



**“Unraveling Identity in the American Diaspora: A Study of Ayad Akhtar's
Homeland Elegies”**

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ABSTRACT

*This study delves into Ayad Akhtar's *Homeland Elegies*' complex exploration of identity within the American diaspora. This study sheds light on the fundamental relevance of culture and the damaging impacts of unhomeliness on immigrant personalities by exploring the difficulties of the characters in their search for identity within the diasporic situation of American society. Using postcolonial concepts, particularly Homi K. Bhabha's conceptions of 'Hybridity,' 'Ambivalence,' and 'Third Space,' this study applies textual analytic tools to closely examine the characters' problem of identity.*

Homeland Elegies valiantly explores the enormous loss of culture and home that occurred in the aftermath of the horrific events of 9/11. Akhtar expertly weaves his personal and familial trauma into the story, creating a highly intimate and introspective work. The work is the author's powerful voice, advocating for Muslim rights and acceptance in America.

*This study contributes to a better understanding of the complicated processes within the American diaspora by unravelling the numerous layers of identity and diasporic experiences in *Homeland Elegies*. It reveals the nuanced ways in which cultural pressures, trauma, and the quest for belonging form the identities of people living in a foreign nation.*

Introduction

Homeland Elegies is a novel part memoir, part essays written by Ayad Akhtar winner of the [Pulitzer Prize for the play *Disgraced* in 2012](#). Ayad Akhtar considers himself American by all means, but his writings do not reflect Americanization. Like all Pakistani American literature, this novel gives a strong voice to some grave issues faced by minorities in America, which gives it critical attention. The Pakistani American literature canon starts with Sara Suleri and continues until now. This canon has a different insight into the diasporic condition, and Pakistani narratives are well praised for their vernacularism. Ayad Akhtar was born in America, but his parents are from Pakistan; this may be the reason his writings exhibit characteristics that highlight Pakistan and the Muslim community.

Homeland Elegies is written in response to Ayad Akhtar's own work, *Disgraced*, which has shown a negative image of Muslims and it has opened a new door for the controversies of 9/11 with reference to Islam. Muslims felt betrayed, especially after Trump's false claim that Muslims in New Jersey were celebrating the 9/11 attacks. Ayad Akhtar's work, *Homeland Elegies*, sometimes goes through great agony for being a resident of America; however, like a good writer, Akhtar tried to balance his characters and plot efficiently. While balancing these characters, Akhtar seems to deliberately focus on certain issues such as identity crises, cultural assimilation, or living in a third space. Most importantly, these issues have already been in great debate among Ayad Akhtar's predecessor-Pakistani origin Anglophone writers (Parveen, 2015). These issues have been in great debate since the very beginning of postcolonial writing. Here the novel's title gives a clear message that the novel is not an elegy sung by one person but by many more

people who are living in America as diasporic identities. The novel, besides diasporic conditions, reflects homesickness and a realistic picture of immigrants. Akhtar weaves the story artistically and gives two different points of view to read: one being a dispirited person who lives in ambivalence regarding his identity, and the other who is immaculate regarding his patriotism for his country.

Ayad Akhtar's realistic approach to his recent work *Homeland Elegies* opens a new door to postcolonial studies, where the writer puts himself into the narrative to show the world the genuine meaning of the diasporic condition and the problem of identity in this global world. Diasporic conditions have been discussed by most Anglophone writers of different origins, but they have all either talked about one country or one language. To make it a stronger topic to talk about, Akhtar used multiple diasporic conditions in different dimensions. He used strong words to pen the Pakistani characters in diasporic conditions, yet he tried his best to show different origins living in the same condition of diaspora. Akhtar uses some strong strokes of pen to weave the story with diasporic themes, having family and politics together. He proves himself a good writer who always gets ready to learn and who records everything and makes a narrative from it (Toohey, 2021). This study aims to explore the characters of the *Homeland Elegies* who are struggling in the search for identity in the diasporic condition of American culture. Homi K. Bhabha's notion of third space has provided an undercurrent for the current study, as a researcher is keen to use the theory of diasporic condition and hybrid identity.

Review of the Literature

Homeland Elegies is a hybrid: the narrator shares the same name and most of the biography with author Ayad Akhtar

(Garner, 2020). The review also states that this novel is written with different angels, as one of the best moments of this novel is "can't wait when we build that wall to keep you critters out." This slogan creates a great drift inside the narrator's heart, who claims himself an American.

