

MUSLIM IDENTITY IN 21ST CENTURY AMERICA

Ayad Akhtar's Works as Autobiography

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RECIPIENT OF THE 2013 PULITZER PRIZE FOR DRAMA, AYAD AKHTAR HAS BEEN LAUDED AS THE DE FACTO VOICE OF THE AMERICAN MUSLIM IN THEATRE AND LITERATURE. AKHTAR, A PAKISTANI AMERICAN, CLAIMS THAT ALL OF HIS WORKS ARE INSPIRED BY HIS LIFE AND PERSONAL EXPERIENCES; THEY ARE, HE ADMITS, A FORM OF AUTOBIOGRAPHY. IN A POST-9/11 WORLD, HOWEVER, WHERE THE POSITION OF MUSLIMS IN THE UNITED STATES HAS BECOME INCREASINGLY SCRUTINIZED, AKHTAR'S WORKS PURPOSELY PLAY UPON AMERICAN FEARS AND ANXIETY IN REGARD TO ISLAM. INDEED, AKHTAR'S WORKS RELY HEAVILY ON MUSLIM STEREOTYPES IN ORDER TO UNSETTLE AMERICAN AUDIENCES AND GAIN ARTISTIC RECOGNITION. BY DOING SO, AKHTAR NOT ONLY CONTINUES THE CLICHÉD DEPICTION OF MUSLIMS IN AMERICAN MEDIA, BUT ALSO UPHOLDS STEPHEN SPENDER'S THEORY ON AUTOBIOGRAPHY: THAT THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE AUTOBIOGRAPHER, HIS SELF, IS FOREVER FORCED TO SUBMIT TO THAT OF SOCIETY, THE OTHER.

INTRODUCTION

“Everything I write is some version of autobiography,”¹ Ayad Akhtar claimed in a 2014 interview. A well-established actor, writer, and playwright, Akhtar prefers to see himself as a “narrative artist” whose literary works are extensions of his existence, his own narrative.² “It’s often a deformed version of autobiography,” he insisted in the same interview, “but everything I write is drawn from personal experience, whether it’s observed or lived.”³ Born in New York City, and raised in Milwaukee, to Pakistani parents, Akhtar seems to embody the very essence of the American Dream: a second-generation immigrant who received an Ivy League education, he catapulted to fame upon winning the 2013 Pulitzer Prize for Drama for his play *Disgraced*. Although the play, described as a “combustible powder keg of identity politics,”⁴ has garnered both praise and criticism, one fact remains irrefutable: Ayad Akhtar is now a star artist in modern-day America.

And yet, Akhtar’s rise to fame is not as simple as it may appear to the unsuspecting reader or viewer. Akhtar’s newfound stardom owes quite a lot to not only the controversial content of his own works, but also the current consciousness of the American public. Indeed, the fact that



WRITER AYAD AKHTAR (COURTESY OF WIKIMEDIA COMMONS)

Akhtar has received worldwide attention nearly thirteen years after the September 11th attacks is no coincidence. Only now, when universal concern over religious terrorism continues to grow and Islamophobia has become a serious concern, can Akhtar rise to success. If *Disgraced* is a combustible powder keg, then Akhtar himself is the one who set the match at the right time and the right place to create the loudest explosion possible. After all, never has the position of Muslims in the United States been more scrutinized than in the post-9/11 world.

Akhtar is in a strange and unprecedented situation as a Pakistani American writer. Until recently, very few Muslim voices have dared to speak about their thoughts and experiences, let alone achieve recognition. Akhtar, by default, has become one of the most significant Muslim artists in America today. His works, he admits, are essentially a portrait of himself and form his own autobiography. Nevertheless, Akhtar insists that he is in no way obliged or responsible to depict Islam in a way that will correct Western misapprehensions. Several of his works, including *Disgraced*, have ignited serious controversy over Akhtar’s incendiary depiction of Islam and Muslims. Akhtar’s narratives may explicitly deal with Muslim identity in a post-9/11 world, but he broaches the subject in a manner that incites rather than enlightens. Akhtar’s recognition stems from his artistic decision to readily play into American anxiety and concern over the role of Muslims and Islam; only then can he provoke and discomfort his audience. Although based on his own personal experiences, Akhtar’s pseudo-autobiographies seem to be shunted through another channel. Indeed, in an attempt to grasp the internal essence of his life as an American Muslim, perhaps Akhtar has been forced to approach his own existence through an external viewpoint – the Western perspective that associates Islam with hostility and aggression.

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL TRADITION

Some academics would claim that the roots of the autobiographical genre originate somewhere during the Middle Ages. This period in European history, after all, not only witnessed the rise of increasingly complex art, architecture, and social structure, but also laid the foundation for the Renaissance. At the turn of the fifteenth century, an English mystic named Margery Kempe chronicled her life, travels, and divine revelations in written form; her resulting work, entitled *The Book of Margery Kempe*, is credited as the first autobiography in the English language.⁵

Perhaps the autobiographical genre does owe its birth to the union between the fallow Medieval period and fertile Renaissance, and perhaps Kempe's literary work is in fact the very first English autobiography. Nevertheless, the exact origins of autobiography are of little consequence; more important is the fact that the autobiographical genre was created and has persisted ever since. Indeed, the birth of autobiography is less important than its permanency and resulting urgency. What lies inside the autobiography, and what is at its very core? What is its essence, and what does it demand from both the author and reader?

