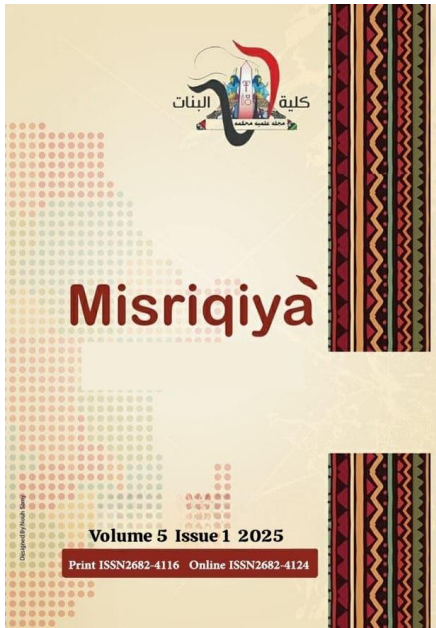




The Third Space and the Trap of Inferiority in Ayad Akhtar's *Disgraced* (2012)

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Abstract

This paper investigates some of the cross-cultural obstacles that immigrants encounter in the host society, as they oscillate between two distinct cultures. Through an analysis of Ayad Akhtar's (1970-) Pakistani-American play *Disgraced* (2012), the paper explores the characters' "third spaces", focusing on the protagonist Amir's grapple with his fragmented in-between identities. It examines how Eastern immigrants could view themselves as inferior, thus conceal their original identities and adopt the new Western culture. Like many minorities in the United States, this is what some Pakistani-Americans do for the sake of economic prosperity and social acceptance. The paper draws on Homi K. Bhabha's post-colonial concepts of 'mimicry', 'ambivalence', 'hybridity' and 'third space' to highlight the extent to which these concepts impact the colonized identities. The paper also explores whether immigrants can create a balanced 'third space' by embracing their indigenous cultures or not.

Keywords: Pakistani-American Minorities, Eastern Immigrants, Homi Bhabha, Third Space, In-betweenness, Inferiority

Introduction

This paper seeks to explore the cultural challenges that Eastern immigrants face as they navigate between their indigenous culture, and the new Western one. By examining Ayad Akhtar's (1970-) Pakistani-American play *Disgraced* (2012), the study delves into the "third spaces" of the characters, with a particular focus on the protagonist's inner conflict with his "ambivalent" "hybrid" identity and sense of inferiority. The study also explores the ways "hybrid" Eastern immigrants could perceive themselves as inferior to the Western mainstream, thus assimilate to the new culture and hide their original identities in pursuit of success and recognition from society.

This study draws upon the theoretical concepts of Homi K. Bhabha (1949-), who is one of the most eminent scholars in post-colonial studies. The study applies Bhabha's post-colonial concepts of 'mimicry', 'ambivalence', 'hybridity' and 'third space' to investigate the impact of the interaction between the colonizer and the colonized. It also explores the impact of these concepts on people's identities and how they result in creating a melting pot society. The study accentuates the extent to which Bhabha's concepts could be revealing of the identities of the colonized and investigates whether immigrants can create a balanced 'third space' by embracing their heritage and overcoming their "inferiority complex".

Further, the study explores some of the challenges that Eastern and Muslim immigrants face, especially post 9/11. The research thus starts by offering a brief biographical background about Ayad Akhtar and his works. Then, it attempts to apply Homi Bhabha's post-colonial concepts of 'mimicry', 'ambivalence', 'hybridity' and 'third space' on Akhtar's play *Disgraced* with a special focus on the character of the Pakistani immigrant in the play, Amir. The paper underscores the repercussions that would occur when hybrid immigrants, minorities, and colonized individuals feel inferior to the culture of the colonizer. In this case they often become compelled to assimilate to the new mainstream culture for the sake of gaining approval from the Western colonizer. The paper also attempts to answer the question whether their mimicry and cultural assimilation lead them to create a balanced third space or a fragmented in-betweenness.

Homi Bhabha's Concepts: Mimicry, Hybridity, Ambivalence, and Third Space

In the late twentieth century, postcolonial critical theories developed to analyze the influence of colonialism on various cultures. These postcolonial theories focus on the colonized experience and investigate the colonizer's

hegemony through Eurocentric literary works. Bill Ashcroft et al. state that a prominent aspect of postcolonial literature is “rewriting the canon” (1998). This rewriting of literature through post-colonial theories allows authors to correct the false portrayals of their culture. Hence, they can subvert the colonial ideas about the “other” and dismiss the misrepresentations of the colonized. According to Ashcroft et al., post-colonial literature came out from the experiences of colonization and emphasized the conflict with colonial power and highlighted their difference from the colonial assumptions and this is what makes them clearly post-colonial (1998).

