

THE GLOBE AND MAIL

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Feminism's unlikely ally, and radical Islam's foe

Critics have called Martin Amis a xenophobic crank for his attacks on Islamic extremism. But as he tells Margaret Wente, 'If you don't feel morally superior to the Taliban, you don't feel superior to anyone'

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Martin Amis, whose novels include [London Fields](#), [The Information](#) and [Time's Arrow](#), has been called "the leading luminary of the English metropolitan literary world." But recently he has been stirring up a hornet's nest of controversy with his attacks on multiculturalism and his detour (as some people see it) into the politics of terror. Critics have accused him of Muslim-bashing, and some say he has turned into a cranky old curmudgeon like his famous father, Kingsley. Mr. Amis will appear in Toronto next week at two events, the [Grano Speaker Series](#) and the [Donner Canadian Foundation Lecture](#). Earlier this week, he spoke with Margaret Wente from his home in London.

You'll be speaking here about feminism and al-Qaeda. What's the connection?

Al-Qaedaism is a shorthand term to describe fundamentalist, radical, extremist Islam. And feminism is a tremendously clarifying theme. You can make all kinds of justifications of al-Qaedaism if you want, but no one can say they approve of certain practices – marrying nine-year-old girls off to older men, female circumcision, honour killing. All these practices express violence toward women.

But surely you're not arguing that violence against women is confined to radical Islam?

Violence against women is the great curse of masculinity. But we don't have honour killing. We don't have clitoridectomy and we don't marry nine-year-old girls. I want women to be saying this, but they're not. Germaine Greer disastrously spoke out against trying to stamp out female circumcision. She set feminism back by a generation.

Why are feminists so evasive about these issues?

It's because of the terror-stricken anxiety of seeming racist or anti-multicultural.

You've described yourself as a passionate multiracialist, but a very poor multiculturalist.

I adore multiracialism. There can't be enough immigrants in this country for my taste. I'd like to see immigrants from Mars or Jupiter. But multiculturalism, I believe, is a fraud. We cannot justify these things because they're traditional. The tradition has to go. There should be no indulgence of them. Honour killing has been massively underreported in this country. And what a misnomer: It's dishonour killing. The Archbishop of Canterbury has been saying that *sharia* law should apply in

various parts of the U.K. No! You don't give an inch on that. The law of the land is the law of the land and it is universal.

When you say that, people immediately assume you want to throw up borders and recreate Little England. That's not the case. Everyone is welcome here, but they must live by our laws.

You've said that as a liberal society, we tend to minimize the terrorist threat. One top security official here said recently that Canadians tend to regard radicalized young Muslim men from the suburbs as harmless kids who talk big. Why don't we take these threats more seriously?

It's a tremendous effort of the imagination to put yourself in the place of someone who really does believe in the irrational goals harboured by such movements. There's always a slight sense of unreality when a new ideology appears that is clearly pathological. It's much easier to pooh-pooh it and say, "Oh, they can't mean it because it's so outlandish." We have also infantilized ourselves with a whole generation of relativism, which declares that no conviction is allowed to stand in stone. This may sound imperialistic or triumphalist, but there is such a thing as universal values.

I wonder if you were as struck as I was by the initial coverage of the shootings at Fort Hood. People rushed to find motives for the Muslim shooter. They speculated about pretraumatic stress disorder and reported that he'd suffered discrimination in the army. There was a lot of dodging around the fact that he was a radicalized guy who supposedly shouted "God is great" in Arabic when he opened fire.

I think a lot of middle-class guilt has bled over into our era. I think we would be much clearer in our minds about al-Qaedaism if it had originated in Norway, or white South Africa, or the Deep South of America. But they've got darker skins than we have and we are rightly drenched in revulsion about singling out people with darker skin. And so we lose sight of the fact that not killing people is better than killing them. Elementary human judgment is put in doubt by this mental habit.

Here's an example: A few months ago, I was at an event at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London. And I said, "Hands up, those of you who feel morally superior to the Taliban." And about 30 trembling hands went up. And then I spoke about the Taliban for a bit, about how they black up the windows of the houses to which women are confined. It's a funny moment we're living through. If you don't feel morally superior to the Taliban, then you don't feel morally superior to anyone.

But still, how worried should we really be about a bunch of guys halfway around the world with roadside bombs? More Americans have drowned in the bathtub than died from terrorist attacks.

I think the situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan – Afpak – is hugely magnified by the fact that Pakistan is a nuclear power. The next thing on the horizon is the alignment of terrorism and a nuclear device – a weapon of mass destruction. It is coming soon. Iraq was a tragic divagation, but Afpak is combustible. Lots of states also have stockpiles of anthrax. It's not irrational to fear a deadly virus attack. In fact, it's more or less inevitable. You can learn how to do it on the Internet.

You've been called a bit of a nutbar for going on this detour, as some see it, into the politics of terror. One critic has said that you sound "increasingly like the embarrassing uncle screaming at the television." That's harsh.

I suppose the shadow of my father hangs over me, in that he did become blimpish. But I don't think I've brought to bear anything other than common sense. It's on the other side that ideology is at work. No one is going to blow themselves to pieces because of relativism, but it's still an ideology. I haven't got an ideology. My ideology is no ideology.

Fans of your novels want to know where's the delightful, witty ironist of *London Fields*? Is he ever going to come back?

Oh yes. They'll enjoy my new novel, which is called *The Pregnant Widow*. It's longish and set in the 1970s and it's all about the sexual revolution.

Oh, good. Is there lots of sex?

There's a lot of talking about it and thinking about it.

That's how I remember the seventies too. More talking and thinking than doing. So why are you so interested in writing about sex?

Sexual intercourse has two remarkable characteristics. It peoples the world and it is indescribable. There aren't many other things you can say that about.

Margaret Wente is a Globe and Mail columnist.

