

The psychology of the terrorist based on Doris Lessing's vision (*)

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We are in London in the seventies or eighties of the 20th century. All unemployed, Alice and his lover, Jasper, and their friends are moving into a dirty, deserted house. Thirty-five-year-old Alice was a good student at the university but never tried to get a job. Her rather wealthy parents divorced long ago. Jasper was not a student because of his poor school achievement and also failed to find a job. Previously, Alice had lived with her lover in her mother's apartment, although her lover had called her mother a bourgeois pig. Neither Alice's mother, nor her father is willing to help them financially. Also, they are not prepared to give them any help in getting permission from the Council to live in the house. Alice's girlfriend gives her £50 and feels sorry for her. *You are such a good girl, Alice, why can't you choose yourself someone you should have a relationship with someone* (Lessing, 1985: 36).

Alice directs the cleaning work in the house, helps the others (who are younger than she is) and handles the negotiations with the Council. As the money she has obtained from her girlfriend is not enough for Jasper, Alice steals £300 from her father, then another £1000 from his shop. She becomes acquainted with a Comrade Andrew in the neighbourhood. He would like to arrange for her a course in computer training, *which would be a sufficient basis on which an intelligent woman like her could build* (Lessing, *ibid.*, 165). Then she could get a good job and flat and live an ordinary life. Alice does not see clearly who Comrade Andrew is, and does not want to live a middle-class life and wait for instructions. Comrade Andrew knows that Jasper and his friends have failed to offer their services to the Irish comrades and now that their plan is to go to the Soviet Union as tourists. He tries to persuade Alice to leave Jasper and the others. *They are playing, Alice, like little children with explosives. They are very dangerous people. Dangerous to themselves and to others* (Lessing, *ibid.*, 227). Andrew admits that he is half-Russian and half-Irish born, and that because of his duties sometimes disappears. He disappears again, but sends £500 to Alice although she has not asked him to do so. Two young men brings big parcels. Next day a man warns Alice that the £500 was to all intents and purposes a contract and that her duty is to do with the material as they wish. Alice is suspicious that the man is an authoritarian Russian and protests against any sort of instruction. One night she and her girlfriend carry a bomb to

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a concrete block in front of a Council building. The noise of the detonation is rather significant, but they are not satisfied with it. The members of the group discuss the advantages and disadvantages of blowing up a railway station, a restaurant or an important public building. Alice finds their ideas wilder and wilder. She goes to her mother.

Jasper steals a car to carry a bomb. Alice worries that they are unable to calculate who will be there when the bomb explodes. She would not like the explosion to happen during the night. But the others do not accept her proposal because their aim is to achieve the greatest possible effect in order that their action should get into the media. They think that the best place and time for the explosion would be in front of a big hotel at the beginning of the rush hour. Just before Alice starts out for the scene, a man with an English accent appears and is interested in Comrade Andrew. Alice would like to hurry, but says that if the visitor meets Andrew, he should tell him not to send anything because they, the independently-minded British communists would throw away everything. The visitor proposes a meeting the next day in a restaurant.

Alice and her comrades go by Underground while Jasper drives the car with one of their woman-comrades. Alice thinks her lover is a bad driver, one who would panic in an emergency. She feels a strong pressure in the pit of her stomach when she thinks that they could murder people and calls the Samaritans from a telephone booth to come quickly as there is to be a bomb in a car. But instead of the correct address she gives another one and adds: *It's the I. R. A., freedom for Ireland! For a united Ireland and peace to all mankind!* (Lessing, *ibid.*, 353) Finally the car appears, but Jasper has caused a minor accident and that is why his woman-comrade is driving it. She cannot park and when she eventually finds a place, parks badly, driving the car violently up on the pavement. Jasper is able to get out but not his woman comrade. The bomb explodes and the car flies apart. *All down the side of the hotel, it was a scene of disaster bodies on the pavement, some lying still, some struggling to rise bits of metal, of shattered glass, handbag, masonry, blood* (Lessing, *ibid.*, 353).

Returning home, Alice and Jasper listen to the news that five people had died and that twenty-three had been seriously hurt. The I. R. A. had accepted no responsibility. Alice cannot speak of her telephone call because this would destroy the friend's trust in her. Jasper and his friends decide it is time to leave the house. Alice, however, stays there and views her lover's dispassionate departure with some resignation. She listens to the news that one of the wounded, a fifteen-year-old girl is dying. The I. R. A. says in a declaration that the explosion was not their work, and that in any event they do not bring the death of innocent people. Alice is laughing in her despair. The house is empty, the women have gone as well. Alice thinks tenderly that the betrayed house is her achievement. She would like to go to one of her acquaintances for a talk. But she realizes that she cannot do it. *No, there 'd only be a lot of silly talk about the I. R. A. and the bombing. Ordinary people simply didn't understand and it was no good expecting them to... Poor things, poor things, they simply don't understand – as if she had her arms around all the poor silly ordinary people in the world* (Lessing, *ibid.*, 366).

