

Negotiating Identity: Race, Religion, and Gender in Ayad Akhtar's *The Who & The What* (2014)

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Abstract

Ayad Akhtar, in his play *The Who & The What* (2014), concerns himself with examining the intricate power dynamics that operate within Muslim American communities and between those communities and the broader western society. His main aim is to underline the impact of the interaction of race, religion, gender, and identity on eastern individuals—especially Muslim women living in the West—and to show whether the social and patriarchal surveillance they undergo may bring about discipline or liberation within their societies. The dramatic events of the play illustrate how religious institutions, familial structures, and community organizations manage to train individuals—particularly women—to behave and think in a certain way in order to conform to a stereotypical image of the dutiful Muslim woman. Through the figure of Zarina Jatt, a Pakistani American woman who writes a humanizing novel about the Prophet Muhammad, Akhtar dramatizes a double layer of surveillance: the external Islamophobic gaze of western society and the internal patriarchal gaze of the Muslim community itself. The events of *The Who & The What* underline that rejection, negative stereotyping, and surveillance toward Muslim women—both from without and from within their communities—do not bring about peace, discipline, or belonging. Instead, this results in fractured identities, existential estrangement, and an urgent, if painful, process of self-creation and literary rebellion.

Keywords: Gender, Identity, Islamophobia, Power Dynamics, Race, Religion, Muslim American Drama, Stereotyping.

التَّفَاوُضُ عَلَى الْهُوِيَّةِ: الْعِرْقُ وَالْدِّينُ وَالْجِنْدَرُ فِي مَسْرَحِيَّةِ «مَنْ هُوَ وَمَا هُوَ»

(٢٠١٤) لِأَيَّادٍ أَخْتَرَ

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المستخلص

يُعْنَى أَيَّادٍ أَخْتَارَ فِي مَسْرَحِيَّتِهِ " مَنْ هُوَ وَمَا هُوَ " بدراسة ديناميكيات السلطة المعقدة التي تعمل داخل المجتمعات المسلمة في الولايات المتحدة، وكذلك بينها وبين المجتمع الغربي الأوسع. ويتمثل هدفه الرئيس في إبراز أثر تداخل العرق والدين والجندر والهوية في الأفراد الشرقيين—وخاصة النساء المسلمات المقيمت في الغرب—وبيان ما إذا كانت المراقبة الاجتماعية والأبوية التي يتعرضن لها تؤدي إلى الانضباط أم إلى التحرر داخل مجتمعاتهن.

تُظْهِرُ الأحداث الدرامية في المسرحية كيف تتمكّن المؤسسات الدينية والبنى العائلية والمنظمات المجتمعية من تشكيل الأفراد—ولا سيما النساء—وتدريبهم على التفكير والسلوك بطريقة معينة، بما يضمن امتثالهم لصورة نمطية للمرأة المسلمة المطيعة. ومن خلال شخصية زارينا جات، وهي امرأة أمريكية من أصول باكستانية تكتب رواية تُضفي طابعاً إنسانياً على شخصية النبي محمد ﷺ، يُجسّد أختار طبقتين من المراقبة: النظرة الخارجية المعادية للإسلام في المجتمع الغربي، والنظرة الأبوية الداخلية داخل المجتمع المسلم نفسه.

وتؤكد أحداث مسرحيته " مَنْ هُوَ وَمَا هُوَ " أن الرفض والتنميط السلبي والمراقبة المفروضة على النساء المسلمات—سواء من خارج مجتمعاتهن أو من داخلها—لا تؤدي إلى السلام أو الانضباط أو الإحساس بالانتماء. بل تقضي هذه الممارسات إلى هويات متشظية، واغتراب وجودي، وعملية ملحة—وإن كانت مؤلمة—لإعادة تشكيل الذات والتمرد الأدبي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الجندر، الهوية، الإسلاموفوبيا (رهاب الإسلام)، ديناميكيات السلطة، العرق، الدين، الدراما الأمريكية المسلمة، التنميط (الصور النمطية)

The Pakistani-American playwright Ayad Akhtar, in his play *The Who & The What* (2014), concerns himself with examining power dynamics both between the West and the East and within Muslim communities themselves. His main aim is to underline the impact of overlapping systems of surveillance—western Islamophobia and internal patriarchal authority—on eastern individuals, especially Muslim women living in the United States, and to show whether these forces bring about discipline or produce instead a deeper sense of alienation and revolt (Sian,2017). The play, which premiered at La Jolla Playhouse in February 2014, centers on Zarina Jatt, a Pakistani American woman in Atlanta who is writing a novel that humanizes the Prophet Muhammad by exploring his desires, doubts, and contradictions. Her literary project triggers a crisis within her family and community that exposes the layered nature of the surveillance to which Muslim American women are subjected.

