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## IRONIC, GROTESQUE, FARCICAL AND TRAGIC DEPICTION OF TOTALITARIANISM IN MARTIN AMIS'S SELECTED WORKS

### Abstract

The aim of this article is to present an ironic, grotesque, farcical and tragic dimension of totalitarianism in Martin Amis's selected works. The author is going to analyse and juxtapose three dictatorial ideologies: Nazism, Communism and Islamic fundamentalism while showing Martin Amis's distinctive literary techniques, styles and modes used with reference to the examination of each of these three issues. Firstly, the emphasis will be placed on the exploration of those novels of the British writer that present Nazism and Communism and their aftermath, namely *Time's Arrow*, *House of Meetings* and *Koba the Dread: Laughter and the Twenty Million*. This section will present ironic, grotesque, satirical as well as tragic facets of these two totalitarian systems depicted by Martin Amis. The subsequent part will focus on the issues of Islamist fundamentalism, terrorism and the relations between Islamist and Western culture at the turn of the third millennium. Here, the author is going to scrutinize Martin Amis's novel *The Second Plane: September 11: Terror and Boredom* as well as she will refer to the writer's miscellaneous interviews, talks and discussions. Similarly to the previous part devoted to the analysis of Nazism and Communism, this one will draw the attention to Amis's grotesque, farcical and ironic delineation of Islamic fundamentalism, yet here, a special emphasis will be placed on the writer's description of a political and social aspect of this matter rather than on his concern for linguistic and stylistic innovation. Finally, by juxtaposing these three totalitarian ideologies in Martin Amis's selected fiction the author is going to show numerous interpretations and sides of this subject matter, ranging from political and social debate to cultural and literary criticism.

Who controls the past controls the future  
Who controls the present controls the past.

*George Orwell*

A great part of Amis's works is saturated with violence, death, murder and victimisation. The critics, such as Brian Finney assert that the writer focuses on these issues largely in order to illustrate the murderous, barbaric nature of contemporary civilisation. Having been born a few years after World War II and brought up during the Cold War with its political turbulences as well as with a perennial menace of nuclear annihilation and finding himself in a world at the brink of millennial war and close to ecological catastrophe, he stresses that it is not his intention as a writer to picture this modern life bleak, atrocious and frightful as it is self-evidently frightful.

Martin Amis recurrently portrays his characters, employing irony, satire, grotesque, farce and black humour, as victims of varied kinds of oppression. Firstly, he foregrounds a murderous side of totalitarian systems, prevalingly Communism, Nazism, the former being in this view closely linked with nuclear concerns. Subsequently, the author underscores a manipulative and exploitative facet of postmodern capitalism, in particular, the omnipresence of media culture, mass communication and information technology. The issues concerning political and social dictatorships are mingled with those presenting capitalist oppression, which is best exemplified in *Money*. Lastly, the novelist brings into light the problem of literary rivalry, the question of the status of a writer and of the value of a literary work in the face of postmodern social and cultural challenges, painstakingly illustrated in *The Information*.

Regarding the theme of totalitarianism, Amis concentrates largely on the atrocities of Communism and Nazism, yet in his most recent works he touches upon the problem of Islamic fundamentalism. Taking into account the first two regimes, one may notice that, on the one hand, the author depicts them individually and distinctively in two novels, *Time's Arrow* and *House of Meetings*, but, on the other hand, he merges them both in his fiction (*Yellow Dog*) and non fiction (*Koba the Dread*). The depiction of Hitlerism and Stalinism in these two dissimilar books betokens the writer's political concerns which becomes noticeable in the above-mentioned novels, as well as his exposition of the novels' artistic values. It is the mixture of Amis's showing his socio-political disquiet and his predilection for literary inventiveness that saturates the majority of the novelist's works portraying different oppressive regimes.

