



ISSN: 1999-5601 (Print) 2663-5836 (online)

Lark Journal

Available online at: <https://lark.uowasit.edu.iq>



*Corresponding author:

Asst. Prof. Maysoun Taher Muhi (PhD)

University: University of Baghdad

College: College of Education for Women

Email:

maysoun.tahir@coeduw.uobaghdad.edu.iq

Keywords:

Conflicts, Cultural Identity, Diaspora, Hom K. Bhabha, Muslim-Americans, Stuart Hall 'the Third Space'

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 23 Jul 2023

Accepted 18 Sep 2023

Available online 1 Oct 2023

Caught in a Cross-Fire: Cultural Identity and Diaspora in Wajahat Ali's *The Domestic Crusaders* and Ayad Akhtar's *The Who and the What*

ABSTRACT

Cultural identity and diaspora are complex concepts extensively studied and theorized by scholars in various fields. The plays *Domestic Crusaders* by Wajahat Ali and *The Who and the What* by Ayad Akhtar offer a unique perspective on these concepts in the context of Muslim-American experiences, particularly the younger generation, as they navigate the construction of their cultural identities within the host country, the United States of America. Diaspora people are too often ghettoized and feel disconnected from their sense of belonging in the host country, where their cultural values and practices are subjected to mockery and discrimination. Although both plays touch upon the impact of the 9/11 attacks and diaspora on shaping and maintaining Muslim identity amidst contextual changes, the primary focus is on the characters' struggle to find a sense of belonging and establish new identities within their respective cultural groups. The characters' pursuit of reinventing their identities sometimes crosses with the authentic, conservative, and traditional culture, leading to an identity crisis due to the volatile cultural struggle between the Muslim lifestyle and Western modernity. Employing a post-colonial approach, this study delves into the characters' journey of reconciling their hyphenated identities within what Homi K. Bhabha terms 'the Third Space,' where they can find a sense of attachment to their identity. Drawing from Stuart Hall's theory of Cultural Identity and Diaspora, the paper concludes that the ongoing conflict of cultural identity clashes within the immigrant Muslim family, as depicted in both plays, necessitates a retrospective re-understanding and appreciation of the dynamic nature of constructing cultural identity.

© 2023 LARK, College of Art, Wasit University

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31185/>

عالقون في مطبات الصراع: الهوية الثقافية والشتات في مسرحيتي "الصليبيون المحاربون" لوجاهات علي و"من و ماذا" لأبياد أختار

أ.م.د. ميسون طاهر محبي/جامعة بغداد/كلية التربية للبنات

الهوية الثقافية والشتات هما مفهومان معقدان . لقد تمت دراسة وبحث هذين المفهومين بعمق من قبل الباحثون في مجالات متعددة. تقدّم مسرحيتنا "الصليبيون المحاربون" لوجهات علي و"من وماذا" لأيدأ أخترا منظورًا فريدًا حول هذه المفاهيم في سياق تجارب المسلمين الأمريكيين، ولا سيما الجيل الأصغر، بينما يحاولون إنشاء هويّاتهم الثقافية في البلد المضيف، الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية. فيتم تهميشهم فيشعرون بالانقطاع عن الانتماء في البلد المضيف، حيث تتعرض قيمهم وممارساتهم الثقافية للسخرية والتمييز. على الرغم من أن المسرحيتين تتناولان تأثير هجمات 11 سبتمبر والشتات على تشكيل والحفاظ على الهوية المسلمة في ظل التغيرات السياقية، يتركز البحث على صراع الشخصيات لإيجاد شعور بالانتماء وإقامة هويات جديدة ضمن مجموعاتهم الثقافية الخاصة. حيث تتداخل رغبة الشخصيات في إعادة ابتكار هوياتهم أحيانًا مع الثقافة الأصيلة والتقليدية والمحافظة، مما يؤدي إلى أزمة هوية بسبب الصراع الثقافي العنيف بين نمط حياة المسلمين والحداثة الغربية. و باستخدام نظرية ما بعد الاستعمار، يتناول هذا البحث رحلة الشخصيات الداخلية للتوفيق بين هوياتهم المنقسمة في ما يسمى بـ "الفضاء الثالث" لـ هومي ك. بابا، حيث يمكنهم العثور على شعور الاحساس بهويتهم. وكذلك اعتمد التحليل على نظرية الهوية الثقافية والشتات لستيوارت هول، و يستنتج من هذا البحث أن الصراع الدائم لتصادم الهوية الثقافية داخل الأسرة المسلمة المهاجرة، كما هو موضح في كلا المسرحيتين، يستدعي إعادة فهم وتقدير طبيعة إنشاء الهوية الثقافية في الماضي.

الكلمات الافتتاحية: نزاعات: الهوية الثقافية؛ الشتات: هوم ك بابا: المسلمون الأمريكيون: ستيوارت هول: "الفضاء الثالث".

1. INTRODUCTION:

Cultural identity is no longer a fixed notion or concept of identified dimensions in our modern and globalised world that stamps with increasing intercultural encounters. Rather, it is constantly negotiated, constructed, and challenged by individuals sharing their collective knowledge, communicative practices, and experiences in a host country like the U.S. However, the concepts of 'culture' and 'identity' are complex and difficult to define. In the diaspora, Muslim culture and identity become networks of ongoing interactions between Islamic rules and practices, the history, heritage, tradition, language, and customs on the one hand, and that of what belongs to the U.S. as a multicultural country on the other hand.