During colonization, people in the colonies become subject to domination, exploitation, and compelled assimilation. Behind the mask of civilization and freedom, European rules and cultures are imposed on the subjugated others, whereas their indigenous cultures are marginalized. In colonial discourse, the colonized are identified as objects, others, and uncivilized savages. According to Bhabha, the objective of the colonial discourse is to portray the colonized as degenerated or inferior based on their race to justify colonization and conquest and to create governmental and instructional systems (1994). The colonizer justifies their hegemony and imperialism by defining the colonized as inferior to them and establishing themselves as their superior master that must be obeyed. In his essay, “Colonialist Criticism” from his book, *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays*, Chinua Achebe argues that colonizers have often perceived colonized individuals in a negative stereotypical way such as “outcasts”, “simple natives” or obedient dolls. He also explains that colonizers created generalized assumptions to treat all natives as if they had the same experiences and conditions, no matter what their ethnic background was or where they came from (1988). To emancipate themselves from the colonizer’s justified suppression and “mythology of ‘civilisation’ ... [and] ‘Western civility,’” (Bhabha 1994), the colonized strive for decolonization and independence to reclaim their freedom and retain their cultural heritage.

Furthermore, both the colonized and the colonizer develop ‘hybrid hyphenations’ due to their cross-cultural interactions. Accordingly, they adopt new hybrid identities that comprise of both different cultures which Bhabha defines as “third spaces” (1994). The colonized people become torn between two identities: the new dominant one and the one that belongs to their indigenous culture and heritage. This creates ambivalence in their characters, and develops a ‘third space’, in which they follow the traditions of two distinct cultures.

Long ago, this ethnocentrism has created an inner conflict in the minds of Eastern colonized people and developed their “inferiority complex” (Adler, 1927). They mimic Western behaviors and assimilate as a self-defense mechanism, disregarding their cultural norms and traditions which the West regards as ‘uncivilized’ and ‘savage.’ They, therefore, consciously, or unconsciously, assimilate by adopting Bhabha’s postcolonial concepts as a reaction to Western society’s stereotypes and ethnocentric views.

Through Homi Bhabha’s essential key concepts, “hybridity,” “ambivalence,” “mimicry,” and “third space” (1994), the relation between the colonizer and the colonized is well-examined. These concepts convey the ways the colonized have resisted the colonizer’s power and hegemony (Huddart, 2006) and reveal the extent to which the colonized individuals are influenced by the colonizer’s dominant culture.

Bhabha’s term *mimicry* denotes copying and imitating the dominant culture’s language, habits, speech, manners, behaviors, customs, and traditions. He maintains that mimicry “emerges as one of the most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge” (1994). Furthermore, he explains how the colonized mimic the colonizers, who are in power, in order to be in a similar powerful position as they are; however, the outcome of their mimicry may come out ridiculous. He asserts that mimicry “represents an ironic compromise” since it is “the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite” (1994). Therefore, he conveys how imitating the ones in power would be fragmented and could never turn out completely the same.

Although *the other*’s mimicry is not exactly the same copy, it somehow reproduces a new tool by which the colonized can resist the colonial discourse. The colonized becomes a “menace” (1994) that reveals the colonizer’s hegemony. He further emphasizes that not only does mimicry imply imitating the dominant culture’s traits and aspects, but also exaggerating this imitation, which differentiates it from mere simple imitation (El-Bardisy, 2020). Through mimicry, the colonized exposes the colonizer’s authority, “almost as though colonial authority inevitably embodies the seeds of its own destruction” (Ashcroft, 1998). Furthermore, the “resemblance and menace” (Bhabha, 1994) can transform both colonizing and colonized people into “hybrid” and “ambivalent” creating new opportunities for the colonized to resist the colonial discourse. Once the colonized understands the colonizer’s limitations and discloses his notions through this imitation process, he forms a new threatening hybridized identity.

The term hybridity refers to an integration of cultures that often occurs due to cross-cultural interactions. Bhabha states that “Hybridity is a problematic of colonial representation and individuation that reverses the effects of the colonialist disavowal, so that other denied of its authority - its rules of recognition” (1994). Accordingly, both mimicry and hybridity produce disturbance to the power and culture of the colonizer. Hybridity that results from the engagement between the colonizing and colonized cultures, disables the hegemony of the dominant culture and causes its downfall. Through intercultural engagements, these hybrid spaces can challenge the norms and shift power relations, causing change in people and societies. Therefore, both hybrid societies can become “two-powered” (Ashcroft et al., 1998). Bhabha also contends that all cultures are mixed and impure since they are constructed by hybridization. Thus, hybridizing is a reciprocal process that affects both the colonizer and the colonized during cross-cultural communication. The colonial “authority may also become hybridized when placed in a colonial context” (1998). Dr. Salman Khan and Shaukat Ali suggest that hybrid culture is a trial of enforcing first world countries’ cultures into third world countries (2020). However, hybridity might disable the hegemony of the dominant culture and cause its downfall.

