r Friday, September 3, 2010 www.thenational.ae

The National

the review

Music Nico Muhly, from Juilliard to Jónsi **r10**

Books No bad news for the king: dying in Burma **r12**

How the 'war on terror' has marginalised Muslims in America **r4**

Invisible men

inside: culture | music | books | movies | listings | sudoku | television

this week's essential reading

'Clearing up the Climate' from the Newsbook blog, *The Economist*

The IPCC is unaccountable and opaque, says a new report from the InterAcademy Council, which also seems to call for the head of its chair, Rajendra Pachauri. Can it be fixed?

cover

Failures of imagination

The baleful effects of the American 'war on terror' have not been limited to the political realm – and the cultural damage has been even more grave, Manan Ahmed writes

The 9/11 Commission Report, issued in May 2004, declared that a "failure of imagination" on the part of the United States' analytical and intelligence communities was a prime reason behind their failure to prevent the September 11 attacks. One of the key recommendations by the Commission, then, was to call for "routinizing, even bureaucratizing the exercise of imagination".

But what did they mean by that word, imagination? In the report, it is used twice in a manner that hints towards its practical value. Once, when discussing the "principal architect of the 9/11 attacks", Khalid Sheikh Muhammad: "highly educated and equally comfortable in a government office or a terrorist safehouse, KSM applied his imagination, technical aptitude, and managerial skills to hatching and planning an extraordinary array of terrorist schemes". Second, when commenting on the foresight of the National Security Council member Richard A Clarke, the only person in the administration concerned about the danger posed by hijacked aircraft. Here the commission notes that his concerns came not from intelligence briefings but from "Tom Clancy novels".

In the first case, it reads more like "cleverness" or "ingenuity" than imagination (the report praises KSM's acquired skills and his adaptability, not his "creativity"). But in the second case, we have a meaning slightly closer to the conventional usage: the "imagination" of Tom Clancy, the writer of fictional thrillers, which supposedly provided clues to the possibility of an attack like that of September 11. Yet the intelligence community failed to grasp the value of this *novelist's* imagination. That the novelist can grasp truths about the terrorist that cannot be accessible to the trained and the skilled seems, on the face of it, a bizarre claim. So, perhaps, the commission meant that the novelist could better imagine Khalid Sheikh Muhammad himself – to understand, that is, what choices, what turns and what histories collided to make him possible? And that it was this capacity which needed to be routinised: the capacity to imagine this Other, to give them an interiority, a mindfulness, an agency, a history.

Six years later, the commission's hopes seem to have been misplaced: the years since September 11 have not provided us with many examples of "the exercise of imagination" when it comes to fictional representations of the Terrorist. When imagined in literary fiction, would-be perpetrators of terrorist violence cleave to a by-now familiar set of stereotypes: as rigid, sexualised "outsiders" possessing already-articulated ideologies. John Updike's 2006 novel *Terrorist* sets out its cardboard characterisation from its very first lines: "Devils, Ahmad thinks. These devils seek to take away my God. All day long, at Central High School, girls sway and sneer and expose their soft bodies and alluring hair." Another type of truncated imagination is at display in the work of numerous other American writers who have addressed terrorism in fiction but constrained themselves almost entirely to the perspective of their American protagonists.

These failures of imagination, in fact, are symptomatic of an uniquely American engagement with the figure of the Terrorist – one that has both a cultural and political impact. Culturally, the Terrorist appears as a "known unknown" (to use Donald Rumsfeld's haiku) – pre-determined along the matrix of "Radical Islam" and its understood components which grant a specific age, a specific geography and a specific profile.

The Terrorist in this cultural milieu can act as a simple marker for forces that are themselves incomprehensible to many – Islam or Pakistan – which allow civilisational arguments without even the rhetorical need to invoke facts, history or local knowledge. One simply has to assert known unknowability – as in the most recent case of the so-called "Ground Zero Mosque" where the word "mosque" is, in itself, a provocation, and the Muslims bear the burden of proving beyond unreasonable doubt their patriotism, their good intentions or even the basic fact that they are American. In effect, once understood as Muslims, the planners of the Islamic community centre in Lower Manhattan automatically become "outsiders" – and they are presumed, therefore, to harbour heinous desires and nefarious intentions.

