



## Muslim Diasporic Narrative of a Pakistani American Identity: A Study of Ayad Akhtar's *American Dervish*

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### Abstract

**Aim:** Muslim people of Islamic heritage form a developing part of the world's contemporary migrant and diasporic population. Muslims have made significant development in gaining multiple forms of public recognition and accommodation in various public spheres and institutions in the United States of America, right up to a representation in the South Asian Diaspora. This research paper aims to cover the issue of a Pakistani diasporic identity in America from the Islamic heritage presented by Ayad Akhtar in his novel *American Dervish* (2012) through the character of Hayat Shah, the protagonist.

**Methodology and Approach:** This novel is all about Hayat's transformation from following up a few practices of Islam to his negation and rejection of his own religion of what he considers to be its irrational and rigid aspects. On being

*a second-generation immigrant, he starts to try and further struggles to find his identity between his homeland's religion and the culture of cosmopolitanism. Moreover, many other characters in the story also try to transform his mindset towards his Islamic identity, such as his mentor Mina Ali, and his parents, Naveed and Muneer.*

**Outcome:** *This research paper shows that the development, constitution, and recognizability of a substantial Muslim Diaspora are identified among the effects of depiction as the familiar tropes of orientation and multiculturalism in the novel American Dervish.*

**Conclusion:** *It shows the point of view of the novelist who explores the idea of a Muslim diasporic person encountering so many teething problems, in the west in general and America in particular, till he adopts the ways of the lifestyle of the host land in his life.*

**Keywords:** Diaspora, Identity, Islam, Muslim, and Dervish.

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The term 'Diaspora' initially, is referred to only the Jewish Diaspora. Still, with the passage of time, it has been referring to almost all the communities around the world that have, most often, found themselves in a quagmire on account of the religious and cultural tendencies of their home country. People, especially Muslims who migrate from their homeland to the host land, face many challenges and difficulties between the overbearing influences of two cultures which include,

on the one hand, polarities of the religious faith of the homeland and, on the other hand, the secular spaces of cosmopolitan centers like America and Europe.

However, Muslims have significantly developed in gaining multiple forms of public recognition and accommodation in various public spheres and institutions in the United States of America, right up to a representation in the South Asian Diaspora. Several lives in diaspora chart a course across the societies in which they live and the land they or their parents had left behind. In addition, it is said that Muslims in America more or less reflect the global profile of Muslims and thus form a heterogeneous diasporic community highly diversified in ethnic, national and sectarian affiliation and degrees of religious conviction. So, in such a scenario, the question of identity lifts to discuss because ethnic, cultural and religious activities relate to a particular identity as Hall notices that “it is something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation”. (394) Crosby suggests that “People experience identity through communication, meaning that identity is often framed in terms of enactments or how they express their identity to those around them.” (16) So above two statements about identity formation stress the impact of religion, culture, country, and community on the identity of anyone, to mention the most important.

This research paper shows that the development, constitution, and recognizability of a substantial Muslim Diaspora are identified among the effects of depiction as the familiar tropes of orientation and multiculturalism in the novel *American Dervish* by Ayad Akhtar, a Pakistani American novelist. He explores the Pakistani diaspora significantly, representing the complexity of Muslim identity in the United States of America—enquiring into how religion, identity, ethnic culture, and family encounter the lived experiences of both first and second-generation immigrants.

Recognized as a well-established Pakistani-American novelist, screenwriter, dramatist, and actor, Ayad Akhtar is a second-generation immigrant writer. He was born to Pakistani migrant parents in New York City and raised in Wisconsin, USA. His literary works often centre on the experiences of American Muslim identity with roots in Pakistan. On being the ‘De Facto Voice of the American Muslim in Theatre and Literature,’ he claims that his life and personal experiences play a significant role in creating his works. In an interview with Trussel, he admits that “everything I write is some version of autobiography”. (Kansas City Repertory Theatre Rep Stages Ayad Akhtar Work about the American Experience) As a narrative artist, he has tried to express his existence as an American Muslim and embody the very essence of the clichéd description of the Pakistani diaspora having the American vision in his works, which are the true extension narrative of his life experiences. He further claims in the same interview, “but everything I write is drawn from personal experience, whether it’s observed or lived.” (Kansas City Repertory Theatre Rep Stages Ayad Akhtar Work about the American Experience)

