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Narrating the Terrorist: Authorial Intent and Perpetrator Representation in Post-9/11 American Fiction

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Abstract

Despite the pervasive cultural fixation surrounding terrorism after 9/11, most American fiction continues to rely on heterodiegetic narration that distances readers from perpetrator subjectivity and reinforces reductive clichés of Islamic extremism, fanaticism, and moral incomprehensibility. This study interrogates the representation of terrorist-perpetrators in four post-9/11 American novels *The Garden of Last Days*, *Terrorist*, *American Taliban*, and *Atta* through McGlothin's framework of narrative voice and empathetic identification. Through close textual analysis, the study demonstrates how three of the novels reproduce dominant cultural imaginaries, offering only superficial accounts of radicalisation and obscuring the psychological and contextual factors behind perpetration. In contrast, *Atta* employs auto-diegetic narration to provide rare access to a perpetrator's consciousness, challenging conventional literary taboos surrounding empathetic engagement. The article highlights the limitations of homogenized or clichéd understandings of perpetration in Western literary and cultural discourse.

1. Introduction

In the aftermath of 9/11 attacks, terrorism became a dominant global concern and a defining cultural discourse in the American society. The collective trauma of those events generated a wave of political rhetoric and cultural production that sought to explain, rationalise, and contain the figure of the "terrorist." However, in popular culture and media, the representation of terrorists has long been reduced to a monolith of "fanatic", "barbarian" or "Islamist militant". Popular depictions obscure the complex human dimensions of perpetrators and fail to answer a more profound question: *why do perpetrators do what they do?* It only reduces them to symbols of absolute evil, eliding the interplay of personal, ideological and situational factors that shape their actions (Wilmsen and McAllister 77; Scanlan 6). Contrary to the public sphere which reduced terrorists to one-dimensional villains, fiction began to question these fixed moral binaries which offered a more intricate lens to investigate violence, culpability and the construction of otherness.

The Post-9/11 American fiction often perpetuates this reductive image of a terrorist. Muslim perpetrators are portrayed as embodiments of deviant masculinity,

pathological religiosity or repressed sexuality and are condemned in popular fiction (Arnsperger 4; Carpenter 144). These depictions rely only on popular cultural tropes rather than psychological realism, hence producing narratives which show that violence is the inevitable outgrowth of Islamic ideology. The emerging field of Perpetrator Studies challenges this simplification by examining the epistemology and hermeneutics of those who commit mass violence. Rooted in the Browning's foundational work *Ordinary Men* (1992), this field investigates the ordinary social, moral and institutional conditions that produces perpetrators rather than pathologizing them. Üngör and Anderson frame this phenomenon as socio-ecological process of "architects, organisers and killers" linking violence to interconnected system of decision making and moral responsibility across the tapestry of radicalisation to mass atrocity (10-11).

In literary contexts, this systematic understanding of perpetratorship aligns with insights of many critics. For instance, *Spaces of Collapse: Psychological Deterioration, Subjectivity, and Spatiality in American Narratives* explores spatiality and subjectivity in post-9/11 American fiction, showing how spatial structures mediate psychological disintegration such as paranoia, repetition and anxiety (Papaspyrou, 4). Similarly, *Making and Un-Making of Perpetrators* stresses the role of evolving political and social structures in shaping both the making and redemption of perpetrators (25). Additionally, Kühl, in *Ordinary Organizations*, highlights how focusing solely on individuals obscures systemic dynamics of perpetration (41), while Stephen Gibson's reading of Milgram's *Obedience Experiments* emphasizes that perpetrators act within complex moral systems rather than through blind obedience (56).

