London and Kabul

Assessing the Politics of Terrorist Violence

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INTRODUCTION

With the destruction of the Twin Towers, discussions related to terrorism have reverberated on global mass media outlets and moved to the forefront of academic discourse. It is in the context of this debate about contemporary (new-millennial) political violence that it is timely to reread and question Doris Lessing’s earlier explorations and evaluations of the terrorist enterprise and of political violence in general. Of particular relevance in today’s debates on terrorism is her reading of the Afghan muhjahidin with whom she sympathized fervently in the 1980s in her nonfictional work *The Wind Blows Away Our Words and Other Documents Relating to the Afghan Resistance*. Later—after the falling of the Twin Towers—many of these very same muhjahidin were labeled as Taliban terrorists and members of the “axis of evil”; then, they were consequently crushed by American military might.

Lessing’s close affinity to issues affecting the Middle East springs from both her childhood roots and her adult dialogue with her teacher, the Sufi writer Idries Shah. Her reverence for the Afghan people’s struggle against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan from 1979 to 1989 can be explained in relationship to her immersion in Sufism in the late 1960s. Lessing’s Sufi mentor, Idries Shah, was originally from Afghanistan. Presumably it is that relationship that led Lessing to be so interested in the situation of the muhjahidin in Afghanistan.¹ Lessing herself attributes her engagement with Afghanistan
to memories of growing up in what are now Iran and Zimbabwe, and refers to these memories on her journey to Pakistan: “I was born in Persia and lived there until I was five. Yes, all kinds of scents and sounds came back.” She also compares Afghanistan to Southern Rhodesia as a conduit of trade leading to warfare and to desolation.

Both Lessing’s fictional The Good Terrorist (1985; cited hereafter as GT) and journalistic The Wind Blows Away Our Words and Other Documents Relating to the Afghan Resistance (1987) are in need of postcolonial interpretation. By postcolonial, I am referring to both a collection of writings and a history of group struggle against exploitation and oppression that considers the overthrow of colonial regimes as the first of many necessary steps toward a desired place of equality and freedom. The origins of postcolonialism as a field of study often cite the pioneering writings of Frantz Fanon and Che Guevara. The Tricontinental Conference of 1966 in Havana has been described as the flashpoint where race, religion, and gender were considered as revolutionary potential in transnational, but localized, liberation struggles. Alice Mellings (GT) and Tajwar Kakar (Our Words) are prototypical postcolonial protagonists in Doris Lessing’s writings; both main characters are female freedom fighters in armed struggle against what they view as colonial oppressors.

While “one person’s terrorist is another’s freedom fighter” is a common sound byte heard in the media, the presumed logical equivalence of these terms is blatantly false. There are many different types or subsets of freedom fighters. One subset of freedom fighter uses nonviolent techniques, perhaps following the teachings of Mohandas Gandhi. Another type of freedom fighter is the armed guerilla (rural and urban), who uses violent methods to strike and combat the armed forces of a perceived oppressor. Terrorists can also be viewed as a further subset of freedom fighters. Terrorists are a subset of freedom fighters, but not all freedom fighters are terrorists.

Although Noam Chomsky’s 9-11 and The Culture of Terrorism, along with Edward Said’s “The Essential Terrorist,” distinguish clearly between the roles of terrorist and armed guerrilla, it can be hard to separate these two subsets of freedom fighters because they often work closely in conjunction with each other. As well, sometimes it is difficult to separate out financiers, spies, or arms dealers in order to know who is a combatant and who is a noncombatant, and accordingly what and who is a legitimate guerilla target. Nonetheless, I argue that the distinction between a terrorist and an armed guerilla remains crucial to understanding Lessing’s appraisal of these two very different postcolonial protagonists.

Terrorist “actions” are violent, but terrorists—unlike armed guerillas—do not engage and combat an army or police force directly. Rather, terrorists use
indiscriminate violence to inflict maximum psychological (shock) effect on the public in order to destabilize the smooth functioning of a targeted political system and for messaging purposes. When successful at the street level, terrorist warfare is analogous to capturing and shaping the course of the ship of state. Both Alice Mellings and Tajwar Kakar, the protagonists of Lessing’s 1980s fictional and journalistic texts, *The Good Terrorist* and *The Wind Blows Away Our Words*, respectively, use violent means to achieve political objectives; but fictional Londoner Alice Mellings, from the novel, should best be considered strictly as a terrorist, while Afghan Tajwar Kakar, an actual person discussed in a nonfiction work, should primarily be understood as a member of a nationalist armed guerilla unit.

**THE LONDON TERRORISTS**

Speaking of the Algerian resistance to French colonial rule, Sartre’s preface to Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* justifies political violence: “perhaps, when your back is to the wall, you will let loose at last that new violence which is raised up in you by old, oft-repeated crimes.” Acts of resistance, including violence against oppression, are debated throughout Lessing’s plots. Are such acts defensible? Do lofty ends legitimate compromising other lofty values as violent means including terrorism alter and transform the desired political ends?

Lessing’s novel ironically called *The Good Terrorist* asks the reader to consider what constitutes a “good” or “not good” terrorist: as if to question why certain terrorist campaigns are perceived, at least by some, as viable, while others are not. The notion of a good terrorist (resistance fighter) can be located in the historical archive of anarchism. At the end of the nineteenth century, anarchists sought to undermine feudal power relations, for example in Czarist Russia, by way of tyrannicide. Noncivilian targets such as kings were selected with consideration and care. The anarchist wanted the masses to evaluate his actions as that of a heroic, valorous, larger-than-life individual, whom others would contrast with their own poverty-stricken, highly regulated, and powerless lives. The historical account of Ivan Kaliayev, who refrained from throwing a bomb into Grand Duke Sergei’s carriage while he was accompanied by his family, represents this moral stance of the “good” terrorist. (Later without the Grand Duke’s family at risk, the suicidal murder mission was accomplished.)