In his *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault explains how discipline is planned to be attained in societies, and how bodies are being tamed to function as obedient agents. The body becomes the "object and the target of power. It is easy to find signs of the attention paid... to the body—to the body that is manipulated, shaped, trained, which obeys, responds, becomes skillful and increases its forces" (Foucault, 1977, p. 136). Powerful bodies focus their attention and effort to manipulate others to serve and achieve those bodies' own targets. The institutions, sects, and organizations that exist in a certain society are expected to contribute to and achieve the targets of a certain power. That is why they should remain in that power's grip. Foucault adds: "The body had become the object of... imperious and pressing investments; in every society, the body was in the grip of very strict powers, which imposed on it constraints, prohibitions or obligations" (Foucault, 1977, p. 136). In *The Who & The What*, both the western state and the Muslim patriarchal family function as disciplinary apparatuses that seek to constrain Zarina's body, her writing, and ultimately her identity.

There has always been a struggle between the West and Islam throughout history. Yet, since the 9/11 events, the West-East clash has been heightened and intensified. The powerful regimes of the West make use of this event to inaugurate a discourse of Islamophobia. Ghauri and Umber(٢٠١٩) feel that "many scholars believe that among the many sources of information that contribute to distort the image of Islam and Muslims in Westerners' minds, the media is the most influential one" (2). Muslims and Islam in the West have been demonized far more intensely than before the attacks. This discourse enhances discrimination, negative preconception, and prejudice against Muslims—and particularly

against Muslim women whose visible religious identity makes them targets of a double marginalization: they are perceived as oppressed by their own faith and as threatening by the western mainstream.

This sense of antagonism between the West and the East “gained much notoriety after the September 11th crisis in demonizing the race of Muslims, isolating them, and considering them as the others”(Bagato, 2020). In *The Who & The What*, Akhtar introduces characters whose inner struggle reflects this external pressure while simultaneously dramatizing a less-examined form of power: the surveillance exercised by the Muslim community itself over those of its members—particularly its women—who seek to question, reform, or reimagine its sacred traditions. Zarina's father Afzal, her sister Mahwish, and the broader Muslim congregation to which her husband Eli ministers all function as agents of a disciplinary gaze that seeks to keep Zarina within the boundaries of acceptable Muslim female identity. The play thus stages a double bind that is peculiar to the Muslim American woman: she must negotiate the Islamophobic gaze of the West and the patriarchal gaze of her own community simultaneously.

The result of such overlapping forms of discrimination and surveillance is depicted in *The Who & The What*, where Akhtar introduces a range of Muslim characters whose responses to their situation illuminate the various strategies available to Muslim Americans navigating these pressures. Like the characters of Amir, Hussein, and Bashir in *Disgraced* and *The Invisible Hand* respectively, the characters of *The Who & The What* are treated as ‘the other’ by the West, which regards their faith as a marker of inferiority, backwardness, and potential violence. Muslims, generally, are viewed as an inferior, ignorant, and uncivilized race by most westerners who, as a result, feel that they must have power over such a group. Thus, a westerner generally claims that he or she is more privileged, empowered, knowledgeable, civilized, and wiser than a Muslim. In his "*The West and the Rest*," Stuart Hall writes that the term 'Western' is being used currently as an adjective that describes "a society that is developed, industrialized, urbanized, capitalist, secular, and modern" (57). Any nation that meets these criteria is mentally conceived as a civilized nation, because the "West = developed = good = desirable; [and]... the non-West = underdeveloped = bad = undesirable" (Hall, 1992, p. 57).

That is why being a Muslim from an eastern origin and living in a society where the dominant discourse belittles one's own culture makes many people experience a long process of self-scrutiny and, in many cases, self-loathing. The way Zarina reacts to this pressure,

though, is neither an assimilation nor withdrawal. Contrary to what Amir in *Disgraced* does by becoming westernized to the extent of changing his name and renouncing his Pakistani identity, Zarina resists the western request of assimilation as well as the request of the community of being docile and conforming. Rather, she directs her feelings of estrangement and outrage into writing a novel- a literary process which is both a statement of identity and a denunciation of the patriarchal institutions that have confined her. Her sister, Mahwish, on the other hand, is a sort of a concession to familial and religious norms and became a wife at a young age, repressed her own desires so that she could do what her father wanted to see a Muslim woman to be. The contrast between the two sisters dramatizes the range of positions available to Muslim American women caught between competing disciplinary regimes.

