

# Terrorism in Literature



# Terrorism in Literature:

*Examining a Global  
Phenomenon*

Edited by

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With a Foreword by Tabish Khair

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Terrorism in Literature: Examining a Global Phenomenon

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To all victims of terrorism, extremism and obscurantism,

May literature undo the curse...



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Chapter VII was included in a PhD dissertation entitled “Trustees of Defiance: Death, Resurrection and Sacred Imperative in African American Literature” (Emory University, 2018).

## FOREWORD

# WHY LITERATURE IS THE ANSWER TO EXTREMISM

TABISH KHAIR

The saddest thing about the world today is not that the most powerful person on earth neither reads nor actually shows any evidence of having read the one obvious book (*The Bible*) that he manages to name as his “favourite.” Far sadder is the fact that highly intelligent writers and scholars often seem to be unable to champion literature except as an opiate (which removes the reader, in hope or hopelessness, to another world), as an aesthetic (which provides us with something “beautiful” to fight for), or as an alternative morality.

Alternative morals do not work. You can read Islam as a religion of peace, explain away the crusades of Christianity, underline that the USA is a nation of immigrants, etc. It makes no difference. Some Muslims and Christians will fashion their beliefs into weapons; some Americans will deny space to immigrants and refugees. Not only will they refuse to read anything other than their own ‘sacred’ texts, they will also shrug off the opposite morals that you draw from those very sacred texts. You cannot convince people by offering them alternative answers, readings they disagree with.

This is what brings us to the core of literature. Literature does not provide alternative answers. Literature teaches a certain process of reading, which enables a certain mode of thinking and contemplation. It is this that is the necessary defence of literature.

Literature has always been an instrument for thinking. This was true of oral literature too, from what one can find in those once-oral texts, which have seeped into writing. Australian aboriginal song-cycles are not just repositories of knowledge; they are also an examination of problems and issues. Think of Homer’s epics or the Indian *Mahabharatha*. Think of

*Beowulf*, which can be read as an examination of the nature of kingship or of early human interventions in nature, among other things.

Writing made literature even more an instrument of thinking. By enabling the transmission of literary texts across space and time, writing came to demand a different kind of contemplation from the reader. As the Korean-German philosopher, Byung-Chul Han points out, contemplation or deep attention defines human activities. Not multitasking. Animals have always multitasked in a largely hostile environment: a deer feeds, runs, takes care of its fawn and keeps a look-out for predators, all at the same time. The capacity to pay deep attention to one matter, to contemplate, is the distinctive attribute of human animals, Han notes.

Written literature demands a highly complex and focused kind of contemplation. When we read literature, we engage through abstract writing with a very concrete world, a world that exists elsewhere (or nowhere) but also needs to exist for us at the moment of reading. The contemplation that literature demands always involves engaging with others, for it is not just a text written by someone else but also contains other selves (characters, voices, etc.). At the same time, the process of reading forces us to engage with ourselves too. Fiction, for instance, creates a very fine distinction between truth and falsehood, which is not based on a simplified theory of facts or lies. One can add to the list. However, I think even this little is sufficient to highlight the deeply complex kind of contemplation demanded by a work of literature.

It is exactly this kind of contemplation that is the antidote to fundamentalisms. Fundamentalists do not just ban texts that fail to fit their world-views; they also reduce the texts they privilege to singular interpretations. They offer one answer, one moral. That is why alternative morals and answers do not work on them. It becomes a choice between what one believes and what someone else believes, but the ability to engage with the other has already been heavily mutated by the reductive reading of fundamentalism. The antidote is not another moral, but a process of reading. It is this process of reading that literature demands – or demanded until recently.

For instance, it is not sufficient to tell the Christian fundamentalist that the *Book of Job* is not about blind faith in God. One has to enable the person to read *Job* in all its complexity – and realise that it asks more questions than it answers. This can probably be done with all kinds of texts – including scientific ones, such as those of Darwinism, and political ones, such as those

by Karl Marx. But literature, by definition, was a highly complex form of such an engagement with our world.

