



Literary Studies

Being Muslim Immigrants in America: Preservation, Resistance, and Negotiation of Identity in Ayad Akhtar's "American Dervish"

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A B S T R A C T

This thesis entitled 'Being Muslim Immigrants in America: Preservation, Resistance, and Negotiation of Identity in Ayad Akhtar's 'American Dervish' aims to analyze the depiction of Muslim immigrants identity in the context of diaspora. Through the lenses of Hall's theory of identity and Clifford's diaspora, the analysis centered on how the Muslim immigrant characters in the novel interacted with other individuals with diverse backgrounds of race, gender, and religion. This contributed towards the construction of identity through the preservation and resistance of homeland culture, dominant culture or host land culture and the negotiation between Muslim immigrants and their state and American society. Therefore, the Muslim immigrant characters in the novel hold a non-essential and fluid identity as portrayed from the perpetual construction of identity.

I. INTRODUCTION

This research discusses Ayad Akhtar's novel entitled *American Dervish*. This novel depicts problematic issue of the identity of the Muslim immigrants in America. The problems typically happens to those who disperse. Hall (1993), suggests that the concept of diaspora not only refers to a group of people who immigrate but also their ability in interacting with the dominant culture through the resistance of the dominant culture, negotiation as well as hybridity issues.

The primary data source used is the novel *American Dervish* (2012) by Ayad Akhtar. The setting is taken place in America around the 1980-1990s. In general, this novel depicts Pakistanis-Muslim families in Milwaukee. Meanwhile, the secondary data are journals and articles related to this research; identity and diaspora are regarded as the lenses in analyzing the construction of identity. Hall (1990:222) states that the identity is unstable, constantly changing, and progressed through representation. That means one's identity will

always be in an endless process of construction and reconstruction. Construction is influenced by the interaction among individuals. This interaction is characterized by the active role being performed by individuals through dialogue with others, as expressed by Taylor (1994:34): "My own identity crucially depends on my dialogical relations with others". Thus, the interaction is profoundly essential in the formation of individual identity (Appiah 1994:154). In addition, Appiah (1994:155) says that identity is also built by the family who plays to mediate the concept and the practice of religion, society, school, and country (1994:154). In other words, the position of the family is aptly pivotal in the formation of identity, for instance, parents instill the values of culture and religious tenets to their children. This attitude according to Appiah (1994:157) and Taylor (1994:33) is an effort to preserve the living pattern of the generation to the next generation. However, this matter prompts doubts and quests regarding their identity which later causes an identity crisis. Accordingly, in this phase, identity becomes an issue caused by the

disbelief of existing identity (Mercer discussed by Hall, 1990:222).

The preservation of value by the next generation according to Taylor (1994:33) should not deter the determination of identity. This means that every individual is free to determine his identity and preserve the identity he believes (survival), even when it may contradict with parents, religious institutions such as the Church, and society (Appiah, 1994:158-159). Thus, individuals may decide to forward the formed identity or determine the identity of his own. The construction of identity is closely related to the issue of uniformity. As expressed by Hall (1990) that the unity and uniformity are framed by power and exclusion which generate the dichotomy of “us” and “them”. Therefore, the identity of which formed by the pattern of such as operation is the essential, stable, and authentic prevailing in a particular group (Woodward, 1997:12). Nonetheless, this essential identity is inseparable from the diversity in the process of its formation. That is, the establishment of the identity of an individual is not merely influenced by the relation to uniformity, but also formed by diversity (Appiah, 1994:155). For example, the establishment of the Arab-Muslim identity in the United States is not only influenced by interaction with a fellow Muslim and Arab community but also with non-Muslims and other ethnics. Hence, the identity of an individual is not only influenced by the community of similar race, ethnicity, and religion but also by the other community of the different race, ethnicity, and religion.

