

## Pakistani-American Muslims Diaspora in Ayad Akhtar's Homeland Elegies

Muhammad Latif Busyeiri<sup>1</sup>, Atikah Ruslianti<sup>2</sup>

*Universitas Negeri Jakarta, Indonesia<sup>1, 2</sup>*

**Abstract:** *Immigrants are inherently different from the people around them and face many challenges that requires them to adapt. They often face prejudice from others due to their differences in appearance, culture, or beliefs. Diaspora has commonly been understood as the dispersion of a group of people beyond their original homeland. The concept of diaspora puts a struggle for the people involved, whether the people being displace or the locals on the diasporic place, in creating identity and community. This study aims to investigate the diaspora of the first- and second-generation immigrants of Pakistani-American Muslims in Homeland Elegies by Ayad Akhtar. This research is descriptive analytical research using Bhabha's postcolonial theories of mimicry, ambivalence, and hybridity. The novel by Ayad Akhtar realistically portrays the diaspora that immigrant individuals and families' experiences as they encounter different cultures and values. The findings indicate that different individuals experience different reactions to their diaspora as they construct different opinions regarding their home culture and the local culture. The second-generation immigrants are found to be more critical towards both cultures compared to the first-generation immigrants.*

**Keywords:** *Diaspora, Immigrant, Muslim, Novel*

### Introduction

Literature have existed for a long time in humanity's history and have had varying forms depending on the era and place such as poetry, prose, drama, fiction, and so on. Literature have remained relevant and popular for people of all ages or status because it allows the reader to experience something that they have never or will ever feel, moreover it also acts as a window to different information or even worlds. It is also possible to argue that certain literature can serve as social documentation because of its mimetic nature (Busyeiri & Dinanti, 2021)

One such example is the novel Homeland Elegies by Ayad Akhtar. Homeland Elegies is a contemporary novel published in 2020. The novel is about an immigrant family, their ties to their homeland of Pakistan, and the new lives they make for themselves in the U.S. The narrator's name is also Ayad Akhtar, and it reads like memoir but it's a novel. That is why from this point on, the name Ayad will be used to refer to the character in the novel instead of the author unless stated otherwise. The novel is written in such a way that it blends fact and fiction which creates a realistic reflection of the real world and its issues.

Immigration has always played a significant role in the history of first-world nations like America. Many immigrants continue to reside in America even now. For years, thousands of individuals from all over the world have immigrated to America in quest of a better life.

---

<sup>1</sup> E-Mail: [latifbusyeiri259@gmail.com](mailto:latifbusyeiri259@gmail.com)

Whether or not their dreams are realized depends on the individual. These immigrants hail from a variety of continents, including Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. Prior to Pakistan's independence and when the country was still ruled by the British, the first wave of Pakistani immigrants to the United States started between 1893 and 1917 (Moore, 2011).

Pavri (2016) states that while most immigrants experienced racism, Muslims from the subcontinent also experienced animosity because of their religion, Islam. One of the widespread misconceptions about the Islamic faith that predominated in America at the time was that Muslims were polygamists and hence ineligible to join the country; there were even calls for the deportation of Muslims who were already in the country. Other Euro-American workers wanted to drive Indians out of the places where they lived and worked. The Asiatic Exclusion League (AEL) was established in 1907 with the goal of encouraging the expulsion of Asian laborers, particularly Muslims from Pakistan.

The novel presents the reader with the problems of identity on immigrants such as the Akhtar family in this novel. Although Akhtar and his parents are part of the same family, they have different opinions and stance regarding Pakistan, America, and also their identity or homeland. This difference stems from the fact that Akhtar is a second-generation immigrant, while his parents are first generation immigrants. Different generation of immigrants faces different hardships and problems during their lifetime in the foreign country, and of course they also have different opinions regarding their homeland and current home.

Making a community that includes both groups would undoubtedly be challenging given the different origins of the immigrants and the locals which leads to diaspora. Diaspora highlights the intentionally variable and historically situated nature of identity and how it is articulated to the architecture of historical movements (whether forced or chosen, necessary or desired). Diaspora ties physical location, identities, and histories of alternative cosmopolitanisms and diasporic networks to one's self (Clifford, 1994).

