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**A Mirror of the World after September 11th Attacks;
Richard Flanagan's *The Unknown Terrorist***

It is a universal truth that terrorism is a practice with a deep historical root that has been experienced by all societies and cultures. Its origins date back to Antiquity, when a group of people gathered together under the name of the Zealots of Judea, also known by the Romans as sicarii or dagger-men, to carry out the murdering of different Roman occupation forces. But terrorism acquired its name during the French Revolution (1789), in reference to the Reign of Terror initiated by the revolutionary government. During the XIX century, it was generalized and related to anarchist and nationalist movements. The XX century experienced this phenomenon associated to state violence under extremist groups' leadership. And, in the young XXI century, several terrorist attacks have already taken place.

Terrorism has always overwhelmed human beings all around the world. Every time a terrorist attack takes place somewhere, the whole world seems to stop to stare amazed and scared at the disaster. But this is not the only effect of terrorism. This torturous, dehumanized practice has become a much more powerful weapon; even though the only result we seem to perceive after any attack is a massive fear and an overwhelming pain.

During September 11th attacks in 2001, 2.600 people died at the World Trade Center, 125 died at the Pentagon and 256 more died on the four planes. The death toll surpassed that at Pearl Harbor in December 1941, as it is recorded in *The 9/11*

Commission Report. After this tragic event, not only the United States of America became a nation transformed but also, the rest of the world.

This is what Richard Flanagan's novel, *The Unknown Terrorist*, reflects. This amazing piece of art is a mirror of the world after September 11th attacks to the United States of America. People from all around the world, but mainly Australians, were blinded by the huge amount of information given by the Media. As a consequence of the fear, they accepted whatever they were being told and, therefore, the truth no longer seemed to matter. This situation not only favoured the reinforcement of racism, especially towards Islamic cultures, but also the obsession with security measures against terrorist attacks.

The Unknown Terrorist is the result of a perfect combination between fiction and reality. Through a very special technique which consists of telling the facts that are going to happen and then, explaining how they happened, Flanagan presents a story which takes place in Sidney, Australia, within four days, from Saturday 3rd March, to Tuesday 6th. We do not get to know the year, but, thanks to references to several real terrorist attacks, we can tell it is 2007. During this period of time, the life of Gina Davis, a pole dancer known as the Doll, is turned upside down due to a misunderstanding caused by an attempted terrorist attack. Three unexploded bombs are found at Sydney's Homebush Olympic Stadium and, after spending a night with Tariq, a stranger who turns out to be a drug dealer mistaken for a terrorist, she becomes prime suspect in the investigation. She witnesses every truth of her life twisted into a betrayal while other characters such as Sir Harmsen or Richard Cody get benefits from it.

We have a short but very interesting introduction which presents the idea that love is not enough, even though human beings have found that it is the strongest force

on earth. Living examples of this fact are presented. Firstly, we have Jesus, who fought hell to make mankind believe in love.

“Jesus, who wanted love to such an extent, was clearly a madman. (...)

Jesus is history’s first, but not last, example of a suicide bomber.”

(Flanagan, *The Unknown Terrorist*, 2)

Here we see how, since the beginning of the story, terrorism is the main theme. The omniscient narrator considers Jesus a terrorist since he let men kill him in order to defend his ideals. Secondly, we are presented Nietzsche, who gave his life for a horse who was being hit, who is “the image of a dreamer”. (Flanagan, *The Unknown Terrorist*, 2) This reinforces either the idea that love is not enough or the strongest force on earth. Finally, we get to Chopin, the compositor of the Nocturnes, which are a group of twenty-one piano compositions (one hour and a half of music).

“Chopin could offer no explanation of his Nocturnes. Why the Doll was haunted by Chopin’s Nocturnes is one strand of this story. In listening to what Chopin could not explain, she heard an explanation of her own life. She could, of course, not know that it also foretold her own death.” (Flanagan, *The Unknown Terrorist*, 2)

We perceive that the life of this girl is going to support the central idea that love is not enough. We are also told what is going to happen to her; she is going to die. But, surprisingly, even though we know the end of the novel when we have just started reading it, we are still surprised many times throughout the whole story.

Through this short but intense introduction we get the feeling that the novel we are about to read is not going to be a mere fictional story, but a transcendental one. And, in fact, it is what we are going to find; a novel which makes us realize that, under such a torturous situation as a terrorist attack, we get blinded by fear and pain and we forget

that there are people trying to get benefits from it, even though it sounds cruel and hard to believe.

The fictional attempted terrorist attack, the three unexploded bombs found at Homebush Olympic Stadium in Sydney, is the key point of the story. It triggers all the facts throughout the whole novel. But, it was the September 11th attacks upon the United States of America and the consequent social situation in every country, but, especially in Australia, what inspired Flanagan to write *The Unknown Terrorist*. As he pointed out in his article, he has used a fictional event to refer to the real situation; the impact that the September 11th attacks had in every single country but especially, in Australia. (Flanagan, *Politics, Writing, Love*)

The fictional attempted terrorist attack at Homebush Olympic Stadium in Sydney and, therefore, September 11th, has three different connotations in the novel. On the one hand, it is the reason why the life of the main character, the Doll, is being destroyed. After the attempted attack, images of the Twin Towers falling are displayed by the Media over and over again; what makes Australians feel fear and therefore, believing a public truth without questioning if it is real or not. So, when the Doll is presented as a terrorist, nobody questions it, they just accept it as true.

“It was only when the Doll was halfway between the fifth and the fourth floors that she noticed a vast image—broken into a grid by the frames of the scores of plasma screens that stacked together formed the giant whole—of the Twin Towers burning.” (Flanagan, *The Unknown Terrorist*, 148)

This is the first reference to the September 11th attacks and, we notice the great importance of the event because it is described and treated as if it was happening at that very moment.

