"THE LAST DAYS OF MUHAMMAD ATTA": A PORTRAIT OF THE ISLAMIC TERRORIST

Susana Bocsaru
Phd. Student, University of Bucharest

Abstract: Following the terrorist attacks of 9/11, Martin Amis felt that writing fiction seemed like a "pointlessly indulgent exercise", and writers needed to attend to "the facts of life." However, in "The Last Days of Muhammad Atta", Amis produces a fictionalized version of the attacks and attempts to paint a portrait of the new global enemy, the Islamic terrorist. Even though the story is a third person narration which typically confers objectivity, the inner motivations of Muhammad Atta, the first hijacker to crash a plane into the World Trade Center, are sought, in an effort to identify "the core reason" behind such abominable acts.

Keywords: 9/11, Muhammad Atta, Islamic terrorist, internal motivation, the Muslim Other.

A global event, broadcast live all over the world, September 11 and its repercussions outstretched far beyond the borders of the US. Novelist Martin Amis, author of Britain's best known fiction, was among the first British authors to take a position on the terror attacks immediately after the events. He became what may be called the ideologue of the situation post-September 11. In 2008, Amis published the volume *The Second Plane,* a collection of essays, book reviews and short stories, as a response to Marxist literary critic Terry Eagleton who had accused him of racism after an interview with Ginny Dougary for *The Times.*[1]

The pieces featured in this collection appear in chronological order form 18th September 2001 to 11th September 2007, and were initially publishedin *The Guardian, The Observer, The Times, The New Yorker,* and *The New York Times.*They cover Tony Blair's premiership and discuss the long lasting legacy of 9/11, which Amis views as a turning point in history. He comments on the nature of the threat in the British society and the constant feeling of anxiety and insecurity in the wake of the attacks, and criticises the British Muslim communities. In time, he adopts a firm anti-Islamist position. It is important to note that the 7th July 2005 London bombings are not discussed.

The two short stories featured in *The Second Plane* are “In the Palace of the End”, published in March 2004, and “The Last Days of Muhammad Atta", published in April 2006, both in *The New Yorker.* Amis' short stories focus on male characters, the main themes being violence, death, thwarted masculinity and loss of identity. They have not received favourable reviews. As one critic remarks, "It is perhaps a mark of the subject at hand that makes these two pieces among the most disappointing in the book."[2]

The fact that these two short stories were published in a periodical means that there is an imposed word limit and also a concern for the general readership of the publication. As a type of fiction, the short story focuses on one incident, has a single plot and setting, covers a short period of time (one day) and focuses on one character.

[1] Ginny Dougary, "The Voice of Experience", *TimesOnline,* 9th September 2006. http://www.ginnydougary.co.uk/2006/09/
[2] Michel Noble, "The Second Plane by Martin Amis" (31th March 2008) https://www.popmatters.com/the-second-plane-by-martin-amis-2496171842.html

BDD-A28286 © 2018 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 00:55:21 UTC)

In "The Last Days of Muhammad Atta", Martin Amis imagines the last few days in Muhammad Atta's life before crashing a plane into the Twin Towers. The narrative perspective is heterodiegtic- the third person narrator is not a character in his own narration.

The motto of the story is a quote from The 9/11 Commission Report: "No physical, documentary, or analytical evidence **provides a convincing explanation** of why [Muhammad] Atta and [Abdulaziz al] Omari drove to **Portland**, Maine, from **Boston** on the morning of **September 10**, only to return to **Logan** on Flight 5930 on the morning of September 11."[3] Since reality does not offer an explanation or concrete evidence in relation to Muhammad Atta's actions on that particular day, Martin Amis offers a fictionalized version of the missing hours. We find out that Atta has two reasons, both of them "puerile undertakings"[4] in retrospect: to meet the Imam and discuss how suicide clashes with the teachings of Islam, and to induce in one of his fellow hijackers, Ziad, a feeling of doubt and sorrow as to the possible rewards awaiting in heaven.

The story starts with Muhammad Atta waking up in a cheap hotel in Portland in the early morning of September 11, and follows his actions as he prepares to board on the plane that would be the first to crash into the World Trade Center. Atta is believed to be "the chief of operations", but two other 9/11 hijackers are mentioned: Ziad Jarrah on board of United 93, and Abdulaziz-al-Omari, on the same plane as Atta. The story describes the useless security checks at the airports, and the terrorist activities on board of Atta's plane: while other hijackers attack a stewardess, threaten and subdue the passengers, Atta gains control of the cockpit and flies the plane into the World Trade Center.