The differences that exist within an individual and their surroundings would lead to them questioning their identity. Identity is an important aspect within a person psyche, in which people have certain ideas regarding who they are as a person and what they should do. Taking it to the extreme, identity might as well control every single part of our life as most of the time we make decisions based on who we are as a person. Hall (1996) states that identity is a process of becoming rather than being, in which someone poses questions based on historical, linguistic, and cultural resources that have affected how they have been represented and how they could represent themselves. However, the concept of identity is much more complex than that as it needs to take accounts the person background, ideology, age, and so on.

One of the initiators of post-colonial theory is Homi K. Bhabha. In post-colonial theory, Bhabha (1994) carries the concepts of hybridity, mimicry, and ambivalence. Hybridity is a combination of various cultural backgrounds within the individual so as to create a new self-identity. Mimicry is an act of imitation carried out by the colonized in the hope of achieving a level of power equivalent to that of the colonizer. However, in reality the colonized will never completely become like the colonizer. Bhabha further explains that mimicry leads to two problems, namely the problem of mimicry itself and the problem of ambivalence. Ambivalence is a complex simultaneous attraction and repulsion to the colonizer by the colonized (Bhabha, 1994). Ambivalence occurs when people face a culture that is opposite to their environment.

As portrayed in the background, it can be concluded that research regarding diaspora in literature is important to be conducted to gain a better understanding of immigrant culture and the challenges they go through.

### **Literature Review**

Diaspora has commonly been understood as the dispersion of a group of people beyond their original homeland. However, Clifford (1994) describes the term "diaspora" as a signifier not simply of transnationality and movement, but of political struggles to define the local - I would prefer to call it place - as a distinctive community, in historical contexts of displacement. The concept of diaspora puts a struggle for the people involved, whether the people being displaced or the locals on the diasporic place, in creating identity and community.

However, the word 'diaspora' itself is actually problematic, as some people take it that it indicates the possibility of never returning to their homeland. However, this diaspora is not stopping people from creating their own identity or community as previously mentioned that diaspora actually links identity to a spatial location and identifications. Alghaberi (2018) states that generally speaking, diasporas can create their own imagined homes in homeless conditions and they can also construct numerous social connections and communities away from home. Their idea of homeland is imaginary, and thus home is merely referred to symbolically or metaphorically.

When identity and culture are considered together since they are seldom distinct, the idea of identity expands significantly. Since humans have a propensity to learn from and imitate their surroundings, ethnicity is a crucial component of identity. Identity refers to how people develop and maintain their sense of community with those who share their nationality, ethnicity, race, or religion via the process of exchanging knowledge about customs, history, language, norms, and traditions (Chen, 2014).

An individual's sense of self in terms of belonging to a specific ethnic group is referred to as their ethnic identity. Although the term "ethnic identity" is occasionally used to mean nothing more than one's self-label or group affiliation, it is typically understood to encompass a range of characteristics, including self-identification, a sense of group identity and commitment, shared values, and attitudes toward one's own ethnic group (Liebdkind, 2006). It is clear that ethnicity is a crucial component of identity given how much an individual's environment affects their sense of self.

Bhabha is one of the founders of post-colonial thought. Bhabha introduced the ideas of hybridity, imitation, and ambivalence into post-colonial philosophy. Mimicry is stated as the complex strategy of reforming correspondingly as the other culture that visualized power (Bhabha, 1994). "Mimicry reveals something in so far as it is distinct from what might be called an itself that is behind. The effect of mimicry is camouflage... It is not a question of harmonizing with the background, but against a mottled background, of becoming mottled – exactly like the technique of camouflage practiced in human warfare." (Lacan as cited in Bhabha, 1994, p.85). Bhabha (1994) borrows the term of mimicry to define 'the desire for a reformed recognizable 'other' as a different subject that is almost the same, but not quite. It is also one of the most elusive and effective strategy to enforce colonial power and knowledge. In summary, mimicry depicts the desire of people from the colonized society to imitate the colonizer culture in order to be recognized as equal with the colonizer. Furthermore, Bhabha

(1994) claims that the act of mimicry is not only mimic the cultural attributes of the majority population but also behavior, manner, and values. Not to mention, mimicry covers in imitating the majority's act of speaking, personal relationship, behavior, lifestyle, and even political views (Singh, 2009).