Furthermore, Goldberg's *What's Moral Character Got to Do with It?* (2019) further frames this debate within moral psychology. Goldberg contrasts *situationism* (which connects evil to external circumstances) with view of Kant who posits that evil is "hidden within a person's moral psychology" (74-76). Browning argued that Nazi perpetrators were not fanatics but "ordinary men" following orders, an idea reinforced by Ardent in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (2006) arguing that evil can be banal – committed by ordinary individuals acting within authoritarian systems. However,

similar analytical frameworks are rarely applied to 9/11 perpetrators, whose portrayals remain confined within demonizing stereotypes. On the contrary, Wolfendale investigates the literary depictions of torturers of 9/11 terrorists who were presented as ordinary individuals transformed by circumstances and their humanisation in literature. Dongen, on the other hand, investigated the role of motivation in the development of a perpetrator's moral psychology but his primary focus was on operational characteristics to define perpetrator typologies rather than motivations.

Rashne (181) identifies the goal of Perpetrator Studies as understanding *both* the individual and the enabling structures of violence, while Waller reminds us that "the most outstanding common characteristic of perpetrators is their normality" (148). Moreover, Wikström (2004) bridges criminology and perpetrator studies, arguing that both *nature and nurture* shape criminal behaviour (9). However, the Post-9/11 American Fiction only portrays Muslim terrorists as inherently evil rather than a product of circumstances. It maybe because of LaCapra's notion of "moral slippage" who warns that when narratives humanise perpetrators, there is risk of shifting of empathy from victims to aggressors. It may justify the avoidance of Post-9/11 authors from exploring perpetrator subjectivity as for fear of appearing to justify violence. However, this avoidance limits literary enquiry and prevents genuine comprehension of perpetration leading to one-dimensional understanding of terrorism.

This study, therefore, applies the critical lens of Perpetrator Studies to explore the ordinariness of perpetrators and to investigate the circumstances that cause the transformation of an ordinary person into a perpetrator. It focuses on four American post-9/11 novels *The Garden of Last Days* (2008) by Andre Dubus III, *Terrorist* (2006) by John Updike, *American Taliban: A Novel* (2010) by Pearl Abrahams, and *Atta* (2011) by Jerret Kobek that are mainly concerned with Islamic terrorism in relation 9/11 and its aftermath. The study argues that a deeper analysis of these works can challenge the cultural monolith of evil terrorist and contribute to broader comprehension of perpetration, moral responsibility and the representation of perpetrators.

Research Questions

1. How do the selected post-9/11 American novels employ narrative voice and other

narrative strategies to construct the literary representations of terrorist perpetrators?

2. In what ways do these representations challenge or reinforce prevailing cultural discourses about terrorism, morality, and human agency?

Problem Statement

Post-9/11 American fiction often reduces terrorist-perpetrators to one-dimensional embodiments of evil, relying on cultural clichés that obscure their psychological and contextual complexity. Such reductive portrayals supplemented by heterodiegetic narration hinder any meaningful understanding of the factors that contribute to the making of a perpetrator and reaffirms the cultural imaginary.

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Significance of the Study

Literature reflects life, and analysing the journey of an ordinary person becoming a terrorist provides insight into the cognitive and contextual factors behind perpetration. Most post-9/11 fiction foregrounds victims and trauma, offering superficial portrayals of perpetrators. By focusing on four different novels that foreground life, motivations and inner worlds of terrorists from diverse perspectives, this study interrogates authorial intent, narrative voice and the extent to which these works move beyond the cultural clichés of terrorism. This research is the first to focus systematically on the cognitive, contextual, and representational dimensions of terrorist perpetrators in American post-9/11 fiction which studies comprehensively how an ordinary individual is transformed into a perpetrator. It challenges the reductive mono-causal portrayals dominant in the popular and literary imagination.

3. Literature Review

The study of perpetrators in literature is a comparatively recent field especially in the context of post-9/11 American fiction. Scholars have consistently observed that both public discourse and literary production following 9/11 overwhelmingly prioritised victim's perspective, relegating the terrorist-perpetrator to the borders of

representation (Crownshaw 75; Banita 166). Crownshaw also argues that understanding of perpetrators in the cultural imagination can only be done through fiction as fictional representation is the sole path to develop a profound understanding of the terrorists of 9/11 (76). However, the imbalance of representation between victim and perpetrator results in mystification of perpetrators as metaphysical embodiments of "evil", thereby denying them human ordinariness and social embeddedness. Such demonisation produces an image of perpetrators as fundamentally alien, which consequently obscures the contextual conditions that led to their making (Anderson 2). Similarly, Waller (9) emphasises the "ordinariness" of those or perpetrate "extraordinary human evil". In the context of post-9/11 fiction, this mystification is not merely a narrative tendency but an extension of wider political, cultural, and media discourses that sought to sacralise the attacks and foreclose deeper inquiry into their causes (Eikonsalo 88; Butler 2).

