

The Cultural Identity Crisis in Ayad Akhtar's Home Land Elegies

IbraheemAjeelDakhil^{1,2}; LonghaiZhang^{1,3*}

¹Department of English Language and Literature, College of Foreign Language and Cultures, Xiamen University, Xiamen 361005, P R China.

²Al-Khwarzmi College of Engineering, University of Baghdad, Baghdad, Iraq.

³Vice President of Minnan Normal University, Zhangzhou, Fujian, 363000, P R China.

***Corresponding Author**

IBRAHEEM AJEEL DAKHIL (ibraheem@kecbu.uobaghdad.edu.iq)

ABSTRACT

The primary objective of this article is to assess Muslim immigrants' status in America after 9/11, as stated in *Homeland Elegies* by Ayad Akhtar. Muslim immigrants are victims of exploitation and are distressed because of changing cultural circumstances and shifting homes. Their cultural disconnect, feelings of homelessness and their homes being snatched lead them to a continuous sense of seeking belongingness. Ayad Akhtar highlights these circumstances in *Homeland Elegies*[1]. The novel captures the predicament of a post-9/11 world where cultural identities were adrift. It presents the immigrants' problems concerning alienation from their homeland and host culture. It has been challenging for Muslim immigrants to connect with mainstream American communities because these immigrants bring an extensive cultural heritage. This novel is a profound autobiographical art that highlights diminishing cultural individuality in a nation coming apart. The novel narrates a deep story that blends fiction and fact to convey belongingness and feelings of dispossession in the global prejudiced perspective in the post-9/11 world. This work comprises a drama relating to family relationships. Moreover, it might be considered social discourse or fantastic adventurous text. The narrative primarily highlights an immigrant father and his son in a nation they call home.

Keywords: *Cultural Identity, Ayad Akhtar, Homeland Elegies*

INTRODUCTION

This article aims to assess the exploitation witnessed by Muslim immigrants in America after the 9/11 attacks and the challenges they faced in aligning with mainstream society, as narrated by Ayad Akhtar in *Homeland Elegies*. The novel is somewhat of an autobiography that captures the moments and characters in the author's real life. Saljooq Asif specifies Akhtar's perspective, "Everything I write is some version of autobiography" (2). The author proclaims himself a "narrative artist" whose "narrative works are extension of his own narrative" (2). *Homeland Elegies* is built around the tale of an immigrant family where the father and son seek belongingness in a nation they call home. They seek their identity in a country that still resonates with the effects of the 9/11 attacks, where the world is fraught with despair, confusion, and disorder. The novel constantly echoes the need for a "home" and a masked sorrow concerning the predicament of a disordered cultural sense.

Homeland Elegies assesses the cultural identity issues faced by American Muslims in the aftermath of the 9/11 disaster in New York. Ayad narrates the tale, saying, "I was going to stop pretending that I felt American". Seemingly, America is a symbol of supreme strength and great success in several fields, including the ability to purchase its way out of challenging conditions. The horrified narrator highlights that he changed into what he calls a "neoliberal courtier." He uncovers his mother's abhorrence against America while his father started indulging in heavy drinking. The mother once mentions him as one of the Americans, "You're one of them now. Write about them. Don't write about us". Here, she demands complete assimilation because she wants her child to write about the immigrant Muslim community, specifically the second and third generations. Akhtar skilfully presents the anguish of an outsider-like feeling to highlight the extreme scrutiny faced by American Muslims in the 21st century after the 9/11 disaster.

This novel handles issues concerning individual and cultural identity and belongingness in a nation torn at the joints. It combines fact and fiction to narrate an intriguing tale of yearning and dispossession in a post-9/11 society. Ayad Akhtar builds a novice account to describe a country where people have seen much suffering due to debt. Here, the immigrants live in dread while the wounded remain uncared for. Akhtar attempts to build an understanding of such thoughts observed from the perspective of one family. The author has, through the novel, attempted to characterise the

American experience through numerous characters, including the father. He describes insiders' and outsiders' perspectives to create and echo broad views that offer the readers a fine view to understanding the true character and shape of the United States. Despite narrating past accounts, this work connects to the present based on Donald Trump, who, throughout the novel, is a dark reflection concerning the novel's peripheral vision to foretell a future that people experience today. Nevertheless, Akhtar is not explicitly focused on Trump; instead, he emphasises structural casualties that allowed his election.

