

Minority Discourse: A Concave View of Hybridity in Ayad Akhtar's *American Dervish*

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Abstract The paper aims to explore a kaleidoscopic view of minority discourse seen through the concave lens of hybridity in Ayad Akhtar's *American Dervish*. The aim of the research is to locate minority discourse on the spectrum of plural existence with special reference to Pakistani-American marginalization. The hybridity of the term American dervish is studied in the context of identity clasped in the scope of minority narrative. Since, minority is a term closely attached to power discourse, Akhtar's narrative delineates the power dynamics of a South Asian community replete with paradoxical sub-existence of identities in the American landscape. The study spreads out the refracted vision of minority discourse while correcting the myopic view of religious affiliation. *American Dervish* provides a concave view of Pakistani-American lives in conjunction with their interaction to both American and dervish identities. Minority discourse has not been explored as an annexation connected to the protracted discourse earlier. This study provides a lens to divulge from myopic focal points to broader affiliation with the social narrative.

Michel Foucault's theory of power and Allen Thiher's work of *The Power of Tautology: The Roots of Literary Theory* are surveyed as theoretical bedrock of the study. The research thus, delves into the meaning of minority in a diverse society, its divulgence into mainstream and the refraction into tautologically contrived and concocted identities and sub-identities forming means of affiliation to the preponderant narrative of the society. Future researchers can explore religious subsets within the global spectrum of plural societies.

Key words minority discourse; diaspora; Muslim identity; hybridity; power

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Introduction

The paper aims to explore a kaleidoscopic view of minority discourse seen through the concave lens of tautological hybridity in Ayad Akhtar's *American Dervish*. The aim of the research is to locate minority discourse on the spectrum of plural existence with special reference to Pakistani-American de-marginalization. The tautological hybridity of the term American dervish is studied in the context of identity clasped in the scope of minority narrative. Since, minority is a term closely attached to power discourse, Akhtar's narrative delineates the power dynamics of a South Asian community replete with paradoxical sub-existence of identities in the American landscape. The study spreads out the refracted vision of minority discourse while correcting the myopic view of religious affiliation. *American Dervish* provides a concave view of Pakistani American lives in conjunction with their interaction to both American and dervish identities. Minority discourse has not been explored as an annexation connected to the protracted discourse earlier. This study provides a lens to divulge from myopic focal points to broader affiliation with the social narrative.

Literature Review

The word Minority is defined as "the smaller part of a number," "a group in society distinguished from, and less dominant than the more numerous majority," "a racial, ethnic, religious, or social subdivision of a society that is subordinate to the dominant group in political, financial, or social power without regard to the size of these groups," and/or "a smaller party or group opposed to a majority, as in voting or other action" ("Minority" Dictionary.com). M. J. Akbar questions 'minoritism,'

then explains, “A minority, therefore, is not a consequence of numbers, but a definition of empowerment” (489). Hence, if minority is connected directly to the power structure of a country then numbers are irrelevant.

The hybridity of the identity of American dervish may deprive him of power in one instance, as a minority, but empowers him at another, as being part of a powerful number of Muslims. Can this be considered an oxymoronic tautology? In this regard, Michel Foucault’s theory of power and Allen Thiher’s work *The Power of Tautology: The Roots of Literary Theory* are surveyed as theoretical bedrock of the study. The research thus, delves into the meaning of minority in a diverse society, its divulgence into mainstream and the refraction into tautologically contrived and concocted identities and sub-identities forming means of affiliation to the preponderant narrative of the society, which creates power.

According to Michel Foucault “Power is Everywhere” (Foucault 63), “the idea that ‘power is everywhere’, diffused and embodied in discourse, knowledge and ‘regimes of truth’ (Foucault 63). Power for Foucault is what makes us what we are, operating on a quite different level from other theories: “His work marks a radical departure from previous modes of conceiving power and cannot be easily integrated with previous ideas, as power is diffuse rather than concentrated, embodied and enacted rather than possessed, discursive rather than purely coercive, and constitutes agents rather than being deployed by them’ (Gaventa 1)” As “Power is everywhere” and “comes from everywhere” so in this sense is neither an agency nor a structure (Foucault 63) and therefore the question arises do numbers matter in minority discourse?