In the aftermath of 9/11 attacks, the dominant trauma narrative shaped literary production in the United States. Trauma theorists note that the event was framed "indescribable", prompting fiction writers to focus on emotional processing of characters rather than structural or geopolitical analysis (Caruth 5; Versluys 1). The "domestication" of 9/11 displaced the attention from global implications of the attack and anchored fiction in stories of disrupted American domesticity (Bond 737; Morley 85). Consequently, the figure of perpetrator or terrorist became a tabooed presence which was rarely explored with complexity and almost always portrayed reductively. This narrow focus was also upheld by liberal-conservative consensus that discouraged inquiry into the event's causes as such an inquiry would risk being interpreted as justification or sympathy for perpetrators (Randall 135; Rothberg 151). This aligns with LaCapra's views who argued that a shift to perspective of perpetrators would increase chances of "moral slippage" and subverted judgement (833).

The result is a literary landscape in which perpetrators are seldom granted psychological depth, narrative voice or credible subjectivity. While fiction has the potential to challenge the dominant cultural narrative (Neumann, 335), American post-9/11 fiction largely reinforced it by reproducing clichés of terrorist as repressed fanatics devoid of personal histories. There was an overwhelming for moral outrage

after 9/11 which further pressured authors to conform to patriotic and trauma-centric narratives rather than pursue transgressive representations of terrorism (Toth and Brooks 3). This cultural climate not only limited the imaginative possibilities of fiction but also contributed to what Appelbaum (44) calls the "mythography of terrorism," wherein simplified and symbolic representations replace critical engagement with perpetrator subjectivity. Such superficial and reductive portrayals hinder a fuller understanding of the perpetrators or their acts. The arguments for moral slippage (LaCapra), sympathy for the perpetrator because of their representation (Adams 2011; Petit 2017) and ethical dilemma for both author and reader (Suleiman, 2) are all valid; however, the objective with regard to studying the perpetrator is not sympathizing with the executioner of violence nor their exoneration, but rather to understand them in a way that helps prevention and reconciliation (Browning 15, Foster 2000; Timm 112). Yet, as McGlothlin (29) notes, there remains a striking absence of comprehensive critical accounts examining perpetrators in fiction. Post-9/11 literature's reluctance to interrogate the terrorist figure has resulted in a significant scholarly gap in which the fictional representation of perpetrators/terrorists affirm existing stereotypes rather than challenging them. This research fills this gap by arguing against the limited representation of perpetrators in post-9/11 American fiction and evaluating their representation under the lens of perpetrator studies.

4. Methodology

This study employs qualitative textual analysis to determine how post-9/11 American fiction represents terrorist-perpetrators. Qualitative inquiry is appropriate for exploring how individuals and groups construct meaning within social and cultural contexts (Creswell 22) and aligns with the article's aim of interpreting narrative strategies and representational patterns. The study focuses on close reading and interpretive analysis as methodology must directly correspond with research aims and analytical procedures (McMillan and Schumacher 74). The method in this study draws on Litosselitti's assertion that qualitative research prioritises the "why" and "how" of phenomena (12), enabling examination of how narrative voice, focalisation and textual framing shape the construction of terrorist perpetrator.

Furthermore, the article relies on textual evidence rather than speculative inference.

Textual analysis, as defined by Bauer et al., seeks to uncover the lifeworld embedded within texts and the authorial perspectives that structure meaning (3). Belsey argues that "any serious textual analysis depends on a grasp of how meaning works," noting that meaning is shaped through cultural and linguistic structures rather than individual intention (164). Belsey further maintains that the text "sets the agenda" for interpretation (167), guiding the analyst rather than serving as evidence for a pre-determined claim. Guided by McGlothin's framework on narrative modality and perpetrator representation, the analysis centres on selected passages that illuminate authorial choices and the extent to which these novels move beyond cultural clichés in depicting perpetrators.