When juxtaposing *Time's Arrow* and *House of Meetings*, the novels written around fifteen years separate from each other, we may easily observe their structural and stylistic dissimilarity and discrepancy in delineating the relations between the author and the characters in a narrative text. The first work is indubitably more experimental and innovative in terms of a narrative form, perspective and mode. However, it is simultaneously polemical and disputatious. Contrary to it, the second book, its more moderate, elegiac, mournful tone, traditional narration as well as the writer's employment of

a reliable narrator being a counterbalance to his regular ironic play with narrator and reader used in the previous novels, appears by far less controversial and more critically acclaimed. Like in a larger part of his novels which present the ferocious reality of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, both *Time's Arrow* and *House of Meetings* are not free from ironic undertones. Nonetheless, it is the former work in which irony becomes its vital and inseparable constituent. By the use of irony as a mode of presenting temporal reversal and splitting of the protagonist and narrator, Amis illustrates the character's perverted ethics and moral decay of Western civilisation. The novelist makes us recognise the ironic mode and time-reversed structure as the most telling yet shocking and ethically contentious ways of narrating the story of the Holocaust and its aftermath, especially through the prism of the Nazi's psyche.

In comparison with a perplexing narration and an ambiguous tone in *Time's Arrow*, *House of Meetings* emerges as a genuine tragedy devoid of a satirical undertone, a linguistic and stylistic experimentation. In this vein the work constitutes Amis's departure from the use of a comic genre dominant in almost all his previous works. Although in both of the novels the author depicts the horror and heinousness of the two totalitarian systems, it is undeniably his later book which highlights the tragic fate of their victims. In *Time's Arrow* genocide is presented by an unreliable, naive narrator who inadvertently distorts its genuine dimension and therefore the readers are denied the insight into the minds of the persecuted. What is more, the novel's aim is to exhibit the barbarous, inhuman nature of a war criminal and his desperate attempts to expunge from his memory acts of terror and his contribution to Jews' extermination. Contrastingly, in *House of Meetings*, the novel which revisits the subject of the Russian gulags, the narratorial voice is given to an unnamed political prisoner and a victim of Stalinism who relates the story of his life during and after his incarceration in Norlag, the Russian concentration camp in the Arctic Circle. The protagonist and simultaneously narrator introduces into the text the figure of his half-brother, Lev and Zoya, a Jewish girl who they both fall in love with and who becomes Lev's spouse. In this regard the story concerns a love triangle between the two brothers and Zoya, and becomes a prelude to the central event of the book – the moment of opening the eponymous House of Meetings where prisoners were permitted conjugal visits after Stalin's death in 1953. Nevertheless, the description of marital meetings in the Russian concentration camp constitutes the background for the analysis of the protagonists' deplorable situation in a gulag and its pernicious influence on their psyche and lives in the ensuing years.

Taking into consideration language and style, one may observe the novel's realist approach reinforced by Amis's use of a reliable narrator who graphically recounts the events. This narration, so untypical of the British

writer, combined with his exploration of the subject utterly deviating from his former issues delineating mostly Western European and American matters, constitutes a new, uncharted territory to Amis. Moreover, the theme examined in *House of Meetings* concerns not only its protagonists but every single character of the book as well. Therefore, the linguistic and stylistic innovation as well as the very narration of the text become subordinated to the ends of tragedy. As Finney remarks, despite the narrator's personal involvement in the story and his foregrounding the figures of his brother and beloved woman, the tragedy of the novel is seemingly not confined to the three protagonists. The critic asserts that here Amis expresses his profound grief and sorrow over the loss of Russia's soul as a result of a long process of dehumanisation and barbarism its society experienced under Stalin's regime, particularly prisoners of gulags. This is illustrated by the following mottos of the prison: "the first law of camp life: to you, nothing- from you everything" (Amis 2006: 223) or "You may live, but you won't love" (Amis 2006: 85). These two quotations, in particular the second one, reflecting Russian citizens' physical and mental maltreatment, and their undergoing the process of emotional washing up, indicate the book's parallel with George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

