

## Conflicted Identities and Influence of Hybrid Culture on South Asian Muslim Americans: A Study of Ayad Akhtar's "*Disgraced*"

\*Hassan Bin Zubair

\*\*Mamona Yasmin Khan

\*\*\* Dr. Masroor Sibtain

### Abstract

This research explores the struggles of South Asian Muslims in light of the model minority myth in Ayad Akhtar's *Disgraced*. The protagonists' struggles for assimilation as model minorities are thwarted due to the collective social suspicion towards Muslim identities. In *Disgraced*, the protagonist Amir begins as a successful, assimilated model minority, a status he has achieved through a rejection of his own Muslim identity. He has, for example, changed his last name to appear of Hindu heritage to assimilate years ago and has even passed himself along at his Jewish law firm as a Hindu-American. When his Muslim identity is disclosed, his world unravels. The primary theoretical frameworks of post-colonialism and hybridity for this study have their roots in the binaries between the Orient and the Occident. The Orientalist outlook in the aftermath of colonialism has remained the foundation of the Western perception of the East.

**Keywords:** Muslim, identity, diaspora, South Asia, America

---

\* PhD Scholar (English Literature), Department of English, National University of Modern Languages, Islamabad

\*\* Department of English, The Women University Multan.

\*\*\* Department of English, Govt. College of Science, Multan

## **Introduction**

In the United States, South Asian Muslim identities are an amalgamation of Asian and American cultural, social, and political identities. This fusion of post-colonial historical and American cultural existences creates hybrid identities. These South Asian Muslim hybrid identities in America, which emerge from the interweaving of elements of the colonizer and the colonized, are multifaceted because of their different social, religious, and historical contexts. Firstly, South Asian Muslim identity in America is informed by the Orientalist post-colonial perspective of the Occident towards the Orient. Second, it is informed by the resulting hybridity, which becomes central to South Asian Muslim diaspora identities. To observe these two factors, the oriental post-colonial perspective, and hybridity, it is crucial to take into account the relevance of the colonial historical context of South-Asian Muslim post-colonial and neo-colonial identities in America. Secondly, mainstream media representations of South Asian Muslims in film, television, and on the news tend to misrepresent Muslim identities as threatening Arabs. The depiction of South Asian Muslims often lacks representation in comparison to their Arab counterparts, creating a binary between South Asian non-Muslims and Muslim Arabs that further complicates the pressure to assimilate as model minorities. Thirdly this study will draw on Model Minority Theory to understand their representation within these two narratives. Finally, this study will add to existing scholarship on model minority theory by showing how this resultant rupture of identity affects a quickly growing South Asian Muslim population, and how their narratives are contributing to the making of a new South Asian Muslim meta-narrative in America.

### Research Objective

- To highlight the binaries between the Orient and the Occident.
- To present the relevance of the colonial historical context of South-Asian Muslim post-colonial and neo-colonial identities in America.
- To analyze the subjects of post-colonialism and hybridity.

### Research Questions

This study aims to answer several questions including:

1. How does Ayad Akhtar's *Disgraced* portray the struggles of South Asian Muslims in light of the model minority myth?
2. How has the Muslim identity projected in the text?
3. How has Ayad Akhtar presented the issues of post-colonialism and hybridity in the text?

### Theoretical Framework and Research Methodology

In diaspora literature, the primary theoretical frameworks of post-colonialism and hybridity have their roots in the binaries between the Orient and the Occident. The Orientalist outlook in the aftermath of colonialism has remained the foundation of the Western perception of the East. Works like *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad and *A Passage to India* by E.M. Forster allude to the mysterious, untamed side of the Orient. As Edward Said writes in *Orientalism*, "this stereotypical view holds that the Oriental is irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, 'different;' thus, the European is rational, virtuous, mature, normal"<sup>2</sup>. It is this side that makes the Orient into something exotic yet feared at the same time. These Oriental and Occidental identities were chalked out anew in the aftermath of 9/11 when an Orientalizing outlook was renewed both globally and

---

<sup>2</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 2001), 16.