5. Theoretical Framework

This study draws primarily on Erin McGlothin's theorisation of perpetrator representation, particularly her analysis of narrative voice and its implications for readerly engagement. In her work *Empathetic Identification and the Mind of the Holocaust Perpetrator in Fiction* (2016), she argues that narrative perspective plays a monumental role in shaping how perpetrators are constructed, understood and ethically positioned within the fiction. McGlothin responds to the long-standing tradition of Holocaust literature and subsequent perpetrator literature that marginalises perpetrators through heterodiegetic narration, she argues that this choice of narrative voice reinforces the cultural expectation that the reader identify solely with the victims and no other identification is acceptable (Adams 31). The heterodiegetic narration sustains the stereotype of narrator as a figure of pure monstrosity and prevents deeper engagement with psychological, historical and ideological conditions that shape their actions.

McGlothin highlights that the choice of auto-diegetic narration in some of the Holocaust fictions like *The Kindly Ones* (2009), *The Nazi and the Barber* (1971), *Time's Arrow* (1991) and *The Zone of Interest* (2014) breaks the orthodoxy by granting perpetrators narrative authority and the readers a direct access into their consciousness. She draws on Kant's concept of narrative empathy (223) to argue that auto-diegetic narration enables a more complex, though ethically fraught, space of readerly encounter. The "privilege of narrative voice," as Suleiman (2) terms it,

becomes central to whether a perpetrator is rendered opaque and distant or intelligible as a character embedded within specific contexts. This article adapts McGlothin's insights as a core lens for the analysis of post-9/11 American fiction. It examines how authors position terrorist, perpetrators in relation to the dominant cultural clichés.

6. Data Analysis

This section analyses the representation of terrorist-perpetrators in four post-9/11 American novels—*The Garden of Last Days*, *Terrorist*, *American Taliban*, and *Atta*—through the theoretical lens of Erin McGlothin's insights on narrative perspective and empathetic identification. This analysis assesses the extent to which each text either perpetuates reductive stereotypes or opens space for a more profound understanding of radicalisation, agency, and the psychological complexity behind acts of mass violence.

The Garden of Last Days by Andre Dubus III

Andre Dubus III's *The Garden of Last Days* offers a fictionalised reconstruction of the days preceding the 9/11 attacks, including an imagined perspective of Bassam-al-Jizani – Dubus's fictional analogue for Muhammad Atta. Although Dubus claims to have relied on extensive research into Saudi culture, Islamic history, and investigative accounts of the hijackers, the novel ultimately reproduces many of the clichés that dominate post-9/11 perpetrator representation. In the end word of the novel, Dubus shared various insights including an admittance to discomfort with "becoming" the perpetrator in the narrative signals an anxiety that frequently appears in American post-9/11 fiction: the fear that humanising a terrorist risks moral slippage (LaCapra 833). As it has been extensively established in the literature review, the cultural imaginary after an act of terror discourages exploring perpetrators with psychological depth (Randall 135; Rothberg 151), and Dubus's narrative choices reflect this wider tendency in the context of 9/11.

A notable feature of the novel is Dubus's choice of a heterodiegetic narrative style i.e. third-person narration which keeps the character of Bassam at an interpretive distance. In McGlothin's view, such a narrative choice is not incidental but structurally significant. McGlothin argues that a third-person narration maintains the perpetrator as an object of observation rather than a subject with interiority and

complex psychological landscape. Thereby, this narrative choice forecloses the interpretively productive possibilities of narrative empathy, though they are ethically fraught (McGlothin 256-257). By opting against an auto-diegetic voice, Dubus aligns his text with what McGlothlin identifies as the entrenched post-Holocaust literary convention that denies perpetrators full subjectivity in order to preserve victim-centred identification (Adams 31; McGlothlin 260). Hence, Bassam's interior world in the novel remains therefore heavily mediated through narrative voice of the author resulting in reinforcement of his representation as a monstrosity rather than a character with complexity.

