

(Un)Empathetic Ties with the Other: Perpetrator Analysis of Martin Amis's *The Last Days of Muhammad Atta*

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ABSTRACT

The paper aims at analysing Martin Amis's short story The Last Days of Muhammad Atta from the theoretical lens of Perpetrator Studies. Amis fictionally portrays his protagonist Muhammad Atta, a real-life perpetrator, who crashed the second plane to the north tower of the World-Trade Centre. The study critiques the fictional portrayal, subscribing to Perpetrator Studies, by taking into considering the postulates of the theory for both the actual study of perpetrators and their literary projections. The problematic aspects in the literary representations of an actual perpetrator have been pointed out in the analysis. The paper pays particular attention to the ways fictional representation of a real-life perpetrator affects our perception of perpetrators and perpetration, thereby diminishing or magnifying the gap that already exists in the us and them binary of victims and perpetrators. Despite the call from the academic and literary circles to have empathetic ties with the other (perpetrator) for oscillating the dichotomy between us and them, after gaining a real understanding of the perpetrators in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, analysis of the Amis's short story suggests that the author ended up utilizing the same representational tropes that have caused the chasm of misunderstanding in the first place. Instead of establishing empathetic ties with other, by giving a considerate account of Atta's life, Amis undermines his own effort due to an overarching bias in the portrayal depicted.

Keywords: Martin Amis, Perpetrator Studies, Empathetic Ties, Representational tropes, Projection

INTRODUCTION

Martin Amis is a British novelist, essayist, screenwriter, and memoirist. In 2008, he published a book titled *The Second Plane* (2008), which consists of fourteen pieces: twelve non-fiction pieces and two short stories. These pieces are his critical and fictional responses to the 9/11 attacks and the war on terror. One of the short stories is titled: *The Last Days of Muhammad Atta*. It was first published in *The New Yorker* in April 2006. The protagonist of the story is a fictionalized version of Mohamed Mohamed el-Amir Awad el-Sayed Atta, an Egyptian national who hijacked the American Airlines Flight 11 on the morning of September 11 and crashed it into the World Trade Centre's North Tower. The short story looks into the mind (and body) of this hijacker. According to "The 9/11 Commission Report", Atta was accompanied by Abdul Aziz al Omari, Satam al Suqami, Wail al Shehri, and Waleed al Shehri,

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but it was Atta who piloted the plane and crashed it into the tower. (The 9/11 Commission Report, 2004)

Perpetrator Studies is an interdisciplinary field that studies the perpetrator of large, as well as small scale violence. One of its important aspects is its attempt to theorize the perpetrators of violent crimes by closely studying the perpetrator's mind-set, motivations, impulses, social set up (that potentially adds to the emergence of the perpetrator), and so on. It is a relatively new and developing field of study but, nonetheless, holds a lot of importance because of the enhancement it can bring to our understanding of the perpetrators and perpetration of violent crimes. The aim is to know and better understand the roots of the problem in a search for more effective solutions.

The 9/11 incident was a great tragedy for the world in general and for America in particular. It resulted in the deaths of almost three thousand people. It was difficult for the world to process the shock. Its effects were felt by all, including the literary community. People responded to it in different ways. The response of literary writers was no less vocal. Articles, essays, stories, visual representations and documentaries etc. were produced in a short amount of time. One such instance is the short story *The Last Days of Muhammad Atta* (Amis, 2008), which is the subject of discussion here. It is a literary projection of the Egyptian hijacker Muhammad Atta, in which Amis fictionalizes Atta and delineates him from a different perspective. It is a fictional filling of a gap in "The 9/11 Commission Report". The report offers no explanation for Atta's visit to Portland on 10th September and his coming back the next morning (The 9/11 Commission Report). *The Last Days of Muhammad Atta* not only offers a fictional account for the reasons of his visit but also fictionalizes the incidents of the next day, by operating in the problematic grey areas of fiction.