Bhabha argues in *The Location of Culture*, that while hybridity looks at the ways people interact with and assimilate into various cultures, a new cultural space can arise in the spaces between dominant and dominated societies, (1994). This new cultural space is what Bhabha calls the *third space* that encourages the emergence of new principles, ideas, and perspectives; thus, redefines “new structures of authority” (1990). In other words, a new “third space” can emerge from this hybrid mixture of the two different cultures. This “third space” is where cultural boundaries blur and blend into each other, and a new hybrid culture emerges, combining the traits of both cultures (Milostivaya, 2017). When cross-cultural communication occurs between the colonized and the colonizer, they absorb both cultures, and each creates their own “third space”. According to Bhabha, all cultural systems are created in a space that he calls the “Third Space of enunciation”, or an in-between hybrid space, that is “neither the one thing nor the other”. This in-between space is a “production of something else besides, [where the identity of the colonized becomes] neither empty nor full, neither part nor whole” (1994).

Although the third space shares some similarities with the two spaces it has emerged from, it is entirely new and has new values and fresh perspectives (Bhandari, 2022). Eleanor Byrne expresses that Bhabha’s third space “is not

simply one thing or the other, nor both at the same time, but a kind of negotiation between both positions” (2019). Bhabha explains that hybridity is what creates a third space, where new thoughts and cultures emerge. (1990).

Further, hybridity arises in an *ambivalent* space, which contains the cultural identity (Ashcroft et al., 1998) since it is a mixture of cultures that occurs within multicultural spaces. According to Ameli in his book *Globalization, Americanization, and British Muslim Identity*, hybrid identities are prevalent among young immigrants, where they grow up with a mixture of traditional and modern cultures. This cultural mixture creates confusion in their identities; thus, they find themselves caught between two roots, two cultural beliefs, and “two opposing waves” (2002). Thus, due to intermixed cultural encounters between the colonizer and the colonized, hybridity creates a contradicting space in both counterparts’ cultural identities. Likewise, immigrants who experience cross-cultural encounters for a long time, establish a new intermixed identity in their own “third space”. However, their third space could blend contradicted cultures and ideas; thus, they may develop dual thoughts and “ambivalent” identities.

The term *ambivalence* originates in psychoanalysis whereby it describes having opposing views and contradictory feelings towards the same thing. Ambivalence is defined as a fluctuation between two things (Young, 1995). According to Bhabha, ambivalence indicates a dual interest to and a repulsion from an idea, a person, or an action. He exemplifies it as, “a constant fluctuation between wanting one thing and wanting its opposite” (1994). Fitzgerald et al. describe the ambivalence as “the ability to hold two opposing ideas in the mind at the same time” (1945). Thus, the colonized oscillates between two opposing cultures which may develop an inner conflict within himself. When people immigrate from their homelands and arrive to a new host culture, they encounter some obstacles dealing with foreign people from another background. They come across different languages, customs, and traditions, and some of them experience anxiety and frustration, or what Kalervo Oberg calls a “culture shock” (1975).

Accordingly, some immigrants reject the new culture by separating themselves to preserve their culture only. However, some others integrate and co-exist with the dominant culture while maintaining their heritage. They attempt to, gradually, acculturate to new social and cultural levels. Meanwhile, others ignore their origins and, completely, assimilate into the new culture. By doing so, they mimic the dominant culture, creating a ‘melting pot’ society where everyone shares similar characteristics.

Challenges Facing Muslim Pakistani-American Minorities in the Melting Pot of the United States

Over seven million Pakistanis residing abroad, Pakistan has the sixth-largest diaspora. It comprises ninety-seven percent of Muslim citizens (Bigsby et al., 2019). According to the recent statistics of the “U.S. Census Bureau”, the total number of Pakistani minorities in the United States is above six hundred thousand. Muslims, especially post September 11, 2001, have been stereotypically identified as terrorists based on the misconceptions of their religion, race, or ethnicity. Edward Said maintains in *Covering Islam* that “Islam has always represented a particular menace to the West”. In addition, Said explains how Muslims have been portrayed by the media as “oil suppliers, as terrorists, and more recently, as bloodthirsty' mobs” (1981). Such negative portrayals have created Islamophobia and induced racism towards Muslims in Western societies. Thus, instead of valuing diversity of cultures and religions, the mainstream has been imposing conformity and uniformity. Muslim minorities in America underwent the law's powerful abusive power. They have been marginalized, monitored, demonized, and considered as a threat (Noureiddin, 2019).

