MARTIN AMIS -"TERROR AND BOREDOM": THE MUSLIM "OTHER" IN A WORLD OF CIVILIZATIONAL BLOCS

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Abstract: A globally mediated event, 9/11 and its consequences reached far beyond the borders of USA. It marked the beginning of a new global war against a new enemy, international terrorism. Martin Amis was one of the first authors in Britain to take a stand on Islamic fundamentalism or Islamism. This paper analyses one of Amis' key articles on 9/11 and it is relevant because his arguments represent the dominant views that settled in the British socio-political context following the event. The Muslim "Other" came to be seen through the prism of Huntington's thesis of civilizational clash and future anti-terror measures were designed to meet the clear, present and immediate threat coming from inside the British Muslim community. Amis spoke of "The Age of Vanished Normalcy" to describe the deep sense of vulnerability and anxiety that settled in the British society in the wake of 9/11.

Keywords: 9/11, the Muslim "Other", clash of civilizations, Islamic fundamentalism, Western values

After the fall of the Iron Curtain, Francis Fukuyama launched the idea of "the end of History" [1]- the beginning of a new era of understanding, peace and prosperity for mankind. In the early 1990s, Samuel P. Huntington drew the attention on the Muslim presence in the West, and made the prediction that conflict is bound to occur between the Muslim and Western worlds. The nature of the conflict will be religious, but it will trigger economic, ideological and civilizational consequences.[2] The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 seemed to confirm Huntington's thesis.

Dubbed "The Day Everything Changed" in the world wide media, September 11, 2001 was framed as a turning point in history, announcing the emergence of a new global conflict. The issues of international terrorism and a seemingly irreconcilable conflict between Western democracies and Islamic fundamentalists- harboured by what George W. Bush called *the rogue states* of the Third World- reached the top of international agenda. The UK government's immediate response to the crisis represented "the first serious challenge to international terrorism, as distinct from Irish terrorism" and also influenced the direction and development of future government policies in relation to both the international and domestic aspects of the American led global response to terrorism, the "war against terrorism."[3]

[1] Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Avon Books, 1992)
[2] Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order (*New York, Simon & Schuster, 1996*)*
[3] Stephen Driver and Luke Martell, *New Labour* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006) 205.

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Novelist Martin Amis was among the first British authors to take a stand 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. September 11: Terror and Boredom,* a collection of essays, book reviews and short stories written between 2001 and 2007. In the book's central essay- "Terror and Boredom: The Dependent Mind"[4]- which I have chosen to analyse, Martin Amis approaches the subject of Islamic fundamentalism and discusses its assault on Western values. Amis analyses the conflict through the prism of the Huntingtonian clash of civilizations thesis.

Martin Amis starts his attack on Islamic fundamentalism or Islamism with a critique of religion in general. He argues that all religions are defined by "ignorance, reaction, and sentimentality". From the very beginning, he highlights a stark contrast between the secular West where "there are no good excuses for religious belief" and the East, where "almost every living citizen...is intimately defined by religious belief."[5] Therefore, Islam is a "totalist" religion which "makes a total claim on the individual" leading to "the surrender of independence of mind".[6] Moreover, "Millennial Islamism is an ideology superimposed upon religion- illusion upon illusion. It is not merely violent in tendency. Violence is all that is there." [7] This is precisely the reason why, while "all religions...have their terrorists", the world is only "hearing from Islam" in the form of terrorist attacks.[8]

In his study, *The Clash of Civilizations: Remaking of World Order*, Samuel Huntington argues that the biggest threat to the West is not only Islamic fundamentalism, but Islam in itself:

Some Westerners… have argued that the West does not have problems with Islam but only with violent Islamist extremists. Fourteen hundred years of history demonstrate otherwise. The relations between Islam and Christianity, both Orthodox and Western, have often been stormy. Each has been the other's Other.[9]

Huntington believes that one of the main causes of the conflict is the difference between the religious systems that make up the foundation of the two civilizations: "the Muslim concept of Islam as a way of life transcending and uniting religion and politics versus the Western Christian concept of the separate realms of God and Caesar." On the other hand, conflict also arises from the similarities between Christianity and Islam. Both religions are monotheistic and universalistic: "monotheistic religions…which see the world in dualistic, us-and-them terms…universalistic,…missionary religions believing that their adherents have an obligation to convert nonbelievers to that one true faith."[10] Elias Canetti defines Islam as "a