*The Good Terrorist* describes two London bombings carried out by politicized squat members who constitute a loose terrorist cell. Alice Mellings’s
group plans to activate the initial bomb at night, thereby testing the power of the explosives being put together in the squat, without causing civilian casualties. Housemate and amateur bomb maker Jocelin “stud[i]es handbooks on how to be a good terrorist” (259–60). She produces her explosive devices from goods including those taken from arms “matériel” passing through the house adjacent to the squat, from which individuals set out for Russian paramilitary training camps, presumably to further other “heroic” revolutionary causes. The novel ironically minimizes the possible harm of terrorist violence by referring to Jocelin’s bombs as “a variety of devices which she was concocting out of the books she referred to as ‘recipe books’” (286–87). At the end of the tale, the “recipe” is “cooked,” but the London terrorists fail. The bombings are not successfully carried out: the first does much more damage than expected, and the second detonates at the wrong time, killing the bomb carrier and innocent civilians, while not destroying any strongly recognizable, symbolic target.

The tale of The Good Terrorist seems to be modeled historically after the brief terrorist action of the Angry Brigade in England from 1970 to 1972. During the 1960s and 1970s there were a number of similar terrorist groups of young radicals throughout the Western world, including the Weathermen in the United States and the FLQ in Canada. This form of Western terrorism has been coined “groupuscular terrorism,” a term that refers to the small, discrete activist groups, with a tendency to break up into parts, that spread across the Western world in the 1970s.11 The British anarchist Angry Brigade was responsible for dozens of bombings and a series of bank robberies, but fell apart when some of its leading members were convicted in highly publicized criminal trials. Their subversive efforts did not succeed in garnering them a following of members, or in having their libertarian Communist message widely disseminated. The other historical source material for Doris Lessing’s account of terrorism in England was that of the ever-present IRA, which targeted England in general and London in particular during the 1980s, the time of her writing The Good Terrorist.

At the outset of the novel, the reader initially sympathizes with Alice Mellings, the protagonist in The Good Terrorist. Alice is part of a group of unemployed, disenfranchised, younger adults in Thatcher’s England. They form through a series of connected squats an entity called the CCU—Communist Centre Union. Alice’s individual squat claims allegiance to established political subversive entities, even after two group emissaries are made unwelcome when they go to make petitions to the IRA in Ireland and the Communist Party in the Soviet Union. Alice initially engages the reader’s sympathy through her resolute resourcefulness. She maintains the squat—cooks, cleans, and keeps
the bill collectors at bay. The reader may consider Alice a “good” terrorist because her homemaking capacity and middle-class know-how make the squat livable. Without Alice’s organization and communication skills, the poor and disenfranchised members of the squat would not have a working, camouflaged base or the monetary means to plan and carry out their political aims.

However, The Good Terrorist investigates in detail Alice’s brand of terrorism and in the process dissects and rejects her revolutionary aspirations as infantile, misguided, and dangerous. Alice and her tiny group of “vanguard,” mostly middle-class malcontents, are socially isolated. Their motives are fed by the need for personal recognition, more than any political desire for social change. These malcontents are driven by their belief that the world owes them more—more recognition, more happiness, more freedom. Alice’s actions, Lessing seems to say, are symptomatic of her rearing. The best gloss on The Good Terrorist may be Lessing’s comments at the end of chapter 2 of her autobiography, Under My Skin. There she talks of an almost instinctive assumption shared by many—particularly those on the Left who oppose “authority” and “the Establishment”—that happiness is their right and can be gauged in personal terms of measurable increase. “Millions of people in our time behave as if they have been made a promise—by whom? when?—that life must get freer, more honest, more comfortable, always better. . . . I feel I have been part of some mass illusion or delusion.” Lessing enacts her fictional assessment and dismissal of Alice’s CCU groupuscular cell in a number of ways: through the use of vulgar and banal language, jokes, and familial domestic politics reproduced in the squat; through the use of Dorothy Melling as her authorial voice; and through implied psychoanalytic diagnosis of Alice and her group.

The Good Terrorist examines the terrorist’s morality, behavior, and language as influenced by the ordinary poor and disenfranchised. The novel’s language is not heroic, but rather banal, partly because it is excessively descriptive concerning details of the flat life, such as people getting along, performing household chores, cooking, and repairing the electricity or plumbing. A method of understatement asks readers to make their own judgments as to the metaphorical applications of fecal matter, for instance. Referred to as such, “shit” is a motif in the text, introduced when, in order to make the squat habitable, a young black man, Jim, and Alice empty buckets of waste that occupy two rooms on the top floor of the house. The toilets had been cemented in by the City Council. In burying the excrement, Alice is trying to deceive the authorities about the transient occupants and the deteriorated physical condition of the building. On a visit to the squat, police officers throw a bag of excrement toward Alice: “This is what you like, isn’t it?”
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[one] guffawed, and flung, in a strong underarm action, a filled plastic bag into the hall. ‘Shit to shit,’ said the other” (315). In the end, rather than a positive valuation of Alice’s character as resourceful or resolute, the reader is left with the police officer’s comparison of Alice to a bag of shit.

The devaluation of language is explored further through mimicry, which all the characters participate in, even though they may not be consciously aware of it.¹⁴ Faye and Roberta mimic British working-class roots. “As good as a music-hall turn: Faye the cockney lass and her feed. Roberta was not speaking cockney, but had a comfortable, accommodating homely voice with the sound of the North in it. Her own voice? No, it was a made-up one. Modelled on Coronation Street, probably” (27). In this meeting, which includes Faye, Roberta, Bert, Jasper, Pat, Jim, and Alice, “[t]he only other person in this room, apart from Alice, with his own voice, unmodified, was Jim, the genuine cockney” (29). Throughout the text, Alice is picking up on clues to disingenuousness or misrepresentation. Squat speech, then, is often banal or designed for effect like the latest fashion statement. Meanwhile, in order to “fit in” to a role within the squat, Alice struggles against her middle-class roots (including what Lessing would call Alice’s own “small personal voice”). Alice must learn to participate in the bravado of her comrades. She also analyses squat speech so as not to be trapped within a group political discourse of indoctrination.