It is interesting to observe that the narrator recounts the story of his life in a Russian gulag and outlines a camp reality, addressing his book to his American stepdaughter, Venus, who additionally writes the footnotes in it. The figure of Venus as the recipient of the narrative as well as the writer's allusions to momentous dates in both American and Russian recent history – September 1–6, 2004, which refers to Beslan tragedy and echoes the terrorist attacks on World Trade Center -symbolise American and Russian shared dramas at the outset of the third millennium. More importantly, however, Amis endeavours to show that Venus's thoroughly American experience makes her fully recognise a Soviet camp life and its reverberations on the one hand, and helps the narrator explain to her the effect on both himself and Lev of their eight years spent in Norlag on the other hand (Finney 2008: 66). This outcome constitutes the main theme of the novel which becomes disclosed in the final pages of the book when the narrator, near to death, opens the letter addressed to him by his long-dead brother Lev.

Amis purposefully uses the figure of the narrator's stepdaughter as a messenger or secret sharer of her uncle's tragic story. He stresses that without Venus's American experience he would find himself unable to disclose the heinousness of the Russian gulag. Brian Finney points out that unlike most writers depicting the theme of Soviet camps, such as Solzhenitsyn who exposed the enormous life force of their protagonists, their powerful willingness to survive and recover from their traumatic experience in the camps, Amis strives to show the alternative dimension of a gulag reality, the

“more typical experience” (Lehmann 2007) embodied by the narrator incapable of transcending the camp’s ferocity. In keeping with this, the protagonist does not exhibit the qualities attributed to Solzhenitsyn’s heroes, apparently larger-than-life characters, but rather stands for a common or “typical” (Lehmann 2007) representative of gulag’s victims. Considering the figure of the narrator’s stepdaughter, her role as the story’s addressee, the author parallels her wholly American experience with the Russian tragic history. In doing so he makes the readers, especially those of Western Europe and of the United States, comprehend the heinousness of any totalitarian system. Amis deliberately places Venus as the recipient of her uncle’s story at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. He wants to highlight the fact that at the outset of the third millennium Western society, having simultaneously experienced a political, social and economic catastrophe, can utterly recognise the tragedy of Russian civilians persecuted in the name of the ferocious ideology of Soviet Communism. In view of that, *House of Meetings* has an educational and didactic dimension. Here, the author apparently abandons humour, satire and lessens his ironic tone. Moreover, he renounces the narrative and linguistic innovation in favour of a realistic depiction of the gulag’s prisoners’ trauma. Hence, this novel stands in a startling contrast to *Time’s Arrow* where the narrative experimentation is mingled with irony by means of which the writer, on the one hand, makes his mostly British and American audience perceive the ludicrousness of the Nazi ideology and, on the other hand, accuses them of their entire ignorance of the history of genocide, the attempt to blot out from their minds the recollections of this disgraceful chapter in the history of World War II.

When set beside *Time’s Arrow* and *House of Meetings*, the novels that separately outline the horrors of the two totalitarian systems, *Koba the Dread: Laughter and the Twenty Million* constitutes a blend of a political-historical essay on the Soviet Russia, a black farce, a satire on both Stalin’s and Hitler’s terrors and an acrimonious debate among Western intellectuals over Communism and Nazism. Although in this work Amis makes references to the two dictators, presenting them as comic pairs, it is the Soviet oppressor and his regime to which the title of the book alludes to. “Koba the Dread” refers to Joseph Stalin who adopted the nickname “Koba” as a child after the hero of a well-known Russian novel *The Patricide* whilst “The Dread” derives from Ivan the Terrible, also known as Ivan the Dread, a “hands-on torturer” and “paranoid psychotic” after whom Stalin modeled himself (Amis 2002: 168). The two elements of the second part of the title mirror a grotesque or irony: “Twenty million” indicates the number of victims who died in his purges, famines and forced collectivization whilst “Laughter” recognises the literary paradigm that organises the writer’s examination of Stalin’s evil (Diedrick 2004: 189–190). Amis directs his satire in the book at the ideas of

a Communist society. Analogously to *House of Meetings*, he is demonstrating his defiance of all forms of ideology, asserting that: “ideology brings about a disastrous fusion: that of violence and righteousness” (Amis 2002: 86).