Bassam's characterisation in the novel further reflects the cultural imaginary surrounding the Muslim terrorists. His encounters in the strip club repeatedly emphasise his sexual repression, disgust toward Western women, and strict moral condemnation of American society. Terms such as "kafir," "whore," "filthy," and "sinful" dominate his worldview, producing a rhetorical field saturated with judgement and revulsion. This language traps Bassam within what Waller calls the myth of the radically "inhuman" perpetrator (9), rendering him symbolically grotesque rather than psychologically intelligible. Dubus's portrayal aligns with what scholars identify as the post-9/11 aesthetic that amplifies perpetrators as metaphysical embodiments of evil (Anderson 2; Crownshaw 75). By adhering to this narrative strategy, the novel mirrors the broader American cultural impulse to treat terrorists as alien and incomprehensible rather than socially or historically produced. Furthermore, the absence of substantive background in the story not only contradict Dubus's stated research ambitions but also reflect the broader reluctance within post-9/11 American fiction to explore perpetrator subjectivity with seriousness (Toth and Brooks 3; Appelbaum 44). Hence, primarily the choice of heterodiegetic narration complemented by author's moralised diction and reliance on cultural stereotypes reinforces the dominant American discourses of terrorism rather than challenging it contributing to the lack of critical representation of perpetrators in fiction.

***Terrorist* by John Updike**

Updike's Terrorist centres on Ahmad Ashmawy Mulloy, a Muslim teenager in post-9/11 New Jersey whose gradual drift toward extremism is narrated through a third-

person perspective. Updike is known for his detailed psychological portraits and one can argue that he has attempted to depict the tensions shaping Ahmed's identity to some extent: his absent father, isolation as a religious minority, influence of local imam Shaikh Rashid etc. However, despite the novel's focus on a perpetrator figure, its narrative strategies ultimately reproduce the same reductive conventions that dominate post-9/11 fiction. Updike's portrayal aligns with the political and cultural climate in which deeper inquiry into perpetrator subjectivity was discouraged for fear of appearing to justify violence (Randall 135; Rothberg 151).

From McGlothin's point of view, the authorial choice to rely on heterodiegetic narrator prevents access to the complexities of Ahmed's mind and moral psychology, even though the narrative follows him closely. McGlothin argues that choosing heterodiegetic narrative style maintains distances the perpetrator from the reader and maintains him as an object rather than a subject, which prevents any possibility of identificatory or empathetic engagement (McGlothin 256-257). In this way, the novel is very similar to the first one, as Updike adopts the same representational strategy which is much common in perpetrator fiction, as McGlothin also observed. The refusal to narratively inhabit the perpetrator's consciousness due to the "transgressive taboo" surrounding perpetrators prevents a deeper understanding into perpetrators inner mind (Adams 31).

This distance between reader and perpetrator is intensified as Updike also uses lexicon saturated with judgement and hostility. The novel's opening word—"Devils"—immediately positions all non-Muslims as morally corrupt and spiritually degenerate. Throughout, Ahmad employs terms like "Kafir," "Animals," "Whores," "weak Christians," and "non-observant Jews," a rhetoric that aligns him with the cultural cliché of the radicalised Muslim extremist. This linguistic framework, similar to Dubus's, frames the perpetrators as symbolically evil and alien rather than psychologically comprehensible (Waller 9). Furthermore, Updike's selective incorporation of Islamic scriptures without contextual interpretation reinforces the ideological caricatures rather than offering insights into lived religious experiences (Eikonsalo 88; Carpenter 144). These effects do not illuminate Ahmed's internal conflict but embed him within the existing cultural imaginary and further flatten his

religious identity into a single trajectory of extremism.

