

The Representation of Terrorism in Contemporary Arabic Novel: A Reading of Abdullah Thabet's Terrorist No. 20

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Abstract

The contemporary Arabic novel is quite alert to the major issues and events of the contemporary Arabic world. This is evident, for instance, in the case of religion-oriented terrorism which became an obsession to contemporary Arabic novelists. There appeared two trends in the treatment of this topic. The first trend tended, which was the fashion before 9\11, is predominantly documentary and affected the techniques of journalism. The second trend, which came to prominence after 9\11, tended toward psychological internalization of the personality and mind of the terrorist. The first trend was pioneered by the Algerian novel of the dark 1990s whereas the second trend was pioneered by the Saudi novel of the 2000s. This paper is a critical assessment of the textual representation of the terrorist in the contemporary Arabic novel with particular emphasis on Abdullah Thabet's novel Terrorist No. 20 (2006). The paper theorizes that this character type is presented as a social misfit, and this is the ultimate source of its negative, and somehow, evil personality.

Keywords: Contemporary Arabic Novel, Fundamentalism, Terrorism, textual Representation, 9\11, Abdullah Thabet.

INTRODUCTION

1. Terrorism & Religious Fundamentalism in the Contemporary Arabic Novel:

Terrorism is not a late comer to the Arabic novel. Arabic novelists treated this character type well before 9\11 and the subsequent invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq. The Arab world experienced some of the painful events of religious fundamentalism especially in Algeria during the dark 1990s. The brutality of the terrorism that struck the Algerian society during these years finds quick response among Algerian novelists in particular. Algerian novel of the 1990s is rich with works and writers who tackled this issue of domestic terrorism such as Rachid Bou Jadra's novel Timimoun (1994), Tahir Wattar's The Candle and Corridors

(1995), and Wasini Alarraj's The Lady of the Shrine (1997) (AlQarani 2018,18).

Despite the ferocity of the crisis and the atmosphere of fear, the Algerian novel was able to interact with the event, developed its methods, and upgraded its narrative structure. Among those works that attracted the attention and praise of critics Rachid Bou Jadra's novel Timimoun. This novel was born in the womb of the crisis and in the midst of the violence of the bloodshed that was taking place at the time. The novel is powerful in registering and documenting the political atmosphere of these dark years. It was really an eyewitness on the utter terrorism that erupted then. (Munir 2015, 27 and 29).

As for the novel The Candle and the Corridors, it follows the same documentary style. It adopts a journalistic technique to reveal the causes of

the bloody crisis that afflicted Algeria in 1992 and the conflict between the parties that were exploited by the forces of terrorism. The novel tries to explore the nature of the fundamental groups and their extremist ideologies. The narrator and the central character is a poet and social researcher who watches closely what happens in the aftermath of the terrorists seize his city. He tries to explore them from the inside so he tried to enlist with them. He provided elaborate description of their style of life, clothes, and mentality. The group were in need for intellectuals like the narrator to boost their cause. Late, the narrator fell victim to the security forces who brought multiple charges against him, including the accusation of terrorism, and eventually fell victim to the conflict between extremist forces and the authority, to end up being killed with stabs of daggers and bullets. Overall, the novel reflects the plight of the Algerian man in that crisis and his rupture between forces and currents (Bashir 2008, 118).

As for AlAarj's novel *The Lady of the Shrine*, it is really the acknowledge masterpiece of this trend in the Algerian novel of the period. This novel received considerable critical reputation for its innovative style of presentation. It keeps the documentary style but gives psychic depth to its direct linguistic surface. The novel is also praised for its frankness and challenge. Alaraaj has no reservation in the treatment of ethical viewpoints and political factions (Jadwe 2014, 813).

The novel of the 1990s highlights the awareness that violence is an inevitable outcome of fundamentalism. This awareness is textually reflected in a series of stereotypical violent characters that find in terrorism a space for self-expression. This starts with clothing and physical appearance and only to culminate in powerful exhibition of dominance behavior that finds in religious fundamentalism a plea to prosecute and abuse others who might oppose it. This necessitates an exploration of the personality and mind of the terrorist as a misfit. This tendency germinated in the Algerian novels of the 1990s but was eclipsed by the historicizing tendency of the documentary style of these novels. A fuller and most significant

