

## **Alienation and Restoration—A Study of Ahmad’s Growth in *Terrorist***

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### **Abstract**

**John Updike’s *Terrorist* is an important piece of post-9/11 literary works. The novel tells the story of Ahmad, the protagonist, who becomes a terrorist but abandons the terrorist attack at the last moment. Using Fromm’s alienation theory as a research perspective, this paper analyses Ahmad’s growth from alienation to restoration, explores reasons for Ahmad’s alienation into a terrorist, and concludes that love and care play an important role in dissolving alienation and helping the protagonist to restoration.**

### **Keywords**

**John Updike, *Terrorist*, Alienation, Restoration, Love.**

### **1. Introduction**

After the horrible terrorist attacks that happened on September 11, 2001, Americans have suffered from endless shock and sadness. For a long period of time, the reflection of the 9/11 event is the hot topic of America and the rest of the world. In the field of literature, a large number of literary works like poems, dramas, and novels that center on that event have emerged to indicate the social reality and humanity reflection in the post-9/11 era. Updike’s *Terrorist* is one of them and the exploration of *Terrorist* is helpful to enrich the researches of post-9/11 literature and inspire the reflections of the potential causes of terrorist’s formation. As a significant but controversial post-9/11 novel, *Terrorist* illustrates the process of how an American teenager has been involved in a terrorist group’s plan of action and how he willingly becomes a human bomb to commit suicide and take innocent citizens’ lives as well. The protagonist of this novel, Ahmad Ashmawy Mulloy, is an 18-year-old teenager living in New Prospect City, a declining city in America with sorts of immigrants. As a mixed-race of Irish American and Egyptian Muslim, Ahmad lives with his Irish mother after his Muslim father Omar Ashmawy abandoned family. Out of curiosity of his father’s identity, Ahmad steps into the local mosque and learns *The Koran* under the guidance of Imam Shaikh Rashid who is an anti-American plotter. On the anniversary of the 9/11 tragedy, Ahmad complies with the instructions of Shaikh Rashid and the owner of furniture store Charlie Chehab, driving the truck with explosive material to the Lincoln Tunnel. However, Ahmad’s action is prevented by his high school teacher Jack Levy, a despairing bystander of American society in the novel. The whole novel is a great attempt in which Updike depicts the social conditions, ethnic predicaments and emigrants’ living environment in the United States.

In this paper, three questions will be answered. Firstly, What is Ahmad’s growth? Secondly, why did Ahmad become a terrorist? Thirdly, how did Ahmad achieve the restoration? According to these questions, the whole paper includes five chapters. The first chapter is the introduction of the essay, including John Updike’s novel *Terrorist*, framework of the paper, and research questions of the essay. The second chapter is the literature review. The author will illustrate Fromm’s alienation theory and *Terrorist* at home and abroad. The third chapter focuses on the alienation of the protagonist Ahmad. The fourth chapter draws attention to the Ahmad’s Restoration. The fifth chapter is a conclusion and reflection of the paper.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Fromm's Theory of Alienation

Erich Fromm, an internationally well-known humanistic philosopher and psychoanalytic psychologist, formed his own unique alienation thoughts by inheriting and summarizing the alienation thoughts of many predecessors. Among them, he was mostly influenced by Marx and Freud. Fromm's alienation theory focused on the analysis of human alienation at the psychological level, and believed that alienation is a pathological state of social psychological experience. He combined Freud's psychoanalysis and Marx's labor alienation theory to form his own unique social psychology. Fromm's alienation theory was no longer limited to the economic and political fields, but extended to the psychological field. In his view, alienation is a form of morbid psychology. As Fromm said in *The Sane Society*, "By alienation is meant a mode of experience in which the person experiences himself as an alien. He has become, one might say, estranged from himself. He does not experience himself as the center of his world, as the creator of his own acts, but his acts and their consequences have become his masters, whom he obeys, or whom he may even worship".

In general, Fromm's alienation can be summarized into four aspects: alienation in the process of production, alienation of consumption, alienation of political life and alienation of social relations. The alienation of social relations mainly reflects in the self-alienation, interpersonal relations and man and society. This paper focuses on the alienation theme and analyzes the ways to eliminate alienation from the following three aspects: self-alienation, alienation between personal relationships and alienation between man and society.