In introducing his book *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said (1994) emphasizes the role of culture as "a source of identity". For him, culture has a double meaning; the first meaning refers

to all collective artefacts done by people who follow up “all those practices, like the arts of description, communication, and representation that have relative autonomy from economic, social and political realms and that often exist in aesthetic form.” The second meaning for culture is seen as a “concept that includes refining and elevating element, each society’s reservoir of the best that has been known and thought”. (p. xii)

Moreover, ‘identity’ frequently refers to a group's personal and behavioural qualities with supposedly collective experiences and integrated cultural behaviour. Yet, ‘identity’ is a paradoxical term, indicating both sameness and distinctiveness. It does not end; it is an ongoing process that emerges to fulfil a lack of wholeness, which is ‘filled’ from outside to us as individuals. The cultural theorist Stuart Hall claims that ‘unconscious processes play a central role in forming over time and psychologically speaking “, there is always something ‘imaginary’ or fantasized about its unity. It always remains incomplete, is always ‘in process, always ‘being formed’”. That might explain why individuals continually look for ‘identity’ and try to connect the dissimilar fractions of our divided selves into unity to recover this fantasized pleasure of fullness. Hall (1995) argues:

Identity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think. Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a 'production', which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation. This view problematises the very authority and authenticity to which the term, 'cultural identity', lays claim. (p.392)

Hall ambivalently views cultural identity as a “stable, unchanging and continuous frame of frame of reference” and “a sort of collective ... shared history and ancestry hold in common.” (Hall, 1990, p.223). Then he proffers another definition of cultural identity that celebrates not only the similarities but “the significant differences which constitute ‘what we really are; or rather...’ what we have become” (p.225). In this context, cultural identity is viewed as undergoing “constant transformation” since it is a “subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power”. Thus, Hall defines cultural identity as the concept that “we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and positioned ourselves within, the narrative of past” (Hall, 1990, p.226).

According to Hall, the conceptualization of the diaspora's 'cultural identity' is understood to be obfuscated by "more superficial and artificial imposed selves" (p.110) and that knowing identity is motivated more by putting it in contrast to people surrounding it. Accordingly, there is an emphasis on portraying identity via the way we are stereotyped; the way we look at ourselves and others and how others look at us within our and their perspective and collective knowledge. Developing a sense of cultural identity have a decisive role in human wellbeing and feelings of belonging and security.

One of the most important ideas Homi Bhabha took from Edward Said's work is "hybridity", which describes the emergence of new cultural forms of multiculturalism. Instead of looking at colonialism as something imprisoned in the past, Bhabha looks at how the history and cultures of colonialism have constantly penetrated the present, asking us to change our understanding of intercultural relations. He claims that hybridity and cultural differences split the concept of identity, making it a kind of intersection and negotiation between contradictory data. Moreover, Bhabha emphasizes the concept of 'ambivalence' by which culture is seen as a set of conflicting concepts and dimensions. The ambivalence that may lead to a division in the identity of the colonized people - is the means that creates individuals who are a hybrid between their cultural identity and the cultural identity of the colonizer. Such interaction creates what Bhabha calls 'the Third Space', representing an ambiguous region arising from the interaction of two or more people/cultures. For Bhabha, such a hybrid or third space is an ambivalent place where the cultural identity has no fixed or essential unity (Bhabha, 2004). It is worth mentioning that cultural identity for every nation is a combination between its unique traditions and other nations' traditions and culture which come to contact. Therefore, immigrants strive to achieve a balance by obeying the cultural traditions of the host country. On the other hand, they try to keep certain rooted customs and traditions inherited from their home or native country.

Muslim-American cultural identity, in particular, was destabilized before 11 September and severely questioned after the 11 September attacks. This event has not been only a turning point in international relations; it also created a 'cultural wedge' within the melting pot of the U.S. In post-11 September, Muslim Americans have encountered a "choice between becoming culturally Western or being downgraded in their social and cultural status" (Castells, 2010, p.144). They faced different questions about their representation of identity. How did they look at it? How

were the others looked at them? Did they observe their similarities or differences? Can they set a crossing point? Is others' view towards them necessary? Should they face a volatile cultural struggle between different identities in a multicultural society? In her article "Critical Exchanges in Post-colonial Studies Post 9\11", Anna Ball (2009) observes that

In this move towards self-scrutiny post-9\11... topics of the so-called margin-race, gender, ethnicity, religion-have been pushed centre-stage in national and global affairs...postcolonialism offers... a variety of frameworks that might account for the paradigms of identity formation, power, and representation formed in the interplay of the marginal and central, local and global post-9\11. (296-7)

In the above quotation, Ball underscores the connection between postcolonialism and the post-9/11 era, shedding light on the tendency of the modern world to study the marginal from different perspectives to retain its identity.

Immigrants' voices have been repressed and denounced by politically ideologized voices emphasising the negative aspects of Arabs' and Muslims' existence. Talking about the criticality of representation, Hall states that "representation is the production of the meaning of the concepts in our minds. The link between concepts and language enables us to *refer* to the 'real' world of objects, people or events, or to imaginary worlds of fictional objects, people and events." (1994, p.17). As a result, language becomes a preferred medium for hegemonizing and brainwashing the masses on a local and global scale. Thus, in their writing, the diaspora writers mirror the lives of immigrants belonging to minorities in the host country and the conflict they face in a new culture to gain 'cultural hybridity. Bhabha believes that the overlapping and cross-fertilization of cultures resulting from the entry of the colonizer, immigration, or others have paved the way for the existence of a 'Third Space' that might unit this collision, achieve a universality based on equality between cultures, and reject the colonial class, which considers the colonizer's culture to be the finest and purer than the identity of the oppressed peoples.

Therefore, diaspora and cultural identity are interconnected in profound ways. Diaspora communities often carry their cultural identities to new lands, striving to preserve their heritage and maintain a sense of belonging despite being geographically dispersed. Cultural identity can

act as a source of cohesion and resilience within diaspora communities, providing a shared sense of history and tradition in the face of challenges posed by displacement and acculturation. The process of cultural identity formation within diaspora communities is a dynamic interaction between the maintenance of heritage and the adoption of aspects of the host culture, leading to the development of unique and hybrid identities.

This realization provides relevant insight into the identity dilemma of the characters in *The Domestic Crusaders* (2010) and *The Who and the What* (2014). The two playwrights, Wajahat Ali and Ayad Akhtar, want to voice out their own opinion and the feelings of Muslim people in general about this tragic event and not let others talk on their behalf, trying to alleviate the stereotypical and not objective views on immigrants presented in the media or literature. Manuel Castells astutely illustrates how this event can be considered a “revolt against socio-economic irrelevance and the resistance of identity against Western cultural domination that could alter the course of history”. (2010, p.144). These playwrights regard storytelling as necessary and the best means to deliver the message and make the American people listen and understand. They know well that Muslims' identity is already stereotyped, and now heinous hatred is shown towards Muslims because of what politics has implanted in Islamaphobia.