shift toward this psychological internalization can be traced to the Saudi novel of the post 9\11 years. It witnessed a radical shift of narrative focus from the historical context of terrorism that inflicted the Arab world to the psychological exploration of the mind and personality of the Islamic fundamentalist as terrorist. But this is not to say that the documentary style is not present in this novel. On the contrary, it still retains its significance but it forms the background of the action proper. It functions to give this psychological internalization of the terrorist a strong sense of mimesis in the tradition of critical realism (Kadhun 2017, 31). This tendency brought with it narrative innovations in the spirit of postmodernism as well. Among the masterpieces that championed this tendency are such works as Abdullah Thabet's *Terrorist No. 20* (2006), Turki AlHamad's *Winds of paradise* (2004), and Alaa Alhathlul's *Commissioned Suicide* (2005) and many others. (Bin Modawar 2019, 55).

Some researchers points out another transformation in the novels that treated the issue of terrorism in its religious context. This transformation has to do with the representation of the figure of the religious terrorist. The conventional image of the terrorist was purely stereotypical. It is on an ethical deviant and psychologically deluded person who is purely one-sided and identified by lack of humanity. In short, the conventional image of the terrorist in the Arabic novel is that of a monster. But with the second trend, the figure of the terrorist is humanized because these novelists tried to understand the motivation and mentality of this figure. Consequently, the terrorist in the later novels is not purely monstrous but a social misfit who is essentially an erroneous human who has the potential to repent and renounce his evil deeds and lineages (Odwan 2017).

This tendency is best represented by the Saudi novelist Abdullah Thabet in his novel *Terrorist No. 20*. This novel is a projection on the 9\11 events and the Saudi terrorists who carried the suicidal attacks on USA. Their number is 19 but the novel imagines a twentieth member who couldn't join the other members of the cell in action. The novel purports to explore the

making of this terrorist in a manner similar to that done by the American novelist John Updike in a novel published few days before Thabet's novel. Updike also explores the making of an American Muslim teenager terrorist in the name of Ahmed Ashmawi. While Updike's terrorist is stereotypical and almost an ideological mouthpiece, Thabet's terrorist is highly complex and a dynamic character. Thabet uses this figure to carry a dual exploration, one external of the cultural context of Arabic and Muslim hatred of America and the West and an internal exploration of the psychic and cultural making of the terrorist figure. Here, the human coexists with the monstrous in a manner that emulates the terrorist figures of Dostoevsky and Conrad (Naydan 2016, 119).

2. Abdullah Thabet's Terrorist No. 20:

Abdullah Thabet (born 1973) is a Saudi novelist and poet. His literary reputation started only after the publication of his first novel *Terrorist No. 20* in 2006 by a local Saudi press. Before this novel Thabet is best known as a poet and an intellectual advocating secularization. His poetry best reflects his intellectual pursuit. He published poetic volumes bearing such daring and controversial titles as *Ripping*, *Seizures*, *the Taboo*, *Taboo CV*, and *Estrangement* (Wikipedia 2021).

The professional training of Thabet as a journalist makes its impact on his novel but does not turn his work into a documentary feature. Thabet has a regular column at *Al-Wattan* journal, which is one of the two biggest national newspapers in Saudi Arabia. This column is noted for its sharp commentary on the social and cultural scene in the country. This familiarity with the making of the Saudi society, no doubt, has contributed greatly to weaving a dense and realistic social atmosphere in *Terrorist No. 20*.

The novel centers on the character of Zahi Al-Jamali, the twentieth terrorist who was supposed to be with the nineteen terrorist who carried 9/11 attacks on the United States of America. The novel is best described as a work which:

Presents an interesting and deeply critical view of the milieu and the environmental conditioning of the religious fundamentalist. This view get deeply involved with such a personality by probing its psychological and social details within the context of the religious, philosophical, and cultural issues and a conflict based on an intricate mass of contradictions that lies deep to the core of this character (Abu Rouman 2014).

The novel focuses on the change in its central terrorist from fundamentalism into a more liberal and humanist self throughout the 30 years of his life and that of his country. This change is resented as a change toward free will. Throughout this the narrative provides expansive space for details on the actual process of recruitment of youth into the terrorist organizations, training procedures in camps, and brain washing techniques which lead to the making of fundamentalist. Thabet uses the technique of confessional narration to provide close details on the subtle techniques the fundamentalists use to draw young boys by focusing on taking advantage of their long leisure time which the society provide no real meet. Thabet might not be the first novelist to deal with this subject but his narrative presentation is so clear that the reader cannot but grasp a deep insight into the nature of the societal dynamism responsible for engendering religious radicalism and its attendant terrorism in the name of religion. *Terrorist 20* departs, on this point, from the mainstream treatment of this topic in the contemporary Saudi novel which tend to either willingly overlook this sensitive issue or deal with it superficially, most often within the perspective of social change that took over the Saudi scene since the late 1970s (B^عn Mahfauz 2017).

