

## THE POST 9/11 PERIOD IN AMERICAN LITERATURE: FROM FEAR AND ESTRANGEMENT TO INTEREST AND DIALOGUE

Ingrida Žindžiuvienė

Associate Professor, Department of English Philology, Vytautas Magnus University

The aim of this paper is to discuss the post 9/11 (September 11, 2001) effect on the development of American literature at the beginning of the twenty-first century. As Christopher Bigsby rightly notices, the first signs of this period were those of bewilderment (Bigsby, 2006, 5). The situation which the United States of America entered had not been experienced before. Emory Elliott observes that “On September 11, 2001, the attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon dramatically altered American Society and culture in ways few would have predicted” (Elliott, 2006, 446). The tragic event has raised “an awareness of collective dangers” in a “trauma-kindred community” (Green, 2005, 211). Although Postmodernism contains such categories as apocalyptic or catastrophe theory or prophetic pessimism (Zurbrugg, 1993, 163), broadly undertaken by many American authors such as Kurt Vonnegut, Don DeLillo, Philip Roth and many others, the September 11<sup>th</sup> catastrophe with its disastrous physical and moral consequences was nothing that could have been predicted. It was and still is the long-lasting trauma that

the country has experienced but has not recovered from yet.

Because of this tragic event, according to Elliott, the country has fallen into the trap of “the destructive seventeenth-century Puritan extreme binary thinking of God versus Satan, Good versus Evil, Success versus Failure, and Us versus Them” (Elliott, 2006, 447). Mainly, these cardinal points appear in American literature of the twenty-first century. As Jeremy Green states, “the traumatized state of the nation has [...] impinged on the world of letters” (Green, 2005, 211). Similarly, Emory Elliott points out the fact that “American literature in the twenty-first century will be influenced by the events of that terrible day and by the ways that the United States government responded” (Elliott, 2006, 446). Soon after the catastrophe, several novels appeared that immediately drew the attention of the readers and critics: for example, *The Kite Runner* (2003) by Khaled Hosseini, *Why I Am a Muslim* (2004) by Asma Gull Hasan, in Great Britain, Ian McEwan’s *Saturday* (2005) and others. The earlier and later novels of this post 9/11 period demonstrates both fear

and interest of the public. As Pelagia Goulimari observes, “the pressure of recent global events seems to have created in [many] writers austere moods ranging from circumspection, to sobriety, to bleakness” (Goulimari, 2007, 1).

In the article “Postmodernism and Islam: where to after September 11,” Akbar S. Ahmed notices that “ideas and practice of multicultural harmony, eclecticism and juxtapositions [...] were halted in their tracks on 11 September 2001” (Ahmed, 2007, 140). The critic points out “the symbolism of the attack on the heart of the financial center of the Western world” and “the strike on the Pentagon, the heart of the military might of America,” drawing a shocking conclusion: “postmodernism lay buried in the rubble on that fateful day” (Ahmed, 2007, 140). Although the latter idea may be considered rather controversial, these issues determine the significance of the event. On the other hand, Ahmed’s statement that “In many important ways September 11 was the day the new century began” is true: the tragic event initiated many irreversible changes in the American society and culture (Ahmed, 2007, 140). Immediately after the event the country was starting on the devastating road of estrangement. As Ahmed states, many religious figures round Bush emphasized “the Christian nature of the USA [...] attacking Islam” and calling it “a very wicked and evil religion” (Ahmed, 2007, 141-142). According to Ahmed, such hysterical attacks reinforced “already existing stereotypes of Muslims” because “to many Americans the religion of Islam simply meant terrorism or extremism” (Ahmed, 2007, 142). As the country started quickly rolling down the road of “Islamophobia” (Ahmed, 2007, 142), “the sense of frustration that Muslims felt in seeing

themselves portrayed negatively” rose (Ahmed, 2007, 144). The critic points out the fact that “this problem has become even more acute after September 11 and continues to cause misunderstandings on both sides” (Ahmed, 2007, 144). Ahmed raises the question of building mutual understanding between the West and Islam and explains the necessity of “the intellectual discourse [which had been earlier] framed in the context of the ‘war on terrorism’” (Ahmed, 2007, 144). This is, probably, the main reason why some prolific authors, including John Updike, choose the topic of educating the readers and helping them to recover from the tragedy, and, at the same time, aiding the audience in crossing the bridge between the two opposing camps as well as helping the opposites to communicate.