The autobiography is a work that contends with time in an attempt to eternally preserve something about the self. According to Georges Gusdorf, the autobiography is simply "a useful and valuable thing to fix [man's] own image so that he can be certain it will not disappear like all things in this world."⁶ Man is in constant dialogue with himself in order to secure his own immortality through autobiography, "the mirror in which the individual reflects his own image."⁷ William L. Howarth similarly describes the autobiography as a "self-portrait,"⁸ while James Olney goes a step further and refers to it as "an attempt at explaining something about human nature and the human condition."⁹ The essence of the autobiography is the essence of its own author, "the isolate uniqueness that nearly everyone agrees to be the primary quality and condition of the individual and his experience."¹⁰ The goal of the autobiography, therefore, is to offer the reader a sense of the autobiographer himself by creating a soulful reflection of the autobiographer. Only then can the reader grasp the essence of the autobiographer, and only then can the autobiographer master time by becoming the "rightful possessor of his life or his death."¹¹

Certainly, the autobiography has flourished and undergone several transformations since Margery Kempe recorded her divine visions several centuries ago. The Victorian era offers countless examples and innovations of the genre, including fictionalized autobiographies. Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Charles Dickens' *David Copperfield* exemplify the creative and metaphysical powers that be-

long to the genre. Both literary works not only allow the reader a glimpse into the emotional and psychological turmoil of their eponymous characters, but are also rooted in the authors' own personal experiences.¹² Such novels, therefore, are examples of a two-fold autobiography; they detail both the fictional narrator's life and journey while also building from the author's authentic essence. Indeed, "the man is forever adding himself to himself,"¹³ as Gusdorf remarks. The autobiography is a mirror as well as an addition to the autobiographer:

Every autobiography is a work of art and at the same time a work of enlightenment; it does not show us the individual seen from outside in his visible actions but the person in his inner privacy, not as he was, not as he is, but as he believes and wishes himself to be and to have been. What is in question is a sort of reevaluation of individual destiny; the author, who is at the same time the hero of the tale, wants to elucidate his past in order to draw out the structure of his being in time.¹⁴

Jane Eyre is an extension of Charlotte Brontë, and *David Copperfield* is an extension of Charles Dickens. Both of these characters are fictional, but they nevertheless stem from the most private essence of their respective authors and add to the self-portrait that each autobiography attempts to illustrate.

Gusdorf clarifies that the autobiographer, however, is acting on a much larger scale by trying to provide more than "only an exterior presentation of great persons."¹⁵ The autobiographer combines his multiple faces as an artist, model, and historian in order to depict himself as "a great person, worthy of men's remembrance."¹⁶ Gusdorf offers Jean-Jacques Rousseau as an example, who, being "no more than a common citizen of Geneva," was nevertheless "a kind of literary adventurer."¹⁷ Indeed, Rousseau begins his *Confessions* by proclaiming, "I am not made like any that I have seen; I venture to believe that I was not made like any that exist."¹⁸ Rousseau offers such an intimate account of his self, but goes even further by lacing his autobiography with a sense of self-confidence that verges on egoism. The autobiographer takes on a herculean task by

"The autobiographer takes on a Herculean task by writing his autobiography; it requires an unparalleled sense of self-assurance and conviction."

writing his autobiography; it requires an unparalleled sense of self-assurance and conviction. Only with this aplomb, Gusdorf implies, can the autobiographer truly offer his private and most intimate self. He claims:

Our interest is turned from public to private history: alongside the great men who act out the official history of humanity, there are obscure men who conduct the campaign of their spiritual life within their breast, carrying on silent battles whose ways and means, whose triumphs and reversals also merit being preserved in the universal memory.¹⁹

If Rousseau immortalizes his private self through excessive self-confidence, then Saint Augustine does the same with the help of Christianity. Saint Augustine offers quite an unabashed record of his life in his *Confessions*, and does not attempt to hide his sins or misdeeds. By exposing himself to the reader, showing himself naked and vulnerable, Saint Augustine finds his greatest strength: only by revealing his most private self can he become invulnerable. Saint Augustine claims, “I intend to remind myself of my past foulnesses and carnal corruptions, not because I love them but so that I may love you, my God.”²⁰ By blatantly discussing his terrible acts, ranging from promiscuous sex to stealing pears, Saint Augustine convinces the reader that “every destiny, however humble it may be, assumes a kind of supernatural stake.”²¹ Saint Augustine’s *Confessions* is a self-examination of his own relationship with God and Christianity, a mirror “whence a new fascination with the secret springs of personal life.”²² Rousseau and Saint Augustine succeed, according to Gusdorf, by exposing their private selves to the utmost degree and reveling in their own intimacy.