According to the German researcher Heike Berner in his dissertation, “Home Is Where the Heart Is?”, “culture, history, and ethnicity” are essential factors that are deeply interrelated and greatly affect the formation of identity (2003). Subsequently, identity crisis has been a significant concern in most societies that include Muslim immigrants and minority groups. In the aftermath of 9/11, Muslim minorities have encountered a dilemma of either maintaining their cultural roots or assimilating to the mainstream in “justification for acceptance” by the society. Although around two-thirds of Muslims in the United States consider their faith primarily essential to them, they realize that migration comes with a price. Migrating does not only entail changing one's setting, but also transforming one's physical, intellectual and emotional status, which feels like a betrayal for one's roots (Bigsby et al., 2019).

For a long time, minorities from different cultural backgrounds have found refuge in the United States away from their countries' political wars or economic crises. Since then, having a hybrid identity has been an essential part of the American society for long. It has gathered numerous cultures from a wide range of nations to pursue the ‘American Dream’ and the freedom that it entails. Several ethnic minority groups immigrated there, hoping for prosperous careers and better opportunities. As a result, these ethnic minorities have created a multi-cultural society in the United States, turning it into a “melting pot”.

The “melting pot” portrays the immigrants’ cultural assimilation into the United States, which has become a “complicated fusion cuisine” (Shteyngart, 2004). Debbie A. Hanson states in *The Journal of American Folklore*, “Whether one views America as a melting pot, a salad bowl ... it is undoubtedly true that, aside from its Native American population, the United States is, and always has been, a country of immigrants” (2011). As minority groups try to blend into the mainstream, to make communication easier during cross-cultural encounters, they mimic the American norms and habits. Through their mimicry and assimilation, they create a “melting pot”, where everyone tries to fit in and match up the Western standards. As a result, they transform a diverse and heterogeneous community into a melting homogeneous one.

Although the “melting pot” implies to the integration of several cultures into one amalgamated culture, this assimilation process has had negative portrayals since the 1960s due to its “ethnocentric and patronizing imposition on minority peoples” (Alba & Nee, 2009). Due to racism and Islamophobia, Muslim minority groups feel compelled to imitate the dominant society. These dominant societies succeed in making people act and think in specific ways to promote a particular stereotypical image about a certain race or ethnic group (Abdel Samie & Abdel-Wahab, 621). Thus, Muslim minorities conceal their identities in fear of these societal demands and stereotypes.

These negative portrayals of Muslim minorities resonate with the Western gaze and ethnocentric view of colonized people as being the ‘other’, ‘savages’ and ‘less civilized’ people. Du Bois argues that because of this biased racism on marginalized people, they often start to reconsider their self-worth and image in society, which typically leads to self-condemnation and culture repulsion instead of condemning the mainstream society for such false stereotypes (2007). Thus, this ethnocentric gaze creates an ‘inferiority complex’ within these minority groups, leaving them compelled to fully assimilate into the white society and conceal their origins. According to W. Lloyd Warner and Leo Srole, “ethnic minority groups have to 'unlearn' their cultural traits, which are 'evaluated by the host society as inferior'” (as cited in Alba & Nee, 2009). Thus, these minority groups are considered inferiors who should give up their own roots and assimilate into the mainstream culture to have a better life in the United States.

Consequently, some Muslim immigrants, including Pakistani-Americans, conform to burying their roots in fear of Islamophobia and racism. Some of them even renounce their race and heritage. After erasing their traditions and origins, they no longer look like their real selves. However, they might do this to protect

themselves from racism, as well as to reach the American Dream, thinking that it would make them ascend to higher levels and obtain better opportunities in their lives.

As a response to such negative portrayals, some Muslim Pakistani American artists have created several autobiographical narratives and plays to correct such misinterpretations of Muslim minorities. Their work reflects controversial issues that hybrid Muslims encounter in immigration.

Ayad Akhtar (1970-): His Life and works

Ayad Akhtar is a renowned Pakistani-American playwright and novelist, who has made noteworthy contributions to the American theater. In dozens of languages, his novels and plays have been published and performed in many popular theatres. He has received many awards such as the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, the Edith Wharton Citation of Merit, and the American Academy of Arts (Schwartz, 2020). He grew up in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, after his parents immigrated in the late 1960s from their hometown in Pakistan. Akhtar pursued his studies in film direction and theatre at the School for the Arts at Columbia University and Brown University (Benea, 2015). Akhtar's Pakistani American heritage endows him with a distinctive viewpoint on issues such as race, religion, and cultural assimilation (Asif, 2015). Akhtar considers himself “a narrative artist [not] a novelist or screenwriter or playwright (Sriram, 2014).

