

The Search for Identity in Doris Lessing's *The Good Terrorist* and Abdallah Thabit's *The Twentieth Terrorist*

Bushra Juhi Jani

Nahrain University, Baghdad, Iraq,

E-mail: bushrajani@ced.naharinuniv.edu.iq, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8981-7003>

Abstract

This paper investigates the search for identity in two culturally diverse novels, Doris Lessing's *The Good Terrorist* (1985) and Abdallah Thabit's autobiographical novel *The Twentieth Terrorist* (2006). The paper examines how identity crisis makes Lessing's heroine, Alice, squat with a group of radicals in London and be drawn into their terrorist activities, and makes Zahi, the protagonist of Thabit's novel, accept being recruited by extremist religious group. However, the findings of this study prove the transformation of both Alice and Zahi. Alice is a different woman at the end of the novel and Zahi escapes from being the terrorist number 20 of the September 11th attack.

Keywords: search for identity, radicalization, terrorism, September 11th attacks.

Introduction:

The present paper is oriented towards identifying the relation between the quest for self-identity and violence, more precisely how losing one's identity amongst a group of others with extreme ideologies lead to terrorism. This theme is examined in two novels, *The Good Terrorist* (1985) by the British author Doris Lessing and *Al-Irhabi 20* or *The Twentieth Terrorist* (2006) by the Saudi Arabi novelist and poet Abdallah Thabit. The two novels are protagonised by characters coming from different cultures and living in different historical contexts, but they share similar feelings of being marginalised and dissatisfied with their lives. Alice Mellings, the "good terrorist" of the title of Lessing's novel, an unemployed Politics and Economics graduate in her mid-thirties, daughter of upper-middle-class parents in London, experiences childhood emotional neglect. Zahi Al-Jibali, the main character of Thabit's novel, a young educated Arab with a degree in Arabic Language and Literature likewise experiences childhood abuse, especially by his father. The paper focuses on the question of embracing a new identity, which makes Alice squat with a group of radicals in London and be drawn into their terrorist activities, and makes Zahi accept being recruited by extremists. At the end of both novels, the search for identity comes to an end, but not without backlashes, especially in Lessing's novel.

The Search for Identity

Studies on radicalization and extremism find the search for identity to stand at the fore of the radicalization and extremism process (Schwartz, 2009, p. 541). In *Psychology of terrorism* (2004), R. Borum observes that the "search for identity may draw him or her to extremist or terrorist organizations" (p. 25). Extremists have the ability to provide extremist-to-be with "a

distinctive identity” which misguides them towards terrorism and social instability (Schwartz, 2009, p. 541). It is then that membership in a terrorist group that “provides a sense of identity or belonging for those personalities whose underlying sense of identity is flawed” (Johnson and Feldman, 1992, p. 294). The problem of those with flawed or fragmented identity, who are attracted to terrorist groups, usually stems from their troubled families, as Jerrald M. Post (1984) illustrates. He states:

There is a tendency for marginal, isolated, and inadequate individuals from troubled family backgrounds to be attracted to the path of terrorism, so that for many, belonging to the terrorist group is the first time they truly belonged, and the group comes to represent family. (Post, 1984, p. 241)

This can explain how the terrorist groups become the new family of the terrorist-to-be, Alice and Zahi, who feel more at home with the groups. Alice, who is alienated from her separated parents, acts as if the squat, a derelict council house, is her home. She does all the cleaning, repairing, and renovating of the house. She even steals money and furniture from the houses of her parents to furnish her new home. Zahi, who is in bad terms with his strict father, leaves his family and finds a new home with the extremist religious group.