The text of The Good Terrorist, I would argue, is modeled on the structural mechanics of popular jokes. Jokes structurally function on the fulcrum of a punchline where, as in the tipping movement of a teeter-totter, the expectations of the listener shift toward a second, usually unexpected and possibly disturbing, meaning. At first, through free indirect discourse, the authoritative, third-person narrative is aligned with Alice’s consciousness. The reader relates sympathetically to an idealistic, Alice-in-Wonderland figure. Using the metaphor of the tipping point of the teeter-totter, the reader’s sympathy for Alice teeters into disgust or detached indifference at the end of The Good Terrorist. The misfired or peccant bomb functions as the punch line, which firmly undermines the reader’s sympathy for Alice, the thirty-six-year-old lost cause, and the other CCU members and their terrorist practice.¹⁵

Thematic concerns that the reader recalls from Lessing’s earlier work are again set out in The Good Terrorist. In her early career, Doris Lessing, like many other Western leftist- and progressively minded people, looked to the Soviet Union for a model of human liberation. Most leftists, including Lessing, reevaluated their positions as information about Stalin’s repressive regime was revealed by the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, by Nikita Khrushchev during the Twentieth Congress meetings, and by Russian writers, such as
Alexander Solzhenitsyn in *The Gulag Archipelago*. Soviet power vis-à-vis the powerlessness of democratic Communist parties was similarly documented, for example, in *The Golden Notebook* (1962), which used a fictional newspaper account of Stalin’s death to show its effect on protagonist Anna Wulf and her left-wing friends. The powerlessness of individual Western Communists is made light of through amusing or poignant descriptions of fantasized and “real” trips by characters in the novel to the Soviet Union on personal missions to tell Stalin and other Soviet officials how their Communist vision has lost credence. The Soviet Union also intimidates and attracts Alice’s partner Jasper and housemate Bert in *The Good Terrorist* (115, 240–41). Their fantasy, of carrying out a personal journey to the Soviet Union, is mocked by another housemate, Pat: “They had it all worked out. They will say to the Intourist Guide: ‘Comrades, we want to speak to someone in authority.’ . . . The Intourist guide will of course say at once, ‘Whom would you like to see, comrades? Comrade Andropov [General Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party, 1982–84]?’” (240).

The narrative from the above lines takes the form of a joke. The punch-line regarding visiting Comrade Andropov occurs at the end of the fantasy sequence. The unexpected absurdity of Jasper and Bert’s answer creates the reader’s humorous response. While at first we can sympathize with Jasper and Bert as young idealists of high purpose, the reader on second thought can but wonder whether these two comrades might actually believe in the possibility of just such a high-level meeting (perhaps reported by the BBC). How inflated are their egos and how misguided are they to visualize their leadership role at the forefront of the proletariat? Would Jasper and Bert even comprehend the joke, which Pat construes? The double meaning contained in the joke relates to our heroes’ fantasies and egos, as the young men’s aspirations (supported by the author, then the reader) are let go of; and, as in the teeter-totter example, they and their ideals are dropped. The authority of Pat’s view is upheld in the novel when she leaves the squat and undertakes Russian paramilitary training. Neither Jasper nor Bert is deemed adequate for such training by the IRA, the Soviets, or the leadership figures in No. 45, the paramilitary squat.

Alice also has strong personal aspirations. She wants to forgo both her middle-class society’s and her family’s frames of reference. Even so, her dependency is shown by her constantly stealing property and money from her divorced parents’ homes and business. As her mother wryly observes, “it turned out that you spend your life exactly as I did. Cooking and nannying for other people” (329). While Alice wants to rid herself of her (divorced) family, she eventually comes to fear that she has—ironically—set her own “trap” in the squat, which is modeled on her family past: “This house, for
which she had fought, she now felt as a trap, ready to deliver her back to Jasper, from whom she must escape” (268–69). Her ambivalence toward her father is mirrored in her nonsexual relationship over many years with homosexual partner Jasper. Jasper sleeps apart from her, and constantly seeks money from middle-class Alice for “cottaging, cruising” purposes (152). Jasper is physically hurtful toward her, yet she defers to him. From the first page, Jasper’s “hand [repeatedly] shot out, and her wrist was encircled by hard bone. It hurt” (5), but Alice awaits a kind word or affirmation from Jasper. Jasper is a replacement father figure especially after her father has told Alice to go away, consequent on her stealing money from his firm and on her throwing a rock through his front window, narrowly missing his young daughter from his new marriage.

Decidedly, Alice’s participation in bombing a public place involves a constitutive break from civil society and from Lessing’s ideal—responsible human agency. Alice had felt guilty already for not satisfying her parents’ expectations of her, especially her mother’s ambitions. The bombings, particularly the one in which a fellow comrade, Faye, is killed, signify Alice’s final separation from “all the poor silly ordinary people in the world . . . her father . . . [who] was too awful to waste time on . . . [h]er mother . . . she might have said a final goodbye to her, instead of just having had one of their silly quarrels!” (366). Furthermore, with the bombing, the fracturing of her actual family is repeated within the terror cell “commune,” her created “family” (232).

Years before, social issues, notably over power disparities, had propelled both Dorothy and her daughter to political action. Dorothy describes herself and Alice as “peasants” in comparison to leaders, who resemble efficient bureaucrats: “This world is run by people who know how to do things. They know how things work. They are equipped [educated]. Up there, there’s a layer of people who run everything. But we—we’re just peasants” (330). The reference to being peasants reminds the reader of Mao’s leadership of the peasant revolution (the Cultural Revolution), Western Marxist-Leninist (Maoist) youth, or perhaps a line from John Lennon’s song “Working Class Hero,” in which he belts out, “you’re still fucking peasants as far as I can see.” And Dorothy had once agreed with the expected youthful response, to not being able to “do anything,” to just “Do It” (which was the rallying call of Jerry Rubin and the Yippies of the ’70s). Now, she cynically finishes the above thought: “We don’t understand what’s going on, and we can’t do anything” (330).