One of the most notable aspects of Ahmad's storyline is the absence of conventional radicalisation triggers. He is neither raised in the Middle East, nor indoctrinated through familial trauma, nor subjected to state violence. Instead, he is an American-born teenager raised by an Irish-American mother, choosing Islam at age eleven—an experience his mother describes as "a second birth" (112). This divergence from familiar radicalisation narratives could have opened a path to exploration of making of a perpetrator but the novel did not pursue this route. Instead, Ahmad's trajectory remains underdeveloped, framed more as ideological inevitability than as psychological evolution. Therefore, the heterodiegetic narrative, selective religious framing, and reliance on stereotypical diction all work to maintain Ahmad as a symbolic perpetrator and ultimately reinforces dominant cultural narrative.

American Taliban: A Novel by Pearl Abrahams

Pearl Abraham's *American Taliban: A Novel* presents a markedly different perpetrator figure from previous two novels. John Jude, later Attar, is not a Muslim raised within stereotyped structures of Middle Eastern extremis nor he has an absent Muslim father influencing his childhood. Instead he is an American-born, secular, philosophically curious teenager raised by liberal humanist parents in North Carolina. His gradual movement toward Islam, and eventually toward the Taliban, initially seems to offer a unique opportunity for fiction to interrogate perpetration outside the usual post-9/11 clichés of coercion, trauma, or inherited extremism. Yet, despite this potentially transformative premise, the novel ultimately reproduces the same narrative strategies that, as scholars note, dominate post-9/11 fiction and inhibit the development of complex perpetrator subjectivities (Crownshaw 75; Banita 166).

One aspect that is similar in all three novels including this one is Abraham's choice of using heterodiegetic narration to shape John's representation. Although the entire novel centres on John, the narrative never grants him an auto-diegetic voice and hence restricts access to his internal mind. This choice of heterodiegetic narration places the perpetrator i.e. John in the same category as Bassam and Ahmed and at a structural distance. Therefore, it signals to readers that John is not a character with whom identification or empathy is permissible (McGlothin 260). The result is that

John's choices, transformations, and ideological shifts are visible only externally, filtered through descriptive narration rather than deep interior psychology. Though reader witness John's actions throughout the novel and in much detail, the are unable to see his reasons for doing so, only what an external narrator is describing to them.

This authorial choice reproduces what McGlothlin identifies as the dominant "cultural imaginary" governing perpetrator representation which refers to an imaginary that resists entering perpetrator consciousness due to perceived ethical risks of doing so (Suleiman 2; McGlothin 259-260). Similar to Holocaust fiction, the post-9/11 American fiction avoids narrative proximity to perpetrators as it has ability to evoke anxieties of "moral slippage" (LaCapra 833) and Abraham adheres to this taboo. The novel presents a series of milestones: an online fascination with Arabic, a sudden attraction to Islam because of a Muslim girl, immersion in a welcoming Muslim community in Brooklyn, travel to Pakistan for deeper study and introduction into the religious militia; but no access is provided into the internal motivations that shape John's decisions.

Scholars such as Waller (148) and Rashne (181) stress that perpetration emerges from a complex interplay of personal, contextual, and psychological factors. Yet Abraham's representation collapses this complexity into a culturally familiar arc in which Islam functions as an almost automatic catalyst for extremism. John is a character who is raised without religious coercion, is emotionally stable and embedded in secular American environment. The novel offers no sustained exploration into why he would find radical Islamic ideology compelling. His transformation is only described at plot level without any details of his internal or psychological motivations. As McGlothlin emphasises, only auto-diegetic narration allows access to the "intrinsic motivations that remain hidden in the deepest parts of consciousness" (257). Abraham's decision to avoid this mode suggests an intentional refusal to complicate John's perpetrator identity. Hence, once again, Abraham's work ultimately reinforces the prevailing stereotypes because of his choice of narrative voice.

***Atta* by Jarret Kobek**

Jarret Kobek's *Atta* stands out not only among the four novels selected in this study

but also among the broader post-9/11 fictional representations of terrorists because it is one of the rare texts that grant the perpetrator an auto-diegetic narrative voice. Unlike writers such as Dubus, Updike, or Abraham, Kobek adopts a first-person mode that invites readers into Muhammad Atta's consciousness. This structural choice immediately positions the text in contrast with dominant post-9/11 literary paradigm which overwhelmingly privileges victim-centred narratives and avoids entering perpetrator interiority due to ethical anxieties surrounding moral slippage (LaCapra 833; Crownshaw 75; Banita 166). By choosing a narrative form that breaches this taboo, Kobek challenges the broader cultural imaginary that portrays perpetrators as incomprehensible embodiments of evil (Anderson 2; Waller 9).