As per Bhabha (1994), ambivalence is a complicated simultaneous attraction and repulsion of the colonized towards the colonizer, adapted from a psychoanalytic phrase. He defines ambivalence as simultaneous contradictory feelings of the colonized towards the cultural traits of colonizer. Ambivalence emerges when the colonized need to quickly adjust themselves into the new cultures within colonial dominance that resulted in the feelings of resistance and admiration of the colonizers and their cultural attributes at the same time. However, from the colonizer's perspective, ambivalence may be perceived as a danger. Because of the colonized's recognized hostility, ambivalence among the colonized might undermine the colonizer's power. This can make it difficult to distinguish between colonized mimicry (attraction) and mocking (repulsion), eroding the colonizers' self-proclaimed superiority (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2007). Thus, ambivalence is a complicated interaction between the colonized and the colonizer that creates contradictory sentiments in immigrants, leading to hybridity.

Hybridity, as one of the most extensively used and contested terms in postcolonial theory, refers to the emergence of new transcultural forms within the bounds imposed by colonization. It refers to the cross-breeding of two species by transplanting or cross-pollination to produce a third, 'hybrid' species in horticulture. Hybridization can take numerous forms, including linguistic, cultural, political, and racial hybridization (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2007). Many times, in post-colonial discourse, the term hybridity has been employed with the notion of merely cross-cultural 'trade.' The usage of this phrase in this situation has been heavily criticized, because it is commonly seen as ignoring and dismissing the inequality and imbalance of the power ties it refers to. This is seen as a re-enactment of assimilationist strategies, in that it conceals or "whitewashes" cultural differences while stressing transformational cultural, linguistic, and political effects on both colonial and colonized parties.

The novel explores the depth of the Pakistani-American family on how they survive and adapt in the United States. Ayad the narrator, and his parents Sikander and Fatima. Throughout the novel, all the family members of the narrator's family all have different views and opinions regarding their homeland and the land they're currently living in. Such as Akhtar, the narrator, who feels much more comfortable in his new culture and truly believes that he is an American whether other Americans accepts him or not. He still holds the identity of Muslim, but he does not follow the rules and obligations of Muslims anymore.

## **Methodology**

Utilizing Bhabha's post colonialism concepts of mimicry, hybridity, ambivalence, this study applies the qualitative method. In line with that, the writer employs descriptive analytical study, which Glass & Hopkins (1984) states that descriptive research involves gathering data that describe events and then organizes, tabulates, depicts, and describes the data collection. The data from *Homeland Elegies* will be analyzed based on the interpretation and then the data will be categorized and analyzed using three different theories by Bhabha which will result in a result in the form of description.

## **Findings & Discussion**

The main characters in *Homeland Elegies*, both first and second generation Pakistani-American Muslims, show how they experience diaspora and constantly negotiated their identities by imitating and fusing their Pakistani-Muslim and American cultures in order to be accepted as equals by the majority population in their surroundings. Identity negotiation is the capacity to reach an understanding between two or more different cultures in order to blend in with the majority of people in a certain cultural situation.

Ayad Akhtar, a second-generation Pakistani-Muslim, and his parents, Sikander and Fatima Akhtar, a first-generation Pakistani-Muslim couple, occasionally felt conflicted when imitating American customs that went against their Pakistani-Muslim beliefs during the course of the book.