Akhtar has been influenced by his contemporaries Stephen Adly Guirgis and Quiara Alegria Hudes, reflecting the multifaceted nature of American society (Bigsby et al., 2019). This has affected his style of writing narratives, storytelling techniques, and character development. As a result, he has been able to create controversial plays that capture his audience. Ayad was deeply religious in his youth, but as he grew older, he wanted to fit in among the American society in Wisconsin. He believed that he did not belong to the same cultural space as his white friends. He had a tough time accepting his heritage and Muslim identity and instead tried to assimilate, especially post 9/11, which is the subject of most of his works (Levingston, 2014). His work has also been praised by critics because it reflects his personal Muslim American experience (Asif, 2015) and the struggles of Muslim immigrants in diaspora (Hasan & Noori, 2021).

Akhtar's plays, influenced by several dramatists and cultural factors, delve into subjects such as the identities of minorities, Islamophobia and ethnic and religious biases (Abdel Hakim, 2019). While viewed from a Muslim perspective, his themes are universal such as “religious devotion and self-awareness” (Levingston, 2014). His most successful Pulitzer Prize-winning play, *Disgraced*,

whose dialogue "...bristles with wit and intelligence" (Isherwood), explores the complexities of Muslim identity in America after the tragic events of 9/11 (Cain, 2022). His other famous works include *American Dervish*, which has been translated into more than twenty languages, *The War Within* (2005); *The Who & The What* (2014); *The Invisible Hand* (2015) and many others (Ayad Akhtar (n.d.)). Akhtar has been awarded many fellowships, in addition to becoming a board director at Yaddo. In 2021, the New York State Writers Institute chose Akhtar to be the New York State Author (University of Scranton, 2022).

In his most famous play, *Disgraced* (2012), Akhtar challenges stereotypes and misconceptions about Muslim identity by addressing essential social and political problems. He explores ethnic identity, which highlights his commitment to displaying the diverse nature of identity in a multicultural society. In an interview with Stephen Moss of *The Guardian*, Akhtar says that all he did was to turn and look at what he was running away from, and then he came out with all the creativity (Moss, 2013). He merges both his autobiography with controversial social themes, which adds authenticity to his work.

In summary, Ayad Akhtar's development as a playwright is greatly inspired by his personal life, heritage, and experiences. His controversial plays have made him a prominent figure in American theater. Through his work, he tackles stereotypes, diverse identities, and different experiences that define individuals in cross-cultural communities.

The Ambivalent Third Space in Akhtar's *Disgraced* (2012)

Akhtar's acclaimed Off-Broadway play *Disgraced* (2012) depicts the conflicts that Muslim minorities undergo and the multiple conflicting identities they create while trying to integrate into the American society. He expresses how 9/11 has had an impact on his struggle with his own identity, questioning what he wants to be and what he is ashamed of (Pioneer Press, 2014). *Disgraced* provides a powerful insight into the challenges encountered by Islamic Americans post 9/11 era (Geier, 2012). It significantly portrays the aftermaths of their assimilation due to the discrimination and racial stereotypes they face. The characters exemplify different aspects of Bhabha's concepts as they experience significant changes in their lives during their imitation and assimilation processes. They are depicted as negatively affected by their religious and ethnic backgrounds. Instead of balancing their new "third space" with their hybrid culture, they mimic the Western mainstream and adopt the Eurocentric ideologies that view the Eastern culture as inferior to them. By surrendering to this colonial mindset, they aspire to achieve the American Dream which symbolizes strength and modernity. To

achieve this, they devalue themselves and look down on their culture with shame and inferiority.

Disgraced is a one-act play that includes four scenes. It takes place in the apartment of the Muslim American-born of Pakistani heritage, Amir Kapoor, and his American wife, Emily, on New York's Upper East Side. Amir is a lawyer who tries to have a partnership with the Jewish people who run his firm. Hence, to gain acceptance from the mainstream, he renounces Islam and condemns his identity. He pretends to be a Hindu Indian and changes his last name Abdullah to Kapoor to obscure his Pakistani Muslim identity. Contrary to him, his wife, Emily admires the Islamic traditions and is greatly influenced by the teachings of Islam, while also embracing her American culture and heritage. Amir's nephew, Abe, also imitates the Americans to avoid discrimination and Islamophobia. He tries to hide his real identity by changing his original birthname, Hussein; however, unlike Amir, he eventually turns back to his religious roots. He visits Amir to try to convince him to support a Muslim imam, who has been charged with funding a Palestinian organization, which is allegedly labelled as "terrorist organizations." Emily and Abe succeed to persuade Amir to defend the imprisoned Imam's case. Later on, Amir invites his African-American co-worker, Jory, and her Jewish curator husband, Isaac, to dinner at their apartment. They start with casual conversations and escalate to debates about race, anti-Semitism, and Islam. Amir finds out that Jory has received a promotion to a partner position at the Jewish law company instead of him due to the company's concerns about his integrity, false identity and association with the Muslim Imam's case. What makes matters worse is that he discovers that his wife has had an affair with their Jewish friend. Thus, Amir realizes that his assimilation and heritage denial were in vain. He spits in his Jewish friend's face and beats Emily until her face bleeds. In the end, Amir realizes that he has lost his wife and his job. He tries to reunite with her, but she refuses and leaves him in his misery and disgrace.

