

## REBELS THROUGH UPDIKE AND DESAI'S LENSES

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### ABSTRACT

9/11 has redefined the world's understanding of the term 'terrorism' and its association with power and resistance. Post 9/11 novels attempt to represent terrorism or rebellions in a new light by investigating the psycho-social positions of the subjects involved in any such cause or movement. *Terrorist* (2006) by John Updike portrays Ahmad's desperate journey towards religious extremism and eventual return brought by his reconciliation with his inner conflicts. Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) shows Gyan's inferiorities that lead to the Gurkha Movement, failing his heroic aspirations and bringing him back to his social reality. Thus both these novels shed light on the individuals that get tangled in the false visions of revolutionary or utopian achievements without any real insight and empathy towards the cause. Hence this paper brings these two characters together to analyse their personal conflicts that ignite deviant tendencies in them and their turn to conformity, reaffirming their ignorant and powerless positions in the society that had originally initiated their rage. This paper thus highlights how the 'terrorists' in these two novels end up with an 'inheritance of loss' and nothing else.

**Key Words:** 9/11, Terrorism, Religious Extremism, Gurkha Movement, Identity.

Placed on this isthmus of a middle state,  
A being darkly wise and rudely great.

This is how Alexander Pope defines the condition of mankind, in Epistle II of his poem, "Essay on Man", describing "the Nature and State of Man, With Respect to Himself as an Individual". John Updike's infamous novel, *Terrorist* and Kiran Desai's Booker Prize winner, *The Inheritance of Loss*, portray similar conflicted characters in a globalized world of multiplicity and disillusionment. Updike's protagonist, Ahmad, and Desai's representative of the struggling class, Gyan, exemplify the rebellious and fragmented subjects of the postcolonial nation-states, who are unable to belong to the mainstream social system; they find themselves to be alienated from it and protest against its overpowering existence. In their process of resistance, they rediscover their beliefs and positions, eventually surrendering to the prevailing power structures.

Desai, in her 2006 novel, upholds the image of an entire population to be discontent and disjointed from a collective reality of the postcolonial nation-state. Gyan, a typical example of the educated bourgeois, suffers from the constant dilemma of his

insignificant background and future aspirations. He gets exposed to the westernized elite class through Sai and indulges in its illusions, forgetting the outside world of reality. Desai describes their distant existences, writing,

Gyan was twenty and Sai sixteen, and at the beginning they had not paid very much attention to the events on the hillside, the new posters in the market referring to old discontents, the slogans scratched and painted on the sides of government offices and shops. (126)

Gyan's affair with Sai can be interpreted as an escape from his monotonous reality of poverty and responsibility. But his encounter with the judge often reminds him of his identity or perhaps the lack of it. He feels an urgency to assert his masculinity and significance, when the Gurkha movement allows him a space to explore himself. Desai puts light on his initial reactions to the marches:

As he floated through the market, Gyan had a feeling of history being wrought, its wheels churning under him, for the men were behaving as if they were being featured in a documentary of war, and Gyan could not help but look on the

scene already from the angle of nostalgia, the position of a revolutionary. (157)

The crowd and its tremor infatuated Gyan to an attachment to a greater cause; to be signified through a heroic revolution. He is shown to be inspired by it immediately, without even realizing the demand of and history behind the protest. Desai writes,

Then he shouted along with the crowd, and the very mingling of his voice with largeness and lustiness seemed to create a relevancy, an affirmation he'd never felt before, and he was pulled back into the making of history. (157)

This incomprehensive involvement to a revolution echoes the age-old critique of the heroism connoted to wars or protests to get the youth attracted to the glorious images of revolutions. But once they enter the real field of struggle, they feel distant from the cause. Gyan's excitement of becoming a part of the making of history is shown to be impermanent throughout the novel. Even on his first day of uttering violent slogans of reformation, "looking at the hills, he fell out of the experience again." (157)

