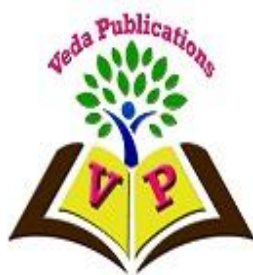**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

THE MAKING OF A TERRORIST: A CRITICAL READING OF JOHN UPDIKE'S *TERRORIST*

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ABSTRACT

International Terrorism has been on the rise for the last few decades. John Updike's novel 'Terrorist' explores the evolution of a modern terrorist in the context of post 9/11 America. In this study, three sociological theories have been applied to John Updike's novel to explain the motivations of terrorists. The theories are social learning theory, frustration-aggression hypothesis and relative deprivation theory. It is discovered that in many ways the actions of the lead character in John Updike's novel who almost ends up committing an act of terror can be explained to a considerable degree on the basis of these sociological theories. This highlights how terrorists are inspired by their social contexts and many writers like John Updike have tried to capture it through their works of fiction which ultimately throws light on reality and improves our understanding of human nature. John Updike's 'Terrorist' is thus a revealing and insightful work.

Keywords*: Frustration/aggression-hypothesis, Relative-Deprivation, Social-Learning, Terrorism, Terrorist.*

INTRODUCTION

Terrorism is not a new phenomenon. The Jewish Zealots who rebelled against Roman Occupation of their homeland of present day Palestine in the first century of the Common Era are commonly referred to as the first recorded terrorists in history [1]. While the methods used by terrorists have changed with time due to technological progress, for instance the Jewish Zealots used knives and swords to slash and kill Roman officials whereas today there is use of guns and bombs by terrorists, the use of terror to achieve social, political, economic, cultural or religious ends remains the central cornerstone of the phenomenon of terrorism. In this context, this paper looks at post 9/11 uptick on terrorism across the world using three sociological theories - social learning theory, frustration-aggression hypothesis and relative deprivation theory. These theoretical insights will be applied on the novel 'Terrorist' by John Updike which traces the journey of a young Muslim man in post 9/11 America who almost commits a major terror attacks in the US. The article is divided into two sections apart from an introduction and conclusion. The first section introduces the three sociological theories mentioned earlier in a concise manner. The second section highlights the key elements from the plot of John Updike's novel and then proceeds to dissect them based on the sociological theories of social learning theory, frustration-aggression hypothesis and relative deprivation theory.

SECTION I - SOCIOLOGICAL THEORIES OF TERRORISM

As mentioned earlier, terrorism is now new even if some of the methods used for terrorism are new. Since, human nature is still the same, scholars have tried to understand the reasons for which some decide to indulge in acts of terror. In our day and age, terrorism has become a global phenomenon because of many reasons which includes increased globalization which has enabled travel and trade at global scale but also has meant immigration which often has led to social friction [2]. Secondly, there has been a rise in religious fundamentalism which can now spread globally, thanks to globalization and availability of technological tools like social media and internet. Lastly, the easy access which many

people are able to have to weapons and weapon making information that includes deadly explosives. All such factors have combined to make international terrorism a major problem in our times and some have dubbed terrorism as a clear and present danger to the security of civilization [3]. In this context, it is highly important to understand terrorists and their motivations such that the phenomenon can be mitigated. Several sociologists have tried to explain the reasons that motivate terrorists using different theoretical explanations.

Social learning theory of aggression suggests that violence is inspired by observation of such behavior and thereby causing imitation [4]. This theory has been used to explain acts of terrorism as terrorism is also in effect acts of aggression. From this theoretical perspective, acts of terror cannot be considered as consequences of innate aggressive nature but of cognitive reconstruction of moral imperatives towards aggressive behavior due to overexposure to aggression, especially at an impressionable age. For example, Teenagers who are living in violent hotbeds of political or civil strife stand a chance to directly witness terrorist behaviors and some of them then seek to imitate them or even more commonly, get an impression from their culture's public glorification of terrorists. For instance, the martyr posters that line the streets of Shia regions of Lebanon and Palestinian refugee camps or the very many songs that celebrate the exploits of some suicide bomber etc. Social learning of such types leads to the acceptability or even glorification of terrorist violence and in some cases it can be more explicit and may also exist in a somewhat formal form as in the teaching of extremist ideologies for Mujahideen fighters in many Pakistani and Palestinian madrasas which are basically religious schools for young impressionable Muslim boys. While Madrasas have been in existence since the time of Prophet Muhammad, there has been a recent worldwide resurgence of Islamic fundamentalism that has inspired an increase in their numbers and possibly in the violent content of their message and a strong percentage of Muslim terrorists who indulged in acts of terror were educated in some form or fashion in such madrasas [5]. Also one cannot discount the fact that wide

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spread education of this type can and will influence even non-attendees because of cultural diffusion. Moreover, social learning of terrorists also occurs through dissemination of terrorist philosophies of different kinds in various from like audio-visual tapes, compact disks, books, and Websites. For example, the charter of the Islamic Resistance Movement i.e. popularly known as Hamas in Palestine has Article 15 which emphasizes the importance of teaching jihad. Thus, it seems plausible that either formal or informal teaching or social learning of violent behavior or ideologies may influence and inspire at least some young people towards terrorism. However, the social learning theory is just one explanation and it does not establish a definitely causal relationship as it fails to explain why only a small minority among the hundreds of thousands of individuals who get exposed to violent behaviors or ideologies of one kind of another become terrorists. Hence, social learning alone is not enough to explain why someone becomes a terrorist but it offers an important piece of the puzzle.