Atta wakes up in a hotel room in Portland and performs his morning chores. Amis starts his characterization by giving us the details of Atta's physique, adding more details about his personal characteristics and idiosyncrasies as the story goes forward. The reader is informed in bits about the past events of Atta's life; his time in Germany and Afghanistan, his meeting with the Sheikh there, as well as information about his fellow perpetrators, often from the perspective of Atta. The story goes back and forth in time, detailing the events of the present day, while adding some more from the previous one, all the while clearing context by referring to and giving information about the distant past. The present day follows Atta from his bed in a hotel room up until his crashing the plane into the tower. Atta's journey from the hotel to the airport, while accompanied by Abdul Aziz, boarding the planes, calling the other leaders of the hijacking teams, going through the security checks, and the hijacking process up until the crash, all are narrated.

The external details in the story on September 11 are in accordance with the actual happenings of the day. Those of the previous day have been fictionalized though. These last two days of Atta's life cover the plot. The narrator is a third person omniscient and delves deep into the details of the events and of Atta's mind (and body). Amis goes not only into the details of the events, but also into the experiences, thoughts, sensations, and feelings of Atta. He uses direct description as well as reflections and flashbacks for building a context. Dialogues are few and strictly correspond to the represented identities of the characters.

The paper hypothesizes that Amis's short story *The Last days of Muhammad Atta* (contrary to the claims) falls short of convincingly portraying a real life perpetrator, providing a just representation for Atta's motivations behind his action, and lessening the gap that already

exists in the 'us and them' binary of victims and perpetrators. It rather assumes that the short story increases the gap between the binary, and, because of the lack of the required empathy with 'the other' that helps the author and the reader to relate to the experiences of a fictional character, does not enhance our understanding of the perpetrator and perpetration from the criteria of Perpetrator Studies.

Being a fictionalized version, the Atta of Amis is different from the Atta of The 9/11 Commission Report, as the Atta in the report is dead but the one in the short story is living. The literary projection or representation of Atta and the transformation that happens as a result of the fictionalization deserve scrutiny because of the fact that despite being fictional, this portrayal of Atta does affect our perception of the perpetrator(s) of the 9/11 attacks. That being the case, the critical study of this portrayal can prove helpful in the real life application of that perception. Producing fiction has the advantage of putting its producer at the liberty of doing what s/he pleases. Yet that never means that the product should not go through any scrutiny. Therefore, in the case of *The Last Days of Muhammad Atta*, it is important to point out the merits and demerits of the fictionalization of the perpetrator from the Perpetrator Studies' viewpoint, while noting its ramifications by paying specific attention to the effects it leaves on the gap between the us and them binary of the victims and perpetrators and on our understanding of perpetrator and perpetration.

The scope of this paper has been delimited to the evaluation of the literary projection of Muhammad Atta from the perspective of Perpetrator Studies. Other characters in the short story are not included in this enterprise nor is any specific attention paid to the pure literary aspects of the short story. Moreover, the study tries to achieve the following objectives:

1. To understand the literary representation of Atta from the perspective of Perpetrator Studies in *The Last Days of Muhammad Atta*.
2. To search for the merits or demerits of Atta's fictional portrayal on our perception about perpetrators.
3. To analyse the impact of the perception on the oscillation of us and them (victim and perpetrator) binary.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the history of modern literature, Shakespeare's play *The Tragedy of Macbeth* (2005) is considered to be the first literary work from the perspective of a perpetrator. It is the story of the protagonist's perpetration that starts with the killing of the King and end up taking more lives in the process of his ambitious pursuit. The circumstances are weaved in such a way that readers can thoroughly relate to Macbeth's situation, despite him being the perpetrator of the crimes. Thus, the circumstances which give rise to the events are thoroughly understandable and result in the reader's empathy, which is an offshoot of the writer's empathy with character. It is the element of empathy that chiefly makes the play a tragedy. Macbeth's soliloquies and dialogues allow the readers to get into his mind and see the events and circumstances from his perspective (Shakespeare, 2005). Readers' sympathies, it should be kept in mind, do not absolve Macbeth of his evil deeds rather only help them in having a closer look at him and yet do not exonerate him of the crimes he committed. This is one of the finest examples of works that successfully portray perpetrators and bring them closer by making their motivations, intentions, and psychic and physical dynamics known to the reader, without absolving them of their transgressions. This establishment of empathetic ties with the perpetrator is an important achievement of the dramatist. (Garcia Periago, 2020)