But the political impact of this imaginative failure is even more pernicious and devastating. It renders the policies for punishing or fighting the Terrorist also unknowable. The practices of the state are, it is assumed, the only viable possibilities of a response to terrorism – an example being the tortured explications of torture itself that were peddled by the media, in which the overwhelming consensus was that whatever actions the state deemed necessary were the correct ones. It demands an unwise degree of trust in the institutions of power, it gives their narrative all of the agency, all of the truth. It gives us a world where only the degree of torture is debated and not the morality of it, where incarceration without even a charge is merely an electioneering issue and not a constitutional crisis, and where indiscriminate surveillance is routinely defended with the argument that if you have nothing to hide you have nothing to fear.

On this highly limited and highly corrosive cultural and political terrain, the figure of the Terrorist enjoys a surprisingly uncomplicated public life in America – devoid of any complexity, and bestowed with nearly universal consensus as to its motives, designs and actions. This may not come as a surprise, but it should. The practice of terrorism is certainly not new to the world (nor to America, for that matter) and, over the course of its own history, it has never before been viewed in such simplistic terms. The Terrorist is, after all, an intimate to the European, and has always been imagined with complexity and nuance: with the capacity to act against the state, to target individuals for assassinations, and to trumpet ideologies, while standing opposed to, but also within society.

English received the word from the French *terreur*, and the earliest proud self-proclaimers of the label Terrorist were the French Jacobins in the 1790s. The assassinations and bombings by anarchists and saboteurs that occurred in the late 19th and early 20th century were amply covered in fiction, defined in legal terms, philosophised and theorised. Works like Dostoevsky's *The Devils* (1872), Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* (1907), André Malraux's *La Condition Humaine* (1933), Arthur Koestler's *Thieves in the Night* (1946), and Albert Camus's *The Just Assassins* (1949) represented the best in the realm of Europe's cultural imagination; at the same time, the actions of colonial powers like Spain in the Philippines, Britain in India and Malaysia, and France in Algeria represented the worst of the political realm.

Between 1980 and 2001, the world's highest concentration of terrorist attacks was in India, where the Sikh Khalistan Movement and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam were responsible for the assassination of two prime ministers. The Kashmiri, the Assamese and the Naxalite separatist movements, and the communal riots between Hindus and Muslims provided even more political turmoil from the 1970s onwards. As had been the case in Europe, India's response to terrorism was both politically draconian and imaginatively complex. Indira Gandhi's imposed suspension of the constitution during the Emergency (1975-1977), or the military crackdown in Kashmir in the 1990s co-existed with the intimate portraits of the Terrorist in popular cinema and arts – Mani Ratnam's 1998 *Dil Se* being a particularly evocative example: a love story enveloping the tale of a young female suicide bomber who is put on this path as a direct result of atrocities committed by the Indian army. So what accounts for the American blind-spot, the failure of imagination in conceiving the Terrorist as anything other than exceptional, foreign, and prone to the basest sexual and ideological provocations?

It is worthwhile to note that, in American formulations, terrorism remains a uniquely non-Western phenomenon, and one that comes from a time other than our own; the ideology of its exponents is often casually described as *medieval* and, hence, in direct conflict with the modern. To construct such an understanding, one has to necessarily forget the European genesis of terrorism and one has to necessarily make the Terrorist a figure outside of comprehensibility – an alien, an outsider. The template for the Terrorist, in the American imagination, is rigid and historically dated. It is the template of the Old Man of the Mountain.

"And in this manner the Old Man of the Mountain got his people to murder any one whom he desired to get rid of." So reads Marco Polo's travelogue, a hodge-podge of Crusade histories and circulating eye-witness accounts of the East as well as myths, marvels and legends. Polo was not the first to introduce Christian Europe to the 12th-century Islamic sect known as the Assassins, but he certainly gave the legend its fullest form, and fixed it in the western imagination for centuries to come. They are community of heretics (*mulahid*) living in remote mountains, who believe that the "*Shaykh al-Hashishim*" is their prophet and they do whatever he asks of them, even at the cost of Their lives. Shaykh is translated as the "Old Man" and, presumably,

Terrorism, continued on **6** →

'New Hat' by Daisy Rockwell depicts Umar Farouk Abdulmattab, the 'underpants bomber' who tried to blow up an aeroplane over Detroit, Michigan in December 2009, posing for a photograph while visiting London. Courtesy of the artist