John Updike (b. 1932) has always been ascribed to the group of American authors who explore the individual self, describing the search for spiritual meaning and moral values. In his works, John Updike has analyzed the burdens of modern life and the torments of the soul, depicting the psychological trauma and a strange sense of unreality that individuals experience in the face of human cruelty, brutality and incomprehensible evil. Although at the beginning of literary career Updike’s fiction was adventurous, later it turned to experimentation with the possibilities of fiction such as intertextuality, narrative techniques and the structure of the novel. However, most of John Updike’s novels analyze different aspects of American reality and can be regarded as an illustration of American lifestyle, political and cultural events. Stephen Abell states that “John Updike is rightly recognized as the foremost chronicler of [...] what he calls the lives and ‘minds of middling America’” (Abell, 2006, 1).

Margaret Atwood (b. 1939) once observed that “as a writer he [John Updike] can do anything he wants” (Atwood in Reilly, 2002, 217). Thus, his recent (the twenty-second) novel *Terrorist* (2006) may be interpreted as an example of the present-day American reality, based on fear and tension. Inspired by the tragic events of 11 September, 2001, the novel focuses on the psychological portrait of a young terrorist. Alexander C. Kafka notices that “the novel’s title is literal”; however, “the book’s aftertaste is the profound sense that we all terrorize each other in strange, quotidian ways. We do so with our cynicism, infidelity, and bitterness, with our bullying, the betrayal of our ideas, with our weakness and disgusting habits, our greed and licentiousness” (Kafka, 2006, 2). Commenting on the title of the novel, John Murphy discusses the importance of the main character’s, Ahmad’s, journey across New York, stating that, although “Updike’s fatalistic title reveals Ahmad’s future,” the author purposefully includes the symbol of a spiritual journey, which may have different interpretations (Murphy, 2007, 3). Similarly to many other Americans, John Updike searches for the answers to the questions: Who is guilty for the tragic events? Who or what makes people, like the main character of this novel, commit crimes? Updike admits that he “felt he could understand the animosity and hatred which an Islamic believer would have for our [American] system. Nobody’s trying to see it from that point of view” (Updike in McGrath, 2006, 1). Having created a sensitive portrait of a terrorist, John Updike introduces a new character type in American fiction: a young inexperienced, but determined, terrorist. Focusing on the period after September the 11<sup>th</sup> events and discussing the aftermath of the

tragedy, John Updike draws a marginal line in American literature and American history.

As John Updike later remembered, on September 11 he “happened to be looking at Manhattan from just across the river, in Brooklyn Heights and later described what he had seen in a “Talk of the Town” essay in *The New Yorker*” (Updike in Hitchens, 2006, 1). Probably, this moment and his previously thought of religious theme for the novel were the primary sources for creating an unusual portrait of an eighteen-year-old Muslim, Ahmad, who “has an absent Muslim father” and an Irish mother (Hitchens, 2006, 2). Although the boy has not seen his father and his direct links with the Muslim culture are minimal, Ahmad turns to Islam for the answers: he finds a local mosque and attends regular classes under the supervision of a secretive imam, Shaikh Rashid, who “sets his young acolyte on the path to martyrdom” – he urges the boy to study for the truck driver’s license, which will eventually result in Ahmad’s driving a truck loaded with explosives “through a dense commuter traffic towards the Lincoln Tunnel and his promised place in Paradise” (Poster, 2006, 1). Most of the novel is focalized through Ahmed’s point of view; however, the author purposefully shifts from the first-person narration to the third-person narration, as though allowing the readers to shift from the subjective point of view to the objective one to be able to draw conclusions themselves. John Murphy states that Updike invites his readers “to imagine ourselves into the thoughts and feelings of those we do not understand [...] from the inside out without condoning or romanticizing his acts” (Murphy, 2007, 4). Commenting on the novel, Theodore Dalrymple points out Updike’s ability to pertain the understanding

of “the worldview of a modern would-be Islamist terrorist, avoiding caricature and recognizing complexity” (Dalrymple, 2006, 2). John Updike neither justifies the young terrorist’s actions nor judges him – instead, the author presents a detailed portrait of the boy, including his background, description of the community and its influence on the main character, whose interactions with the society demonstrate the young terrorist’s attitude towards the American way of life.

Stephen Abell observes that “Ahmad’s wholehearted holiness is the keynote of the novel, and Updike is desperately keen to emphasize it” (Abell, 2006, 1). Updike discusses the importance of faith in a human being’s existence, explaining Islamic traditions and numerous religious issues. As Christopher Hitchens comments, “John Updike continues to offer us, as we have come to expect of him, his grueling homework”: in providing much information on Islam, quoting from the Koran (Qur’an), explaining the boy’s avocation and aspiration, John Updike demonstrates his astonishing capacities of penetrating the mind of a future-to-be terrorist (Hitchens, 2006, 3). In a certain way, John Updike takes up the role of an educator; he seems to raise the question of acceptance of diversity within the society, discussing religion, beliefs, traditions, culture and way of life of “the Other.” Stephen Abell acknowledges Updike’s brave attempts “to reveal empathy for a rigorous religious philosophy that is foreign to his own” (Abell, 2006, 1). In doing this, the author demonstrates an objective point of view and his wish to help other people in acting similarly. Actually, there are several instances in the novel when the author discusses Judaism and Christianity; however, these are not extensive and, probably, serve to counterweigh Ahmad’s