2-The art of ‘becoming’ as well of ‘being’ in *The Domestic Crusaders* and *The Who and the What*

Sometimes the plays speak what everybody knows; sometimes, they speak what nobody says. Sometimes they open paths or unveil truths; sometimes they challenge the way things are done or understood” (Leonard and Kilkelly, 2006, p.27)

The current study views Wajahat Ali's *The Domestic Crusaders* and Ayad Akhtar's *The Who and the What* as artistic works that raise questions of whether the immigrant Muslims who have lived for generations in the U.S. could bridge two different cultural identities or fail in that. And how was that reflected in the plays? How do the playwrights challenge the troubled domain of composing identity and setting up hybridity?” The plays show that creating a balance between two completely different worlds is not easy. In this context, Etienne Balibar (1995) highlights that “identity is never a peaceful acquisition: it is claimed as a guarantee against a threat of

annihilation that can be figured by another identity” (p.186). Accordingly, belonging to a particular cultural identity in a diaspora-segregated community creates a possible dispute between cultural identities. This evaluation indicates the augmentation of ‘Islamophobia’ after 9/11 and the cultural identity fallback.

In the subsequent sections, the studied plays delve into the intricate interplay between 'becoming' and 'being' within cultural identity, family dynamics, and societal expectations. The characters' journeys vividly portray identity formation's fluid and intricate nature, navigating their roles within their families and broader cultural contexts. Stuart Hall's conceptual framework of 'becoming' and 'being' offers a valuable lens through which we can analyse the characters' experiences of self-discovery, transformation, and the negotiation of their identities within these two plays.

The characters in *The Domestic Crusaders* exemplify Hall's concept of 'becoming' as they grapple with their identities as Pakistani-Americans in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks. The play showcases the characters' ongoing process of addressing their cultural heritage, family dynamics, and American experiences. The family members are constantly 'becoming' as they react to and interact with the evolving social and political landscape. They are not fixed in their identities but are influenced by the changing cultural and historical contexts around them. The tensions between generations and the clash of traditions highlight the characters' struggles in negotiating their sense of 'being.' They present themselves as part of a family and cultural identity, but this 'being' is not static; external perceptions, media portrayals, and personal aspirations influence it. In *The Who and the What*, the central character Zarina embodies the concept of 'becoming' as she engages in self-discovery through her writing and exploration of Islam. Her journey involves questioning and redefining her identity, which aligns with Hall's idea that identity is a continuous and dynamic process. Zarina's 'being' is complex as she negotiates her identity as a Muslim woman, a daughter, and an aspiring writer. Her interactions with her family, particularly her father, further illustrate the tensions between her 'being' and the various roles and expectations placed upon her. The play explores how Zarina's 'being' is influenced by external factors such as cultural norms and religious beliefs, while her 'becoming' is driven by her intellectual curiosity and desire for self-expression.

2.1 "When those two towers fell, we fell with them": Wajahat Ali's *The Domestic Crusaders*

In announcing the new performance of *The Domestic Crusaders* (2010), Emma Thompson displays, "*The Domestic Crusaders* is exactly the sort of theatre we need today. The gulf that separates cultures must be bridged, and art is one of our best hopes. I'll support this all the way – please join me and Wajahat in building this bridge!" (2010). The play is also viewed as a cultural shock of a diasporic writer who is writing about a diaspora community that not only struggles to survive in the host country but furthermore to build a sense of relation with it while keeping and maintaining its traditional values and heritage, that is afraid to be lost within the daily life of the civilized and entirely different country. The title *The Domestic Crusaders* is significant as it refers to the lives of the diaspora and the struggles that the play's characters go through in establishing their identities, fighting and quarrelling among themselves, both on and off the front lines of their families. Symbolically and appropriately, these fights are greater in front of the family than outside. When the writer Asmale Reed read the script of the play, he claimed that Ali's characters "can be found in every kitchen drama—the sort of play that concerns itself with food, dating, sibling rivalry, intergenerational conflict, humor, and pathos" (*The Domestic Crusaders*, 2010, p. ii)

All the characters seem to be fighting other characters in the house. The play's events explain that the characters' strife to attain their identity in the competitive society begins when immigrants enter the United States and end with their death. This struggle is an endless war that must continue from generation to generation. *The Domestic Crusaders* is a two-act play where three generations of a Pakistani family have come to search for the American dream, which has become a nightmare. This simple family consists of six members: Hakim, the grandfather; a 54-year-old engineer; Salman, the father; Khulsoom, a 50-year-old mother; Salahuddin, the elder son between 26-27; Fatima, a daughter between 24-25; and Ghafur, the youngest son. The play's events occur throughout a single evening during Gafur's 21st birthday. Still, the playwright masterfully employs flashbacks to reveal the tragic tales of what happened to nearly all the characters years earlier.

Shocking his traditional parents, Gafur declares that he no longer wants to be a doctor. He decides to be a teacher to convey the truth of real Islam. He informs his parents that "You will get the blessings of my work," "We have enough blessings," says his mother. "You can bless us by becoming a surgeon. You like kids? Become a paediatrician. Teach them Islam as you give them their lollipops." (*The Domestic Crusader*, p.55)

Gafur shows an understanding of the unsteady nature of both America and Americans. His personal and painful experience that he went through after 9/11, the security of the airport, brings a change in his personality. His identity, which is supposed to be established before two generations, is about to be demolished just because of his dress and the long beard; he was treated rudely and irrespectively. Gafur recognizes that it is only the job of the Muslims to keep a foot in the two worlds. The Western authority and media also put all Muslims in a dangerous zone, asking them to prove their loyalty as “they are perceived as threatening outsiders” (negotiating Muslim identity in a post 9/11 World). Gafur explained to his family the delay and how the FBI agents investigated him before letting him go. After receiving him warmly, his mother, Khulsoom, expresses her worries about his future:

Khulsoom: Great, make them lock you up next time! You read – you should know better. The FBI probably has a file on you now!"

Ghafur: "They spend five minutes doing a body search.... The other passengers stroll on by, witnessing the Muslim-mammal zoo exhibit. I'm sure it made them safe, that I was being sanitized."