Silman (2020) states that Akhtar's style and passion for fiction writing are extraordinary. He compares Akhtar with Melville, Dreiser, and T.S. Eliot in storytelling. He further argues that Americans are living in isolation. American culture is marked with alienation, competitiveness, and loneliness. *Homeland Elegies* deals absolutely with American ambiguities, especially after 9/11 (Fatima, Warda, & Zia, 2021). Schrefer (2020) argues here regarding the author's status in America, as he believes that he has not been given due privilege. He calls *Homeland Elegies* the Symphony of America.

Bhabha's concept of ambivalence corresponds to the issues in *Homeland Elegies*. Ambivalence is defined as the coexistence of opposing sentiments, beliefs, or attitudes. *Homeland Elegies* characters frequently suffer ambiguity as they encounter contradictory emotions and perspectives, such as the longing for a sense of belonging and the problems of assimilation, or the friction between cultural heritage and the desire for acceptability in American society. Gall (2020) describes her perspective in quite a different way. She states Akhtar purposefully avoids discussing how closely his own experiences parallel those of his literary characters. This purposeful choice produces a strong sensation of discomfort, reflecting the uncertainty that many of us confront on a daily basis, especially in an era dominated by "fake news." However, one of the remarkable accomplishments of *Homeland Elegies* is that, rather than discouraging readers, this confusion sparks a desire to

learn more. It piques one's interest not just in learning about the nation's and one's own ancestors' histories, but also in how our daily decisions and actions might contribute to the betterment of humanity rather than propagating destructive myths.

Homeland Elegies, Akhtar's novel, offers a varied vision of the United States and investigates how economic neoliberalism, mixed with post-9/11 worries, lead to the establishment of a nationalist state known as "Trumpland." The book examines the societal implications of this phenomena and dives into the complicated link between the individual and the nation (Araújo, 2022).

This novel is praised for its powerful and thought-provoking story. It tackles difficult topics that were avoided in public discussions after 9/11. The author, Akhtar, effectively explores the failures of the nation in achieving the American Dream. He criticizes the country's obsession with money and power, and how everything seems to be privatized. The book also highlights the decline in cultural and moral values (Schwartz, 2020).

The literature review highlights the substantial contributions made by many scholars and critics in shining light on *Homeland Elegies'* topics, narrative strategies, and societal critiques. The writer's skill to navigate the terrain of ambivalence and ambiguity is emphasised repeatedly throughout the assessment. Scholars have praised Akhtar's deft study of these subtleties, which transcend the boundaries of public debate, especially in the aftermath of 9/11. As we go deeper into Akhtar's writings, we see how his thorough technique and immersive storytelling not only capture the multidimensional essence of the American Dream, but also allow readers to engage with the novel's powerful message and thought-provoking concepts.

Research Methodology

The current study employs a qualitative approach, specifically utilizing textual analysis as the chosen technique for in-depth examination of the text in relation to the study's objectives. According to McKee (2003), textual analysis is an ongoing methodological process that involves gathering data, providing researchers with insights into the author's intended meaning within the context and culture of the text. Researchers employ this method to make well-informed interpretations."

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework is framed by negotiating Homi K. Bhabha's seminal ideas regarding diasporic cultural realities and anxieties. Bhabha's concepts regarding hybridity, liminality, ambivalence, mimicry, and identity are considered concrete in terms of a critical approach to literature. Moreover, Bhabha enables readers to raise questions about these concepts with their capacity for understanding cultures.

Bhabha defines cultural hybridity in a more comprehensive and concrete way in his comments on hybridity. Hybridity is not about tracing two separate entities; rather than that Hybridity is more about something emerging from two moments (Bhabha, 1994, p. 114). Bhabha also argues that there is no such thing as a pure culture or purity of culture, so there is no fixed form of culture that is possible (Arif & Parveen, 2014). In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha says when two cultures try to join each other, a space always remains there; that space is called by Bhabha the "third space" (1994, p.34).

The current study revolves around the postcolonial domain. Postcolonialism as a literary theory studies the literature that is mainly produced by or in the nations that were once colonized by powerful European countries such as Britain, France, and Spain

(Nawaz & Mehboob, 2018). Majorly it deals with the works-art-literature produced by artists of those states that had colonial backgrounds. Chambers argues postcolonial literature commonly deals with themes of an identity crisis as the artists of those countries were once colonized (2019).