Dorothy knows from experience that Alice will not “pull it [capitalist imperialism] all down” (330) by attending pickets. Referring to their decades
of political activism, Dorothy says to her longtime friend Zoë Devlin: “It’s for kicks. It’s for fun. . . . people picketing, or marching or demonstrating. They are having a marvellous time. And if they are beaten up by the police so much the better” (335). By her comments, Dorothy dismisses her own previous activism and likewise Alice’s group for demonstrating and picketing (even before events escalate to the bombings). Dorothy Mellings most clearly embodies Lessing’s critique of 1960s politics; through the mother’s dismissal of Alice, Lessing directs derisive humor at this “grown-up,” postwar, baby boomer. In Lessing’s view, Alice’s revolutionary ideals invite a self-destructive outcome in the same manner fated for 1960s-style radicalism.\textsuperscript{17}

The Good Terrorist reveals the lingering drive for personal recognition through political action, from picketing to planning urban terrorist attacks. Activism is the group’s way of gaining recognition in the media, whose recording of their attacks the group scrutinizes as a process of group identity formation. When the first bombing is reported in “a little paragraph in the Guardian” as the antics of “hooligans,” the group’s ridiculous reaction is “We’ll show them” (312). A paragraph in the local Advertiser is taken by the group as “a snub . . . another in a long series of belittlings of what they really were. . . . They were murderous with the need to impose themselves, prove their power” (314).

Reacting against the lack of media attention, Jocelin explains the proposed use of in-house-assembled electronic controls in the second explosive device: “it’s a question of how to make the greatest impact . . . this way, it’ll be front page in all the papers tomorrow and on the News tonight” (346).\textsuperscript{18} Jocelin’s second peccant bomb indiscriminately kills and maims citizens in the London street. The timer for the device is deliberately set by squat member Faye to kill herself and others not at the site chosen by the group. This is Faye’s third suicide attempt, which her lesbian lover Roberta attributes to Faye having been “a battered baby” (121), to which Alice quips mockingly in return: “Well, I suppose Faye will die of it one of these days. She has tried to commit suicide, hasn’t she?” (122). The squat’s lofty ideals of proletarian revolution are subverted by Faye’s personal desire for freedom from the complex pain of her life. Faye’s fanatical death wish is evident in her three suicide attempts and her final plan, to indiscriminately murder other civilians.

But chaos in the group is highlighted also by Alice’s warning to the authorities—a farcical subplot—that a bomb blast is imminent, a bomb she attributes falsely to the IRA, which dismisses the amateurish effort, threatening to “knee-cap those who committed such acts in their name” (364). Alice conveniently forgets her call made to authorities from the bomb site, just as she conveniently forgets the fact of her involvement with selling her family’s
home. When the media attributes the second bombing to the IRA, as Alice had told them, Jocelin responds, “What a fucking nerve.’ ‘Absolutely,’ said Alice, not connecting her telephone call with this development. Then, after a few minutes, listening to the indignation, the frustration of the others, she did connect it, and she realised that she could never tell them what she had done. Never. She never would be trusted again” (360).

Faye—who committed suicide in the bomb blast—earlier appreciated Alice’s perceptual confusion as akin to that of the dreamy namesake story figure. “A wonder, she is . . . Alice the Wonder, the wondrous Alice . . .” (82, ellipsis in original). Not only does Alice Mellings play with the meaning of words, as does Carroll’s Alice, but also, like Alice in Through the Looking-Glass, Alice Mellings inhabits her own fantasy world: “When her mind started to dazzle and to puzzle, frantically trying to lay hold of something stable,” then Alice “allowed herself . . . to slide back into her childhood where she dwelt pleasurably on some scene or other that she had smoothed and polished and painted over and over again with fresh colour until it was like walking into a story that began, ‘Once upon a time there was a little girl called Alice, with her mother Dorothy’” (368). After she has taken experiences and misrepresented them to herself and others, she slips into states of imagined security and storybook solipsism.

Alice does not succeed in maturing beyond childish interactions and understanding. For instance, near the end of the novel Alice reveals to a British spy—Peter Cecil—the existence of a Russian spy—Gordon O’Leary—and evidence of arms passing through No. 45, the adjacent squat. By divulging the identity of the Russian agent in this spy and counterspy sequence, Alice has put herself, the Russian agent, and her terrorist cell at risk of prison or worse. Severing its close association with Alice’s maneuverings, speculating on Alice’s conduct, the story leaves her: “Smiling gently, a mug of very strong sweet tea in her hand, looking this morning like a nine-year-old girl who has had, perhaps, a bad dream, the poor baby sat waiting for it to be time to go out and meet the professionals [the spies]” (370). The reader retreats from the work, into which she or he has been led, in order to consider the story from a greater distance. Any sympathy with the main, focalized character (a form of revolutionary hero worship or heroine identification perhaps, encoded in the novel form) seems unwarranted, as Alice is revealed finally as a disturbed neurotic criminal, in need of “professional” psychiatric assistance.