Perhaps the autobiography is something even more intricate, mired in the complexities of both the inner and outer selves. Stephen Spender believes that the autobiography is a genre that “is no longer the writer’s own experience” as “it becomes everyone’s.”²³ The autobiographer searches through “the vast mine” of his personal experiences to discover the “ore” of his inner essence – but this personal ore is not enough. Indeed, Spender argues that the autobiog-

rapher must “convert this ore into forms that are outside the writer’s own personal ones,”²⁴ thus rendering the autobiography a product caught between the inner and outer selves. Spender maintains:

Yet unless one is to oneself entirely public, it seems that the problem of an autobiographer, when he considers the material of his own past, is that he is confronted not by one life – which he sees from the outside – but by two. One of these lives is himself as others see him – his social or historic personality – the sum of his achievements, his appearances, his personal relationships. All these are real to him as, say, his own image in a mirror. But there is also himself known only to himself, himself seen from the inside of his own existence. This inside self has a history that may have no significance in any objective “history of his time.” It is the history of himself observing the observer, not the history of himself observed by others.²⁵

The autobiographer is caught in a peculiar dilemma: the autobiography consists of observations that not only he makes about himself, but also observations made by others about himself. Thus, the autobiographer is a dual product consisting of the inner self – the ‘ore’ mined by the autobiographer from his own personal field – and the outer self – the ‘ore’ mined by the autobiographer from stranger fields. The autobiography, consequently, is a product formed by the inner, personal self as well as the perspective and impressions made by society, the outsiders, the observers.

Spender’s theories about the autobiographer and his two lives have some serious implications. Few autobiographies exist that unite these two lives, and according to Spender, even Rousseau and Saint Augustine fail to do so. What about the personal life prevents such a union? Spender insists that “the inner life is regarded by most people as so dangerous that it cannot be revealed openly and directly.”²⁶ The true Self cannot handle exposure to the Other, as it will be criticized, dissected, and ripped apart. Perhaps, then, Spender is correct when he states that the autobiographer is indirectly “commenting on the values of the age in which he lives.”²⁷ Indeed, the perspective of the autobi-

“Anti-Islamic incidents were the second least reported hate crimes before 9/11, but are now the second highest among religious-bias incidents.”

ographer, his very Self, is shunted through another channel, that of society and the Other. Ayad Akhtar's case is no different, but to examine his autobiography, one must first gain a deeper understanding of the Self and the Other with which he interacts – Muslims and the American public, respectively.

PERCEPTIONS OF MUSLIMS IN THE POST-9/11 WORLD

Although negative sentiments toward Muslims can be traced back to Qur'anic times, the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11th, 2001 seem to have ushered in a new age of Islamophobia in the annals of history. While American media was intensely focused on Osama bin Laden and the nation's relations with the Middle East, few headlines reported on hate crimes against those of South Asian or Middle Eastern descent. Anti-Islamic incidents were the second least reported hate crimes before 9/11, but are now the second highest among religious-bias incidents. Indeed, from pre-9/11 to post-9/11, a startling increase of 1600% in anti-Islamic incidents took place.²⁸

More than thirteen years later, the 9/11 attacks continue to serve as a reminder of the United States' vulnerability in regard to international relations and terrorism. Indeed, perhaps more pressing today is the ongoing ISIS crisis. The rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria was both unexpected and startling, immediately appearing in headlines across the globe and striking fear into the hearts of millions. The very goal of ISIS – to “establish[...] an independent Islamic state”²⁹ – is the ultimate fear that terrorized the American public following 9/11. A group constructing a caliphate in the Middle East, with the threat of apocalyptic expansion, forms the basis of nearly every post-9/11 nightmare. And certainly, the ISIS crisis does seem to be a cause for concern: the organization has seized a considerable amount of area stretching from northern Syria to central Iraq. The fact that 57% of American citizens approve of U.S. military action against Islamic militants in Iraq and Syria should therefore be no surprise.³⁰

The ISIS threat has stimulated mass anxiety in the American public, and prominent speakers are adding to the hysteria of the supposed threat against Western democracy. On his October 3rd, 2014 episode of *Real Time with Bill Maher*, cable talk show host Bill Maher insisted

that the fraction of Muslim extremists in the world is more “than just a few bad apples.” He also related Muslims to the Mafia and even derided Islam as “the mother lode of bad ideas.”³¹ Maher is one among countless individuals who equates Islam with terrorism and questions the allegiance of the American Muslim population. Perhaps the most noticeable Islamophobe is Pamela Geller, executive director and cofounder of Stop Islamization of America (SIOA) and the American Freedom Defense Initiative (AFDI), an umbrella group including SIOA.³² Although both organizations are classified as hate groups by the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), Geller continues to spread her campaign via anti-Islamic ads on buses, taxis, and subway stations in New York and Massachusetts.^{33, 34}

Maher and Geller are only two vocal figureheads who have the resources to broadcast their message to the American public – and yet, perhaps most unsettling is just how many American citizens agree with their sentiments. According to a 2010 *TIME* poll, 61% of Americans opposed the construction of the Park51/Cordoba House project, or as Geller herself calls it, the ‘Ground Zero Mosque.’ Furthermore, 28% of respondents believe that Muslims should not be eligible to sit on the U.S. Supreme Court, while



GROUND ZERO MOSQUE PROTESTER (COURTESY OF WIKIMEDIA COMMONS)

nearly one-third of the nation thinks Muslims should be forbidden from running for presidency.³⁵ Such attitudes, unfortunately, do not seem to have diminished with time. According to a 2014 survey conducted by the Pew Research Center, the American public views Muslims in the coldest manner and least favorably out of several other religious groups.³⁶ Findings from another 2014 poll conducted by the Arab American Institute are consistent with such data. In addition, the latter poll revealed that “a growing percentage of Americans say that they lack confidence in the ability of individuals from either [the Arab or Muslim community] to perform their duties as Americans should they be appointed to an important government position.”³⁷ Indeed, never has the position of Muslims in the United States been more precarious than in the post-9/11 world.