### 2.2. Previous Studies on *Terrorist*

As a prolific writer John Updike, the research and studies from various perspectives on his works are also plentiful. Most of literary critics and academic papers show great interests in Updike's Rabbit-series novels in late twentieth century. In the wake of the boom of post-9/11 novels, the publication of *Terrorist* leads a new research hotspot. Research findings and reviews of this work from overseas and domestic academia will be both introduced. The western critics hold diametrically opposed views on this novel. Some scholars don't think highly of *Terrorist*, and even give an awful appraisal towards it. Some of them deem it as a work filled with racial prejudice. For instance, Richard Gray (2011) in his book *After the Fall: American Literature since 9/11* makes a review in less than one page and gives a conclusion: this is a meaningless story. And Kakutani (2006) blasted *Terrorist* as "one-dimensional" and "cartoonish". However, with more comprehensive and rational assessment on 9/11 events appearing, the valuation of the novel is more positive and impersonal. The research in this period can be divided into three major perspectives. Firstly, the perspective of religion. Mikbal M. Alosman, Raihanah M. M and Ruzy Suliza Hashim (2018) in their paper also point out the novel is "abundant with binary representations of Muslims whose acts and interactions with fellow Christian and Jewish Americans are scripted by their respective religious values". Updike's Muslim characters are presented as "flawed and faulty in their beliefs and conviction". Jonathan Shainin (2006) in "The Plot against America" says that "Updike should view terrorism through lens of religion should come as no surprise; faith for him is a far more interesting subject of inquiry than politics". Secondly, the perspective of Arab-American racial issues. Some scholars give attention to the racial issues presented in *Terrorist*. Mita Banerjee (2008) maintains that "*Terrorist* is a novel obsessed with, and not only curious about, skin color". In identifying a sudden increase of the phenomena of racial profiling after 9/11, Banerjee observes how *Terrorist* and many other novels linked to the cultural climate of the tragic events discriminate and denaturalize Arab Americans in order to question their "fit" in American identity. Mansutti (2011) also talks that "readers could find Arab Americans were feared for their looks and were put in a position

where their 'Arabness' ended up overcoming their 'Americanness' in which the novel implied". Thirdly, the perspective of literary technique in *Terrorist*. The literary technique *Terrorist* employed is a recent research trend of the novel compared with the research of terrorism. The scholars Riyad Manqoush, Noraini Md. Yusof, Ruzy Suliza Hashim (2011) from University Kebangsaan Malaysia mentions in their paper that the use of allusion in the depiction of 9/11 acts is a typical way of post-9/11 novels.

Domestic scholars also made achievements on the research of John Updike's novel *Terrorist*. In CNKI, over thirty journal papers and eleven M.A. and doctored theses and dissertations can be found on this topic. These scholars give emphasis on the analysis of characters and deep implications. Zhao Na (2016) in her article "On the Scapegoat in John Updike's *Terrorist*" focuses on Ahmad's scapegoat identity, and probes into the cause why Ahmad becomes a terrorist in that social condition. The study of this novel detects the cultural imagination of writer Updike's personal experience as well. Pu Yu and Wang Dong (2012) decipher *Terrorist* from the perspective of cultural imagination and critical theories, which indicates that "Updike's writing is in correspondence with the western traditional views of the oriental Islamic world". A certain number of reviewers highlight the cultural conflicts presented in the work. Wang Weiqian (2013) explores the clash of civilizations from the social, religious and moral conflicts. She discusses the social and household conditions Ahmad lives, and the reason why Ahmad turns to Islam. Zhu Xuefeng (2006) says, *Terrorist* contributes to "the dialogue between different religions, and gives a new angle to Updike's picture of the America". The role shaping of the novel and the ethical crisis facing protagonist Ahmad is another point worth paying attention to. Reviewers like Wang Xiangmin (2018) and Wu Ronglan (2015) study the novel from literary narrative perspective. Majority of degree papers on this novel are researched in Trauma theory, other papers including the study of Ahmad as "the Other" in the novel, and the study under the theory of ethical literary criticism.

In summary, scholars have conducted wide and in-depth analyses on *Terrorist*, while studies of the novel from alienation are rare. This paper applies Erich Fromm's theory of alienation to analyze the reasons for the formation of terrorist and explores the importance of love and care in dissolving alienation and saving the protagonist.

### 3. Alienation

In Fromm's theoretical system, alienation is an abnormal mental activity and a form of experience in which the individual feels himself to be the centre of his personal world and the creator of his own actions. The alienated individual loses contact with himself, others and the external environment. Lack of emotion, false love and repressed ego exacerbate the distortion of personality and lead to loss of self. Ahmad, the protagonist of *Terrorist*, loses himself in the alienation of relationships social environments as well as in his religious fanaticism and becomes a terrorist.