Search for Identity in The Good Terrorist

The Good Terrorist is about characters, who struggle with losing their identity because of either tense childhood experiences or troubled families. Alice’s disturbances, for instance, have their roots in a childhood which “she has never entirely outgrown,” as Margaret Scanlan pinpoints (1990, p. 189). Alice’s parents follow their own pleasures, especially her mother, Dorothy, with her “self-indulgent immersion in the swinging London scene,” which makes Alice, “the needy child unable to separate or grow up” (Yelin, 1998, p. 98). Her mother is used to organize extravagant parties, that “had gone on all through [Alice’s] childhood and adolescence” (Lessing, 2013, p. 228). These parties make Alice feel insignificant and outside the family. During these parties, Alice is occasionally forced out of her bedroom to let some guests sleep there. She sleeps on the floor next to her parents’ bed after these parties:

It was like sleeping in the same room as two creatures that were hardly human, so alien and secretly dangerous did they seem to Alice as a child, and then growing older, at eleven or twelve, and then older still, at fifteen or so. She changed, grew up, or at least grew older, but it seemed that they did not. Nothing changed. It was always the same ... (Lessing, 2013, p. 231)

The feelings of being insecure, abandoned and disconnected in her childhood do not prevent Alice from recalling these memories, which she transforms and alters to make them pleasant to her. She frequently allows herself “to slide back into her childhood” to dwell pleasurably on some scene or other that “she had smoothed and polished and painted over and over again with fresh colour” to live “in this dream, or story” as a way to relive and reshape her “bloody unhappy” childhood (Lessing, 2013, pp. 395, 130). In the novel’s last line, she is described “like a nine-year-old girl ... the poor baby,” who naïvely drifts into terrorism (Lessing, 2013, p. 397). She acknowledges that: “I am a terrorist, I don’t mind being killed” (Lessing, 2013, p. 393).

Alice’s fragmentation of the self is shown clearly in her rages, which are distinctly abnormal. For instance, when she is informed that her father refuses to guarantee her electricity bill, she

“exploded inwardly, teeth grinding, eyes bulging, fists held as if knives were in them. She stormed around the kitchen, like a big fly shut in a room on a hot afternoon, banging herself against walls, corners of table and stove, not knowing what she did, and making grunting, whining, snarling noises.”(Lessing, 2013, p. 150)

This “incipient madness, perhaps schizophrenia,” as Scanlan puts it, explicitly connects to her terrorist impulses: “hot red waves of murder beat inside her. I’ll blow that house of theirs up, she was thinking, I’ll kill them” (1990, p. 189; Lessing, 2013, p. 152). These rages show “the murderess in Alice” and express “the bitterness” she feels against her parents as well as those “fascists” including, “the bloody middle classes,” “the bourgeois,” and the state (Scanlan, 1990, p. 189; Lessing, 2013, pp. 339, 247, 163, 266).

Because she has never entirely outgrown her childhood experiences, Alice is easily exploited by the radical group of communists and revolutionary idealists, who are some lazy and unemployed young men and women, living on the government's social security benefit, though they are from upper or middle social class families. They are, as described by Scanlan, “distinctly pathological types,” who are pushed to the fringes of society mostly because of childhood abuse and the lack of love and harmony in their families (1990, p. 190). What really brings them together in this group is the search for a new identity. For instance, there is the suicidal lesbian Faye, “a battered baby,” who is haunted by a “ghastly childhood,” that makes her live, between fits of weeping and raging, on different anti-psychotic drugs (Lessing, 2013, p. 130) There is also Jasper Willis, Alice's homosexual companion, who is the son of a wealthy solicitor living in a Midlands town. His father went bankrupt when he was half way through his schooling at a grammar school. Jasper hates his father and he holds him responsible for the obstacles he has to face to complete his education. We are told in the novel that he was “full of hatred of his father, who had been stupid enough to go in for dubious investments” (Lessing, 2013, p. 30).

Jasper despises “his middle class voice;” he, therefore changes his accent so that “with working class comrades he could sound like them, and did, at emotional moments” (Lessing, 2013, p. 16, 31). Alice has a BBC voice that she changes occasionally, using her “meeting voice,” for example, when meeting a new comrade (Lessing, 2013, p. 14). However, like Jasper and Alice, their comrades are unhappy with their original identities and intend to adopt new ones through changing their accent or adapting what Alice calls, “a false voice” so that they might be seen as coming from a working class background (Lessing, 2013, p. 36).