Interaction with other individuals from different backgrounds sparked the emergence of non-essential identity which is the identity to accept differences. This identity is the antithesis of the essential identity and is stable (Woodward, 1997:12). In this context, Hall (1990) argues that the identity of the non-essential is cultural as it is established from the social and cultural interaction. Accordingly, the individuals show their identity in the form of being and becoming. Hall (1990) says that the process of individual who performs the identity as he believes and understands from the dominant discourse in the family, religion or any other institution is called the process of being. On the other hand, the process of becoming takes place when an individual shows his identity

by positioning himself in the social milieu, for instance, a female Muslim immigrant who bares her religious attributes like hijab due to the prohibition of the country for such religious attributes. In this context, the identity of Muslim immigrant women is ‘fluid’. And it is apparent that one’s Diaspora experience is firmly connected with the problems of identity. The term of diaspora initially refers to Jews who left the country and spread to various places around the world. However, the term expands its meaning referring to the global citizens who left their homelands such as immigrants, expatriates, refugees, labors, isolated individuals, cross country community, and ethnic communities (Tololyan as discussed by Clifford, 1994:303). Bhabha (as discussed by Clifford 1994) stated that the Diaspora and migration are similar, as a part of a transnational phenomenon namely transfer and relocation. The Diaspora does like immigrants are different from the common traveler. As Chambers (1994) asserted that migration is associated with change and ambiguity. This means that migration is inseparable from uncertainty as seen in a dynamic process of internalization on language, history, and identity. In contrast to migration, Chambers (1994:3) reveals that regular travel is carried out on the basis of certainty; the departure, arrival, and activities planning. Thus, the individual on regular traveling has it rarely complicated and complex compared to the individuals who migrate.

II. DISCUSSIONS

Preservation toward Ancestral Culture

American Dervish presents the Muslim immigrant attitude towards ancestral culture and the dominant culture through preservation

and resistance of both cultures which is seen from the relationship of the characters. The issue of the ancestral culture is depicted through the relationship between Hayat and his mother, Muneer. In this case, the text shows the existence of the boundary between Hayat’s family as Muslim immigrants in America with other religious communities. Hayat is not allowed to buy ice cream sold in the church as his mother forbids him: “We don’t go to church, Hayat. We’re not Christians. We have to draw the line somewhere.” Muneer demonstrates her firm. From this time forward, her attitude is viewed as the resistance against America’s dominant community

which is represented by the Christians. Muneer's attitude suggests an essential process of identity in which according to Hall (1990) aimed to create exclusion hence it forms the dichotomy of "us" and "them". In this context, "us" refers to the Muslim community while "them" are Christians. His resistance has sturdily cemented in the following quote: Mother shot me a warning look. "Nothing in this country is free. The sign in front says the proceeds go to the parish..." "We don't need to be giving money to Christians." (Akhtar, 2012:40). Instead of choosing to mingle with Christians through activities held by Christians, Muneer shows her nonpartisan attitude towards Christian groups as he voiced "We don't need to be giving money to Christians." Her assertiveness to not give donations on social activities carried out by Christians is an attempt to assert her identity as a Diaspora group who preserves their identity. Muneer's manner in accordance with Esposito's argument (2002:173) that the American relationship with the Muslim immigrants is often seen from the context of conflict and confrontation because "Islam was viewed as a foreign religion, distinct from The Judeo-Christian tradition". Thus, the dichotomy between 'us' and 'them' is inevitable.

Subsequently, the issue of preserving ancestral culture is also portrayed from the glorification of patriarchal culture. Hayat's family is a Pakistani-Muslim immigrant who settled in Milwaukee. Hayat said that his mother experiences the impact of patriarchal dominance: She was with a man who started cheating on her almost as soon as they arrived in America. In short, by the time I was ten, she'd been miserable for years. (Akhtar, 2006:25). Muneer did not oppose her husband's demeanor as she said she'd been miserable for years. This points out that Muneer only accepts what Naveed did for years and advised Hayat not to imitate Naveed's behavior (Akhtar, 2006:161). In this case, Muneer's migration to America has not halted Naveed from his dominance but actually preserved it.

The depiction of patriarchal culture also can be seen from relationships between Mina and Sunil. Mina is a best friend of Hayat's mother. When Mina moves to America and stays with Hayat's family, she has to obey her parents' wishes to marry Sunil, the man who is from Pakistan. Even though Sunil has been living in America for many years, he perpetuates

the patriarchal culture from the homeland. As a husband, Sunil instills the patriarchal values toward Mina as it is believed to be the religious tenets and his upbringing which upholds patriarchal values since he was in Pakistan (Akhtar, 2006:327). In other words, the patriarchy operates in regards of religion and that the text shows how Sunil perpetuates the hereditary patriarchal culture when he settled in America.