The present novel *American Dervish* is also written semi-autobiographical and talks about the diasporic experiences of Hayat Shah, a Pakistani American second-generation immigrant who grows up in Milwaukee just like him. This main character of the novel is related to a similar background which Ayad Akhtar has. Like Hayat’s parents, his parents are also from Pakistan, and they are, as he said, “secular humanists” who did not much care of doing daily practices of Islam religion. (Writing About the Midwestern Muslim Experience). He himself indulged in his religion and faith and even created a strong Muslim identity by going through a stage of passionate religious dedication. He once exposed in an interview about this, “I was obsessed with what [the Qur’an] meant and understanding how I should live, and it was a very important part of my childhood but it really didn’t come from my parents...I think it had a lot to do with trying to

understand how and why I was different and what that meant, growing up in Milwaukee, where we really were the only Muslim family in the 80s in our area of town". (Writing About the Midwestern Muslim Experience)

Considering as one of the South Asian Diasporic novel, *American dervish* is a wonderful entertaining coming of age story of a young boy named Hayat Shah growing up in a Pakistani immigrant secular household who come to "milkwaukee's rural westerly suburbs, a stone's throw from diary country... (25) This novel recognizes those elements of migratory experiences that shatter or reinforce a second generation immigrant's attachment to his homeland's culture and affect his readiness to adapt the host land. As a first-person narrator, he narrates his life struggling with identity and his place in American society. Due to the Pakistani Diasporic existence in the USA with a particular focal point on the significant view of the Muslim Community, Hayat finds his identity marked with religious aspects of his homeland Pakistan as well as communal ways of American society where he lives presently. His identity deals with the interrelation of fluidity and multiplicity. A writer argues that "Identity is not fixed and singular. It is fluid, multiple, relational and in process." (Jappe 5)

This novel is a bildungsroman narrative focuses on "the narrative of development of an individual person to maturity and meaningful membership in collective life" of the diasporic realm. (Cheah 237) Indeed, it presents the development of a Muslim boy Hayat whose identity becomes something uncertain due to his upbringing up in a complex world. When the novel starts with a prologue in which he appears as a full-fledged American who, under the effect of host land's culture, expresses his rejection and resistance to his homeland's culture and religious (Islamic) creeds by eating pork which is strictly prohibited in Islam. After eating it, he feels like this, "My heart raced as I chewed, my mouth filling with a sweet and smoky, lightly pungent taste that seemed utterly remarkable... perhaps all the more so for having been so long forbidden. I felt at

once brave and ridiculous... I felt like I was complete.” (4-5) From the beginning, he finds his identity in the relationship with his Jewish girlfriend Rachel that shows his assimilation in the American society. He describes his intimacy with her “our wonderful and troubled interfaith romance is tale for another time... it was in Rachel’s arms—and it was with her love—that I finally discovered myself not only as a man, but as an American.” (345) His close connection with the Jews is influenced and encouraged by his mother Muneer who herself likes the Jews for their civility in treating women. She wants him to be like a Jew. She accepts, “that’s why I’m bringing you up so differently, so that you learn how to respect a woman...I’m bringing you up like a little Jew”. (117) The fascination of Jews onto her is passed by her forefathers who liked to be with them and respected their community. She exposes this very clearly that “I never met my grandfather—he died soon after I was born—but I heard a lot about his respect for Jews, respect which stemmed from his experience living in their midst in England in the years after the second world war”. (118) Thus, her liking for the Jews is inherited by her father “instilled in his children a belief that Jews were the special people, blessed by God above others. . .” (101)