PORTRAYAL OF MUSLIMS IN AMERICAN MEDIA

The inclusion of minorities in American television and film has been an ongoing issue, with many critics claiming that the American media whitewashes important characters of color. The portrayal of Muslim characters, however, may be a bit more problematic; indeed, whenever Muslims are represented in media, they are constantly depicted as violent or terroristic individuals. Depictions of Muslims that gain success are often those that somehow associate Islam with terrorism or other stereotypes, and as a result, Muslim characters in television or film are always defined by these qualities or themes.

One might think that this issue arose after the 9/11 attacks, but such demeaning depictions of Muslims have been present throughout the Western world for ages. Disney’s 1992 animated blockbuster *Aladdin* is only one example of racism and stereotyping.³⁸ The winner of two Academy Awards, *Aladdin* is a loose adaptation of “Aladdin and His Magic Lamp,” a tale in the famous literary collection *Arabian Nights*. Although an extreme success for Disney, the film met with such controversy upon release that *Entertainment Weekly* ranked it in a list of the most controversial movies in history.³⁹ The American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC) objected to the opening lines of the movie, also the opening lines of the song “Arabian Nights”:

Oh, I come from a land,
From a faraway place
Where the caravan camels roam,
Where they cut off your ear
If they don’t like your face,
It’s barbaric, but hey, it’s home.

The ADC claimed that these verses perpetuated the view that the Islamic world is a realm of barbarism and aggression. The lyrics “Where they cut off your ear / If they don’t like your face” were ultimately changed to “Where it’s flat and immense / And the heat is intense” after the theatrical release of the movie. The ADC and other critics, however, continued to point out several issues with *Aladdin*. The depiction of Princess Jasmine, who is trapped and oppressed by her patriarchal society, aligns with the stereotypical belief that Muslim women are trapped and subjugated. Similarly, the citizens of the fictional kingdom of Agrabah are uncivilized, rude, and barbaric; at one point in the film, a merchant nearly cuts off the princess’ hand after she gives an apple from the merchant’s cart to a poor boy. The ADC also took offense to the depiction of the two main characters, Princess Jasmine and Aladdin, for having more Anglican features and accents, whereas the citizens of Agrabah possess darker skin, heavy accents, and grotesque facial features. Disney’s film, the ADC argues, promotes the idea that the Arab world is “alien, exotic, and ‘other’... a place of deserts and camels, of arbitrary cruelty and barbarism.”⁴⁰

After 9/11, however, the American media became a hotbed for Muslim characters. Now, Muslims and the Middle East provide perfect characters and settings for real-world drama and conflict. In 2011, the political thriller television series *Homeland* premiered on Showtime and won a series of awards and accolades, including the 2012 Primetime Emmy Award for Outstanding Drama Series. Nevertheless, the show has been criticized for its portrayal of Muslims and the Middle East, with American journalist Laila Al-Arian lambasting *Homeland* as “TV’s most Islamophobic show.” “All the standard stereotypes about Islam and Muslims are reinforced,” she claims, “and it is demonstrated *ad nauseam* that anyone marked as ‘Muslim’ by race or creed can never be trusted, all via the deceptively unsophisticated bureau-jargon of the government’s top spies.”⁴¹ Al-Arian’s argument is not unfounded: the first three seasons of the show revolve around Marine Sergeant Nicholas Brody, a prisoner of war by al-Qaeda who is finally rescued after eight years. Although hailed by the American public as a war hero, CIA officer Carrie Mathison suspects that Brody is now a sleeper agent on American soil. The crux of the television show raises the neurotic question: can a white, male American turn against his own country after converting to Islam? Al-Arian insists that Brody “is such an awful pastiche of American fears and pseudo-psychology that only an audience conditioned by the Islamophobic, anti-Arab tropes in our media could

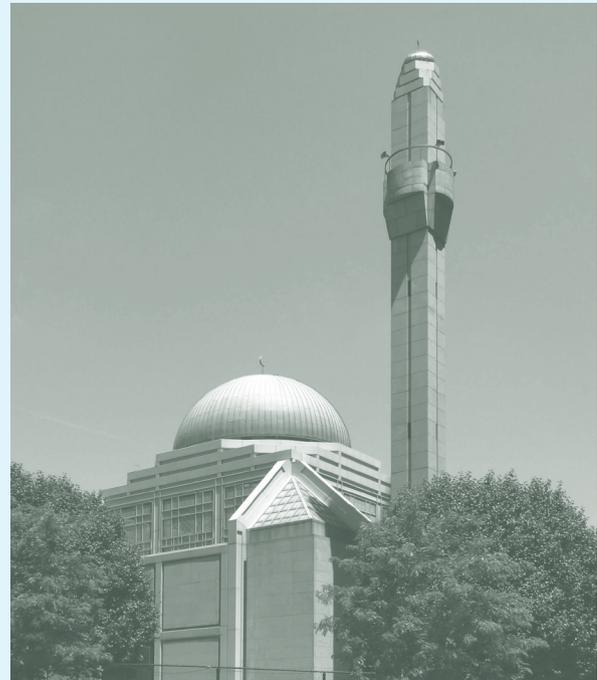
find him consistent.”⁴² Mathison’s fears about Brody are ultimately grounded: not only does he attempt to commit a suicide bombing, but he also aids al-Qaeda in assassinating the Vice President.