The National the review

> *Paintings like Rockwell's grant that the terrorist might look like one's uncle, one's student, someone who can potentially be understood*

this week's essential reading

{ 'Unearthly Powers' by Wendy Lesser, The Threepenny Review
Like all obsessive writers, Isaac Asimov was a victim of the repetition compulsion, rewriting a single novel over and over again. He was a child of his time – but he also transcends it }

Kumar wants to make the war's consequences visible by exposing the inequities of domestic counter-terrorism prosecutions

➔ **Terrorism,** continued from **4**

the *hashashin* as "assassin". To these earlier sketches, Marco Polo had added new colour: a secret paradise, filled with beautiful and willing maidens, somewhere high in the mountains, where the kidnapped youth first opens his eyes and gazes at rivers of milk and honey. Here he stays, engorging himself on all the delights, being indoctrinated, taught the skills of evasion and of murder. Then, he is drugged once again, and this time he awakens to find himself in front of the Old Man, his prophet, who now asks him to do his bidding, the killing of a rival, and the reward would be the return to the Paradise.

It may not be an accident that George W Bush, in his utterances immediately after September 11, invoked the Crusades. For one of the earliest and most influential advisers to the White House on matters Islamic was Bernard Lewis, the "doyen of Middle East historians" and one of the main proponents of the "Clash of Civilisations" thesis, a darling of Bush and Cheney and the chief-explicator of Islam to the rest of America. He was also the author of the most popular scholarly work about the Assassins, his 1967 study *The Assassins: A Radical Sect in Islam.*

The Crusades and the "Assassins" were central to Lewis's understanding of Muslim terrorists. In his framing, the figure of the Terrorist remains perpetually fixed to the 12th century: the Terrorist is an outsider, the Terrorist is brainwashed and beholden to an incomprehensible ideology, the Terrorist is a young sex-crazed man, the Terrorist is an automaton bent on destroying western civilization. It mattered little to this account that the historical "Assassins" were a secret sect who called themselves

'Experiment in International Living' (above), a portrait of John Walker Lindh. 'Tuna Princess' (right) depicts Mohamed Mahmood Alessa, who was arrested en route to fight with militants in Somalia. According to his mother, he had hoped to take his cat, Tuna Princess, as well. Courtesy of the artist

fedayeen (self-annihilators), operating in the mountains of Alamut, in northern Iran. Theologically they were Nizari Ismai'ili – a subsect within the Shia tradition – but their cause was political: they were intent mainly on carving out a space for themselves against the declining Seljuk empire and the Egyptian Mamluks. Hence, they were responsible mainly for assassinations of Mamluk officials and other Muslim notables. There are no credible reports that they ever took hashish – only the Mamluks referred to them, derogatorily, as the *hashashin* – or that they ever had a secret paradise.

Lewis's Assassins/Terrorists model, which has come to dominate the American discourse on terrorism, is clearly ahistorical, but it also has a geographical component: the place of the Terrorist, in this view, is always "outside". Recall that one of the rationales for the invasion of Iraq was the so-called "fly-paper theory", which posited that as long as we were killing terrorists "over there", they couldn't come and kill us "over here". This geography of exclusion can be seen most starkly in the realm of law, where the Terrorist is deprived of the protections and rights that apply to "domestic" space: confined at Guantanamo Bay, stripped of constitutional rights, subject to "extraordinary renditions".

The failure of these policies, of course, has been widely observed and fiercely argued. But the confluence between the political and cultural understandings of the Terrorist in America has gone almost entirely unremarked: this single framework renders all Muslim Americans politically suspect and culturally incomprehensible. What's more, that they are politically suspect makes them more culturally unknowable; their cultural foreignness, in turn, makes them more politically suspect.

▶▶▶

It is among the accomplishments of Amitava Kumar's new book, *A Foreigner Carrying in the Crook of His Arm a Tiny Bomb* (Duke University Press, Dh80), that it refuses to separate the cultural and the political means by which the War on Terror has been waged. Kumar's slim volume begins in India, with the wrongful arrest of terror suspects – and with the observation, by a poultry farmer in Walavati, that "What the Americans were doing in Abu Ghraib, they learned from our policemen here". As he traces the ordeals of the "ordinary men and women whose lives are entangled in the War on Terror", Kumar endeavours to connect not only the tortuous practices common to states fighting terrorists, but also the ways this "war" has been imagined. He covers the cases of three convicted terrorists, in their own words, and in the words of their loved ones. The three men were all caught in sting operations and accused of planning crimes, or expressing the desire to commit crimes, against the United States; one convicted of purchasing a rocket launcher, another of wanting to detonate bombs in the New York City subway, and the last of funding Sikh terrorists in India.

