

**Loss of Culture, Nation and Identity: A Post 9/11 study on the exploitative state of
Immigrants in *Home Elegies* by Ayad Akhtar**

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Abstract



The aim of this research is to scrutinize the status of immigrants in the post 9/11 era where diasporas' people feels the jolts of exploitation and the pangs of displacement not only from their homes but from their Identity as well. Uprooted from their culture and wandering with the sense of "Unhomeliness" they are in a constant search to "belong" somewhere. This crisis is depicted in Ayad Akhtar's Homeland Elegies. His work echoes the trauma of cultural loss and identity issues in post 9/11 America and how they are alienated not only from the culture that they live in but also from the country where they are born particularly on the basis of their religion Islam.

Keywords: Diasporas Identity, Unhomeliness, Post 9/11, Cultural Loss, Identity Crisis

Introduction

The current research proposes to study the exploitative treatment of Muslim Americans in post 9/11 era and their struggle to fit in the current status quo as shown in the novel *Homeland Elegies* by Ayad Akhtar. His novel is considered as an autobiography to some extent; in one of his interview, he claimed to be a "narrative artist" whose "narrative works are extension of his own narrative" (Asif, Saljoq). It is a story of an immigrant father and son, searching for a sense of belonging in a nation (whose wounds are unhealed) which they call home. They are trying to exist in a world which still resonates with the tragedy of September 11 incident; in a world which full of mayhem, despair and disorder. There is a constant longing for "home" and a veiled sadness for the loss of culture and identity present in this story.

Theoretical Framework:

Home is an ambiguous concept or a "mythical place" for the communities (mcleod.209) that are situated outside of their native land. The more they struggle to mix in, the more they become alienated in a country which they call home which is hostile to their culture and especially their religion. Now Religion, in this sense plays an important part for Muslims living in America. The West has always abhorred Islam and created an anti-Islamic and extremist narrative that has paved a way for them to subjugate Muslims, creating difficulties for them and "othering them" in the countries where they were born. This research has been undertaken in order to provide a particular stance for the future researchers about the exploitation of Muslims and the attack on their culture, identity and religion in the wake of attack on "twin towers". The main aim of this research is to find out that whether Muslim immigrants feel threatened in their own homeland or they have adjusted to the culture of their host country or not; also what are the factors that contribute in creating a hostile perspective about Muslims in post 9/11 America.

Research Statement:

- 1- How cultural loss affects immigrants in post 9/11 era?
- 2- Why immigrants face the problem of nation and identity?
- 3- Why state becomes exploitive for immigrants?

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Research Objectives:

The objective of this research is to show how *Ayad Akhtar* tries to explore the above mentioned crisis faced by immigrants by examining the special and personal boundaries of a Muslim family living in America. This study fills the gaps in research relating the post 9/11 treatment of Muslim Immigrants which is still oppressive. Moreover, this research has been taken by keeping in view the theoretical framework as laid by *John McLeod* in *Beginning Post colonialism* which deals with the Diasporas Identities of immigrants and it's the relationship between Islam and Post colonialism and its effects or impacts on the Muslims in the post 9/11 world.

Research Methodology:

This research is purely qualitative in nature. It has been done through deductive method of reasoning drawn from the textual analysis of the given text in order to investigate and to find out whether there is any proper solution to that or not. The researcher has gone through an extensive amount of critically analyzing both the primary and secondary sources relevant to the research. Sources such as online websites, academic journals, reviews, interviews, and books from different writers were consulted which deals specifically with the relevant topics such as post-colonial diasporas' identity, culture, 9/11, secularism, and conservatism. The researcher has conducted this research on the post-colonial framework.

Themes and Variables in the Novel:

Homeland Elegies is a complex novel that deals with the issues of Muslims living in the states in the wake of September 11 incidents. A tale of immigrant father and an American son; there struggle to blur ever boundary that exist between them and their homeland, America with all its glory and limitations (Garner, Dwight). According to Kirkus' review "Akhtar explores family, art, money, sex, religion, politics and prejudice in vivid, bracingly intelligent prose". It is a beautifully written and unflinching meditation on the "American Dream" in the wake of Islamophobia, economic crisis, and the unmasking of national rot that Trump years have given us. (Abbas, Sadia).