Literature is not good or bad writing; it is writing that presses against the current limits of language. When Joseph Conrad's narrator keeps referring to Africans as "cannibals" in *Heart of Darkness*, but then wonders about the fact that they do not attack and eat him despite starving and having the opportunity, Conrad is consciously or unconsciously pushing against the limit of a historical discourse: the 19th century European tendency to identify Africans with cannibalism. These limits might be historical, political, linguistic, social, gender-related, etc. Mark Twain, for instance, pushed against the limits of established language by inducting 'dialect,' as did many Caribbean or Black British poets. The limits might even be ontological: an engagement with the fact that the language of the self can never fully express or 'know' the other, and yet language is our most powerful means to relate to others, to 'know.'

There is a great need to promote literature as that collection of texts which encourages such a process of reading. Extremism – of which is spawned terrorism – allows only singular readings; literature, if it is really literature, always calls for complex readings. Extremism gives easy answers; literature makes us ask difficult questions. We need literature today, more than ever before. We need it not because it is pleasing, relaxing, inspiring, beautiful, ethical, etc.; we need it because it is our deepest instrument of thinking and it trains us to engage in *the* process of contemplation which made and makes us human. We need it because it connects us to the Other without reducing his/her difference.

Hence, an anthology like this one is absolutely necessary in times when terrorism usurps all the space for thought, contemplation, and a fruitful encounter with the Other. Its editor and contributors help open that little space for deep thought and contemplation, which is our only real hope.



## INTRODUCTION

# TERRORISM IN LITERATURE: EXAMINING A GLOBAL PHENOMENON

BOOTHEINA MAJOUL

The coils of a serpent are even more complex than the burrows of a molehill.

—Gilles Deleuze

If the humanities has a future as cultural criticism, and cultural criticism has a task at the present moment, it is no doubt to return us to the human where we do not expect to find it, in its frailty and at the limits of its capacity to make sense. We would have to interrogate the emergence and vanishing of the human at the limits of what we can know, what we can hear, what we can see, what we can sense. This might prompt us, affectively, to reinvigorate the intellectual projects of critique, of questioning, of coming to understand the difficulties and demands of cultural translation and dissent, and to create a sense of the public in which oppositional voices are not feared, degraded or dismissed, but valued for the instigation to a sensate democracy they occasionally perform.

—Butler, 151

In a world where nothing is certain, in which transcendental belief has been determined by scientific materialism, and even the objectivity of science is qualified by relativity and uncertainty, the single human voice, telling its own story, can seem the only authentic way of rendering consciousness.

—Lodge, 87

This volume celebrates literature as a subversive tool and as an alternative for change. In her article “Truth and Politics” Hannah Arendt emphasizes the important role of scholars in telling the truth, as generally their motives are innocent and there should be no political agenda in their texts. They indeed try to fully explore the world via words and attempt to objectively portray facts. Arendt explains:

Outstanding among the existential modes of truth-telling are the solitude of the philosopher, the isolation of the scientist and the artist, the impartiality of the historian and the judge, and the independence of the fact-finder, the witness, and the reporter... These modes of being alone differ in many respects, but they have in common that as long as any one of them lasts, no political commitment, no adherence to a cause, is possible. (16)

She indeed calls this “the non-political and, potentially, even anti-political nature of truth – *Fiat veritas, et pereat mundus*” (Arendt, 17). She also highlights the difficulty of such a task. Writing about the world and penetrating the dangerous geographies of dissent and truth-telling runs the risk of rejection and exclusion. Arendt insists on the difficulty of the mission; she contends: “Throughout history, the truth-seekers and truth-tellers have been aware of the risks of their business” (Arendt, 1). In fact, many writers, intellectuals and scholars in general suffered from their daring to unveil truths; they were persecuted, ignored, attacked, refused, and even jailed because they once told a truth, which offended, bothered or dismantled the status quo. Arendt explains:

Since philosophical truth concerns man in his singularity, it is unpolitical by nature. If the philosopher nevertheless wishes his truth to prevail over the opinions of the multitude, he will suffer defeat, and he is likely to conclude from this defeat that truth is impotent – a truism that is just as meaningful as if the mathematician, unable to square the circle, should deplore the fact that a circle is not a square. (11)