The intoxicating characteristics of rebellions are mocked as Gyan thinks of its glitters: "There was the nobility of it, the daring of it, the glorious fire of it." (158) Being able to negate his family and background in the abundance of strangers, Gyan feels liberated. It gives him a sense of belonging to a group of worthy men, who are striving for change. Gyan's realizations are shown as Desai states, "It was a masculine atmosphere and Gyan felt a moment of shame remembering his tea parties with Sai...It suddenly seemed against the requirement of his adulthood." (161)

Gyan can finally relate to the struggle of the Gurkhas, finding expression for his own frustrations. Through Sai, he perhaps reminds himself of his hybrid position. Just as Sai is caught between the colonial hangover and her Indian reality, Gyan is torn between two classes—one he belongs to, and the other he aspires to belong to. He yells at Sai in self-reflection, "Don't you have any pride? Trying to be Westernized. They don't want you!!!!" (174)

Later, his personal aspirations overshadow his communal struggle, when he returns to Sai and confesses, "I'm confused. I'm only human and

sometimes I'm weak" (249) But Sai's self-assertion reminds him of her position of power and his of powerlessness, which ignites enough revolutionary spirits in him to return to the 'insurgents' and tell them about the guns. They were the insurgents that did not really care for the cause just like Gyan and spread terror around to take revenge on the elites for their power and wealth. Gyan identified with them instead and not with the revolutionaries. Desai writes,

There were those who were provoked by the challenge, but Gyan was finding that he wasn't one of these. He was angry that his family hadn't thought to ban him, keep him home...He spent the nights awake, worrying he couldn't live up to his proclamations. (260)

Another book review by Sucharita tries to contextualize Gyan's 'inheritance of loss', claiming it to be a result of his cultural alienation. She thinks,

In Gyan's case, it is an overflow of words, impressions, and expressions of feeling that reflect his growing sense of loss in his personal and cultural existence. He is situated in a twilight area that does not make any lasting sense to him. His loss is one that continues through his existence in the novel; he is never at peace with himself, never in grip of the situations in which he places or finds himself.

Gyan was seeking meaning for his life through the resistance. Thus his contribution to the public protest becomes a personal journey of self-discovery. He keeps wondering, "How did you create a life of meaning and pride?" (260) Then he returns to Sai once again, to perhaps confront an alternative meaning of his life he has been impatient to derive. Sai fails to inspire or comfort him, when he snarls at her, "What's fair? Do you have any idea of the world?" (260)

Sai's discovery of his poverty enrages him and he starts blaming Sai for his downfall, as he reflects on his unconscious actions. However, it can be interpreted that Sai is actually responsible for his state as she exposed him to the life that he envisions for himself now and hence the dilemma has crushed him. He reflects,

Sai was not miraculous; she was an uninspiring person, a reflection of all the contradictions around her, a mirror that showed him himself far too clearly for comfort. (262)

The authority Gyan expected to exercise on Sai as a tutor could not be sustained in their affair as Sai would not allow his dominance over her in a romantic relationship. That challenged Gyan's notion of his manhood and allied him to the revolutionary movement of GNLFF. Hence, when he was grounded and got time to think through his actions, he was "relieved by this reprieve into childhood" (272). He realized once more that he would rather fight with Sai and not for the rights of the Gurkhas. He consoles himself thinking,

He wasn't a bad person. He didn't want to fight. The trouble was that he'd tried to be part of the larger questions, tried to become part of politics and history. (272)

Reconciled to himself, he was spending a content life in his leisurely activities of solitude, when a sudden sense of guilt overpowers him as he looks back and wonders, "how could he have told the boys about the guns?" This guilt remains persistent and the only thought driving Gyan by the end of the book. Thus, he ends up being represented as a confused middle-class boy, failing to find a place for himself in his own land and people, trapped between conflicts of class and identity in relation to an upper-class, westernized teenage girl. In this portrayal, Gyan is lessened to the position of Eliot's Prufrock, where he does not dare to 'disturb the universe' with his interference in it.