[4]Marin Amis, "Terror and Boredom: The Dependent Mind" în *The Second Plane. September 11: Terror and Boredom* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2008)
[5] Amis, 49.
[6] ibid., 79.
[7] ibid., 91.
[8] ibid., 49.
[9] Huntington, 210
[10] Huntington 210-211

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religion of war", inside which one can discern "invisible double crowds, standing in opposition to each other", the faithful and the unbelieving.[11]

Although Martin Amis insists on a clear distinction between Islamism (by which he understands religious extremism) and Islam (a moderate version of religion), he states that moderate Islam has lost a "civil war" inside its faith. Consequently, the distinction becomes almost imperceptible.[12] In his opinion, moderate Islam "is always deceptively well represented on the level of the op-ed page and the public debate; elsewhere it is supine and inaudible".[13] Islamists instead have an important say on the world scene, through their terrorist attacks.

Huntington noted the same thing in 1996. In his opinion, American leaders are wrong to consider that the actions of Islamic fundamentalists are rejected by the vast majority of moderate Muslims:

Protests against anti-Western violence have been totally absent in Muslim countries. Muslim governments, even the bunker governments friendly to and dependent on the West, have been strikingly reticent when it comes to condemning terrorist acts against the West.[14]

Huntington also seeks to explain the causes of what he sees as a renewed conflict between Islam and the West towards the end of the 20th century: demographic growth inside the Muslim population and their migration to the West, Islamic Renaissance which brings renewed confidence in the values of their civilization as compared to the values of the West, universalist pretensions on the Western side and Muslim resentments related to the Western political and military interference in the conflicts inside the Muslim world.[15] Conflicts focus not as much on territorial issues, but more importantly on "broader inter-civilizational issues such as weapons proliferation, human rights and democracy, control of oil, migration, Islamist terrorism, and Western intervention."[16]

The idea of a clash of civilizations and the speculations related to the growing conflict between the East and the West invoke the image of a polarised world, where identities are positioned in radical opposition to one another. The post-9/11 world appears to be one polarised between civilization (the West) and barbarians (the rest). The negative traits of the Other are highlighted. Under these conditions, the encounter with the Other provokes fear and anxiety because "the stranger" threatens our very survival. Tzvetan Todorov, in *The Conquest of America* explained that the process of Othering can lead to the extreme of perceiving the Other as a group outside our culture, "outsiders, whose language and culture I do not understand, so foreign that in extreme instances I am reluctant to admit they belong to the same species as my own."[17] Todorov identifies three types of relating to Otherness, three axes of the problem of the Other: (1) "the axiological level': a value judgement is applied: "the other is good or bad, I love or do not love him…he is my equal or my inferior"; "the

[11] Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, (New York: Seabury Press, 1978) 141.
[12] Amis, 50.
[13] ibid.
[14] Huntington, 218.
[15] ibid., 212.
[16] Huntington, 212
[17] Tzvetan Todotov, *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other* (New York: Harper and Row, 1984) 3.

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praxeological level": submit the Other, be submissive to the Other or be indifferent; (3) the epistemic level: being able or unable to understand the Other: "I know or am ignorant of the other's identity" and on this level "there is no absolute…, but an endless gradation between the lower or higher states of knowledge."[18] Relating to Otherness is an unsettling endeavour. As Elias Canetti remarked, 'There is nothing that man fears more than the touch of the unknown. He wants to see what is reaching towards him, and to be able to recognize or at least classify it."

Martin Amis analyses the problem of the Other at the axiological level. "Terror" and "boredom"- the words that figure in the title of his essay- are the attributes of the dependent mind, the Islamist terrorist's mind, one which is devoid of imagination. Amis does not refer to a common boredom, but to a "super-boredom, rounding out and complementing the super-terror of suicide-mass murder". This kind of boredom is even more dangerous than terrorism, Amis argues, because:

Boredom is something that the enemy doesn't feel…the opposite of religious belief is not atheism, or secularism or humanism…it is independence of mind-that's all. When I refer to the age of boredom, I am not thinking of airport queues and subway searches. I mean the global confrontation with the dependent mind.[19]

Obviously, Amis contends, any conversation with the dependent mind would lead nowhere, given its nullity. In his opinion, the Islamic culture is characterized by "extreme incuriosity"[20]. It is a culture which remains closed to external influences, comparable only to the totalitarian ideologies of the 20th century: Nazism and Stalinism, irrational cults which celebrate death are the exact opposite of the values of the Enlightenment:

Anti-Semitic, anti-liberal, anti-individualist, anti-democratic, and, most crucially, anti-rational…cults of death, death-driven and death-fuelled. The main distinction is that the paradise which the Nazis (pagan) and the Bolsheviks (atheist) sought to bring about was an earthly one, raised from the mulch of millions of corpses. For them, death was creative, right enough, but it was still death…For the Islamists, death is a consummation and a sacrament, death is the beginning.[21]

In his study published in 1977, *Orientalism*, Edward Said discusses the phenomenon of Othering through polarization which implies a denigration of the Other. The central idea of his study is that the East is an essentializing ideological construct, realized in mirror image to another cultural fiction, the West:

The relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony…*The Orient was Orientalized not only because it was discovered to be "Oriental" in all those ways considered common*- place

[18] ibid., 185.
[19] Amis, 77-78.
[20] ibid., 79.
[21] ibid., 80.

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by an average nineteenth-century European, but also because it *could* be—that is, submitted to being—made Oriental.[22]

Instead, Huntington speaks about a power struggle between Islam and the West:

Kto? Kovo? Who is to rule? Who is to be ruled?...So long as Islam remains Islam (which it will) and the West remains the West (which is more dubious), this fundamental conflict between two great civilizations and ways of life will continue to define their relations in the future even as it has defined them for the past fourteen centuries.[23]

In an article entitled "The Clash of Ignorance", Said gives a direct response to Huntington's study and warns against the danger of maintaining such a polarizing worldview. His argument goes as follows: through "the personification of enormous entities called "the West" and "Islam", the internal dynamics and diversity of each civilization is ignored, while the pretention of speaking in the name of a whole religion or civilization implies "a great deal of demagogy and downright ignorance".[24] Said criticises Huntington for speaking about civilizations in terms of "shut-down, sealed-off entities that have been purged of the myriad currents and counter-currents that animate human history, and that over history have made it possible for that history not only to contain wars religion and imperial conquest but also to be one of exchange, cross-fertilization and sharing." In the post-September 11 world, "The basic paradigm of West versus the rest (the cold war opposition reformulated)" has stood intact. This labelling into Islam and the West serves to no purpose, in Said's opinion, other than mislead and confuse, instead of examining and contemplating on the current situation, on the reality, characterized by "the interconnectedness of innumerable lives, *ours* as well as *theirs*."[25]

Martin Amis takes the opposite view. He insists upon the irrationality of the enemy and excludes any form of dialogue. We are dealing with an irrational cult of death, an Islamist "death hunger" which, "outside Africa", is comparable only to Nazi Germany and Stalinite Kampuchea. Amis notices, however, that Islamism seems to be experiencing its last phase of existence, "a death agony".[26] Schiller famously stated that "*world history is* the world's court of justice"[27]. Amis also confides that history will eventually serve justice: "nothing so impossibly poisonous could expect to hold itself together over time". However, Amis warns, "there are sound reasons for thinking that the confrontation with Islam will be testingly prolonged."[28]

The difficulty of formulating an answer to the problem of Islamist suicide mass-murders rest precisely in the enemy's irrational hatred: 'Contemplating intense violence, you very rationally ask yourself, "What are the reasons for this?"...It is time to move on. We are

[22] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London; Penguin, 1977) 6.
[23] Huntington , 212.
[24]Edward Said, "The Clash of Ignorance" in Paul Mandaville and Paul James (eds.), *Central Currents in Globalization: Globalization and Culture*, vol. 3 (London: Sage, 2010) 254.
[25] ibid., 257.
[26]Amis, 81.
[27] Friedrich *Schiller qtd. in* Reinhart Koselleck, *Conceptele şi istoriile lor* (Bucureşti: Art, 2009) 182.
[28] Amis, 82.