Discussion and Analysis

Muslim population does not belong to the ruling party in the United States of America therefore it is considered a minority. Hayat in *American Dervish* is brought up in a Muslim household in a town in USA. Despite his father’s conscious effort to dissociate his identity from his Muslim faith and community, his mother’s friend Mina inculcates within him an identity he can allocate his roots to. It provides a scaffolding for him. He does not follow the teachings of the clerics but follows the Holy Quran from the heart. He learns the English translation of the Holy Quran and imagines himself to be a Hafiz. Mina’s teachings are rooted in the spiritual upbringing of his character. She narrated stories of the Prophet, Djinn and sufi saints. She taught him, “With everything in life, Hayat, is the intention that matters” (53). She was teaching him in a pre- 9/11 USA, that there are three words repeated in the Quran and these are “‘God’, ‘benevolent’, ‘merciful’” (56). She asks him

“When someone hits you, what do you do about it?,” his immediate response is “Hit them back?” however, Mina leads him to forgiveness, and says “You can forgive them [...] If you forgive them you’re showing mercy” and benevolent means “when you do something good, you are being benevolent”(56). He acquired power from learning about a “holy power” which was benevolent and merciful. According to Hayat, “the months that followed were witness to a series of spiritual experiences” (59). He understood the ‘inner aspect’ of praying, which enabled him to feel that God was near him (65). It is significant to note that, “For Mina, faith really wasn’t about the outer forms,” and advocated “ijtihad, or personal interpretation,” however, “the only problem was, the so-called Gates of Ijtihad had been famously ‘closed’ in the tenth century,” because, “personal interpretation led to innovation and that these innovations created chaos in the matter of knowing what it meant to obey God’s will” (66-67). On the contrary, Akhtar shows American Muslims, who live and enjoy livelihood in America yet condone it, and consciously dissociate themselves from the American nation, yet, expect to be a part of it. Chatha “loved to talk about what God was going to do to American unbelievers on Judgement Day.” According to him, “Allah will turn them this way and that [...] He’ll fry them just like one of their fishes at the church Friday fish fries” (80). The same fish he would devour heartily. Akhtar demonstrates two ways of interpreting Islam and elucidates the paradoxical lives the Pakistanis live shunning the fabric of their livelihood which they opted for yet adorning it wholeheartedly. Hayat’s American boy is enlightened by Mina’s ‘dervish’ teachings but he remains American. The novel begins with his realization that as he bites into the forbidden “brown-and-white pork bratwurst,” he feels “brave and ridiculous”(4), yet “complete”(5), he becomes a “Mutazalite”¹(9) for assimilation. However, as we journey through his past events, we realize the potency of his love for Islam as nurtured by Mina. The American and dervish live side by side within his Identity and Self. It is not simply a matter of assigning Identity to his Americanness and Self to the Dervish in him. These interchange with time and circumstances.

Hayat, as a ten-year-old boy delves into both the Identity and the Self to locate his point of nexus and arrives at an alliance with a larger force, in numbers, which is the Muslim nationhood he belongs to. However, with the course of time, he questions his Pakistani, American and Muslim selves, in the context of majority and minority discourse within these three realms. Akhtar proffers the existence of power within the discourse.

Hence, the minority discourse has the potential to be empowered if the

1 Those who withdraw, or stand apart. In Islam, Political or religious neutralists. Britannica

narrative it presents is generated through knowledge creating a specific truth. If the country is ruled by a member of the minority group, the community is automatically empowered by the system of governance, curriculum choices and media generated knowledge. As was the case in Indian Hyderabad state, where the majority population comprised Hindus (approximately 80%), however, the ruler was Nizamuddin, a Muslim, the narrative of the State was Muslim, with its agents of power creating knowledge aligned with the Muslim discourse. Hence, minority is relative to the power structure. An American Muslim discourse can enervate its ideologies through stepping up on the hierarchical order in the society. In *The White Tiger*, Aravind Adiga shows how Balam, belonging to the lowest caste could become a powerful man by acquiring wealth. In *American Dervish*, Akhtar, does not empower his character with materialistic wealth but elevates his stature for himself through his mystic knowledge. Mina, becomes the source of his uplift and he considers her as the guide rather than his parents, because she takes him on an inward journey to arrive at the truth, of being One with God. The societal truth he had been exposed to by the American society is concrete rather than abstract:

Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its “general politics” of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. (Rabinow)

The power of the hybrid title, *American Dervish*, lies in its oxymoronic tautology, inclusive of both concrete and abstract elements which make up Hayat. According to the dictionary, “A tautology states the same thing twice in slightly different wording, or adds redundant and unnecessary words. Tautological reasoning is logic that uses the premise as the conclusions, or is too obvious to be necessary” (“Tautology”). Akhtar has empowered both the words by conjoining them and producing a new ideological bedrock which the Muslim community can adhere to. Hayat finds the Holy Quran as his bedrock to adhere to, and memorizes the English translation and in his mind believes that he is Hafiz, however, he is shunned for not learning the Quran in Arabic. His knowledge of the Quran is far greater than of the child who memorizes it in Arabic. Hayat tries to even follow the Quranic teachings

and finds solace in reading the English translation.

According to Allen Thiher in *Words in Reflection: Modern Language Theory and Postmodern Fiction*, “ ‘The world’ or ‘reality’ , then emerge as solely the result of intertextual relationships” (Theo). Hence, there is a relationship between the concrete and the abstract. It is therefore, important to trace this relationship. Thiher writes: “Derrida’s writings are exemplary of the postmodern awareness, that, if the world no longer represents a theological form of presence, a manifestation of some transcendent logos, it can be taken as the trace of all other words. Texts are a tissue of all other texts” (Thiher 90). Hayat, finds this transcendental logos in the Quran, which he reads and the stories of the dervish he hears.

Thereby, Hayat finds allegiance to his Muslim identity, Mina, however, introduces Hayat to the mystic elements of being Muslim. While exposing him to the prayer and recitation of the Quran, Mina also acquaints him to the benevolence preached in Islam. According to Hayat, “For once, life in our home was settling into a peaceful, lively rhythm,” he was not sure if they could be happy because he felt, “we were formed and informed (to various degrees) by an Eastern mythos profoundly at odds with the American notion of happily-ever-after. For though we longed for happiness, we did not expect it” (Akhtar 70). Hayat, thus, acquires a latent power within him through the knowledge of Islam which Mina provides him to connect to two worlds and stay connected. He remains American but acquires a mystic knowledge which allows him to look within himself. His father, on the other hand, wholly absorbs his American identity and absolves his Muslim self. On the other extreme, are people like Mr.Chatha, according to him, Islam was unforgiving so each act was accountable, he believed in an intolerant Islam. He chose to reside with Christians and Jews but advocated hate and continued to hate the communities he had whole-heartedly opted to live with for better sustenance. In his case, sustenance was material rather than spiritual. To appease his spiritual side, he quotes verses without context and deems judgement. Sonny asks, “Why only these verses, Ghaleb? Why not have him read sixty-two as well?” Chatta is unaware of sixty-two verse, so Sonny exclaims, “Maybe it’s you who needs to know your holy book a little better” (130-31). Dawood then reads verse sixty-two:

It is true: The faithful, those who follow the
Jewish faith, the Christians, the Sabians-all
Who believe in God and the Last Day and do
Right-these shall find reward with the Lord.
They will not fear. They will not grieve. (131)

In this case, knowledge created out of references which are quoted out of context create the truth. Hayat, living in USA, tries to locate the multiple truths within the religious and scholarly text with the help and support of Mina. According to Foucault,

Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organization. And only do individuals circulate between threads; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power. They are not only its inert or consenting target; they are always also the elements of its articulation. In other words, individuals are the vehicle of power, not its points of application. (98)

