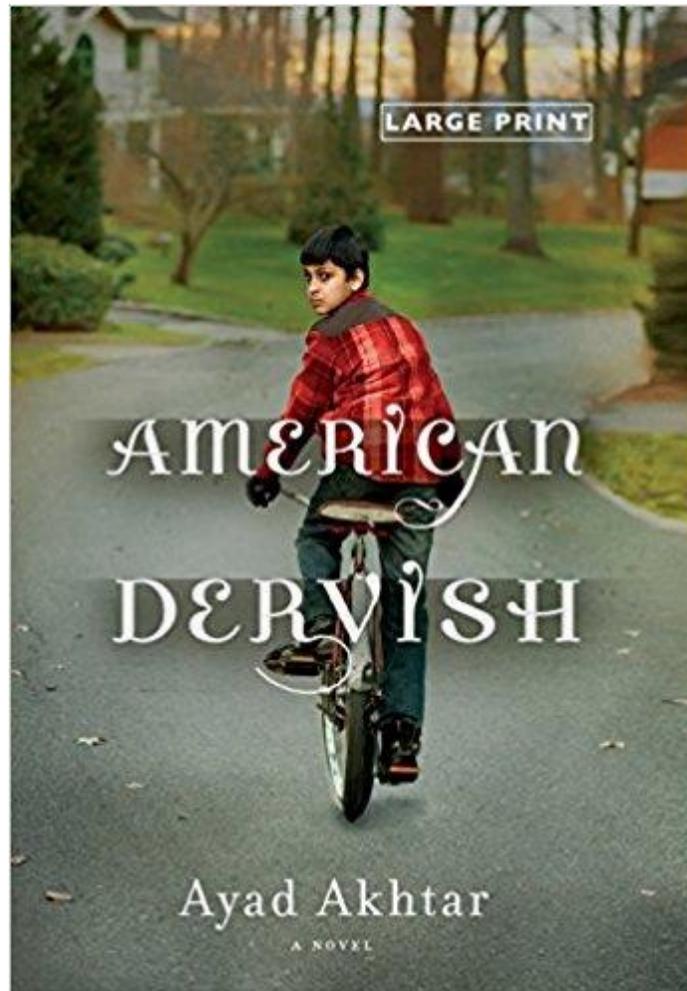

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**Between the Sacred and the Secular: The Process of Assimilation in
Ayad Akhtar's *American Dervish***

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Abstract

People who migrate to the cosmopolitan centers like America and Europe, especially Muslims, most often find themselves in a quagmire with regard to their cultural and religious identity. Their positioning of themselves in between two cultural polarities of faith and cosmopolitanism sometimes poses difficulties in their efforts to assimilate to the new situation. This paper focusses generally on the challenges faced by the immigrants in a foreign country with a cosmopolitan culture, and particularly in the case of the Pakistani Muslim family in America presented in Ayad Akhtar's *American Dervish*. Ayad Akhtar's novel examines the dilemma of the immigrant family of Hayath Shah thrown between the overbearing influences of their faith on the one hand and the promises of the secular space they have adopted, on the other. In the novel, Akhtar portrays a second generation Pakistani boy's struggle in choosing between his religion and the culture of cosmopolitanism. However, different characters in the novel try to change his attitude towards his religion.

Keywords: Ayad Akhtar, *American Dervish*, migration, diaspora, cosmopolitanism, assimilation, sacred, secular, immigration, foreign country.

Introduction



Ayad Akhtar

Courtesy: <https://www.amazon.com/American-Dervish-Novel-Ayad-Akhtar/dp/0316183318>

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Ayad Akhtar's novel *American Dervish* presents the struggle of the immigrants, trying to assimilate themselves with the host culture. There are also people who try to hinge on their faith managing to resist assimilation, and a few others despite their conservative background, easily move on their journey, and try to integrate themselves with the cosmopolitan culture of their host country. In due process they drift away from the religion of their birth, and their faith becomes a matter of chance. The second generation settlers tread a different path; they find themselves in a quandary because of the experience of their parents with the cosmopolitan culture and the uncertainty they face. The protagonist Hayat Shah's comes into this complex world, where he faces hurdles in assimilating to the modern world. Is he able to adapt to the American way of life, does his faith allow him to remain a secular human being? These questions form the basis of our paper.