One of the most offensive topics in literature is terrorism because it generally leads to questioning and debating fundamentalism and secularism. This project aims at exploring terrorism in literary works away from any political agenda. It aims at silencing the voices of evil rather than giving voice to guilty victims or shedding light on those who try to legitimize their crimes. I do believe in the power of literature; it indeed plays an important role in re-righting history and changing the trajectory of readers. In fact, both writers and readers could be instruments of change. Arendt asserts: “The political function of the storyteller – historian or novelist – is to teach acceptance of things as they are” (Arendt, 18). “Things as they are” is the main objective of this volume; it indeed aims to unveil through a thorough analysis of published works of fiction the truth behind this global phenomenon, as every text entails the writer’s own investigation of the issue inside another writer’s text.

This volume presents papers from different corners of the world: Algeria, America, Argentina, Australia, Cameroon, Denmark, India, Italy, Tunisia,



and Turkey. One of the most important literary figures dealing with terrorism in his novels is the internationally acclaimed Indian writer Tabish Khair, who generously agreed to write a foreword to this volume, “Why Literature is the Answer to Extremism”. He sheds light on the possibilities offered by literature as a means of dissent and as a powerful tool of truth telling that can counterattack media propaganda and social media’s manipulative discourse.

The volume is divided into five parts: “Terrorism in Tabish Khair’s Novels”, “Terrorism in the Era of Political ‘Truthiness’”, “Examining Terrorism in American Novels”, “Women and Terrorism”, and “On Fighting Terrorism Otherwise”.

“Terrorism in Tabish Khair’s Novels” includes two articles analysing selected works by the Indian novelist Tabish Khair. In “Manipulating the Truth: the Role of Mass and Social Media in Tabish Khair’s *How to Fight Islamist Terror from the Missionary Position* and *Just Another Jihadi Jane*”, Dr. Elisabetta Marino explores the way Tabish Khair -together with his readers- tackles the mechanisms and implications of post-truth (and how he tries to deflate its power, using the weapons of irony and role switching) by focusing on his two latest novels, *How to Fight Islamic Terrorism from the Missionary Position* (2012) and *Just Another Jihadi Jane* (2016), where the problems of immigration, marginality, fundamentalism, and terrorism, as well as their representations, are central.

And Daniele Valentini’s “Tabish Khair’s *Just Another Jihadi Jane: An Inside Look at Foreign Fighting*” analyses the figure of the foreign fighter through the novel *Just another Jihadi Jane*, which touches the linchpins of today’s ISIS phenomenon: faith, displaced identities, discrimination, peer pressure and media coverage make up the explosive cocktail which leads two women to extremism. He focuses on Tabish Khair’s portrayal of a fighter’s compelling psychological image. Valentini examines how terrorism is presented in literature and sheds light on how it affects people; he attempts to include the toolbox of literary studies within the framing of an effective counter-narrative to tackle an elusive figure – the foreign fighter – that may pose a threat for years to come.

The second part is entitled “Terrorism in the Era of Political ‘Truthiness’”. The first article in this part is “Rushdie’s *Two Years Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Nights*: On (In) Coherence & Terror in the Era of Truthiness” in which I examine Salman Rushdie’s story *Two Years Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Nights*. The novel probes an age of colossal

fragmentation of reality. It opposes the magic of Jinnis to the reality of terror of our times. It is a surreal novel, one more dystopian fiction on the absurdity of our times. The paper analyses Rushdie's political fiction *Two Years Eight Months and Twenty- Eight Nights* that imagines a War of the Worlds between the visible universe of the humans and the invisible realm of the Jinnis, which incarnates what Slavoj Zizek calls "the gap between humanity and its own inhuman excess" (5). The study focuses on the philosophical debate between the philosopher Ibn Rushd and the Sufi scholar Al Ghazali, and examines how the novelist uses the battle of the books: Al Ghazali's *The Incoherence of the Philosophers* and Ibn Rushd's *The Incoherence of the Incoherence* to rethink and deconstruct history, mythology, theology, philosophy and political truthiness. It also aims to show how Rushdie's satire blurs the boundaries between the magic and the real, and provides the readers with an allegory about humanity's struggle between coherence and incoherence in an age of terror and political truthiness, a post-truth era.

