Two Counter-Narratives of Global Terrorism: Sunjeev Sahota's *Ours Are the Streets* and Tabish Khair's *Just Another Jihadi Jane*

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In his 1981 volume entitled *Covering Islam*, Edward Said had already emphasized the way Islam had been grossly misrepresented in Western media as "a monolithic, enraged, threatening, and conspiratorially spreading" religion, as a marketable "new foreign devil" (xxviii) ready to engage in violence and wage war against civilized nation-states. Fifteen years later, in a revised introduction to his book, he even noticed "a more highly exaggerated stereotyping and belligerent hostility" (xi) than before. The attacks of 9/11 and 7/7 have further contributed to consolidating and promoting an oversimplified and homogenizing portrayal of the Islamic Other (regardless of each individual's authentic beliefs), placed in an irreconcilable binary opposition with the self. By implicitly legitimizing the mass killings of innocent civilians (who suffered the most casualties), the contentious rhetoric of the War on Terror—aimed at identifying and destroying fundamentalist networks in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq, to name a few of the countries involved—has also resulted in the exposure of blatant inequalities and unbalanced power relations: apparently, the worth of human life varies, reaching its lowest in the Global South.[1] Acts of extreme violence such as the attack on the Twin Towers cannot possibly be condoned; yet, paradoxically, in this global fight against terrorism, depicted by Gayatri Spivak as a "monstrous civilizing mission" (84), inhuman actions have been rendered rightful and humane (Herrero 3). Moreover, the strategic reiteration of political propaganda and the dull repetition of a set of preconceived ideas have replaced the practice of active listening, essential for any constructive and mutually enriching dialogue. Effective communication and the prospects for reciprocal understanding are thus undermined: since worldwide societies are becoming culturally polarized, we are witnessing what Byung-Chul Han has called the "proliferation of the same" (1), stemming from the self-destructive "expulsion of the Other."

As Claire Chambers has observed, in our challenging times, "literature is uniquely placed to tune into the radical subject's wavelength and bandwidth" (171), and is, therefore, entrusted with a pivotal function. Given their capacity to trespass boundaries and explore fresh avenues of imagination, in fact, fictional works are actually endowed with "a power and a truth" (Chambers 171) that nonfictional accounts do not possess to the same extent. By focusing

on two recent novels, *Ours Are the Streets* (2011) by Sunjeev Sahota and *Just Another Jihadi Jane* (2016) by Tabish Khair, this essay sets out to tackle the issue of Islamic fundamentalism beyond constructed binarisms and generalizations, while reassessing the role of literature as a means of elucidating the complexity of global phenomena, such as radicalization and extremisms, often obscured by propaganda and political manipulation. Written in the wake of 9/11 and 7/7, both novels provide potent counter-narratives. Indeed, their plots end up revealing that the alleged hatred of the West on the part of the jihadists, as well as the religious indoctrination they willingly embrace, often lie on the surface of precarious lives (Butler 2016), severely affected by marginalization and neoliberal policies and practices. Hence, far from exhibiting the symptoms of fanaticism, the UK-born protagonists of both narratives—Imtiaz, the hesitant would-be suicide bomber in Sahota's volume, and Jamilla, the "reluctant fundamentalist" in Khair's novel—mistakenly view their belonging to a terrorist cell as finally being part of a closely-knit and protective group, an imaginary community they have always yearned to belong to.[2] As will be shown, in both novels, the boundary between the righteous and the sinner is blurred, whereas the characters' vulnerability is constantly exploited to serve political and economic agendas.

Ours Are the Streets

Composed over three years after the 7/7 bombings in London and inspired by the tragic backlash they provoked (Mendes 53), Sahota's debut novel, *Ours Are the Streets*, epitomizes the writer's conception of literature as a mirror held up to society, capable of reflecting "facets of life" (Shaw 265) that might otherwise be overlooked. As Sahota underlined in a 2017 interview, sensitive topics such as terrorism and the current refugee crisis are typically dealt with in a straightforward and uncomplicated manner, which gives "no concession to nuances" (266): "The media and government want a simple narrative that comes with easy hooks, and gets easy catchwords and slogans out there, which will make people think that they're on top of the situation" (266). Conversely, readers who approach a novel are confronted with previously unforeseen, often conflicting options and possibilities: far from acting as idle consumers of commonplace and trite information, therefore, they are encouraged to adopt different perspectives on familiar and unfamiliar issues. In his effort to emphasize the writers' social responsibility, while casting light on the transformative, mind-opening experience fostered by works of art, Sahota compares reading a novel to plunging to the bottom of a pool: when you reach the last page, "it's like emerging from the water and feeling slightly dazzled. You see the world—the whole world, the particular and the universal, or, if we want, the local and global—as

fundamentally different to the way it was when you started reading" (265).