A Pakistani Immigrant Family

Even the other characters in *American Dervish* face this difficult situation. The novel presents the Pakistani immigrant family of Naveed Shah, consisting of his wife Muneer and their son Hayat, who is in his preteens at the beginning of the novel. Naveed finds more freedom in America than Pakistan; he falters from his faith in the process of trying to adapt to the American Culture, which threatens to ruin his family life. Hayat is a second generation Pakistani immigrant, who finds himself in a tricky situation, because of his mother's influence of Jews and her liking for them. His tutor Mina Ali, who is a childhood friend of his mother, comes to stay with them fearing persecution from her husband. She teaches him the Quran and basic principles of Islam. Hayat is torn between his father's idea about religion and Mina's teachings. His case exemplifies the problems encountered by immigrant communities in general, where they try to grapple with their state of being in between and cosmopolitan.

Hayat's Dilemma in Identifying Himself as a Muslim

Hayat's life is mixture of identities from the beginning of the novel; his relationship with a Jewish girl, Rachel, is a step forward for his getting absorbed in the American society and his mother had always talked about the influence Jews had on her. She was trying to bring him up as

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a Jew, because in her opinion, Jews were at their utmost civility when it comes to treating women; she says this is the reason why she is trying to bring him up like a Jew: “that’s why I’m bringing you up so differently, so that you learn how to respect a woman” (117). Hayat’s mother welcomed Nathan Wolfshon, a Jewish doctor and a friend of her husband, and Mina’s marriage, because she thought that Mina would be respected by Nathan, irrespective of her broken marriage. She says “I keep telling her the fact that Nathan’s Jewish is good thing. They understand how to respect women, behta, they understand how to let a woman be a woman, to let her take care of them. They understand how to give a woman attention” (117). Her liking of the Jews was passed on to her by her father and forefathers who happened to mingle with them during second world war, she clarifies that “I never met my grandfather – he died soon after I was born – but I heard a lot about his respect for Jews, respect which stemmed from his experience living in their midst in England in the years after the second world war” (118). Hayat takes this seriously and develops a relationship with Rachel and he feels liberated and complete in her company. He discovers himself by having an interfaith romance when he says “our wonderful and troubled interfaith romance is tale for another time... it was in Rachel’s arms – and it was with her love – that I finally discovered myself not only as a man, but as an American.” (345). His eating of pork in the college as mentioned in the prologue makes him a full-fledged American. The vendor had mistakenly handed him a bratwurst, he tried to call the vendor but he had already gone away “I turned back to the aisle to call out to the vendor when I stopped. What reason did I have anymore not to eat it? I lifted the sausage to my mouth, closed my eyes, and took a bite. 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 so long forbidden. I felt at once brave and ridiculous. And as I swallowed, an eerie stillness came over me” (4). He felt that a burden has been removed, that night he had a sound and peaceful sleep, “I slept soundly that night, held in restful sleep like a baby in a mother’s loving arm”. (5). Mina’s attempt to teach him the Qur’an, failed because of Hayat’s father.

Mina tried to revive the faith of her friend’s family who seem to have lost in the American wave. She supervised Hayat’s religious learning. Hayat agreed to learn the Quran