The second article "But you live in Kashmir: Government induced Terrorism?" in Malik Sajad's *Munnu: A Boy From Kashmir*, researchers Saptarni Sadhu and Ritwik Balo comment on Malik Sajad's usage of visual metaphor to depict violence, seen through a Kantian lens, understood to be a 'phenomena' and not merely an 'event'. They attempt to explore how terrorism can result in the elicitation of metaphors that can be categorized as utterances, which are containers of what Morse Peckham has called: "negative romanticism".

The third article in this second part is Dr. Korstanje Maximiliano's "The Fictional Borders of Terrorism: Interrogating the Role of Witnessing in Modern Literature". It discusses terrorism in the post-9/11 context. Maximiliano probes the world's tendency to commoditize the attack as a form of entertainment in video games, films, and novels, and at the same time to shed light on its effects through the media and written texts. He focuses on how media tends to consume others' suffering and how literature offers a fertile ground not only to infer the expectations, cultural values and beliefs of lay people respecting terrorism but also to understand how ideology works. He analyses the novel *La Lenta Agonia de Los Peces* by the Peruvian novelist Eric Frattini, which centers on Havana Sinclair, one of the best spies in British Intelligence. He shows how the writer blurs the boundaries between fiction and reality to denounce what the Australian sociologist Luke Howie dubbed "witnessing", i.e. consuming terrorism through media. Terrorism becomes just one aspect of life. Isn't that what Arendt calls "the banality of evil"?

Part three is entitled “Examining Terrorism in American Novels”; it includes four chapters analysing the works of DeLillo, Baldwin, Burroughs and Updike. Dashiell Moore’s article “What Happens in Small Rooms: DeLillo and the Terrorist Spectre” shows how realist fiction can elucidate the zeitgeist, help the nation ‘work through’ traumatic events, enable North Americans to regain their bearings and re-orientate the national narrative. He explains how North American post-traumatic literature faces popular understandings of ‘unassimilated’ and ‘uncontrollable’ trauma.

In “To Be Thinking About a Thing Like That Black Bodies as Sites of Terror and Resurrection in James Baldwin’s *Going to Meet the Man*”, Dr. Jimmy Worthy II argues that James Baldwin’s short story interprets Black bodies as sites of terrorism and exposes the psychological instability of practitioners of racial terror. He interrogates the ways in which Jesse, Baldwin’s protagonist, confronts not only his emaciated identity as White, masculine authority, but also his memories of Black subjection and mutilation as the path to restoring such authority. The essay shows that Jesse’s entrenched racist beliefs blind him to his own depravity, rendering him a victim of terrorism.

In “The Politics of Sexual Horror in *Naked Lunch*”, the Tunisian researcher Mongia Besbes analyses William S. Burroughs’s novel *Naked Lunch*. The novel is a surreal depiction of a dark world, springing from a junkie’s mind as it materializes his worst fears and most devious desires. The world of carnivorous centipedes, flesh-craving mugwumps and the murderous Benway intertwines sexuality and death with terror as a sexual horror. Besbes shows how the premise of horror lies in representing what is ontologically frightening and unspeakable; horror is omnipresent in gothic fiction, where the depicted atmosphere is everything but enchanting.

And in “Global Trends and Shifting Paradigms: Towards Asymmetric Warfare in John Updike’s *Terrorist*”, Dr. Yvonne Iden Ngwa analyses John Updike’s *Terrorist* and (unlike the bulk of existing critique on American war narratives that focus on the accuracy with which war veterans present war experiences) focuses on Updike’s representation of the unconventionality of asymmetric warfare and concomitant security measures in a changing global context.