Probably the significance of Thabet's terrorist can best be appreciated in the context of what the critic Jaber Asfour takes to be the ultimate failing of the Arabic novel when dealing with the figure of the religion-oriented terrorist. Asfour theorizes that the modern Arab mind, like its novel, fails to self-fashion its psyche into a modernist consciousness. They are both still caught into the chaos of self-search. The Arab novel of the late 20th century fails to

deconstruct such native types as the Islamic terrorist/fundamentalist. The shackles of decadent cultural heritage prohibit the novelist from creating the necessary aesthetic distance with his material. Instead, the Arabic novelist is still imprisoned in the web of power of ideology, whether it is religion or history. What Thabet did was to get rid of the impulse to historicize that dominates Arabic and Oriental narratives of the self and other. His terrorist is without the rhetoric of otherness because he is now is caught in an existential self-exploration. More importantly, the failure of the intellectual discourse is further aggravated by a failure of textual experimentation. New avant garde novelistic forms are urgently needed to conduct a real existential exploration of the mental, psychological, and intellectual horizons of this character type (Asfour 2003).

3. The Textual Representation of the Terrorist in the Novel:

The novel starts with an evocation of place where the terrorist of the title lived and was brought up. It seems that Thabet was trying to work out the concept of environmental conditioning, so prevalent in the Western naturalistic novel of the late 19th century. Asir, the geographical locale, is evocated as a socio-spatial space whose moody atmosphere is the result of "wind, ghosts, and puzzlement" as the writer states (Terrorist No. 20, 12) (Extracts from the novel are my own translation).. The nature of the people of this geographical locale is one of extremes whether in love or hatred. Yet, the novelists fails to make the environment responsible for fashioning religious radicalism and terrorism. This is due to two preasons. First, there is an absence of the principle of heredity which connects the character to its environment. Second, there is an absence of any ethical perspective of the evocation. This second reason is a point of strength to the credit of the novel. It avoids falling into the abyss of stereotypes and ideology.

After all, it seems that Thabet was not aiming at creating an effect of environmental conditioning as much as trying to show that violence is an intruder to such community. The spatial consciousness is most probably

calculated to immerse the reader into the epistemological horizon of the narrative space. What supports this claim is that Zahi Al-Jabali, the would-be 20th terrorist does not exist in factuality and remains a decentered voice throughout the novel. He remains an I-witness on the historically factual terrorist ideologies of the day.

The novel opens like an autobiography: "Zahi al-Jabali wrote: Beginning: Who am I? How did I become like that? What do I want? The times and places carried me and traveled with me until this moment of writing, of engraving my features accurately. This writing may one day have some significance to others (Terrorist No. 20, 2006: 9). Practically, the narrative is retrospective as the mature narrator promises to look back over his life and what happened to him.

The novel soon lapse into a series of confessional vignettes that are less an establishment of a subject position than a reportage-like of journalistic investigative work into the making of a fundamentalist/terrorist in the Saudi context. However, these sociological insights remain limited to the background of the confessing voice of the terrorist. They both foreground the subjectivity of the speaking voice and provide a necessary background to justify his narrative. It is interesting to note that the more mature narrator is kept distinct from his young self, performing the narrative. This narrative distance is critical and contributes a lot the reliability of the narrator. This is best seen, for instance, in the suffering of the adolescent Al-Jabali of the repression social customs and attitudes of Asir community. What the adolescent feels is genuine and the reader most probably creates a link of sympathy with him. His handsome appearance becomes a source of abuse to him in a highly male society. His relationship with his two sisters socially dubs him as an effete. What makes things hard for him is his dictator father who is more a monster than a father (Terrorist No. 20, 5). Here, the stereotypicality of the father is exaggerated. He is not individualized character but is used as a representative of a common social type in the Saudi society of that time. The Jabali family has recently migrated to the

city as part of the process of urbanization that took over the Saudi society in the late 1970s. Although an urban man by now, Zahi's father refuses to give up old ways of life. So he forces his son to do shepherding on the streets of the city. This becomes a big source of embarrassment. This would definitely contribute to the child's growing anti-social sentiments. The father's stiff character and rigid mentality also contributed to the rise of such sentiments in Zahi. The father is so strict when it comes to religious duties to such an extent that he becomes maniacally cruel. Thabet, at this point, uses skillfully the Dickensian style of invoking the readers' emotional response through the melodramatic exaggeration of the victimization of the innocent child. Forcing Zahi the little child to perform his religious duties and rites proves to be a torture as the father applies harsh physical punishment to his son to force him to strictly observe worship. The suffering of starvation because of fasting, the beating with thick stick, the screams of the father create an atmosphere of terror to Zahi and subsequently contribute to the making of his mature personality as a social misfit (Terrorist No. 20: 66-77).