Khulsoom: "Didn't I tell you to shave your beard before you came? Who gave you the brilliant idea to keep a beard? And you wore the topi? ... Why don't you hold a sign saying, I'M AN EXTREMIST. ONE WAY TICKET TO ABU GHRAIB, PLEASE." (*The Domestic Crusaders*, p. 38-41)

According to the above conversation, it seems that the ‘Third Place’ of these characters, which was originally assumed to be constructed out of the culturally negotiated and contradictory identities of their native ones “against the backdrop of their dominant society”, are living suggests that this space is still fragmented, unfinished, questionable. It continues to be a site of struggles for meaning and representation. Hakim, the grandfather, expresses a situation inside the supermarket: "Yesterday at the flea market, I was picking up my fruits – as usual. One white man was next to me. He was with his son – just a boy, probably eight or so. The boy looked up at me and asked, are you related to Osama bin Laden?" (*The Domestic Crusaders*, p.16). Media imprints this disfigured image of Muslims in the public opinion that every man with a beard is a terrorist. Hakim defended the identity and the entity of Islam and Muslims, answering the boy: "He [Osama bin Laden] is a terrorist who doesn't know the first thing about the religion of Islam" (*The Domestic Crusaders*, p.17)

Wajihat Ali, through Ghafur, enunciates that he wants “to make people unlearn all the misinformation they’ve been forced [to learn] their whole lives about Muslims, Islam, Arabs, and the Middle East” (*The Domestic Crusaders*, p. 55). Furthermore, Media after the events of 9/11 played a critical role in shattering and fragmenting the built ‘Third Space’ of the diasporic communities in the U.S. by concentrating on the identity of the terrorists who boomed the twin towers, claiming that Islam and people of Islamic identities are the real cause of that heinous crime. Moreover, the media emphasises the consequences of the attacks and how the government will retaliate (Radhi, 2018). In this concern, the media misrepresented Muslims. They became a conduit for colonial ideas that threatened the existence of the Muslim people in the U.S. Media’s negative attitude oriented towards Muslims and Islam arouses in Hakim painful memories related to the long colonial and post-colonial history of the Muslims in the colonized country and the Christians, the colonizers. Hakim comments disgustedly, “Just like the British—typical colonizers, imperialists, just like the Ferengi Europeans. Come in—rape, loot, destroy, [and] turn brother against brother and countryman against countryman just for dawlat and power. Man never changes.” (*The Domestic Crusaders*, p. 47).

These memories of colonialism are intermingled with the physical scar that “still lingers after all these years” (Ali, 2016, p. 36) on Hakim’s chest. Later in the play, he uncovers the cause of this injury and wants the audience to share those moments with him to witness the effects of violence and understand its impact. He “(positioned center stage and talking directly to the audience, begins his story. He is physically present but immersed in his nostalgia)” (*The Domestic Crusaders*, p. 97). He narrates how he became a killer to take revenge for murdering two of his Muslim friends, Amir and Umair, who were tortured and killed by a “Hindu mob.” By this, he only “learned how easy it is for a man to lose his soul.” Trying to escape from India, he was shot in the chest. “This scar is forever a part of me. It reminds me of the violence, the hatred, the death, [and] the suffering that I both experienced and was responsible for . . . it is my punishment.” (*The Domestic Crusaders*, p. 101).

Therefore, the media reinforced the established stereotyped identity that Muslims tried for generations to transform and achieve the required assimilation. Moreover, it is well known that “over three-quarters of people in Western societies rely on the mass media, mainly television, as their primary source of information about Islam and Muslims” ((Rane, Ewart, & Martinkus,

2014, p. 29). In *The Domestic Crusaders*, Wajihat Ali clearly illustrates how the media plays a crucial role, serving as the authoritative voice of television and radio that can overpower the family's conversations to report or provide commentary on the news. (Samman, 2021):

Radio: (Voice-over) We now return to our in-depth coverage of 'the war against Extremism.' Joining us now for an NPR exclusive are world-renowned, respected academic experts on Islam and the Middle East. (*The Domestic Crusaders*, p. 5)

The T.V.: (Voice-over) The president urged the nation today not to fear or doubt, even though the battle against extremism and evil will be long and painstaking, with unfortunate but inevitable sacrifices. According to the president, these sacrifices are necessary to ensure our freedom and to help protect the liberties and values of all freedom-loving people against those dedicated to tyranny and hatred. (*The Domestic Crusaders*, p.44)

The offspring of Salman and Khulsoom live independently from their parents, much like Western children. They have limited interactions with their families. Fatima, however, feels ashamed of her family's history and disassociates herself from it when she learns about her grandfather's actions and her ancestors' experiences during the 1947 partition of Pakistan and India.

Fatima, a law student and activist, advocates for people's legal rights, especially women. While participating in a protest rally, she was arrested by the police. Her aspiration to learn cooking and marry a Muslim Pakistani man led to a conflict with her mother. Fatima believes that marriage and domestic responsibilities are not the most crucial aspects of life; many other talents exist to explore. Moreover, she liberates herself from her mother's hatred by realizing the value of Black Muslims as individuals and embracing their company without hesitation. Unlike typical Eastern children, Fatima openly criticizes and insults her mother, even calling her "stupid" when Khulsoom asks her to refrain from associating with the Black community.

Other characters like Fatima try to prove "identity as being and identity as becoming". Fatima, the young daughter, has produced a new form of cultural meaning where she tries to blur the different cultures' limitations and question the established categorizations of culture and identity.

Unlike her mother, who peacefully and happily symbolizes traditional femininity, Fatima, though she decided to wear the headscarf (hijab), represents the new generation of women by identifying herself away from the native cultural demands to have a modern version of Western feminine gender. Through her love relationship with African-American Muslim, Fatima believes that she has changed, saying, "In my head, I think I changed – evolved into a better Muslima, a stronger woman, more liberated, more fearless, ready to fight and take on the world – but it's all pointless delusions in the head. You take temporary vacations from yourself, time to time." (*The Domestic Crusaders*, p. 68)

It is worth noting that most of the play's characters share their culture by shifting into their Pakistani language in their conversation. This code-switching is significant in enhancing one's cultural identity because language is a culture by which we can define ourselves. Furthermore, the characters' interest in presenting or offering a new image of their religion, Islam, shows the cultural differences. Hakim, who witnessed different circumstances in his long life, asks different questions that force the audience to look down deep into themselves to re-judge their preconception of Other's identity. Hakim declares:

What do you or anyone on T.V. know of this? By talking about it, you think, they think, you can understand what it means to kill someone? Some say don't use violence; use peace. What happens when violence comes after you, and you just want to teach poetry and study law? What happens when you kill, and instead of earning your death, your friends are killed instead? Is that just? Is that fair? No one can know or understand until they have to face that reality. (*The Domestic Crusaders*, p.101)

Despite taking place throughout one night, the stories shared by each character in the play expand the temporal scope of the play. Ali's exceptional writing style presents a multifaceted portrayal of a Pakistani-American family, using humour to depict each character's essence straightforwardly. Ali aptly refers to this approach as "the universal" (quote in Radhi, 2018, p.119), intending to shed light on the truth surrounding the events before and after the 9/11 attacks, a defining moment of the 21st century. The play delves into the clashes of cultural identities within an immigrant Muslim family, showcasing the tensions between preserving traditional values and embracing modern perspectives. Throughout the narrative, the characters

grapple with the challenges of assimilation while preserving their cultural heritage in the United States.

The character Ghafur poignantly adds a historical dimension, drawing parallels between past upheavals and the current situation of American Muslims, saying: "The mighty Muslim Abbasids wiped out like trivial insects by the Mongolian hordes. All of Christian Europe devastated, crippled at every level by the Dark Ages, warfare, and the Black Plague" (*The Domestic Crusaders*, p.70). Meanwhile, Salman, the father, delivers a concluding statement that captures the emotional impact of the 9/11 attacks on the Muslim community, highlighting the repercussions faced by Muslim Americans, stating that "When those two towers fell, we fell with them" (*The Domestic Crusaders*, p. 83)

The Domestic Crusaders is a powerful tool through which Ali aims to challenge the negative portrayal of Muslims in the media, often depicting them as savage and vicious. The play emphasizes the importance of accurate labelling and correcting misconceptions to promote understanding and reveal the truth about Islam. Ali's artistic mission is to integrate Muslims into American society, presenting them on equal footing with other ethnic communities. The play significantly contributes to American Muslim literature, providing an authentic and compelling portrayal of an American Muslim family. Through its exploration of the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks and its challenge to stereotypes, *The Domestic Crusaders* is a groundbreaking and honest portrayal of Muslim-Americans' complexities, deserving of enduring appreciation and recognition.

In *The Domestic Crusaders*, Ali offers a nuanced portrayal of cultural identity as a dynamic and evolving process rather than a fixed and static construct. The play celebrates the resilience and adaptability of diaspora communities while shedding light on the challenges and conflicts they encounter as they navigate the complexities of cultural assimilation and preservation. Through a humorous yet poignant depiction, Ali captures the essence of each family member and the struggles they face in reconciling their cultural roots with the evolving American landscape. He skillfully portrays the universality of the immigrant experience, showcasing the shared journey of diaspora communities as they strive to find a sense of belonging in their new home while honoring their ancestral traditions. The characters in the play embody a range of cultural identities, reflecting the diverse experiences of diaspora communities. As first-generation immigrants, they grapple with the clash between their traditional Pakistani values and the influence of the American society they now inhabit. The play delves into the tensions and

conflicts that arise as family members attempt to maintain their cultural heritage while adapting to the values and norms of their new homeland.

2.2- “Can we belong and yet be separate?: Akhtar's *The Who and the What*

Ayad Akhtar (b-1970) is a Pakistani-American artist who has significantly impacted the world of literature and drama. He is a talented playwright, novelist, screenwriter, and actor, best known for his Pulitzer Prize-winning play, *Disgraced*. The Washington Post calls Akhtar's work "poignant and wise" and notes that he is a "generous new voice in American fiction." His work has garnered widespread recognition and praise, cementing his place as a talented and important voice in contemporary literature. (Raymond, 2014).

Akhtar's *The Who and the What* follows the story of Zarina, a young Pakistani American writer grappling with her identity as a Muslim woman and the expectations that come with it. She is working on a book that challenges traditional Islamic views on women and relationships, which causes tension with her family and community. The play examines the tension that arises from trying to reconcile traditional cultural values with the desire to assimilate and be accepted in American society. Zarina's father, Afzal, is a devout Muslim who tries to maintain traditional cultural values and expectations. At the same time, Zarina and her sister, Mahwish, are more assimilated and have different attitudes towards religion and cultural identity. This tension is further complicated by the fact that Afzal is an imam, or religious leader, and has a position of authority in the community. The play explores the diaspora experience, which is the sense of displacement and dislocation that comes with being part of a community spread out worldwide. The characters in the play are all affected by the diaspora experience in different ways, whether it is feeling a sense of loss for their homeland, struggling to maintain connections with family members who are far away, or feeling torn between their cultural heritage and their American identity.

The play is a thought-provoking and nuanced exploration of the complexities of cultural identity and the diaspora experience. However, the play is often seen as reflecting the Post 9/11 Era. It is considered an autobiographical work by its playwright, Ayad Akhtar, as he claimed that all his plays are autobiographical. In a 2014 interview, he stated that all his writing is based on some form of autobiography. He acknowledged that it “It’s often a deformed version of autobiography, but everything I write is drawn from personal experience, whether it’s observed or lived.”

(Trussell, 2014)Therefore, this play reflects personal questions he already thinks of and attempts to share them with his audience.

Through Zarina's character, the play addresses many themes, such as religion, traditions, family dynamics, and societal perceptions. Its portrayal of the struggles and conflicts within a Pakistani American family highlights the importance of understanding and empathy between different cultures and communities. It also challenges traditional cultural values and encourages a more open and inclusive approach to religion and cultural identity.

As a modern American Muslim, Zarina is driven by a strong desire to understand Islam and the Prophet Mohammed (PBUH) on a more human level. Her rebellious spirit leads her to write a novel portraying the founder of Islam not just as a figure of worship but as a real man with complexities. In exploring the Prophet, Zarina raises questions about the treatment of women under Islam, sparking conflicts with her father and creating a clash between generations in American society. The play is essentially an immigrant story about Afzal, the father, and his journey towards accepting America. On one level, Afzal embraces American culture. In contrast, on another level, he struggles to reconcile with the American way of life and his daughter's choices, often at odds with his beliefs. Akhtar characterizes his story, which highlights the conflict between two generations, as a "very old tale which is told again and again." (Raymond, 2014)

As a Pakistani-American woman, Zarina challenges stereotypes and resists societal norms, shedding light on the perspective of Muslim women and the struggle they are facing in constructing their identity in the diasporic community. Despite being conservative, she strives to break free from the confines of tradition and heritage to pursue her ambitions. Zarina's writing and her desire to marry someone outside her cultural and religious background exemplify her attempts at assimilating into the broader American society. She seeks to embrace the values of personal freedom and individual choice, which are often associated with Western culture. On the other hand, her father represents the struggle to preserve cultural and religious traditions in changing times.