The fourth part is about “Women and Terrorism”. In “Effects of Terrorism on Autobiographies: Muslim Women Autobiographies Before and After 11 September 2001”, Dr. Berivan Saltik analyses the effects of the

September 11 terrorist attacks on autobiographical narratives of Muslim women. She focuses on how the event has impacted the telling of the life stories of Muslim women. She also provides a background for the analysis of traditional autobiographies of Muslim women and examines Leila Ahmed's *A Border Passage from Cairo to America – A Woman's Journey* (1999), as a literary example of pre-September 11 Muslim women's autobiographies. Then, she focuses on the effects of September 11 on Muslim women's autobiographies and analyses Souad's *Burned Alive* (2003) as a literary example of the post-September 11 periods.

And in "Female Jihadism and the Spectacle of Violence/Terrorism in Jalila Baccar's *Khamsoun*", the Tunisian researcher Dr. Hanen Baroumi uses Fanon's perspective to analyse the violence used by some female jihadists and terrorists, as a re-created feminism disguised Islamic feminism or women's resistance. She reads this female as "recreated violence" as a counter-violence used to propagate the idea of revolt and agency. Through an analysis of specific examples of the violent roles of female jihadists in contemporary Tunisian literary texts, particularly in the work of Jalila Baccar, this paper attempts to mark the boundary between female extremists and female victims of extremism by focusing on the consequences of creating and embracing violent identities. The major protagonists embrace a radical religious understanding of resistance as they display the rising extremist ideology of Islamism. The play enters into a dialogue with Western and Arab politics and unveils the lost hopes of Arabs in the aftermath of historical events. It is important to forge a new interactive space of reflection on the question of terrorism, women's violence and a number of areas including social change, political action, and gender issues, mainly in light of the on-going aftermath of the Arab Spring. The study of female jihadism and women terrorists, as a growing phenomenon, requires new theoretical frames for this gender shift, as women's increasing participation in apocalyptic violence seems to mark a socio-political shift in their attitudes toward the 'myths' of secular nationalism, political change, and gender roles. This paper aims to explore the links between gender studies, Islamist ideologies, and terrorist studies.

The last part is entitled "On Fighting Terrorism Otherwise". The first article "Poetry as Justice in the Fight Against Terror" by Dr. Nouredine Fekir discusses the important role that poetry can play in fighting terror: poetry as a genre should/could be the voice of freedom and liberation but also a tool to prevent terrorism and its many hidden forms: neocolonialism, imperialism and all forms of state manipulation and all kinds of injustice.

The second article is “Fighting Terror in Arab American Narratives: Naomi Shehab Nye’s *An Open Letter to Any Would be Terrorists*” by Dr. Dalel Sarnou. She sheds light on the situation of many Arab Americans who felt excluded from mosaic nationhood in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. She focuses on Arab American writers who reacted to this exclusion by producing narratives which seek to relocate this minority group within the larger mainstream society with an attempt to re-translate their traditions, religion, and geopolitical identity to the so-called ‘Arab world’. Dr. Sarnou analyses Naomi Shehab’s *Open Letter* and examines how the Arab American writer expresses her inner consciousness as an Arab and an American within the Arab community and the wider mainstream community through the power of words, to remind both sides of the simple truth and to humanize and connect the two. The paper explores Nye’s consciousness as an Arab American to rebuild bridges of dialogue and to fight universal terrorism unconnected to religion.

And the third paper is “‘Imaginary Homelands’: Fighting Terror, Writing in Exile” by Dr. Argha Banerjee. He explores the writings of some authors of South Asian origin who themselves have been victims of terror and were forced into exile. The texts are: the works of Taslima Nasreen, the writings of bloggers from Bangladesh, the Pakistani Malala Yousafzai’s novel *I am Malala*, the Tibetan spiritual leader Dalai Lama XIV’s autobiographical work *Freedom in Exile* and *The Art of Happiness in a Troubled World*, the British Indian novelist Salman Rushdie’s *Shalimar the Clown* and *Imaginary Homelands*, and works of fiction and memoirs by Kashmiri Pandits in exile. Dr. Argha Banerjee focuses on how these writers negotiate the ideologies of terror that caused their subsequent displacement and exile.

