Religion and Identity in Ayad Akhtar’s *American Dervish*: A Cultural Study

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Abstract: This study examines the clash between the religious and social aspects of Muslim’s life in Ayad Akhtar's debut novel, *American Dervish*. The novel expounds the failure of the Muslim character, Hayat Shah, to integrate himself into a new communal life as he still holds on the remnant beliefs he has acquired from his earlier life in Pakistan, his home country. Hayat embodies the newer generation whereas his father embodies the older one. They behave identically in pursuing the similar way in that Hayat discovers his self in befriending the Jewish girl Rachel and in giving up the Islamic creeds, taught by his mentor Mina; simultaneously, his father discovers his individuality in accompanying his lifetime workmate, Nathan Wolfsohn, a Jewish professor. Ayad Akhtar intends to highlight the behaviour of the immigrants, who face the teething difficulties in their lives until they discover a way to integrate themselves into their new community. The study adopts the cultural approach in analysing the novel.

Keywords: Religion, Identity, Islam, Judaism, Ayad Akhtar & *American Dervish*

1. Introduction

The foreword of *American Dervish* releases with Hayat Shah who devotes his most euphoric minutes with the Jewish young lady Rachel. At the beginning of the novel, Hayat becomes a close friend with his classmate, Rachel whose magnificence and graciousness beguiles him. With Rachel, Hayat is prepared to go to Professor Edelstein's class, which is a "Survey of Islamic History in fifteen minutes". The teacher refers to a study made by one of his German associates with respect to the Quran. The outcome which the German researcher has attained can be summed up in the accompanying quotation: "In short, Edelstein claimed, his German colleague was about to show the world that the bedrock Muslim belief in the Quran as the direct, unaltered, eternal word of God was a fiction" (*American Dervish* 62). The last two furiously do not stay the class while Hayat stays in class with his Jewish sweetheart, Rachel. Hayat, untouched by what is said in regards to the Quran, says that he is "a true and tried Mutazalite." which was not true. Later, he discloses this to Rachel, his darling. The novelist divides his novel into a prologue and four books, each of which includes four chapters except book two, which includes five chapters. At the end of the books, there is an epilogue.

2. The Religious and Social Clashes

The novel wisely depicts social, cultural and religious clashes since it "bridge[s] cultural divides and build[s] understanding. Akhtar narrates a rich and heart breaking event about the limits of religion and the hazards of love (David Daley in *USA Today*)." It is no wonder that *American Dervish* crystallizes the heated struggle between generations, religions, cultures and races. "Mr. Akhtar’s astute observations of the clashes between old world and new, between secular and sacred, among immigrants might seem familiar to readers of both contemporary and classic literature (Adam Langer)." Akhtar's works usually tackle the problems encountered by the Muslim immigrants who inhabit in Western countries, generally, and America, particularly. He believes of himself as "a narrative artist. I don’t think of myself as a novelist or screenwriter or playwright. All of those modalities... are obviously very different, and I’m not
sure that I prefer any one to the other (Aditi Sriram interviews Ayad Akhtar).

At the very begin of Book One, Hayat's mother Muneer Shah converses with him about her closest companion Mina Ali who is going to the States from Pakistan a year after her terrible marriage to Hamed Suhail. Before she comes, Hamed sends her his lawyer to advise her that "he [Hamed] divorces you, he divorces you, and he divorces you" (American Dervish 5). Thus, the lawyer adds, "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 (American Dervish 5)."

To escape from such a ghastly milieu, Mina acknowledges the invitation from the Shah's family to live with the Shah in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Hayat exceptionally well notices that Mina's child Imran is magnetized by his dad Naveed and he himself to Mina. Hayat calls attention to: "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 (American Dervish 32)."