Meanwhile, Jocelin the bomb maker remains at large, capable of deploying further terrorist explosives. Previously Alice had held onto Jocelin as her heroine or “touchstone,” but an innocent reading of their accord does not hold: “And herself, Alice? Did Jocelin despair her too? It occurred to her that
she was using Jocelin as a touchstone, a judgment-point. As though Jocelin were the key to everything? Well, it was she who was at work on the bombs, or whatever” (291). Jocelin is, in Kleinian psychoanalysis, a good-mother replacement for the one who is perceived as bad, for Dorothy, whom Alice is attempting to exorcize. Melanie Klein explains the psychological mechanism whereby we construct by projection good-mother figures, who theoretically compensate us for the repressive wrongs committed by perceived bad-mother figures, whose attributes we also assemble. The third-person narrator admonishes Alice’s need of support and self-understanding: “Oh yes, Alice did know that she forgot things, but not how badly, or how often” (368). Forgetful and scattered, Alice is easily manipulated, outplayed, and in need of mothering.

This coy narrative requires readers to slightly distance their vantage point from the third-person narrator in order to diagnose patterns in the group’s or Alice’s behavior, such as Alice’s need of mothering by strong female squatters. Lessing explains that she was more detached than usual in writing The Good Terrorist. This analytic detachment is a necessary part of the assessment process for the reader’s grasp of Alice as a “good”—now recast as a childlike—terrorist. In the end, the narrative voice passes disparaging judgment on Alice Mellings as a Western malcontent, who desperately desires personal gratification and reward through terrorist enterprise.

SEARCHING OUT AFGHAN FEMALE GUERILLAS

At issue in The Good Terrorist is Lessing’s consideration of terrorism within Western political struggle. Should one conclude that a slave’s violent reaction is sometimes necessary to defeat an oppressor, but that Alice’s problem is that she imagines an oppressor where one does not exist in order to do battle and, thereby, satisfy emotional needs? The theme of examining women and terror during the course of Thatcher’s England continues in The Wind Blows Away Our Words, but, in contrast, Lessing’s journalistic work admires the heroism of Moslem women and men against occupation. The cause of the mujahidin rebels against the Soviet occupying army, Lessing seems to say, is arguably reasonable.

Lessing tailors two distinct narrative forms for her appraisal of Alice Mellings and Tajwar Kakar as very different postcolonial subjects. Through detached realism, in The Good Terrorist, she is examining the cultural and psychological factors that make disaffected Western middle-class youth
become terrorists. Her careful analysis of misguided youthful militant activity in the novel contrasts with the journalistic intentions in *The Wind Blows Away Our Words*, which are to make an emotional appeal to Western readers, in order to draw them into a sympathetic appreciation of the 1980s guerrilla struggle within Afghanistan and the situation of Afghan women and child refugees in Pakistan.

The persuasive argument regarding violence for political ends in *The Wind Blows Away Our Words* is different from the novelistic dismissal of terrorist activity in *The Good Terrorist*. Lessing seems to qualify her conclusions in *The Good Terrorist* in her written recollections of a charity-sponsored journey to Pakistan in 1986 where she sought out freedom fighters whom she depicts as resistance figures, rather than terrorists. Published two years after *The Good Terrorist*, *The Wind Blows Away Our Words* commends the mujahidin rebels (subsequently part of the Taliban) in their struggle against the Soviet occupation. In the text (dedicated “[t]o the gallant people of Afghanistan”), Lessing records her visits to the Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan during September 1986 on behalf of Afghan Relief. “[A]ssociated with the Afghan struggle for some years, through Afghan relief” (34–35), she was invited “to come and see . . . so as to write articles about the conditions of the refugees and about the mujahidin, among whom, rumours said, were women fighting in all-female groups” (39). Lessing notes with particular concern the hospitals of Pakistan full of children with hands and feet blown off by “most horrifying” Russian antipersonnel bombs disguised as toys or fruit (33–34). Her text “[d]ocuments” the refugee plight that began in 1979 when the people began to “flow out” of Afghanistan into Iran and Pakistan, and the “Resistance” to the Afghan Communists, followed by the Russian occupation, began.

Lessing describes the mujahidin struggles in “The Resistance—called ‘the Jihad’ by the Afghans, the Holy War” (33): for seven years since the Russian occupation,

the mujahidin have fought without aid from outside, though very recently more arms have been reaching them; never enough, however, and never as much as the western powers, particularly America, have claimed. Some of the most extraordinary battles of our time have been fought between armies of modern tanks, and ragged men, women and children armed with home-made grenades, catapults, stones, ancient rifles—and the Afghans have won, again and again. The Afghans have even brought down helicopters with hand grenades tied to kites. (34)
In an entry from December 1986 she notes that Stingers (American ground-to-air missiles) reaching the mujahidin “must be doing everything for their morale” (139).

She records favorably her meeting with a female member of the mujahidin. Through the entire text her small group (composed of three women—Lessing, a Texan, and an Afghan born in Britain—and also a male Swedish filmmaker) makes unsatisfactory attempts to film alone female fighters. Islamic laws of Purdah limit access to these women. “At last we found a woman [Tajwar Kakar] we could interview and film without supervision by some self-appointed monitor. What had previously seemed so hard to do [in refugee camps policed by mullahs] became simple as these things do when they happen after long difficulties” (136).

A monthly bulletin published by the London “Afghan Information Centre,” which is included as part of Lessing’s text, admires “Tajwar Sultan, A Resistance Fighter.” As a teacher, Kakar reportedly provided schoolchildren with rubber balloons and toy explosives in order to disrupt the first-anniversary-observance ceremony of the Communist regime in April 1979: “It was panic. The parading party members ran for cover. The official tribune was in confusion. Many people were hurt in the rush. Even the wife of the provincial governor was injured and admitted to a hospital. The ceremony was cancelled” (146). This description stands in contrast to the repulsion felt against carnage and death caused by bombs going off in London in The Good Terrorist or the antipersonnel bombs maiming children and civilians in The Wind Blows Away Our Words.

Usually Lessing’s fiction champions the individual who opposes group pressure or coercion. Lessing’s comment, applauding “all Afghanistan rising against the Russians” (33) as a measure of Afghan communal spirit and determination against centuries of imperial war and occupation, does not agree with her lifelong value for individual thinking against the pressures of group consensus. Such individualism is promoted in her 1985 Massey Lectures, Prisons We Choose to Live Inside, where she credits those rare individuals who can withstand social pressures, whether ordinary or coercive.