Like Alice and Jasper, the other members of the group leave the warmth and comfort of living with their parents and seek to experience the suffering of living hard and face the danger of confronting what they believe the fascists represented by the city council officers, the police and ultimately the British conservative government of Margaret Thatcher.

Alice and all the members of her group look for self-recognition and self-realization, which are, as A. H. Almaas asserts, “the direct experience” of identity (2012, p. 96). They find in the media, especially the BBC, the way to achieve self-recognition and assertion of their new identity as terrorists, who are able to commit terrorist acts. Margaret Scanlan explains that they “have chosen action over the word depend on the media-the BBC” to give them “their speaking voices and to give voice to their actions” (Scanlan, 1990, p. 187). They consider their first act of terrorism as a failure because the media fails to recognize it:

“A paragraph in the local Advertiser! They felt it was a snub of them, another in a long series of belittlings of what they really were, of their real capacities, that had begun ... so long ago they could not remember. They were murderous with the need to impose themselves, prove their power.” (Lessing, 2013, p. 386)

This loss of recognition disturbs them and makes them “feel disoriented and lost”, to use Almaas terms (2012, p. 111). In order to achieve recognition and prove their new identity, they decide to do more damage in the next bombing. Their decision to escalate to the car bomb that kills five including Faye, is, as Margaret Scanlan explains, “explicitly a reaction to having received only one ‘little paragraph in the Guardian’” (2013, p. 335). The unspoken thought “in all their minds” is “we’ll show them” (Lessing, 2013, p. 335). It is what Sumit Mukerji describes as “the aspiration for status and respect” which “motivate[s] militant behavior” (2012, p. 27). To make sure that their achievement is recognized by “front page in all the papers tomorrow, and on the news tonight,” they decide to explode the next bomb during the day, when more people are around (Lessing, 2013, 371). Although, “they had messed it up” and the bomb is detonated prematurely, they achieve self-recognition, as Alice thinks, “after all, if publicity was the aim, then they had certainly achieved that!” (Lessing, 2013, 393).

Before their move to the council house, Alice and Jasper live in her mother’s house for a few years. Her mother notices the disturbing behaviour of Alice and tries to help her by providing her and her boyfriend a room in her house, but Alice is more interested in gaining a new identity and starting a new life with the squatters. The “good girl Alice” has to save the house that they are squatting in from being demolished by the council (Lessing, 2013, p. 49). She does her best to make the house habitable again. In fact, the title of the novel, “The Good Terrorist,” is oxymoric, as Robert Boschman notes, to reflect the contradictory sides of Alice’s personality which wavers between good and terrorist at the same time (1994, p. 16). Her contradictory nature of good and bad is stressed in the novel when she is praised ironically as “good girl Alice” after she flung skillfully a “stone as hard as she could at the glass of the bedroom window” of her father’s house (Lessing, 2013, p. 140). This contradiction is even applied to the act of terror itself; after the bomb has exploded and killed five people, she pities those who do not understand the necessity for the outrage:

“Alice sat with tears in her eyes, thinking, poor things, poor things, they simply don't understand! - as if she had her arms around all the poor silly ordinary people in the world.” (Lessing, 2013, p. 393)

Alice tries to defend the use of violence, which shows that she is, as Virginia Scot remarks, “neurotic in her world view though she is quite convinced of its validity” (1989, p. 25).

In the end of the novel, Alice refuses to leave the squat and go with the others including Jasper. She refuses being exploited by Jasper, who “had become dependent on her” for “fifteen years” (Lessing, 2013, pp. 17, 16). She has become, as Lalbakhsh and Yahya point out, a “New Woman” because of her new awareness of the abuse and “whose independent unbound identity stands much higher than the ... oppression and masculine obstinacy that had imprisoned her for so long” (2012, p. 54).