Thabet shows great skills in transforming these sociological insights into a genuine psychological plight for his hero. The journalistic reportage disappears totally to give way to the working of imagination in the recreating of his protagonist's worldview. Family and society are responsible to shape Zahi as a social misfit. This process is further substantiated when he joins the religious school. This is indeed the most important station in his making as a terrorist. The place is presented as repressive and negative. Thabet might have intended this to be read as social criticism of religion dominated Saudi society. But the significance of the religious school goes far beyond that. It figures as a textual space for ideological contestation of identity and belonging. First the school is represented as a paradoxical space. The narrator tells us that alone among his brother he was forced to join the religious school at the ill-counsel of his unloving brother. The latter persuaded his father to send Zahi to this school instead of a

governmental school by luring him with the social and financial prestige that such schools promise: "The monthly money allowances that the memorization of the whole holy Quran can secure him and wins him paradise and the respectability of being a religious sheikh." (Terrorist No. 20: 20). It should be noticed that the brother's allurements to his father mix the promise of paradise with money and social prestige as Sheikh. It seems that this brother speaks to the divided ideology of theological education in religiously conservative communities like that of Saudi Arabia. The secular rewrites the divine in a manner similar to Max Weber's insights into capitalism appropriation of the ethics of Christian Protestantism (Chiefly 53-56).

The reader cannot mistake the note of bitterness in the voice of the adolescent Zahi. The bitterness does not result from religion or the school per se but, rather from his discovery that the school is just another space where the male chauvistic society of Asir replicates itself. Zahi describes his first moments in the religious school as a 'mixture of fear, eagerness, and joy.' But soon he is exposed to the harsh reality of the school atmosphere. "As I joined my class," says he, "threats and taunting become familiar to my ears. The tutors were shouting and scolding little children, hurry up, why are you late, stop there, bring me the pandybat" (Terrorist No. 20: 35-53). There is nothing peculiarly Islamic about this episode because the claustrophobic atmosphere of the place, the violent rhetoric of the tutors, the child's sense of imprisonment and terror recall James Joyce's Jesuit school episode in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1914) as an intertext.

As a result Zahi shows symptoms of personality disorder such as behavioral contradiction. He is aware of this psychic dissonance in his behaviors, especially when he confesses that:

I was also the boy who sang the Qur'an, the boy who sings it more sweetly than anyone my age knows, and I was the same boy who cursed the muezzin when he raised the call to prayer, or the neighborhood imam when he recites the

loud prayers, and I was the one who cried because he saw a cat run over by a car or saw the separation of two lovers in a television series.. and I was also the one who He likes to defraud his father or one of his older brothers.. He steals money from the sleeves of their clothes and goes to buy what he wants of chocolate and sweets.. (Terrorist No. 20, 67).

This schizophrenic behavior is symptomatic of his anti-social sentiments. He is evolving into a social misfit. He shows a secret hatred and rejection of family and religion in secret. His over-emotional response to everyday life incidents does not only reflect his repressed humane side but also a sign of rebellion in the face of the prevalent social norm of aggressive masculinity for to cry is socially ruled out as not masculine. Stealing has a double significance. First, it is a sign of his hatred of his family, especially father and elder brothers whom he takes as responsible for his suffering. Second, It is an assertion of his effaced childhood. He steals to buy candies which is a typical childhood pleasure from which he was denied. Thabet shed useful light on this aspect of Zahi's behavior when he says that: "I don't think that these transformations in Zahi's personality are just the result of his family atmosphere. They are rather related to his sense of self and personality. They climax in his harsh assertion of his being in the face of family, society, and all faces of reality" (Alsoumairi, 2009, 493).