When Mina Ali goes to the States, Hayat, who has been captivated by his cmentor Mina, starts to take in a portion of the Islamic precepts: how to be a dervish and how to memorize the Quran. It is just Mina who thinks about showing Hayat the Islamic precepts: his guardians, then again, do think nothing about this aspect. "There's Hayat's father, a secular humanist who doesn't want to be bound by the limits of scripture” (Writing About The Midwestern Muslim Experience). Moreover, his mother turns a deaf ear to these religious ideologies. Hayat memorizes the Quran in English and he adapts third of it by heart. To him, the dearest dream to satisfy in life is to wind up a hafiz; in the meantime, Mina describes the tale of the dervishes to Hayat with the goal that he may some time or another get to be one of them. She might want to see him carry on and act like the dervish, specified in Mina's story, sitting along the edge of the street and taking a gander at two individuals who are eating oranges. At the point when the dervish takes a gander at them, they spurn him and marvel why he is doing such. They, then, hurl him with the orange peels. Rather than becoming angry, the dervish says thanks to them (American Dervish 87). In this respect, Mina says: "In fact, he realized he was the same as that ground, the same as those peels, as those men, as everything else. He was the same as everything created by Allah’s hand (American Dervish 88)."

3. Hayat's Education

Since Hayat is being taught to be a hafiz on account of Mina, he, towards the end of Book Two, asks God not to give his father a chance to be scourged in the flares of Hell fire for his transgressions. Hayat watches, "I saw Father waving at me through the endless flames. I begged God to forgive him, to turn him away from his sins. I heard Father’s cries of pain as the fires burned him" (American Dervish 136). To protect his father from the agonies of Hellfire is the reason why Hayat is enthusiastic to be a hafiz. "That's what Mina had said. Every hafiz earned not only his own place in Paradise, but his parents' as well.

No matter how many drinks, no matter how many mistresses, Father would be saved” (American Dervish 137). Hayat's fascination with Mina is demonstrated spiritually, and physically, too. He starts to physically cherish her, particularly in the wake of having seen her naked body in the lavatory.

Hayat says more, "I had never seen anything so perfect as her naked body, its swelling at the chest and hips... My heart stirred. Something inside me was already burning” (American Dervish 56). Out of his physical adoration for Mina and his excitement for taking in the Islamic teachings, Hayat cannot acknowledge her being married to Nathan, a Jewish man. Appropriately, he sends a telegram to her guardians in Pakistan, letting them know that their little girl will wed a Jewish man. Mina's guardians arrive and counteract such a marriage. Hence, Mina is married to a Muslim man, Sunil, with whom her life turns into a bit of hellfire maybe more grave than that life she has gone through with Hamed Suhail to the degree that she passes away by uterine cancer. When she dies, she does as such without grumbling trying to show her closeness and cozy association with the life of a dervish and what such an existence profits her to do.

Since Hayat's parents, Naveed and Muneer, are skeptical about religion, Mina assumes the liability to fill this crevice in Hayat's life. Hayat never hears any religious stories from his parents; all he gets from his mother are her stories about his father's white mistresses (American Dervish 33). Out of her sufferings on account of her spouse, Muneer begins to impart into her child the assessment that he ought to shun the Muslim conduct of treating ladies and embrace the Jewish one. Many times, Muneer advises her child that she might want to see him carry on like a Jew. While trying to help her child to remember her message to him, she says: "That's why I'm bringing you up differently, so that you learn how to respect a woman. That's the truth, kurban: I'm bringing you up like a little Jew” (American Dervish 101). Mother never saves at whatever time or push to demonstrate Hayat how the Jews are absolutely not quite the same as the Muslims in treating ladies; the Jews treat them respectfully, the Muslims respond discourteously. Muneer includes: "They understand how to respect women, behta. They understand how to let a woman be a woman, to let her take care of them. They understand how to give a woman attention" (American Dervish 101). It overtly seems that Hayat inherits his love for the Jews from his mother while she inherits it from her father. Muneer's father "instilled in his children a belief that Jews were the special people, blessed by God above others...” (American Dervish101). Hayat's father and forefathers stem their ideas about the Jews from their understandings with them. Hayat pin points that his grandfather's respect for the Jews "stemmed from his experience living in their midst as a student in England in the years after the Second World War”
(American Dervish 101). According to Hayat's grandfather, the Jews significantly respect learning while Muslims do not: he thinks that the Jews' education is a factual one, "not the rote memorization and mindless regurgitation of tradition he saw as common to Muslims" (American Dervish 101). What Hayat's grandfather expresses about Muslims could be basically applied to what Hayat says or practices in the novel.