Scholars from all over the world have contributed to this volume. As readers themselves, they share an eagerness to understand the psychopathological personalities circulating among us, what Doris Lessing calls “the invisible poison, which spreads everywhere” (*Prisons We Chose to Live Inside*, 61). They thus attempt to compel their readers to dig deep into literature, to think, to cogitate and to learn; they are aware of the important mission of the intellectual in our society. Edward Said asserts that the vocation of the intellectual consists of “maintaining a state of constant alertness, of a perpetual willingness not to let half-truths or received ideas steer one along” (23).

Let us spare a thought to all victims of terrorism all over the world.

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## PART I

# TERRORISM IN TABISH KHAIR'S NOVELS

We need literature today, more than ever before. We need it not because it is pleasing, relaxing, inspiring, beautiful, ethical, etc.; we need it because it is our deepest instrument of thinking and it trains us to engage in *the* process of contemplation which made and makes us human. We need it because it connects us to the *Other* without reducing his/her difference.

—Tabish Khair

CHAPTER I

MANIPULATING THE TRUTH:  
THE ROLE OF MASS AND SOCIAL MEDIA  
IN TABISH KHAIR'S *HOW TO FIGHT ISLAMIST  
TERROR FROM THE MISSIONARY POSITION*  
AND *JUST ANOTHER JIHADI JANE*

ELISABETTA MARINO

In 2016, the Oxford Dictionary nominated “post-truth” as its international word of the year, defining it as an adjective that “relat[es] or denot[es] circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief”<sup>1</sup>. In a post-truth world, dependable and impartial evidence is no longer relevant: people are entitled to select their own version of reality, based on perceptions, opinions, and deeply ingrained biases and stereotypes. Furthermore, as Stephan Lewandowsky, Ullrich Ecker, and John Cook have elucidated, this tendency can be further “amplified by leaders who model deception and delusion as adequate means to garner support” (361). Since truth seemingly lies in the eyes of the beholder, whatever challenges one’s worldview is often utterly rejected as false, while the correction of misinformation frequently proves ineffective, even ironically resulting in the strengthening of previously-held beliefs.

Social media has played a pivotal role in an era characterized by fake news and alternative facts. Facebook’s algorithms, for instance, filter and sequence the posts users see on their screens, according to the history of their likes and clicks; in Michael Gross’s words, “this creates the famous filter bubble effect, meaning that everybody is selectively fed opinions that they are likely to agree with and news they want to see” (2). Moreover, a large mass of contrasting information is available to anyone surfing the

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.oxforddictionaries.com/press/news/2016/12/11/WOTY-16>

Internet; as most people lack the necessary skills to distinguish between reliable and unreliable sources, news matching one's beliefs is generally regarded as more trustworthy and, therefore, accepted and shared.

In a globally connected and over-informed world, where populist leaders and social media paradoxically foster isolation and polarization by nurture clusters of like-minded people who reinforce each other's views as well as rejecting difference, literature seems to be entrusted with the responsibility to restore the balance and suggest alternative ways. As Tabish Khair wrote in his 2010 article "Non-Fiction", valuable books are those "that make you think anew", that succeed in undermining prejudices and traditional sets of assumptions. In his *Reading Literature Today* (a ground-breaking volume, published in 2011, that he wrote with his friend and colleague Sébastien Doubinsky), he further explored this concept by claiming that "literature is not a sedative or a balm, it is not a God or a moral code; it is not even a refuge or oasis of sense. But literature [...] is where we are confronted with the possibilities, problems, and limits of language, which are finally also the problems of reality (and representation)" (10). Accordingly, the reader envisioned by Khair is compared to a critic, to "an active thinker and interpreter" (Khair and Doubinsky, 15), who refuses to identify with the passive consumer of highly legible texts with a linear plot and a predictable development; reminiscent of Seamus Heaney's famous poem, he/she is actually engaged in a relentless act of digging, of uncovering possibilities and unexpected connections.