Furthermore, her good opinion about the Jews as well as her distance from Islam, are encouraged by her husband’s assimilation and get absorbed in the cosmopolitan culture after their migration to America. Hayat highlights one point when he says, “Deep down, Mother was a believer, but the years she’d spent with Father—who thought religion was for fools—had trained her, I think, to check her religious impulses”. (49) Again, it is Naveed whose bad impact on her so much that she starts to be unconvinced about her religious practices and ideology. Besides this, her husband’s deception on her and bad treatment toward her are also responsible of her disliking the Muslim men and their bad treatment of their wives. Hayat describes her father’s cheating by remembering when he was turned into five, “I’d been hearing about Father’s mistresses since the night Mother

dragged me through the streets of Milwaukee as a five-year-old, searching for Father, who we eventually found at the apartment of a woman he worked with at the hospital". (27)

As a Pakistani individual, his development of Muslim diasporic consciousness is followed by the life of his religious mentor Mina Ali who migrates from Pakistan to the United States of America with her son a year after her terrible marriage to Hamid Suhail and family abuses in her hometown. Here, this novel criticizes the Pakistani diasporic community amid of patriarchal Pakistani Muslim culture from the perspective of feminist. When she comes to America, she is divorced by her husband and gotten his attorney informing that "You have just given birth to Hamed Suhail's son. He has chosen the name Imran for the boy. Imran will stay with you until the age of seven, at which point Mr. Hamed Suhail has the right to full, undisputed custody." (5) In order to avoid from such a horrible menace of her husband about child's custody, she accepts the proposal from her best friend Muneer Shah (Hayat's mother) to live with her family in Milwaukee in the hope that America can make a good escape for her. She sees this chance as a good opportunity to start a new life while having American dream that will secure her life and guarantee her son's education.

By the time Mina Ali lives in his house, Hayat has been fascinated by her so much and wants her to be near him. He himself points out: "I loved her voice. And I loved being so close to her. My days now revolved around the anticipation of that nighttime hour... listening—my eyes closed—to her breathy voice as she told bedtime tales." (32) Her Islamic activities influence him as he sees her more devoted to Islam religion and committed Muslim. She starts to supervise him some of the Islamic studies; how to memorize the Qur'an; how to be a dervish. He also agrees memorizing the Qur'an in English and takes interest in becoming a hafiz only to save her parents from the torture of hellfire. As his mentor Mina teaches him, "Every *hafiz* earned not only his own place in Paradise, but his

parents' as well." (137) Despite being related to a Muslim family which is secular that doesn't perform any Islamic practice after coming to America, Hayat learns to do his homeland's cultural-religious practice with the help of Mina Ali. In this way, she becomes a substitute of his father because Naveed his father never teaches him Islamic tenets due to his incredulous feelings towards Islam which is resulted of some terrible experience in the past. Moreover, he doesn't hear from his mother also about these religious ideologies. Thus, His parents never impress upon him any Islamic religiosity and even Naveed being an irreligious, forbids Mina to teach him with the thinking of Islam can deterred him from absorbing into his secular society. No doubt then that Naveed negates all characteristics of religion, as stressed out by Randy Boyagoda when she asserts: "Hayat's father is a philandering alcoholic neurologist who wears his atheism proudly, scorns the local immigrant Muslim community, and regards all religions, and Islam in particular, as backward and embarrassingly crude". (Teenage Muslim Misadventures) It is only Mina who assumes the liability to show the Islamic precepts to him. She herself believes in more contextual and personal interpretation what is called *Ijtihad* in religious matters.

In this sense, we see that Hayat's condition, as a Muslim diasporic identity in America, is caught between his father's thoughts about Islam or being irreligious and Mina's supervision to guide him about learning Islam. His problem exemplifies the difficulties faced by diasporic society in general, where they seek to struggle with their situation of being in between and cosmopolitan. His character is like a mirror of presenting the foremost theme of the novel that was penned on the concern of Muslim American identity sticking on to the Islamic beliefs and heritage in the USA, particularly, in Pakistani Diaspora.