To express his terrible childhood at the hands of Mina who desires to see him as a hafiz or a dervish Hayat states, "My soul was outgrowing the child-sized raiment with which my Islamic childhood had outfitted me" (American Dervish 316). In the epilogue, Hayat decisively states: "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" (American Dervish 329). Since Hayat discovers his personality in no place except in the organization of the Jewish young lady, Islam was no longer valuable to him. "My heart yearned to pray. I put my hands out before me in the Muslim style and tried to conjure the heartfelt fire I knew so well from back when Mina lived with us. But my words rang hollow. Like sounds spoken to the deaf, or worse, to no one at all" (American Dervish 317). Just before the epilogue, Hayat, talking to Mina, reveals his rejecting of Islam and its tenets, not shortly, but slowly. "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" (American Dervish 325). To worsen the situation, before giving up Islam behind, Hayat's two friends Farhaz and Hamza teach him a number of filthy words in English. Also, in the final chapter (Chapter 17), Hayat sadly says that he has hardly read the Quran for the last ten years. Furthermore, he has only rejected the kind of respect he once had towards the Quran. "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" (American Dervish 341).

Before the end of the novel, the reader understands the way that Hayat cannot be the American dervish for some reasons. To start with, he now disposes of all the Islamic teachings and fundamentals. He likewise calls attention to that his personality in America pivots exclusively on his closeness with the Jewish individuals and group, particularly with Rachel. In doing as such, Hayat needs to revoke his kindred individuals, the Muslims when all is said in done, and specifically the Pakistanis. As appeared toward the end of the novel, when Hayat needs to know more information about Mina's two kids after her demise, it is Professor Nathan Wolfsohn, the Jewish teacher, who advises him about their lives. It is very clear that Hayat gets his data about Pakistani individuals from Professor Wolfsohn. Besides, the reader is completely mindful of the way that Hayat cannot be the American dervish since he, in his fantasy, does not stay with the Prophet till they perform the prayer. "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" (American Dervish 213). Hayat cannot endure any serious trial in his life. He could not process the thought that Professor Wolfsohn may marry aunt Mina despite the fact that he is entirely prepared to be changed over to Islam for her own particular purpose. Almost towards the end of the novel when both Hayat and Professor Wolfsohn meet, the latter states: "I never got over your aunt. She was, and always will be, the love of my life" (American Dervish 333). Once more, Hayat couldn't achieve or demonstrate enough persistence with his father's grave changes that undesirably disrupt his relations with his family. Instead of offering exhortation to his dad not to drink or seek after the white American paramours, he works together with his mother to uncover his father's purposes of shortcomings. While Hayat is listening stealthily on his father and the medical caretaker's coquettish demonstrations, he turns out to be completely mindful of his father's defiled deeds. Hayat clarifies how he gets his dad right then and there: "He was listening as she talked, every part of him leaned in toward her. He sipped at a drink, nodding. He looked happy. They both did. And then he kissed her" (American Dervish 288). The novelist diligently endeavours to show to what degree the father-child connection is torn in half. The child is watching out for the father while the father's stance may turn to pieces once the father sees his child, watching him. "As if sensing something, Father stopped. His gaze turned to the window. Our eyes met. He froze. Then the woman turned to look. I recognized her now. It was the nurse from the hospital room. Julie" (American Dervish 288). Mina, then is the best character in the novel who has abstained every one from the burdens and throes she has gone over. She never grumbles of any wrongdoings submitted by any character against her. Further, she tries to show Hayat how to be a dervish, which reveals one of her best qualities. Her being another dervish or the American dervish is very evident in her taking after the sermon, conveyed to Hayat to show him being a dervish. It mirrors her mental state when life and demise, joy and pity, and châteaux and detainment facilities are all the same in her eyes, that reflect her truthful submission to the soul of Sufism, and shows how she is only concerned with finding the true 'path to Him'. Mina says:

"Faith has never been about an afterlife for me, Hayat. It's about finding God now. In the everyday. Here. With you. Whether I’m living in a prison or in a castle. Sick or healthy. It’s all the same. That’s what the Sufis teach. What comes our way, whatever it is, that is the vehicle. Every single life, no matter how big or small, how happy or how sad, it can be a path to Him" (American Dervish 326).

This statement suggests that being a dervish means, like a true Sufi, to be dissolved in the Almighty's Being spiritually and physically; i.e., one's personality, self and identity are be dissolved in a greater one of Being, thus giving up everything for Allah. Such a picture of a genuine dervish is the opposite side of absorption into any group. She straightforwardly announces that she could be a bit of dust, or a grain of sand, or nothing at all with the goal that she will not hurt or be harmed by anyone on earth. In doing so, she best practices the significance of absorption to the degree that she could not
care less about the external types of her religion; this way, "She didn’t wear a head scarf!" nor did she fast in Ramadan (American Dervish 50). To demonstrate the gist of a true dervish or Sufi, Mina perceives: ‘To be a Sufi,’ she continued, ‘means to give up the world and everything in it. To be a Sufi means to depend on nothing, to want nothing, to be nothing. A Sufi is a day that needs no sun, a night that needs no moon, no stars. A Sufi is like the dust on the ground, not the stones that hurt people’s feet when they walk, but the dust that no one knows is even there’ (American Dervish 258).

Examining the above stated attributes of a dervish or a Sufi, it is clearly seen that Mina is the genuine one. She marries Hamid Suhail who divorces her three times and debilitates her to take his child back to his authority. Mina and Milwaukee, joined by her child Imran, to live as two visitors with Hayat's parents. Mina educates Hayat Quranic lessons in vain, stops him when his father requests that her do as such, cooks sustenance for them like a cleaning specialist, demonstrates her utter status to wed the Jewish man, weds the vicious man Sunil Chatha whose white American wife divorces him, and in the end dies because of Sunil after a long stretch of wretchedness. To agree to what society forces upon her, Mina transforms her physical structure in an approach to acclimatize herself into the group. "Her fashionable hairstyle made her a modern woman, an American woman, an astounding prospect to folks like us who never would have thought we could look like that” (American Dervish 53). Once more, a portion of her absorption into society is shown in her faithful readiness to wed the Jewish man, Professor Wolfsohn. It is likewise quite evident that Mina, not Hayat, is the dervish in the novel since it is she, not he, who have *can practise) the genuine characteristics of a genuine dervish. It is important that Hayat is the person who battles the American mores looking for his character, an inquiry which closes in recanting his Islamic doctrines so he can discover his resort in absorption. Then again, Hayat can't be a hafiz for some reasons. In the first place, he has been coached by Mina who shows him the Quran in English, not in Arabic. Mina, to define her perspective, states that all deeds are weighed on goals, not appearances or structures. Out of this stance, Mina shows Hayat how to memorize the Quranic verses in English. Souhef, the Imam disproves this perspective, telling Hayat "You have to learn the holy book in our holy language for that. But don’t be discouraged. You have all the time in the world” (American Dervish 301). Second, Hayat's connection with Mina is not only spiritual, but also physical. This relation is strongly cemented directly after Hayat sees her bare body while she is having a shower. The picture of Mina's naked body appears to be insistent and predominant in his life. “The image I thought I’d taught myself to forget would return, unbidden—her breasts;... — and hours of confusion and unrest would ensue. I made fresh attempts to suppress the mental picture. To no avail. The more I resisted, the more persistent it proved” (American Dervish 161). Later, he leans down to give Mina a kiss. The affectionate relation between the two appears to be mutual and both admit it. After kissing her, the following short dialogue succeeds:

“That’s so sweet, behata.”