To assimilate into the American melting pot, the characters in the play adopt mimicry, but they face several obstacles and fail to be an exact copy of the mainstream nor integrate and be a part of the society. As Bhabha contends, copying the colonizer produces "a repetition with difference", and "the desire to emerge as authentic through mimicry . . . is the final irony of partial representation". Hence, replicating the colonizer's behaviour might appear as "mockery" (1994). It might be an ironic mimicry because it cannot be identical to the mainstream. According to Ania Loomba, in her book titled *Colonialism/postcolonialism*, "The process of replication is never complete or

perfect, and what it produces is not simply a perfect image of the original, but something changed because of the context in which it is being reproduced” (2002). Nonetheless, mimicry can be threatening to the colonizer and subversive of his colonial hegemony.

Therefore, they become caught into ambivalence and torn between their original culture and the dominant one which they wish to be part of. Through investigating the protagonist Amir's struggle with his hybrid identity and gaining acceptance across Western cultures, significant aspects of Homi Bhabha's mimicry, hybridity, third space, and ambivalence are uncovered within the play.

Akhtar presents Amir as a self-made man, who integrates with the norms of American society. However, behind this image, he is vulnerable and struggles with an inner conflict about his Pakistani heritage, feeling disconnected from it. Thus, by representing Amir's internal and external conflicts, the dramatist builds dramatic tension. Stephen Moss of *The Guardian* claims that the protagonist finds it difficult to balance his multiple identities as an Asian American versus an American, a Muslim versus a secularist, and an activist versus a passive observer of injustice (Moss, 2013).

Amir mimics the Americans, speaks a “perfect American accent” (Akhtar, 2012, p. 12), and wears a “six-hundred-dollar Charvet shirt” (p. 44). To assimilate completely, he changes his Muslim last name from Abdullah to Kapoor, a Punjabi name, to evade any religious or racial profiling. He further conceals his real identity and religion and pretends to be an Indian American in hopes of getting promoted at his Jewish firm. Consequently, thinking he is Hindu, his boss sends him a gift of “a bottle of scotch” and “a statue of Siva” (p. 16). Changing his last name also symbolizes his fear of becoming an outcast for his religion. He devalues his own heritage and renounces his Islamic roots to be approved. Amir's renunciation highlights his misconception of assimilation; he thinks that renouncing his cultural and religious roots is the key to embracing a more American identity and getting accepted by society.

Amir experiences major changes in his life after he attempts to mimic the American mainstream. His mimicry builds up his new hybrid identity. Subsequently, he creates a new “third space,” that has both cultures' ambivalent and contradicting ideas. Thus, his new third space increases his inner conflict and struggle to accept himself. He develops what Du Bois calls a “double consciousness” which makes him incapable of seeing himself except through other people's eyes (2007). Therefore, Amir becomes torn between the two cultures and experiences a sense of “two-ness,” two distinct identities and two

divergent thoughts (p. 9). His third space is now full of ambivalence and opposing ideas, that are portrayed throughout the play.

Further, satire is a central device in Akhtar's characterization of Amir as he prefers wearing expensive six-hundred-dollar shirts, but his dinner party takes place in his apartment, which is very simple and has "subtle flourishes of the Orient" (Akhtar, 2012, p. 11). This scene also highlights his ambivalence since his apartment's Oriental atmosphere contradicts with his rejection of his Eastern culture. Also, his ambivalence is shown in his contradiction with Islamic traditions, as he drinks "wine" and eats "pork tenderloin" (p. 38). He tries to represent success as it is viewed in the West by eating chorizo and drinking wine (Soloski, 2012). In addition, he condemns his faith and says, "I'm not Muslim. I'm an *apostate*. Which means I've renounced my faith" (Akhtar, 2012, p. 57) and falsely depicts Islam as "a backward way of thinking...comes from the desert. From a group of tough -minded" (p. 33). Meanwhile, he ambivalently says he is proud of "those folks in Middle East dying for values you were taught were purer and stricter and truer..." (p. 38). He also contradicts himself by asserting that the Quran matters and by referencing what the prophet says about paintings and dogs in the following exchange:

AMIR (CONT'D): And paintings don't matter. Only the Quran matters.

EMILY: Paintings don't matter?

AMIR: I didn't mean it like that.

EMILY: How did you mean it?