Frustration-aggression hypothesis offers a psychological explanation for aggressive behavior and it explain violent behaviour as stemming from the frustration of specific goals. This hypothesis was first applied in studies that dealt with scapegoating and hate crimes and there was indication that as sources of frustration accumulate, i.e. for example during an economic crisis or a nationalist struggle or a religious crusade, frustrated groups may unleash their aggression on a convenient social target. The frustration-aggression hypothesis was introduced by a group of Yale University psychologists that included John Dollard, Leonard Doob, Neal Miller, O.H. Mowrer, and Robert Sears in a famous work titled Frustration and Aggression [6]. In this work, they tried to integrate ideas and findings from several disciplines, especially sociology, anthropology, and psychology. Their work was acclaimed for its eclectic use of psychoanalysis, behaviourism, and even Marxism and ended up becoming one of the most influential explanations of aggressive behaviour in the history of social science. Their initial hypothesis was later modified by the Yale group, however, and in 1941 they proposed that frustration can result in to many different responses and only one of which is

aggression and this was valid for human as well as nonhuman (i.e., animal) actors and for groups as well as individuals. With respect to intergroup relations, the frustration-aggression hypothesis can be useful to shed light on how the dynamics of stereotyping, prejudice, and out-group hostility is both a result and producer of frustration. The theory of scapegoating is probably one of the most well-known application of the frustration-aggression hypothesis to study how prejudice gets formulated. This draws in part from Freudian concepts of displacement, projection, and catharsis and the scapegoating theory argues that once frustration and the impetus and motive for aggressive behaviour have emerged, it then makes relatively little difference who receives the brunt of the violence and thus a terrorist will not be worried by children or innocents getting hurt because of his or her actions. While may be in some cases, aggression can naturally take the form of retaliation against the specific initial source of frustration, in many other cases, situational constraints like lack of competence or tools can prevent a person from being able to react against the actual source of frustration, such as when the frustration was caused by a very powerful person or group. Thus, the terrorist who cannot successfully take down a well-guarded military camp will choose to attack a soft target like a crowded market. According to the theory, this display of aggression onto a socially sanctioned, ideologically directed victim group serves several purposes. Firstly, it channels the expression of aggressive impulses and results in cathartic relief once the aggression has been released. Secondly, while in normal scenarios, it is socially undesirable to behave violently toward others without any justification, but prejudicial attitudes that develop due to frustration can be used to justify and rationalize the expression of hostility. Thus, because of such rationalization, those who are affected by terrorism can be blamed for their own plight as targets of hostility and prejudice. For example, when innocent children are killed due to acts of terror, it is justified as due to their belonging to a particular social group. The frustration-aggression hypothesis continues to exert a very strong influence on decades of research of violent behavior including terrorism. However, the hypothesis has been severely criticized

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on the grounds of rigidity and overgeneralization and thereby it became necessary to limit the scope of the hypothesis to establish its validity. It has to be applied carefully and with extreme care in order to obtain useful results.

It has also been proposed that relative deprivation of some kind, be it economic or political or cultural disparities can also cause terrorism. This claim underlies Gurr's theory of relative deprivation [7]. Rebellions or acts of terror come to be when people cannot bear the misery of their lot. Gurr's theory derives more from psychoanalysis than from sociology. However, while Gurr stressed on economic deprivation predominantly, one can extend the argument to include any kind of relative deprivation. As a matter of fact, more recently, it has been argued that increasing differences between the material welfare of the poor and the rich will provoke a new era of political violence which will only accelerate as globalization not only creates new kinds of poverty and deprivation that goes beyond just material poverty but globalization, thanks to increased immigration and travel, also facilitates communication and links between those who perceive themselves to be globalization's victims and those who are seen as relatively better off. This increases the chances of violence. The possibility that either absolute deprivation or relative disparity fuels terrorist sentiments, especially among members of an oppressed class was first noted during the major European revolutions of the eighteenth through the early twentieth centuries. They were provoked, at least in part, by class disparities. Thus, relative deprivation theory is another sociological theory which is useful in understanding the behaviour and actions of a terrorist.