Being the only Pakistani-Muslim family in the place they live who was also associated as the minority had made Akhtar and his family experience diaspora and question their identity which all of them face differently. They were also conscious that as Muslims in America, their Americanness, or the quality or traits of being American, would be constantly questioned by people around them. The circumstance of being an orient in foreign land led the family members to cope in different ways. Sikander Akhtar, the father, chose to embrace this new land by mimicking every culture and way of life that America has to offer, even believing in beliefs that may even be harmful to him and his family. Fatima Akhtar, the mother, had a 180-degree point of view compared to her husband. While she admits that she also enjoys some parts of America such as their food and entertainment, she never truly felt at home in America and longed to go back to Pakistan even until her dying breath. Ayad Akhtar stands in the middle of both his parents with him not necessarily preferring any of the cultures until the end of the book. He chooses to embrace parts of both culture that finds convenient and helps him, and he would not blindly follow any form of beliefs that both sides had. He took on a more critical approach in negotiating his identity

The readers are given some insight in one way or another into the history and circumstance of many Muslim characters in the book, Ayad Akhtar the protagonist had the most in-depth explanation as his experiences throughout his career affected his identity. The novel explores the Akhtar family, with Ayad being the main focus throughout many historical events that happened in America such as Donald Trump's presidency. One major event that heavily influenced the family and also Muslims worldwide was the 9/11 attack, which the novel explains thoroughly how the event changed the characters directly or indirectly. After the events of 9/11, the characters were treated differently by the locals because of them being Muslims. Each character faced different treatment and retaliated in different ways, such as Akhtar who decided to wear a cross and conceal his identity so that he can be accepted by people around him.

### **1. Mimicry**

Mimicry may be described as the desire of individuals from the East to be treated equally to people from the West (Bhabha, 1994). Ayad and his parents, Sikander and Fatima, employed mimicry to negotiate their numerous identities in order to be viewed as equals with the majority population in their area as minorities residing in the United States. Mimicry occurs in the hopes of gaining access to the same advantages as the majority. Mimicry extended to

emulating the majority's habits of speaking, dressing, eating, personal relationships, conduct, and even political beliefs for immigrants. Throughout the story it can be seen through the main characters on how they try to mimic their peers and also American culture in order to be accepted in America.

*The eruption of bigoted views I'd never known he'd espoused. That whites were lazy, and all they really cared about were their weekends away and their summer vacations; that blacks didn't like to pay their medical bills because they still had a slave's mentality and saw the system as a master to be rebelled against; that women had a deeper understanding of life because they had to give birth and were built to suffer, which is also why they wouldn't care that Trump said nasty things about them* (Akhtar, 2020, p. 24).

Sikander's mimicry wouldn't just stop at things that would impact himself, as he was fully obsessed with America and also Trump. Sikander's obsession with Trump would eventually lead him down a road of the same racist and bigoted opinion. As is true that everyone has their own reserved opinion regarding certain people or race, while average citizens may feel constrained by the boundaries of polite society from voicing their most xenophobic and bigoted ideas, Trump's role as a demagogue would bolster his followers to be racist and also ignore rational arguments (Mendes, 2016). Sikander's mimicry of Trump in hope of regaining the connection with him had left Sikander to grow the same bigoted views as Trump. Even with Sikander not being part of the majority, Sikander would go on to have extreme negative views on other people such as black people having slave mentality, women being made to give birth and suffer, and even white people being lazy.

*Worst of all—and I do hope it will not compromise too much the reader's view of me, though I would understand if it did—I was a pig with women. The episode with Julia at the theater in the wake of Riaz's first visit still haunted me—an object lesson in proximity to wealth as an aphrodisiac and the seemingly endless depth of my own racially charged sexual hunger.* (Akhtar, 2020, p. 127).

Ayad had made his way into America's culture which foregoes any rules and would follow their desire in order to maximize their life pleasure. Ayad wanted to mimic Americans who holds the image of frivolous, pleasure-seeking consumers, in love with expensive alcohol and also sexual pursuit (Gershon, 2020). Starting with Ayad's introduction to expensive alcohol and the subsequent racially motivated intercourse, Ayad had been on a sexual conquest with many women ever since then. Ayad's mimicry of the sexual culture of America is not only his way to assimilate himself with others, but also as a way to satisfy his own racially charged sexual hunger, as Ayad had been known to desire fair skinned sexual partners. Ayad's sexual conquest means that Ayad had truly left behind his Islamic identity, as pre-marital sex in Islam is forbidden.

