Martin Amis: Islam and the Limits of Permissible Thought

Martin Amis, the celebrated and pilloried British novelist, on freedom, terror and moving to America.

By
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Updated Dec. 28, 2012 6:15 p.m. ET

Modern Britain might have been the expected focus of conversation with Martin Amis following the publication of his latest novel, "Lionel Asbo." After all, the book comes with the subtitle "State of England," and the state of the place, in his eyes, rather differs from the country on glorious display during the Summer Olympics and, months before that, in the queen's Diamond Jubilee. The England in Mr. Amis's withering portrait is a cultural dystopia where an irredeemable thug is catapulted to national prominence after winning the lottery. Thus does modern Britain reward lethal criminality and proud ignorance with unearned riches.

But when Mr. Amis, one of the most celebrated and pilloried British novelists of recent decades, sits for an interview in his Brooklyn brownstone—he is a recent émigré from the land he so relishes anatomizing—the buzz about all things British has long faded in the news, supplanted by the autumn miseries of the Middle East. After the Arab Spring washed through the region, he says, "I was talking to my younger son. He speaks Arabic." A hint of paternal pride passes over his face. "He's about to do a third degree—the first one was history at Oxford, the second one was on the Muslim Brotherhood. He's lived in Jordan as well as in Egypt.

"I said to him, it seems like Islamism doesn't look like a ubiquitous threat anymore. But he said, 'Ah, their hour will come. They're in government now. That's what's happened now. Some clever people have realized you can't stay out of the system.' "

Is Mr. Amis skeptical now of the "clever people" emerging from the shadows of the Arab Spring?

"Well," he says, looking lost in thought. "There's Tunisia"—where a moderate government is establishing itself—"but it does seem the weight of the past is enormous. Egypt is 4,500 years old. It's unbelievably ancient. And Egypt has

never had democracy. Would that you could, with a snap of the finger say, 'This is better,' and everyone agrees it is better. But it's going to be difficult."

He continues: "We gave a dinner party. We had Israeli friends over—everyone at the dinner table except my wife and I was called Cohen. And a right-wing Israeli—who is very right-wing—he said, 'I don't think they're ready for democracy.' And a guest at the table said, 'I find that very offensive.' When people say that—that they're offended—they're not really arguing with their head. They're arguing with the blood. But I yearn for the people of the Middle East to benefit. I yearn for it."

Readers who have followed Mr. Amis's career will recall the infamous "race row," as the newspapers called it, between the author and Terry Eagleton, a Marxist English professor at the University of Manchester.

In August 2006, the British police foiled a plot to detonate explosives on 10 trans-Atlantic planes. A short time later, Mr. Amis said to an interviewer: "There's a definite urge—don't you have it?—to say, 'The Muslim community will have to suffer until it gets its house in order.' What sort of suffering? Not let them travel. Deportation, further down the road. Curtailing of freedoms. Strip-searching people who look like they're from the Middle East and Pakistan. . . . Discriminatory stuff, until it hurts the whole community and they start getting tough with their children."

For a writer given to nuances, this was a striking statement. The comment went largely unremarked until Mr. Eagleton alighted upon it and denounced Mr. Amis.

The professor accused him of recommending "punitive measures against all Muslims, guilty or innocent." Mr. Amis responded by insisting that the remarks were not "advocating anything." They were, he said, "a thought experiment," only "conversationally describing an urge—an urge that soon wore off."

In a letter to a Muslim columnist who had accused him of being "with the beasts," Mr. Amis argued that "the extremists, for now, have the monopoly of violence, intimidation, and self-righteousness." But, he said, "I don't want to strip-search you . . . or do anything else that would trouble or even momentarily surprise your dignity, or that of any other irenic Muslim."

Reflecting on the episode half a dozen years later, he has a simpler explanation: "I said something stupid. I was in a rage."

But then he crosses his legs, and with the change of position offers an explanation that sounds suspiciously like a justification. "But to contextualize

it—to use a Terry Eagleton kind of word—it was the day the plot to blow up 10 airlines was exposed. The next day, the lady journalist came from London"—to interview him in the Hamptons on New York's Long Island—and "on the flight that day, the lady journalist told me, you weren't allowed to take books. I was demoralized. I was thinking: We're going to lose this. It seemed to be such a terrible symbolic victory . . . to deprive trans-Atlantic passengers of reading for a long flight." He pauses. "I thought only one book, the holy book, is winning."