The third person narration gives the illusion of objectivity. It implies that the author should not let his personal opinions interfere with the representation of the narrative, which should be independent. It is not the case here. Amis' story, to paraphrase a commentator, seems to tell at every step what a British writer would think is going on in the mind of a Muslim terrorist than what it really is. Even the words used to recreate Atta's thoughts "sound a lot like Amis:"[5] "The themes of recurrence and prolongation, he sensed, were already beginning to associate themselves with his last day."'[6]

Most blatantly, the character is taken out of context and presented in the final day of his mission. As one commentator explains, "dead time doesn't do anything for fiction, which needs to function and if- as here- past, present and future are collapsed together then fiction is impossible."[7] Amis creates a character that is completely dehumanized, functioning like a machinery to destroy, most stunningly, for no reason other than a profound hatred for mankind. Amis intends to draw a portrait of the terrorist, the typical Islamist terrorist. Yet, his character is one-dimensional and simple. The character is on a path of self-destruction as the self dissolves into violence. The story is punctuated by flashbacks which give some details about Atta's preparations for this day, but the information is not credible.

[3]Martin Amis, "The Last Days of Muhammad Atta" in *The Second Plane. September 11: Terror and Boredom* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2008) 95.
[4] ibid., 99.
[5] Sameer Rahim, "Review of *The Second Plane* by Martin Amis", 29 January 2008. http://www.complete-review.com/reviews/amism/second.htm
[6] Martin Amis qtd in Rahim.
[7]Sam Anderson, "The Second Plane by Martin Amis" (10th July, 2010) http://dreisnerbooks.blogspot.com/2010/07/

BDD-A28286 © 2018 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 00:55:21 UTC)

There is a lot of introspection. The inner motivations of the character are sought. We find out that he is not religious, and that his only focus of his existence is the Islamist jihad. There is a reference to the six dozen of virgins waiting in heaven, and two discussions with the Sheik and the Imam who approve to the plan. But nothing except the thought of the coming death makes Atta smile: "It was 8.24. He laughed for the first time since childhood: he was in the Atlantic of the sky, at the controls of the biggest weapon in history."[8] Instead of an objective presentation of facts, we encounter a reflecting character.

Amis uses **irony** to highlight what he imagines to be the generally accepted values and behaviour of typical characters. The character he creates is chronically constipated, and suffers from terrible headaches. There is a grotesque depiction of Muhammad Atta. His breath smells like a "blighted river" as a result of "disused gastric juices bubbling up the sump of his throat".[9] He cannot not even stand to look at himself in the mirror and wonders how his "gangrenous" face did not seem suspect to the inspectors at the airports. He comments that in the future "the profiling wouldn't need to be racial: it would be facial merely."[10] One reviewer comments that Muhammad Atta is not credible at all: "*The face of Muhammad Atta* is the face that was repeated on TV screens worldwide in the months that followed 11 September…Atta can't see himself in his reflection, and Amis can't see him either: which makes him not a person but a **narrative black hole**." [11]

The character is, it seems, pretty mentally unstable. We find out about his training in the camps of Afghanistan. When the Sheik asks him if he is ready to die, he does not even want an answer. Dementia is probably written on his face. The sheik comments: "The question isn't necessary…I see the answer in your face."[12] The character is dehumanized, maimed by disgust and hatred of everything, even of his life.

Interestingly enough, we find that the terrorist is not motivated by religious belief: "Atta was not religious...If you took away all the rubbish about faith, then fundamentalism suited his character, and with an almost sinister precision."[13] Fundamentalism reflects his character traits: a frustrated individual, profoundly misogynistic, who likes the idea of brotherhood but "despises his fellow brothers", one who hates the idea of music and laughter and who sees life as an illusion. As the narrator explains, Muhammad Atta is an apostate, since an educated man cannot believe in religion. There is also contempt for romantic love and for staying alive.Jihad, for him, is a fashion he blindly believes in, until the end. Jihad is "the most charismatic idea of his generation."[14] Atta is a sadistic, ferocious character, not interested in religion. However, Islamic fundamentalism is fascinating to him by its strength. We find out that "Muhammad Atta… was doing it for the core reason and for the core reason only",[15] later explained as anticipated perpetuation of death: "The core reason was, of course, all the killing- all the putting to death. Not the crew, not the passengers, not the office-workers in the Twin Towers not the cleaners and the caterers, not the men of the NYPD and the FDNY. He was thinking of the war, the wars, the war-cycles

[8] Amis, 96.
[9] ibid., 97.
[10] ibid, 98.
[11] Sam Anderson, "The Second Plane by Martin Amis" (10th July, 2010) http://dreisnerbooks.blogspot.com/2010/07/
[12] Amis, 98.
[13] ibid., 102.
[14] ibid., 101.
[15] ibid., 99.

BDD-A28286 © 2018 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 00:55:21 UTC)

that would flow from this day". Also, for this individual "killing was divine delight. And your suicide was just a part of the contribution you made - the massive contribution to death."[16]Bringing about death was a way to give meaning to his existence: "All your frigidities and futilities were rewritten, becoming swollen with meaning."[17] For this character, death is the only meaningful active force in his life.