Afzal's daughters, Zarina and Mahwis, grapple with assimilating into American culture while preserving their Pakistani heritage. Afzal, an immigrant and conservative man, is committed to maintaining his homeland's cultural and religious traditions. At the same time, American society

influenced Zarina and Mahwish as they grew up. Zarina, through her controversial book, challenges traditional interpretations of Islam and seeks to create her unique hybrid identity, reflecting the complexities faced by individuals in diaspora communities who navigate between different cultural influences.

Mahwish appears uneasy about Zarina's book, which tackles the sensitive and provocative topic of "women and Islam". This indicates that Zarina holds different beliefs regarding religion and traditions, as she rejects the notion of hell as a literal place of punishment and views it as a symbolic representation of human suffering. When Mahwish expresses surprise at Zarina's lack of fear towards hell, Zarina explains that it is impossible to fear something one does not believe in and that hell symbolises the human cycle of suffering.

Mahwish: how are you not scared of hell?

Zarina: I can't be scared of something. I don't believe in it. Mahwish: it is in the Quran.

Zarina: it is a metaphor, for suffering for the cycle of human suffering." (*The Who & the What*, p.8)

In a separate conversation about love and marriage, Mahwish asks Zarina about her plans for marriage. Zarina's rejection of traditional customs shocks Mahwish, who accuses her of changing the subject. Zarina believes that living in America means they are not bound by Pakistani customs, which leads to a confrontation about what is acceptable behavior.

Mahwish: you're just trying to change the subject again...I cannot get married before you do, Zarina.

Zarina: That's absurd. This is not Pakistan.

Mahwish: It's not what 's done.

(*The Who & the What*, p.12)

Zarina is passionate about writing and she values the time it provides her to pursue her craft; as she explains, "My life is fine, leaves me time and space to write" (*The Who & the What*, p.16). However, she also uses writing as a means of distraction, hoping it will help her forget her past love, Ryan, the non-Muslim, even though she knows she still holds feelings for him. Writing has become a central part of her life, particularly after the loss of her mother and her breakup with Ryan, as she shares that her book was all she had left during those trying times. "all I had was that book, after Mom died, after Ryan, that book was it"(*The Who & the What*, p.66).

Unfortunately, these personal struggles complicate her sister's marriage, as Pakistani tradition dictates that the eldest daughter must marry first.

The play also delves into the role of faith in shaping cultural identity and family dynamics. Afzal's strong religious beliefs are integral to his cultural identity and the expectations he holds for his family. Through her writing, Zarina's pursuit of personal freedom challenges Afzal's traditional beliefs, leading to conflict and strained family relationships. Being affected by the American style of full autonomy, Zarina started writing about the Prophet's Mohammad's personal life by reading some Islamic biographies. She thinks we must understand who the Prophet is, not what we imagine he is. Consequently, that causes a clash between the father and his conservative community and the daughter, who believes that we need to question everything, even the originality of the Quran, and doubts the sanctity of the Prophet:

AFZAL (Throwing the manuscript at Zarina): This is the Prophet!—peace be upon him—What did I do to deserve this!?

ZARINA: Dad, you can't just read a few sentences and think you know what it's about.

AFZAL: I don't care what it's about!

MAHWISH (Emphatic): No! What's it about?!

AFZAL (To Zarina): And for your information, I read more than a few sentences. God being a woman? God having breasts?

ZARINA: That's not what's in—

AFZAL: It is. I read it.

ELI: It's a metaphor, sir.

AFZAL: I don't care what it is! God does not have breasts!

ELI: I'm just trying to help.

AFZAL: Nobody asked you.

ZARINA: It's about the Prophet, Dad. And the Quran. And how what we think we know about those things is not real. Not human. (*The Who & the What*, p.61)

The characters' sense of belonging to their cultural heritage and the host country is complex and sometimes conflicted. More than any one, Zarina feels the weight of the cultural expectations of their heritage while simultaneously seeking acceptance and belonging in the American society

they call home. This tension between preserving cultural roots and assimilating into a new culture is fundamental to diaspora experiences. Her desire to write a book challenging traditional interpretations of the Prophet Muhammad is seen as threatening to the more conservative members of the Muslim community, including her father. Accordingly, Afzal is deeply troubled by his daughter's progressive views, viewing them as a threat to the core values of their traditional Muslim community. As Zarina's manuscript gains traction, tensions rise within the family, highlighting generational and ideological differences where the Muslim community members reject her and her father, and this is why the father is worried that she might be killed if she visits Pakistan:

AFZAL (Over): It's unacceptable! Completely unacceptable! I won't stand for it!

MAHWISH: Calm down, I'm sure she'll—

AFZAL: In Pakistan? She would be killed for this. Killed. If anybody gets their hands on this, God forbid...

(Getting emotional)

If anything happened to her, to either of you...

MAHWISH: Dad. Stop it. It'll be fine.

AFZAL: How do I know that?

MAHWISH: Nothing's gonna happen.

AFZAL: How do you know that?! Can you promise me that? Can you? (*The Who & the What*, p.69)

Zarina's challenges underscore the intricacy of managing cultural identity in a diaspora, where individuals may feel torn between preserving their cultural heritage and embracing new ideas. She engages in a lively debate with her father, Afzal, and members of their community about her book on the Prophet Muhammad. She defends her progressive interpretation, emphasizing the importance of questioning traditional beliefs and the need for a more inclusive and modern understanding of Islam. Her arguments challenge stereotypes that depict Muslim women as docile or lacking agency in religious interpretation. Through the character of Zarina, the play challenges cultural stereotypes associated with Muslim Americans. She eliminates one-dimensional representations of Muslim women as submissive or without agency. Her strong

desire for self-expression and intellectual pursuits defies the narrow stereotypes often associated with Muslim women in Western society.