Likewise, Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955) also deals with a perpetrator protagonist. The 12 years old Lolita's statutory rape and sexual molestation by Humbert, her step-father, makes the novel an irksome case. In fact, Humbert narrating the tale from his own perspective provides the reader with a good understanding of a perpetrator's mind and the manoeuvres he implies in carrying out his machinations. In fact, the perspective of the narrator is so much marked that it side lines that of the victim. Humbert's obsession with nymphets is explained, up to some limit, by his unfulfilled love with his childhood friend Annabel Leigh, who dies prematurely. Thus, Humbert tries to justify his immoral conduct without any attempts at exculpation. Although the novel makes it clear that Lolita is a minor and the victim and Humbert an adult and the perpetrator, the underhanded enticements from Lolita herself ignite Humbert's coal of passion into high flames. The narrator being Humbert himself, is successful, so much so that despite being a "hateful person" (1964 & 2017) which is how Nabokov describes Humbert in his Playboy interview, he earns the sympathies of his audience up to a greater extent. Thus, through the power of the first-person narrative technique, Nabokov lays bare the internal motives and psyche of a perpetrator and lets the readers understand and judge him for themselves.

Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) is a peculiar work from among the fictional works that deal with the tragedy of 9/11. The protagonist Changez notes his reaction as 'remarkably pleased' when he finds out about the 9/11 attacks on TV while still living in America. Although he is not the perpetrator of the attacks, he does relate to the situation in a fathomable way. He tries to make his American interlocutor understand that violence is bad no matter where practised, and hopes that the 9/11 attacks stir up the sympathies of the western world with the victims of the violence America perpetrates on other soils. This perplexing situation could have been explained so well in fiction only. The monologue structure of the novel makes sure that the audience create empathetic ties with the protagonist to better understand his situation.

Empathy and how much helpful it is in lessening the hatred of 'the other' has been touched upon by Ian McEwan in his article "Only Love and Then Oblivion" (2001), but from a different aspect. The attacks, according to McEwan, "reminded us of other tragedies, of wars and natural disasters around the world" (2001, para. 4). He points out the notion that in day-to-day life, we do not pay any attention to the circumstances which potentially give rise to such calamities. However, his emphasis on empathy is one-sided, for he demands it for the victim only. He mourns the perpetrators' inability to empathize with those who were victimized, yet himself partakes little empathy with the perpetrators.

By brushing off the perpetrators as 'holy fool(s)', his approach to 'the other' is no more sophisticated than that of the perpetrators which gave rise to the calamity in the first place; labelling the other as immoral, inherently wrong, and harmful, without a sincere attempt to understand their circumstances. To him the hijackers would not have performed the deed had they "been able to imagine themselves into the thoughts and feelings of the passengers" (McEwan, 2001, para. 14). Yet, going on, he still maintains his simplistic view of 'the other' by saying that the "hijackers used fanatical certainty, misplaced religious faith, and dehumanising hatred to purge themselves of the human instinct for empathy. Among their crimes was a failure of the imagination" (McEwan, 2001, para. 15). McEwan does not note his own failure of the imagination in the very piece in which he demands its success from the perpetrators. The perpetrators, no doubt, failed to arouse empathy with the victims, but we must not fail in our empathy towards the victims, for consolation, but towards the perpetrators also, for better perception of and solution to the problem by calling them 'holy fools' and the reasons for their

attacks as 'dehumanising hatred' help very little in this regard, for, in the very words of McEwan, "(i)magining what it is like to be someone other than yourself is at the core of our humanity" (McEwan, 2001, para. 14).

Compared to McEwan, Don DeLillo (2001) offers a convoluted explanation in "In the ruins of the future". To him, it is the achievements of America in the modern world which the terrorists attacked. America is the most advanced country in the world and it has influenced every culture but the influence is not welcomed everywhere and the "terrorists of September 11 want to bring back the past" (DeLillo, 2001, para. 4). The technology of America caused death to their culture and the terrorist used the same technology to kill Americans. The attacks of 9/11 were the attacks of the past on future to halt its further encroachment. He notes the religious aspect too by saying that the past is obsolete and "it must depend on suicidal fervour to gain its aims" (DeLillo, 2001, para.51). DeLillo does not offer any specific theory of the terrorists besides the notion that the modernity of America attracted them and notes certain of their characteristics like their willingness to die for their cause. But his notion is not simplistic at least and tries to go much deeper in guessing or supposing the mind-set of the 9/11 perpetrators. In his theory he tries to account not only for the theological but also for the social and cultural stimuli that resulted in the response. It may be wrong but it is a sincere effort for it is the result of an attempt that had a rush of empathy.