Thus, religion is used only as a mask to kill randomly. The reader can reach the sole conclusion that there could be no other possible explanation for Atta's actions other than sheer and indiscriminate violence. Moreover, neither Ziad nor the other hijackers are presented as especially religious. They were only caught in "a peer-group piety contest".[18] Later on, the narrator discloses that Ziad "wasn't doing it for love, or for God. He was doing it for the core reason, just like Muhammad Atta."[19] Atta was a chronically bored individual, for whom "all the time was dead time."[20] He believes the other face of terrorism is boredom and notices that "whatever else terrorism has achieved in the past few decades, it had certainly brought about a net increase in world boredom."[21]This is one of the statements that Amis never gets tired of expressing. Terrorism and boredom are flip sides of the same coin.

Interestingly enough, in the end, the suicide killer reflects on the inutility of the killings. The terrorist acts prove to be random and senseless: "And then the argument assembled all by itself. The *joy* of killing was proportional to the *value* of what was destroyed. But that *value* was something a killer could never see and never gauge. And where was the *joy* he thought he had felt—where was that *joy*, that itch, that paltry tingle? Yes, *how gravely he had underestimated it. How very gravely he had underestimated life*.[22] The killer's final revelation is about the value of life in itself. Also, the plural in the title may be used to imply that the murder-suicide act could be repeated forever.

Amis has been criticized for the simplicity of his character. As Kristiaan Versluys explains: “As a pure projection of Amis’s own viewpoint, Atta is utterly ‘othered.’ Having no access to the private thoughts of the historical Muhammad Atta, Amis has created a character that is the incarnation of his idiosyncratic take on Islamic terrorism.”[23]Moreover, it seems that Atta is nothing but a repressed and sexually frustrated individual, resembling the figure that Amis paints of Sayyid Qutb, the father of Islamism, in "Terror and Boredom", the central essay of the book. The sole character trait of Muhammad Atta seems to be misanthropy, as a result of frustration and a generalized dissatisfaction with life. The story is again a critique of Islam, a fictionalization of Amis' point of view on the subject, a comment on the horror of the attacks, the inefficiency of the security systems in western societies, the clash of values between the West and Islam, and the impossibility of drawing a moral equivalence between America and the Islamic world. The character is one-dimensional, ready formed. He is not on a path towards self-discovery as the self is complete.

The structure of the story is circular, of the play-rewind-play type: it begins and ends with the same sentence: “On September 11, 2001, he opened his eyes at 4 a.m., in

[16] ibid., 122.
[17] ibid.
[18] Amis, 96.
[19]ibid., 115.
[20]ibid., 113.
[21]ibid., 108.
[22] ibid.,, 124.
[23]Kristiaan Versluys, *Out of the Blue: September 11 and the Novel* (Columbia University Press, 2009) 160.

BDD-A28286 © 2018 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 00:55:21 UTC)

Portland, Maine; and Muhammad Atta's last day began."[24]The circular structure could suggest the fact that, among the crowds of believers, whether they are Islamists, Christians or of any other religion, there could be a Muhammad Atta. Fictionalizing his last day may as well be a fictionalizing of the last day of every religious fanatic (more or less a believer) who blows himself up, or commits abominable crimes against those around him, having that core motivation which is impossible to explain or comprehend by a person who uses reason as a guiding principle in life, not fanatic blindness, which is sometimes senseless.

Some critics believe that "The Last Days of Muhammad Atta" barely deserves the name "fiction", since it merely reiterates all the arguments that Amis advances throughout the book. Amis does not create a credible character. He is one-dimensional, not autonomous, and speaks with the author's voice. Moreover, there is no trace of humanity, since even religious motivation is negated. The Islamic fundamentalist is presented as irrational and impossible to comprehend or enter into a meaningful conversation with. Islamic fundamentalism becomes the absolute Other with whom there could be no common discourse.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Volumes:

Amis, Martin. *The Second Plane. September 11: Terror and Boredom.* London: Jonathan Cape, 2008.

Versluys, Kristiaan. *Out of the Blue: September 11 and the Novel.* Columbia: Columbia University Press, 2009.

Articles:

Anderson, Sam. "The Second Plane by Martin Amis", 10th July, 2010.
http://dreisnerbooks.blogspot.com/2010/07/

Dougary, Ginny. "The Voice of Experience". *TimesOnline,* 9th September 2006.
http://www.ginnydougary.co.uk/2006/09/

Noble, Michel."The Second Plane by Martin Amis", 31st March 2008.
https://www.popmatters.com/the-second-plane-by-martin-amis-2496171842.html.

Rahim, Sameer "Review of *The Second Plane* by Martin Amis", 29 January 2008.
http://www.complete-review.com/reviews/amism/second.htm

[24]Amis, 124.

BDD-A28286 © 2018 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 00:55:21 UTC)