Depictions of Muslims in a positive light are rather rare; more importantly, any such attempts are often unsuccessful in mainstream American media. In 2005, the television drama *Sleeper Cell* also premiered on Showtime and won rave reviews. The show centers on an undercover Muslim FBI agent who must infiltrate a terrorist sleeper cell. Actor Michael Ealy, who portrays the main Muslim character in the show, claims, “That’s the one thing I think is very subversive about this show that we set out to sort of do, is to say, ‘We want Americans to root for a Muslim.’”⁴³ Although some critics maintain that the show perpetuates stereotypes, Ealy makes an important point: *Sleeper Cell* subverts stereotypes to a greater extent than *Homeland* ever has. Despite the accomplishments of *Sleeper Cell*, a range of critics insisted that the show is far too sympathetic to terrorists and their motivations.⁴⁴ The show ultimately ran for only two seasons and a little more than a year; no proper explanation was given for its abrupt cancellation.

Nevertheless, there have been other creative attempts at television shows that focus on Muslim characters without the backdrop of terrorism. In 2011, TLC premiered *All-American Muslim*, a reality television program that followed the daily lives of five Lebanese-American Shia Muslims in Dearborn, Michigan. The show generated significant controversy during its run, with the Florida Family Association labeling it as “propaganda that riskily hides the Islamic agenda’s clear and present danger to American liberties and traditional values.”⁴⁵ Ultimately, *All-American Muslim* turned out to be a bit too bland for viewers: the premiere attracted 1.7 million viewers while the finale garnered only 900,000 viewers. TLC cancelled the program after one season because, as Adam Martin for *The Wire* points out, “nobody wants to watch a show about a normal, all-American family.”⁴⁶ Indeed, the show met its end not because viewers were repelled by its supposed Islamic propaganda, but because of its boring and average depiction of American Muslim families. A similar situation happened with the sitcom *Aliens in America* that aired on The CW from 2007 to 2008. The show, about a Muslim exchange student from Pakistan who moves in with a host family in Wisconsin, earned positive reviews but failed to attract any viewers. *Aliens in America* was also cancelled after just one season.⁴⁷

In early 2014, controversy erupted over ABC Family ordering the pilot for a new television drama entitled *Alice in Arabia*. The show was intended to be a “high-stakes drama series” about a “rebellious American teenage girl” who is “kidnapped” by her Saudi Arabian relatives and forced to be a “virtual prisoner in her grandfather’s royal compound” while “surviving life behind the veil.” ABC Family’s announcement of the pilot program was lambasted by nearly all American Muslims; BuzzFeed derided *Alice in Arabia* as “the latest in a line of simplistic stereotypes of Muslims on American television,”⁴⁸ while *TIME* declared it “racist.”⁴⁹ Four days after the pilot was picked up, ABC Family announced that it was no longer moving forward with the project.

Of particular interest in the entire *Alice in Arabia* scandal is the role of Brooke Eikmeier, the creator of the show as well as an Arabic-speaking U.S. army veteran. In a piece for *The Hollywood Reporter*, Eikmeier insists that her concept for the show was drastically different from the way ABC Family decided to advertise it. Eikmeier states that she envisioned a unique program, “a series that showed [Muslims] fairly and with admiration and complexity, that



ISLAMIC CULTURAL CENTER IN MANHATTAN (COURTESY OF WIKIMEDIA COMMONS)

would give opportunities to Arab writers and Arab actors,” and that ABC Family’s press release left her “horrified.”⁵⁰ Although the full story will likely remain unknown, the scandal around *Alice in Arabia* hints at a deeper and more complex issue: exactly how does the American television industry – and by extension, American arts and media – choose to depict Muslims and Islam? If Eikmeier is telling the truth, then ABC Family purposely and needlessly advertised her show through the most stereotypical lens possible.

The ADC and Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) insisted that *Alice in Arabia* perpetuated stereotypes and Islamophobia, and that American media continually misrepresents Muslims. What these organizations and critics fail to note, however, is that the American media has attempted to put forth accurate and positive depictions before. Perhaps *Alice in Arabia* was a step in the right direction marred by terrible wording and advertising, but shows like *All-American Muslim* and *Aliens in America* were heavily divorced from any stereotypes or Islamophobia – and unfortunately, that is what led to their respective downfalls. Several shows that have attempted to holistically portray Muslims, including *Sleeper Cell*, *All-American Muslim*, and *Aliens in America*, were cancelled shortly after their premieres due to low viewership and interest. In contrast, *Aladdin* reigns as one of Disney’s stunning achievements while *Homeland* will be entering its fifth season in 2015. The protests of the ADC and CAIR are futile; the general American public does not wish to change its opinions, and they do not want to waste their time on a show that does not appease their presupposed notions of Muslims and Islam. In such an atmosphere, how can Muslims voice themselves and be heard?