The preservation of ancestral culture is also represented through Chata family, a Pakistani-Muslim family. This family shows resistance through their antipathy towards America. The family interaction of Ghaleb Chata is described restrictively with other fellow Muslim community: ...they gathered like herd animals as a way of avoiding fact that they were no longer in Pakistan (Akhtar, 2012:80). From the following statement, the family lifestyle is portrayed to delimit themselves with Americans. This is an attempt to perpetuate their identity which is considered essential; that is the identity of those who eschew from the atheistic American culture either in fashion or mindset. This point shows that the Chata family is not accommodative towards changes.

Resistance toward Host land and Ancestral Cultures.

Resistance is also another pivotal issue presented in the novel. As explained previously, Hayat witnesses the powerlessness of his mother and Mina living under patriarchal culture. Hayat begins to question it. The absence of resistance from Mina and his mother towards patriarchal dominance has made him unable to understand. Hayat's sadness and disappointment affected by the domestic violence between Muneer and Mina. He cannot accept Mina's viewpoint that what happened to her and Sunil is the will of God. Hayat claims that it was something that he could not understand Hayat thinks; Humiliation, I told her, was not a vehicle to anything but senseless injury (Akhtar, 2012:342). Another intriguing event is when Hayat is faced to an ambivalent situation. His father and mother teach him to respect Jewish. Yet, he finds some contradictions in reality. He witnesses how Nathan, his father's friend who is also a Jewish judged and humiliated by an Imam Souhef, a prominent religious figure in Milwaukee. Nathan plans to learn Islam. However, he cannot make this

plan true as the Muslim immigrants in Milwaukee thought that a Jewish is always a Jewish; the people that betray God as stated in Koran (Akhtar, 2012:240). Hayat amongst the second generation Muslim immigrants encounters an identity crisis phase which is inseparable from the ambivalence that he experienced. Firstly, Hayat questioned his attitude towards Jewish groups loathed by Muslim immigrant community in Milwaukee. However, it contradicts his parents' point of view which leans more positive towards the Jews. Hayat realized that the Jews are good as portrayed by his friend's kindness, Simon Felsenthal. Hayat said that: I confused over why God hated the Jews so much. It made even less sense to me now (Akhtar, 2012:332) Secondly; Hayat is also dubious about Islamic tenets taught by Mina on entrusting the fate outlined by God. He then began to inquire its tenets and suffer from the crisis of identity as he is exposed to contradictions among the kindness and the bad sides of the Jews and Muslims as contradicted in the text. Hayat refutes to perform religious routines like reading the Koran as he did. As shown by the following narration: "I have been giving up on Islam little by little for years and that now there was barely anything left. (Akhtar, 2012:341). Such situation faced by Hayat is in line with the argument made by Coburn (2003:6) that the second generation of American Muslims tends to no fully strengthen their religion creed compared to the first generation of Muslim immigrants. Further, he pointed out that the second generation of Muslim immigrants has prejudice against the Islamic tenets. The teachings delivered by the elders, the community and Imam (religious leader) are imposing and limiting their activities. As the consequences of this situation, there lies some distance between the second generation Muslim immigrants and Islam itself. The construction of Hayat's identity when he renounced Islam is also encouraged in the text from his conversation with Rachel, his classmate: "So you don't know what it's like to lose your faith? "Not really." I nodded. "It's freeing. So freeing. It's the most freeing thing that's ever happened to me.." (Akhtar, 2012:11). Hayat as the first narrator in the narrative shows an explicit view that has been estranged from his Islamic creed. The following statement "it's the most freeing thing that's ever happened to me" is an indication of the lifetime feeling after releasing

from the reined Islamic tenets. Ali (2013) states that the situation was the depiction of Hayat who lost his religious identity viewed from his resistance against Islam. The resistance which manifested in *American Dervish* is associated with the attitude of Muslim immigrants against the dominant society (American). However, in the novel, Hayat is precisely described to resist by leaving the Islamic tenets which he practiced earlier. In other words, Hayat offers his side towards the dominant society (America).

Negotiation as Muslim Immigrants' Strategy in Living in America

The issue of negotiations also appears in the text through Muneer, Mina, and Hayat. Muneer has strict rules in her relation with the non-Muslim community. Nevertheless, Muneer shows contradicted action to what she said to Hayat. This is disclosed in the text when Hayat claimed Muneer's attitude is contradicted from earlier: "As I saw it, we gave money to Christians every day. At the mall, at the grocery store, at the post office. What was the difference?" (Akhtar, 2012: 40). Hayat's expression demonstrates the Muneer's dualism which reflects the ambivalence of Muslim immigrant's identity. This means Muneer's previous stance in giving no contribution to the Christian social activity is not entirely correct. As a Muslim living in a country with the majority of Christians, it is not plausible for Muneer to be separated from all activities including the financial activity run by Christians. Hence, Muneer's essential identity has not lasted long as it is unstable.