SECTION II - CRITICAL READING OF THE JOHN UPDIKE'S 'TERRORIST'

In the novel 'Terrorist' by John Updike, one can find expressions of all the above mentioned sociological theories in the making of the lead character who almost ends up as a terrorist. The story begins with a brief but revealing monologue by Ahmad who describes the condition of American youth. He narrates a fight he had with an older boy named Tylenol who thinks Ahmad is flirting with his girlfriend Joryleen. Ahmad however is living a

contradiction as he likes that girl but is trying hard to suppress his feelings as he feels it is against the instructions of God. His only solace is at his mosque and he studies the Quran diligently under the guidance of his imam, Shaikh Rashid. He even believes that his convictions are stronger than that of his teacher because of the Shaikh's tendency to interpret the Prophet Muhammad's hadiths figuratively and to display traces of a skeptical and liberal mind-set. In this opening section itself one can see relative deprivation, albeit a self-imposed one due to religious beliefs. Ahmad is suppressing his feeling and is subconsciously jealous of his American friends who can fully live their lives as they wish - *"Ahmad is a firm believer of Islam. His religion keeps him from drugs and vice, though it also holds him rather aloof from his classmates and the studies on the curriculum"* [8]. His religious beliefs conflicted with his human nature as expressed by the following statement, leading to frustration - *Ahmad hated Americans and says:*

> *"These devils seek to take away my God. All day long, at Central High School, girls sway and sneer and expose their soft bodies and alluring hair. Their bare bellies, adorned with shining navel studs and low-down purple tattoos, ask, What else is there to see?"* [9].

In a way, the contradiction between Ahmad's religious beliefs and the popular culture of the society he was living in leads to his existence as a deprived, frustrated individual, though he denies that to himself.

At home, Ahmad lives with his somewhat negligent mother, Teresa Mulloy, a third-generation Irish American who was a Catholic but is atheistic and has abandoned her religious beliefs. Ahmad hated her to an extent because of her lack of religious belief and comparative openness toward sexuality and relationships with men but he still cared for her as a dutiful son. On the other hand, Ahmad idolized his father, an Egyptian immigrant who had abandoned him and his mother when he was just three years old

> - *"His father's name is Omar Ashmawy and mother's Teresa Mulloy. He feels that his father is alive. He has a childhood desire to find out his father. When Jack Levy asks him*

What is he like to be called? Mulloy or Ashmawy. He says Ahmad Ashmawy" [10].

One of Teresa's love interests in the story is also Ahmad's guidance counselor, Jack Levy who was an atheistic Jew. He tries to steer Ahmad towards college and away from his chosen career path of being a truck driver. However, Ahmad was committed to his desires to become a truck driver and this was on the advice of his Shaikh who convinced him by arguing that driving is a practical skill of good merit whereas academic studies served only to advance American secular beliefs. Ahmad was also afraid that academic studies will strengthen his occasional religious doubt. Social learning into terrorism happens to Ahmad through a variety of means. He reads international news and propaganda glorifying martyrs of terror acts and finally his trucking career is what that directly leads Ahmad toward involvement in a terrorist plot directed against the Americans and he is enlisted in an attempt to blow up the Lincoln Tunnel under the Hudson River. Ahmad agrees to drive the truck into the tunnel and blow himself up. This is a direct result of his formal and informal social learning. A discussion with his Arabic teacher shows this vividly –

"Ahmad's Arabic teacher was discussing about the killing of "infidels", Ahmad enquired about conversion of "infidels" into Islam. The imam asks: The cockroaches that slither out from the baseboard and from beneath the sink – do you pity them? The flies that buzz around the food on the table, walking on it with the dirty feet that have just danced on feces and carrion – do you pity them?" When Ahmad responded in 'No' to his questions, he tries to boost Ahmad's heart with hatred: "You want to destroy them. They are vexing you with their uncleanness. They would take over your table, your kitchen; they will settle into the very food as it passes into your mouth if you do not destroy them. They have no feelings. They are manifestations of Satan, and God will destroy them without mercy on the day of final reckoning. God will rejoice at their suffering. Do thou likewise, Ahmad" [11].

This exchange shows how social learning was an important part in his embracing terrorist ideas. The novel ends on an optimistic note with some suspense and some twists. On the day of the planned attack, his fellow planners are not at their planned meeting place. However, Ahmad continues to proceed with his suicide mission alone. Driving the bomb-laden truck, he encounters Jack Levy on the side of the road who has been alerted about Ahmad's involvement in a potential terror attack. Jack along with Ahmad and tries to convince him not to go through with the bombing. In the end, Jack is successful and Ahmad reconsiders and aborts his terrorist mission.

CONCLUSION

This paper looked at John Updike's novel 'Terrorist' and threw light on it based on a few sociological theories of terrorism. While such works of fiction are based on the imagination of authors, they also capture a slice of time in history and thus highlight the spirit of their times. A sociological dissection of them can reveal interesting and insightful social commentary which is what this article attempted.

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