Zarina finds it absurd that they, as American women, must follow Pakistani morals while they live in the U.S.A and follow the American lifestyle. This reflects Hall's idea that cultural identity is always in flux and can be shaped by various factors, including personal experiences, family and community backgrounds, and broader social and political contexts. Hall believes that identities are never unified and, because of this, are always in the process of being formed, transformed, or negotiated across time and space. While Zarina is inclined to be critical, her father, Afzal, holds more conservative views. In a conversation where he advises Eli on how to treat his wife, Afzal asserts that the wife has a greater influence over her husband than she intends to have. He believes it is the husband's responsibility to bear this burden and asserts that the wife will not be content until the husband subjugates her: "She won't be happy until you break her, son. She needs you to take it on, man" .(*The Who & the What*, p.55)

Zarina tries to live and stay in her 'Third Space', her comfortable zone. Her pursuit of a "Third Space" of hybridity, where she challenges and translates traditional meanings into new ones, reflects the process of creating and negotiating her cultural identity as a Muslim-American woman. It showcases the potential for transformation and the emergence of new cultural identities within the diasporic context. However, the play presents a captivating narrative that challenges stereotypes and delves into the multifaceted nature of cultural identity while shedding light on the ever-relevant tension between tradition and progress in Muslim Americans' lives. Afzal strives to accept his daughter's independence and self-expression and struggles to reconcile his traditional Pakistani values with the realities of his daughters' lives in America.. He accuses her of being too American, implying that her desire for autonomy and self-expression results from her exposure to American culture. This reflects Hall's idea that cultural identity is shaped by our interactions with others and the broader cultural context in which we live. He wants to guide them towards traditional Muslim values, but he also wants them to adapt and be successful in American society.

Afzal is portrayed as a powerful patriarchal father who tries to traditionally guide his daughters' lives amidst the chaos of modern culture. He tries to convince her to marry and even sets up a dating website account on her behalf, eventually introducing her to a young convert to Islam named Eli. Eli has converted to Islam, which allows him to negotiate and redefine his cultural identity in a new way. However, his conversion also raises questions about cultural

appropriation and how non-Muslims can appropriate and commodify Islamic culture. He tries to balance his American identity with his newfound faith and the expectations of his Muslim community. He is torn between his duty as an imam and his loyalty to Zarina, his friend and potential love interest.

As Zarina and Eli begin to understand each other, their relationship deepens, and he admires her strong personality, particularly when he discovers her project of writing a book about the Prophet. However, tension arises in their relationship when her father reveals Zarina's past boyfriend to Eli, leading to a heated confrontation. Despite his fiery nature when he perceives wrongdoing, Eli strives to be open and supportive. He views the hijab or veil as a symbol of devotion, faith, and pride, contrasting Zarina's interpretation of it as a symbolic representation of being like the wives of the Prophet. Zarina and her mother were unveiled, defying the conservative norms of their community, which despised the veil. Zarina's book explores gender politics and sheds light on Zaynab Bint Jahsh, the seventh wife of the Prophet Muhammad. However, Zarina remains unconvinced by the traditional narrative and questions Eli about the story of the Prophet seeing Zaynab naked, as mentioned in Tabri. Eli dismisses the story as discredited, implying it may be distorted or fabricated.

Nonetheless, the Quran confirms that Zaynab married the Prophet after her divorce from his adopted son, Zayd. This revelation suggests that Zarina's scepticism about the story may be valid, as the play explores the complexities of interpreting religious texts and history. At this juncture, Allah clarifies that adoption is forbidden through these blessed words. Unfortunately, Zarina misunderstands this truth because of her deep desire to explore everything related to Islam. Afzal uncovers the true content of her book; he is shocked and rejects her. The playwright is interested in exploring relationships and the contradictions within the family that define and reshape the identity. The characters in the play raise questions about God's perfection, feminist obedience to the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad, and the hijab's role in Muslim women's lives. These questions cause conflict within Zarina's family, leading to a personal crisis.

Meanwhile, the tension between family members escalates when Zarina reveals Mahwish's secrets to her father about her multiple relationships, further complicating the situation. The ensuing two years pass without communication between them. In the end, the play culminates in a heartfelt reconciliation between Afzal and Zarina after she reveals her pregnancy. He prays for her and imparts loving advice for her future.

Zarina's writing about Islam and the Prophet can be seen as a representation of the third space. Her work navigates the boundary between her Pakistani heritage and her American identity. Through her writing, she explores the complexities of her cultural background, questioning traditional beliefs and norms. Zarina's use of provocative language and reinterpretation of religious narratives can be interpreted as an attempt to create a third space where she can express her individuality while engaging with her cultural heritage.

On the other hand, Eli's character embodies the third space in multiple ways. As a convert to Islam, he exists in the liminal space between his American upbringing and his newfound faith. His role as an Imam in the Pakistani-American community further positions him in the interstitial zone of cultural encounters. Eli's presence challenges conventional notions of identity as he embraces Islam while maintaining his American background, creating a third space where different cultural influences merge.

Drawing from his own experiences in America, Akhtar infuses humour into the play while addressing serious issues Muslim women face. Through this thought-provoking drama, he poses uncomfortable questions about identity, religion, and the complexities of contemporary life. The play delves into interfaith tensions concerning American Muslim matrimonial norms and questions the balance between belonging and individuality. Akhtar fearlessly examines contemporary attitudes towards religion, race, culture, class, and sex, shedding light on the contradictions that shape identity. He draws from his heritage as a Pakistani-American, with a profound fascination for the Prophet Muhammad since childhood. His connection with the characters and their struggles demonstrates his desire to explore complex questions about his cultural heritage and his family's Muslim faith.

Bhabha's concept of ambivalence, which refers to the simultaneous coexistence of conflicting emotions and identities, is relevant to the characters in *The Who & the What*. Zarina experiences ambivalence in her relationship with Islam. She is deeply connected to her cultural heritage and critical of certain aspects of her faith. Her writing reflects this ambivalence as she seeks to reconcile her personal beliefs with traditional religious narratives. This ambivalence also leads to the emergence of hybrid identities. The characters embody hybridity by navigating their dual cultural influences. They do not fit neatly into predetermined categories but rather occupy a space of diversity, drawing from various cultural elements to form their identities. For instance, Eli's conversion to Islam and his role as an imam reflect a hybrid identity that blends his American background with his newfound faith.

