



## From Political Anarchism to Global Terror: A Comparative Study of Terrorism In Joseph Conrad's The Secret Agent, Doris Lessing's The Good Terrorist, and John Updike's Terrorist

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### ABSTRACT

*Terrorism is one of the most disturbing realities of the modern world, and literature has often reflected its many faces. This paper studies how three major writers Joseph Conrad, Doris Lessing, and John Updike show terrorism through different times and ideas. Conrad's The Secret Agent (1907) presents the early image of political terrorism born from confusion and moral decay in modern London. Lessing's The Good Terrorist (1985) shows how terrorism can grow inside ordinary homes and among people who feel powerless. Updike's Terrorist (2006) presents a young man who turns to religion and violence to escape spiritual emptiness in post-9/11 America. The paper traces how the idea of terrorism changes from a political act in Conrad's time to a social and personal crisis in modern fiction. The analysis uses simple sociological and psychological approaches to show that terrorism in literature reflects both political unrest and deep human fear. The study concludes that terrorism in fiction has moved from group violence and ideology to personal belief, alienation, and loss of identity.*

### KEY WORDS

*Terrorism, ideology, modern fiction, radicalism, alienation, ideology.*

### INTRODUCTION

Terrorism is not a new idea. It has existed in different forms for over a century, but its meaning and motive have changed with time. In the early 1900s, writers like Joseph Conrad showed terrorists as confused people who worked for secret causes without true belief. In the later 20th century, authors

like Doris Lessing described terrorism as part of personal and social rebellion. In the 21st century, writers such as John Updike began to see terrorism as a deep spiritual and psychological crisis. Literature helps readers understand how fear and violence shape human behavior. As David Lodge writes, Conrad's *The Secret Agent* was "the first serious novel to deal with political terrorism" and its effects on modern society (Lodge 112). Through fiction, readers see not only bombs and attacks but also the thoughts, emptiness, and pain inside those who commit violent acts. This research paper studies three novels *The Secret Agent* (1907), *The Good Terrorist* (1985), and *Terrorist* (2006) to explore how the meaning of terrorism has changed in literature. Each novel belongs to a different century and reflects a different kind of fear: political, social, or religious. The method used here is comparative analysis, supported by ideas from social and psychological criticism.

### **Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent*: The Birth of Political Terror**

Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* is set in London in the early 1900s, a time when Europe was facing real anarchist attacks. The story centers on Mr. Verloc, a lazy spy who pretends to work for a small group of revolutionaries while secretly serving a foreign embassy. Verloc's job is to plant a bomb to create political fear, but the plan ends in tragedy when his wife's brother, Stevie, is accidentally killed. Conrad's London is dark, confusing, and full of corruption. It becomes, as Harold Bloom notes, "a symbol of moral decay and hidden violence under the calm surface of modern civilization" (Bloom 36). The terrorists in the novel do not truly believe in any cause. They speak about revolution, but they are selfish and confused. The Professor, another character, carries a bomb with him at all times ready to destroy himself and others. He represents the cold, mechanical side of terror, where life has no meaning. Conrad's view of terrorism is deeply ironic. He shows that the act of terror is not about faith or justice but about emptiness and loss of purpose. As Fredric Jameson points out, the novel "turns the political act into a psychological one, showing the inner emptiness behind public violence" (Jameson 142). Thus, *The Secret Agent* presents terrorism as a product of modern confusion, not just politics.

### **Doris Lessing's *The Good Terrorist*: Domestic Ideology and Failed Revolution**

Doris Lessing's *The Good Terrorist* (1985) takes place in a very different time—the late 20th century. It tells the story of Alice Mellings, a young British woman who joins a small group of left-wing activists living in a run-down house. They claim to fight for justice and socialism, but most of them are confused, directionless, and emotionally unstable. Lessing shows how terrorism can grow from small personal frustrations. Alice cleans, cooks, and takes care of everyone like a mother, but she is also drawn into violent political acts. Critics like Susan Watkins have said that the novel "reveals how private emotions and political desires mix together in the making of terror" (Watkins 91). Unlike Conrad's male-centered and public terrorism, Lessing's story brings terror into the domestic space. The house becomes a symbol of both rebellion and decay. It shows how normal people, through anger and confusion, can turn violence into something ordinary. Alice's group imagines themselves as heroes, but their revolution fails because it is based on anger, not belief. Lessing's novel suggests that modern terrorism often comes from emotional needs rather than real political goals. Compared to *The Secret Agent*, *The Good Terrorist* shows a more psychological and social kind of terrorism.

### **John Updike's *Terrorist*: The Psychology of Modern Extremism**

John Updike's *Terrorist* (2006) explores terrorism in the 21st century, especially after the 9/11 attacks. The novel follows Ahmad Ashmawy, an 18-year-old Muslim-American living in New Jersey. Ahmad feels lonely, rejected, and disconnected from modern American life. He believes Western society is immoral and empty, and he turns toward a strict form of Islam that teaches him to hate others. Updike's story is different from both Conrad's and Lessing's because it looks inside the mind of a terrorist. Ahmad is not a professional spy or part of a large political group. He is a confused young man searching for meaning. As James Wood notes, Updike "shows the terrorist as a victim of modern loneliness, not just a symbol of hate" (Wood 114). In *Terrorist*, the main enemy is not society or Government but the spiritual emptiness of modern life. Ahmad's

final decision not to explode the bomb shows a moment of moral awakening—something that Conrad's Verloc or Lessing's Alice never achieve. Terrorism here becomes a psychological disease, not just a political problem.

## **The Evolution of Terror: From Politics to Psychology**

When these three novels are read together, they show how terrorism has changed over a hundred years. In Conrad's time, terror was seen as a political act—a fight between Governments, spies, and anarchists. In Lessing's world, terror became social and emotional—the product of failed revolutions and frustrated dreams. In Updike's modern America, it turns personal and spiritual—a war within one's own soul. All three writers agree that terrorism grows out of confusion, loneliness, and loss of belief. The change from Conrad to Updike also shows how literature keeps adapting to real history. Each author mirrors the fears of his or her own age. The city plays an important role in all three novels, becoming the symbol of modern chaos where politics and religion clash. From the outside, terrorism may look like a political act, but these novels show it as something deeper a human cry for purpose in a world without faith.

## **CONCLUSION**

Over time, literature has turned terrorism from a public act of violence into a private story of pain and confusion. Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* shows the beginning of modern terror, where empty politics and moral decay create meaningless violence. Doris Lessing's *The Good Terrorist* moves terror into the home, showing how failed dreams and personal frustration can turn into rebellion. John Updike's *Terrorist* brings the story into the 21st century, where fear and faith mix inside one person's heart. All three novels tell us that terrorism is not only about politics or religion it is about human emptiness. When people lose their values, they try to find meaning in destruction. These stories remind readers that the best way to fight terrorism is not only through law and power but also through understanding, education, and moral strength.

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