Literature Review:

Ayad Akhtar is an American Playwright and novelist. Most of his plays and novels deal with issues relating Muslims living in America in terms of their conflicting cultural and religious identities and difficulties in achieving the "American Dream". In his first novel *American Dervish*; he narrates the story of a boy Hayat oscillating between his secular upbringing and his newly found interest in becoming a hafiz, thus threatening both his identity and his place in American culture (Malik, Sarwat). Thus; "A moving and confrontational novel.....*Homeland Elegies* deals in ambiguities that were beyond pale of public discourse in the year after 9/11" (Kunzru, Hari). Akhtar in his book successfully interrogates and exposes nation's recent failure in term of American Dream (entertainment weekly). He strongly criticizes the country's greed for wealth, power and its privatization of every sect as well as the gradual declines in their cultural and moral values (Schwartz, Alexandra).

The current study has been undertaken after a critical examination of the novel in terms of the existing complexities that are present within American culture and which becomes a barrier for the people of color (especially Muslims) to exist, under the decade old trauma of this nation while subscribing to the theoretical rationale of post-colonial diasporas' identity and the notion of "home". The need of this research is felt in order to identify the causes of alienation for the immigrants in the host country and their refusal to accept the host's culture.

Discussion:

In *Homeland Elegies* Akhtar reflects on his struggle with his Muslim American identity in a fictionalized narrative. In this novel, his namesake Aktar (the protagonist) is a Pulitzer award winning playwright and author who is in constant struggle to withhold his American Identity in a white Christian majority who hold the view that every Muslim is either a terrorist or is involved in some kind of extremist activity. "It is a passionate, wrenching portrayal of Americans exiled into otherness" (Eagan, Jennifer). Born to a Pakistani Immigrant parents; he is an American by Heart and soul, but find himself in a constant battle to prove himself a true American. Akhtar spent most of his idyllic childhood in the peaceful suburbs of Wisconsin near Milwaukee where his father Sikander was practicing medicine. Tensions escalate after September 11 attacks. He has to face many suspicious gazes and have to prove himself as an American.

Another important aspect of the novel is Aktar's relationship with his parents. Though protagonist fears his rejection of American identity in the post 9/11 circumstances; it's his parents who suffer from the dilemma of hybridity, changing identities, loss of previous culture and above all homesickness and "unhomeliness". The father seems to have fully accepted his new American identity and adjusted to its culture but Aktar's mother Fatima faces a lot of trouble living outside her motherland. In one of his interview, Aktar describes his mother's torment of living in a foreign land:

Davis: and what was she missing?

Akhtar: Home. She was missing her family. She was missing the smells, the tastes, the sounds. She was missing the sense of belonging. She was missing a culture that knew where she came from. She was missing a culture that valued death. She was missing a culture that respected elders. She was missing everything that mattered in life because life here was lonely. And you know, she ended up in a part of Wisconsin where it was covered in snow all the time....one can understand the sense of exile and the sense of homelessness or at least homesickness.(Akhtar).

There is a constant yearning to search for a "home" in Diasporas individuals. According to Avtar Brah:

"Home is a mythic place of desire in the diaspora imagination. In this sense it is a place of no return, even if it possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of origin" (*Geographies of Diaspora*, pg.192).

To be at "home" means belonging to a place where we feel peace and where are able to communicate with others easily. But it becomes a difficulty for the displaced individual (McLeod, pg.210). They become unable to cope with this homelessness and make "Imaginary Homelands" as Rushdie said. Fatima was homesick and refuses to call America her home.

Textual Analysis:

"It's not our home. No matter how many years we spend here, it won't ever be our home" (Akhtar, ch.2, part 3).

She even felt a sense of pride when 9/11 happened though that moment occurs after the death of her loved one; Latif Awan, she said:

"They deserve what they got. And what they're going to get." (Akhtar, ch.2, part 5).

On the other hand, Sikander at the beginning seems to have adjusted to the new American lifestyle. He indulges himself in drinking, prostitutes, gambling and moreover a proponent of "American Dream" and failed to see its flaws. His whole life he stayed away from his religion and forgot about his culture. A doctor by profession, he lost his license in a lawsuit and eventually everything he owns in America. He forged an identity which wasn't his own. In the end he returns to Pakistan. He said to his son:

"I had a good life there, so many good years. I'm grateful to America. It gave me you! But I'm glad to be back in Pakistan, beta. I'm glad to be home" (Akhtar.ch.9).

