

Loss of The Self and Identity Crisis: A Muslim Reading of Ayad Akhter's Disgraced

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Abstract:

This study explores identity crisis leading to loss of the self in Ayad Akhter's Disgraced through the Muslim lens. Identity construction is central to human existence, especially in the wake of post 9/11 since the event classified the Muslims in the category of 'others' not us. The play demonstrates Amir's rejection of his original identity by changing his name distancing from Islam and rejecting his culture leading to a profound loss of the self. The play offers a cautionary narrative about the consequences of cultural dislocation when read from a Pakistani lens. Ultimately, it turns into a tragedy of the loss of self to assimilate into American society.

Keywords: Loss of Self, Identity crisis, cultural dislocation

Introduction

'I am not an Athenian or a Greek but a citizen of the world' Socrates

Derrida's 'Deconstruction' offers us insight into multiple interpretations and versions of meaning. To him, meanings are fleeting, unstable and unfinished.

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They keep on encompassing supplementary signified. It decenters and unmasks all the centers, thereby questions binaries, exposes biases, stereotypes, gender discrimination, racial or ethnical discrimination and demands reversing of privileged positions, cultures and identities. (Bertens, 2002) People throughout the history have labelled dominant languages and cultures vis-à-vis less dominant with hyphenated identities such as 'Muslim-American, British-Asian, Afro-American, and Asia-American. Hyphenated identity was brought into question during the two Great Wars when Powerful country like America brought into question about immigrant loyalty, especially of Muslims.

Post 9/11, in the face of global terrorism, created Islamophobia and questioned the loyalty of Muslim-Americans. On the grounds of religious affiliation or ethnic background, they were seen as terrorists. This stereotypical thinking stands in contradiction with the American dream of judging a person on the basis of their abilities not complexion, caste or creed. With it Luther's dream is blown to pieces who voiced content of the character as a defining factor. (Luther, 1963)

Identity at the simplest level refers to how we see ourselves, others around us and how we relate ourselves in the world around. We make others estimation based on their identity. It breeds familiarity or estrangement. It is how we view ourselves and the rest of the world. Such views, shaped by our attitudes and ideologies, help us in group formation for social representation while handling social conflict, social struggle and maintain ones hegemony. It formulates the

notion of us-ness and other-ness. 'Other-ness' includes all those who are not 'us'. This 'others-ness' can be located in the difference embedded in language, culture, religion, caste even colour and contour. In fact, it is fundamental to humans. Globalisation and American hegemony especially post 9/11, classified Muslims in the category of 'other-ness' Muslims projected as terrorists were marginalized and deemed as uncivilized and fundamental. It brought into attention the western responsibility or 'white man's burden of polarizing the two. Mohsin Hamid's 'Reluctant Fundamentalist', H. M. Naqvi's 'Home Boy' and Ayad Akhtar's 'Disgraced' are portrayals of such a notion of 'other-ness' and marginalization.

This paper studies *Disgraced* from a Muslim perspective and argues that the protagonist's tragedy emerges from the internalized hostility towards Islam and distancing from spirituality. The analysis combines a Muslim perspective with the post-colonial concerns of binaries, especially in the wake of cultural displacement. Also, the paper argues that displacement results in moral collapse.

Research Objectives

- To analyze Muslim identity crisis in the play *Disgraced*.
- To examine Amir Kapoor's loss of the self through a Muslim perspective.
- To explore relationships between spiritual alienation and moral collapse.

Research Questions

- How does the play *Disgraced* portray identity crisis of Muslims, especially after 9/11?

- How does Amir Kapoor experience loss of the self?
- What contribution does the play offer about moral collapse vis-à-vis the protagonist's estrangement from the faith?

Literature Review

The play has drawn readers' attention from diverse backgrounds. The dominant scholarship on the play centers around post-colonial angst, race, and Islamophobia. The play portrays the anxieties of Muslims who want to assimilate in a society deeply affected by the tragic event of 9/11. Amir Kapoor's representation aligns with the experience of assimilation and consequential anxiety.

Post-colonial critics have studied the play by applying Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity, mimicry and beyond space. Al Amro et al (2021) argue that the play is a demonic representation of Muslim as other cultures. Edward Said's concept of Orientalism has also been applied where Muslims are stereotyped and are viewed through Western perspective. However, the Muslim perspective rooted in the Quranic injunctions and the life of the last prophet, Hazrat Muhammad Mustafa (SAW) is rarely seen. In contrast with the existing scholarship on the play, this paper fills the gap in the dominant literature. The study offers a Muslim perspective on the self and how it relates to Amir's psychological disintegration.

Theoretical Framework

The Islamic concept of selfhood pivots around man's relationship with God. At the heart of it is moral discipline and spiritual consciousness. Men are detached and lose their identity if they shun the ways of God given in the Holy Quran and taught by the Hazrat Muhammad (SAW)

the seal of the prophets. The Quran argues that those who remember God, God remembers them. God makes those people forget themselves who forget Allah.