Pankaj Mishra, in his article, "The Inheritance of Loss by Kiran Desai: Wounded by the West", comments,

Not surprisingly, half-educated, uprooted men like Gyan gravitate to the first available political cause in their search for a better way. He joins what sounds like an ethnic nationalist movement largely as an opportunity to vent his rage and frustration. "Old hatreds are endlessly retrievable," Desai reminds us, and they are "purer . . . because the grief of the past was gone. Just the fury remained, distilled, liberating."

Labeling *The Inheritance of Loss* as a novel of the 'post 9/11' genre, Mishra brings reference of other novels with similar storylines, looking at the pent up frustrations of its dissatisfied population. He mentions,

Orhan Pamuk wrote soon after 9/11, people in the West are "scarcely aware of this overwhelming feeling of humiliation that is experienced by most of the world's population," which "neither magical realistic novels that

endow poverty and foolishness with charm nor the exoticism of popular travel literature manages to fathom." This is the invisible emotional reality Desai uncovers as she describes the lives of people fated to experience modern life as a continuous affront to their notions of order, dignity and justice.

Satis Shroff, in his article, "Kathmandu Blues: *The Inheritance of Loss* and Intercultural Competence", criticizes Desai for her lack of vision into the mutiny she describes and empathy with the revolutionaries, as Gyan is the only rebellious individual she looks into, who fails to connect to the broader cause. He writes, "The Gorkha characters remain shallow, like caricatures in Bollywood films, and she overdoes it with the dialogue between Sai and Gyan."

Shroff also blames Desai of misrepresenting an entire population, enraging them by underestimating their revolutionary spirits and demands. He comments,

Had she shown empathy towards the Nepalis from Darjeeling and Kalimpong and made a happy-end love story between Gyan and Sai, the Nepalese would have greeted her with khadas and marigold malas. The way it is, she has only stirred a hornet's nest.

Even though Desai's attempt to bring a silenced mutiny into people's attention is commendable, her distance from the subject matter neutralizes her effort to connect. Thus, she exemplifies Spivak's claim that the subaltern cannot speak. She also shows that they cannot be represented by the elites, who lack proper vision and empathy.

Similarly, Updike has been highly criticized by most critics for his lack of involvement with his protagonist, Ahmad and lack of authenticity in the portrayal of a convert Muslim in USA. Ahmad perfectly fits Pope's description:

He hangs between, in doubt to act or rest;  
In doubt to deem himself a God or Beast;

Though Terry feels that her son is "above it all" (3), we find Ahmad to be in constant struggle with himself and the world to protect his beliefs. The very first line of the novel, "Devils, Ahmad thinks. These devils seek to take away my God" (85), reflects his consciousness of being 'polluted' by the 'impurities' he keeps himself away from.

Michiko Kakutani, the famous critic, rejects to utter any praise for Updike's portrayal of Ahmad, pointing out a lack of insight into the character as an autonomous individual. She writes,

Unfortunately, the would-be terrorist in this novel turns out to be a completely unbelievable individual: more robot than human being and such a cliché that the reader cannot help suspecting that Mr. Updike found the idea of such a person so incomprehensible that he at some point abandoned any earnest attempt to depict his inner life and settled instead for giving us a static, one-dimensional stereotype.

However, Kakutani's rage could also be rooted in the fact that Updike holds America itself responsible for producing such a 'terrorist'. This notion implicitly supports all the allegations against USA, for spreading terrorism throughout the world, especially the Muslim world and the Islamic outrage being one of its most powerful reactions. Through Ahmad's eyes, Updike marks out the flaws in the American ways, suggesting that the numerous cults arising in America are protests against the 'excesses' of the society. Kakutani criticizes him stating,

He declares that he seeks "to walk the Straight Path" — something that is not easy to do, he thinks, in a country where "there are too many paths, too much selling of many useless things." He is given to saying things like "the American way is the way of infidels," and the country "is headed for a terrible doom."