sincere avocation and deep faith in Islam. Jem Poster rightly notices that Updike’s “thoughtful, disturbing narrative insists repeatedly on the moral and spiritual dimensions of jihad, tacitly urging us towards a deeper understanding of Islamic fundamentalism and revealing, in the process, patterns of connection vastly more subtle and complex than anything recognized by America’s political masters” (Poster, 2006, 1).

The novel *Terrorist* is set in New York and takes up the period of several months in Ahmad’s life. As it has been already stated, the title of the novel suggests of the closed ending; however, the author’s purposefully designed open ending introduces the aspects of the mutual understanding and the possibility of a dialogue. In describing the young terrorist, Ahmad, according to Hartwig, Updike reveals “the cognitive reality” both in introducing several flashbacks to the earlier period and in inviting the reader to project the future (Hartwig, 2007, 1). John Murphy observes that “Updike tries to get to the heart of Ahmad’s extremism, to understand or at least to recognize the strange alchemy that produces a suicidal soldier of God” (Murphy, 2007, 2). In a way, Updike tries to explain the background of any possible terrorist: in the novel, “his” terrorist is American-born, in his late teens, living in New Prospect (“a fictionalized Paterson, home to a large Arab-American population”), New Jersey (in “postmodern gothic” environment), is heartily devoted to Islam, feeling sincere hatred for the Western culture and, under the clever guidance of his imam, waiting for a reward in the Afterlife, which is promised by a jihad (Walsh, 2006, 1). Although the portrait of the young terrorist includes naivety and maximalism of a young person, the cardinal poles on which the portrait is built are “intersections of faith and

fanaticism” (Murphy, 2007, 3). In this way, Updike tries to find an explanation for the causes of a terrorist act.

Considering the significance of the novel, it is possible to interpret *Terrorist* as the urge to realize the essential things in life that would stand out as opposite ones to different forms of degradation. It may also raise the question of punishment, which, according to Alexander C. Kafka, “comes in the degradation of life itself – aging, loneliness, illness, mourning, regret” (Kafka, 2006, 2). Alongside the theme of terrorism or the opposition existing between two different cultures and world views, the novel discusses vices of the American society such as consumerism, superficiality, and hypocrisy – the issues that have been at the center of attention in the works of numerous American authors. As John Murphy notices, the novel presents a picture of “a faith-impooverished society” within “deteriorating American landscape” (Murphy, 2007, 1-2). For example, the beginning of the novel presents brutal, ugly, vulgar aspects of the American society:

*DEVILS*, Ahmad thinks. *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?* Boys strut and saunter along and look dead-eyed, indicating with their edgy killer gestures and careless scornful laughs that this world is all there is – a noisy varnished hall lined with metal lockers and having at its end a blank wall desecrated by graffiti and roller-painted over so often it feels to be coming closer by millimeters. (Updike, 2007, 3; italics in the original).

Ahmad understands that his classmates “lack true faith; they are not on the Straight

Path; they are unclean” (Updike, 2007, 3). He seems to be detached from the school-world around him, which enables him to view the surrounding rather objectively.

Moreover, the readers easily trace Updike’s point of view in Ahmad’s thoughts: “Infidels, they think safety lies in accumulation of the things of this world, and in the corrupting diversions of the television set. They are slaves to images, false ones of happiness and affluence” (Updike, 2007, 4). The teachers at school “have the pink lids and bad breaths,” “habitually drink too much,” “some get divorces, some live with others unmarried,” “their lives away from school are disorderly and wanton and self-indulgent”; there are “paid to install virtue and democratic values by the state government [...] and that Satanic government farther down, in Washington, but the values they believe in are Godless” (Updike, 2007, 4). A characteristic representative of such society happens to be Tylenol Jones (whose mother named him after the brand of medicine), an ordinary Afro-American, Ahmad’s classmate, who dislikes Ahmad for being different: Ahmad’s religion “holds him rather aloof from his classmates and the studies on the curriculum” (Updike, 2007, 8). He strongly believes that “*the only guidance, says the third sura, is the guidance of Allah*” (Updike, 2007, 18; italic in the original). Ahmad sincerely believes in his God: “he protects his God,” who is his “invisible but palpable companion” and “is ever with him” – “God is another person close beside him, a Siamese twin attached in every part, inside and out, and to whom he can turn at every moment in prayer. God is his happiness” (Updike, 2007, 39-40). To Ahmad, American society is Godless, where “everything is fight,” “everything is war” (Updike 147). Even his appear-