Mostly set in current-day Sheffield, "a dysfunctional city […] plagued by deindustrialization and high unemployment" (Zinck 82), the narrative of *Ours are the Streets* chronicles the radicalization of Imtiaz Raina, a second-generation British Pakistani who, after the death of his father, following a visit to the land of his ancestors (near Lahore) and to Afghanistan, is recruited as a suicide-bomber, and trained to detonate his explosive device inside a shopping mall. Readers are actively engaged in piecing together the fragments of a dense and unpredictable story, as it may be detected in the choice of a highly elusive narrative form. Sahota's non-linear, disjointed *bildungsroman* is presented as a long letter—or a series of diary entries—that Imtiaz writes for the sake of his infant daughter Noor, to counteract the way his ultimate deed of self-annihilation and violence will be featured in the media: "You won't find it easy, I know, but don't listen to what the newspaper and TV will have said about me. None of it is true. They don't know me" (Sahota 2). Just like Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007), the novel is also shaped as a dramatic monologue, a form that, in this case, necessarily subverts habitual tropes and conventions: while the voice of a suicide-bomber is usually doomed to silence by the circumstances of his death, this time the reader (whom the writer conflates with Noor) performs the part of the mute interlocutor and is, therefore, obliged to listen to an alternative (but no less truthful) version of the facts. Besides, as Hamid has explained while delving into the reasons that had prompted him to choose "the testimonial form" (*The Guardian*, 11 December 2010), the recipients of the story feel directly involved: "An unexpected interpretative space opens up before us, nags at us, seduces us. We feel more like characters than we are used to" (*The Guardian*, 11 December 2010).

In the vast majority of profiles, Islamic fundamentalist terrorists tend to be portrayed as a solid category: they are "maliciously intelligent, meticulously organized, highly calculated, well trained, extremely dangerous, blindly faithful to their radical doctrines and irrational ideologies" (Labdi 411). Jihadists are also supposed to share some common personality traits: exceedingly susceptible to the influence of authoritarian leaders, they frequently display suicidal behavior in association with severe psychiatric conditions, such as depression or post-traumatic stress syndrome (Merari *et al*. 96). Moreover, Simon Perry and Badi Hasisi have highlighted that martyrdom-seeking actions are largely the result of a "rational situational choice" (72), based on the careful evaluation of costs and benefits, namely religious and personal rewards.[3] On the other hand, Sahota's protagonist Imtiaz—whose name tellingly means distinct, unique, "with power of discrimination" (Sánchez-Arce 207)—cannot

easily fall into such a category. What makes Imtiaz's radicalization so disquieting is that, at the onset of the narrative, he seems to be positively integrated into the cultural and social context where he lives. Rather than expressing himself in broken English, thus stereotypically exposing both his ethnic background and his difficulties in adjusting, his vocabulary, abounding in diastratic variations (i.e., *sempt* instead of *seem*, *were* in lieu of *was*), indicates his belonging to the Sheffield working-class (O'Brien 139). As the protagonist clarifies, before travelling to Pakistan, he used to "hang out with [his] mates" (Sahota 3), mostly white, self-indulgent youngsters with whom he partied, got drunk, and flirted. Furthermore, he would "wear their clothes and be part of their drift towards nothing" (3), a possible reference to the present state of urban and moral degradation of the city, elsewhere depicted as "an abandoned fairground" (29) dominated by the "shiny dome" (29) of the local mall, a surrogate temple for the worshippers of consumerism.[4] Initially, Islam does not serve as a major component of Imtiaz's identity: he ventures to the mosque when he falls prey to what he terms "the Friday feeling" (9), merely to "wash off the sins of the week" (9), which he is bound to repeat over and over again. Allegedly, Sahota's protagonist is a full-fledged British citizen: the precarity of undocumented migrants is not his lot, nor is he stripped of the "right to have rights" (Arendt 296), as it happens to refugees, asylum seekers, and stateless people in general.