## 2. Ambivalence

Every culture brings with them their own customs and also practices, people will commonly be more willing to accept cultures similar to those they had grown up with. When immigrants live in a different land that is different from what they are used to, the feelings of

confusion or ambivalence would commonly be found in them. Ayad and his parents, Sikander and Fatima, were sometimes confused when they mimicked American cultures that were incompatible with their Pakistani Muslim beliefs. The colonists' contradicting sentiments regarding the colonized's cultural features, values, and lifestyle are classified as a state of perplexity or ambivalence (Bhabha, 1994). As they encounter cultural clashes, ambivalence might place immigrants in an in-between situation. Every person has had different types of cultural clashes. For second generations of immigrants, cultural clashes can be influenced by differences in their upbringing and peer pressure, whereas first generations usually have cultural clashes due to their inability to familiarize themselves with the new cultures in their environment. This usually emerges within immigrants as they need to quickly adjust themselves with the new distinctive cultures in their destined country (Koseuglu, 2017). In *Homeland Elegies*, the differences of cultural clash experienced by the first and second generations of Pakistani-American Muslim were reflected by Ayad and his parents.

*That when he thought of the place now, America, he found it hard to believe he'd spent so much of his life there. As much as he'd always wanted to think of himself as American, the truth was he'd only ever aspired to the condition. Looking back, he said, he realized he'd been playing a role so much of that time, a role he'd taken for real. There was no harm in it; he'd just gotten tired of playing the part.* (Akhtar, 2020, p. 269).

Sikander felt Ambivalence nearing the end of his journey in America, as he was unsure about his identity and his place in America. Sikander had felt both the good and bad of America as he amassed a fortune but also lost it all due to his obsession with capitalism and gambling. His ambivalence was only resolved as he moved back to Pakistan in which he realized that all this time he had only been trying to be American, a role in which he could never fully realize due to his own heritage. Sikander had known how American culture and also practice has made many people beyond rich and also gave them infamous popularity. Through his mimicry and obsession with America and its people, Sikander had hoped to gain the same amount of wealth and popularity where he could be accepted by society. Years after he followed the practice of investing, gambling, and capitalism in which many Americans indulged themselves in, Sikander has never experienced the same amount of success as other Americans. This failure to live up to his own expectations caused him to become ambivalent and finally realize his own identity that he was never an America, merely pretending to be one. These attempts are never likely to succeed because the colonized nation is a marginal group or group that is considered as the other and marginalized by the holder of power, the marginalized society tends to be a society that is ignored, oppressed or despised by the superiority of the colonizer (Sungkar, 2013).

### 3. Hybridity

The first and second generations of immigrants took various amount of time and energy to become acquainted with the new cultures in their surroundings. The first generations, who are more likely to have a greater feeling of connection to their original cultures, typically had to put in a lot of effort to assimilate and become familiar with the cultural practices and characteristics of the majority population in their destination country. Meanwhile, the second

generations, who mingle with their peers more often on a daily basis, had an advantage in familiarizing themselves with the customs of the destination country. As a result, the second generation has a better capacity to integrate their numerous diverse cultures (Liu, 2015). One of the most common methods for integrating immigrants' diverse identities was to hybridize their distinct cultures. In postcolonial discourse, hybridity refers to the conquerors' integration into the new cultural context (Bhabha, 1994). When immigrants have achieved a balance between their various cultures, they frequently begin to hybridize them. This act is done in an effort negotiating their identity as immigrants wanted to harmonize within themselves their own cultural heritage with the public's culture.

The hybridization of cultures doesn't happen that often within the Akhtar family as Sikander fully immersed himself with American culture and Fatima fully rejected American culture and instead chose to enclose herself with the cultures and values of her homeland and religion. Most often, the Akhtar would hybridize themselves by culture of food and drinks or entertainments, as previously mentioned.