Few Muslim artists have gained success or recognition in American society, and one cannot help but wonder if Spender was correct in his theories about the autobiographer and his dual lives. He insists that “the inner life is regarded by most people as so dangerous that it cannot be revealed openly and directly.”⁵¹ Likewise, Muslims are unable to depict their own narratives in American media due to ignorance and lack of interest. If the true Self cannot be exposed to the Other, then perhaps the autobiographer is indeed indirectly “commenting on the values of the age in which he lives.”⁵² The perspective of the autobiographer, his very Self, is forced to be told through that of society and the Other – and Ayad Akhtar has done exactly that.

CULTURE CLASH: AYAD AKHTAR AND HIS LIFE AS AN AMERICAN MUSLIM

Born in New York City and raised in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Ayad Akhtar always struggled with his identity and place in American society. From a very young age, Akhtar was drawn to his faith and even went through a phase of intense religious commitment. His parents, both doctors who emigrated from Pakistan in the late 1960s, are “secular humanists,”⁵³ according to Akhtar, who did not impress religion upon their children. Akhtar, in fact, taught himself how to pray and read the Qur’an. In an interview with National Public Radio (NPR), Akhtar had this to say about his childhood:

I was obsessed with what [the Qur’an] meant and understanding how I should live, and it was a very important part of my childhood but it really didn’t come from my parents... I think it had a lot to do with trying to understand how and why I was different and what that meant, growing up in Milwaukee, where we really were the only Muslim family in the ‘80s in our area of town.⁵⁴

Akhtar admits that in his youth, he struggled with his identity and was caught between two worlds. “I didn’t have a place in the [American] culture in the same way that my white friends did,”⁵⁵ Akhtar recalls in another interview.

After studying theatre at Brown University, Akhtar traveled across Europe and studied acting under renowned actor and director Jerzy Grotowski. And yet, Akhtar was not ready to explore his heritage or culture in his work; indeed, his first novel, centered on a poet who works at Goldman Sachs, only tangentially related to Islam and failed to secure a publisher or literary agent. By the time Akhtar enrolled in Columbia University as a graduate film student in the 2000s, however, he was ready to confront his identity. With two fellow students, Akhtar co-wrote a screenplay entitled *The War Within*, focusing on a radicalized Pakistani student who plans on carrying out a suicide bombing in New York’s Grand Central Station. The film, released in 2005, proved to be a creative turning point for Akhtar. “The film was the preparatory gesture,” he claims. “It was part of a process of coming out in some way. It was me fully accepting that I was going to represent myself as Pakistani, as Muslim.”⁵⁶

Akhtar’s comparison of his own cultural acceptance to ‘coming out of the closet’ is rather fascinating. Similar to how closeted individuals may feel shame or guilt, Akhtar

implies that he, too, used to feel a sort of discomfort as a Pakistani American. Akhtar used his creative epiphany to propel his career forward – and with startling success. Less than a decade after the release of *The War Within*, Akhtar irrevocably found himself “the *de facto* voice of the American Muslim in theater.”⁵⁷

THE SELF AND THE OTHER: AKHTAR’S AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL WORKS IN THE POST-9/11 WORLD

Akhtar has repeatedly insisted that the inspiration for all of his works stems from his culture, religion, and heritage. “Everything I write is some version of autobiography,” he said in a 2014 interview. “It’s often a deformed version of autobiography, but everything I write is drawn from personal experience, whether it’s observed or lived.”⁵⁸ In another interview, Akhtar elaborated on his relationship with the autobiographical genre:

Guernica: What do you make of the American preoccupation with memoir and the autobiography? Novelists will write a book in the first person and many readers will think, “That has to have happened to them in real life.”

Ayad Akhtar: Especially if you’re a writer of color or if you’re a woman. Because if you fall into either of those categories, you’re expected to be writing of your experience. But if you’re not, then you can write about anything.

It’s always perplexing to me, the ways in which my own autobiography has found its way into my work. And it’s often very misleading. I’ll take details, and they are working in the opposite way from which they existed in my life. The story begins to have its own demands: I need this, that, and the other, and I could use this thing, but I have to change it. And so that comes into the story, and it has the register of authentic life, and people think, of course, it must have happened exactly like that.

They’re going to get confused if they keep reading what I’m working on. They’ll think, “How can he be that and that? It doesn’t make any sense!”⁵⁹

Akhtar maintains that although his works are based on his own life, they nevertheless occupy a different sphere, one of artful authenticity and literary fantasy – and yet, the very nature of these works is what seems problematic. His works may be a blend of reality and fiction, but that they all paint Muslims in a negative light is somewhat disturbing. Akhtar distances himself from his bigoted, oppressive,

and violent characters, but the question remains – why solely create characters like these in the first place?

Akhtar’s first novel, published in 2012, was instantly met with critical acclaim. His manuscript *American Dervish*, in fact, was picked up by Little, Brown and Company for a six-figure sum only one day after the publisher received it. *The New York Times*, among others, reviewed it quite favorably, calling the novel a “pleasure,” a “self-assured and effortlessly told”⁶⁰ debut. *American Dervish* centers on a young boy named Hayat Shah, a Pakistani American living in suburban Milwaukee who must grapple with his culture, faith, and identity as he enters adolescence. Although his novel resembles a bildungsroman in many aspects, the inclusion of bigoted Muslim characters interrupts Akhtar’s narrative and forces it to take on a darker tone. One pharmacist idolizes Adolf Hitler, and in one of the novel’s most upsetting scenes, the imam at the local mosque delivers an anti-Semitic khutbah and calls the Jewish people “loathsome.”⁶¹ Even Akhtar’s protagonist is unable to resist such prejudice: when Mina, the object of Hayat’s adolescent affections, begins to fall in love with a Jewish doctor, Hayat “turns to a more conservative, literal version of Islam” and unfortunately “gravitate[s] toward those aspects of Muslim scripture and culture that cast Jews in a negative light.”⁶² Other Muslim characters, in addition, are subtly misogynistic, and as Hayat becomes jealous of Mina and her Jewish lover, the reader cannot help but wonder how toxic of a combination anti-Semitism and misogyny can truly be.