However, Hayat couldn't be hafiz or a dervish in his life because of many reasons. Firstly, his memorizing the Quran in English, as contrary to the conventional Islamic practice, seems to be a futile task under the fact of the Quran



is memorized in its original holy language Arabic. But when he recites a small number of verses in nikah ceremony of Mina, he is mocked by everyone. Farhaz tells him while laughing at him, “you’re a moron. Didn’t anybody ever tell you it doesn’t count if this not in Arabic.” (317) Gradually, he begins to give up his efforts to follow Islamic tenets. He realizes the fact that his identity in America gets stuck in between his homeland’s religion and his host land’s culture. But as a Muslim American, he finds himself unable to change his attitude towards his religion. His integration with Jewish community, especially with Rachel, juxtaposes him into communal American culture. This is reflected at the end of the novel, when he is informed by Professor Nathan Wolfsohn, Jewish person about Mina’s two children after her death, as a prove of Jewish community’s manner of giving respect to woman, despite of Mina’s departing. He seems to be impressed by the behavior of a Jewish person as a kindred individual who provides him the information about Pakistani people.

Secondly, Mina’s love for a Jew person professor Nathan Wolfsohn and her decision to marry with him confuses Hayat to understand the facts of scripture about the position of Jews that they are cursed person. And then again, he argues with Mina on this matter when she rebukes him for spreading lies against Nathan, “But it was wrong for you to say what you said. It’s not what is written in the Qur’an”. “Yes, it is Auntie... it says.... “You’re too young to understand somethings.” “The Qur’an says many things. And some you’ll not understand until you’re older”. (236)

Third reason of his failure of becoming a hafiz or dervish can be his dream which makes him conscious that he has come away from his Islamic conviction after seeing himself walking away from performing the prayer led by the prophet. “Mina had said it was a great blessing to see the Prophet in a dream, but there didn’t seem to be any blessing in mine. Instead of staying and praying with him, I’d left.” (213) Now he begins to reject the idea of Islamic faith and heritage that

run counter to the traditional ways and beliefs. In this way, Hayat stops to do any severe trial of the Islamic teachings and fundamentals in his life.

By the end of the novel, he, while talking about Mina, exposes his discarding of Islam and its ideologies, not unexpectedly, but bit by bit. “I wanted to tell her [Mina] that I had been giving up on Islam little by little for years, and that now there was barely anything left.” (325) Farhaz and Hamza, his two acquaintances also persuade him to avoid his homeland religion by teaching him a few of grubby words in English. To make things even worse, he has not processed the thought of respecting the Qur’an he once had towards. Again, in the last 17 chapter, Hayat straightforwardly accepts that he has hardly touched the Quran for the last 10 years. “Inside the library, the return bin was filled with books. I didn’t give the moment much thought. I didn’t kiss the cover as I usually did. I just put the Quran down on top of the other books and watched it slide to one side, tumbling out of view. It was the last Quran I would touch for almost ten years.” (341)

It is quite apparent that the aim of the Ayad Akhtar’s craftsmanship is to show the Muslim American identity of Hayat found in difficult situation adhering to his beliefs when he assimilates with the group of other people having dissimilar values and anguishing because of their own dogmas. In *American Dervish*, the author brings out the concept of changing the identity of Pakistani American immigrant because of his inability to hold on his homeland’s tenets which he has inherited as well as in befriending a Jewish girl Rachel whose social, cultural, religious, and national background are quite different from his. Through this story, the novelist presents that phase of the Pakistani Diaspora society constructed in it, happens to have such thought as migration should only be developed in other forward direction instead of returning to the homeland, the next possible step is to adapt the ways of the host land. In this way, the author has succeeded in conveying his message that it seems to be impossible to remain

stable on a particular approach in America, chiefly if they are Muslims. In the case of Diaspora of Islamic culture, he wants to suggest that the formation of a collective identity, or diasporic consciousness and solidarity, is more often a response to a hospitable climate in the host societies than an expression of cultural nostalgia. It is a reaction to the stamp of Muslim with which such individuals are automatically branded regardless of whether or not they are believers or practicing Muslims, or see Islam as a defining factor in their lives.

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