The western centrality that claims to maintain peace and discipline becomes, in fact, the main justification for the western nations' practice of mass surveillance over 'the other', particularly Muslims, especially after the 9/11 events. Surveillance is supposed to be practiced in order to maintain society's discipline and welfare. In his *Discipline*, Foucault asserts that surveillance is "an effort to adjust the mechanisms of power that frame the everyday lives of individuals; an adaptation and a refinement of the machinery that assumes responsibility for and places under surveillance their everyday behavior, their identity, their activity, their apparently unimportant gestures; another policy for that multiplicity of bodies and forces that constitutes a population" (77). However, the surveillance practiced against Muslims after 9/11 is not the neutral, welfare-preserving institution that Foucault's description might suggest. It is, rather, a targeted mechanism for producing Muslim subjects as inherently suspect—a mechanism that operates both through formal state institutions and through the informal networks of community and family (Morey, 2011).

In *The Who & The What*, this surveillance manifests in particularly intimate forms. While Afzal does not face formal state interrogation in the way that Hussein does in *Disgraced*, the play makes clear that the Muslim community in Atlanta is acutely aware of the scrutiny it faces from the broader American society. The horror with which Afzal reacts to the news that his daughter has written a novel in which the Prophet Muhammad is portrayed in human, lustful, and fallible ways, is not simply a personal or theological response, but it is a social anxiety of what will be the effects of exposure. On hearing about the contents of the novel, Afzal takes pains to warn Zarina of the perils of attention: "If someone finds out that you have this, you will never be able to visit Pakistan. We will never be able to go to Pakistan. Never again" (Akhtar, 2014, p. 75). This warning reveals how deeply the external surveillance of the

Muslim community has been internalized by Afzal himself; he has become, in Foucauldian terms, both a disciplinary subject and a disciplinary agent, surveilling his own daughter in order to pre-empt the scrutiny of a hostile external world.

The widespread negative conception of Muslims in mass media does not only formulate the non-Muslims' perception of Muslims and Islam, but it also encourages some Muslims to question their own religion and culture, and to mistakenly start believing that Islam is really a religion of backwardness and oppression. In *The Who & The What*, this dynamic is staged through the character of Zarina, who has internalized enough of the Western feminist critique of Islam to feel the force of its arguments, but who remains sufficiently attached to her tradition to insist on the difference between the religion itself and the patriarchal uses to which it has been put. In one of the play's most intellectually charged exchanges, Zarina explains to Eli the origins of the hijab as she interprets them through her historical research "And because of Muhammad's very human impatience to be with his wife, generations and generations of Muslim women wear a curtain to his bedroom on their faces. I mean, really?" (Akhtar, 2014, p. 42)

This argument is not just an airing of grievances; rather it is a statement of what religious authority is all about. Zarina emphasizes that the unveiling of the veil was a historically contingent, politically and emotionally driven phenomenon and not an eternal divine dictum--a point of view that resembles that of the feminist Islamic academic Fatima Mernissi, who has argued in *The Veil and the Male Elite* (1991) that the Quranic verses of the hijab were a creation of special historical conditions, not By playing this argument out in theatrical terms, Akhtar brings into view the power relations that reinforce the gendered aspects of Muslim identity: the very institutions of religious authority that offer the veil as a religious command also offer the Muslim woman who challenges that command as a transgressor, a deviant and, in the worst formulation of it, a blasphemous (Mernissi, 1991).

Muslims are thus made to continually defend themselves and justify their beliefs and actions, hoping that they would not be misunderstood or mistakenly categorized as 'bad Muslims.' In his *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror*, Mamdani (٢٠٠٤) asserts that after the 9/11 events, President Bush distinguished between "good Muslims" and "bad Muslims"—"bad Muslims" were clearly responsible for terrorism, while "good Muslims"... would undoubtedly support "us" in a war against "them" (196). This philosophy places Muslims living in the West under a psychological pressure. Now and then,

they have to verify that they belong to the good-Muslim category. In *The Who & The What*, this pressure takes a particular form for Muslim women, who are expected to demonstrate their goodness not only by distancing themselves from terrorism but also by conforming to a patriarchal model of Muslim femininity—modest, obedient, devoted, and silent.