“I love you, Auntie.”

“I love you, too, Hayat” (American Dervish 192).

Hayat's mind is not only obsessed with Mina's image of her naked body, but also by her photograph, that his mother "posted... on our refrigerator door” (American Dervish 2). Hayat elucidates the indescribable influence the picture has on him both physically and emotionally. "One night I lost myself. Mina’s picture before me, my hands between my legs, I disappeared into pleasure. Before I knew it, my loins shuddered and convulsed, releasing something thick and wet inside my underwear” (American Dervish 162).

Notwithstanding Mina's picture of the exposed body and photograph, Mina's physical vicinity to Hayat irritates and unutterably shudders his body. "Mina leaned in to turn the page. Her arm brushed against mine, her touch whispering along my skin and echoing up my arm to the back of my neck” (American Dervish 37).

In another event, Mina takes the young man into her arms, advising him that he would turn into a hafiz sometime in the future. It is a minute which witnesses the amalgam of both physical and scholarly thought processes. Mina plans to help him to remember turning into a hafiz while he is altogether fixated on her dazzling excellence and writhed with compelling feelings. "She took me into her arms, and all at once I felt it again: that exquisite shudder running along my limbs, up my back” (American Dervish 42).

From the very beginning of the novel, it is entirely clear that Hayat is far nearer to his mother than to his father. Thus, the peruser anticipates that Hayat will take after his mother's progressions in worshiping her perspectives with respect to the Jews. This is the reason behind Ayad Akhtar's beginning his novel with Hayat and Rachel's particular solicitation. From this time forward, a young man like Hayat who is guided by the lovely Mina can be neither a dervish nor a hafiz. It is maybe part of the writer's
craftsmanship to demonstrate Hayat's fruitless endeavour to be either a dervish or a hafiz when Akhtar depicts Hayat's life as being controlled by his fixation on his mentor, Mina.

4. Identity of Hayat's Father

The other character who speaks of the loss of Islamic personality among the elder generation in *American Dervish* is Hayat's father, Naveed Shah. All through the novel, the author makes it entirely clear that Naveed is an abominable character for a modest bunch of reasons. To begin with, his wife Muneer specifies nothing about him except for his relations with the white escorts. Hayat, the child, watches, "I heard more tales from Mother about Father's mistresses than anything else" (*American Dervish* 33). Hayat also recalls his father's difficulties with his family. In this regard, he says: "Throughout my childhood, Mother spared me little detail about her troubles with Father. And at ten, I already knew myself well enough to know that if I listened too closely to what she said, my blood would start to boil" (*American Dervish* 11).

Naveed is with his friend Professor Wolfsohn who is "from Boston, Jewish, urbane, and pleasantly gregarious" (*American Dervish* 68). Naveed, on the contrary, comes from "a third-world village, Muslim, rough-hewn, and sardonic. Their colleagues at the hospital called them the Odd Couple" (*American Dervish* 68). To make their contrast more apparent, Naveed's son says "the butt of most of Father's jokes was Nathan's love for all things cultural: the theater, symphonies, not the way he likes the mouths of his white prostitutes. Free be either a dervish or a hafiz when Akhtar depicts Hayat's life personality among the elder generation in *American Dervish* (women, who are heavy and dark and mentally imprisoned" he said. Not like Eastern she liked to say" (and cheated on his wife couldn't claim to have any credibility; she liked to say" (*American Dervish* 167). All these bad traits of Naveed's identity can be considered as part of his loss of Islamic identity.