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because of his infatuation towards her physical appearance. He wanted to be near her. Mina narrated the life story of the Prophet to him. All these years he grew up listening only to his father's stories with the "white prostitutes". He memorized the Qur'an in English but his only aim in learning was to free his parents from the hell fire, "Mina said that becoming a hafiz was one of the greatest things a person could do in one's life. It meant not only securing one's own place in Jannat, but a place for one's parents as well" (54). Naveed did not approve of his son learning the Qur'an. He forbade Mina from teaching him, because he felt that the Qur'an deterred him from adopting his cosmopolitan culture and generated differences between Nathan and him. Hayat was confused that Mina was in love with a Jew, whom the scripture mentions as the cursed people. He argued with Mina about the status of Jews, when Mina scolds him not to spread lies against Nathan, "But it was wrong for you to say what you said. It's not what is written in the Qur'an". "Yes it is Auntie... it says in ----"you're too young to understand somethings." "The Qur'an says many things. And some you'll not understand until you're older" (236). His belief that the pages of the scripture will not burn, was shattered when Naveed, in a fit of anger tore the pages, danced on them and burnt them: "It wasn't until the paper actually caught fire that I realized I was surprised. I had expected the pages not to burn" (249) but he continued memorizing the verses, so that he could save his parents from hell fire. That it was futile learning the Qur'an in English was exposed when he was asked to recite a few verses during Mina's *Nikah* ceremony. Farhaz, the fifteen-year-old *hafiz*, was unable to stop laughing when he recited these verses in English. The Iman of the Milwaukee mosque also did not approve of his recitation though he praised him for his effort. Farhaz laughed, "You're a moron. Didn't anybody ever tell you it doesn't count if it's not in Arabic" (317). Hayat was eager to know whether his hard work will bear fruit. He asks the Imam about it. "Farhaz says it doesn't count if I didn't memorize the Quran in Arabic." The Imam replied that "Arabic is our holy language, young man". When Hayat asks, "Does it count in English?" The Imam replies "Count for what?" Hayat says, "To get me and my parents into heaven" (317). He felt as though he was mocked by everyone. He gave up his effort slowly and by the time he met Mina in her death bed after a decade, he was able to realize that he had come away from religion, barely remembering

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what he had memorized. In a dream he saw himself walking away from the middle of a prayer which was led by the Prophet, “I walked out of the mosque and left them praying” (229).

Naveed’s Abhorrence of Faith and His Attempts to Assimilate

The loss of identity is explicit in Naveed’s approach towards religion. He tries to assimilate himself in the cosmopolitan culture and thereby loses his Muslim character once he arrives in America. His abhorrence towards religion started from the time his mother enforced a strict rule in their house, waking up her children early and beating them for not following the prayer timings. Hayat says that “Father’s antipathy for the faith came from the fact that his own mother used devotedness to abuse her children, beating them out of bed for their morning prayers, not feeding them if they never put in their hours of religious study” (49). His impact on his wife was so much that she too lost her faith. Hayat sheds light on this point when he says, “Deep down, Mother was a believer, but the years she’d spent with Father – who thought religion was for fools – had trained her, I think, to check her religious impulses” (49). He also believed that religious people like the Chahta’s are hypocrites and he did not approve of their speaking against the Americans or the Jews. He did not mingle with the Pakistani families scattered in Milwaukee, their get-together was referred to as herds by him. Hayat says, “He called them sheep, claiming that they gathered like herd animals as a way of avoiding the fact they were no longer in Pakistan” (80). When Nathan speaks about religion to Mina, he interrupts them saying that this topic is only for fools, “Religion, my friends, is a topic for fools. And this conversation is a living proof” (146). No wonder then that Naveed scorns all aspects of religion, as stressed by Randy Boyagoda when she says: “Hayat’s father is a philandering alcoholic neurologist who wears his atheism proudly, scorns the local immigrant Muslim community, and regards all religions, and Islam in particular, as backward and embarrassingly crude” (Randy Boyagoda *American Dervish*).

The same way he forbids Mina from teaching the Quran to Hayat and also the tenets of Islam. She has to stop teaching because it was a part her getting assimilated to the society and succumbing to her guest’s rules, she says to Hayat “your father asked me not to participate in

your religious study any more. He made me promise and ... I have to honor his promise. I am his guest, after all” (256). Similarly, his family life also is in trouble.

By the time Hayat narrates the story of his parents, their life was already in shambles. Naveed had started cheating his wife, the moment they landed in America. Hayat says about this as, “she was with a man who started cheating on her almost as soon as they arrived in America. In short, by the time I was ten, she’d been miserable for years.” (25). As a result, Hayat started to hate his father’s behavior, he says, “And at ten, I already knew myself well enough to know that if I listened too closely to what she said, my blood would start to boil.” (27). Because of this experience his mother starts bringing him up as a Jew.