With such a confused personality Zahi is now more dangerously exposed to the lure of the fundamentalist groups. Zahi's fascination with the character and life style of Sheikh Hameed who leads a luxury life and organizes trips, camping, and other entertainment events for the students of the religious school. This sheikh behaves in a highly calculated way to increase Zahi's anti-social sentiment. He allows Zahi a glimpse into a world of luxury that his family denied him. It is like a poor child standing marveling at candy store case show. This sense is further increased in Zahi through the character of Yahiya who takes the lead from Sheikh Hameed to increase the sense of rebellion in Zahi, especially against family and civil society. Zahi, at this point, challenges the

authority of the family, especially the father and elder brothers (Terrorist No. 20, 2006, 75). Thabet, here, sheds lights on the way fundamentalist groups use material allurements to recruit potential terrorists from among the dissatisfied adolescents of the poor classes. What Thabet is doing is to demystify the myth that youth join terrorist groups for the promise of paradise and its virgins. Sociologically, it is the material drive that is the real motivation rather than any other-worldly ambition.

It is to the credit of this novel that it is almost the first Saudi novel to dare attacking the religious institution openly. This is a taboo that no other Saudi writer ever imagined to break. Most probably this is a direct consequence of 9\11 and the shocking fact that most of the terrorists were of Saudi nationality. A sudden awareness seems to come to Saudis of the dangerous drift of the religious institution in their country, that their once peaceful religion is turning into ugly violence. It is tempting to locate this attach on religious fundamentalism in the context of the tendency to embrace secularization in Saudi society after 9\11. But nothing in the novel support such a claim. Thabet does not prescribe secularization as antidote to religious fundamentalism. Instead, he finds the solution in a return to the moderate values of the traditional Saudi society as the best means for his protagonist to regain his human and social existence. A better explanation would consider what Thabet is doing in this novel as part of a collective shock of sudden awareness and subsequent self-analysis that the Saudi society must have felt after 9\11.

The overtones of this shock of sudden awareness can be detected in the narrator's exposition of the hidden working of the fundamentalist groups to carry their evil ends. The voice of the narrator at this point appropriates the voice of a culture being taken off guard in a moment of sudden self-discovery. This is best captured in the narrator's past and present experiences of the month of Ramadan. When a child, the narrator reminiscences: "I remember that father and school once forced me to fast Ramadan and when I could no longer stand hunger and thirst

I used to leave home. Once I be out of sight I eat and drink” Terrorist No. 20, 61). Few pages later the Zeist Geist of Ramadan radically becomes deceptively brighter: “So soon went the nights of Ramadan and our football team used to win each night. I played with excitement, scored many goals, and showed high skill in solo play. After that I count the remaining time of the night second by second to see them, meet, them, and sit with them in school” (Terrorist No. 20, 74). The two spaces of Ramadan write a nation and its imaginary. The invocation of the Lacanian mirror stage is inevitable here because the historical moment that Thabet inscribes in the space of Ramadan finds a nation not only stifling under religious puritanism but also that very puritanism is appropriating its imaginary. In both spaces Zahi and the nation are in the grip of the same logos of fundamentalist puritanism and its extremist discourses. It should be noticed that in the second version of Ramadan the fundamentalist groups utilizes the secular to temper the rigidity of the religious tradition. Ramadan nights, in the traditional puritanical view, are times of worship, prayer, and vigil but the fundamentalists replaced that with football matches and other secular entertainments to allure young boys fed up with the rigidity of traditional religious practices. This might be read as a sharp criticism of the hidden evil agendas of these fundamentalist groups. But more significantly this is exactly how religious radicalism appropriates the imaginary of the nation. 9\11, it should be recalled, is not an historical moment for the Saudis and the Islamic world in general but is the culmination of that moment of a nation shyly hesitant at the cross-road between secular reforms and religious extremism, or more precisely, between modernization and tradition. Religious radicalism appropriate the secular as a means to fix the nation in the oblivion of historicity.

Thus, both spaces uncover how cultural appropriation operate in the Saudi context. While the first space fixes Zahi into an object position the second subject promises to transcend him into the status of a subject but only to discover that this transcendence is in truth an eclipse of his very subjectivity. This

aspect of cultural appropriation is expressed through the notions of belonging and identity. Zahi, and the young generations he represents, refuse to identify and belong to family and society and prefer to attach himself to a more fruitful form of life. Thabet openly states this idea at the expense of turning his novel into an ideological propaganda. He makes Zahi declares that “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.” (Terrorist No. 20, 35)

Zahi, at this stage, tries to identify with the group visually and conceptually by adopting their beard and clothes style and ascetic style of life. Later, on the advice of his mentor Sheikh Hameed Zahi “leaves his family for fear of being prey to sins and the lecherous people. My mother was crying and clinging to my dress as I was leaving home but I didn’t care at all for her tears” (Terrorist No. 20, 85). The group succeeded to isolate Zahi from family and society see all those who disagree with the group, even if they were his family members, as unbelievers in Islam.