Theoretical Framework

Culture may be understood as the values shared by several individuals. It consists of aspects like language, social norms, religion, birthplace, art, music, and literature. Cultural individuality is a vital aspect of identity and individual perception, including self-conception. These aspects correlate to other cultural characteristics like religion, social position, nationality, locality, ethnicity, generation, or other social structures exhibiting cultural individuality. Hence, cultural identity consists of individual aspects and the broader aspects of the culturally similar set of individuals united by shared cultural aspects. Cultural identity might be understood as a continuous phenomenon altered by several historical, social, and cultural influences. Several individuals experience changes in cultural individuality more than others. People witnessing relatively minor cultural changes often exhibit strong cultural identities. Therefore, such people experience a dynamic and solid cultural assimilation.

Therefore, cultural uniqueness has evolved in three phases: first, people understand culture as an assimilation of beliefs, practices, values, and behaviours. Second, people are considered individuals belonging to the culture based on their position in the selected community. Third, such individuals contribute to the culture and change relation dynamics. Culture-based relations are not limited to the individuals in a family; co-workers, neighbours, and friends contribute to such interactions.

The idea of a home is ambiguous. John McLeod considers home a "mythical place" where communities (209) seek belongingness beyond their native land. Alienation is directly related to the individual's effort to assimilate into mainstream communities. Though these societies are considered home, there is often a sense of hostility to culture, specifically religion. In this context, religion is critical; however, it is a vital factor for Muslim immigrants to America. The West has shunned Islam, leading to anti-Islamic sentiment, including a radical narrative that it uses to subdue Muslims, create challenges for them and disconnect them from their homelands. This study was conducted to build a foundation for future research concerning Muslim exploitation and building ongoing campaigns concerning their culture, religion, and individuality in the aftermath of the "twin towers" disaster. The fundamental objective of this study is to ascertain Muslim immigrants' vulnerability in their homeland, including their assimilation and adjustment to the host nation's culture. Moreover, it aims to determine the aspects that lead to an unfriendly perception of Muslims in America in the post-9/11 era.

For Akhtar, Pakistan and America are home nations. Home consists of parents whose conditions made him move to New York and Wisconsin. While travelling across American states and towns, he offers his readers views as an insider. He shares the specifics of life around him. He believes homes are not just located on different continents but are also the manifestation of mindset.

Ayad Akhtar is an American novelist and playwright born in Pakistan. Most of his literary contributions discuss concerns associated with Muslim immigrants in America. They undergo extensive hardships trying to keep their religious and cultural uniqueness intact while pursuing the American dream.

Akhtar's first novel, *American Dervish*, narrates the tale of a boy named Hayat who juggles his newfound pursuit as a hafiz and his secular upbringing. Hayat's connection to the American culture and his cultural individuality have been threatened. Hence, *Homeland Elegies* is considered an aggressive and touching novel because it highlights the uncertainties that are not part of the usual public discourse in the post-9/11 world. In his novel, Akhtar assesses and successfully brings to light the failure of the United States in achieving the American Dream. He firmly mocks the country's hunger for power, money, and privatisation of several aspects, including the steady decline in moral and cultural values. Alexandra Schwartz commented that Akhtar "strongly criticises the country's greed for wealth, power and its privatisation of every sect as well as the gradual declines in their cultural and moral values"[2].