People who are living in an age of postcolonial era always find themselves in continuous change, cultural difference, and being complexly connected in this global village. Quick communication and different means of trade from one country to another and from one continent to another have drastically shaken identities (Arif & Parveen, 2014).

The same point of view was made by Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* "We find ourselves in the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion" (1994, p.1).

Postcolonialism's major emphasis remains on the resistance against the Occident; besides the resistance, some intellectuals took other subjects to talk about, such as representing the marginalized masses (Moore, 2020). Some authors also took postcolonial thoughts just to aware people regarding their rights and identities, where they discussed the issues of hybridity and transculturality (Kagoyire & Vysma, 2020).

Cultural diaspora may appear for three reasons in countries where people try to start a new journey: First, the cultural conflict as a major culture always dominates the minor culture. Second, "othering" minorities or minor cultures do not find themselves in the major events of the country, so they find themselves in the states of others. The last one is that hegemony comes with power, and minor cultures always feel powerless in defining their own culture, ideology, or religion (Joshua, 2021).

Home is considered a mythological place full of desire in the imagination of the diaspora. It means the home is a place of no return, or even if it is possible in some cases to visit the geographical locations, that place is understood as a place of origin (Rios, p. 192).

Textual Analysis

Ayad Akhtar shows America as a state with many diasporic identities, as America is full of people from different nations. In the very beginning, Ayad Akhtar author's namesake lead character looks patriotic and well settled with the American dream. He enjoys everything about being in America, and he praises America for it. He consumes alcohol, gambles, and enjoys time with prostitutes. All the time, he stays away from religion and believes himself to be pure American. He had nothing to do with culture. Only one thing was there that always remained with him: he was born into a family that migrated from Pakistan to America, and his family was Muslim by religion. Having a Pakistani-origin family on one lobe of the brain and American pride on the other lobe of the brain was a constrained situation for Akhtar. In the entire novel, he tries to balance it from one character to another character.

Like Ayad, his father Akhtar, who has been shown a famous doctor that treated Trump, ex-president of America, once for his cardiac problem, also remains in the diasporic situation. As earlier, Dr. Akhtar, father of Ayad, achieves the American dream and enjoys all the prestigious honours America has bestowed on him, taking full advantage of them. He also indulges himself in some unusual habits, such as drinking, gambling, and prostituting. He loves America and fights his wife and relatives for America, he starts believing himself to be an American with an American cultural identity. Dr. Akhtar was a big fan of Trump.

He supported Trump and his ideology, even though he supported Trump's policies against Muslims. When Trump announced harsh policies against Muslims in 2016, that was the first time Dr. Akhtar started thinking America was not a good place to live for him and his son. On losing a licence in a lawsuit. He realized and opened up his eyes when he lost everything and went back to Pakistan. From Pakistan, he called his son and said:

*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, p.296)*

Not only Ayad's father Akhtar was in that situation; his mother, Fatima, never accepted being in America. Even while living in America, she favoured Pakistani cuisine, culture, and traditions. Fatima's character is shown completely against American culture. She was not like her husband, Dr. Akhtar, who was very much impressed by American culture, rather than that from the very beginning she knew that it was not her culture.

It's not our home. No matter how many years we spend here, it won't ever be our home. And maybe this brings out things in us that were never meant to be brought out. (Akhtar, p. 49)

This excerpt from the Novel *Homeland Elegies* shows the diasporic condition of people living in America. These words were shared by Fatima, the mother of the protagonist, where she tries to convince her family friends that America is not their country, but her husband, Dr. Akhtar, was very much confident about his identity as an American as he was achieving everything at that time. On the other hand, Fatima and Akhtar's classmate, Dr. Latif, were very much convinced by Fatima's idea that

America was not their home. Dr. Latif was always ready to go back to Pakistan, even though he was a philanthropist who was running a free clinic for poor Americans. Yet he had thought that his identity would always remain Pakistani rather than American. He looked almost fragile: "The longer we're here, the more I wonder...who I'm Becoming" (Akhtar, p. 49).

Latif was conscious of his own identity and the identity of his children as well. Latif is shown not only as a strictly religious person but also as a person who was afraid of losing his identity in American culture. His older daughter 9-year old was asked to wear Hijab as it was customary. His fear of losing identity was right, as his daughter, at 9 years age was not happy with Pakistani culture.