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not dealing in reasons because we are not dealing in reason." Amis reaches the conclusion that the only "reasonable" response to the terrorist attack cannot be anything but "an unvarying factory siren of unanimous disgust."[29]

In *Understanding Identity,* Kath Woodward explains that at times of war, identity is marked through the difference between "us" and "them", through direct opposition. Identity formation implies setting the boundaries which locate the parameters of difference and sameness.[30] George W. Bush's speeches were meant to express the shock, but also to mobilize the American people against the enemy. Woodward explains that identity also implies a dimension of intentionality and rational choice. In Bush's speeches, the United States and its allies are constructed as rational agents, in direct opposition to the irrationality of the enemy.[31] John Frow notices the fact that any reasonable explanation for the terrorist attacks has been rejected from the start. In his opinion the explanation lies in the American foreign policy errors in the Middle East.[32]

Martin Amis discusses the effect that the suicide mass-murders have upon the western world: they induce a permanent sense of terror. He speaks of *horrorism,* "a maximum malevolence", a "superterror", "just whisper the words and you fatally trample a thousand people".[33] Moreover, the terrorist attacks of September 11 have had far reaching consequences on literary imagination. Amis recounts how he abandoned work at a novella- a satire entitled "The Unknown Known" (a phrase taken over from Rumsfeld's speeches). Amis equates writing with freedom itself: "Writing *is* freedom; and as soon as that freedom is in shadow, the writer can no longer proceed." The severity of international events limits the power of imagination. Don DeLillo expressed the same concern and spoke of the author's role in offering a kind of "counter-narrative" to the violent narrative created through terrorist acts.[34]

Amis tells the plot of his novella. Ayed, the narrator is a "diminutive Islamist terrorist" planning an innovative terrorist operation. His idea was "to scour all the prisons and madhouses for every compulsive rapist"[35] in Waziristan (Bin Laden's country) and send them to Greely, Colorado. When his plan fails, he decides to mail order a belt in order to become "the first to bring martyrdom operations into the setting of his own home".[36] The victims would be his four wives. Amis explains that the location is not incidentally chosen. Greely, Colorado is the place where Sayid Qutb, the ideologue of Islamist Muslims lived for a while. Amis describes him as a misogynist, sexual truant and anti-Semite. Qutb's fundamental work, *Milestones,* defines Islamism in its present form and is known as "the *Mein Kampf* of

[29] ibid., 68.
[30] Kath Woodward, *Understanding Identity* (New York: Oxord University Press) 9.
[31] ibid., 12.
[32] John Frow, *The Uses of Terror and the Limits of Cultural Studies* wysiwyg://15//http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/symploke/v011/11.1frow.b
[33] Amis, 71.
[34] Don DeLillo, "In the Ruins of the Future: Reflections on Terror and Loss in the Shadow of September"(*Harper's* Decembrie, 2001) 37.
[35] Amis, 55.
[36] Amis, 87.

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Islamism"[37], Amis writes. Eventually, Amis gives up writing his novella because in the aftermath of September 11, which he terms "the Age of Vanished Normalcy", irony is dead: "With Islamism, with total malignacy, with total terror and total boredom, irony, even militant irony (which is what satire is), merely shrivels and dies."[38]

Amis analyses Qutb's work and he notices the intense hatred for all aspects of American life. Qutb's biggest fear is that America would exterminate Islam through the power of example. America is the Great Satan, the tempter. Amis suggests that the Islamist war against the West is a kind of "thwarted narcissism"[39], deeply rooted in sexual frustration and anger generated by Islam's impotence on the world scene. Therefore, "the Islamists' hatred of America is as much abstract as historical, and irrationally abstract too. The hatred contains much historical emotion, but is their history, and not ours, that haunts them." [40]

This historical hatred is uniltaral, Amis claims:

Far from wanting or trying to exterminate it, the West had no views whatsoever about Islam per se before September 11, 2001...now we know. In the West we had brought into being a society whose main purpose, whose *raison d'etre*, was the tantalisation of good Muslims.[41]

Huntington, too, speaks of the fear of "Westoxication of Muslim societies" which appeared simultaneously with Islamic Renaissance- the reaffirmation of Islam.[42] He believes that Muslims fear western power and its possible effects on their way of life. At the same time, he sees the conflict between Islam and the West as deeply rooted in history. Contrary to Martin Amis' opinion, Huntington believes the West fears Islam in its turn because it is "the only civilization which has put the survival of the West in doubt."[43]

Amis is convinced of the moral superiority of the western civilization. He rejects the idea of moral equivalence in this conflict. While admitting that, after the 1990s, the world has experienced a "moral crash" and episodes like Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib are regrettable, they are not even by far equivalent in implications to the opposed ideology, Islamism, which "conjures up the image of an abattoir within a madhouse", their sole purpose being the extermination of the non-Muslims, either by conversion or by execution.[44] "Our moral advantage, still vast and obvious, is not a liability, and we should strengthen and expand it. Like our dependence on reason, it is a strategic strength, and it shores up our legitimacy."[45]

Amis is concerned that too many cultural relativists are compromising with Islamic fundamentalism. In a passage, he imagines how John Walker Lindh advises Bin Laden to attack the West, because its response would be weak: "the West is enfeebled, not just by sex and alcohol, but also by thirty years of multicultural relativism". Amis criticizes the West's

[37] Amis, 58.
[38] ibid., 87.
[39] ibid., 65.
[40] ibid., 64.
[41] ibid., 63.
[42] Huntington, 213.
[43] ibid., 210
[44] Amis, 56.
[45] ibid., 75.