Akhtar constantly struggles to balance personal identity and status in the prevalent culture. His younger self had to follow his parents to join their group and religion. Akhtar's parents were physicians. Once he was fiercely dedicated to his religion, his parents migrated from their homeland, Pakistan, to settle down in America in the late 1960s. Akhtar appeared in an interview on National Public Radio; he commented about his parents being "secular humanists" who did not force religious knowledge. Hence, he gained religious knowledge about conducting prayers and reading the holy Qur'an. Akhtar suggested the following in his interview:

I obsessed over the meaning [of the Qur'an] and comprehended how to live. It was a significant aspect of my childhood; however, my parents did not convey that knowledge... I believe it was profoundly related to my endeavour to understand the reasons for my being different, including its manifestations while growing up in Milwaukee. Ours was the only Muslim household in that region in the 1980s.

Research Questions

This paper attempts to address the following questions:

- 1- How did the 9/11 disaster affect the cultural individuality of Muslim immigrants?
- 2- What identity- and country-related problems do Muslim immigrants encounter? For what reason do these problems become crises?
- 3- Why does America turn exploitative for immigrants, regardless of Muslim religion?

Research Objectives

This study's primary objective is to highlight Ayad Akhtar's endeavour to assess cultural identity issues facing Muslim immigrants by investigating the hardships and individual challenges of a Muslim immigrant household staying in America. This paper addresses a niche concerning the limited research literature on Muslim immigrants' life after the 9/11 disaster. They are subjected to prejudice, oppression, and unfairness. Moreover, this research is built upon the perspective of the theoretical constructs specified by John McLeod in *Beginning Post colonialism*. McLeod discusses handling the identities of the immigrant diaspora, its post-colonial roots, its association with Islam, and the effects and outcomes on Muslims after 9/11. [3]

Research Methodology

This work comprises qualitative research only, which has been conducted using deductive analysis and reasoning from textual examination of the novel to assess, evaluate, understand, and conclude if there is an appropriate solution for this issue. The researcher assessed a lot of information by critically evaluating secondary and primary information sources associated with this topic. He referred to several related topics using numerous sources like websites, academic journals, reviews, interviews, and books by several writers who discuss cultural individuality, post-colonial diaspora, secularism, conservatism, and 9/11. The present review evaluated the post-colonial approach.

Homeland Elegies is thought to be a difficult novel as it discusses concerns about immigrant Muslims and their lives in post-9/11 America. It narrates the tale of an immigrant and his American son who attempt to dissolve the borders they face, which hinder their efforts from travelling to their homeland. Here, Akhtar assesses and considers several aspects like art, religion, sex, family, prejudice, and politics in a detailed and bracingly brilliant text. It is a beautiful novel highlighting the American Dream, economic challenges, Islamophobia, and uncovering the national rot during the Trump administration.

Literature Review

The present study was started after a detailed assessment of the novel concerning the present complexities associated with the American culture, challenging the lives of people of colour, specifically Muslims, in the wake of the decades-old national crisis. The research recognises the conceptual argument behind post-colonial diasporas' individuality and the idea of "home". The author felt the need for this study to ascertain the roots of immigrants' alienation in the host country and their reluctance to adopt the host's culture.

Fatima Aleena, Warda Shehzadi and AsfaZia[4] conducted research on immigrants' identity loss, highlighted by AyadAkhtarin *Home Elegies*. This work establishes the exploitative tendencies in America, which are validated by assessing the lives of Muslim immigrants after the 9/11 disaster. In a noteworthy text, Sophia Brown[5] assesses aspects like individuality, migration, and narrow-mindedness, including the rise in themes like migration and diaspora. Three literary publications have repeatedly discussed these themes: *God 99* by Hassan Blassim, *The Voices of the Lost* by Huda Barakat, and *Homeland Elegies* by Ayad Akhtar. These novels present the need to narrate about the individual and his identity in what is understood as auto-fiction. They establish the phenomenon of writing literary texts as a vital act of exposure, facilitating people to provide an accurate meaning of immigration and its effects.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

The initial portion of the novel highlights the protagonist's strained relationship with his father, who spent a short stint serving as Trump's doctor in the 1990s. Hence, his following years were enjoyable because he worked for a celebrity. The father denies Trump's philosophy concerning Muslims and immigrants. Trump is believed to harbour sentiments against Muslims and immigrants. After that, he supports Trump's presidential campaign. Nevertheless, Akhtar proves his expertise in dialogue as they debate the 2016 presidential election campaign till the son surrenders to his father's irritatingly apparent explanation.