This loss of identity or culture or yearning for home was felt more closely by the immigrants who came from another country but not for the ones who were born into the new one. Akhtar, the protagonist felt threatened by all these losses only after the September 11 attacks which still presents Muslims in a negative light. He witnessed it by himself.

"I stood there and watched. Soon enough, the second tower just disintegrated. Right there. Right before my eyes. A column of smoke and powder tumbling down, like some terrible black flower collapsing in on itself" (Akhtar.ch.6).

This was something the narrator was accepting expecting for a long time ago as the aftermath of America's role in upsetting the balance in the Middle East and also its role in the proxy wars being fought on the same land.

After witnessing the falling of the twin towers, he become terrorized and sensed the lurking shadow of suspicion that this incident has bestowed on him owing to his brown skin and his religious beliefs. He was labeled as a terrorist that day. After that he started wearing cross around his neck for a certain time period.

Another such incident occurs when the narrator's car break down when he was heading toward Harlem, and was forced to spend a day in Scranton. He met an officer who was friendly in the beginning but turn hostile toward Akhtar after knowing he was a Muslim of Pakistani and Arab origin. He wrote:

“No longer a practicing let alone believing Muslim and yet still entirely shaped by the Islam that had socially defined me since 9/11. As much as I am worried about my place in America as Muslim and yes I have a good reason to; that terrible day in September foreclosed our futures in this country.....” (Akhtar.ch.4).

Being raised in a secular household, Akhtar called himself a secular Muslim, for he did not believe in Islamic teachings and found them problematic. He believed Muslims be to be living in a culture that did not understand them (Akhtar). Though West has created an Anti-Islamic discourse much before the attacks but it was after the incident that a new kind of Islamophobia started to emerge in America (Asif, saljooq). Even the basic notion of Islam was challenged such as the story of Prophet’s marriage to Ayesha which was being viewed as a form of child abuse by American (Akhtar.ch.3).

Akhtar is unable to comprehend Islam and its preaching. His views mostly shaped by the western secular writers such as Salman Rushdie he views Islam in a conflicting ways. He says:

“With each successive reading of Quran, it’s become clearer to me how indebted it is not only to the time and place in which it arose but also to the psychology of the one whom I cannot but see as its author, Muhammad. (for Muslims, to speak of Muhammad as the author of Quran is a surpassing blasphemy; only God could have authored such a miracle, we are told; Muhammad was just a holy stenographer , if you will, take divine dictation”(Akhtar.ch.3)

Thus the narrator presents in this novel; the dilemma of being haunted by the 9/11 incident and how his American identity is being affected by it. Akhtar has adapted the American culture because he was born into it. Though his accent and skin color betrays but he is an American and not an outsider. He doesn’t feel homesickness that his parents felt because it is his home. In the last chapter, while addressing to an elderly man at university; he was asked to leave if he find it difficult to live here to which he reply:

“I am here because I was born and raised here. This is where I’ve lived my whole life. For better, for worse..... And it’s always a bit of both. I don’t want to be anywhere else. I’ve never even thought about it. America is my home.” (Akhtar.ch.9).

Recommendations of study outcome:

It should be not wrong to say that the immigrants suffer a great deal not only due to displacement but also under the aftermath of 9/11. They have left a culture which was their own for a new culture that is hardly accepting them due to their religious affiliation. That results into a conflicted identity not only for the immigrants but also their children who are a part of new culture; but are still forced to identify with the culture they don’t understand.(Akhtar). Thus 9/11 only played a part in the great game of racial, ethnic and identity politics in America and strengthens the roots of fear and terror in the Muslim community.

Conclusion:

To conclude, Akhtar in *Homeland Elegies* depicts his struggle in the 9/11 world that has severely damaged his identity as a Muslim American. He presented an “elegy” to mourn the loss his parents struggle in America. His mother’s distraught memory of witnessing the horror of partition and its impact on her latter life; his father submitting to his desires of indulging in American culture and to form an identity which was not real, his success and downfall, everything is depicted sincerely.

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