Alice and most of the members of her group are suffering from the after effects of traumatic childhood which make them lose the sense of their identity. Alice has never entirely outgrown her unhappy childhood. She remains emotionally immature, wavering between good

and bad, raging madly and violently, clinging to an abusive and oppressive companion for a long time and above all getting involved in a terrorist attack. By the end of the novel, we sense some kind of maturation when Alice refuses being exploited and acknowledges her new identity as a terrorist.

Search for Identity in *The Twentieth Terrorist*

Abdallah Thabit's autobiographical novel chronicles his own search for identity when he was very young. The author joined extremists led by a loosely knit group of public school teachers, who recruited him when he was in the ninth grade. Morgan Spurlock, observes in *Where in the World is Osama bin Laden?*, that Thabit's novel is "somewhat fictionalized account of how he was recruited at age fifteen" (2008, p. 197). In an interview with *The Washington Post* journal in 2006, Thabit acknowledges that "people, especially the young, are always looking for an identity – they need a sense of who they are," therefore they are drawn into terrorism. He states,

"if your parents or your community or your country don't provide you with [an identity], you will look for it elsewhere. And these groups provide you with one." (2006)

However, after a few years, Thabit broke away from the group,

"but another guy from his town, Ahmed Alnami, ended up being one of the fifteen Saudi hijackers on September 11." (Spurlock, 2008, p. 197)

In the interview with the *Post*, Thabit states that he was terrified that he "could easily have been in Alnami's place" (2006). He adds,

"I felt like someone who'd gotten off a boat just in time and then watched it capsize with him and others onboard." (2006)

Thabit tells his interviewer, "I love Nami, but I hate what he did," and that what inspired him to write the novel (2006). The novel starts with these lines:

"I have tried not to categorize this book. My purpose in it is for you to know Zahi al-Jabali, who surely might have completed the team of 19 killers in America that September day. He was the twentieth terrorist." (Thabit, 2006, p. 1)¹

Like the novel's real life author, Zahi is writing his own memoirs, which opens with words that show his search for identity: "Who am I? How did I become me? What do I want? Where do I stand? Where am I heading?" (Thabit, 2006, p. 1).

Zahi is the last born of a family of nine siblings. His family is not particularly privileged, but there is enough to have a decent home and a TV set, which at the time set the family apart from their neighbours. Zahi blames his parents, especially his father, for taking strict measures against him during his childhood that lead him to be recruited by extremists in his teenage years. Mashhoor Abdu Al-Moghales et al. explain that

¹This passage is taken from an excerpt from the novel, the first edition of 2006, translated from the Arabic by Peter Theroux. 2012. *International Writing Program Archive of Residents' Work IWP*. The University of Iowa. https://ir.uiowa.edu/iwp_archive/391.

“misery, deprivation and strict upbringing will certainly have its negative influence on Zahi which have forced him to search for another escape at an early age and make him ripe for recruitment.” (2018, p. 371)

Like Alice and the members of her group, Zahi feels neglected by his parents. He looks for an escape from his family for the lack of love and happiness and moves from his warm and large house to live hard in the extremists’ camp.

In his childhood, Zahi has to look after livestock while other children in his neighbourhood play in their free time. He shares a bedroom with his two elder brothers who are annoyed by his presence for intruding their privacy. His mother treats him badly because he wets his bed. She complains to his father about her agony cleaning blankets spoiled by. He develops ill feelings towards his father in particular because he has always neglected him and rejected his requests. Zahi, in retrospect, confesses that he is lost, expressing his desire to escape from the “hell of his family” and rebel against his father (Thabit, 2011, 69-70).²