Nonetheless, as Ana Cristina Mendes has pointed out, in *Ours Are the Streets*, "citizenship fails to provide affective binding to the United Kingdom" (55). Ironically, it is precisely when Imtiaz begins to date red-haired Becka (his future partner in a cross-cultural marriage) that he becomes fully aware of the unbridgeable gulf that actually exists between himself, a second-generation immigrant, and the British girl, whose nickname "B," as she is called throughout the novel, may stand for the symbolic correlative of her mother country (Jones 12), from which, eventually, he feels excluded.[5] Even though Becka willingly converts to Islam and agrees to raise their daughter as a Muslim, Imtiaz's growing intimacy with her and the spouses' reciprocal contact with their respective families reveal previously undetected flaws which, in turn, uncover much deeper individual and collective wounds. When Imtiaz is invited for dinner by Theresa (B's mother) and her latest partner, he is faced with the problems of any dysfunctional, modern-day family, where members have little or no emotional connection with one another. Unable to have a proper conversation, in fact, they continuously talk over each other, following their own train of thought without listening. As Imtiaz—or Imziat as his name is carelessly mispronounced (21)—does not observe any dietary restriction apart from pork consumption, he is condescendingly reassured by Theresa that "[he]'ll fit right in" (21): he is still perceived as a misfit or an outcast, whose legal status has to be legitimized

through marriage. Regardless of his birthright, his dark skin forcefully acts as a boundary. Becka's first meeting with Imtiaz's parents also allows submerged problems to surface. The young man's embarrassment at the cheap furniture and the plastic-covered settee in their dilapidated house turns into shame and self-hatred when he realizes that, to impress his fiancée by inviting her to a fancy restaurant, he has unintentionally exposed his parents to an unnecessary ordeal. Indeed, Sahota lingers on the couple's frustration at being unable to read the menu, due to their lack of proficiency in English; he focuses on the veiled lady's frightened look, as if she wished to make herself "as small and invisible as possible" (44), not to be scrutinized by the other customers as a weird and curious object. The writer also describes the humiliation experienced by Imtiaz's father (Abba, in the text) and his indignant reaction at being sexually approached by a group of drunk white women on a hen night, resulting in a tell-tale sentence that marks a turning point in the narrative: "maybe if there were more brave enough to speak out like me we would not be having our children driving planes into buildings" (45); a heartfelt appeal to reciprocal respect, an invitation to listen, learn, and finally share lie behind his blunt and shocking apology for 9/11.

From this episode onwards, the narrator relates a series of disgraceful events that summarize Abba's life of overwork and mortification. A taxi driver since his early years in Sheffield, he had been bullied and abused by many of his clients; besides, his vehicle had been repeatedly broken into and vandalized—on one occasion, somebody had even urinated on his back seat, out of sheer contempt (72). In the end, he dies of a heart attack, while running after a fare-dodger. Abba's demise is presented as an epiphanic moment by Imtiaz, who acknowledges the existence of a differentiated city for the immigrants and their offspring, a city characterized by spatial inequalities and fewer opportunities,[6] where they are fated to remain "separate-and-unequal" (Soja 58). The end of the British multicultural dream is thus captured in the following remark, which lends its title to the novel: "We were meant to become part of these streets. They were meant to be ours as much as anyone's. That's what you said you worked for, came for. Were it worth it, Abba? Because I sure as hell don't know" (Sahota 70).

Imtiaz's Radicalization: A Counter-narrative

Peter Morey and Amina Yaqin have explored the way Muslims have been stereotypically depicted in the media since 9/11, as "often little more than caricatures" (18). Given the rapidity of communication in our Internet era, in fact, stylized and codified images such as the so-called "Islamic Rage Boy" (23)—with his cursing mouth open, his dark, glittering eyes, and thick, black beard—have become viral,

thereby allowing for no nuances. Moreover, as the two scholars have elucidated, through our modern channels of communication, the inclination to violence and extremism of a small part of radical and politicized Islam has been simplistically extended and ascribed to various Muslim communities across the globe (18). An additional, widely shared preoccupation is that, on the other hand, potential terrorists might be "Westernized liberal subjects lurking undiscernibly among us" (Chakravorty 192) and, therefore, even more threatening. Imtiaz's story is different. Embracing radicalization is portrayed by Sahota as a ready (and easily exploitable) response to his character's feelings of not belonging and uprootedness. As Roger Griffin has argued, in fact, the protagonist somehow sleepwalks his way to martyrdom (84). He never displays the (stereo)typical symptoms of fanaticism, nor does he appear entirely convinced of the wisdom of his actions, as he keeps delaying the moment of collecting his explosive vest, while his mind is haunted by the ghastly memories of those who had already blown themselves up before his eyes.