The alienation of Zahi from his traditional social milieu is paralleled by a process of alternative center formation. This new center is the school of the fundamentalist group which figures alternatively as the school, weekend center, Ramadan center, and summer center. It becomes a new reality for Zahi and the generations of young boys he represents. The school, in short, figures as a metaphor for Zahi’s education into fundamentalism. Commenting on his educational progress the narrator says “By the year 90 I became a purely ascetic religious code member. But above all I was a huge hope that surprised those who consider my sincere, great, and diligent efforts as symptoms of a leading figure on whose hands Allah might bring some good change to this world” (Terrorist No. 20, 97). Now Zahi boldly identifies with the group by being ranked inside the group and most importantly by sharing its seemingly noble ends. But such ends are soon trivialized into the practice of social abuse such as beating young men who listen to music and abusing anyone whom they

deem to be against their ideology. The narrator is aware of this: “We became loaded with hatred not only for the West and all governments but also for our society, families, and brothers. It was not uncommon to hear of one of us beating his brother or runs away from his parents or even insulting his father and calling him unbeliever and that acquit himself from him. Even for me, a year or two may pass without ever me greeting my brothers” (Terrorist No. 20, 106). Zahi is now a social misfit and it evident that this sort of education into fundamentalism is dehumanizing in effect and this is really the core of the religious extremist (Jani 2020, 6).

But as soon as Zahi reaches this stage of identification and declares an official lineage with the group and its extremist ideology the novelist starts, somehow implausibly, a reversal process or more properly an unbecoming process. The narrative tempo races towards the fall of Zahi from the group. Thabet here defies expectations of the classic sudden realization of the central character of the ugly truth of this group. On the contrary, his fall and exclusion from the group comes as a result of a series of dramatic events. The process of unbecoming starts with disillusionment through discontent and finally refusal. It all starts at the moment he received his results of school tests. He was waiting with his colleagues on the trip of the scientific center of the group. When his bad results are announced he mistakes them for success and prostrates in praise of God. A belated realization of shame comes upon him as the situation deals him a great blow of humiliation: “they all exploded in laughter on my unfortunate prostration to God. At the beginning I laughed with them but later cried bitterly, felt left down, and hated them all” (Terrorist No. 20, 124). The situation might seem to be coincidental and contrived but it helped to start the spark of unbecoming. The blows come quickly. His father threaten to kick him away, he feels bitterly disappointed and is afraid of ruining his future, and finally is expelled from the group on charges of homosexuality with the little children whom he works hard to persuade to embrace the cause of the group. This later point reflects that the

fundamentalist groups are not homogenous. They suffer from factions and conflicting interests (Alenizi 2008, 38). Some of the rival competitors in the group accuse him of using his handsomeness and soft voice to allure little children sexually. The narrator, however, is not clear on the validity of this accusation.

The group, which by now becomes a personified entity in the narrative, tries several times to regain him to its ranks. Each time he refuses and finally they retaliate of him:

Their last reaction was that they betrayed me cheaply and not befitting anything other than their hatred and aggression. Four men came to my house, claiming that they wanted to talk to me, so I welcomed them to enter my house, but they insisted that I go out with them in their car. I went with them because I never thought of any ill towards them....They changed their approach with me. They got off the car and one of them pulled me out, then they swarmed on the four of them (Terrorist No. 20, 145).

While this shows the aggressive and monstrous nature of the group, this act of betrayal is an important symbolic gesture that the counter process of unbecoming is by now complete. It also brings the title of the novel to full significance. Nothing up to this point in the narrative of Zahi justifies the title and nothing even relates to 9\11 attacks. Yet, here we have the connection. The final stage of the process of unbecoming suggests strongly the possibility that Zahi, and many others of his generation, would have been with the terrorist who carried 9\11 and other domestic attacks if they kept to the road of the group. The novel, however, is not clear as why Zahi, and many other Saudi youth in reality, left the road. Is it divine providence or something innate in the community? One thing is certain: Thabet’s textual silence opens the door widely for rich possibilities of interpretation.

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