstruating women (people would not eat, drink, or sit with the woman and would even send her to a separate place), people asked Prophet Moḥammad what is the Islamic rule on this issue. Unlike the previous extremities, the Qur'ān orders sexual abstinence during this period and nothing more.

Representations of the Qur'ān and the People of the Book

Since the Crusades, it was believed that Islam opposed Christianity and Judaism and promulgated the killing of non-Muslims by equating “unbelievers” with Jews and Christians. Updike takes the same approach for representing Islamic principles regarding people of other religions. He tries to imply that the Holy Qur'ān encourages violence and the killing of non-Muslims, mentioning how Muslim terrorists read verses of the Holy Book before suicide bombings in order to receive courage and inspiration. Also, Updike makes the claim that the tone and language of the Qur'ān is violent and abnormal. As an example, Ahmad suspects that his Sheikh loves “the Holy Quran for its language, a shell of violent shorthand whose content is its syllables”⁹³ – or when he feels “something sadistic in the taunt and in the many verses” of the Holy Quran.⁹⁴

In *Terrorist*, Updike also propagates the idea that Islam encourages the violence and the killing of non-Muslims. For instance, when Ahmad is heading to the tunnel to set off the bomb and his Jewish teacher is trying to dissuade him, he recites from Qur'ān (48:29):

Those who follow him [referring to Prophet Mohammad] are ruthless to unbelievers but merciful to one another. . . .

The selected verse, creates the impression that Muslims are ruthless toward Jews and Christians. In reality, the above verse is about the conquest of Mecca, which happened when the pagan Arabs violated the terms of the agreement with Muslims.⁹⁵ This conquest took place without bloodshed and with no revenge. Prophet Moḥammad forgave all who were against him and treated them with the utmost tolerance. He strictly forbade the massacre of civilians and helpless people, as well as the destruction and plunder which differentiated Muslim action from other wars of that era. Updike's ignorance or intentional misrepresentation also becomes evident when Charlie, a Muslim, who later turns out to be a covert CIA agent is trying to coax Ahmad to carry out a terrorist act and recites a verse from the book: “And the Jews plotted, and God plotted. But of those who plot, God is the best.”⁹⁶ But in fact this verse is not referring to the Jews at all, and the word is intended for “unbelievers,” referring to Quraysh clan that tormented the Muslims.

The Representation of the Prophet

One of the dominant misconceptions in Orientalist studies was the assumption that the Holy Qur'ān that came through Prophet Muḥammad was not original; rather, he was depicted as a poet who composed the religion of Islam as a collage of Judaism and Christianity. As a result of this misconception, the Holy Qur'ān was considered as a source of justification for Muslim wrongdoings and not a divine revelation.

The representation of the Prophet Muḥammad by Updike confirms the oldest Orientalist tradition of Islamic representations since the Crusades: one that sees the Prophet as an archetypal symbol for deceit and manipulation. As it was mentioned earlier, on several occasions, Updike refers to the verses of the Qur'ān as the “Prophet Words”⁹⁷ or “his rapturous poetry.”⁹⁸ Apart from the brief and somewhat ironic mention of the Prophet’s wives, which Updike provides an opportunity for describing the Prophet as a worldly,⁹⁹ the Holy Prophet is represented according to the well-established clichés of Orientalism.

Martyrdom vs Suicide Bombing

One of the most recurring features in post-September 11 literature is the interchangeable use of the concepts of martyrdom and suicide bombing for killing innocent people. Moreover, it is regularly propagated that Muslims generally hate life¹⁰⁰ and have a profound eagerness for death. In the *Terrorist*, Muslims are represented as ruthless killers who kill civilians with no remorse – when Ahmad says to Chehab that he pities those who jumped from the towers, those who were merely guards and waitresses,¹⁰¹ Chehab rejects this sympathy by calling ordinary people the enemy. Throughout the novel, whenever the Sheikh or Chehab are coaxing Ahmad to carry out a suicide bombing, they call the act “martyrdom.” When Ahmad is preparing himself for the suicide bombing:

He should read the Quran, or study the pamphlets, readily available from overseas sources, composed and printed to prepare a shahid – the ablation, the mental cleansing of the spirit – for his end, or her end, for women now, their loose black burqas well concealing their explosive vests, are permitted in Palestine, the privilege of martyrdom.¹⁰²

Though in Islam there is a clear distinction between martyrdom and suicide bombing with the objective of killing civilians. This concept is closely related to the concept of jihād and is best understood when it is put in that context. As was mentioned in the Islamic concept of jihād (based on verses of the Holy Qur'ān and the Prophet’s life) is a defensive act, which

is avoided unless it becomes inevitable. In Islamic teachings, a defensive war is never launched against civilians and non-militant people, and jihād is considered legitimate when it is with the purpose of stopping aggression, protecting the oppressed, and defending religious freedom.¹⁰³ The significant distinction between suicide bombing and martyrdom operations is the target of the action. While those terrorists who claim to be driven by religious ideologies almost always carry out their attacks against civilian targets, martyrdom operations are not targeted against non-militant objects.

As Ali Shari'ati explains, the act of martyrdom is not a bloody or destructive event, but a positive outcome of those who have sacrificed. Because it is not seen as a tragic event, the *shahid* chooses death willingly; it is a decision made "with all their awareness, logic, reasoning, intelligence, understanding, consciousness and alertness."¹⁰⁴ Though this willingness is not for death itself because Muslims view life a gift bestowed by God, which should be protected in a proper way, this sacrifice of martyrdom is made with consciousness and intelligence (and is not fatalistic) for defending innocent people against oppression. In this way, martyrdom is not an act of terror and destruction; on the contrary, it is a sacrifice which saves the lives of others.