The Afghan resistance “intensified what was only an aspect of their character”—fanaticism within the group personality (135)—but the group she holds responsible for (its incapacity to hear and inflexibility to act upon) Afghan suffering is a “largely indifferent” Western media and their consumers, to whom her text is addressed (34). Lessing links Western media consumption and spectacle: “What has happened is that we have been conditioned to see Hitler’s Germany, which lasted for thirteen years, a very short time, as the archetype of evil for our time; have accepted this continual ham-
mering on one nerve” (169). Accordingly, absolute evil is construed as the truth, which causes the media to favor horror and spectacle—for example, the December 2003 dramatic arrest of a disheveled Saddam Hussein from a tiny farmhouse cellar in Iraq, or the subsequent release of a film of his December 2006 hanging—thereby pushing aside other important social justice issues from public view.

Explaining our incapacity to solve deep-seated differences except through war, Elaine Scarry has examined the conundrum of human apathy toward destruction. Indifference and difficulty comprehending the complex issues about war that Scarry raises in The Body in Pain may prevent our critical engagement with Lessing’s (fictional) London situation and the (actual) Afghan struggle.22 The contrast between Lessing’s texts can be seen in the focus of each: The Good Terrorist succeeds in interrogating Alice’s psychological motivations, while showing the threat of such drives as real and devastating. The Wind Blows Away Our Words, a documentary, attempts to draw sympathy from the West toward the long-suffering Afghan people, then under repressive Soviet occupation. This journalistic description is sociological and historical, although, in searching out Kakar, it shares with The Good Terrorist an interest in women’s involvement in political violence.

Here one should note that Lessing’s search for Kakar has historical relevance; until recently, the Western press described Islamic women as imprisoned in the bhurka, not as disguised bomb carriers.23 Meanwhile, she argues against seeing difference only in terms of conflict and provides other relevant information that the Western media were not conveying.24 Lessing warned that our “ignorance” concerning Islam could foster the extremism she recognized as frightening to the West:

We are full of ignorance and prejudice and so are they [Moslem countries]. It is unfortunate that the West, particularly America, associates the words “Islam,” “Moslem” with “Terrorist,” or with Fundamentalist Islam, such as we read about in connection with Khomeini and Ghadafi. This is only one strand of Islam and not, in my view, the most important one, though it may, alas, become the most important. (46)

Lessing’s prescience in examining ideological political differences being played out in war is shown in this work. She foregrounds the benefits to the Afghan refugees should the international community become involved as a result of her journalistic intervention and has the foresight to warn of the importance of international monitors if the refugees are sent home, in order to prevent slaughter (139–41).
Unrelenting analysis through fiction and documentary is Lessing’s typical style. In *The Good Terrorist* and *The Wind Blows Away Our Words*, violence is understood as a political option. The often-quoted political philosopher Hannah Arendt dismisses the notion of necessary aggression and violence in human relations as errant biologism. In her book-length study, Arendt queries violence as a means to solving human problems: “The practice of violence, like all action, changes the world, but the most probable change is to a more violent world.” While Lessing concurs with Arendt’s view about the unreasonableness and the futility of political violence in the long term, Lessing explores a notion of primal aggression in the form of reaction against oppression in her account of Afghanistan.

Acting against known destructiveness, especially oppression in her life, Tajwar Kakar in her biography admits both violence and dialogue as viable in the political process. In June 2002—sixteen years after Lessing met Kakar in Pakistan, and after the end of the Russian occupation and subsequent to the War on Terror and the Western-led attacks against Afghanistan—when the Loya Jirga, the Afghan grand tribal council, convened in order to decide Afghanistan’s government, Tajwar Kakar, as Deputy Minister of Women’s Affairs, opposed the “powerful warlords” during the assembly. She called for their removal from the council, arguing: “Many of the warlords in control of the provinces are the Mujahideen, freedom fighters who fought against the Soviets. Now some of them are fighting hard to subjugate women.” Advo- cating on behalf of children in her role within Women’s Affairs, from May 8–10, 2002, Kakar was one of five Afghan delegates to the United Nations for the General Assembly Special Session on Children.

Lessing’s account of Tajwar Kakar looks favorably at her early efforts to release Afghans from Russian control. Since Kakar has always fought alongside Western interests—“the good guys”—she might not be considered a terrorist by definition, as some countries following the United States’ lead define terrorism as any military action by a subgroup against a liberal democracy or Western-leaning government. However, most academics and Lessing’s texts add further complexity to the American definition of terrorist. The ’80s Tajwar Kakar could be construed as a “state-sponsored terrorist,” since the mujahadin were primarily armed by the United States and financed largely by its OPEC allies. However, I suggest that Tajwar Kakar and the mujahadin do not fit neatly into any terrorist category—including state-sponsored terrorists—as most of their subversive activities were those of a combatant or armed guerilla of the resistance.

Today’s terrorist attacks target civilians in their normal (often consumerist) routines and perceived political somnolence. Unlike Alice Mellings, who
is, strictly speaking, a terrorist (of the Western groupuscular strain) whose role is that of a bomb carrier. Tajwar Kakar does not seek to blow up civilian targets. The muhjahidin fought only the Russian army. Even when creating havoc in the Soviet Anniversary Parade for maximum psychological effect, the explosives Kakar’s students detonated were mostly harmless, and the street scene could be imagined as guerilla street theater. Doris Lessing calls Tajwar Kakar a resistance fighter, which seems a latter-day reworking of the term guerilla fighter. Perhaps resistance fighter captures better the essence of an exemplary postcolonial subject who first resists colonial oppression as a nationalist and then resists sexual oppression by the very same nationalist liberators. As a protean being, Tajwar Kakar employs tactics that vary according to the circumstances and include a variety of nonviolent and violent means.