After his recruitment by his schoolteachers, Zahi leaves home to live with other members of the extremist religious group in a depot which reminds us of Alice’s squat. The religious group offers Zahi worldly rewards such as money, education and jobs to seduce him to commit barbaric physical violence. Similarly, Alice is offered money for using the house as a conduit for propaganda material and guns to be used against her state. Alice accepts the money, but rejects the deal, showing her contradictory nature, while Zahi is happy to enjoy his group’s offer. He says, “they gave me everything I desired: books, travels, prayers, all the things I couldn't have while living with my family” (Thabit, 2011, p. 220). He becomes loyal to the group and is ready to do anything they ask him to do. Thus, the fanatical religious group succeeds in making Zahi conform to their radical ideology. By conforming to the ideologies of others, Zahi has lost his individual identity in the collective identity of the extreme religious group. Abdu Al-Moghales et al. explain that “Zahi’s question of his identity is crucial to his drive for an extreme religious group and his interaction with the community afterwards” (2018, p. 370).

Zahi takes on the habits of the group, mimicking their affectations by donning a shin-length garment and growing a bushy beard. He attends the group’s conferences, seminars, summer camps. He listens to preachers who speak of hell and death. As a member, he has to practice certain rituals, such as going in a car to a cemetery in the middle of a cold night in order to lie in an open grave while listening to a preacher’s sermon played in the car, talking about death, punishments in the grave and hell (Thabit, 2011, pp. 82-83).

He comes to despise his family members, considering them as sinners and infidels. He takes strict measures against them, wanting them to take the TV set out because his new ideology considers it as a devil that invades the Islamic ethics. He also wants his family to remove the photographs in the household and to banish music, though he knows well that his family and all villagers in his area are “infatuated with musical entertainment and love singing and dancing” (Thabit, 2006, p. 3). Zahi tells his father that he is “cheating the family and thus robbing it of its share in *Jannah* (paradise)” (Thabet, 2011, p. 85).

As he progresses, Zahi feels he cannot be a rooted extremist. It is his enrolment in university to study Arabic literature that helps rescue him. His deep love for music and poetry

²I provide my own translation of quotes from Abdallah Thabit’s 2011 Arabic text.

begins to wake up inside him. He becomes more tolerant, discarding extreme views and breaking the restrictions imposed on him by the group. He refuses to join a training camp in Afghanistan. He averts the fundamentalist thought and bigotry, especially after September 11, 2001 attack on the Twin Towers when he discovers that 19 members of his previous extreme religious group, including a young fellow resident of his city, who goes to Afghanistan, has been deeply involved in the preparation for the attack. He has spotted the troubles early or else he would have been the terrorist number 20.

Towards the end of the novel, Zahi feels that he "no longer need(s) another identity" because, as he says, "I finally understand my identity" (Thabit, 2011, p. 239). It is his early love of music and poetry that enables him to regain his identity and his control over life. Through Zahi, Thabit tries to deliver his message to young people, as he says in his journal interview, to

"live, love, listen to music, enjoy art. When you go through what I've been through, you realize you were kidnapped, and you have to learn to live and taste and feel, all over again." (Ambah, 2006)

Like Thabit, Zahi escapes his kidnappers, learns to live freely away from extremism and terrorism and regains his identity.

Conclusion

As the analyses of Doris Lessing's *The Good Terrorist* and Abdallah Thabit's *The Twentieth Terrorist* have shown that the search for identity and for a sense of belonging by the protagonists of these two novels is quite similar, but ends differently: the identity crisis, caused by childhood abuse and neglect, makes both Alice and Zahi vulnerable to being drawn into radicalization and extremism. Alice is drawn away from her troubled parents and is unable to repair the damage caused by her. She has also gone along with the car bombing conducted by her group while feeling it was not right. Although she becomes a new woman when she finds her identity and her sense of belonging in the end of the novel, she acknowledges that she is a terrorist. Zahi, on the other hand, is encouraged by the terrorist group to treat his family members as infidels and sinners – an influence Zahi does not ignore – but after realizing that he does not need to search for a new identity any more after finding a sense of belonging in his love for art and poetry, he returns back to his family, leading a normal life as a schoolteacher and a poet. Unlike Alice, Zahi manages to repair the damage and avoid being killed with the other nineteen terrorists of September 11. It is love and art that have the healing power of ending the search for identity and the risk of terrorist recruitment.