AMIR: Honey. You're aware of what the Prophet said about them?

EMILY: I am, Amir.

JORY: What did he say?

AMIR: He used to say angels don't enter a house where there are pictures and/or dogs. (p. 54)

This scene reflects what Bhabha calls a "slippage" of mimicry (1998), since it highlights Amir's ambivalent third space, and inner conflict. No matter how hard he tries to contempt his roots, he feels a sense of belonging to his Islamic heritage. His duality and ambivalence are clear when he talks to his cousin Abe about his name change:

AMIR: I'm talking about you being called Abe Jensen.

Just lay off it with me and your folks at least.

ABE: It's gotta be one thing or the other. I can't be all mixed up.

EMILY (Off Amir's reaction): Amir. You changed your name, too.

ABE: You got lucky.

You didn't have to change your first name.

Could be Christian. Jewish.

Plus, you were born here. It's different. (Akhtar, 2012, p.18)

He again contradicts himself and criticizes his cousin's mimicry for changing his Muslim name from Hussein to Abe, while he himself has changed his last name to hide his Muslim origins. Abe depicts his mimicry and sense of inferiority towards his origins. He justifies changing his name by referencing the Quran. He tells Amir how lucky he is that his first name could be thought of as Christian or Jewish instead of Muslim to avoid racial profiling. In contrast to Amir, Abe was not born in America; thus, he does not hold citizenship, though he wishes to.

Moreover, Amir's ambivalence is evident in his relationship with Emily as his renunciation for his Islamic heritage contradicts with her deep interest in his Islamic background and culture. Her interest in Islam forces him to face his own reality and reminds him of his origins and of post 9/11 prejudices. This increases Amir's identity crisis and his urge to hide his true self; thus, making him feel more trapped in his feelings of inferiority and prejudice. He claims that "the next terrorist attack is probably gonna come from some guy who more or less looks like me" (p. 31), which shows his perception of himself as a terrorist in the eyes of American society. Edward Said states in *Culture and Imperialism*, that hybrid identity leads to the suffering of diasporic people, "... the net effect of cultural exchange between partners conscious of inequality is that the people suffer" (1994). As Amir builds up his third space through mimicry and assimilation, he suffers from feelings of inferiority toward the mainstream, which further intensifies his identity crisis.

The Trap of Inferiority in Amir's Third Space

Akhtar symbolizes Amir's marriage to Emily as a gateway to his mimicry in pursuit of the American Dream. He depicts Emily as Amir's key to Americanization, as he mentions that, Franz Fanon states in *Black Skin, White Mask* that by having a white woman, one gains access to the white culture. Fanon expresses:

I wish to be acknowledged not as black but as white. Now-and this is a form of recognition that Hegel had not envisaged-who but a white woman can do this for me? By loving me she proves that I am worthy of white: love. I am loved like a white man.

I am a white man.

Her love takes me onto the noble road that leads to

total realization. . .

I marry white culture, white beauty, white whiteness. (1986)

Furthermore, the dramatist introduces a different form of symbolism in Emily's painting of Amir as Diego Velázquez's Portrait of Juan de Pareja, both at the beginning and end of the story, which serves as "a framing device" for the play (Al-Amro, 2021). The painting conveys Emily's 'white saviour complex' (2021, p. 8809), and her perception of Amir's 'mimicry' and 'inferiority complex'. She tries to draw him in the image of a wealthy man, who is in fact a slave in disguise of a rich man. Emily's painting of Amir exemplifies his mimicry and masquerade, not his real identity. In the painting, she draws him as a brown man wearing a white businessman's suit and tie. Through her eyes, she transforms Amir from a brown slave into a white elite. The painting declares her feeling and reaction towards the waiter's racist gaze to Amir at the restaurant:

EMILY: A man, a waiter, looking at you.

AMIR: Looking at us.

EMILY: Not seeing you. Not seeing who you really are. Not until you started to deal with him. And the deftness with which you did that. You made him see that gap. Between what he was assuming about you and what you really are.

AMIR: The guy's a racist. So what?

EMILY: Sure. But I started to think about the Velázquez painting. And how people must have reacted when they first saw it. They think they're looking at a picture of a Moor. An assistant.

AMIR: A slave.

EMILY: Fine. A slave.