Afzal embodies this male ideal with intricacy that makes it difficult to easily criticize him. He is no bad man; he is a loving, hard working immigrant father whose whole identity is structured around his love to his daughters and his religion. He shows his reaction when he finds the novel of Zarina, it shows his anguish, not calculated cruelty “When that cancer had finally eaten your mother alive, behti, when she was dying... I promised her. She was the center. I promised I would be the center to hold the family together. Don't you see what this is? It's like that goddamn cancer!”(Akhtar, 2014, p. 77)

This passage is crucial for understanding the Foucauldian dimensions of Afzal's behavior. His insistence on Zarina destroying her manuscript is not to him exercised in the sense of arbitrary power, but rather is exercised in the sense of love, a desperate measure to keep the family unit coherent in the face of an existential threat which he sees as such. But the impact of this demand is the same as the impact of any other disciplinary power, it aims at silencing the deviant body, at returning it to conformity, at erasing the mark of its disobedience. Discipline, according to Foucault, does not always involve coercion, it can be as well as an internalization of norms, as the desire of the subject to conform, to love, loyalty that binds one to the institutions within which one is confined.

The most radical gesture of the play is Zarina responding to this pressure. In contrast to Amir in *Disgraced* who reacts to western surveillance by internalizing its conditions and becoming a traitor to his own culture, Zarina will not succumb to the external and internal pressures of conformity. She does not reject her religion; she does not disown her affection towards her father, or her community. What she insists upon is the right to make her own terms in the dealing with her tradition--to visualize the Prophet as a whole human being, and to make that visualization her own means of self-creation. Her novel is therefore not an apostasy but a testimony as she refers to it “Contradictions only make him more human, which only makes him more extraordinary”(Akhtar, 2014, p. 41).

This assertion of the humanity of the Prophet is in the social world of the play a very transgressive one. It questions the hagiographic tradition according to which the Prophet was

not merely a human subject but an object of contradiction who, as Zarina points out, has been employed to justify the subjugation of Muslim women by being interpreted as a divine edict. In this regard, her novel is not merely a literary experiment; it is a political intervention in the current struggle of the meaning of Islamic identity.

The role of Eli, the husband of Zarina and the imam of a small Atlanta mosque reveals the play interests in the questions of the true Muslim identity in another perspective. Being a White American who has converted to Islam, Eli is in a structural ambiguity position in the Muslim community. His conversion provides him with a kind of spiritual authority which, ironically, is boosted and challenged by his whiteness. Because Eli is made to feel loved and valued by the community, as Afzal sarcastically notes, the community is itself passionate about Eli being converted into a Westerner, which illustrates a larger process of the West as a validating center “You know how many hundreds of thousands of dollars it's taken to have that jingle printed on your brain?” (Akhtar, *The Who & The What*, p.11).

Eli is white, and therefore has a certain type of cultural capital in the Muslim community- When a white man joins, and the Red Sea parts, as Afzal notes, a white man joining a Muslim community is both a source of pride and alienation to traditionalists who perceive ethnic and cultural origin to be intimately linked to authentic Muslim identity. Hall comments on the relationship between identity and positioning, stating that one must think of identity as “itself, enunciated. We all write and speak from a particular place and time, from a history and a culture which is specific. What we say is always 'in context', positioned” (*Cultural Identity and Diaspora* 68). Eli speaks from the context of a voluntarily adopted faith, uncomplicated by the generational inheritance of discrimination, gender inequality, and patriarchal authority that shapes the faith as Zarina has inherited it.

Eli's response to Zarina's novel mirrors, in compressed form, the play's central ambivalence. He is the first person to read the completed manuscript, and his initial response is ambivalent: he acknowledges that it is brilliant and that he could not put it down, but he also tells Zarina that the man she has written is not the man he recognizes “Your portrayal of the Prophet is stunning. That searching quality, his constant self-questioning, his rich conflicted inner life. You really put me in the head of this man... But he's nothing like the man I know. I didn't recognize him, Zarina” (Akhtar, 2014, p. 52).