So, it is the individual, himself, who creates knowledge and his own power in turn. Minorities are considered different because of the knowledge created about them and from them. As Foucault further states, “Knowledge linked to power, not only assumes the authority of ‘the truth’ but has the power to make itself true” (Foucault 27). It is therefore, of utmost importance to accommodate all agencies of power in the creation of knowledge. Foucault further claims that,

it is quite possible that the major mechanisms of power have been accompanied by ideological production[...] but basically I don’t believe that what has taken place can be said to be ideological [...] It is the production of effective instruments for the formation and accumulation of knowledge [...] All this means that power, when it is exercised through these subtle mechanisms, cannot but evolve, organize and put into circulation a knowledge, or rather apparatuses of knowledge, which are not ideological constructs. (102)

In this regard, minority communities, in order to, acquire some form of power create knowledge disguised as ideological truth to bind them while creating a sub-hierarchical order within the order they live in. It is a way and means to create a simulation of power. In doing so, they create knowledge which adheres them as a sub-community rather than as a productive part of the nationality they belong to. The families in *American Dervish* hold American nationalities, however, they wish to extract the economic benefits of the macro society they live in while forming a micro society which continuously debunks the macro society. They use knowledge based on their ideological discourse to disprove the society. Hayat, reads the verses

of the Quran free from the constraints of ideology and cultivates the teachings in his practical discourse. He finds the essence of the religion. Mina is his guide, despite her transgressions from the codes set by her religion, she maintains the humane aspect of her religion and inculcates that within Hayat. Thus, his hybrid existence as an American and a dervish create peace within him. He tries to locate both aspects of his existence the identity of being an American at the same time his dervish self. A dervish is “any member of a Şūfī (Muslim mystic) fraternity, or *tariqa*. The main ritual practiced by the dervish is the *dhikr*, which involves the repeated recitation of a devotional formula in praise of Allah as a means of attaining an ecstatic experience. Dervishes can be either resident in community or lay members. A wandering or mendicant dervish is called a *fakir* (faqir) (“Dervish Sufism”). In Merriam Webster dictionary, “a dervish is one that whirls or dances with or as if with the abandonment of a dervish.”

However, in this novel, dervish is used to describe his inner state, which is whirling as he is trying to find his center. It is quite a novelty that a young ten-year old child, is trying to locate a center. Since, Hayat is exposed to his father’s way of life as well as Mina’s, his approach is different from other children of his age. As Mina leaves, the thread that strung him to both worlds snaps. An adult, Hayat, in the prologue, “rushed to Schirmer Hall,” he claims, the “Quran tucked under my arm, [...] I would find a place near the back-[...]where I would have the space quietly to reel and contemplate as the diminutive, magnetic Edlestein [a professor] continued to take his weekly sledgehammer to what remained of my childhood faith” (Akhtar 5). The prologue sets the mood of the novel as one which will cater to the oxymoronic existence of being American Dervish, as he “unwrapped” his packet of burger to “find” he “wasn’t holding a beef frank, but a marbled, brown-and-white pork bratwurst,” he wonders and contemplates upon both his identity and self and exclaims to himself, “What reason did I have anymore not to eat it? None at all” (4), so the question arises, is Mina the only connection he could find with God and his religion? With her departure does that connection break? The American within him entices him to bite into the forbidden food, as he states, “My heart raced as I chewed, my mouth filling with a sweet and smoky, lightly pungent taste that seemed utterly remarkable-perhaps all the more so for having been forbidden for so long [...] I felt like I was complete”(4-5). The forbidden meat unites his two worlds. Akhtar shows how he feels freed from faith and it coincides with Mina’s death. Hence, he was carrying the burden of two worlds and as he abandons one for the other he feels free. However, in Mina’s death, he feels grief for himself. There, in that moment, he finds the power in him to tell the story which united the two worlds. The need

to express and narrate the story keeps him connected, despite his endeavor to break free. The story empowers him to enter his dervish self. As Mina says, “That’s someone who gives up everything for Allah” (101). She says, “I’m talking about a Sufi. A Sufi dervish. Whose whole life is devoted to Allah. It was his choice to give everything up” she further explains, “Because by giving everything up, his home, his family, his job, nothing is in the way anymore. Nothing between himself and God” (102). According to Mina, a dervish becomes “the same as everything created by Allah’s hand [...] What was in his way before? He thought he was different. But now he saw he was not different. He and Allah, and everything Allah created, it was all One” (104). Hayat discovered peace, “For once, life in our home was settling into a peaceful” state of mind, “For though we longed for happiness, we did not expect it. This was our cultural text, the message imprinted in even the movie videos my parents rented from local Indo-Pak grocer” (70), while the cultural discourse offered “loss, pain and sorrow,” the Quranic verse he remembers states,