Regarding *The Last Days of Muhammad Atta*, the information Amis presents in his short story are dubbed as 'not credible' by Susana Bocsaru in her article "'The Last Days of Muhammad Atta': A portrait of The Islamic Terrorist" (Susana Bocsaru, 2018). "Instead of an objective presentation of facts, we encounter a reflecting character" (p. 346), she says. In her view, the portrayal of Atta is unjust and even goes to the margin of distorting his personal identity and body image. Such a depiction surely cannot claim to possess any sympathy, let alone empathy. Contrarily, Birgit Däwes, in her article "'Close Neighbours to the Unimaginable': Literary Projections of Terrorists' Perspectives" (2010), celebrates Amis's representation of a perpetrator in the short story. But it's her paradigm and the lens through which she sees the work, as she is concerned more with appropriation than representation that necessitates this celebration. According to her: "writers who adopt a (fictional) terrorist's perspective contribute much more to the cultural context of the 9/11 attacks than just literary scandals" (p. 497), as they "cater to our need for stabilizing narratives in very different ways" (p. 496). Her focus in the analysis of such representations is not on the improvement in our actual perception of the perpetrators or the gap in the binary but on "our need for stabilizing narratives". Regarding empathy, she says that "(b)y appropriating the perspective of Atta, Amis caters to the psychological need for comprehension from a perspective that is 'safe' in the sense that it undercuts empathy" (p.503). Amis's story does not let the reader to get thoroughly acquainted with the protagonist, as an "ironic stance reinforces the detachment between character and readers" (Däwes, 2010, p. 504).

We can safely assert that the story depicts a perpetrator protagonist but does not give him any agency, rather misuses the portrayal for "our need for stabilizing narratives", as Däwes puts it. The element of empathy inherent in the description of Atta's corporeal unpleasantness and misery is not there to humane him but to make him a detestable human. In her view, Amis's Atta, with the coming of humanist thoughts to his mind right before crashing the plane, turns into 'Kristevan abject', i.e. the 'jettisoned object', "(t)hrough the apparently conflicting impulses of rejection (as Other) and identification" (p. 505). She further elaborates:

Just when the grotesque revenge of Atta's own body has turned him into an easily dismissed Other, the intimacy of his death does precisely what Kristeva describes: it draws readers toward the place of the homologous , where its meaning collapses (...) both through Atta's death and through the way this death is narrated (p. 505).

This identification part of Däwes's conception of Amis's Atta as the 'Kristevan abject' is thought of as the "universalized Western subject" (p. 53) in the essay chapter "Blow the World Back Together" (2009) authored by Brandon Kempner. The humanist turn taken by Atta in his final epiphany right before his death is in reality the turn of Amis to the use of Western literary framing. He argues that *Last Days* uses "universalized Western subject" (p. 53) like pre 9/11 works and, counteracts "the idea of 9/11 as a permanent rupture in Western history & culture" (p. 53), altogether rejecting the claim that "the 9/11 attacks completely reconfigure Western culture & subjectivity" (p. 54). Although it is widely argued that the 9/11 attacks changed the literary themes and techniques. *The Last Days of Muhammad Atta* is a re-statement of some traditionally Western modes of narration, interiority, and literary framing" (Kempner, 2009, p. 54). Amis's technique is effective, when considered from Dawes's viewpoint, but to judge it in regard to empathy, she herself holds the view that the protagonist of Amis's short story "is not a character readers are likely to sympathize with" (Däwes, 2010, p. 504). While Kempner holds that by imposing what Amis "sees as the 'truth' of the western experience onto Islamist characters, he violently excludes the possibilities of other cultural or intellectual perspectives" (Kempner, 2009, p. 68).