locally in the form of American Islamophobia. As Khaled A. Beydoun explains in his book *American Islamophobia: Understanding the Roots and Rise of Fear*, "American Islamophobia is fluidly shaped and impacted by uniquely American stimuli, including...legal and political systems, history, racial and religious demographics, and private interests and actors"<sup>3</sup>. The rise of Islamophobia and a resultant climate of distrust within the United States changed how South Asian Muslim identities were perceived. These identities were subjected to scrutiny based on their color and creed. Beydoun attributes this to a failure to frame, "Islamophobia as a system of bigotry [that was] not only endorsed and emboldened by law but [was] also carried out by the government actors, [which] severely underestimates the scale of its menace and the process by which it inflicts injury and authorizes popular behavior." As a result, Muslims in America were subjected to dogmatic scrutiny that Beydoun refers to as "structural Islamophobia, predicated upon the caricature of Muslims embedded by Orientalism and propagated by Islamophobia"<sup>4</sup>. As a result, in the aftermath of 9/11, South Asian Muslims found themselves at a crossroads in their American existence.

### **Textual Analysis**

Ayad Akhtar is a second-generation postcolonial writer who raises the question of rupture in the South Asian Muslim diaspora identity in post-9/11 America. Akhtar's play focuses more on socio-political themes found within American society, namely its New York City setting. Both Akhtar

---

<sup>3</sup> Khaled A. Beydoun, *American Islamophobia: Understanding the Roots and Rise of Fear* (California: University of California Press, 2019), 96-98.

<sup>4</sup> Khaled A. Beydoun, *American Islamophobia*, 29.

and Hamid actively grapple with the issues of Islamophobia, assimilation, and identity for South Asian Muslims in post-9/11 America. Born in 1970 in Staten Island, New York, Akhtar, as a director, screenwriter, actor, and editor, has been contributing to the diasporic literature since 2002, and through his work, has tackled some of its most controversial questions.

Themes of identity, bigotry, neo-orientalism, and integration for South Asian Muslims in America are consistent throughout his body of work. He incorporates these themes concerning self-identification for Muslims in America by highlighting their different facets, as he explores the dilemmas attached to them. He was a co-writer and actor for the American drama film *The War Within* (2005), "a depiction of terrorism in the heart of America and at the center of the Muslim American Community"<sup>5</sup>. "It is a daring take on an immensely sensitive issue, a humanized portrayal of the suicide bomber, and an intimate glimpse into the processes that lead to the protagonist's radicalization."<sup>6</sup> The film presents the underlying "sense of personal trauma produced by torture and moral grievances against the United States, which leads to involvement in terrorist action."<sup>7</sup> Akhtar revisits these motifs of identity, religion, and assimilation in America in his 2012 debut novel, *An American Dervish*. The novel is a bildungsroman, a coming-of-age story about a Pakistani-American grappling with issues of identification as Muslim, as American, and as a human. Nina Subin, in a review published in *The Globe and Mail*, describes the work as a Sufi

---

<sup>5</sup> Beydoun, *American Islamophobia*, 29.

<sup>6</sup> Lopamudra Basu, *Ayad Akhtar, the American Nation, and Its Others after 9/11: Homeland Insecurity*. Lanham: Lexington Books, (2019), 117.

<sup>7</sup> Basu, *Ayad Akhtar, the American Nation, and Its Others after 9/11*, 117.

invocation, a Chopin nocturne, or even the weight of silence experienced in a meditative trance that portrays the faultless mimicry of the spoken language of a community of Pakistani immigrants in American suburbia<sup>8</sup>. Akhtar also questions the religious and cultural choices of Muslims in America as he presents "two provocative themes, including the twinning of adolescent sexuality with spirituality, and the moral courage to expose spiritual hypocrisy and anti-Semitism practiced by Muslims."<sup>9</sup> These incendiary thematic approaches animate Akhtar's entire body of work. Through these approaches, he questions prevailing cultural perceptions and their relevance in America.

The model minority debate thrives by fostering intergroup animosity between Asian Americans and the community, positioning South Asian Americans as pawns in the white supremacy system. While model minority status had long been associated with Asian and South Asian Americans, its application to South Asian Muslim identities in post-9/11 America can be seen through the binaries created between Muslim and non-Muslim South Asians, as well as between "good" and "bad" Muslims. Shams explains how "the security associated with the Model Minority stereotype was ultimately shown to be "fleeting" as in the aftermath of 9/11, South Asian Americans found themselves no longer a glorified Model Minority but, conflated with Muslim and "Muslim-looking" groups, targets of virulent Islamophobic backlash and targeted surveillance. In her article "Successful yet Precarious: South Asian Muslim

---

<sup>8</sup> Basu, *Ayad Akhtar, the American Nation, and Its Others after 9/11*, 117.