Truly, with hardship comes ease,
With hardship comes ease! (71)

He recalls the stories that Mina told him, “the ones about dervishes: the first, in which a dervish sitting by the side of a road has orange peels tossed on him by a couple of passersby and, in that moment of ill-usage, awakens to the fiction of the personal self that imagines it is any different from the peels or the passersby, or God Himself; and the tale that suggested being ground to dust was the way to our Lord” (337), according to Hayat, it is people which grind you to dust and Mina intentionally married Sunil “someone to ill-use her, someone who would eventually grind her to dust” (337), thus, a deliberate effort on her part to be One with God. Mina, showed him a quote from a collection of Fitzgerald’s letters: “The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposing ideas in the mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function” (340). Hayat has to hold both worlds together. Mina says, “Faith has never been about afterlife for me, Hayat. It’s about finding God now. In the everyday” (342). Hayat could not find God in her pain, but she said, “When Chisti [the Saint] was dying [...] he was in pain all over his body. His followers didn’t understand how a man who Allah loved so much could be put through so much pain [...] Do you know what he told them when they asked him why Allah was making him suffer so? [...] This is how the divine is choosing to express Himself through me [...] what he meant is that His glory. Even the pain” she paused, “That is the real truth about life” (343).

Since, “‘Power is everywhere’ and ‘comes from everywhere’,” it “is neither an agency nor a structure” (Foucault 63), “‘power/knowledge’” “signify that power is constituted through accepted forms of knowledge, scientific understanding and truth” (Rainbow). Hayat attempts arrive at Mina’s “real truth” to understand his whirling selves.

Conclusion

Akhtar’s novel, offers means of enervation within the body of minority discourse through affiliation to mystic ideologies which unite rather than divide differences. Therefore, the truth created from the powerful discourse finds its way into the society. Akhtar raises the question whether, a minority discourse can also infiltrate the macro discourse. He presents characters like Sonny to show how universal Truths of existence and humanity can connect people. Foucault claims further that, “Truth is a thing of the world: it is produced only virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its ‘general politics’ of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true” (Rabinow). These “regimes of truth” are “reinforced constantly through the education system, the media and the flux of political and economic ideologies” (Rainbow). According to this approach, power “transcends politics and sees power as an everyday, socialized and embodied phenomenon” (Rabinow). Since, “power is [...] a major source of social discipline and conformity,” “there is little scope for practical action [...] the norms can be embedded as to be beyond our perception” (Rabinow). Hence, to “challenge power is not a matter of seeking some ‘absolute truth’ [which is in any case a socially produced power], but ‘of detaching the power of truth from the forms of hegemony, social, economic, and cultural, within which it operates at the present time’” (Rabinow 75) and connecting them to agents of knowledge which propagate universality. In *Power/ Knowledge*, Foucault claims, “it is a fact that we have repeatedly encountered, at least at a superficial level, [...], an entire thematic to the effect that it is not theory but life that matters, not knowledge but reality, and above, and arising out of this thematic, there is something else to which we are witness, and which might describe as an insurrection of subjugated knowledge” (81), the “illegitimate knowledges against the claim of unitary body of theory which would filter, hierarchise and order them in the name of some true knowledge and some arbitrary idea of what constitutes science and its objects” (Foucault *Power/ Knowledge* 83). This knowledge is present between the oxymoronic existence, since binaries are parts of a whole and not mere oppositions Akhtar creates a world where

the whole can exist together and produce a “lively rhythm”(70). Future researchers can explore religious subsets within the global spectrum of plural societies.

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