METHODOLOGY

Scholarly perpetrator studies discourse is opposed to the practice of painting the perpetrators of atrocities in whole black. It is frequently dubbed as "inadequate and counterproductive", (Knittel & Goldberg, 2020, p. 2), "unhelpful" (Walker, 2020, p. 254), and "problematic" (Jinks, 2020, p. 340). This is not meant to lessen the horrendousness of their actions but because it does not help us in enhancing our understanding of the type of people and their actions. It thus goes entirely against the purpose and goal of perpetrator studies and the betterment of society at large. It is rather 'counterproductive' as it exacerbates the already bad situation and leads to the assumption that such people do exist who are monstrous, evil, wicked, violent, inherently bad and hell-bent. The ratification of these assumptions leaves us in a hopeless and despondent zone. We are then left with no choice but to accept it as an inevitable phenomena. Not only that but this conception of atrocities has been proven wrong in most of the cases. Even if people do perpetrate atrocities for the sake of it, they still try to justify it in multiple ways. Perpetrator Studies, instead stresses an approach that takes into account the complexity, multifacetedness, and contradictoriness of the phenomena. Possessing or adopting a critical eye is important, as it enables us to be sceptical not only of our own assumptions but of any simplistic explanations offered, no matter, by theorists or the agents themselves.

Empathy, which, in simple terms is the "imaginative understanding of others" (Zembylas, 2020, p. 370) is an important requirement of this approach. Understanding the transformation of ordinary individuals into perpetrators of mass violence "obliges us to suspend our disbelief and engage with" those individuals (Adler, 2020, p. 296). Uninformed popular understanding of perpetrations often go either to the extreme of absolving perpetrators or thoroughly demonizing them (McGlothlin, 2020). This indicates the inability to 'humanize' perpetrators and "empathize with them". (McGlothlin, 2020, p. 365). Perpetrators are, no doubt,

serious offenders, yet it is imperative to consider their "humanity, citizenship, and needs for self-respect and belonging." (Walker, 2020, p. 258). History is witness to the baselessness of the conception of perpetrators as "evil incarnate", largely in the sense that they can transform as authentically from perpetrators into ordinary individuals as from ordinary individuals into perpetrators. (Earl, 2020, p. 115). Perpetrator scholarship, therefore, stresses upon the cultivation of empathy for perpetrators. Taking into consideration the conceptual paradigms, the socio-political, economic, and cultural aspects of others is essential in the interpretation of their actions. It is this consideration that enables us to take the "imaginative leap" (Jinks, 2020, p. 337) which is crucial to minimizing the gap in the, us/them, binary.

The aims and goals of perpetrator studies make it incumbent upon us to pay considerable heed to the perpetrators and their perspectives. What it means is that a near to complete understanding of atrocities is next to impossible if we do not consider the agents' view. The "moralistic debate" of preferring the "victim perspective" instead of "perpetrator perspective" does not point to a way out (Kühl, 2020, p. 41). As in the words of Kühl the victim perspective "plays a subordinate role" when we want to make sense of the matter (Kühl, 2020, p. 41). Zachary J. Goldberg too points out that the focus should be directed to origin and not consequence (2020). The purpose of this shift from one perspective to another is the resolution of the issue. This is not in the least meant to downplay the suffering of the victims or to devalue it. Not doing enough homework in this regard leads to the emergence of, to use the words of McGlothlin, "unidimensional, almost superhumanly diabolical Others" (2020, p. 365), who carry attributes as monsters, evil incarnate, and who take 'divine delight' in the killing of civilians. That is chiefly why McGlothlin stresses on the avoidance of "dichotomous thinking" (2020, p. 365), and the importance of explaining a single perpetration from multiple perspectives when teaching Perpetrator Studies (2020).

The motives and motivations, behind an act of perpetration, lie at the core of a perpetrator's perspective. Most human actions are agenda-driven and actions as colossal as mass violence cannot be devoid of motives. The understanding of these motives is "essential if we are to better understand the dynamics of mass atrocities and someday prevent them" (Adler, 2020, p. 296). The motives and motivations behind perpetration are not as simple as popular imagination would have us believe and this points to the troubles we have to take in gaining an informed understanding of the phenomenon. Simplistic observations are "comforting" but not illuminating (Earl, 2020, p. 115). Research in Perpetrator Studies, instead, tells us that the "subject positions exist on a spectrum and that specific individuals may occupy different and contradictory positions on that spectrum at different times and in different contexts" (Knittel & Goldberg, 2020, p. 2). The "multidimensionality of perpetrators", and the "variety" of motives is stressed upon and the "paradigmatic" image of perpetrator is marked down (Üngör & Anderson, 2020, p.9). As opposed to popular perception of perpetrator and perpetration, research assigns less value to the pathology of individuals, and "enduring circumstances or personal characteristics." (Üngör & Anderson, 2020, p. 9).