Akhtar assimilates individual experiences flawlessly. For instance, during racial profiling and delineation by the police, he highlights the adverse effects of capitalism and political addresses. Hence, he talks about subjects like the impact of debt, excessive college fees, healthcare marketisation, and Robert Bork's critical discussion that was vital to deregulating the American financial framework. Nevertheless, *Homeland Elegies* is not as controversial as apparent because Akhtar's characters are deep and discuss numerous paths and heated debates they conducted. Akhtar's family friend, whom his mother silently loved, was discussed because he gave up his medical practitioner job in New Jersey and travelled back to Pakistan because his motherland offered healthcare and medical facilities for the less privileged. Another family friend is a dynamic and persistent stock dealer who practices a fully legal profession that bankrupts entire cities.

Homeland Elegies is considered an inescapable narrative of the American system built on several ties. The author ends the novel by questioning free speech. Akhtar's erstwhile professor and mentor, Mary, invites him to a college campus to share his view at a Muslim student protest. In the professor's view, Akhtar's novel is demeaning and perilous; these claims are based on an online abstract rather than a comprehensive assessment and critical review.

Though Akhtar went to college for his speech, he was criticised by Islamophobic posters, while those very students stood in his defence. The professor then asserts that the present generation of students might have hindered their abilities due to social media characteristics like obscenity and platitudes to handle things sincerely. She also highlighted in the interest of such students that they are made aware of cognitive fundamentals: to understand what is worth listening to and remembering, how to handle boredom, differentiate between facts and rhetoric, and guard oneself against discomfort. Akhtar suggested that a classroom discussion by Mary was painstakingly laborious, and she built an atmosphere of cautious optimism.

Akhtar narrates *Homeland Elegies* to describe the personal conflict as a Muslim and possessing a Muslim American identity using a fictional story. Akhtar is the protagonist in this novel; he is a playwright, author, and Pulitzer awardee. Akhtar suffers from persistent conflict because he wants to maintain his American individuality in a majorly white Christian society that claims every other Muslim is a terrorist or associated with radical activities. Akhtar is a true American born to Pakistani immigrants. Nevertheless, he constantly battles to establish himself as an American dedicated by soul and heart. He had a peaceful childhood that he spent mainly in the suburbs around Milwaukee, Wisconsin, where his father was a healthcare practitioner. The post-9/11 period is tense, and he must bear several looks of suspicion. He struggles to establish himself as an American individual.

Hostility towards Muslims and Islam can be traced to the emergence of the Qur'an; however, the World Trade Centre terrorist attacks on 9/11 triggered a different chapter in the Anti-Islam narrative. The American media has centred on Osama bin Laden and American relations with Middle Eastern nations. Fewer news reports addressed hate crimes witnessed by South Asian and Middle Eastern individuals. While Anti-Islamic criminal activities were at the second last spot before 9/11, they are now the second highest, committed in the name of religion. In "Muslim Identity in 21st Century America", Asif suggests that "from pre-9/11 to post-9/11, a startling increase of 1600% in anti-Islamic incidents took place"[6].

After 9/11, the American media focused on Muslims, who, along with the Middle East, are appropriate examples of real-life drama, struggle, and fights. The 2011 political T.V. drama "Homeland" started airing on Showtime; it won several awards, including the 2012 Primetime Emmy Award for Outstanding Drama Series. Furthermore, this show has been mocked for depicting the Middle East and Muslims; it has been categorised as Islamophobic by American journalist Leila Al-Arian. She commented, "All the standard stereotypes about Islam and Muslims are reinforced and it is demonstrated ad nauseam that anyone marked as 'Muslim' by race or creed can never be trusted, all via the deceptively unsophisticated bureau-jargon of the government's top spies"[7].