References

- Abdallah Thabit (2006). *The 20th Terrorist*, an extract in English, translated from Arabic by Peter Theroux. https://iwp.uiowa.edu/sites/iwp/files/Tabith_%20Sample.pdf.
- Abdallah Thabit (2011³). *Al-Irhabi 20* (The Twentieth Terrorist). Dar Al-Saqi.
- Abdu Al-Moghales, Mashhoor, et al. (2018). Saudi Novelists' Response to Terrorism through Fiction', *Trames*, 2018, 22(72/67), 4, 365–388.
-

- Almaas, A. H. (2012). *The Point of Existence: Transformations of Narcissism in Self-Realization*. Shambhala Publications.
- Ambah, Faiza Saleh. (2006, July 24). "The Would-Be Terrorist's Explosive Tell-All Tale". *The Washington Post*. <http://www.rayaagency.org/2010/09/interview-with-abdullah-thabit-in-washington-post/>
- Boschman, Robert. (1994, July). Excrement and 'Kitsch' in Lessing's 'The Good Terrorist'. *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature*. 25:3, 7-26.
<https://journalhosting.ucalgary.ca/index.php/ariel/article/view/31285/25367>
- Borum, R. (2004). *Psychology of terrorism*. University of South Florida.
- Johnson, P. W., & Feldmann, T. B. (1992). Personality types and terrorism: Self-psychology perspectives. *Forensic Reports*, 5(4), 293-303.
- Knapp, Mona (1986). *The Good Terrorist* by Doris Lessing. *World Literature Today*. University of Oklahoma. 60 (3): 470-471. <http://doi:10.2307/40142299>.
- Lalbaksh, Pedram and Yahya, Wan Roselezam Wan. (2012, July). Politics of Feminine Abuse: Political Oppression and Masculine Obstinacy in Doris Lessing's *The Good Terrorist*. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics & English Literature*. Vol. 1 No. 3, 54-57.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.7575/ijalel.v.1n.3p.54>
- Lessing, Doris. (2013). *The Good Terrorist*. Harper Collins Publishers.
- Mukerji. Sumit. 2012. Rendezvous with Militants. <https://doi:10.7763/IPEDR>.
- Post, Jerrold M. (1984). Notes on a psychodynamic theory of terrorist behavior, *Terrorism*, 7:2, 241-256, <https://doi:10.1080/10576108408435577>
- Scanlan, Margaret. (1990). Language and the Politics of Despair in Doris Lessing's "The Good Terrorist". *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*. Vol. 23, No. 2:182-198. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1345737>
- Schwartz, Seth J. (2009) 'Terrorism: An Identity Theory Perspective'. *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*. 32(6):537-559. <https://doi:10.1080/10576100902888453>
- Scot, Virginia. (1989). Doris Lessing's Modern Alice in Wonderland: The Good Terrorist as Fantasy. *The International Fiction Review* 16,2.
<https://journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/IFR/article/download/13995/15077/18703>.
- Spurlock, Morgan. (2008). *Where in the World is Osama bin Laden?*. Random House.
- Yelin, Louise (1998). *From the Margins of Empire: Christina Stead, Doris Lessing, Nadine Gordimer*. Cornell University Press.

Bushra Juhi Jani is a lecturer in contemporary English novel at Nahrain University in Baghdad, Iraq. She received her PhD degree in English Literature from the University of Sheffield in 2018. She wrote her thesis on violence in Margaret Drabble's novel and four selected Iraqi novels. Her research interest lies in the area of English and Iraqi novels as well as Movie Studies. She is also interested in translating into English of Iraqi stories and novels. She co-authored the translation of an anthology of Iraqi short stories, which comprised ten Iraqi storytellers, published by Lincom Academic Publisher in Germany 2019.