Bhabha's notion of unhomeliness, which refers to a sense of displacement and estrangement, is evident in the characters' experiences. As diasporic individuals, they often feel "unhomely" in their country of origin and host country. Zarina's sense of being caught between two worlds manifests unhomeliness. Bhabha defines 'unhomeliness' as "something of the estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world". This concept is central to his idea of 'hybridity', which describes something new and not entirely one thing or another. (Bhabha, 2004, p.37) Being American, she faces cultural expectations from her Pakistani heritage, which creates a feeling of displacement.

This feeling of unhomeliness is intensified when characters like Zarina and Eli challenge traditional cultural norms. Their questioning of societal expectations and religious traditions leads to estrangement within their communities. In this regard, Afzal holds that Eli is responsible because he knows Zarina is writing something potentially harmful about the Prophet. However, Eli does not intervene, and Afzal questions how he can call himself an imam when he shows no concern for his wife's actions: " Call yourself an imam. What kind of Imam doesn't care about his wife writing such things about the Prophet? (*The Who & the What*, p.73) Nevertheless, Eli finds himself caught between his responsibility as an imam and his allegiance to Zarina. This inner conflict is especially pronounced when Zarina's writing creates tension within her family and the larger Pakistani-American community.

Conclusion:

The Domestic Crusaders by Wajahat Ali and *The Who and the What* by Ayad Akhtar are significant plays that explore cultural identity and the complexities of the diaspora in the United States. Both plays elucidate on the experiences of Muslim American families and individuals, contributing to a deeper understanding of the multifaceted experiences of diaspora and cultural identity in post-9/11 America. Hall's theory shows how cultural identity is influenced by internal negotiations and external forces that perpetuate stereotypes and shape public perceptions. The characters' diasporic status provides fertile ground for the emergence of 'the Third Space', where cultural encounters and negotiations occur.

Ali and Akhtar's selected plays represent a different aspect of cultural identity, demonstrating that it is not monolithic but multifaceted. The play illustrates the desire to preserve cultural traditions while simultaneously adapting to the realities of the American context. This

negotiation between cultural preservation and adaptation highlights the fluidity of cultural identity and how it evolves in response to changing environments and experiences. The two plays depict the struggles of Muslim-American families as they navigate their cultural and religious identities in a society that is often hostile to their beliefs and practices. The family is a microcosm of the larger Muslim-American community in both plays. Their struggles with cultural identity and belonging reflect the experiences of many Muslim Americans today.

In *The Domestic Crusaders*, the play's central conflict revolves around the tension between the patriarchal traditions of the family's Pakistani heritage and the more liberal values of their American upbringing; similarly, in *The Who and the What*, the play's central conflict revolves around the tension between the characters' religious beliefs and the more secular values of American society. In both plays, the characters are caught between two worlds, struggling to reconcile their cultural heritage with their American identities. In *The Domestic Crusaders*, Salman is torn between his desire to uphold his Pakistani traditions and assimilate into American society and in *The Who and the What*, the character of Zarina is torn between her devotion to Islam and her desire to live a more independent life. In *The Domestic Crusaders*, the family's cultural and religious differences lead to conflicts and misunderstandings between family members. In the same way, *The Who and the What* portrays tensions and disputes between family members due to their contrasting perspectives on Islam by showcasing these conflicts.

References

- Akhtar, A. (2014). *The who and the what*. New York: Back Bay Books,
- Ali, W. (2010). *The domestic crusaders*. San Francisco: McSweeney's Books.
- Balibar, E. (1995). "Culture and identity." In John Rajchman (Ed), *Identity in question* (pp.173-96). New York: Routledge.
- Ball, A. (2008). Critical exchanges in post-colonial studies post 9/11. *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies*. 30.3(2008): 296-315.
<<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10714410802143039>>.
- Bhabha, H. K. (2004). *The location of culture*. London: Routledge.
- Castells, M. (2010). *The power of identity* (2nd ed). Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd.

Hall, S. (1990). "Cultural identity and diaspora". In J. Rutherford (Ed.), *Identity: Community, culture, difference* (pp. 222-237). London: Lawrence & Wishart.

..... (1994). Cultural identity and diaspora'. In Williams, P. and Chrisman, L. Harlow: Longman (Ed.), *Colonial discourse and post-colonial theory: A reader* (pp.392-403). London: Routledge.

Leonard, R. H., and Kilkelly, A. (2006). *Performing communities: Grassroots ensemble theatres deeply rooted in eight U.S. communities*. Oakland, CA: New Village.

Radhi, G. F. (2018). "Islamophobia: Media vs. drama, A Study in Wajahat Ali's "The Domestic Crusaders". University of Kufa: UOK Journal Hosting Service oai:journals.uokufa.edu.iq/article/6941.

Rane, H., Ewart, J., & Martinkus, J. (2014). Media-generated Muslims and Islamophobia. In *Media Framing of the Muslim World* (pp. 29-46). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan

Raymond, G. (2014). [Ayad Akhtar on the Underlying Themes and Passions of *The Who & the What*](https://www.slantmagazine.com/features/the-who-and-the-what-interview-with-ayad-akhtar/). <https://www.slantmagazine.com/features/the-who-and-the-what-interview-with-ayad-akhtar/>.

-

Said, E.W. (1994). *Culture and imperialism*. New York: Vintage Books

Samman, M. M. (2021). A post-colonial Scrutiny of the Media Imperialism in Wajahat Ali's *The Domestic Crusaders* (March 12). *AWEJ for Translation & Literary Studies*, Volume 5, Number 1, February. <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3802966> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3802966>

Thompson, E. (2009). *The Domestic Crusaders* – Acclaimed Muslim American play debuts on 9-11 in NYC. <https://goatmilk.wordpress.com/2009/07/13/the-domestic-crusaders-acclaimed-muslim-american-play-debuts-on-9-11-in-nyc/>

Trussell, R. (2014). Kansas City Repertory Theatre Rep Stages Ayad Akhtar Work about the American Experience. *The Kansas City Star*. , 18 Oct.