Although based on different historical times, both The Good Terrorist and The Wind Blows Away Our Words are worthy of reflection in the post-9-11 millennium. In comparison to The Good Terrorist, the present composition of Western groupuscular terrorist cells has changed, as they consist mostly of angry male Islamic youth. Another difference is that the (tapped) Internet has come to replace the (tapped) telephone as the communication device of choice. Nonetheless, the terrorist’s aspirations of using bombs to shock the unaware general public into political action and into facilitating change has not radically altered since the writing of The Good Terrorist. Just as Lessing scrutinizes the CCU cell in The Good Terrorist, the reader of “Current Events” should be skeptical of the efficacy of Western Islamic terrorists arguably attempting to further the cause of decolonization in the Middle East by targeting Western sites. It is likely that the reaction of the public to the terrorist cell within its midst is to cower and kowtow to increasingly militarized, popularly elected governments.

In the developing-world national liberation struggles, the guerrilla fighter such as Tajwar Kakar is a familiar, repeated role, a role often cast in heroic tales. The trajectory of this historical timeline of armed resistance to colonial oppression goes back at least to the American and French Revolutions, and in more recent times includes the liberation of South Africa from apartheid (with the assistance of Cuban troops and weapons). Even so, times change, and in our postmodern world of simulation and game-playing scenarios, this reader cannot but wonder about the future role of armed guerilla fighters in national liberation struggles. It is ambiguous whose interests are served by these games of conflict: whether guerrilla resistance benefits more the arms dealers, the competing global and regional powers (fighting proxy wars), or the truly impoverished peoples of the world.
NOTES


2. Doris Lessing, *The Wind Blows Away Our Words and Other Documents Relating to the Afghan Resistance* (New York: Vintage, 1987), 49. She refers to Sufism in an interview with Amir Mohamedi, leader of the (liberal) Hiriquat Party: “I have read enough about Islam to know some of its basic ideas, history, and great historical figures, and was not surprised that he [Mohamedi] looked like pictures of [the Sufis’] Rumi or El-Ghazali, the very image of a medieval saint” (*Our Words*, 65).

3. *Our Words*, 70–72, 74, 97, 100–101, 123. Further, Lessing has stated her attraction to a “type of landscape. When I went to Granada in Spain, I suddenly remembered the mountains around Kermanshah, where I was born, a town which is now, I’m told, battered flat by war, a very ancient trading town, which is now in ruins. It is a landscape which is high, dry, and dusty. That is, in fact, the landscape I had in Zimbabwe—sorry, in the old Southern Rhodesia” (Sedge Thomson, “Drawn to a Type of Landscape,” in *Conversations*, 189). My thanks to Phyllis Sternberg Perrakis for reminding me of the salient interviews in Ingersoll’s collection; and to both her and Debrah Raschke for searching commentary on my terrorist discussion.

4. Guevara is identified as a revolutionary “type” in *The Good Terrorist* (London: Cape, 1985). Caroline “was in love with a young Che Guevara from the L.S.E. [London School of Economics]. . . . She looked . . . full of secret and unscrupulous satisfactions” (288).


7. Noam Chomsky, 9-11 (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2002); Noam Chomsky, *The Culture of Terrorism* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1988); Edward W. Said, “The Essential Terrorist,” in *Blaming the Victims: Spurious Scholarship and the Palestinian Question*, edited by Edward W. Said and Christopher Hitchens (London: Verso, 1988), 149–58. Nonetheless, left-wing Communists are careful to distinguish their form of “collective” revolutionary action from that of “individual” terrorist attacks. In *The Good Terrorist*, Bert, a member of Alice Mellings’s terrorist cell, decontextualizes snippets of Lenin’s writings on terrorism and violence to justify the group’s car bombing (345, 362). However, Lenin clearly noted the difference between the organization and discipline required by a mass communist movement and that of anarchic terrorist cells. See Alice Ridout’s “‘What Is the Function of the Storyteller?: The Relationship between Why and How Lessing Writes’” in Part Two of this collection for further discussion of Lessing’s engagement, then disillusionment, with Communism [editors’ note].

realist accounts of terrorism (which would include *The Good Terrorist*). “[M]an’s bondage [which] consisted of being observed” is situated within “a system of computers, for what was observing was two cameras connected to two computers observed by two further computers and fed into computers connected to *those* computers” (Dürrenmatt, 109). In Dürrenmatt’s view, terrorists and other individuals perform within simulations, game-play scenarios, or operational projects, in which frames their acts must be interpreted. See Rubenstein’s remarks on how “Lessing has continued to surprise her readers by remaining several steps ahead of their expectations,” in “Notes for Proteus: Doris Lessing Reads the Zeitgeist,” in Part One of this volume [editors’ note]. The comparisons with Chomsky’s social criticism and Dürrenmatt’s novel show her contributing already in the 1980s to the understanding of terrorism.


10. Townshend underscores the importance of Lessing’s novel for its discussion of this notion of the “good terrorist” (20–21). For his discussion of the infamous attack on Grand Duke Sergei, see Townshend, 58. “Terrorism” or “terrorist” is a category assigned by others; likewise, Alice “could not remember a point when she had said, ‘I am a terrorist. I don’t mind being killed’” (*GT*, 367).

11. For a discussion of groupuscular terrorism, see Townshend, 66–73. Lessing has identified the 1983 Harrods bombing as a specific source for the car bombing in *The Good Terrorist*. See Margaret Scanlan, *Plotting Terror: Novelists and Terrorists in Contemporary Fiction* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001), 173–75, for a review of historically specific issues and other incidents related to *The Good Terrorist*.


13. The most repeated pejorative adjective in the text is “shitty,” used especially by Alice, but also by the other squat members to refer to “fascists,” meaning ordinary British citizens. The group dismisses those who do not share their vision of the end of British colonial rule in Ireland, which they imagine will be shaped by their Communist ideals (especially about shared resources).

