



TERRORISM: A DYSTOPIA OUT OF CRISIS

DEBDOOT MUKHERJEE

State-Aided College Teacher, Category-1, Department of English,
Bhangar Mahavidyalaya, University of Calcutta



DEBDOOT MUKHERJEE

Article Received:10/02/2021

Article Accepted: 06/03/2021

Published online:15/03/2021

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.9.1.188](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.9.1.188)

Abstract

Too much of dissatisfaction in life often leads to digression from the main course of life and an individual meanders along trying to manage the situation of crisis resulting in subsequent modes of creation for survival. This is quite true in the lives of almost all human beings and should not be denied as a mere hypothesis because some truths simply get established because they exist in the deepest corners of human mind and are subject to change from person to person. This point of view holds place in the life of any individual going through a black hole of answerless interrogation by life itself and chooses to alight on a comfortable platform which becomes his own world. This particular arena takes shape as the individual's psychological solace, personal nest and a storehouse of such interactions where formation of a new society becomes inevitable with self-claimed discourse being the ultimate goal to satisfy what was once dissatisfied. The huge flow of this tempestuous calmness may topple the hegemonic establishments that once cut in the straight course. Uncertainty over this issue is the origin of the fear of a parallel line, a separate society and above all an altogether different narrative that shivers hard to proliferate amidst the chosen ones.

Terrorism is one such narrative told quite differently and we are, and we cannot deny, are really frightened of it. This paper looks forward to dig out some of the above-mentioned areas to find out the uncertainty that is looming large over the possible solutions to the magnanimous problem of Terrorism all over the world. It discusses these issues in light of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and other global issues related to Terrorism.

Keywords: Dissatisfaction, Crisis, Terrorism, Uncertainty.

Introduction

When the iconic twin towers of the World Trade Centre fell on September 11, 2001, the world realised that even the most powerful may fall apart. Amidst the criticism that followed, one thing was certain – that there is a narrative that needs to be feared and therefore corrected. This narrative called for a pronounced attention to a fearful structure called Terrorism. The simple and so called "fear" has made it compulsory for all of us to give a piece of our

thought to the overwhelming existence of Terrorism in our society in its varied forms. Literature, being a mirror of the society has also mirrored this dystopia in its own way.

Discussion

It is needless to give any special space to the already clichéd definition of terrorism but it never becomes tedious for us to dig out the same definition in search of the roots and causes of

Terrorism that has indeed become a threat to the International community and though it is not so powerful to bring doom to the whole of human civilisation, it can definitely loosen the threads that bind the peaceful co-habitation of human beings. As the title of this paper suggests, terrorism is a crisis in itself, a parasite that eats up the host, an auto-immune disease that blindly leads to the production of phagocytes resulting in destruction of the body and nothing else. It is a maelstrom that gobbles anything that come in the middle of it without any goal. To discuss the psychodynamics of terrorism is to discuss the play of violence in the mind of a terrorist. Loosely speaking, a lot of research has already been done from a number of angles viz., social, political, economic as well as literary. The moot point still remains in understanding the crisis involved in creation of a mindset that creates terror among fellow beings. Some lines from the famous Shakespearian tragedy of *Macbeth* may be of some importance. After having done with all kinds of violence to spread terror of his name, Macbeth, the tragic hero utters some words that are really sensible and eternal towards the end of the play –

MACBETH: To-morrow, and to-morrow, to-morrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
To the last syllable of recorded time;
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
Life is but a walking shadow; a poor player,
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more: it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing." (Shakespeare. *Macbeth*.
5. 5. 19-28)

The above-mentioned lines do pertain to Macbeth, the tragic hero in William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* but they have an eternal appeal. It is quite an accepted fact that the terrorists are ambitious and they are ambitious for some kind of power which makes them political in nature. Judging a terrorist's personality is not an easy affair and almost all the time scholars try to look from a different angle that seems quite near to the object but can hardly make

the several parallel lines meet. There is no doubt about the fact that all kinds of terrorism, viz., political, religious, fundamentalist, and so on depend on creating a series of fear factors among the people of a community, place, country and so on. Their objectives lie where the objectives of overtly power-hungry people lie, that is the desire for domination and hegemonic position that can draw mass support and satisfaction of a certain kind of ego that is vehemently posed against a particular regime. However, this focus of the terrorists leads to making themselves suicidal bags for their own cell. This is where their life becomes "a walking shadow", "a poor player" that sets the stage with his or her terror, the "sound and fury" (Shakespeare. *Macbeth*. 5. 5. 19-28) and then with one suicide bomb on the body explodes to be heard no more. However, their life should not be considered from the point of view of pity because none of them show pity to their targets. The question of crisis does not rise at this point. It basically stems from the point that no one is born as a criminal or a terrorist. To consider poverty and unemployment to be the reasons behind making of terrorists will be too generalised a hypothesis to bank on - "The truth is that no one is born as a terrorist. We have, therefore, to reject totally the role of heredity genes, blood, and so on in understanding the personality of a terrorist. Equally, no theory of a bruised childhood or of an evil neighbourhood and environment is going to explain a terrorist's behaviour. For each abused youth who turns into a terrorist, there are scores of youths who nurse no such injuries and traumas and in fact become a part of the social order. Recent studies have shown that over 80 per cent of the terrorists in advanced countries come from reasonably affluent families. (Maini). Each terrorist personality is thus an individual case, though it may end up as having all the marks of its tribe.