“The Twin Towers fell again (...) The Doll closed her eyes. When she opened them, she saw Osama bin Laden. George W.Bush. Missiles being launched. Men in robes firing grenade launchers. Great buildings exploding into balloons of fire. Women covered in blood.”

(Flanagan, *The Unknown Terrorist*, 148)

The fall of the Twin Towers is repeated several times throughout the story and is directly linked to the Doll's feelings. The more devastated she is, the more that image is repeated in her head. Her own life is falling down like the Twin Towers did years earlier.

On the other hand, the attempted terrorist attack at Sydney and, therefore, September 11th attacks, is portrayed as the reason why some of the secondary characters get benefits.

“He had risen rapidly in the security services as they swelled post-September 11 and his youthful looks and bad suits belied the high standing he now enjoyed.” (Flanagan, *The Unknown Terrorist*, 262)

Siv Harmsen, who appears as delegate of the ASIO (Australian Security Intelligence Organization), was directly promoted after the attacks, but what he did to be promoted is not even mentioned. This remarks that many people get benefits from terrorism simply because they are in the precise place at the precise moment.

“Siv Harmsen continues working into the night, (...) He will in the morning raise the matter of a bravery award for Nick Loukakis with the minister.” (Flanagan, *The Unknown Terrorist*, 318)

Nick Loukakis is going to be named courageous Detective Sergeant thanks to Siv Harmsen for nothing, since he tried to help the Doll but it was already too late; she had shot Richard Cody and committed suicide when he arrived at the Club.

“The minister tells Zoe LeMay on Undercurrent how he wishes to add his tribute to the many that have been pouring in all day honouring a courageous journalist and great Australian, Richard Cody.” (Flanagan, *The Unknown Terrorist*, 318)

Richard Cody is going to be given an honorific mention after being shot by the Doll. He was the person who brought all the worst details of her past life to light in order to make her look like a real terrorist with his made-up affirmations on his TV programme. He got his own programme and ascended socially at the Doll's expense.

As we see, terrorism is also a means to get benefits for some people, even though it may seem hard to believe.

September 11th attacks obviously affected nations as a whole, especially, Australia. The government spent huge amounts of money to improve its security system. The country was even congratulated by the American Ambassador.

“He welcomed the effort of Australian authorities in their counter terrorism work; indeed, he went on, in his experience Australia was almost unrivalled in its homeland security measures.” (Flanagan, *The Unknown Terrorist*, 268)

This not only shows the extreme obsession with security measures but also, how the United States of America became a reference to follow in all fields. Australians strictly followed American instructions after the attacks, moved by the fear. We can see how terrorism can be also used as a means to get control not only over the people affected by attacks but also over other countries.

Other real terrorist attacks are also mentioned, since, to a large extent, they also contribute to the situation of madness reached after the attempted terrorist attack at Sydney. After it takes place, the Media are constantly reposing images of 2002 Bali

bombings, 2004 Beslan Massacre, 2005 London Bombings and 2004 Madrid Train Bombings.

Another important issue that is present throughout the novel is racism as a consequence of terrorism.

“What kind of scumbags? (...) Islamic scumbags. (...) My uncle was in the war and he said the only language they understood when he was in Syria was a good boot up in the arse” (Flanagan, *The Unknown Terrorist*, 65)

September 11th attacks favoured racism, especially towards Islamic cultures, since they were carried out by Islamists. There is a generalized and deep hate towards them.

But we can also perceive a dislike towards Americans, since after the attacks Australia's government followed orders from the United States without questioning. For many Australians, this was a sign of submission.

Journalism and, more precisely, the Media, in the wrong hands, can be a powerful weapon through which power, fame and money can be obtained. Through them, politicians and journalists cause terror and therefore, get to have people under control. A public truth is created, since real truth no longer matters because people do not even question if what it is been said is true or not as a consequence of the fear. In other words, “journalism, (...) is the art of making a sow's ear out of a silk purse”. (Flanagan, *The Unknown Terrorist*, 27)

This theme, which is closely related to terrorism, constitutes the base of the story. The Doll is a victim of the corruption of journalism. Richard Cody uses the power that the Media give him to ruin her life and, as a result, improve his own social and economic situation.

Another important theme present in *The Unknown Terrorist* is suicide. A distinction between two different types of suicide can be made. On the one hand, we are presented suicide committed by terrorists. They commit suicide in order to kill other people and, this way, defend their own ideals. On the other hand, we have suicide committed by an innocent girl who is victim of a misunderstanding and of the corruption of journalism. The Doll, after four days seeing how her whole life is being unfairly destroyed, shoots the man responsible for her nightmare. Afterwards, she realizes she has no reason to keep on living and kills herself.

Flanagan establishes a connection between these two types of suicide by getting the Doll, who is not a terrorist, to do what terrorist do: kill people and committing suicide. Thus, if we have a look at the title of the novel, *The Unknown Terrorist*, we see how there is a progression of meaning. At the beginning of the novel, the Doll was unknown but not a terrorist, but at the end, she becomes a terrorist but is not unknown anymore.

In conclusion, Richard Flanagan's *The Unknown Terrorist* is an exciting, intriguing and entertaining piece of art which recreates the situation lived after the September 11th attacks to perfection. Controversial issues such as terrorism, racism, the corruption of journalism and suicide are exposed through a simple, direct but powerful writing style. It is amazing how Flanagan gets the reader attracted to hard, painful issues which are usually rejected by most readers.

In my opinion, this novel is not only a mirror of the world after September 11th attacks but also a window which allows the reader to go beyond the surface of the tragic event.

Works Cited

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