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excessive tolerance. In moments of crisis, he says, tolerance, a mark of Western ideology, "weakens our power of perception and judgement and it weakens our moral unity and will."[46]

Amis believes that security measures in airports are useless unless they are limited to those most susceptible of committing terrorist attacks, namely the representatives of the Muslim community. He recounts how he waited for a half an hour for an airport officer to "methodically" search his six years old daughter's backpack:

There ought to be a better word than *boredom* for the trance of inanition that weaved its way through me. I wanted to say something like: "Even Islamists have not yet started to blow their own families on aeroplanes. So please desist until they do. Oh yeah: and stick, for now, to young men who look like tey're from the Middle East.[47]

In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11, the negative side of the relation with the Other has been highlighted, leading, in extreme cases, to feelings of xenophobia. In the process of Othering, feelings of anger, hostility and hatred are projected upon people who are considered dangerous because they stand for a dangerous culture.

Regarding the West's response to the terrorist attacks, Amis believes it was rash, and the Bush administration is guilty of the arrogance of power. The Iraq war was unplanned, a fiasco, yet, "we should not delude ourselves that the underling motives were wholly dishonourable". The Iraq endeavour can be metaphorically conceived of as "a gigantic contract...for the paving company called Good Intentions." Therefore, the general goal of the war was, in the author's opinion, "a dramatic (and largely benign) extension of American power", yet the outcome points in the opposite direction, "a dramatic reduction of American power."[48] A failure of the western world in the "war against terrorism", Amis warns, would have devastating consequences upon the future generations. He imagines what a world ruled by Islamists would look like and what it would mean to his family:

One way of ending the war on terror would be to capitulate and convert...It would be a world of perfect terror and perfect boredom, and nothing else- a world with no games, no arts and no women, a world where the sole entertainment is the public execution. My middle daughter, now aged nine, still believes in imaginary beings (Father Christmas, the Tooth Fairy); so she would have that in common, at least, with her new husband.[49]

Amis believes that the failure of Islamic societies can be explained by the fact that women are oppressed. This is the reason why Islamic states lag behind western societies in every aspect: economic, technological, cultural, intellectual. And if Martin Amis is sure that "the impulse towards rational inquiry is by now very weak in the rank and file of the Muslim male", there is still hope coming from Muslim women.[50] He suggests that money that is being spent on wars should be used instead in order to raise the self-consciousness of the Muslim

[46] ibid., 74.
[47] ibid., 76.
[48] Amis, 86.
[49] ibid., 78.
[50] ibid., 89.

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woman.[51] In the end, Amis pleads for the independence of mind, liberated from religious dogmas. The secular way of thinking is the wave of the future: "opposition to religion already occupies the high ground, intellectually and morally. People of independent mind should now start to claim the spiritual high ground, too.[52]

In one of Saint Paul's epistles, the Katechon is explained as a force which delays generalized apostasy. One hundred years ago, André Malraux famously declared that "the *21st century will be religious* or it *will* not be at all." The 21st century is, and does not seem to be religious at all. Moreover, a possible source of a third world war is religious fundamentalism. The image of a polarized world between Islam and the West does nothing but to maintain the intensity of the conflict. While Martin Amis insists that any dialogue with such a malevolent and irrational enemy would be useless, in cultural studies, the accent falls on the concept of relation, on an ethical understanding of the relationship with the Other. The mechanisms of globalisation have brought about profound social and cultural transformations. People have become aware of the presence of the Other in a way which is fundamentally different from the past. The Other is no longer the distant stranger, the barbarian. Under the conditions of time-space compression, the Other- in its various manifestations (cultural, religious, sexual etc.) has broadened people's practical and conceptual horizons. The world is shrinking and it is important to find a common base of discussion. Identity cannot exist independent of the Other in a world of relations. It is only through communication that the Other can be perceived.

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[51] ibid.

[52] ibid., 92.

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