Alice is thinking. *After all, if publicity was the aim, then they had certainly achieved that! All of them knew their lives were at risk, the moment they understood this sort of thing, decided to become terrorists. She could not remember a point when she had said, 'I am a terrorist, I don't mind being killed.' (...) I was all the time waiting for something to start – she thought and on face came a small scared incredulous smile at the inappropriateness of it. Had she not believed that the bomb was serious, then? No, not really she had gone along with it, while feeling it was not right and behind that was the thought that serious work (...) would come later* (Lessing, *ibid.*, 367).

She remembers the man whom she will meet. He certainly is not a Russian perhaps he is a member of the British counter-intelligence. She does not remember exactly what she told him the previous day, but she knows that she has told him nothing about the material. She imagines that they will have a nice lunch and speak of nothing disagreeable.

I understand Alice much less than I do not understand her, although the narrator describes not only Alice's circumstances, but also her actual state of consciousness. The reader is often in her consciousness, sharing in her view of people and their situations. Alice's perspective cannot be, however, separated

from Lessing's. Thus the reader changes from a narrow perspective to a well-informed one and moves away from that of Alice (Greene, 1994: 214).

She lived during her youth in good circumstances. Even her appearance was favourable and she did not have any difficulties during her student years. She had a degree, which made possible a successful career even if she showed no signs of a deeper interest. Although she has never had a place of work, I cannot think of her as workshy. She was always busy. She was diligent and worked hard, even at the dirtiest jobs at home. Her sense of reality worked very well, too. She was steady with the Council, she was efficient and careful. She did everything for the community, more precisely because by no means did she wish to separate herself from the group. Although she stole from her father, she regarded herself as a revolutionary, not as a thief. At the same time, she always was honest.

She connected her life to that of Jasper, who had exploited her. She felt that she stuck to her lover for reasons other than the sex, and nobody was able to understand her attachment. Jasper was the guarantee of the way of life that gave sense to Alice's existence. This way of life, however, meant a need not only for being endangered, but also for being subjected to brutal force, even to force more brutal than Jasper's. During demonstrations *she knew that they would all be arrested at the slightest provocation. She yearned for it, longed for the moment when she would feel the rough violence of the policemen's hands on her shoulders, would let herself go limp, would be dragged to the van...* (Lessing, *ibid.*, 237). Presumably, Alice's longing for even physical subjection to an irresistible power shows that she was attracted to Jasper in spite of his harshness, but because of it, and that in the depth of her being she did not find this too much, but rather too little.

At the same time, no doubt that she was the awakening conscience itself. When she sat down exhausted and thought of how good it would be to be alone and quiet, she immediately felt guilty for being unfaithful to her comrades. She explained that she did not want to be like her mother, who was selfish. But this attitude, which seemed to be a conscious counter-identification, had an unconscious root. Her extraordinary solidarity along with some kind of motherliness, was the most obvious sign of her tender womanhood. But, it was as though this was inseparable from her repressed drives, full of aggressive images, not only towards her parents and all the bourgeois rubbish they represented, but even towards herself. The reader cannot know the precise history of her conflict with her parents, but I see this as basically a self-conflict, as a split in her personality. The unconscious side of her self represents her mother I shall talk about this later. At the same time, for her conscious self both her parents represent the evil to be rejected and those against whom the weak and the deprived are to be supported, those toward whom her only task is to be good. By all means, the adjective in the story is correct one: Alice is good in the sense that she thinks of goodness. She is good with her comrades good-for-nothing young people whose only merit is that they come from an unfavourable social background and are unable and unwilling to accept the norms of the British society.

Alice never hankered after reading, and she read only the indispensable books, even at the university, where she studied economics and politics. She thought that a clear view of life was endangered by reading. In her eyes, education and knowledge were not valuable. Her slogan was that only the facts are interesting and meanwhile she could not see that she was being driven by her rather primitive and hostile disposition against every discipline, against everything that could be considered a part of her parents, and thus finally against herself, too. I must repeat again that I do not understand why and how this disposition developed strongly and lastingly in her, but this is the fact which determined her choice of an uneducated, hot-tempered lover mouthing empty ideological phrases and of other comrades, and of her whole way of life. And these formed the basis of her belief in the existence of fascism in the Britain of the day and in the necessity of terror.

As a matter of fact, when one feels in danger, one needs to know clearly who are the good and who are the bad. A black-and-white view of the world, a clear separation between bad and good, is a manifestation of an archaic way of thinking that uses absolute categories (Beck, 1999). It is appropriate when one does not have enough time for reflecting and making fine distinctions, but is damaging to oneself and to everybody else in all other situations. By the way, it is also a breeding ground for all kinds of fundamentalism. The world is changed according to its needs. The tragic consequences of the

Messianistic formula are well-known: all problems of society and of the human condition in general will be solved once and for all. These lastingly false interpretations eliminate any willingness for adaptation, problem-solving and compromise. And from my point of view these factors connecting Alice with the former Red Brigade and today's Islamic terrorist are more important than all the obvious (sociological and psychological) differences separating them.