She didn't like it, and she told me so... I'd always thought her the most "American" of her siblings, more American, certainly, than I was... She'd made a secret tape at a friend's house and carried the cassette with her everywhere, always ready to pop it into a tape deck for a song or two when her father wasn't around (Akhtar, pp. 46-47).

His daughter Ramla was very young, yet she too indulged in American culture. On the other hand, Latif was forcing her to wear a hijab. Ramla was interested in pop music rather than Pakistani songs; she was interested in American culture, she was happy with her friends. And his father Latif was getting stricter day by day; that is the reason for the diasporic condition, where a person cries for the loss of identity. That condition where a person couldn't decide about reality. Typically, a child can't understand what is right and what is wrong. "Latif was getting stricter, not only with his kids but also with himself" (Akhtar, p. 47).

Latif's character is shown in a condition where he tries to return back to his

own country. He is also depicted as a person who started wearing white *Jalabiya*, which is not Pakistani attire but rather the famous attire of Arabs. Later, he joins the Afghan Taliban in the war against the USSR. Latif came to America to become a famous doctor. To achieve the American dream, he becomes a good doctor and a philanthropist and is shown to be worried about his identity. He later wears Arab attire and goes back to Pakistan to join the Afghan Taliban. In all these stages, Latif seems to be in search of a real home and his identity. Finally, when he couldn't decide between American and Pakistani identities, He took the third space, which is the Afghan army, which he thought he was joining for the sake of Islam.

When Latif was killed, Fatima went into great agony. She continuously remains in pain, which was one of the many reasons for her death, but she gets happy with the 9/11 attacks.

"They deserve what they got. And what they're going to get." (Akhtar, p.57)

Fatima once tried to accept American culture because of her once-loved husband and son, but when his teenage love, Latif, got killed, she got back to her old ideology that America could never be her home, as she believed we and they could not meet in one place.

Once, Fatima wrote in her diary that America was not her place; she considered America a foreign place. That is the place she never liked and never accepted to recognise it (Akhtar, p. 53). At one point in an argument with her son Ayad, she completely rejected America as a good place to live, and she replied in agony that she didn't know she might be mad.

All the major characters were shown in great danger of losing their identities. They were living in diasporic conditions because they were not born in America; they were immigrants; that's why they were in

the great yearning for home (Fatima, Warda, & Zia, 2021), and Ayad, the protagonist, was a born American; he was happy being an honoured American who had no problem with identity until the 9/11 attacks happened. Ayad seems to have been raised in a beautiful dream, but after the 9/11 attacks, America was no longer the same place for him. He started feeling threatened after the fall of the great towers, though he believes that the fall of the twin towers was an equalizer of power between East and West. He mentions that it happened because of America's role in the Middle East.

Ayad, who was very much satisfied being an American, felt free to express his ideas, and he could enjoy freedom by all means. His idea of being free was shattered after the 9/11 attacks. He was gazed at as if he were either a terrorist or involved in something negative. Ayad mentions how bad it is to be a Muslim in America. He started wearing a cross necklace to avoid unusual inquiries from authorities.

It was not only the religion he was worried about, but his skin colour also became a problem, so he started wearing a cross for a certain time (Fatima, Warda, & Zia, 2021). He was in a state of confusion about what he should do; his country was not accepting him; his identity was blurring; he was a foreigner in his own country. That is a state where he was neither an American nor a Pakistani.

Another unfortunate event happened to the protagonist in Scranton, his car broke down, and he was handled harshly and illegitimately. Extra money was taken from him, and when he had the company of the police, the policeman was very friendly, but his tone suddenly changed when the policeman learned his name is of Arab origin and he is a Pakistani Muslim. The narrator states, I am not practicing Islam, yet I am known by it. It was Islam that defined me differently after 9/11. Yes, I have a good

reason to deny being Muslim; it was the worst event of 9/11 that changed our fate.

Ayad was raised in an American culture that is secular; therefore, Ayad calls himself a secular Muslim. Furthermore, being secular, he doesn't believe in Islamic teachings that he believes are problematic. Additionally, he believes Muslims are living in a confused culture that Muslims are not getting it properly. The narrator also states what was created long before by the West, but a new tone has been set after the 9/11 attacks (Asif, 2021).

The narrator sometimes tries to go into the depths of Islam, and all his knowledge is based on the western historian or on learning from diasporic Muslims who lost their identities in mimicking their masters (Fatima, Warda, & Zia, 2021).