As for Stalin, the novelist’s presentation of the Soviet dictator echoes a monstrous world-historical version of the grotesque, preposterous villains that recurrently appear in his novels, the most prominent of whom are Quentin Villiers in *Dead Babies*, Fielding Goodney in *Money* or Steve Cousins in *The Information*. Furthermore, the novelist invariably employs literary tropes and categories to explain the outcomes of Stalin’s iniquity (Diedrick 2004: 190). In *Koba the Dread* the Soviet dictator is not solely depicted as a historical figure but is also as a literary character equipped with most grotesque and hideous features attributed to the afore-mentioned characters. Stalin is depicted as a murderer, whilst the eponymous twenty million are anonymous, unnamed group victims exterminated during the Communist regime. In view of this, *Koba the Dread* bears resemblance to *Time’s Arrow*, especially with respect to the foregrounding the figure of the perpetrators, their repugnant portrait and a thorough scrutiny of their crimes. What distinguishes Amis’s later work from his previous novel is its humouristic, satirical undertone and the author’s deviation from presenting Stalin and the Soviet holocaust towards his fierce polemics with various thinkers concerning totalitarian systems.

As was formerly underscored, *Koba the Dread* is called a black farce owing to the novelist’s grotesque, caricatured portrayal of the Soviet dictator and likewise to his perception of the situation in Russia as weird and absurd when Stalin was in power. At this point, Diedrick refers to the writer’s novel in which the British author assigns the Russian nightmare to a subgenre of comedy, sounding as if he has returned from one of the 1971 seminars with the literary critic he reported attending at Oxford in 1969 (Amis 2001: 232): “Russia, 1917–53: what is its genre? It is not a tragedy, like *Lear*, not an anti-comedy, like *Troilus and Cressida*, nor yet a problem comedy, like *Measure for Measure*. It is a black farce, like *Titus Andronicus*.” (Amis 2002: 258). However, the critic stresses that the author’s juxtaposing Stalin with *Lear* garbles Shakespeare’s greatest tragedy and his comparison of the state of Soviet Russia to these plays appears unseemly as it renders both literature and history trivial and simplistic. Diedrick underlines the discordance between Amis’s delineation of Stalin’s murderous policies, citing and referring to prominent Russian novelists, such as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Eugenia Ginzburg and Nadezdha Mandelstam, and the writer’s pondering on the macabre yet satiric facet of the Soviet system and its ideology. In this respect the critic claims that *Koba the Dread* ought not to be considered as a serious historical study, and therefore a black farce seems to be a more appropriate term for this work.

Needless to say, farce constitutes one of a few generic components of Amis's work. In fact, it is a hybrid form, combining personal elements, such as autobiography, biography, and historical ones, like political science and historical fiction (Keulks 2003: 243). Taking into account its historical and political aspect, it is worth referring to the writer's rumination on the attitude of a Western society towards Soviet crimes. He voices his disquiet over the "chief-lacuna" of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – the failure of Western intellectuals, among others, his father, Kingsley Amis, to condemn the grotesque, gruesome crimes perpetrated in the USSR even as they were occurring, and their disinclination to utterly renounce some of their Communist sympathies since (Diedrick 2004: 191). Amis highlights the hypocrisy of Western thinkers in their assessment of the disgraceful legacy of Stalinist Russia and, in this respect, he parallels it with their equivocal treatment of the Holocaust which he accentuated in *Time's Arrow*.