It has to be agreed that Ahmad's confusions and language come up to be very unnatural and forceful. Though "Ahmad himself is a product of a red-haired American mother, Irish by ancestry, and an Egyptian exchange student..." (13), he is shown to be somewhat 'inferior', even after Levy's remarks on his brilliant academic performance. Kakutani points it out clearly that,

Ahmad talks not like a teenager who was born and grew up in New Jersey but like an Islamic terrorist in a bad action-adventure movie, or someone who has been brainwashed and programmed to spout jihadist clichés. Much of the time he sounds like someone who has learned English as a second language.

It is made very evident that Ahmad is a critique of the postmodern America and its ways. In numerous occasions, he criticizes the tattoo culture, the

endorsement of 'sex', capitalism as a system and various other fetishes and kitschy aspects of the system, determining the American ways of life. For example, he tells Joryleen, "...this can be 'fun,' observing the customers and the varieties of costume and personal craziness that American permissiveness invites." (70)

Tim Adams, in his witty article called, "Portrait of the terrorist as a young aesthete", comments,

Ahmad, we are told, loathes the decadent West, 'the way of the infidels, headed for a terrible doom'. He wants his head to be full of the Koran, but Updike, writing in a sympathetic third person, makes him of the devil's party whether he likes it or not.

Obviously, Updike, an evident critic of America, makes Ahmad his spokesperson to mock the society and the system. Therefore, Adams says that "the young holy warrior cannot control his wandering Updikean eye" and adds that "Ahmad seems too attuned to the world, too Updikean."

Ahmad is not blindfolded by his Islamic preaching entirely. He is not cynical of Christianity if it is believed and the rituals observed by its followers with faith. He respects other people's beliefs and is open to questioning of his own faith. Therefore, he even visits the church and listens to the songs carefully. He does not feel threatened by them and explains to Joryleen, "I am a good Muslim, in a world that mocks faith." (69) While trying to justify his beliefs to her, he realizes that he is reaching the questions that he himself has on his religious preaching, but has hidden from his mentor in fear of being dejected. Updike writes, "She is leading him, he feels, close to the edge of betraying his beliefs, just in responding to her questions." (70)

He is even ready to consider that his beliefs could all be fruitless and still restrains from being lost in the material fetishes prevailing all around. He responds to Joryleen, "If none of it is true...then the world is too terrible to cherish, and I would not regret leaving it." (72)

But the questions haunt him and he utters them once in a while to Shaikh Rashid, despite his inability to satisfy Ahmad's queries. He is afraid of being called of the devil's party, when he questions, "Shouldn't God's purpose, enunciated by the Prophet, be to convert the infidels? In any

case, shouldn't He show them mercy, not gloat over their pain?" (76)

He protests against Charlie's interpretations of Jihad and asserts, "Jihad doesn't have to mean war...It means striving, along the path of God. It can mean inner struggle." (149) Again, during his solitude, he thinks of Allah in terms of himself, refusing to believe in the strict prohibitions of the scripture. Updike reflects upon Ahmad's mind, writing, "When I turn to Allah and try to think of Him, it is borne in upon me how alone He is, in all the starry space He has willed into existence." (225)

"Q-news", a Muslim magazine, entitles the article, "Updike's Terrorist: An(other) American Folly", commenting on Updike's novel. The writer, Raneem Azzam, focuses on the other side of the novel, which is commendable. He writes,

Ahmad is a serious and staunch believer and senses that he shares an intimate, proprietary union with the Almighty. He sees himself as "God's sole custodian," and although he is aware of his blasphemous compassion for the Creator, he yearns to meet Him nonetheless.

However, another justification behind his questioning mind can be his American identity. Ahmad introduces himself as a 'product of an American mother' and asserts his hybrid identity. No matter how mixed his origin is, he is born and brought up in America and therefore, does not picture himself as an outsider. "Ahmad's American eyes" (99) fail to relate to the Muslim community leaving near the mosque. Neither can he understand the complex condition of the wars in the Muslim countries. Azzam writes, "If Updike's rendering of the relationship between Ahmad and his notion of God seems unorthodox, it perhaps reflects the boy's mixed heritage."