Analysis and Discussion

Amir's Rejection of the Self through Assimilation

Akhter snapshots this play on American Muslims; unpacks their insecurity of assimilation on the path of formulating their identity and navigating their belonging. It sparks the questions of identity and racial stereotypes. Power of the play is such that makes reader and viewers think whether we construct our identities or they are closely and inherently established in religion, race or culture. It engages the reader to wrestle with their perception of American culture and the west which is taken as privileged hold and of Islam and adherents of Islamic culture which is taken as backward and uncultured in the 21st century.

To Amir, a 40-year-old and a successful law practitioner in the Jewish law firm, is ambitious of moving up the social order and reaching the top of hierarchal order in America. He wishes to see dream come true to be conferred with the promotion the firm as a partner. He embraces America, adopts American norms, abandons his parental Muslim cultural heritage, changes his last name from Abdullah to Kapoor and cloaks his Pakistani identity. His refusal to adapt to the prevailing American culture means denial to his upward social mobility,

financial gain and personal grooming. His perspective of Islam, Islamic ways and culture is of derogatory and of belittling nature. It is manifested when he calls Quran about tribal ways of life and calls it a shit to be uprooted as it is about backwardness. (Akhter, 2012). He behaves contrary to Martin Luther's view of life to define oneself with the content of the character and is swept away with the tides of globalization. Drifting to center, he endeavours to shun margin in the hope of being included in us-ness. His inclusiveness in us-ness creates loss of the self, loss culture, loss of diversity. Similarly, Hussein, Amir's nephew, hides his Muslim identity by changing his name from Hussein to Abe. But unlike his uncle he has not shunned his parental religion. In fact it is his cause. Contrary to Amir's approach is the perspective of his wife Emily of white breed who considers Islam as a gateway to remarkable freedom. She credits Islam universal and Muslim as pioneers of the artistic techniques and introducers of the Greek intellect to the west (Akhter, 2012).

Amir's Moral Collapse

The play unfolds the critical question of the realization of identity loss when both Emily and Abe persuade him to defend a local religious cleric who was accused of collecting funds and supporting the cause of Hamas. He refuses to defend the religious cleric on the grounds that the imam is a bigot. Emily also estranges him when she tells him that if the Imam wanted one of his own people, then Amir should be there to represent him. To this Amir categorically say he is not from among those. In fact, it was the bigotry of Muslims as Amir reflects that made him shun Islam and Islamic culture, values and norms. Contrary to his will, he attends to the proceedings of the court. To his surprise, New York Times publishes an eye-opening article that

he was the defense attorney of the cleric. The publication appears to be a blow and infuriates him. In the evening, the couple had dinner with Isaac and Jory. The former is Jewish and the latter African American working in the same law firm as Amir. During the dinner it is revealed to him that the firm is promoting Jury instead of Amir, as he had disguised his religious background from the Jewish partners. Another shock is revealed to about his wife, Emily who had shared bed with Isaac on the London trip. The two upsetting revelations drag him into fury and he hurls bigoted and abusive language at Isaac and Jury who rush out of the apartment instantly. After the two are gone, Amir beats Emily in the fit of viciousness. Six months later, Emily is parting ways with Amir and divorcing him. FBI in the final scene questions his nephew his fundamentalist Muslim heritage and identity. At the end of the play, we can see Amir standing alone and looking thoughtfully at his portrait which Emily had painted.

Amir at the Crossroads of Otherness

Amir, who embraced all that western culture offered to him: eating habits, drinking and dressing habits they were all western. He shunned religious practices binding upon a Muslim. But the Western culture will not embrace him no matter what sacrifices he offers on the altar. Their dream of becoming American will never be actualized. They will always be seen as non-American. Such treatment is manifested by the waiter who looked at him with racist orientation. The waiter puts himself in the category of “Us” as superior, powerful and privileged and Amir as “Other” and inferior. It is not only the waiter who underscores Amir but Isaac also emanates such a behavior

when he tells Emily that the slave owns the master's wife.

Conclusion

A Muslim reading of the play *Disgraced* shows that spiritual distancing leads to an identity crisis. The protagonist's crises result from his rejection of the self, his family, his culture and the very spiritually seated faith. He does so to get acceptance into American society.

The paper demonstrates that his attempt to remove his Pakistani culture rooted in Islam results in moral and spiritual collapse. It ultimately leads to loss of the self. Consequently, the play can be a warning against such an attitude of self-negation. The paper highlights that the true dignity is in connection with God and maintaining moral integrity.

In a nutshell, it can be asserted that the play is pregnant with diverse ideas and poses serious questions in the world we are living; the world that claims global and people as citizens of the world insisting on the use one language and one order. But on the other hand, the same world has polarized the world into two blocs or classes: Western and Eastern, or colonizer and the colonized. Post 9/11 changed social reality and gave birth a kind of renewed sense of 'white man's burden' thereby creating a different social reality; a reality which is full of racial and ethnic discrimination. The play raises the question about the immigrants' identity crisis, especially of Muslims settled in America, which 9/11 has even created. The world needs to rethink the ideological notions of 'Us-ness' and 'Otherness' and adhere to what

Socrates said: 'I am not an Athenian or a Greek but a citizen of the world'

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