One of the so many problems of dealing sincerely with perpetrators in discourse is the problem of exculpation. The honest attempt to get a closer look at the perpetrator might at times and places seem to exonerate the perpetrator of the deed. On the other hand clinging too tightly to one's own 'conceptual framework' often leads to flawed understanding. Thus there is a need to avoid both extremes. A kind of moral and intellectual attitude is required to not only escape these pitfalls but also get a good understanding of the phenomenon. Concepts like Susanne C. Knittel's "the ethics of discomfort" offer the mediating ground (2020, p. 379). It entails a critical engagement with perpetration in which certainty about the moral position of the onlooker is

questioned and the perpetration is viewed from a place that does not involve partiality towards the onlooker as well as perpetrator. It enables us to be open to both of the viewpoints while maintaining a critical approach.

The inclination of the student to find a totalizing narrative has to be kept aside and the path to more understanding enhancing interpretation has to be created, which, as mentioned, implies a critical approach to one's own ethical frameworks. Critical approach is the key as it saves us from falling too backward or too forward. Neither should our practice of digging deep be an attempt to exonerate the perpetrator, nor should it be seen so. That is chiefly why this approach results in an element of discomfort in the practitioner of this approach, as the practitioner has to leave the comfort zone. However the critique should be affirmative, not negative, as 'affirmative critique', in the words of Knittel, "entails an openness and a willingness to engage with the object on its own terms". (Knittel, 2020, p. 382).

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

In *The Last Days of Muhammad Atta*, Amis ridicules Atta by assigning him multiple physical deficiencies. Amis tells us that Atta has problems in bowels movement. It starts moving only when he is about to hijack the plane (Amis, 2008). He is the "connoisseur of headaches" (Amis, 2008, p. 103) and has an aching scrotum. His breath smells like "blighted river" (p. 95) and his "gangrenous" (p. 96) and "comically malevolent" (p. 96) face is so hateful that he himself cannot bear to look at it in the mirror. He thinks that if he somehow survived the attacks he would be more troubled by "facial" profiling than "racial" (p. 96). His name, Muhammad Atta, is itself "a promise of vengeance" (p. 96).

Atta, we learn from Amis, was associated with an Islamic terrorist organization but he himself was an "apostate" (Amis, 2008, p. 100) who did not believe in paradise. He still participated in "peer-group piety contest" (p. 94) but in actual he just "played along with it" (p. 99). It was because of the charisma of jihad that he "allied himself" with it (p. 99). His "formulaic sanctimony" (p. 97) was because of peer-pressure. Interestingly, his reasons for going to Portland, Maine were only causing doubts in the mind of a fellow perpetrator Ziad. Atta himself was an apostate and wanted to cause doubts in Ziad's mind too. Amis, thus goes to assign Atta's perpetration more to his character than his ideological foundations. He was not religious but "fundamentalism suited his character" (p. 99).

He believed in the Islamic punishment for adultery and sodomy and was hostile to women. Atta "never laughed" because "he found nothing funny" (p. 100), hated music, and thought of the world as "an unreal mockery" (p. 100). "(U)nbounded boredom" (p. 110) was the whole of his condition and "romantic and religious ardour" (p. 112) could not be provided for by his being. The "detestation of everything" (p. 96) was evident on his face and he could not bear it anymore. It was an "illness without a symptom" (p. 114), associated with him since childhood. His "nihilistic insouciance" (p. 113) enabled him to perpetrate with "complete tranquillity" (p. 98) and his "nihilistic elan" (p. 104) is what makes him suggest an attack on the nuclear power plant which was too much for the Sheikh. We learn more about Atta when he is about to crash the plane into the tower. When he becomes certain of the success of his plan that is when he laughs "for the first time since childhood" (p. 118). That is when he becomes "glad" and feels "love" (p. 119). Thus Amis paints the image of a "killer" (p. 120) and thus we receive it.