Then he comments, "Ahmad's motivation for involving himself in terrorist activity is too muddled to be convincing." Azzam points out Ahmad's lack of understanding of the concept of 'jihad' that is typically interpreted by the so called 'terrorists' as their primary motivation. He states,

Among the most blatant shortcomings in Ahmad's extremist rationale is his ignorance of typical jihadist ideology. He occasionally criticizes Israel, and once mentions the writings of Sayyid Qutb, but for the most part he is

apolitical. Eventually he chooses martyrdom in order to be "radiant and central" when he's never fit in. Readers are expected to believe that he is drawn toward death and murder only for the lustre of paradise and the dream of joining his lonely God.

Similar to Gyan, Ahmad is shown to enjoy his idle life and scared to step outside his comfort zone. Receiving the proposal of driving a truck by Rashid, he seems unwilling to accept the offer, for which he had been waiting for so long. He tries to convince Rashid that he was not ready for driving yet, "backing a step from what he senses is too easy and swift an entry into the adult world" (142-143)

This incident can also be interpreted as a slip from his mission and vision of involving in the 'pure', 'religious' occupation of serving God. It can be a result of his leisure days, which had allowed him a lot of time to think about his life. There's also a hint that Levy's thoughts also acted as constant reminders of the attraction of other subjects. Whence Updike writes,

As he flies through the run-down blocks, he remembers Mr. Levy's vague talk of college but grand subject matter, "science, art, history." (143)

Ahmad's decision to abstain from the mission appears to be a gradual progress, if we look into a few scenes, which hint at the changes in him. Observing a bug's death moves him thoroughly and he becomes aware of death for the first time. Updike describes the incident as, "The experience, so strangely magnified, has been, Ahmad feels certain, supernatural." (254)

His sudden realization of death perhaps reduces his wish to be one with God through death, which seems to be the driving force behind his agreement. It is as if what he had confessed to Joryleen earlier that this world does not attract him in any way; hence he is not afraid of death. His close observation of death makes him realize, "God giveth you life, Ahmad thinks, then causeth you to die." (280)

Thus, at the end of the novel, we see a different Ahmad from the first scene. We witness his progress and changes. The last line of the novel gives an impression of Ahmad being liberated and astray from his 'straight path' as he asserts, "These

devils, Ahmad thinks, have taken away my God.” (310)

Therefore, it can be claimed that Updike ends the novel with Ahmad’s enlightenment, being free from the extreme beliefs that lead one towards destruction. He might also have lost faith in Islam altogether. Thus, similar to Gyan, Ahmad does not remain determined to his visions and choose to leave them for a search of a new and better life. Just as Desai failed to provide an authentic portrayal of the marginal character of her novel, Updike is not familiar with his Muslim protagonist. However, in his interview with Charles McGrath, Updike justifies his portrayal of Ahmad saying,

I imagined a young seminarian who sees everyone around him as a devil trying to take away his faith," he said. "The 21st century does look like that, I think, to a great many people in the Arab world.

Unsure of his attempt’s success, he seems as confused as Ahmad as he remarks in the same interview, "I think I felt I could understand the animosity and hatred which an Islamic believer would have for our system." David Walsh provides a satisfying interpretation of Updike’s portrayal of Ahmad as he believes,

Updike is a believer, but he has hitherto rejected a directly religious presence in his work, arguing that “Fiction holds the mirror up to the world and cannot show more than this world contains.” And this world does not contain an adequate explanation for Ahmad’s trajectory.

If that is so, Updike can be considered very successful in representing the ambiguity of today’s world, where no one or no faith can be supported wholeheartedly. Desai’s depiction of Gyan can also be interpreted as ‘the inheritance of loss’ of a voice. Similarly, in the conflict of narratives, counter-narratives and revisions of narratives, the subaltern youths like Gyan or Ahmad are coping with the situation and others are getting lost in it. Thus they embody the unsolved mystery of the

world and humanity, reminding us once again of Pope’s description of mankind—

Sole judge of truth, in endless error hurl'd;  
The glory, jest, and riddle of the world!

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