<sup>9</sup> Nina, Subin, "Review of *American Dervish*, by Ayad Akhtar," *The Globe and Mail*, 27 Jan. (2012): 224.

Americans, Islamophobia, and the Model Minority Myth," Shams further explains: "These tensions, in turn, have helped paint Pakistan's and Bangladesh's global national image as 'dangerous' Muslim countries"<sup>10</sup>. She refers to Balbir Singh Sodi, a South Asian Sikh, who, due to misidentification as a Muslim, was the first fatality of the post 9/11 backlash.

After 9/11 the identification of the South Asian Muslim Model Minority was established anew, not based on a binary between Muslims and non-Muslims but a binary between the "good" and "bad" Muslims. Mahmood Mamdani, in his article Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: "A Political Perspective on Culture and Terrorism, questions the claim that we can read people's political behavior from their religion or their culture"<sup>11</sup>. This socio-political divide based on religious identities can be detrimental to a cultural construct such as America. This binarism between the good and bad Muslims establishes model minority stereotypes anew, which, in turn, complicates the socio-political existence of Muslims in America.

In *Disgraced*, Akhtar is focused on the exploration of these binaries through their portrayal of the protagonist, a model minority South Asian Muslim, who has a critical view of his Islamic heritage. Akhtar represents this secular Muslim identity through the character of a South Asian lapsed Muslim, Amir Kapoor (formerly named Amir Abdullah). Through Amir, Akhtar establishes a new lens for an examination of conflicts within the cultural and religious identity of South Asian Muslims who present as a

---

<sup>10</sup> Subin, "Review of *American Dervish*, by Ayad Akhtar," 224.

<sup>11</sup> Tahseen Shams, "Successful yet Precarious: South Asian Muslim Americans, Islamophobia, and the Model Minority Myth." *Sociological Perspectives* 63, no. 4, (2020): 653–669.

secular model minority. However, he also addresses the price associated with the betrayal of self and the discarding of one's own cultural/religious identity for successful assimilation. *Disgraced* also explores these binaries beyond Islam through the representation of orthodox and reformed characters of other backgrounds through a mix of Jewish, Christian, and African American characters. Akhtar makes subtle use of neo-Orientalist tropes to accentuate these thematic approaches. He purposely creates controversy to unsettle these binaries through a process that can be interpreted through what Bhabha, in *Nation and Narration*, describes as the "perplexity of living." As he writes: "It begins [...] from that anterior space within the arbitrary sign which disturbs the homogenizing myth of cultural anonymity."<sup>12</sup> In *Disgraced*, Akhtar presents this "perplexity of living" through the model minority positionality of Amir's secular identity. The play is set a decade after 9/11 in a luxury Manhattan apartment. The plot focuses on Amir, who has achieved considerable worldly success.

*Disgraced* presents this perplexed positionality of Amir's character, as he is trapped between his religious and cultural identity and the American dream. This leads to his eventual fall from grace even when he has discarded these identities and embraced the model minority positionality for assimilation in America. This representation of Amir helps Akhtar examine the impacts of racialization based on the religion and culture of model minorities. Akhtar skillfully portrays the implications of model minority theory through the prospect of becoming, if not white, then a

---

<sup>12</sup> Mahmood, Mamdani, "Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: A Political Perspective on Culture and Terrorism." *American Anthropologist*, vol. 104, no. 3, (2002): 766–775.

racial identity that successfully approximates whiteness. This approximation is held out to those who perform their model minority status most successfully. The prospect is often used as bait offered, withdrawn, offered again in service of manipulating particular kinds of social and political performances. In the aftermath of 9/11, the possibility of achieving some empowering proximity with whiteness is withdrawn from Muslims, particularly those who can be visibly identified as Other. The social and political operation of the Model Minority as an idea and ideological construct is to preserve and reproduce the centrality, the status, and the dominance of whiteness. Through *Disgraced*, Akhtar, therefore, "launches a corpus that presents a new kind of critical and experiential interculturality."<sup>13</sup> This interculturality stems from the duality of his own hybrid identity as a South Asian Muslim American. It brings about what Ashis Sengupta, in "Staging Diaspora: South Asian American Theater Today," describes as "a diasporic consciousness that both encompass a plural sense of nation, belonging, and ethnic and cultural identity in a transnational capitalist and global context."<sup>14</sup> Mona Bagato writes that "Amir tries hard to hide his racial and religious background to gain acceptance into the mainstream society."<sup>15</sup> As a result, "he [remains] the unassimilable other despite his perfect American accent, and despite his carefully decorated abode exuding multiculturalism, which becomes a

---

<sup>13</sup> Homi K., Bhabha, *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 1990), 1.