In *Koba the Dread* Amis focuses on the Soviet oppressor and his regime, yet Stalinism is not the exclusive theme permeating his work. The figure of Stalin echoes that of Hitler to whom the novelist refers when comparing the two totalitarian systems. The juxtaposition of the two dictators and their dissimilar ideologies reflects the writer's predilection for portraying in his fiction opposing comic pairs and exaggerated contrasts, such as Terry Service and Gregory Riding in *Success*, Keith Talent and Guy Clinch in *London Fields* or Richard Tull and Gwynn Barry in *The Information*. He employs a similar procedure in *Koba the Dread*. Nevertheless, one may detect a disparity between the caricatured portrait of the afore-mentioned fictional pairs, miserable, defenceless characters and the narrators devoid of agency, and a depiction of the two powerful oppressors. Amis uses literary references or categories to assess the historical and moral differences between the evils of Hitler and Stalin. The author remarks that "Nazi terror strove for precision, while Stalinist terror was deliberately random" (Amis 2002: 85), employing this allusion to the witches' chant in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* to compare the two leaders: "Ideology brings about a disastrous fusion: that of violence and righteousness – a savagery without stain. Hitler's ideology was foul, Lenin's fair-seeming" (Amis 2002: 86). Subsequently, he endeavours to explain why, in contrast to the Holocaust, the Soviet calamity is capable of evoking laughter, as he suggests in the title of his work. He finds the solution to this problem in utopian hankering –an idea he considers when alluding to *Dr Faustus* and Milan Kundera's *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*:

Is that the difference between the little moustache and the big moustache, between Stalin and Beelzebub? One elicits spontaneous fury, and the other elicits spontaneous laughter? And what kind of laughter is it? It is, of course, the laughter of universal fondness for that old, old idea about the perfect society. It is



also the laughter of forgetting. It forgets the demonic energy embedded in that hope. It forgets the Twenty Million. (Amis 2002: 256–57)

Diedrick underlines Amis's maintaining that scanty observers of the Soviet experiment laugh spontaneously when they consider Stalin and therefore the critic regards this comparison as affected and false, typical of a farce or grotesque, but not of an in-depth historical examination (Diedrick 2004: 194).

Nevertheless, one cannot fail to notice that the novelist's hinting at a satirical perception of the Soviet dictator indicates his irony on the cultural paradox in viewing diversely Communism and Nazism, particularly with respect to the unequal social condemnation of the two systems and their ideologies. Amis blames Western thinkers and men of letters for disregarding the horrifying scale of Stalinist regime in respect to that of Hitlerism. He indicates that some part of Western society distort the images of the two totalitarian leaders who evoke disparate mental reactions, that is wrath in the case of Hitler and laughter and mockery in the case of Stalin. Furthermore, one may concur with Diedrick's viewpoint that Amis's book cannot be regarded as a serious, objective historical-political study on the Stalinist history owing to the writer's personal involvement in polemics with various thinkers concerning Communism as well as his digressions and references to personal matters, such as a depiction of his sister's death. However, in *Koba the Dread* the British author does not aspire to elicit a historical truth and his book serves rather as a base or prelude to his mulling over his family concerns. In fact, the writer correlates Stalin's cruelty to the Fatherland and his father's severity, or even sadism as a husband and father, as well as he compares, unfortunately, as critics assert, the extermination of the unnamed twenty million victims of the regime to the demise of his sister Sally. Furthermore, Amis's work constitutes a painstaking analysis of the nature of evil and perception of a criminal. In a grotesque portraying of the Soviet dictator the author makes references to his most well-known villainous characters, adroitly combining dread, horror, repulsion with satire and farce.

Communism and Nazism constitute two elements of Amis's informal literary totalitarian 'triade'. A substantial part of his recent fiction, and especially non-fiction, reflect the novelist's preoccupation with Islamic fundamentalism. In the works, such as *Yellow Dog*, "The Last Days of Muhammad Atta" and *The Second Plane: September 11: Terror and Boredom* the author attempts to disclose cultural and social backgrounds to the terrorist ideology, making allusions to Islamic extremists, and to accentuate the idea of power and hegemony in the contemporary world. Despite the fact that Amis's latest fiction and essays provoked acrimonious debates among literary circles, prevailing in Arabic countries, they mirror a new tendency in

his literary oeuvre, such as his concerns over religious fundamentalism, women's discrimination in Islamic countries, or the relationship between faith and political terrorism. All the above-mentioned books written after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 provided a deep insight into a devastating reality of this late modern era. This event, together with the concomitant Islamic bombing attacks on the London tube and a railway station in Madrid, which reflect social, political and economic hecatomb of Western civilisation, became a turning point for Amis as well as for numerous Western intellectuals and thinkers in perceiving the world and its society at the turn of the new millennium, in particular with respect to troubled relations between Western and Islamic cultures. The scale of this terrorism induced the novelist to ponder on the very nature of Islamism and to create his theory and interpretation of what it represents. The author asserts that the roots of Islamic militancy goes back to the 13<sup>th</sup> century when Islam became subordinated to the West and this resulted in radicals' unrepressed fury. He stresses that it represents an extreme fanatical ideology which presupposes the rejection of reason (Finney 2008: 109).