Another event that describes the interaction between Muneer with non-Muslims is when Muneer overtly interact with the Jews. When Muneer bought raw beef in a butcher shop belongs to the Jewish, she chooses the shop because the Muslim's shop was far from their residence. According to Muneer, the meat can be consumed because of the way the cow slaughtered is similar to the Muslim one "bleeding them to death as an imam or rabbi stood over the animal and spoke God's name" (Akhtar, 2012:119). The difference in beliefs does not hinder Muneer to interact with Jews because of the similarities in terms of the religious rules. Thus, the text portrays Muneer's negotiation with the non-Muslims (Jews). Muneer was experiencing

the politics of position in which according to Hall (1993) is a strategy to integrate with the social situations and conditions. Muneer's positive action towards the Jews is represented when Hayat and she joins a Jewish Day of Atonement. (Akhtar, 2012:120). As explained previously, Muneer is an assertive character in keeping her relationship with Christians. But she did not do the same towards Jews. She is represented as ambivalent Muslim immigrants. On one hand, she is very assertive when interacting with the non-Muslim community. On the other hand, she was being lenient and tolerant which only means that she is profoundly permissive to Jews but not to the Christian. This attitude influenced by Hayat's late grandfather who taught Hayat's mother to respect Jewish (Akhtar, 2012:240).

Another form of the negotiations is also displayed by Ghaleb Chata. Although Ghaleb Chata draws distance from American culture as previously discussed, the text proves that the identity of Ghaleb Chata is fluid. This is seen when Ghaleb Chata negotiates to purchase the pharmaceutical company through installment with interest rates (Akhtar, 2012:125). This means Ghaleb Chata is unable to avoid the fact that they are living in a plural environment where non-Muslims were involved in his family life. Though Ghaleb Chata is antipathy toward the Jews and Americans, he still needs to adjust to the social situations where they lived in through the negotiation process. This led to the transformation of his identity as a Muslim, from the one who rejects non-Muslims becomes the one to conduct the thing that Hall (1993) called as the politics of position to adapt to another culture.

Above all, the novel presents Hayat as the character who negotiates which is seen from various events of his childhood. This leads him to decide his own identity as he said: I could merrily play at becoming the sort of American boy-embracing a bright future. (Akhtar, 2012:333). His bitter upbringing has encouraged him to be the promising sort of American boy. His transformation as he says: "I worried about my brand of jeans and my style of

hair. I listened to the latest by U2 and R.E.M. on my Walkman as I sat on the bus to school (Akhtar, 2012:333). The words jeans, R.E.M and U2 are the representation of western culture (fashion and music) that is assumed to be the indicator of Hayat's acceptance towards dominant culture. He is exposed to hybridity which means the mixing or mingling of ancestral culture with the dominant culture, hybridity in the text is preserved by Hayat's decision to live with Rachel (his classmate who is a Jewish) as he declared in the epilogue entitled 1995: 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. (Akhtar, 2012:345). Hayat's action represents a Muslim character that is open in choosing his life partner. His interfaith relationship is a form of integration with the country where he grew up as he asserted finally discovered myself not only as a man but as an American. Accordingly, he determines his identity as the second generation of Muslim immigrant who is accommodative towards other individuals with diverse backgrounds. His attitude is generated from his parents' lesson about the positive side of Jews as he manifests his sympathy towards the Jews through his relationship with Rachel.

III. CONCLUSION

American Dervish indicates the preservation of homeland culture including religious creed and patriarchal values. The novel offers the view of one's perpetuation towards the tenets embedded from the homeland. On the other hand, the novel presents the resistance towards the dominant culture which draws boundaries between the Muslim immigrants and the Americans. Yet, the main character demonstrates resistance toward homeland culture. The novel also portrays negotiation performed by the immigrant Muslim character as the attempt of integration with the American situations of multi-race, ethnic and religion. Henceforth, the identity of Muslim immigrants reflected in *American Dervish* is non-essential and fluid as seen from the continual process of identity construction.

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