5. Loss of Identity

Loss of identity is also uncovered in his hatred of saying prayer five times a day (as a muslim). Naveed believes this is nothing but a sort of duplicity. He argues that "Praying all day long. Nothing to show for it. They're hypocrites" (*American Dervish* 72). Likewise, it is Naveed who has gravely influenced his wife in a manner that she starts to be questionable about her religious convictions, and it is this anxiety which horribly affects upon everyone around him, especially the individuals from his family. Hayat reveals this state that 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" (*American Dervish* 33). Naveed thinks that religion would do no good to people; hence, they should abjure it. He says, "Religion, my friends... is a topic for fools. And this conversation is the living proof" (*American Dervish* 130). Thus, he thinks that going to a mosque to say a prayer( *to pray) is a kind of idiocy, and it is the idiots who go to masjid: "There are idiots enough here for someone to lead.... Chatha and all those stooges with their masjid on the South Side. Be grateful you don’t know any of them yet" (*American Dervish* 48). No big surprise, then, that Naveed disdains all parts of religion, as pushed by Randy Boyagoda when she says: "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." (*American Dervish*)

Similarly, Naveed prevents Mina from teaching the tenets of Islam* and particularly the Quran) to his son. Mina states: “Your father asked me not to participate in your religious study anymore. He made me promise and... I have to honor his promise. I am his guest, after all” (*American Dervish* 240). Part of Mina’s assimilation into society lies in her succumbing to her visitor’s principles and in staying faithful to her obligations not to show Hayat the Islamic lessons. Naveed does not discover his pleasure at home; a remarkable opposite, he discovers it in his cheerful stay with the white fancy women. His wife affirms this moment that she says,“What has your Father sacrificed for my sake? Hmm? Tell me! Not even one night’s pleasure with one of his white prostitutes...” (*American Dervish* 141).

Above all, he taints the Quran since it implies nothing to him. It is likewise entirely evident that the Quran is the establishment of his dismay as it symbolizes his country, kindred individuals, religion, and most prominently Islam. The way Naveed treats the Quran clearly demonstrates his profound disdain of this religion. He pulled and tore pages and bits of pages tumbling to his feet. He tore and tore and after a short time the floor covering was secured with paper. Furthermore, now Father moved and ground the pages underneath. He had a wild look in his eye as he ventured frantically way how Muslims experience issues in another society.Roddy Ashworth points out that " In Akhtar’s skillful hands, American dervish helps non-Muslims understand the difficulties of following deeply held religious beliefs in a secular society, although we see hayat [sic] lose his Muslim
faith." To live among other people of different cultures, one has to adapt himself in some way to accept the other. Isabel Fernandes points out that "The recognition that we are human beings lost in the middle of a living cosmos determines that each moment of our lives we are compelled to establish a changing relation to our circumambient universe" (American Dervish).

6. Conclusion

The author capably succeeds in conveying his message that it appears to be more than impossible to keep hold of one's views in America, chiefly if they are Muslims. Readers can purely observe this in American Dervish and Disgraced, thematically. From the structural point of view, Ayad Akhtar also appropriately marks pronounced paces in operating the technique of flashback to show to what degree the protagonist of the novel relates all the novel's events just to quench Rachel's thirst for listening to Mina's story, by Hayat. Had she not been fascinated in listening to Mina's narration, there would have been no American Dervish. It is also noteworthy to demonstrate how Akhtar has been extremely influenced by a number of Western theologians. In his interview with Aditi Sriram, he mentions several of the theologians who have impact on him like, Jonathan Edwards, Emerson, Reinhold Niebuhr, Paul Tillich and some authors like, Saul Bellow, Philip Roth, Woody Allen, Seinfeld (Aditi Sriram interviews Ayad Akhtar). Being profoundly affected by Western writers, thinkers, and theologians makes it significantly clear that Akhtar, in his works, tackles a number of subjects in which he highlights the conflicts between East and West besides other problems such as religion, Islam vs. Judaism, ethnicity, and cultural conflicts.

References