The response of Eli demonstrates how idealized in itself is his image of the Prophet, a form which introduces the idea of Islam as a religion of radical equality and compassion and which covers over the historical contradictions of Islam. His canonical Prophet, the man who

goes to the ill woman who throws rubbish on him, the incarnation of the transcendent generosity, is a character made out of the highest moments of the tradition, stripped of the human contradictions which Zarina demands be made real. The novel requires Eli to meet the differences between the idealized object of his adoration and the historical individual who is behind the tradition. His subsequent defense of the novel--his claim that Zarina is not producing blasphemy but testimony--is the most explicit assertion of artistic position of the play itself.

In contrast to Amir who attributes their predicament to Muslims and their religion as being oppressive, Zarina assumes that it is the tradition of interpretation that is patriarchal, rather than the religion, that has given rise to the circumstances of Muslim women oppression, and perpetuated them. She and Eli believe that the unwelcomingness of the community to the novel does not represent the robustness of the faith but a weakness due to centuries of a battle of self-identification. The only homeland they both have ever known is the one that they feel like strangers in, both Zarina and Hussein in *Disgraced*. But, in contrast to Hussein who finally feels hopeless about his role and contemplates leaving America, Zarina decides to stay, and to insist on the potential of a reformed, more honest involvement with her tradition within.

Mahwish is supposed to be characterized in such a way that it throws light on the other way that Muslim American women can choose as they are subjected to the twin surveillance of western Islamophobia and family patriarchy. Similar to Hussein in *Disgraced* who shallows-adopts the clothes and name of an average American to prevent being discriminated against, Mahwish shallows-adopts the role of a good Muslim daughter to ensure that she has a feeling of security and belonging. She gets married at a very early age, smothers her intellectual curiosity and brings out her image as the antithesis of her rebellious sister. However, as the play reveals that her compliance is not contentment; it is a survival tactic that has its own price. The second act of the play shows that Mahwish has been living with Haroon due to the deep level of emotional and physical humiliation, and that she has been harboring a love affair with a man- Manuel, a GRE instructor- who embodies all the things that her controlled life has denied(Akhtar,2014,pp.85-92).

The case of Mahwish demonstrates that the Foucauldian argument whereby disciplinary power is not merely suppressive of desire is especially clear. The set of rules that she has subordinated herself to have not brought her joy or wholeness; it has caused her to be part of her own downfall. When an emergency arose in the family because of the novel of Zarina,

Mahwish first took sides with her father, where she criticized the novel as filth and threatened to begin wearing the veil as a cleansing process. Her response is a show of how far she has internalized the disciplinary norms of the community that she has tried so much to please. However, the fact that eventually Afzal intervenes on her behalf, offering to allow her to go home and part ways with Haroon, indicates that the patriarchal system she has been serving can respond to female suffering in a more subtle way than it would seem to initially condemn Zarina.

According to Schoenmann (2013), negative stereotypes and characteristics are usually attributed to out-groups and the most likely targets of the negative image are cultural, racial or religious minorities that appear to be different than the norm, but not their ethnic or cultural difference. This dynamic plays on many levels simultaneously in *The Who & The What*. The western mainstream stereotypes Zarina as a Muslim woman who must be liberated by the oppressive religion she belongs to; her community stereotypes her as a dangerous deviant who is a threat to the collective identity; and her father stereotypes her as a brilliant yet lost daughter who must be brought back to the right track. No one of these stereotypes explains her as the full complexity of her personality and resisting all these stereotypes is a significant part of the dramatic effect of the play.

The interaction of the play with the idea of the binary between the good and bad Muslim that Mamdani marks is especially subtle (Mamdani, 2004). The binary in *The Who & The What* plays out not so much around the axis of terrorism and loyalty to the West as it does in *Disgraced* and *The Invisible Hand*, but around the axis of gender conformity and religious obedience. The implicit implication of the terms the community in the play imposed on a woman to be a good Muslim woman is that she must accept this patriarchal view of the religion, she must not challenge the divine rights of the conventional gender role, and she must not elevate her intellectual and creative ambitions to the needs of her family and society. By these norms, Zarina is a bad Muslim woman, not by virtue of her being a supporter of terrorism or an anti-American, but by virtue of her insistence on doing her own thinking about the origins of her own tradition.

The surveillance that the west has been practicing on Muslims since 9/11 has made most of the Muslims into docile bodies: they are ready to accept anything that can be said to them by the West, the civilized center of the world, and they are only trying to prove that they have good intentions. In the play by Akhtar, however, this dynamic is further complicated by the fact that not only the West but even the community imposes disciplinary pressure on Muslim

women. What Zarina has lived through is that Muslim American women are in a distinctly dual bind: they must demonstrate their goodness to a western mainstream who think of them as being victimized by their faith and at the same time demonstrate their goodness to a community that thinks of them as dangerous agents of western secularism. The outcome of these clashing pressures is not submission but some sort of imaginative revolt the writing of a novel that rejects the western stereotype of Islam as well as the self-enhancing fantasy of the community.