ance makes him stand out against other students at his school – he always wears a white shirt, narrow-legged black jeans; “his shirts come back stiffened by cardboard from the cleaners, whose bills he pays out of the money he earns clerking at the Tenth Street Shop-a-Sec two evenings a week, and on weekends and Christian holidays” (Updike, 2007, 9-10). Feeling superior to his classmates and surveying the world around him, Ahmad sensitively understands the reason for this: “*The world is difficult, he thinks, because devils are busy in it, confusing things and making the straight crooked*” (Updike, 2007, 11; italic in the original). He criticizes the American society, stating that it “fears getting old” and that “infidels do not know how to die” (Updike, 2007, 174). When Ahmad becomes a truck driver, one day traveling with one of the owners of the company he works for, Charlie, he shares his contempt for the American society and American lifestyle: Ahmad agrees with Charlie on the timely terrorist act of September the 11<sup>th</sup>: Charlie notices that “It’s nice to see those towers gone,” “they were ugly – way out of proportion. They didn’t belong” (Updike, 2007, 186-187). Charlie and his family belong to Islamic extremists, who prepare Ahmad for an act of terrorism – to blow up the Lincoln Tunnel. Ahmad understands that, according to the Koran, he has to “be ruthless to unbelievers”; he also knows the reward for this, a straight road to the Paradise, where eventually God will greet [him] as His son” (Updike, 2007, 294; 305). However, on the scheduled day, because of different circumstances, Ahmad fails to commit a suicidal terrorist act. The author does not put this as weakness, but as something Ahmad is regretful about; the novel ends exactly in the words that started the

novel: “*These devils, Ahmad thinks, have taken away my God*” (Updike, 2007, 310; italic in the original). Thus, the suggested by the title of the novel outcome does not materialize, which may lead to the appearance of hope in the American society.

Concluding, it is possible to state that the issues discussed in the novel point to the overall egocentricism of the American society, described in many ways and forms by Updike himself and by other contemporary American authors. Alongside to the themes of terrorism or the degradation of the American society, Updike chooses a tool of opposition to direct the reader along the path of mutual understanding. As Walsh notices, “Updike is quite right to be appalled by much of what he sees. There is an awfulness, a material and spiritual poverty, affixed to so much of American life” (Walsh, 2006, 4). Ahmad’s point of view on the American society and his revulsion against the “popular culture of underclass America” might lead to the explanation of freedom and different aspects of it (Dalrymple, 2006, 4-5).

By disclosing the main character, Updike does not so much depart from the stereotypical portrait of a young Muslim; however, throughout the novel the author is trying to explain his actions to the readers. In doing this, John Updike undertakes a serious and, at the same time, very difficult and challenging task both to describe the vices of the American society and to explain the opposing and contradicting point of view. In the tone of anxiety he discusses cultural and social issues, describes the contradictions and incommunicability between the certain groups of the society and analyses the challenges of the contemporary world. John Updike’s attempts illustrate the concern of many Americans to find the answers to the urging questions at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

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## RUGSĖJO VIENUOLIKTOSIOS PASEKMĖS AMERIKIEČIŲ LITERATŪRAI: NUO BAIMĖS IR SUSVETIMĖJIMO IKI SUSIDOMĖJIMO IR DIALOGO

Ingrida Žindžiuviėnė

Santrauka

Straipsnyje apžvelgiama tragiško įvykio JAV istorijoje (2001 m. rugsėjo vienuoliktosios) įtaka amerikiečių literatūrai. Ši tragedija šalyje sukėlė ilgalaikį po-trauminį efektą, paskatinusį amerikiečių rašytojus rinktis terorizmo apraiškų temas. Vienas jų, John

Updike (g. 1932), priskiriamas prie amerikiečių rašytojų, analizuojančių individo būklę, moralinių vertybių paieškas. Savo romanuose John Updike aprašo šiuolaikinio gyvenimo ypatumus, psichologines traumas, žmonijos žiaurumą, brutalumą ir nesuvokiamą

blogį. 2006 m. parašytame romane *Terrorist* („Teroristas“) rašytojas pateikia šiuolaikinės amerikiečių visuomenės, kurioje vyrauja baimė ir įtampa, analizę.

Aprašydamas jauno teroristo gyvenimą, rašytojas pabrėžia amerikietiškos visuomenės ydas ir analizuoja šalies politinę situaciją.

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*Author's address:*  
Department of English Philology  
Vytautas Magnus University  
K. Donelaičio 52 - 615  
LT-44244 Kaunas, Lithuania  
E-mail: i.zindziuviene@hmf.vdu.lt