In his counter-narrative on terrorism, Sahota invites his readers to humanize his protagonist, to understand his fragility and the complexity of his psychological state, "to sympathize"—at least in some respects—"with a suicide bomber" (Morrison 574). When he reaches Pakistan to bury his father, Imtiaz is called *valetiya*, the word for *foreigner* which he hates (Sahota 105), since it identifies him as an alien. As weeks pass by, however, he slowly acquires a formerly unknown sense of community that transcends national borders, a globe-straddling community grounded in religion and cemented by family ties. No longer drifting or suspended in a cultural and social vacuum, he relishes his new position in the village and rejoices in his interconnectedness with fellow human beings: "I were always so and so's grandson and such and such's nephew or whatever. I were never just me, on my own. No one ever called out, 'Hey, Imtiaz!' And I loved that. It were like for the first time I had an actual real past, with real people who'd lived real lives" (115).

In the initial sections of the novel, Imtiaz justifies his suicide mission by drawing on ready-made propaganda, coupled with deeper reflections on the lives "that are not quite lives" of certain populations, cast as "ungrievable" and "destructible" (Butler 31) by Western governments in their War on Terror: "I learnt when I went away that any land that attacks your homeland or your Muslim brothers and sisters has to face the consequences of its decisions. […] These people think that what happens to our people in Palestine and Kashmir and Iraq and Afghanistan is just what happens to people whose lives are meant to be lived in a different way to theirs" (Sahota 29). Nevertheless, what can be gathered as the plot unravels is that, on his way to the training camp in Afghanistan, Imtiaz's intention to become a jihadist is triggered and supported by an acute craving for belonging

that makes him susceptible to manipulation. When he is told "you're not a valetyia any more, you understand? You're an apna. You're ours" (178)—a sentence that echoes the opposition *ours vs. theirs* in the novel's title—Imtiaz is overjoyed: "I learned that I weren't a lone man in this world. We were all of us here together" (178). Some pages later, when his allegiance is deviously tested, he manages to provide the jihadist leader with a perfect answer: "I'm here to protect my people. […] I am a Muslim" (197). His companions' reaction to that assertion (possibly the outcome of indoctrination, since this is exactly what he is expected to say in such a circumstance) is equated to the emotional response of football players after scoring a goal: "they were all climbing on top of me, like team-mates […]. My head got rubbed, my back patted, my shoulder squeezed" (197). What really matters to Imtiaz is the intimacy with his brothers, the same sense of camaraderie he cherishes while describing the blissful afternoons at the nearby caves, in-between brainwashing sessions and the practice of military exercises:

> I loved those afternoons. The silence were like a pact between us. And the whole time we were messing about in the cave we weren't soldiers or fighters. Not chosen, not responsible, not anything. Just a few friends laughing the day on. And it weren't just us that ran to the caves to escape the heat. Loads of men, young and old, from all the local villages would climb the track looking for an empty cave where they could play cards, have a smoke. (215)

The narrative ends without offering a definitive conclusion to Imtiaz's story, which cannot be written by the protagonist either because the police have succeeded in stopping him before his suicidal attack, or because, at last, he has chosen death as a glorified martyr over a life at the margins.

Sahota has compared his novel to both a bridge, joining reader and writer, and a table, around which they may have a fruitful conversation (Shaw 265). It might be argued that, through *Ours Are the Streets*, he longs to open up whole new opportunities for understanding; indeed, his novel may be interpreted as an invitation to suspend one's judgment and shift perspective, to finally discern the endless possibilities lying between the interchangeable figures of the victim and his/her tormentor. There is always more than one way of observing the pattern of interaction between people, as will also be shown in Khair's *Just Another Jihadi Jane*.