Muneer’s Fascination for the Jews

A factor which had a great influence on Hayat was his mother’s fascination for the Jews. Her grandfather’s admiration for the Jews was the reason behind Muneer’s decision. The love story of Mina and Nathan was a positive sign for her, as she was of the opinion that Jews respected women and her individuality. When Mina was worried about Nathan’s religion she says it is a good thing that he is a Jew, and tells Hayat that, “They understand how to let a woman be a woman, to let her take care of them. They understand how to give a woman attention” (117). She also tells Hayat that this is the reason why she is bringing up as a Jew, “That’s why I’m bringing you up differently, so that you can learn how to respect a woman... I’m bringing you up like a little Jew” (117). Her obsession was so much that she did not send Hayat to school during Jewish festivals. Moreover she drove long distances to buy meat from a Jewish butcher and also enjoyed talking to them. Her experience of marital life had given her a bad opinion about Muslim men.

Naveed’s behavior was responsible for her approach towards Muslim men. She had given up her studies in Pakistan and came to America to settle there. She considered it as a great mistake not to have completed her degree, Hayat says “... it was always her great regret that she didn’t wait to finish her degree” (25). Hayat says that he remembers his father’s deception on his

mother from the time he was five years old. “I’d been hearing about Father’s mistresses since the night Mother dragged me through the streets of Milwaukee as a five-year-old, searching for Father, who we eventually found at the apartment of a woman he worked with at the hospital” (27). She also did not approve of the immigrants’ treatment of their wives.

Mina and Nathan, the Perfect Couple Separated by Religion

Hayat’s obsession for Mina and her closeness was threatened when Nathan comes into her life, though they are separated by religion their understanding makes them think about their marriage. When Mina asks Hayat about his opinion on Nathan, he says “How could he be my uncle?” (p155), a Jewish man marrying a Muslim girl? The Qur’an says so many things about the Jews and yet Mina wants to marry one.” According to her, Nathan has understood that “Islam is a wonderful way of life” (p.155). He incites Imran not to accept a white man as his father and also succeeds in stopping her marriage by sending a cable to her parents in Pakistan: “MINA MARRYING A KAHR STOP HIS NAME IS NATHAN” (240). Her father threatens her with dire consequences, and stops the marriage. Nathan was ready to convert, in order to marry her. Her first marriage to Hamed Suahil ended in divorce. She fled Pakistan to save her son Imran from Hamed, who had threatened to take him away. Due to this she had lost her faith in arranged marriages. When her parents asked her to remarry, “she told her parents that not only was she interested, but there was no chance she would ever, ever consider another arranged marriage after what happened with Hamid” (100). She found an alternative in Nathan, but his religion was an obstacle though he was ready to convert for her sake. But the immigrant community and the local mosque did not want to accept a Jew. Thus religion plays a significant role in splitting the lovers.

Conclusion

Though this is Ayad Akhtar’s debut novel, it is “a sensitive coming-of-age story” (David Daley). The novel depicts social, cultural and religious clashes among the immigrant community in general. Akhtar narrates a tale of rich and cultural divide that is prevalent among the characters of his novel. “Mr. Akhtar’s astute observations of the clashes between old world and

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new, between secular and sacred, among immigrants might seem familiar to readers of both contemporary and classical literature (Adam Langer).”

American Dervish is a skillfully written American novel. In his novels Akhtar usually tries to tackle the problems related to immigrants who live among western communities in general and America in particular. He thinks of himself as “a narrative artist. I don’t think of myself as a novelist or screenwriter or playwright. All of those modalities ... are obviously very different, and I’m not sure that I prefer any one to other (Aditi Sriram interviews Ayad Akhtar). The novel tells us that it is almost impossible to hold on to one’s own religious beliefs when living in a cosmopolitan country like America, particularly if they are Muslims. This is the prevalent theme of his novels, particularly in *American Dervish*. In the guise of quenching Rachel’s thirst in listening to Mina’s story, Hayat narrates to her the circumstances which drove him to the present state. Naveed and Muneer’s casual approach to religion left Hayat to depend on Mina to know about his culture. The novel gives an insight into the likely problems faced by those who migrate from mono-religious context into a cosmopolitan country, where they are introduced to different cultures and beliefs.

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