Homeland Elegies also extensively mentions the protagonist and his bond with his parents. Akhtar doubts that his American individuality might be disregarded owing to the aftermath of 9/11; his parents witness several dilemmas like hybridity issues, identity change, diminishing sense of culture, homesickness, and, most significantly, being unhomed. It appears that the father wholly adjusted to the new mainstream culture, including an acceptance of his American self; however, the mother, Fatima, faces several challenges staying outside her homeland. Akhtar comments on his mother's plight of surviving 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 longed for belongingness. She missed the culture of her motherland, where death was valued. She missed her cultural value of respect for the elderly. She longed for the aspects that mattered because life here was secluded. And you know, she

stayed in an area in Wisconsin that was persistently covered with snow... the exile, homelessness, and homesickness are apparent (*H. E* 145).

Individuals from different diasporas have a burning need to find a "home". Michael Rios and Naomi Adiv[8], comment in *Geographies of Diaspora*, "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" (192). "Home" is like being connected to a place where there is peace. McLeod asserts home as a place where people "are able to communicate with others easily. But it becomes a difficulty for the displaced individual" (.210). People cannot handle homelessness or build apparent homelands. It is exhibited when Fatima rubbishes America as her home; "It's not our home. No matter how many years we spend here, it won't ever be our home" (*H.E*, ch.2, part 3). Moreover, she is gratified about the events of 9/11, though it happens after her beloved Latif Awan's demise. She commented, "They deserve what they got. And what they're going to get" (*H.E* ch.2, part 5).

Also, initially, Sikander appears well-adjusted and assimilated with the mainstream American community and way of life. He was spoilt by drinking, gambling, and prostitutes, apart from being an advocate of the "American Dream"; hence, he was oblivious to the flaws. Considering his deep assimilation, he went astray from religion and was separated from his cultural heritage. His professional medical license was cancelled due to a lawsuit, ultimately losing all American possessions. He forged a fake identity and had to return to Pakistan. He told 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" (*H.E*. ch.9).

The predicament of losing cultural individuality and the desire to be at home is more pronounced for immigrants than those born natively to the host country. The protagonist felt the peril of these losses after 9/11, which, to this day, affects Muslims negatively. He gave a first-person account, "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" (*H.E* ch.6).

The narrator accepts this issue and has expected it for a long time. These events from America led to a significant role and status imbalance in the Middle East. It also affects the proxy wars fought in these regions. After witnessing the twin tower disaster, he is apparently associated with terror and perceived as suspicious. This mistreatment is the result of brown skin and religion. Furthermore, he was called a terrorist. Consequently, he started wearing a cross for some time.

Another event indicates the cultural conflict and intolerance towards others; it happens when the protagonist's car develops a fault during his trip to Harlem. He spent one day in Scranton, where he talked to an officer who usually behaved in the beginning. However, his behaviour was hostile when the officer discovered Akhtar's religion and Pakistani and Arab origin. He narrates about this event:

Not practising, let alone believing Muslim anymore; still, Islam has affected my social identity after 9/11. Regarding my concerns about my place as a Muslim in America; I have a solid reason to; that September excluded our future in America (*H.E*. ch.4).

A self-proclaimed secular Muslim, Akhtar believes so because of his upbringing in a secular atmosphere. He often conflicted with Islamic teachings because he did not believe those. He understands that Muslims should not stay in a culture that misunderstands them. Asif indicates that despite the West is responsible for the Anti-Islamic narrative, "much before the attacks but it was after the incident that a new kind of Islamophobia started to emerge in America". The West contends some fundamental Islamic theories, including considering Lady Ayesha's marriage to the Prophet as a form of child abuse.