*To celebrate, he'd mixed a pitcher of Rooh Afza lassi—the rose-flavored squash beverage was my mother's favorite. He shrugged in response to her question and held out a glass for her to take. She was in no mood for lassi (Akhtar, 2020, p. 16).*

The western world has a culture in which there is one thing that would always be present when an individual or group like family are celebrating something, which is alcohol, specifically champagne. Champagne is used around the western world from the past and even until today to celebrate momentous occasion as they are considered a status symbol due to their price. The Akhtar family would try and imitate this culture during their celebration, however with their own twist as Pakistani-Muslim family. Bhabha (1994) states that hybridity is a fusion of several cultural backgrounds in an individual that occurs at the in-between stage, the time where two or more cultures coexist. Hybridity thus gives rise to a new self, a new identity, as a result of the individual's many cultures coming together. The Akhtar created a new identity by hybridizing the culture of celebrating with champagne by substituting the alcohol with lassi, a nonalcoholic drink. The Akhtar adopted the culture of celebrating momentous occasion by opening up an expensive drink, however since they are Muslim and forbidden to drink alcohol, especially Fatima who still holds the value deeply, they combine the culture with their own version of expensive drink. This form of hybridity is considered cultural hybridity in which mixing arts, music, fashion, food, and ways of life, for example, is a form of cultural hybridity. Immigrants from the east, such as Asian or African immigrants, who are pressured to acculturate and adapt to the mainstream population's manners and cultures will try to adopt and adjust themselves to the values and cultural attributes of the place where they live in order to assimilate with the majority population without suppressing their own cultural identity from their heritages (Singh, 2009).

### **Conclusion and Summary**

The different ways of coping with diaspora and identity negotiation are different for Ayad and his parents. The first generation in Ayad is shown to be more open and critical towards



American, Pakistani, and Islamic cultures. Ayad did not feel belonging towards his Pakistani and Islamic culture as he was influenced more by his American peers.

Despite the fact that the number of immigrants in the United States is growing, society still views them as outsiders. Furthermore, immigrants who have been given citizenship in the United States may face prejudice and discrimination from society because of their ethnicity, nationality, or religion. This condition frequently causes immigrants to doubt their place in society as well as their status in the United States. Furthermore, the second generation's adaptability like Ayad in adjusting to American norms causes them to be viewed as too American for their parents yet too foreign for their peers. As a result, the first and second generations were continuously negotiating their identities in order to properly socialize in a changing world. Identity negotiation, in essence, aids immigrants in efficiently interacting with and finding a balance within a new cultural setting that may be different from their originating cultures. Because they held distinct beliefs and had different experiences.

## References

- Akhtar, A. (2020). *Homeland Elegies*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company.
- Ashcroft, B., Griffiths, G., & Tiffin, H. (2007). *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts* immigrants. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 46, 26-35.
- Mendes, A. A. (2016). Digital Demagogue: The Critical Candidacy of. *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric*, 6(3/4), 62-73.
- Moore, K. M. (2011). *Pakistani Immigrants*. Retrieved from UC Santa Barbara: <https://www.religion.ucsb.edu/wp-content/uploads/4148-321-1pass-Pakistani.pdf>
- Pavri, T. (2006). *Pakistani americans*. Retrieved from every culture: <https://www.everyculture.com/multi/Le-Pa/Pakistani-Americans.html>
- Singh, A. (2009). *Mimicry and Hybridity in Plain English*. Retrieved from Lehigh: <https://www.lehigh.edu/~amsp/2009/05/mimicry-and%20hybridity-in-plain-english.html>
- Sungkar, L. A. (2013). The other dalam Gadis berkulit hitam Karya Sembene Ousmane. *Jurnal Ilmiah Kajian Humaniora*, 1, 156-167.

### About the Author:

<b>Chief Researcher</b>
<b>Muhammad Latif Busyeiri</b> <i>State University of Jakarta, Indonesia</i>
<b>Researcher Member</b>
<b>Atikah Ruslianti</b> <i>State University of Jakarta, Indonesia</i>