Given what has been presented so far, this paper will focus on the two latest novels by Tabish Khair, namely *How to Fight Islamist Terror from the Missionary Position* (2012) and *Just Another Jihadi Jane*<sup>2</sup> (2016), which tackle controversial issues such as immigration, marginality, fundamentalisms, and terrorism, as well as their simplistic and one-sided portrayals in the media. As will be shown, albeit in different ways, these texts contribute to healing the "selective blindness" (Fu, 161) that affects post-truth societies, i.e. the inability to see beyond one's own paradigm. Indeed, by introducing unexpected plot-twists, while exposing the strategies employed by governments and political leaders to disseminate partial information and manipulate the truth through Facebook, Twitter, the news, or the press, Tabish Khair forcefully prompts his readers to acknowledge and overcome their own preconceptions, thus embracing the complexity of a multi-stranded reality where the One and the Other may eventually coincide.

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<sup>2</sup> The novel was first published in India, under the title *Jihadi Jane*.

*How to Fight Islamist Terror from the Missionary Position* is set in current-day Aarhus (Denmark). The plot is centered on three main characters: an unnamed narrator (a young university professor, coming from a Muslim Pakistani background), Ravi (a flamboyant Indian Brahmin, a talented writer, and a struggling PhD student), and Karim, an older and fervently religious Muslim from India, who works as a taxi-driver, hosts a Koranic study session in his flat every Friday, and often disappears for a few days after receiving puzzling phone calls. Both the narrator (recently divorced) and Ravi end up renting two rooms from Karim, who seems to be constantly craving for money, often working double shifts. As the story proceeds, the narrator becomes increasingly suspicious that Karim may belong to a terrorist cell. When one of the participants in his prayer sessions, a Somali man, turns out to be the infamous protagonist of the so-called “Islamist Axe Plot” against Herr Hansen (a retired cartoonist responsible for the caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad published in *Jyllands-Posten*, a conservative newspaper), the narrator decides to report his ambiguous landlord to the police. Despite his apparently odd behaviour and dangerous connections, however, Karim is completely innocent: the mystery of his recurring disappearances revolves around his twenty-three-year older Danish ex-wife, affected by Alzheimer’s; many years before, she had reluctantly decided to divorce her spouse, not to burden him with her condition. Needless to say, out of pure and unreserved love, Karim had always continued to care and provide for her.

Joining together a range of sensitive topics (terrorism, sex, religion), the title of the novel somehow anticipates one of the most challenging topics the author deals with: as Samhita Arni has emphasized, in fact, ‘Islamist terror’ is not just an evident reference to fundamentalism, but also to “the terror the assimilated immigrant feels about the unassimilated”, whose very existence and curious behaviour are capable of conjuring up the specters of ostracism and discrimination, “the shade of suspicion” (Khair *How to Fight*, 22) that, as the narrator remarks, is still cast on all immigrants by the Danish newspapers. From the very first pages of the volume, therefore, the narrator’s biased opinions on Karim seem to be shaped by the media, to such an extent that Ravi teases him, accusing him of “sound [ing] like a Danish tabloid” (30). When the 2011 ‘Norway attacks’ are hinted at in the plot, Tabish Kahir reminds his readers that “the Danish media first blamed [them] on Islamists and then, when it became clear that the white right-wing, Christian fundamentalist was behind these acts of terror, somehow still managed to suggest at times that immigration and Muslims were the real cause” (114); written well before 2016, when the term ‘post-truth’ suddenly became popular, this sentence perfectly