#### 3.1. Alienation between Ahmad and People

The alienation of relationships is the beginning of Ahmad's self-disorientation, mainly in the form of kinship relationships. When Ahmad was three years old, his father was forced to run away because he didn't know how to survive and struggled to provide for his family. Ahmad lives with his mother, Teresa Mulloy. However, Teresa is not a good mother. She cares only about her personal happiness and pleasure, but never puts any thought into her child. Since Ahmad was ten years old or even younger, Teresa has only taken less than an hour a day to look after her child, spending most of her time on art and love. Like most Americans, she believes that "sexuality is worth more than all family relationships". Therefore, she has no fear of entering and leaving with various men in and out of her own flat without considering Ahmad's

feelings. While pursuing her own happiness, she does not know or care what her son is doing. In desperation, Ahmad decides to enter a mosque to learn Islam.

Incredibly, Teresa covers her hypocrisy and irresponsibility with excuses such as “treating him as an equal” and “respecting and supporting him in whatever he chooses”. She never knows what Ahmad is doing at the mosque or the danger that is approaching. For example, when Ahmad tells her about the trouble he found while working at Chehab’s furniture factory, it doesn’t bother Teresa in the slightest. When Ahmad’s teacher, Jack Levy, discovers that there is something wrong with Chehab’s furniture factory and persuades Ahmad to leave, Teresa knows nothing about it. Even when Jack Levy tells Teresa of his suspicions, she remains oblivious to that. Fromm (1955) points out that in an alienated society, the relationship between people is simply one of “mutual exploitation between two abstractions, two working machines.” Teresa doesn’t care about her child because Ahmad has no use for her. Frankly speaking, he only exposes her age and prevents her from finding more and better lovers. It is clear that Teresa’s irresponsibility cuts off Ahmad’s only connection to the world. Lonely and helpless, he only tries to fit into the world in his own way, which is to believe in Islam.

### 3.2. Alienation between Ahmad and Society

In addition to apathetic kinship, the alienating social environment also solidified Ahmad’s religious belief, accelerated his separation from the outside world, and became the catalyst for his terrorist attack. Fromm argues that modern society has been generally alienated and permeates all aspects of life. In *Terrorist*, the society in which Ahmad lives is a true reflection of this phenomenon. In this alienated social environment, people repeat monotonous tasks according to instructions and requirements. They have no control, no creativity, and no ability to think independently. They are like a working machine, running around for money and living. Ahmad’s teacher repeats boring knowledge in the classroom every day for a salary, and his counsellor, Jack Levy, feels that in the process of his work he has become a machine, a part of the chain of work that can be easily replaced in the heartless, materialistic Western world. Moreover, people around Ahmad are increasingly inclined to use sexual fulfillment to escape their loneliness and isolation, and to alleviate the long established estrangement and mistrust between people. The mass media, represented by television, is frantically trying to sell people things they don’t need. People do not consume out of necessity, but simply to have. More and more people are addicted to the virtual world created by the Internet and refuse to face reality. However, the doctrine of Islam that Ahmad learned is incompatible with this sick society. In Ahmad’s view, the behaviour of every alienated individual in this society is an insult and desecration of Allah. They are devils and enemies. They wanted to take away their Lord and destroy their faith. Ahmad is disgusted and hostile to this strange world and he does not want to fit in. He is immersed in Allah’s world and cannot extricate himself from it, gradually becoming another type of alienated person in the modern world.

### 3.3. Alienation between Ahmad and Self

For Ahmad, the greatest impact of religion is his alienation from himself, a complete loss of the self. In elaborating his theory of alienation, Fromm states that the difference between monotheistic and polytheistic religions lies not in the number of gods but in the self-alienation of the believer in the former. The believer constructs an idol with his energy and artistic talent and then worships him. This idol is no other than the result of the believer’s own efforts. Ahmad’s dependence on Lord Allah is such relationship. When Ahmad enters the mosque, he desperately craves fatherly love and companionship due to his disappointment with his mother. Consequently, he projects the good virtues of his imagined father onto Allah, the Lord. To him, the Lord is faithful and He will never betray Ahmad, let alone abandon him. The Lord is always with him, helps him in his prayers and guides him on the right path. The Lord is his happiness and brings hope to his despairing life. Attachment to Lord Allah enables Ahmad to overcome

his own existential separateness and connect with the world. Nevertheless, this way is at the expense of his own independence and sense of wholeness. After Ahmad projects good virtues onto Allah, he in turn submits to Him and prayed to the Lord to endow him with some powers and give him encouragement and guidance. The Lord became the centre of his world and Ahmad himself is marginalized.

At this point, Ahmad's ego is constructed through the Lord, and without Him there is no existence for him. He loses the motivation to develop his own independent existence, resulting in the alienation of his ego. When the extremist Muslim Shaikh Rashid took advantage of Ahmad's devotion and worship of God Allah and induced him to become a terrorist to attack the United States, he did not refuse. In his view, the devil had taken over America, the whole society had fallen, and they were about to take away their Lord. Ahmad is willing to sacrifice himself to fulfil his mission with a terrorist attack and to uphold the will of Allah.