<sup>14</sup> Sudipto Chatterjee, "South Asian American Theatre: (Un/Re-) Painting the Town Brown," *Theatre Survey* 49, no. 1, (2008): 109-117.

<sup>15</sup> Sengupta Ashis, "Staging Diaspora: South Asian American Theater Today." *Journal of American Studies*, vol. 46, no. 4, (2012): 831-854.

microcosm for the idea of America as a melting pot."<sup>16</sup> "Amir is a representative of postcolonial citizens who managed to penetrate the space of the Other through their intellectual and physical existence and ambivalent subjectivities."<sup>17</sup> The derogatory attitude of the waiter towards Amir is situated in the Western perception of brown bodies and Muslim identities after 9/11. Because of racial bias, the waiter could not "place" Amir properly. Robin E. Field, in 'The Question Remains... Of Your Place': "Challenging Reductive Identities in Ayad Akhtar's *Disgraced*", explains the behavior of the waiter. Specifically, it is his focus upon Amir's race that makes him believe his racial identity gives him power over Amir"<sup>18</sup>. This projection provides an opening for a discourse of sexualization of Orientalized brown bodies and gender roles in the context of 9/11.

### **Findings**

In projecting the model minority stereotypes through Amir, Akhtar makes a clear demarcation between the personal and socio-political spheres. He falls back on the historical stereotypes of Muslim and Jewish rivalries to defend each of the religious identities on stage. Issac and Emily's defense of Islam against Amir's critique of it is ironic against the backdrop of the

---

<sup>16</sup> Mona, Bagato, "Exploring the Theme of Neo-Orientalism in Ayad Akhtar's *Disgraced* as a Representation of the Arab-Islamic World." *International Journal of English Language, Literature and Translation Studies (IJELR)*, vol. 7, no. 1, Mar. (2020): 122-132.

<sup>17</sup> Bagato, "Exploring the Theme of Neo-Orientalism in Ayad Akhtar's *Disgraced* as a Representation of the Arab-Islamic World", 122-132.

<sup>18</sup>Muna Ali, "Muslim American/American Muslim Identity: Authoring Self in Post-9/11 America." *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 31, no. 3, (2011): 355-381.

political climate that was a prevalent part of the post-9/11 United States. We see a character of Muslim heritage critiquing Islam, and characters of Christian and Jewish heritage defending it. Akhtar also reverses the perception of Islam as fundamentalism through Amir's character. Through Amir's anti-Islamic sentiments, Akhtar can hold a mirror to the prevailing anti-Islamic sentiment in America. Hearing these caricatures from Amir to provide authenticity to the South Asian Muslim narrative. Amir's defense of Islam might not even hold a candle to the fraught socio-political positionalities of South Asian Muslim identities in America.

The situation quickly shifts from the socio-political to the personal sphere, when Amir learns about various ways he has been betrayed professionally and romantically by his firm, Jory, Isaac, and finally, Emily. It is in this sphere where on confrontation from Amir, a shift is seen in Isaac's character as well. Amir, incensed at the betrayal of his wife, spits on Isaac, an evident mimicry of his mother's action from his childhood and a reference to that earlier flashback. Isaac's enraged words in response to Amir, "There's a reason they call you people animals," discard any pretense of civility. This altercation between Amir and Isaac further casts doubt on his earlier defense of Islam, creating confusion about whether Isaac's earlier defense of Islam was hypocrisy or whether he is now merely making use of Islamophobic insults to retaliate. Akhtar, through this volatile interaction, brings out the presumed "tribal identities" with the historical context of both his Muslim and Jewish characters. The interaction at the dinner table brings about a dramatic volte-face of all identities as it transitions from Islam to the personal sphere. Multiple character shifts can be observed within all represented identities. Akhtar