McGlothin's core view that narrative voice determines the reader's ethical and affective positioning toward perpetrators. She argues that heterodiegetic narration sustains distance, while auto-diegetic narration opens a fragile space for identificatory and empathetic engagement (McGlothlin 256–63). In the novel *Atta*, Kobek has employed the latter mode for portraying Atta's early life. The auto-diegetic representations of his childhood in Egypt, student years in Germany and ideological transformation allows readers to witness how Atta suffered from mental disorders since childhood and how personal frustrations, social disillusionment, and ideological encounters coalesce in Atta's worldview. Unlike typical representations that reduce radicalisation to Islamic extremism or cultural pathology, Kobek's portrayal illuminates the incremental and psychologically textured processes behind Atta's choices. These portrayals align with insights from various scholars of perpetrator studies such as Rashne (181) and Waller (148), who emphasise the ordinariness and contextual embeddedness of perpetrators rather than their presumed monstrosity.

One of the notable features of this novel is the dual narrative structure. Atta's childhood is told through auto-diegetic narration and his U.S. training is depicted through heterodiegetic narration which creates a productive contrast between the two narrative styles. Whereas the heterodiegetic sections echo the distancing techniques prevalent in post-9/11 fiction, the auto-diegetic chapters subvert them by granting Atta narrative authority. The juxtaposition reinforces McGlothin's argument that narrative modality shapes whether a perpetrator becomes legible as a human subject or remains

confined to stereotype (259). Kobek's Atta is not absolved or valorised; rather he is situated within a cognitively rich interior world. The narrative foregrounds his ideological ruminations, emotional volatility, and evolving justificatory logic leading to the 9/11 attacks. A stark contrast can be observed to the reductive portrayal of the first three novels, a kind of portrayal that has been thoroughly criticised by scholars who argue that demonising representations obscure the social, historical, and psychological conditions that foster perpetration (Wilmsen and McAllister 77; Scanlan 6; Kühl 41).

Hence, by using auto-diegetic narration, Kobek participates in the rare literary attempt to represent a terrorist-perpetrator as a complex human agent rather than a symbolic vessel of evil. In this way, *Atta* breaks decisively from the conventions of post-9/11 American fiction. The novel's willingness to inhabit perpetrator consciousness challenges the monolithic representations dominant in both cultural and literary discourse, thereby aligning with McGlothin's call to examine perpetrator interiority as a means of understanding rather than excusing atrocity.

7. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the post-9/11 American fiction continues to grapple with ethical and narrative challenges in the representation of perpetrators. While the first three novels namely *The Garden of Last Days*, *Terrorist*, and *American Taliban: The Novel* rely on heterodiegetic narration that keeps perpetrators at a distance and reinforces familiar cultural clichés of fanaticism, sexual repression, and ideological absolutism, *Atta* disrupts this pattern by granting auto-diegetic access to the perpetrator's consciousness. By analysing these texts through McGlothin's framework, it becomes evident that the choice of narrative voice directly shapes reader's ethical and affective orientation. Narrative voice is decisive in determining whether perpetrators remain symbolic embodiments of evil or appear as psychologically legible subjects embedded with historical and social contexts. This study underscores a significant gap in contemporary fiction and critical discussion about perpetratorship. Future literary scholarship can focus on analysing perpetrators from multiple perspectives to provide a deeper understanding into their psychology and motivations. Additionally, authors writing about terrorism may benefit from moving beyond

trauma-centred or stereotype-driven novels toward narrative forms that interrogate the cognitive, contextual and ethical dimensions of radicalisation. Such approaches can broaden literary inquiry and contribute to a more informed public discourse on perpetratorship and its origins.

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