Just Another Jihadi Jane

Cristina M. Gámez-Fernández and Om Prakash Dwivedi view Khair as a "socially responsible writer who writes not to entertain but to provoke thought and thus augment moral and ethical values in society" (xv). The crucial contribution of literature to unravelling the intricacies

of modernity was also underlined by the author himself in his 2011 scholarly work entitled *Reading Literature Today*, written in collaboration with Sébastien Doubinsky. According to Khair, "literature is not a sedative or a balm; it is not a God or a moral code; it is not even a refuge or oasis of sense. But literature […] is where we are confronted with the possibilities, problems and limits of language, which are finally also the problems of reality (and representation)" (10). In its capacity to exceed "the consensual, legible, linear […] usages of ordinary language" (73), literature also implies an additional effort on the part of the reader, who is personally involved in deciphering not just the text, but also the "noise in its language" (11), as well as the gaps and silences that add to the texture of any artistic endeavor. By assuming the prerogatives of "an active thinker and interpreter" (15), the model reader envisaged by Khair takes a keen part in the creative process, instead of functioning as "a blank receptor of the intention of the author" (Khair, "The Death" 130). Moreover, while uncovering concealed meanings and multiple layers of significance, s/he also ideally learns how to move beyond fixed dichotomies and non-negotiable categories of identity.

Khair has devoted many pages to the issue of Islamic fundamentalism in its global context. In "9/11: Conscience and Coffee," composed immediately after the attack on the Twin Towers, he warned against undue generalizations, signaling that the entire Muslim and Arab population would be held accountable for "the dastardly act of a handful of Islamic terrorists" (Khair, "9/11" 12). In the same article, he also posed a rhetorical question on the differential value assigned to some human lives and actions if compared to others: "why is it that we always justify our own violence and consider violence by the enemy to be sheer sacrilege? Isn't it where it all begins?" (8). In novels such as *How to Fight Islamist Terror from the Missionary Position* (2012) and *Just Another Jihadi Jane* he has further investigated these questions, while suggesting potential remedies to the chronic condition of indifference—or "selective blindness" (161) in Chun Fu's definition—that affects today's post-truth societies, "a posture so static and lifeless that there would be no more knowledge of the Other and no more the will to know the Other" (Fu 161).

Like *Ours Are the Streets*, *Just Another Jihadi Jane* may be read as a dramatic monologue narrated to a silent male writer (and to the reader) by Jamilla, a young lady who seizes the opportunity to share her own counter-narrative on the process that led to her radicalization and to the death of her friend Ameena, a suicide-bomber. In the first chapter, "Reading Scheme," the author provides his readers with an insightful clue to approach his story: the title alludes to a provocative villanelle by Wendy Cope that Jamilla, a firm believer in Islam, considers inappropriate as part of the school syllabus, given its subject

—marital infidelity—and ambiguities. Depending on the way it is read, in fact, the recurring line "look, Jane, look! Look at the dog! See him run!" (Khair, *Just Another* 14) may refer to either the family pet running around the garden, or the adulterous milkman featured in the poem, striving to flee the fury of an outraged husband (Marino 17). As it may be inferred from this episode, literature teaches how to think anew, following different patterns and equally acceptable routes; in the multiplicity of perspectives it offers, it brings whoever accepts the challenge closer to the complexity of truth.

The social and cultural background of both Jamilla and Ameena (two girls born and brought up in the north of England) is clearly investigated by Khair. While the former comes from a strictly religious Muslim family from Pakistan, Ameena is apparently more westernized: the daughter of divorced Indian parents, she smokes, wears casual clothes, and regards sexual abstinence as an unfeasible option. The girls' radicalization is sparked by a concurrent crisis in their lives: feelings of exclusion, loneliness, and failure prompt them to turn to an alternative, supposedly more welcoming community that, as in the case of Sahota's protagonist, is meant to provide them with a fresh sense of belonging, with the prospect of leading "a life that [is] meaningful and just" (Khair, *Just Another* 79). Indeed, Ameena unreservedly embraces a radical version of Islam when she is humiliated and deserted by her latest blond and blue-eyed boyfriend. Likewise, when Jamilla's application for a scholarship proves unsuccessful, she realizes that she is fated to transform into "another version of [her] Ammi" (73), a submissive and self-effacing woman, who dutifully fulfills her biological mission as no other possibility is available. Jamilla's epiphanic moment comes the morning after discovering she will never have the financial means to further her education; during her daily bus ride, a bizarrely dressed woman viciously objects to her garb (she is wearing a niqab): in her view, the girl is "letting down [her] gender and not fitting into the culture" (74), thus suggesting that, unless she conforms, she will always be stigmatized as a perpetual alien. In another passage of the novel, Jamilla also recalls the patronizing attitude of those who campaign against veiling, "pityingly, as one would fight for the rights of a performing seal in a circus" (78), assuming that no woman in her sane mind would ever consent to such a violation of individual liberty (a principle that is exclusively filtered through the lens of Western culture). Either response amounts to the same conclusion: she will always be ghettoized and branded as the odd one out.[7]