In "The Second Plane," a collection of nonfiction published in 2008, Mr. Amis noted that he is an "Islamismophobe," not an Islamophobe. The events of Sept. 11 left him bereft and angry and in desperate search of distinctions. "Let us make the position clear," he wrote in an essay titled "Terror and Boredom." "We can begin by saying, not only that we respect Muhammad, but that no serious person could fail to respect Muhammad. . . . But we do not respect Muhammad Atta. "

Nowadays, in the wake of the change that has convulsed the Middle East, Mr. Amis sees, cautiously, much promise for the secular and moderate and religious Middle Eastern men and women who yearn for change as they weigh the Islamists' promise of welfare and economic growth. "In most ways, Islamism has quickly become political rather than terroristic. But how is it done? We all want it. What matters to me, in my own life, is not prosperity beyond a certain point. It's freedom of speech. Democracies can't work without that. It takes all my powers of empathy to imagine what it must feel like to not be able to say what you think. It's a huge hurdle."

The mention of freedom of speech brings to mind how the late Christopher Hitchens rushed in to defend his friend when the debate with Mr. Eagleton erupted in 2006. "The harshness Amis was canvassing was not in the least a recommendation," Hitchens wrote, "but rather an experiment in the limits of permissible thought."

Though Mr. Amis says that he moved to the U.S. early this year for family reasons—his wife, Isabel Fonseca, is an American, and they have two teenage daughters—the impulse to make the move from Britain had come two years earlier, after "Hitch" fell ill with esophageal cancer. "When he was diagnosed, that's when we started talking about coming here. He might have lived another five or 10 years." Hitchens died in December last year.

Mr. Amis had watched with fascination the arc of Hitchens's career after he moved to the U.S. in the early 1980s. How did Mr. Amis account for his friend's success as that rare character in the modern world, a public intellectual? "British journalists are more forthright, and disrespectful, in a good way," he says. "And Hitch was an old Trotskyist at heart. So that made him a bit fierce.

Writers were always subliminally valued because America was uncertain about what it was and these writers would help tell America what it was. But it would also define them and give them nationhood." He laughs: "You don't need to tell an Englishman who he is."

Then again, even though Mr. Amis stayed behind in Britain, he was every bit as fascinated by America as his friend had been. Mr. Amis's first wife, Antonia Phillips, is an American, and his most celebrated novel, "Money" (1984), is set in New York. His literary hero: an American, Saul Bellow, who was also something of a father figure. Mr. Amis had a complex and not entirely satisfactory relationship with his own father, writer Kingsley Amis, who was none too encouraging of his son's decision to follow him into the writing game.

The game has changed dramatically in the time since Mr. Amis joined the family business in 1973 with "The Rachel Papers," his debut novel. "There's definitely pressure on the novel. It's to do with the world speeding up. What a lyric poem does is stop the clock—things aren't going to move forward—but the novel has adapted to that. I'm much more conscious now of the fact that the arrow of development has to be sharper. The static novel is dead."

What fiction does he read, in these straitened days for literature? "I read my friends—[Ian] McEwan, Julian Barnes, Salman"— Rushdie. Among younger novelists, only Will Self and Zadie Smith pop up. "But otherwise, I read people who are all dead. There's only one value judgment in literature: time. If someone has been read for 50 years, then they're probably very . . . rewarding. You can't say that about the latest sensation by a 28-year-old—I was once that," he says, and folds his arms, smiling.

To be precise, he "was once that" 35 years ago. Now Mr. Amis is at an age, 63, when biographers start to take a writer's measure, as with Richard Bradford's "Martin Amis: The Biography," published in the U.S. a few weeks ago. Mr. Amis is hardly ready to follow Philip Roth's recent lead and retire from writing fiction, but he is reflective about his career.

"When you're coming to an end, you don't take any comfort in your achievements. What matters is how it went with women and how it went with children. That's what becomes important," he says. "The terrible symmetry is that men don't tend to blame themselves—it's always someone else's fault. And women tend to blame themselves. But, then, at the very end, it's the men who start blaming themselves and the women stop blaming themselves. And that's why they're happier."

'Lionel Asbo" does not seem to be the work of a happy man, even if Mr. Amis does clearly take a perverse pleasure in delineating the horrors of modern

Britain. Was he watching the Olympics this summer, with their presentation of a bright and shiny alternate British reality?

“Following it, but not watching,” he says. The family was in the countryside during the summer. The Games looked “pretty marvelous,” he says, “but I’m ashamed to say I was defeated by the TV we had. When my daughters were around, they could get it going. But then they left. And I couldn’t switch on the TV.”