This is the crisis in maelstrom, a ceaseless series of doubtful and answerless interrogation into the personality of terrorists that come to us in varied types and names. The core of the matter remains the same- uncertainty. Sometimes it is the crisis in establishing identity and again at another instance it is simply following a dogmatic belief as it is seen in case of terrorism in the name of religion. Names of

groups are just the signifiers in different dresses that point towards a common signified, that is certain "Criminal acts intended or calculated to provoke a state of terror in the general public, a group of persons or particular persons for political purposes are in any circumstance unjustifiable, whatever the considerations of a political, philosophical, ideological, racial, ethnic, religious or any other nature that may be invoked to justify them." (United Nations, 49/60). If creation is a process involving a huge inculcation and application of energy, Terrorism is also created out of force to put up its banner upholding its existence and the actions that follow show the struggling face of an existential crisis named Terrorism, a disorder that may not ever come to a definite end. The reasons, being many can be summed up into a single whole, i.e., establishment of a counter-narrative.

In this context two entities abruptly come to the mind: the concept and making of the dreaded ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) or *Daesh* and the fictional Gilead in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*.

There should be no doubt about the fact that the Republic of Gilead in *The Handmaid's Tale* and the dreaded "Caliphate" proposed by ISIL (as ISIS is otherwise known as) can both be taken as examples of dystopian vision where discourse between the constituting elements is measured by some typical yardsticks such as power, totalitarianism, change, nightmarish vision, oppositions and above all a constant conflict between fantasy and reality. The comparison seems quite like a fish out of water but anybody who has read the novel by Atwood should have found a striking similarity in Atwood's futuristic envisioning of the Republic of Gilead and Islamic State (originating as *Jama'at ai-Tawhid wal-Jihad in 1999*) declaring its chief goal as the establishment of the Caliphate at least since 2004. The caliphate, as the name suggests is an Islamic State ruled under a caliph. *The Handmaid's Tale* goes a bit further by adding the concepts of feminism and irony into it. The main purpose behind the comparison does not lie simply in the understanding of the two but in utilising a fiction to analyse and comprehend the reality. There is no doubt that the dreaded Islamic

State is not a fiction and it is no place where thousands of lives taken by them should be justified by fiction but the web of events which Offred, the narrator— and the Handmaid whose "tale" is reconstructed tell us vehemently of the way in which a dystopia in reality can be created as IS did when it constructed it unrecognized caliphate in many parts of Iraq and Syria like Mosul and Raqqa respectively. It is very important to note that Atwood, a Canadian writer sets the dystopian state of Gilead in America owing to the importance of Puritanism in American cultural norms which may have no ideological similarity with ISIS which, as it is well known to us fell out with al-Qaeda on the question of the establishment of the caliphate in the world. Osama bin Laden and his deputy Ayman al-Zawahari were in favour of building a popular Muslim support before the proposal of any such caliphate. The ISIS wanted to impose a caliphate regardless of what the masses thought. However, the point of dystopian vision toppling the utopian state can be found in both.

A comparative analysis of the strategies taken up by the Commanders in Gilead and the fighters of ISIS may give us some idea of the similar dystopian background that these two shares. Captured while trying to escape to Canada with her husband and daughter, Offred is a woman who has been transformed into a handmaid by the so-called new regime that is on a mission of creating a self-fashioned world out of its own and in this process uses the handmaids as merely "wombs" on two legs reproducing for the sake of power and social control. Thus, the very feminist side of the novel stand for something that is truly significant because it shows an act of perverting creation and using creators for the sake of fabricating a designed society. Other women of the kind of Offred in the novel are Ofwarren, Moira and Janine. All of them are made to go through an institutionalised sex of the monthly state-sanctioned Ceremony in which the handmaid is impregnated by the Commander. The ISIS has combined two of the most lethal yet mutually opposing ideas in Islam—the return of the Islamic empire and the end of the world. Thousands of people across their territories were enslaved, killed and tortured by them. Above all they have moved as stealthily as a tiger in forming strategies to subjugate

the world and thereafter locate their caliphate in it. In their doing this they made many women slaves to them, especially sex-slaves who were not only used for pleasure but as wombs for producing more of their kinds, that is to say children who would be lessened in the doctrine of terrorism just like the handmaids who were indoctrinated by the Marthas of the Republic of Gilead. It is interesting to note that the Islamic State called its mysterious leader the "commander of the faithful" (McCants) to encourage jihadists to consider him as the caliph. In the Republic of Gilead, the Commanders played an important part in deciding the identity of the handmaids, for example Offred was named after Fred, the commander and should be read as "Of-Fred" and the same goes for "Of-warren" and others. To disobey the commanders and to talk to men other than them was crime and there would be instant punishment. Thus, the freedom of creation was choked and regimentation was the order of the day.