Jamilla's Radicalization: A Counter-narrative

As Lina Khatib has emphasized, "the existence of Islamic fundamentalism […] can be seen as an example of the failure of the

nation-state system to create a truly national identity. [… It] has arisen as a kind of substitute for a failing Arab identity" (394), even in Western multicultural societies. Joining the jihad is, therefore, fathomed as an enticing way of exercising one's agency and power, while acquiring recognition as members of a particular community of kindred spirits that knows no national borders. Accordingly, in Khair's novel, Islamic fundamentalism is highlighted as a global force that fosters a new sense of citizenship advertised through the Internet: chat-rooms, Twitter, blogs, Facebook groups and individual profiles become the new hunting ground for enlisters, who cunningly intrude into the lives of potential recruits, by preying upon their vulnerability. Without wondering what they really have in common with one another, Ameena and Jamilla deceptively expand their horizon by meeting new people in a virtual territory of pixels and delusions: "Ameena and I identified with all of them, erasing the differences that existed with the brush of a hypothetical Islam, an imagined community. I am sure most of them did the same" (Khair 53). The girls are not aware that, in truth, their world is shrinking, as they are increasingly isolating themselves from friends and family, thus lapsing into the very perverse practice that caused their marginalization, namely the expulsion of the Other.

Mesmerized by the inspired posts and tweets of Hejjiye (meaning *pilgrim*)—a forty-year-old Internet preacher who exhibits a curious mixture of disdain for Western materialism and passion for Gucci bags—Jamilla and Ameena flee to join her in Syria, where she runs an orphanage, allegedly serving as a shelter for female supporters of the newly established Islamic state. They soon realize, however, that the structure is actually used to groom either jihadi wives or female suicide bombers, depending on the inmates' looks (those who are not attractive may be readily sacrificed for the cause). From the moment of their arrival until Ameena's self-inflicted death, Khair sets out to debunk the myth of a monolithic Muslim world, by showing that Daesh does not only pose a threat to the West, but also to Islam itself. Apart from noticing that jihadi wives occupy an ancillary position if compared to first wives (whereas no hierarchy should exist between them), Jamilla is shocked by the unnecessary killings of minorities and other "whitewashed Muslims" (163)—the way moderate Muslims are disparagingly labelled. The fighters' callous behavior never ceases to surprise her; Ameena's ruthless jihadi husband, for instance, practices "gratuitous violence […] under the cloak of his Islam" (164); besides, he scorns those who have to take capsules of Captagon (to lessen fear and boost their fighting ability) before going into battle, as "*real* men nee[d] nothing but their faith in order to murder and rape" (165). Hejjiye also orders what she calls a holy "purge of books" (175): volumes penned by orthodox Islamic scholars who are deemed not radical enough are collected and unceremoniously set on fire. Before this spectacle of devastation, Jamilla recalls the wise and farsighted

words of one of her mates back at school: "Burning a book's like burning a human being. Once yer start burning books, yer end up burning the entire world, every damn human being in it!" (178). Finally, the intentional action of exploding oneself for the glory of God is against one of the founding principles of Islam, "because suicide is repugnant to Allah" (125), as one of the women in the orphanage remarks; needless to say, she is immediately silenced and punished for her audacity. Hence, in Khair's novel, the disposable life of suicide bombers is reminiscent of the accursed existence of Giorgio Agamben's *homines sacri*; far from being blessed martyrs or fervent zealots, they are bred for destruction and, like livestock, instantly replaced by other interchangeable specimens: each of Hejjiye's recruits, therefore, is *just another Jihadi Jane*.[8]