Akhtar continues his discussion of women in his 2014 play *The Who & The What*. Described as a “fiery-flavored stew” that stirs “matters of faith and family, gender and culture,”⁶³ Akhtar’s play centers on Zarina, an Ivy-educated young Muslim woman who ruminates on the role of women in Islam. Controlled by her rigid father, Zarina critiques both Islamic history and the veil; she is convinced that “misogyny [lies] at the heart of Islamic history”⁶⁴ and longs to pen an exposé. “I hate what the faith does to women,” she admits in one scene. “For every story about [Prophet Muhammad’s] generosity or his goodness, there’s another that’s used as an excuse to hide us. And the story of the veil takes the cake.”⁶⁵ Where Zarina is critical, her father is conservative: when instructing another male Muslim about how he should treat his wife, Afzal states, “She has more power over you than she really wants. She can’t help it. And she won’t be happy until you break her, son. She needs you to take it on, man.”⁶⁶ Akhtar describes his story, about the clash between two different generations, as a “very old tale which is told again and again.”⁶⁷ In

many aspects, Akhtar is correct – but despite the play’s forced happy ending, the issues of misogyny and oppression are raised and subsequently left dangling, never truly resolved for the audience.

But compared to either *American Dervish* or *The Who & The What*, Akhtar’s 2012 play *Disgraced* is probably the most controversial work of all, as well as the most praised. Indeed, the winner of the 2013 Pulitzer Prize for Drama, *Disgraced* began its highly feted Broadway run in October 2014. The play centers on mergers and acquisitions lawyer Amir Kapoor who lives with his wife in a post-9/11 Upper East Side. Ashamed of his Pakistani heritage and desirous of a successful career, Amir goes as far as to change his name and renounce his faith. Whereas at least two other characters are supporters of Islam, Amir emerges as Islam’s most aggressive critic in the play. Amir constantly equates Islam with violence, oppression, and bigotry; at one point, despite his wife’s counterargument, he even maintains that the Qur’an endorses wife-beating. In a hateful rant at the dinner table, Amir spews the following to his wife and guests:

[Islam] goes way deeper than the Taliban. To be Muslim – *truly* – means not only that you *believe* all this. It means you *fight* for it, too. Politics follows faith? No distinction between mosque

and state? Remember all that? So if the point is that the world in the Quran was a better place than this world, well, then let’s go back. Let’s stone adulterers. Let’s cut off the hands of thieves. Let’s kill the unbelievers. And so, even if you’re one of those lapsed Muslims sipping your after-dinner scotch alongside your beautiful white American wife – and watching the news and seeing folks in the Middle East dying for values you were taught were purer – and stricter – and truer ... you can’t help but feel just a little bit of pride.⁶⁸

Akhtar, ever the keen playwright, uses Amir’s “blush of pride”⁶⁹ at the 9/11 attacks to invoke the doubt and suspicion of the American audience toward Muslims in a post-9/11 world. Indeed, Akhtar effectively plays upon the fears of the American public to create shock value and controversy – so when Amir admits, “I guess I forgot ... which *we* I was,”⁷⁰ and when Amir’s guest calls Amir a “fucking closet jihadist,”⁷¹ the lines between ‘them’ and ‘us’ are quite clearly drawn.

But Akhtar takes everything a step further. In one of the play’s most harrowing scenes, Amir viciously beats his wife when he discovers her infidelity. He assaults her in a “torrent of rage”⁷² until he realizes the inhumanity of his own actions; by the end of the scene, his wife’s face is covered with blood. Amir’s violence connects to his earlier comments about how Islam promotes wife-beating – the



IMAGE FROM PERFORMANCE OF *DISGRACED* AT THE BUSH THEATRE (COURTESY OF GERAIN LEWIS/ALAMY)

paradox, however, is that Amir detests Islam and is an apostate. Consequently, how could the American Amir slip into the supposed behavior of his ancestors? “It’s tribal,” Amir tells his guests. “It is in the bones... You have to work *real* hard to root that shit out.”⁷³ Akhtar paints a disturbing portrait of a man who angrily flees from Islamic culture, only to discover it silently lurking within himself. Indeed, Amir becomes the bigoted and violent stereotype that he so detests, and consequently, Akhtar’s protagonist perpetuates Muslim stereotypes in a society that is already anxious about the role of Muslims and Islam. Akhtar does the same with the only other Pakistani character in the play, Amir’s nephew. Near the end of the play, Abe tells his uncle, “[Americans have] conquered the world. We’re gonna get it back. That’s our destiny. It’s in the Quran.”⁷⁴ Abe’s dreams of establishing a worldwide Islamic caliphate are eerily similar to the current goal of ISIS, and once again, play upon American fears. Akhtar’s Pulitzer Prize-winning play ends with a tragic silence and no redeemable Muslim character standing on the stage. What exactly is the American audience supposed to take away from a work like this?