14. Scanlan develops a thorough reading of language manipulation in *The Good Terrorist*. In her view, “The welcomed return to earth in *The Good Terrorist* [after Lessing’s *Canopus in Argos* series] is accompanied by a renewed sense of speech differences, but also by a heightened sense that the voice in which one speaks may not be a spontaneous authentic expression of a personality but a deception” (79). Scanlan adds, “[w]hat attracts the novelist to her subject is a fascination with the inaudibility of personal voices, with the fragility of printed books in a world where the electronic media accent our speech and feed our violence” (91). In particular, Lessing seems to show how group mentality and above all group language carries Alice and the other members along. See Lessing’s comments about this power of group mentality in relation to *The Good Terrorist* in her interview with Claire Tomalin, “Watching the Angry and Destructive Hordes Go By,” in *Conversations*, 175, and in her interview with Michael Upchurch, “Voice of England, Voice of Africa,” in *Conversations*, 226–27. Also, Susan Watkins in “Writing in a Minor Key: Doris Lessing’s Late-Twentieth-Century Fiction” in Part Three of this collection explores how narrative choices affect the politics of terror [editors’ note].

It is interesting to see *The Good Terrorist* as demonstrating the workings of reading conventions, which Wolfgang Iser describes in *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980). The reader must follow clues, ones that Alice may be missing, in order to judge Alice as the book’s “good terrorist” or “bad terrorist.” Iser describes the manipulation of the reader in the reading process: “As the literary text involves the reader in the formation of illusion and the simultaneous formation of the means whereby the illusion is punctured, reading reflects the process by which we gain experience” (Iser, 290). The reader’s sustained curiosity is necessary for a full appreciation of Alice’s amateur terrorist group in No. 43 Old Mill Road, which operates in tandem with No. 45, an arms and information distribution point associated with paramilitary training camps and a Russian spy network. Iser’s narrative theory of illusion-puncturing supplements my discussion of secondary meaning revealed in everyday jokes and irony.

16. Lessing seems to satirize Alice’s appalling behavior toward Dorothy Mellings, which Alice justifies through her use of bogus language such as calling her mother a “shitty old fascist” (330). Alice is so duped by ideology that she cannot remember her own actions, an enigma that baffles her mother: “Alice could remember nothing of that [calls she made to the estate agent about selling the family home]. Dorothy could not believe Alice did not remember. For the thousandth time the situation was recurring . . . Alice . . . thinking that her mother maliciously made things up; while Dorothy sighed and pursued interesting thoughts about the pathology of lying” (326). See Lessing’s comments on her relationship with her mother at the end of the second chapter of *Under My Skin* (15–17), where she also speaks of girls’ attitudes toward their mothers and the contemporary sense of entitlement she questions.


18. A trestle table, like the one the reader may recall for Communist Party affiliate Anna Wulf’s four notebooks in *The Golden Notebook*, is used for Jocelin’s bomb preparation in *The Good Terrorist*: “On the long table in front of Jocelin were four nasty little devices, identical, ranged side by side, and looking rather like outsize and complicated sardine tins” (336–37). Other fiction writers and their critics have similarly alluded to and
speculated about the connection between author and terrorist. For an in-depth analysis of the author-terrorist connection through a variety of texts, see Scanlan, *Plotting Terror*.


20. See the Lessing interview by Thomas Frick where he asks Lessing about her “detached realism” in *The Good Terrorist* (“Caged by the Experts,” in *Conversations*, 160). Lessing attributes the detachment of the observer in *The Good Terrorist* to her age. “It was probably due to my advanced age. We do get detached” (161). Realist detachment facilitates exploration of the terrorist personality and experience in *The Good Terrorist*. In my dissertation, I argue that Lessing’s style of realism changes with *The Diaries of Jane Somers, The Good Terrorist, and The Fifth Child*, and one characteristic is the author’s increased attention to the way in which “reality” is known and represented in fiction (Sandra Singer, “Doris Lessing’s Fiction and Contemporary Cultural Theorists” [PhD diss., University of Cambridge, 1992], 222–46).

21. Lessing in *Our Words* eventually questioned the goals of searching out female resistance fighters: “this interest of ours . . . had come to seem frivolous, even typical western sensationalism, or gimmicky. What did it matter who was fighting? . . . For them it is the fight that counts” (138).


23. *Our Words* depicts the bhurka as clothing for deception: “it goes without saying that this bhurka is used for all kinds of dangerous or shady transactions. The authorities on the frontiers between Pakistan and Afghanistan look at hands and feet: is this a mujahid or a journalist trying to get in to Afghanistan?” (102).

24. Lessing describes in *Our Words* approaching her agent, Jonathan Clowes, in order to speak against an “Everyman” series presentation on television of “the mujahidin as crazed, drugged fanatics, babbling about their rights to a paradisal bliss” (159). She wanted to repair this distorted television image by speaking about her recent visit to Pakistan, but the television program “and two others said in effect, ‘No, Afghanistan is just a bore.’ ‘No one is interested in Afghanistan.’ This neatly illustrates the media’s way of sheltering behind attitudes they have themselves created” (160).


26. Ibid., 80.


29. State-sponsored terrorism is facilitated, according to Chomsky in *The Culture of Terrorism*, when the “enormous economic and propaganda resources of the dominant (often foreign) society [are] combined with a depressed economy, ethnic rivalries, religious controls, exploitation of fear and ignorance, a mounting cycle of violence and other factors” (83). The “U.S. [in El Salvador and Nicaragua] has organized and directs a terrorist force [the Contras in Nicaragua, for example] that must use violence to achieve the ends of the foreign master and the local elites that rely on external power, unable to enter into a political struggle since they have nothing to offer the population beyond a renewal of misery and subordination” (Chomsky, 93, emphasis added).