The mention of the new caliphate will go incomplete without the stories that hover around the lives of victims of ISIS at places like Mosul (which was captured in early June, 2014), Raqqa (taken by IS in January 2014) and the Sinjar Province in Iraqi Kurdistan (captured by ISIS in August 2014). *The Guardian* published an article named "Slaves of Isis: the long walk of the Yazidi women" on Tuesday 25 July 2017 06.00 BST which tells a horrific tale of the lives of captured women and girls at ISIS. It tells the story of a 25-year-old girl Leila, who belongs to a family of Yazidi farmers and shepherds. The family also contributed physically to the "peshmerga", the group of Kurdish soldiers who fought IS later on. When Sinjar was seized Leila was also taken captive with her family.

"The Yazidi women in Sinjar didn't realise it yet, but the Isis fighters were carrying out a pre-planned mass abduction for the purpose of institutionalised rape. Initially they were looking for unmarried women and girls over eight." (Otten)

It was only much later that the matter of abduction came to the concern of the International community. Some victims who had escaped from

the concentration camps came to tell their story and the media flooded with them. There was limitless torture on married women and the unmarried girls were either sold or raped. "Leila posed as a mother to her small niece and nephew after she saw the other women being taken away, and correctly assumed that being unmarried was dangerous." (Otten). As was understood the women who were kept as slaves were punished for looking after their men before the caliphate was established; it is also reasoned that their genitals need to be purified and the children need to be inducted to the army as fighters for waging the holy war. There is no doubt when one infers that the children from these sex-slaves will be brought up as the exclusive "actors" (sociologically speaking) in the society created by Isis. This is quite similar to the play of power, war and regimentation in the Republic of Gilead where the Commanders use the handmaids to create new lives in the totalitarian society.

There are several instances in *The Handmaid's Tale* that find a direct resemblance with the way ISIS has been trying to establish their caliphate all over the world. The bodies of dissenters hanging on the wall in the Republic of Gilead can be compared to the regular beheadings of the dissenters by ISIS. The videos are available on the world of web. The voice of dissent is never heard in totalitarian societies and the suppressed remain the subaltern. The novel not only deals with a dystopian vision but it tries to dig into the minds of those who want to create a counter-narrative by inverting the heights so that there is an alteration of the potential difference. The "Historical Notes on the Handmaid's Tale" at the end of the novel tries to prove that fiction can take the shape of reality and the reel may change sides with the real. The mention of scholars dealing with the Republic of Gilead in 2195 somewhere gives us that chilling effect to think of such a republic. This noticing of future by Atwood in the novel is akin to the way terror has been visualised by the IS. The attacks on the twin towers in the USA on "9/11", the Attacks in Mumbai, India on "26/11" and the fusillade of attacks all over the world seem to be insignificant to what IS has thought of. Though major parts of Iraq and Syria have been released from the grip of the IS, the fear of IS reviving

cannot be left out. All the same, the revival of this institutionalised terrorism cannot be ruled out.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that the nations are too powerful to be completely erased by terrorist organisations like IS but the creation of perverted minds among people of the society may lead to changing the process of taking the doctrines of the main stream society or community. Then a crisis will be created, a maelstrom that sucks in whatever comes to its opening, a black hole that leads to some unknown land with fear as the only companion.

Laws are created almost every day to curb terrorism all over the world and countries are working together to quarantine this virus from the world but the simple concern of a simple man remains– “Can this dystopian vision be inverted completely in the age of institutionalised terrorism?”. The answer is subject to debate indeed.

Works Cited

1. Atwood, Margaret. *The Handmaid' s Tale*. Vintage, 1996.
2. Maini, D. S. *The Hindustan Times*. April 9, 1995.
3. McCants, William. “State of Confusion.” *Foreign Affairs*, September 10,2014, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/141976/william-mccants/state-of-confusion>.
4. Otten, Cathy. “Slaves of Isis: the long walk of the Yazidi women.” *The Guardian*, July 25, 2017, <https://syndication.theguardian.com/automation/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.theguardian.com%2Fworld%2F2017%2Fjul%2F25%2Fslaves-of-isis-the-long-walk-of-the-yazidi-women&type=article&internalpagecode=world/2017/jul/25/slaves-of-isis-the-long-walk-of-the-yazidi-women>.
5. Shakespeare, William, and Kenneth Muir. *Macbeth*. (Arden Shakespeare ed.). Routledge, 1988.
6. *The UN General Assembly Resolution*. Report No. 49/60, UN, 1994.

Works Consulted

1. Ahuja, Ram. *Social Problems in India*. 3rd ed., Rawat Publications, 2014.
2. Armstrong, Karen. *Islam: A Short History*. Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2001.
3. McCants, William. *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State*. Picador, 2016.