All three of Akhtar’s main works have a common theme: Muslim characters that are painted in a less than flattering light. Indeed, while “some Muslims have accused Akhtar of employing negative stereotypes for dramatic effect,” others even claim that he is “airing the Muslim community’s dirty laundry for an outside audience.”⁷⁵ Akhtar, however, maintains that instead of purposely depicting unlikable Muslim characters, he is simply “writing about the American experience.”⁷⁶ In regard to such criticism, Akhtar responds:

[Readers] have wondered why, in an age of very real anti-Muslim bigotry, I am choosing to delve into the more shadowy elements of modern Islamic identity. The issue is not unimportant. And the response to it is not simple. “Correcting” the impression many in the West have of Islam is not an artistic project; it is a public relations matter. As such, the optics of how Islam is perceived cannot be of concern to me except insofar as it is of moment to the characters I am writing about.⁷⁷

Akhtar echoes his sentiment about the game of public relations and optics in a 2012 interview with Bill Kenower:

I think there’s this sense that as a Muslim American artist of some visibility, where there’s a real dearth of that in the culture today, that I am seen as having some sort of responsibility and that that responsibility is unfortunately seen as a, or formulated

as, almost a PR strategy or an optics game, in which I am called upon to reflect back an image of Islam that is going to correct the [Western] misapprehension or misperception of it. And that is a very valiant job; it’s just not the job of an artist.⁷⁸

Akhtar insists that as an artist, he should not be expected to clear up any misunderstandings about Islam or Muslims, and perhaps he is right. Akhtar has repeatedly stated that it is not his responsibility to offer a “message or some higher meaning”⁷⁹ to his American audience.

There is no doubt that Akhtar’s formula has succeeded: now a Pulitzer Prize-winner in the midst of elite company, Akhtar has become the most prominent Muslim voice in American literature and theatre. And yet, although he admits his works are autobiographical, Akhtar continually attempts to divorce them from the aura of Muslims, the Other. In an interview with *The Wall Street Journal*, Akhtar says:

I think the alleged proposition is you are going to go see my work and learn something about “those” people. And a lot of times people come away thinking, “Actually, I’m illuminated about myself.” But that’s my intention. I’m writing to the universal. I’m not writing to some specific ideal that fits in with the zeitgeist. I just happen to be situated, because of my history, my upbringing, my passions, my ecstasies and my demons, to be writing about subject matter that seems to be meeting the world in an unusually direct way. But that’s not a conscious strategy on my part. That’s just luck. I think I’m writing about the American experience.⁸⁰

According to Akhtar, his works are not about Muslims or the Muslim condition; instead, they focus on Americans and the American condition – but to make the American experience the centerpiece of one’s works, Akhtar claims one must “wrestle with your demons and your passions, and to celebrate and criticise your traditions and your community.”⁸¹

And so, consciously or unconsciously, Akhtar seems to have realized Spender’s theories on autobiography. By casting the American Muslim community in a negative light, Akhtar is “commenting on the value of the age in which he lives.”⁸² No one except Akhtar himself truly knows whether or not he is using the American anxiety of Muslims and Islam to jumpstart his career, but the American artist is quite open about his literary difficulties:

So my idea of being a writer meant writing like a European modernist, and I needed 15 years to get over that. I was working for a long time with the wrong idea, which was not bringing me close to my own subject matter, because I never thought that anything I experienced as a kid or that I saw in my community would be of interest to anybody else. That imprimatur took a long time to work out of my system, and it didn't happen until my early 30s.⁸³

The implication is clear: only when Akhtar began to focus on his own community and heritage was he able to achieve success – but success itself stems from society and its consciousness. In a society that immediately discards any medium that portrays Muslims in a positive light on the basis of it being boring or average, such as *All-American Muslim*, while championing medium that perpetuates Islamic stereotypes, such as *Homeland*, how can a Muslim or Pakistani artist ever expect to achieve recognition? Even Akhtar himself admits that he is sometimes taken aback at the incendiary and unsettling things he has written: “An actor will say something and suddenly I’ll be shocked that I’ve written this thing. I can’t believe it. I want to leave the room.”⁸⁴

And certainly, one cannot blame Akhtar for his shock and disquiet. The mercurial and tempestuous Hayat from *American Dervish*, the impetuous Zarina and prejudiced Afzal from *The Who & The What*, and the conflicted yet callous Amir from *Disgraced* – they are all characters that Akhtar himself created, characters formulated from his own personal experience. Who knows what Akhtar will write next? What stories will he tell, and what characters will populate them? To firmly claim that Akhtar has totally bowed to American consciousness, the Other, and let his Self and experiences be dissected and shunted through another channel, another pair of eyes, another consciousness is a bit extreme. And yet, with the material that Akhtar exploits in his works, one cannot help but wonder what role he is playing on the stage of American media and politics in a post-9/11 world. In fact, perhaps Abe Jensen from *Disgraced* has the final word in these matters:

For three hundred years they’ve been taking our land, drawing new borders, replacing our laws, making us want to be like them. Look like them. Marry their women. They disgraced us. They disgraced us. And then they don’t understand the rage we’ve got?⁸⁵

But then again, who knows?

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