deliberately uses Amir, a South Asian Muslim, to point out the post-9/11 Islamophobia perception of Islam in America. Amir's interpretation of Islam, as already explained, emerges from his self-Orientalizing tendencies. Emily's defense of Islam is rooted within her neo-oriental and romanticized approaches towards Islam as for her, "there's so much beauty and wisdom in the Islamic tradition. "Both Emily and Amir are trapped in their ways within their Oriental fantasies. Akhtar ironically utilizes Isaac's character as the voice of reason against Amir's attacks on Islam, which he then reverses through the personal conflicts of identities. Emily's infidelity brings about Amir's self-Orientalized fantasy of tribal instincts, which he associated with Islam.

In the last scene of the play, in the aftermath of that night's violent outburst and the dissolution of their relationship, Amir's anger has given way to self-acceptance. He no longer thinks he can be a privileged minority as he explains to Abe that he is now working on the case of Imam Fareed. Abe, now dressed in traditional Muslim attire, has come seeking his help as he is now being questioned by the FBI. Abe explains to Amir that he was at Starbucks with his friend Tariq where his friend's flirtatious conversation with the barista somehow turned quite inflammatory due to the skull caps they were wearing. Their Muslim identities were questioned, which eventually led to the discussion towards Al-Qaeda. As the conversation became heated, the youth implied that America created Al-Qaeda and that they deserved what they got. They were soon arrested, held on suspicion, and questioned by the FBI. At the play's end, Abe is worried as to what he should do now and asks Amir what he would do if he were asked by the FBI to work against his

community. Amir advises him that he needs to be careful and that he must realize that the world outside his house is not impartial. He tells Abe that in a situation like that, one should make clear that they are on the side of authorities, to which Abe says he is not on their side. Amir adds that if Abe does not take this matter seriously, he might end up getting deported. Amir goes on to explain that their families came to America to have a "better life," which could not be attained in Pakistan. Abe angrily points out that Amir's life is not better: he tells Amir that he is deluded and has forgotten his self in his quest for assimilation, which will never come to fruition as he will never be a part of "them."

Akhtar places all his South Asian Muslim characters Amir, Abe, and Imam Fareed in the play at different social and cultural standings. Their fates, however, collide, and for each of them, suspicion, loss, and disgrace are similar conclusions. South Asian communities are forced to repress any anger and play the role of model minorities, even as anguish eats them away internally. Amir, a successful American man who has earned his success through perseverance, believed he had earned his place in American society. But Akhtar reveals that in a climate of suspicion and fear, no one is free. That Amir is even considering the idea of a pro-bono case for Imam Fareed enlists him in the list of suspicious terrorist sympathizers. A similar fate is meted out to Imam Fareed, whose mere act of collecting money for the mosque makes him end up in jail on vague charges. The third South Asian Muslim identity is represented through young Abe and his friend Tariq, who represent the current generation: Tariq is a youth of South Asian Muslim origins, who cannot counter any allegations or even debate and present a different perspective about 9/11

without being interrogated afterward by the FBI. Regardless of their statuses, these disgraced South Asian Muslims are chained to their religious identity in the eyes of society, but any anger that they express is harshly punished with a fall from grace, threats of deportation, and even captivity. Akhtar does not present any ready-made solutions. What he conveys is that there are no such solutions. What he aims to bring about through this play is an acceptance of reality.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the narrative of Amir's disgrace addresses the wider implications of the model minority myth on South Asian Muslims in America. His character helps bring to a critical dialogue many contemporary trends in the discourse of racialization of South Asian Muslims in post 9/11 U.S. society. Akhtar jarringly explores the constant pressures associated with living in an Islamophobic society. The resultant anger of these communities is internalized, taking a form of self-hatred, in the case of Amir. The suspicion accorded to South Asian Muslims around the world is also explored through Amir's self-identifying and volunteering himself for security checks at the airports, and in the use of words "duplicitous," mentioned to and relayed by Jory from his father-like boss Mort. Any anger or resentment showed by these communities over differential treatment will also seem to prove that suspicions of their barbarism are right. This situation is not even helped by changing one's identity or moulding oneself into a more desired model minority. Thus, Amir's accomplishments, hard-work, and posing as a Hindu did not work out for him.