However, Alice's sense of reality broke through even this distorted world-view. She was aware of Jasper's unfitness for the attack. The unreal ideas of the group members made her nervous, and she was the only one who would have liked to explode the bomb at *innocent* time as she said. She tried to avoid the tragedy at the last moment but was unable to step outside the group and intentionally deny her feeling of identity. In her telephone call she linked the expected devastation which she was afraid of to cheering the peace of mankind in the name of the I. R. A.. The hypocrisy of this attitude she realized clearly. Alice was shocked when following the attack a friend of Jasper's read from a piece of paper which he pulled from his top-pocket over his heart: *The law should not abolish terror to promise that would be self-delusion or deception it should be substantiated and legalised in principle, clearly, without evasion or embellishment. The paragraph on terror should be formulated as widely as possible, since only revolutionary consciousness of justice and revolutionary conscience can determine the conditions of its application in practice. Lenin – said with confidence* (Lessing, *ibid.*, 362). Alice saw the now-smiling man outside the hotel like a leaden-faced corpse. In contrast to him, to Jasper and to the others who were going their ways without any remorse, even satisfied with themselves as people who did what they had to do, Alice was unable to continue anything.

I have mentioned in passing that owing to the absurd ideas of the group Alice went to her mother, although she had tried to break with her. And she had to experience again that they were unable to understand each other. Her mother told her that she had wished so much for Alice to be an educated woman, because she herself was not one. The mother knew that her own life had already passed without her doing anything remarkable. Unfortunately, Alice and Jasper, like herself, were *peasants, you'll never do anything*. Alice contradicted: *We are going to pull everything down. All of it. This shitty rubbish we live in. (...) – With so many of you around, with only one thought in your minds, how to get the power for yourselves... – laughed her mother. Jasper will be probably the Minister of Culture, he's the type for it. (...) And you'll be his willing aide* (Lessing, *ibid.*, 330). Her mother's words hurt Alice who ran from the room, pushing her mother to the edge of the table and calling her an old fascist. Thus she expressed her deep sense of uncertainty over whether their great goals would be realized, saying that Jasper's speeches made no sense, and that their desire for power was ridiculous and unacceptable. And mainly, and this was the most terrible for her, that the poor simple people like her mother were right.

While Alice's unusually violent anger was brought about by a simultaneous painful recognition and repression of reality, the next scene with her mother – one showing a strong attachment that contradicted her self-image – was brought about only by repression. This occurred the day following the devastating action when Alice imagined what her mother would say if she knew what had happened. *Not that Alice believed that she – Alice – had any reason to feel bad she hadn't really been part of it* (Lessing, *ibid.*, 366). The events of the past 24 hours had been beyond Alice's powers of psychological endurance. She was unable to manage the tension arising between her subjective inclinations and her political self. Her personal energies were towards building and care, while her political ambitions were destructive and murderous (Green, *ibid.*, 213).

She is starting on the way to derealization with the aid of her fantasy. As a first step, she plays down her real role. Then, fearing the consequences, she relies upon not on her good memory, but on her good forgetting, and to find a stable point she grasps onto her childhood. *'Once upon a time there was a little girl called Alice, with her mother Dorothy. One morning Alice was in the kitchen with Dorothy who was making her favourite pudding, apple with cinnamon and brown sugar and sour cream, and little Alice said, "Mummy am I a good girl, aren't I?"* (Lessing, *ibid.*, 368).

How can the nice good girl who accepts her mother's warmth have anything to do with the foolish attack, how can she be a terrorist murderer of people whose only crime is that they just

happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong moment. When Alice is warned by the pressure in her stomach that her mind is unbearably stormy, she has to travel even farther from her adult being. The derealization process is going to be total. In her fantasy Alice locks the windows and doors. She goes up to the attic and puts a weight on the trapdoor so that no one can come up to it. *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 the time to go out and meet the professionals* (Lessing, *ibid.*, 370). But you can be sure that they are coming, as they have come earlier, but now they will find somebody who has lost the world finally, somebody who was once Alice.

Although Alice exhibits feelings of superiority and extreme hatred to conceal those of worthlessness, self-hatred and unimportance, (behind all of these preoedipal and oedipal anger can be supposed), I think it would be too much and too little to characterize her as suffering from “terrorist psychiatric syndrome” (see Frick, 2003).

There is a general impression that a “true believer” is humble. But the truth is that giving up individuality causes arrogance. The true believer thinks that if someone believes in things that are different from those she or he believes in that person is evil itself. The hatred and cruelty coming from selfishness are nothing in comparison with the cruelty coming from unselfishness, as an American docker with a life of ups and downs remarked more than half a century ago (Hoffer, 1951).

And here is a similar, somewhat later conclusion, from a likewise much experienced self-taught English writer of Hungarian origin. If you measure it on a historical scale, the damage caused by individual violence is unimportant as compared to the devastations and mass murders caused by devotion to collective belief systems. Instead of mature social integration, this self-denying resolution is a consequence of the primitive identification which partly or wholly suspends the feeling of subjective responsibility and starts the quasi-hypnotic phenomena of mass-psychosis (Koestler, 1967).

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