epitomizes its devious mechanism: the choice of an alternative, fabricated, enduring version of the facts, mirroring one's biased worldview and expectations. The 'Islamist Axe Plot', however, is probably the episode that best allows the writer to explore the strategies devised by mass media to manipulate the truth, and their impact on society. The story of the assault is related by eyewitnesses and other people marginally involved, who change their version of the facts to be more consistent with the gruesome expectations of news reporters and reputed specialists on terrorism. The girl at the counter of the supermarket where the garden axe and the kitchen knife were bought, initially describes the aggressor as a "rather emaciated, nervous-looking man" who appeared "distracted" (166); he was covered in layers of woollen clothes that made him seem bigger and more intimidating than he really was. Later on, the writer informs us, "in another interview, the girl corrected herself and said he looked 'very intense'" (166), as one would reasonably expect in such a situation. Nobody seems to care about the reasons behind that desperate act: everybody simply continues to follow his/her train of thought and preconceived opinions. Supposed experts on TV talk shows merely focus on one minor aspect of the story, namely "the sharpening of the weapons" (166), eventually agreeing that "the sharpening of weapons on a street-side bench was an act of premeditation and suggested devious planning. The fact that the Somali left his mittens on the bench also indicated (it was widely noted) that he wanted to retain full use of his hands" (167). Humorously, Hensen's frightened next door neighbour is more upset by the fact that, rushing away from the crime scene, she had left "her poodle's doings" (166) on the street: "it was the first time she had ever broken the law, she told the press at every opportunity" (166). The reaction of the cartoonist himself sounds paradoxical and rather ludicrous. After opening the door to "an African or an Arab" (168) (as he dismissively tells the press to indicate, in any case, an alien), following what he deems an "uncivilized knocking" (168) – the blow of the Somali's axe – he quickly barricades himself into the bathroom, preventively "reinforced by anti-terror experts" (168). Then, hoping the same experts will prove right in stating that family members of chosen targets are never attacked by terrorists, he peacefully sits down on the toilet seat, and begins to eat the sandwich he has in his hand, waiting for the police to arrive. The narrator and Ravi initially react with sarcasm and scepticism to what they label a "tragic farce": "media claims of Al Qaeda and conspiracy appeared exaggerated to us. This was needless drama in a land of few incidents" (189). Shortly afterwards, however, the narrator surrenders to the manipulative insinuations of the press. As Tabish Khair highlights in the

narrative, “the Danish tabloids were full of suggestions of conspiracy and terror cells” (171); a few lines later, he adds: “the Islamist Axe Plot; the Al Qaeda conspiracy, TV, talk shows, tabloids, broadsheets, politicians, police officers, security agents: everyone had an opinion, or spoke in loud ominous silence” (172). Although the narrator cannot refrain from admitting that he was not “uninfluenced by the atmosphere” (172), he ends up accepting the official, widely advertised version of the facts, thus reporting Karim as a possible accomplice in the plot. When all charges against him are eventually dropped and the truth is uncovered, the narrator regretfully understands that “the reported facts were stained by incomprehension and suspicion” but, as he adds, “how could the Danish media really comprehend a man like Karim when [they], Ravi and [himself], had failed to do so?” (183).

As Gillian Dooley has underlined, *How to Fight Islamist Terror from the Missionary Position* is really “a story of friendship and love, misunderstanding, betrayal and pain” (1): it is a novel that compels its readers to think outside the box, to contemplate different perspectives. Yet, in a post-truth world corrections are rarely fully effective, and people continue to rely (at least in part) on information already proven to be false. Hence, as Tabish Khair bitterly observes, after Karim was released, “a politician from the Danish People’s Party ranted about how weak the Danish legislation was, how it allowed terrorists to walk away Scot free. Anti-Muslim online sites such as *Uriahposten* foamed in cyberspace” (181).

*Just Another Jihadi Jane* tells the story of Jamilla, the narrator, and her school friend Ameena, two young girls with different backgrounds, living in the north of England: while Jamilla comes from a strictly observant Muslim family of Pakistani origin, Ameena’s Indian parents are divorced and westernized. Despite her Islamic faith, Ameena smokes cigarettes, wears casual clothes, and lost her virginity to one of her numerous mates. Heartbroken at the desertion of her latest blonde, blue-eyed, and popular boyfriend, she turns to Jamilla’s unfaltering faith to heal her pangs of love. Soon the girls find themselves entranced by the mesmerizing words of an Internet preacher, Hejjiye, who runs an orphanage in Syria where women who support jihad fighters are supposedly sheltered. Filled with religious zeal and a new sense of belonging, the two friends flee their country to Syria, where Ameena is immediately married off to a jihadist, Hassan, who had contacted her on Facebook just before her flight. Jamilla’s “longing to simply live a life that was meaningful and just” (Khair *Just Another*, 79) is soon replaced with her rude awakening to the brutalities of