Alongside his personal encounters with these terrorists, Kumar shows the haphazardly constructed legal cases, the government witnesses, and the clash of half-digested cultural understandings. He peels back the stories that we only know by headlines – the Lackawanna Six, the American Taliban – with a novelist's eye and a reporter's doggedness. Kumar is not out to rehabilitate these characters nor to act as their apologist. He keeps a studied distance, a knowing diffidence – but not just to the terrorists: to the prosecution, to their evidence, to the informants used by the US government to provoke the defendants into convictable speech and acts.

It is when he widens his gaze from the terrorists to the arts, to public speech and to advocacy, in order to highlight the efforts of artists to observe, catalogue and explain – and the efforts of the state to control, coerce and regulate – that his book becomes a truly horrific indictment of post-September 11 "failure of imagination". He correctly identifies "all of us" as participants in the state's war on terror – sanctioning the drone attacks, extra-judicial assassinations and extraordinary renditions. By focusing on the banality of the state's cases against the old, the infirm, the misfits, the ill-suited, Kumar reminds us that the war raging far from our doorsteps is also all around us. He wants to bring that war closer, and to make its consequences visible, by exposing the inequities of domestic counter-terrorism prosecutions. It is a hard case to make, especially in a country that is yet to face up to the realities of the war it rages far away, in Afghanistan and Pakistan. But it is an essential case, and a moral one, and he makes it powerfully in the vacuum that has been left by the failures of fictional and historical imagination.

▶▶▶

Kumar makes both a political and legal argument, but also a cultural one. It is to his credit that, while writing a non-fiction book, he acknowledges the power of the imagination – of art – to wrestle into view that which politics works to hide from us. Kumar's work demonstrates that the Terrorist is not a "known unknown": he is both ordinary and comprehensible.

So what does it really mean to imagine the Terrorist? One answer can be found in the work of the American artist Daisy Rockwell, whose paintings exemplify an effort to humanise the other, to shift the gaze of Americans inward rather than outward, and to force a dialogue with the "known unknowns". Rockwell is the grand-daughter of Norman Rockwell, the painter of iconic America. In her paintings of terrorists and militants – Osama bin Laden, Mullah Omar, John Walker Lindh, Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, Mohamed Mahmood Alessa, Veerrappan – they are depicted gazing directly at the viewer, based on photographs that are disconcertingly ordinary. It is a humanising and an intimate gaze, which disarms the viewer – one unaccustomed to seeing these figures surrounded in bright colours, or dazzled in sparkle. But out of this seemingly jarring contrast emerges the most pertinent question – what exactly are we looking at? Who exactly are we viewing? After all, the central conceit of the Assassin/Terrorist paradigm is to deflect such questions and to shroud them in darkness. Rockwell, instead, locks the Terrorists into a silent conversation with us, where they inhabit the space between the canvas and our imagination, utterly knowable,and completely fragile.

In the aftermath of September 11, Rockwell was teaching South Asian literature at a university in Chicago. She remembers the shocked, confused eyes of her Pakistani-American Muslim students – who confessed that they felt they had suddenly been made outsiders, that they now hovered irreversibly at the edges of an American life that had not been easy to negotiate to begin with. Those eyes seem to follow us in Rockwell's paintings of John Walker Lindh, the so-called American Taliban or of Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, the Nigerian underpants bomber.

Kumar writes that one of his key concerns was to find out "how artists and writers, those conventionally regarded as imaginative, would help us disturb the algebra of hate". Certainly, his own book is a clear challenge to the ossified discourse on terrorism in the United States. Paintings like Rockwell's are perhaps even more fundamentally disruptive. They grant that the terrorist might look like one's uncle, one's student, someone who can potentially be understood, someone who resolutely belongs to this time, this space, and this history.

Manan Ahmed is a historian of Pakistan at Freie Universitat Berlin. He blogs at Chapati Mystery.