The effects of the rebellion of Zarina affirm Foucauldian analysis of disciplinary power in the play. When the novel finally comes into the limelight of publicity, by the finding of the manuscript by Afzal, and the consequent rift it causes, the reaction of the community is prompt and vindictive. Eli loses a big part of his congregation; Afzal loses drivers who do not want to work with the father of such a woman; the windows of the family are broken by other members of society who believe that Zarina has insulted Islam. Such communal disciplinary measures are, in Foucauldian terms, the panopticon at work: the community displays the degree of its surveillance through the coercion of its response to the one who has eluded its gaze. But the play tells us that this punishment fails to do its purpose. When Zarina and Eli go to Oregon, she never takes it back, the novel is published and has reached its readers, the Muslims in Istanbul, Lahore, London, and Omaha, who tell her that the novel has helped them. The disciplinary apparatus has worked, but has failed to bring out the docile body that it intended to bring.

The characters of *The Who & The What* do not allow themselves to survive in the same way Zarina does, and still, being not accepted by the American society and unable to live a fully accepted life, they find alternative ways of survival. The play gives an epilogue of Afzal, a man who has over time, painfully come to realize the boundaries of his own patriarchal authority due to the community boycotting his business. The reaction of Afzal to this meeting with Mahwish when she sets it up at their old coffee shop two years after he estranged her is full of pride, pain and hesitant acceptance. He informs Zarina that he has read her novel thrice; that he does not yet comprehend why she needed to write it; but that there are people in other parts of the Muslim world who have written to tell her that it helped them. His inability to understand is itself a form of understanding: he can no longer claim that the novel is simply filth, because the evidence of its reception contradicts that claim. This tentative reconciliation does not dissolve the conflict; it holds it, as Akhtar's Author's Note suggests, in the key of hope.

Despite the trials of all the characters to belong to their concerned communities, despite the hard effort they exert to assimilate or to resist, and despite the sacrifices some are ready to offer in order to feel that they are welcomed in the only homeland they have ever known, they find out that they would always remain questioned and treated with suspicion. It does not matter how educated, how articulate, how clearly devoted to the betterment of the community a Muslim American woman may be—she will always be viewed as 'the other' by the West, and as a potential deviant by her own community, if she insists on thinking for herself. As Maras notes, “the US Justice Department’s actions post 9/11, where they detained hundreds of persons based on little more than the fact that they were Arab or Muslim non-citizens, clearly demonstrates this” (Maras,2012,pp. 65–81). In the Muslim American community depicted by Akhtar, a parallel dynamic operates: Zarina is sanctioned not because her novel is demonstrably harmful but because it is Muslim—because it speaks from within the tradition rather than simply attacking it from without, and therefore poses a more intimate and more destabilizing kind of threat.

Conclusion

After investigating *The Who & The What*, the play demonstrates that rejection, negative stereotyping, and targeted surveillance toward Muslims in western societies—and toward Muslim women within their own communities—do not bring about peace, discipline, or belonging. “Scarce experiences with the minority group results in that the 'others' seem threatening and create a feeling of insecurity among the majority group” (Schonemann, 2013, p. 2). Being an outcast in one's own homeland, and being subject to a double disciplinary gaze from without and from within, affects the Muslim American woman's way of thinking and her attitude towards life and society. Instead of strengthening loyalty and a sense of belonging, practicing scrutiny over Muslim Americans—whether through state surveillance or through communal patriarchal authority—overcomes them with a sense of rejection, alienation, and creative rage. Trying to tame individuals by passing specific laws or imposing specific community norms to guarantee that they would behave in a certain way does not lead to discipline or more security. Instead, this results in fractured identities, increases estrangement, and—in the case of Zarina—produces a literature of testimony that insists on the possibility of a more honest and more fully human engagement with the Islamic tradition. Akhtar's play thus argues, through its very form and its comedic orientation toward hope, that the only sustainable response to the double surveillance faced by Muslim American women is

neither compliance nor apostasy but the harder, lonelier, and ultimately more redemptive act of speaking the truth as one sees it—even when that truth costs everything.

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