Amis considers Islamic fundamentalism as preposterous and irrational, and thus compares it to the ludicrousness of Stalin's and Hitler's regimes, arguing that their ideologies imply the abomination of reason. Added to that, the writer draws the attention to misogyny, racial and ethnical prejudice and religious fundamentalism as inseparable elements of Islamism. In response to the charges of discrimination and hatred for the Muslim culture he stirs up in Arabic countries and Islamic minorities in Britain, he totally denies being an Islamophobe, asserting that he finds the harassment and violence against Muslim women outrageous and that it is mortifying to be a member of a society in which any minority feels endangered. Still the same, the writer considers himself an anti-Islamist since he underlines that "there is nothing irrational about fearing someone who professedly wants to kill you" (Amis 2007).

Amis's works concerning Islamic extremism mirror his polemics on the social, political and historical dimension of religious fundamentalism, but above all his meticulous observation and exploration of the iniquity of any totalitarian system. Similarly to *Koba the Dread*, in *Yellow Dog* and *The Second Plane* the novelist's historical-political concerns are intertwined with his linguistic inventiveness and literary allusions. This becomes apparent in the first-mentioned novel, the work which does not directly and overtly outline the issue of Islamic terrorism, but it incorporates "the mental environment that seemed to come after September 11<sup>th</sup>" (Weich 2003). *Yellow Dog* focuses on the problem of male insecurity and their desperate attempts to gain power and control over women via violence and harassment. Amis delineates this concern through a mental metamorphosis

of the main character, Xan Meo, who, having been severely beaten over the head by two hired criminals, becomes sent back to an atavistic state of mind in which his male fantasies and yearnings dominate his behaviour. The author underlines a correlation between the figure of Xan and his image of Islamic extremists who are so obsessed with their powerlessness, helplessness and indignity that they dream of compensatory dominance over women. He shows that both his protagonist and fundamentalists use violence as a retaliation against their humiliation and maltreatment.

Taking into account *The Second Plane*, one may notice their considerable structural and stylistic difference from *Yellow Dog*. When set beside a linguistic experimentation of the previous novel, exemplified by the proliferation of fragmentary sentences and exchanges as well as the book's narrative complexity, the next two works are regarded as political essays on Islamic ideology and terrorism. However, in terms of its style, "The Last Days of Muhammad Atta" bears some resemblance to *Yellow Dog* and to *Koba the Dread* since in these works the novelist satirically and grotesquely portrays Xan and Atta, yet, as critics maintain, he much more demonises the latter and turns him into a mindless ideologue (Finney 2008: 109).

All things considered, Amis's depiction of Islamic fundamentalism, together with his presentation of the two heinous 20<sup>th</sup>-century totalitarian systems, mark a turning point in his literary output, and reflect a new dimension of his fiction and its new, at times alternative readings. Similarly to the novels dealing with Nazism and Communism, the above-mentioned fictional and non-fictional works delineating Islamic fundamentalism are ironic, grotesque, farcical and tragi-comic examinations of dictatorial systems and their ideologies. All of them undoubtedly accentuate political, social and cultural forms of oppression inflicted by totalitarian leaders upon their citizens. Nonetheless, it is the works referring to Islamic terrorism which highlight a political and social menace of religious fundamentalism to contemporary societies, especially to the western world. Amis's employment of irony, satire, caricature, grotesque and farce may constitute an effective literary tool in depicting the atrocious, barbaric nature of any totalitarian system. It is also a dexterous combination of political history, social chronicle, documentary with personal narrative, memoir or autobiography which invariably reflects the author's linguistic inventiveness and stylistic creativity.

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