Akhtar's complete assimilation leads to misinterpretation of Islamic preaching and teaching. Western thoughts and secular opinion have primarily moulded his present perspective. Like Salman Rushdie, he perceives Islam in conflicting terms. He asserts, "With each successive reading of the 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 the 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" (*H. E*.ch.3).

Thereafter, this novel presents the crisis of cultural identity loss for Muslim immigrants, including their sinister thoughts about the 9/11 disaster. This crisis also affected those who disregarded most of their cultural heritage and adopted the American lifestyle and identity. Akhtar completely assimilated the typical American lifestyle and values because he was born in the States. Aspects like colour and accent are detractors; however, he is regarded as more American than an outsider. Hence, he is not as homesick as his parents because America is the home he has seen, without

having any memory of their native culture. In the concluding chapter, when he must leave the country if his life is intolerable, he comments, "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" (*H.E* ch.9).

Homeland Elegies is a novel whose characters offer individual perspectives concerning life as an individual of colour staying in mainstream society. Their opinion can be specifically considered appropriate in the context of the early twentieth century since leaders strive for a definition of the roles that businesses must play while addressing racial justice. Mike Jacobs played the character of a black lawyer who served several Hollywood stars. Ayad was stunned by Mike's liking for Republican leaders. Mike believed that America's most appealing ideology was "Everything was about getting rich. At least Republicans were honest about it". Such an individual associates the economic decisions of the 1970s, specifically Robert Bork's perspectives concerning competition law concerning present-day minority groups.

Akhtar links the rising anti-immigrant, racist, and anti-Islamic thoughts with the flawed concept of American capitalism for the betterment of the labour-class rural American population. He discusses the destruction of a manufacturing unit in America, the stock market's rise, and America's significant debt issue. Moreover, he destroys the myth concerning model minority, which refers to immigrants from South Asian nations. It emphasises the systemic unfairness imposed on the Black population. It was eradicated during and after Obama's term in office.

Still, their painful and worrisome events at the national scale were shifted in moments of incisive social ridicule and exhilaration. Akhtar does not have limits: he recalls the challenges he faced while dating a Muslim woman he admired, one whose departure was due to tuberculosis. He dismisses stereotypes associated with Muslims, including his father, who likes whiskey; Riaz, a capitalist who loves adventure and a gay patron. Riaz is involved in finance and is not considered a religious person; however, he has been disturbed by Muslims' perception. Several people might not consider him a Muslim, which he opposes. In contrast, Asha might even be less inclined towards religion than Riaz. Yet she outshines the narrator, who comes from a family of many, where every member has a different religious view. The narrator's father's religious views are not aligned with the mother's.

RESULTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It must be mentioned that Muslim immigrants are victims of diminished cultural identity. It is not solely due to displacement but also the outcome of discrimination after the 9/11 disaster. They must separate from their deep-rooted and historical culture to assimilate a new culture. Still, the host culture hardly welcomed them because of their religion and colour. These factors precipitate a cultural identity crisis for Muslim immigrants and the subsequent two generations who belong to the new culture. Sadly, they are part of a culture they have little understanding of; this is not what they deserve. Therefore, the 9/11 disaster was an important event in this unfair treatment based on ethnic, racial, and identity politics in the United States. These attacks reinforce feelings of terror and dread for the Muslim diaspora.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Akhtar's *Homeland Elegies* highlight the conflicts in the post-9/11 era, which has extensively dented his cultural individuality as a Muslim American. He writes an "elegy" that is his mourning for the problems his parents faced in America. His mother's distressing recollections of living through the partition and its effects on her life, while his father gave in to the desires glorified by America, he built an identity that was disconnected from reality. Akhtar sincerely writes about success and failure.

Akhtar likely wrote *Homeland Elegies* not just as a narrative on business ethics. The novel targets readers with different personalities, including those who want to understand the present socio-political landscape. Moreover, researchers like Akhtar's technique of associating stories comprising distinct characters. Fiction offers an excellent opportunity to present the impact of humanity on economic policy. Lastly, the novel is highly relatable owing to its great narrative approach.

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