Virgins as Motivation

The promise of virgins for martyrs – which asserts a stereotypical cliché about Easterners being oversexed so that even when they are fighting for their sacred cause there is sensuality behind it – is one of the most recurring images of Muslims. The verses of the Holy Book related to rewarding martyrs are those which promises them with "best rewards" without making any specifics.¹⁰⁵ There are several examples in which Updike mentions virgins as one of the main motivations for the many young men such as when Sheikh fears that a revision about the virgins "would make Paradise significantly less attractive for many young men,"¹⁰⁶ and this confirms the Orientalist cliché of Muslims sensuality. The popular conception of the paradise in the Qur'ān which is held among Westerners and is propagated is that it is a place just for sensual pleasure – but an examination of actual descriptions in the Qur'ān gives quite a different picture:

Think not of those who are slain in Allah's cause as dead. They are alive, finding their sustenance in the presence of their Lord; they rejoice in the Bounty provided by Allah: And with regard to those left behind, who have not yet joined them (in their bliss), the (martyrs); glory is in the fact that on them is no fear nor have they (any cause to) grieve.¹⁰⁷

Some of these fabrications originated probably from different sources such as inauthentic books of Hadiths, which have no authenticity among Muslim scholars. Interestingly, the sources that are used by John Updike are some of the most obsolete but popular clichés (which one can find in Wikipedia with no profound research), whose credibility is rejected by Muslims scholars.

Conclusion

As Nancy Beth Jackson puts it, the stereotypical representation of Arabs and Muslims, “tend to lump Arabs, Muslims, and Middle East into one highly negative image of violence and danger”¹⁰⁸; such images are largely drawn from collective memory than actual experience. *Terrorist* and *Falling Man* apparently represent the pervasive influence of centuries of deeply rooted Orientalism and are perhaps continuing that tradition in a more subtle way. Like the Crusades literature, Islam still remains something of a threat to and is in sharp contrast with the whole existence of the West – and all its claimed manifestations and representations such as civilization, humanity, rational thought, and pluralism.

The novels seem to endorse the existence of an entity called the “Islamic mind,” which regards Islam essentially and by nature backward and barbaric and considers everything related to Muslim individuals as being based on such an Islamic tradition. This approach tends to “Islamicize” all sorts of abnormalities of individuals – thus, the wrongdoings of individuals and groups such as al-Qaida (which ironically Western countries and their Saudi allies helped to create) are generalized to all Muslims and eventually to Islamic principles. Said provides a good response to this attitude when he points out that, “We need understanding to note that repression is not principally Islamic or Oriental but a reprehensible aspect of the human phenomenon. ‘Islam’ cannot explain everything in Africa and Asia, just as ‘Christianity’ cannot explain Chile or South Africa.”¹⁰⁹

On the other hand, while everything Islamic is represented as violent, backward, and repressive, when serving the U.S. interest, the same can even be considered a justification for Western’s support for dictators, and this was claimed to eventually lead to modernization and democracy. For example, to understand the politics of Algeria, one had best consult the Qur’ān, or that “they” (the Muslims) had no understanding of democracy, only of repression and medieval obscurantism. Conversely, it was argued that so long as repression was in the U.S. interest, it was not Islamic but a form of modernization.

One significant point that is missing in both discussed novels is the absence of any feelings toward the victims among the “other” peoples. As

Howard Zinn puts it, no comparable sympathy was paid to those killed by Americans: “in contrast with the vignettes about the victim featured in the New York Times, there are few available details about the dead men, women and children in Afghanistan.¹¹⁰ Don DeLillo and John Updike are so preoccupied with a sense of self-pity that they ignore any capability of humanity, love, joy, and suffering on the other side. The portrayal of the American victims in the novels put a human face on those people who were killed and created an impression that every one of them was a human being who deserved a full and happy life – while the victims of the other nation were not represented at all.

So when September 11 takes place and nearly three thousand civilians are killed, the whole world must lament for the lost lives of the U.S. victims that were taken by a group which were backed and armed by the United States in the 1980s – and the bitter irony is that Muslims should pay for this U.S. policy with the lives of hundreds of thousands of civilians.

Though the novels have been written in the twenty-first century, and there has been an increase in contact with and information about Muslims, the writers often use the same clichés and stereotypes about Muslims that have existed since the Middle Ages. As Sardar puts it:

Willful misunderstanding and knowledgeable ignorance have remained the guiding spirit of Orientalism, it has survived defiantly and remained dominant when alternative information has been readily available. Orientalism is composed of what the West wishes to know, not of what can be known.¹¹¹

The danger of DeLillo’s supposed authoritative narration and Updike’s fictitious representation of Islamic principles is that such fabrications replace the reality and have little or nothing to do with Islam. To conclude, the novels work within the old-established Orientalist discourse with no profundity of research about Islam, the Qur’ān, the Prophet, jihād, Muslim women, etc. The readers are exposed to an amalgamation of fabrication, racism, half-truths (in quite a selective way), and the distortion of reality – and this in turn leads to more stereotyping and injustice.

Notes

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30. Ibid.
31. Ibid., 249.
32. Ibid., 262.
33. Ibid., 101.
34. Ibid., 224.
35. The Holy Qur'ān (4:29).
36. The Holy Qur'ān (2:195).
37. The Holy Qur'ān (5:32).
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41. Ibid., 219.
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43. Ibid., 99.
44. Said, *Orientalism*, 207.
45. DeLillo, *Falling Man*, 81.
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48. Ibid., 99–104.
49. Ibid., 171.
50. Ibid., 104
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92. Leviticus 15:19–24.
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94. *Ibid.*, 74.
95. *Al-Mizan*, vol.18, 472.
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