The "ideological justification" of Atta's actions is thought of as a forceful drive in the committing of such cruelty on civilians (Üngör & Anderson, 2020, p. 8). Focusing on that alone, however, does not guide us soundly. In this regard, the traditional theorization of motives in atrocities, quite wrongly, focused either on those of the individuals or of the organization to which the individuals belonged. Köhl thinks that focusing too narrowly on any of the two leads to an incomplete understanding (2020). We, instead, have to adopt a sociological systems approach to see how the motives of the individual 'align' with those of the organization. The motives of the individuals may be different from those of the organization but the point of interest is the achievement of the ends. It is the "generalization of motives" which brings the harmony (Köhl, 2020, p. 39). Üngör and Anderson point to the same notion that the "grand political projects" seldom offer thorough explanation for the motives behind perpetration (2020, p. 17). Ideology does play a role but what is important is the "resonance" that it has for the agents.

The motive of Amis's Atta in his perpetration is the "core reason only" (Amis, 2008, p. 99), i.e. "all the killing" (p. 118), the killings that the attacks and the succeeding wars would result in. It was the "primordial secret" (p. 119). Killing was what he truly wanted and that is chiefly why he wanted to attack the nuclear power plant as he felt no qualm. He knew the ills and wrongs of America but he "was not persuaded of a moral equivalence" (p. 108). He had no concerns with it. Death was his concern and that is what he believed in. "Killing was divine delight. And your suicide was just a part of the contribution you made—the massive contribution to death" (p. 119). At the end of the story Amis attempts at poetic justice, punishing Atta by denying him the joy that he had anticipated in the carrying out of his nefarious designs. Atta is made to see the value and beauty of life only after he has destroyed it. Such analysis of perpetrator motives and perspective however presents its own set of problems, not the least among which is the issue of exculpation of perpetrators and justification of their enterprise. The story is narrated from third person omniscient perspective and not from the perspective of the protagonist, which is a very important requirement for making the reader understand his worldview. Amis compensates for that by a third person omniscient narrator which gives the impression of letting us delve deep into the protagonist's mind, while the actual strings are still pulled by the author himself.

Thus Amis creates a character whom we already do not like. His picture is painted in whole black. The details of his physical deficiencies distorts Atta's picture in our mind and we go forward with the story expecting horrible deeds from him. The perpetration is assigned more to his hell-bent character than all other factors combined. A person who finds 'nothing funny', hates laughter and music and women, is a dangerous person indeed. We cannot expect anything good from a person whose whole condition consists of 'unbounded boredom', lacks the parts of 'romantic and religious ardour', and detests everything. What is the killing of three thousand people to a person who thinks of the world as an 'unreal mockery', and takes 'divine delight' in killing? Such a person, no doubt, could be 'glad' only when he is about to kill. It is evident from this portrayal that the complexity of perpetrators is thoroughly absent from the short story. It is an uninformed acceptance of popular perception which thoroughly demonizes the perpetrator. The lack of empathy becomes evident from this demonization. The story itself prevents the 'imaginative leap' for which it should have empowered us.

The story gives much space to the perspective of the perpetrator but a lot less to his motives and motivations, which, as we discussed earlier, lie at the core of perpetrator perspective. Amis does not take any trouble in theorizing the motives of Atta. He instead avoids 'empathetic unsettlement' and ascribes the perpetration to the 'core reason only'. The 'variety'

of motives that is stressed upon by Perpetrator Studies is totally ignored. The perpetration's cause can very easily be assigned to the 'pathology of individual'. Taking 'divine delight' in killing is 'illness without a symptom'. The alignment of ideology with individual's motives does exist but the individual's motive is too individual.