## 4. Restoration

In *Terrorist*, Updike not only identifies the problem of alienation that is prevalent in today's capitalist society, but also suggests a healing for alienation—love. This chapter will describe how Ahmad returns from the abyss and achieves salvation in two main parts: external help and his own awakening.

### 4.1. External Help

Fromm believes that love fulfills man's need to be at one with the world, while preserving the integrity and independence of the self. He also emphasizes that love is an active capacity of the human being, a capacity to break through the barriers that separate him from others, a capacity to unite him with others. Love enables man to overcome his loneliness and sense of separation, but it recognizes his own value and preserves his own dignity. In today's society, people need love to break down the alienation and separation among them and to build a personal connection with others, with themselves and with the world. Only in this way can people regain their rationality and find their lost selves. In the novel, Jack Levy is the only one who really cares about Ahmad. It is his love and enlightenment that awakens Ahmad's rationality and prompts him to give up the idea of a terrorist attack at the last moment.

Initially, Jack Levy's concern for Ahmad was simply a teacher's duty. He must help these children who seem to lack flesh-and-blood parents and assist them in stepping out of their fantasy world and planning their future. When he discovers that Ahmad has lost himself by indulging in beliefs, he begins to really worry about the boy. But when Levy tries to persuade him to reconsider whether to go to school or work, Ahmad is filled with hostility in his eyes. He has been completely alienated into his own world with Allah and refuses to accept any influence from the outside world. Nevertheless, Levy does not give up and he tries to help Ahmad in every way he could. He finds Teresa and asks her to help the child choose a more rational future. For instance, when he is aware that there is something wrong with the Chehab's furniture factory where Ahmad works, he promptly tells Teresa about his doubts; when he learns of Ahmad's impending terrorist attack, he risks his life by getting into Ahmad's explosives-laden truck and trying to convince him to change his mind. Jack Levy's love for Ahmad is a productive love, involving "care, responsibility, respect, and understanding". In Ahmad's growth, he never sees himself as a bystander, but actively to care about Ahmad's happiness and sadness. The teacher knows what Ahmad really needs and respects him objectively without distorting his existence with a subjective consciousness.

Fromm states that love is productive and is an individual's connection to others, self and nature in a positive, creative way. In *Terrorist*, this positivity and creativity is exemplified in the way

Jack Levy breaks the Ahmad's isolation from the outside world and evokes his capacity for reason and love power.

#### 4.2. Self-awakening

In addition to the external help that leads to Ahmad's return, his own awakening also plays a key role. Firstly, Ahmad learns that Charlie Chehab, who has been urging him to sacrifice his life for Allah, is in fact an undercover agent of the CIA. He wants to use Ahmad to eliminate the extremist Muslims. Sheikh Rashid and others also do not stick to their allegiance to the Lord when danger comes and flee in all directions. They also simply use Ahmad to suppress the infidels and demonized America. Hence, the hypocrisy and betrayal of those around Ahmad hammers a crack in his indifference, and his faith wavers. Ahmad yearns to be close to his God, but his God has not taught him to destroy others. He realizes that his faith is being used for evil purposes, driving him to antagonize American society and achieve the despicable political aims of the manipulators behind the scenes. This is the first step in his awakening.

Fromm considers psychologically healthy people to be those who have the capacity to love, a creative spirit and respect for their own lives and the lives of others. Then Levy tells Ahmad about his relationship with Teresa, so that Ahmad can feel the warmth from the outside world. Teresa has many lovers, but they never consider Ahmad's feelings when they come in and out of the flat. Levy is different; he truly loves Teresa and cares about the feelings of Ahmad. This respect and trust makes Ahmad realize the value of his existence, which is the second step in his awakening. By the end of the novel, when Ahmad smiles at the two children in the front car who are making faces to amuse him, he regains his ability to love and reason, and finds his lost self. Therefore, overcoming alienation requires a revolution of love, calling for the establishment of true love between human beings.

#### 5. Conclusion

We can draw a summary of Ahmad's growth: he falls into a terrorist step by step and eventually gets back by giving up the terrorist attack under the care of love. On the one hand, the alienation of human relationship and social environment compels this confused teenager to save himself in extreme ways. On the other hand, while his terrorist attack brings horror and shock, it also prompts people to reflect on their behaviour and seek ways to change things. Admittedly, it is true that the way to overcome alienation is not another kind of alienation, but love, trust, understanding and support between people.

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