The disturbing figure of the female suicide bomber has been polarized by scholars into two distinct types: the "subwoman," who is negatively "othered" (she suffers from personal traumas and is liable to manipulation), and the "superwoman," who is still "othered," albeit positively, and cast as an empowered and liberated heroine (Marway 224).[9] Through the character of Ameena, Khair yet again demonstrates that binaries are easily neutralized when reading schemes become multiple. Faruk Bajraktarević has portrayed Ameena's sacrifice as a "productive act of symbolic maternity or a 'transfer of vitality' onto Jamilla" (18), as the detonation of her belt creates the conditions for the otherwise impossible escape of her friend. The "ultimate other" (Golimowska 30) *par excellence*—the terrorist and suicide bomber—is thus subverted and turned into a sympathetic and selfless individual. Likewise, Hejjiye, the jihadi fighter and preacher, may be simply viewed as a modern icon of success and personal fulfilment who, in any setting or situation, would disregard morality and social responsibility to pursue her ends:

> She could have been a politician in Europe, justifying racist immigration laws in the most humane terms; she could have been a corporate head in New York or a banker in Tokyo. Whatever set of rules she found around herself, she would employ to empower herself, not even able to see the monstrous shadows thrown by her goodness. It was only a fluke, I felt, that Hejjiye had been born in circles where the route to power lay through the strictures of Islam. (Khair, *Just Another* 205)

Even Jamilla eventually becomes aware of her own unchanging reading scheme, of her selective blindness towards the community where she was born and reared, perceived solely through the filter of her prejudices and fears. Indeed, she realizes she "had failed to register the many people who did accept [her] as [she] was, veiled and alien in their world, just because there were some who stared, or muttered, or shouted like the crazy woman in the bus" (141).

To conclude, as this essay has tried to demonstrate, both *Ours are the Streets* and *Just Another Jihadi Jane* encourage readers to embrace

reality in its actual complexity, since well-known phenomena are observed in different lights and from varying angles. By questioning the eulogized, flat reality and populist techniques, both novels offer counter-narratives to the dominant discourse on global terrorism, functioning as powerful antidotes to any kind of fundamentalism, grounded in reductions and simplifications. Imtiaz and Jamilla are not just terrorists, nor can they be straightforwardly labelled as enemies of the West, or religious fanatics. In truth, in their yearning for compassion, they are also the victims of perverse, manipulative systems that exploit local/global structural vulnerabilities for political ends. Both Sahota's and Khair's works also prompt us to ponder on the vital part still played by literature nowadays. In the words of Khair, "[w]e need literature today more than ever before. We need it not because it is pleasing, relaxing, inspiring, beautiful, ethical, etc.; we need it because it is our deepest instrument of thinking and it trains us to engage in the process of contemplation which made and makes us human. We need it because it connects us to the Other without reducing his/her difference" (Khair, Foreword xiii).

Notes

1. As Talal Asad has elucidated, nowadays "cruelty is an indispensable technique for maintaining a particular kind of international order, an order in which the lives of some people are less valuable than the lives of others and therefore their deaths less disturbing" (94).

2. Both narratives are reminiscent of Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist.*

3. As the two scholars have pointed out, the reasons that prompt suicide bombers to choose a voluntary death are multiple and often interlaced. First of all, "by pressing the detonator, the martyr immediately opens the door to Paradise" (59) for both himself/herself and his/her beloved ones. Besides, even before the actual moment of his/her self-sacrifice, he/she enjoys fame and prestige: the would-be martyr is immediately turned into a hero/heroine, a glorious role model to imitate, thus allowing for an upgrade of his/her own socioeconomic status and position, while experiencing (delusional) feelings of empowerment.

4. The dome of the shopping mall is even "wrapped in some sort of dim halo" (29), to further highlight its perverse and blasphemous sanctity. It is not by chance, therefore, that the building becomes the target for Imtiaz's terrorist attack.

5. Sahota's B closely resembles Hamid's (Am)Erica.

6. The concepts of distributional inequalities and discriminatory geographies have been explored by Edward Soja in his *Seeking Spatial Justice* (47-56)

7. As Tabish Khair has noticed in *The New Xenophobia*, "Muslims are put under pressure *not* to tag themselves or to segregate under new xenophobia. […T]he fact of their Muslimhood (often raised to an abstract level of idealist, cultural, and moral issues, such as the contention or belief that 'they are not capable of democracy') makes them perpetual strangers, but they are expected to keep this difference as invisible as possible" (37).

8. Jihad Jane was also the name used by Colleen LaRose, a female American terrorist who converted to Islam.

9. "Women are not expected to be violent and, when they are, they must be 'explained' in ways that preserve gender norms" (Marway 222).

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