On the representational grounds too, the image of Atta presented by Amis seems to be on a level that concurs with the popular imagination. Atta is a killer who takes 'divine delight' in killing is a picture not colourful enough for fiction. Such a black (and white) picture does not reflect any literary depth as in the view of Stephanie Bird, it is necessary for complex stories to play the field of grey zone, as nothing is purely black & white, and less so in fiction that is worth its salt (Bird, 2020). To Bird, challenging the generally accepted notions of perpetrators and perpetration is one of the "vital qualities" of fiction (Bird, 2020, p. 302). Presenting the killer image may be popularly attractive as a coherent narrative what is necessary is a convincing portrayal of the perpetrator not a convincing account of the state of affairs. "Fiction belongs to the realm of play and speculation, where it need not operate in the service of argument or coherence but can articulate multiple perspectives, imagine contradictions, and convey unresolved emotions and motivations" (p. 302), says Bird. A fictional account has to go deep and make the perpetrator's narrative complex, even if it leads to the margin of exculpation (Bird, 2020). It not only deploys the bad aspects of perpetrators and perpetration but also touches upon the aspects that are not congruous with those, thus adding the much needed nuance. The nuance is maintained even though there might be an external pressure on fiction to concur with the normally not nuanced enough views or theories held by real life people about important issues or individuals.

What marks fiction, Bird argues, is its ability to go beyond the totalizing narratives and add nuance, flexibility, and "ambiguity" (2020, p. 307) to our understanding, all the while attempting accurate portrayal. Fiction, by its very nature, is subject to "accurate portrayal" (p. 307) only, often disregarding of the moral question or other such prescription. Amis, in our instance, avoids the prescribed narrative of Islamic terrorism but weaves that of a 'nihilist killing'. Moreover, Bird argues that the usual way novels solicit empathy for perpetrator is by referring to the perpetrator's "ideological commitment to the social good" (2020, p. 304), which is totally non-existent in Amis's short story. Robert Skloot, while discussing perpetrator representation in theatre, explains more explicitly how the dramatization of perpetration complicates the boundaries of victims and perpetrators and thwarts our expectations of finding closure accounts (Skloot, 2020). The distinction between our capacity to perpetrate good and evil at times becomes complicated phenomena, as the "purity of character" is against "human nature" (Skloot, 2020, p. 317). The literary process itself makes it difficult because of its attempt at accurate and illuminating portrayal. On the other hand, though it is a short story not a play, what we see in our instance is a purely evil character.

An analysis of *The Last Days of Muhammad Atta* from another perspective reveals that there is an abundance of what Rebecca Jinks calls "cultural codes of genocide" (2020, p.334). Stock characters, the evil stamp, underdeveloped unidimensional characters who have a penchant for killing, no excavation of motivations as the label of 'evil' is enough, and ratification of popular perception are some of the 'cultural codes' of holocaust representation (Jinks, 2020). To Jinks, the cultural codes of holocaust literature and film are still used in the portrayal of atrocities in order to give those atrocities the flavour of genocide (Jinks, 2020). These techniques make the literature or film appear familiar as the depiction of inhumane accounts, like those of genocides. The perpetrators are othered by making them unlike us, and are depicted more often than not, as abnormal (Jinks, 2020). The distance between us and

perpetrators is maintained and the "imaginative leap" is discouraged as the narrative clings to its own conclusions (Jinks, 2020, p. 337). The narrative is weaved and the perpetrators portrayed in a way that make the atrocity an inevitable occurrence, which is a wrong interpretation of the law of causality. The demonization of perpetrators is a more than necessary component, usually at the expense of taking into account the broader context. They are still widely used both in literature and film (Jinks, 2020).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The paper concludes that Amis replaces evil for 'nihilistic insouciance', while the other codes remain more or less in place. Like the label of evil, the label of nihilist killer renders the questions of why and how unnecessary. The chief personality trait of Atta depicts is a killer who takes 'divine delight' in killing. Other aspects of his personality, even if discussed, remain side-lined because of the accentuation of this one trait. Killing thousands of people is no small transgression and the motivations for which should have been explored in depth, no matter how much contradictions or complexity lay there.

The Last Days of Muhammad Atta presents a demonized picture of the perpetrator Atta as there is a lack of empathetic ties with 'the other'. His motives for perpetration presented in the short story are implausible as Amis shoots the arrows from his comfort zone and does not take the 'imaginative leap' required for a convincing portrayal of the perpetrator. This confinement in the comfort zone results in the use of the cultural codes of holocaust as well. Moreover, by undermining the authenticity of the ideology of jihad, the story fabricates the ideology of 'annihilating nihilism'. This representation of perpetrator, thus, exacerbates the situation by widening the gap that already exists between the victim and perpetrator binary.

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