At the end of the novel, his father calls him from Pakistan. Ayad replies that he has adopted the American identity because he was born and raised in America. His religion and skin colour do not match Americans, yet America is his home. He doesn't feel lonely here, as he has everything here.

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, p.304)

Discussion

According to Homi K. Bhabha (1994, p. 370), one person who lives between cultures has kept the characterization of the modern world (1994, p. 370). Ayad Akhtar writer and his fictionalized character both seem happy with America, yet both try to find out their identities. Writer Ayad Akhtar writes about diasporic conditions through the characters

of Fatima, Akhtar, and Latif, and somewhere and somehow he asserts the problem of identity from the perspective of the lead character, the protagonist. The protagonist enjoys being in Pakistan and eating food there.

Fatima and Latif's characters are good examples of Bhabha's hybridity. The character of Dr. Akhtar-Father is an example of ambivalence, and Ayad's character lives in the third space and has made his own culture, which is neither American nor Pakistani.

Ayad's relationship with his parents is an important aspect. His parents really suffered after the 9/11 attacks. Somehow his father managed to accept the reality that America did not remain the same, and it couldn't be the same after these attacks. His mother, Fatima, who was already in pain because of Latif's death and cancer, These attacks added more suffering to her pain, which was already deprived of culture and identity. She was missing her homeland all the time. She was missing everything about her homeland, Pakistan: food, people, bird's sounds, smell, even taste. She was missing the best culture, where younger people respect elders and elders love younger people. She was missing the green land, which she couldn't find in Wisconsin, that was always filled with a white layer of snow (Akhtar).

Home is a place where someone feels ease, peace, and liberality to communicate, but it becomes difficult for diasporic people (McLeod, p. 210). His parents and Latif were in search of home; one after another started in search of that place called "home.". It started with Latif, who died in search of that word; later, Fatima suffered in pain due to unhomeliness. In the end, Dr. Akhtar, after a lawsuit, felt the importance of that word and left all his possessions and went to Pakistan.

The author himself uses a dozen words in Urdu to show his love for language, but as he tries to balance and prove that he is patriotic at the end of the novel, he stays in America and calls it his home. At the same time, his great praise for a character like Riaz is also an appreciation for the Muslim world. Riaz defends the cultural heritage of the Muslim world, which is also a sign that Ayad Akhtar himself is still confused about pure identity.

The narrator mentioned that he read Edward Said and Salman Rushdie at a very early age when he was thinking of becoming a writer. These readings split him between two cultures. He has a taste for postcolonial writing and thought, which he tried to defend. Through the eyes of Latif, the author mentioned that the British lived with us for many years, but they never got close to us through our culture or other means. We should learn a lesson from British imperialism (Akhtar, p. 42); he mentioned colonizers multiple times in this novel. He also mentions how the CIA betrayed us-Pakistanis, and how they use the Middle East for their own good. That is one side of the author's learning, there is another side of his learning where he supports Rushdie and his Islamic teaching. He believes Rushdie wasn't given a chance to prove his point of view regarding his blasphemy work. The author himself doesn't believe in Islamic teaching, as he seems to have studied it superficially.

The author lives in a world of confusion; Schreffer (2020) argues that the son of Akhtar, who has been tortured by America, rises with his fame but is still fatigued by others comments with their negative approach. Even Schreffer thinks here that Akhtar is fighting for the same privilege that is normally awarded to white writers.

These dual points of view show that Ayad is living in a third space and he is

trying to find his own identity in America. He wants to tell the truth, but at the same time, he believes America is a good country, and it is right of America to use its powers even against Muslims. As in The New York Times book review, Garner (2020) states this novel as a very American novel, though the writer himself faced lots of unwelcome events, which the writer stated very well in *Homeland Elegies*.

Conclusion

Homeland Elegies mourns over the loss of identity in America; it narrates the story of the diaspora condition in terms of the ever-changing realities of this global world. Akhtar tried his best to present this problem, and he well justified the problem of identity among the immigrants of America, especially after the attacks of 9/11. He used personal stories to narrate the problems of American Muslims, which added more impact to his narrative. It can be said here that he depicted all the characters, including his parents and his own, sincerely. He depicted his real success and downfall to show the meaning of the diasporic condition of a successful person who lives lavishly but may still be missing his origin.

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