But whose portrait—it turns out—has more nuance and complexity than his renditions of kings and queens. And God knows how many of those he painted. (Akhtar, 2012, p. 12)

Thus, Emily, the white 'colonizer', secretly views Amir, the 'other', as a 'slave', but her 'white saviour complex' makes her try to whitewash him so that he looks similar to the 'colonizer', thinking that this would protect him from facing racist looks like the waiter's. Therefore, Emily contributes to shaping Amir's third space and constructing his hybrid identity by hiding his real self. Through Amir's mimicry of white people's attire, Emily tries to cover the fact that he is seen as a 'slave' and makes him match the American standards. Amir conforms to Emily's construction of his identity and his Americanized self, which contradicts who he really is. By trying to mimic the whites, Amir submits to the Western gaze and

believes that he is a ‘slave’ and inferior to the whites. Thus, to be in the same whites’ superiority level, he mimics them and forms a fragmented third space, but, simultaneously, struggles with ambivalence as he tries to disregard his origins. Lopamudra Basu argues that “Amir, following his predecessor Juan de Pareja, is seeking approval of white American society and his gaze is directed at Emily and other representatives of that group who hold power and whom he is always trying to appease” (2016).

Amir tries to escape from his reality and mask his new Americanized self in order to please his wife, friends, and every white person around him. However, he feels a sense of contempt for both his origins and the new Americanization he tries to mimic. This duality resonates with Bhabha’s concepts of mimicry and ambivalence, as he navigates between the two cultures, but his mimicry makes his identity incomplete. Thus, he lives in a third space comprising of his two cultures but filled with fragments of belonging to neither cultures and feelings of self-contempt and inferiority towards his Eastern heritage. This sense of inferiority makes Amir compelled to hide any traces that belong to his Pakistani origins and chooses to Americanize himself in every possible way.

Amir’s attempts at full assimilation may reflect a desire for self-fulfillment through fantasizing about being a white man. He only wants to satisfy his inner self and his ego to feel that he is just as white as other Western people with all the privileges they have at work and in society. His inferiority complex of feeling less than other white people around him has made him loudly reject himself and act as if he is completely a white American.

The Western gaze and white supremacist ideologies have led Amir to dismiss his Eastern roots and attempt to assimilate through whitewashing. Amir suffers from feeling inferior to the white, and that his original culture cannot blossom or be civilized.

Akhtar represents this Western gaze in the climax scene of Amir and Emily’s dinner party with their friends, Isaac and Jory. During the rising action, the suspense intensifies, and the dramatic mood becomes tense when they discuss the symbolism of Emily’s Velázquez’s portrait. As the conversation unfolds, Akhtar foreshadows Amir’s conflict and inferiority complex. He represents the white Western gaze through Isaac’s eyes since he only sees Amir in a racist stereotypical image. Isaac expresses to Emily that Amir is a “slave,” who “finally has the master’s wife” (Akhtar, 2012, p. 63), referring to her painting. Another scene also foreshadows Isaac’s discrimination towards Amir when they speak about his Charvet shirt:

ISAAC: So, there you are, in your six-hundred-dollar Charvet shirt, like Velázquez's brilliant apprentice-slave in his lace collar, adorned in the splendours of the world you're now so clearly a part of... And yet...

AMIR: Yeah?

ISAAC: The question remains.

AMIR: The question?

ISAAC: Of your place. For the viewer, of course. Not you. It's a painting, after all... (p. 44)

Isaac, symbolizing the white colonizer, feels that Amir's mimicry forms what Bhabha calls a "resemblance and menace" to him (1994, p. 86). He realizes that Amir wears expensive clothes and has a beautiful American wife, thus might be in the same status as him, which foreshadows "the menace of mimicry" (p. 88). However, to him, Amir's mimicry remains fragmented and is just a "mockery" (p. 86) of himself. He still considers Amir "inferior" and "barbaric", no matter how expensive Amir wears. He believes that Amir cannot be equal to him in his financial and social status. For him, Amir's expensive shirts cannot hide his self-deprecation and inferiority complex. Isaac symbolizes the white man that has imposed himself and his hegemony on the colonized just to make them feel less than themselves. These Western ideologies have rendered the Eastern the constant need to assimilate and even surpass the white society, although they internally feel that no matter how hard they try to assimilate, they can never be in the same status or equal to the white. Therefore, the Eastern consistently undergo a feeling of insufficiency, accompanied by an urge to assimilate to the dominant colonizer. Likewise, Amir symbolizes the colonized who has fallen into a trap of his inferiority complex in his new third space, where he is forced to be biased to the new white culture and reject his indigenous culture. He has unconsciously colonized himself by degrading his own identity which is formed as a third space instead of embracing it. He internally oppresses himself and reflects the negative stereotypes about colonized people, believing that he is naturally inferior due to being from an Eastern culture. He believes in Said's argument in *Orientalism*, which critiques the Western racist notion that portrays "the Orient as being always the same, unchanging, uniform, and radically peculiar object" (1979), and that the white is the civilized superior with the upper hand. The West has imposed these ideologies of themselves as being more intelligent and more civilized, thus the Eastern have been unconsciously driven into these beliefs of being eternally colonized, less intelligent, and that they can never be as privileged as the white

colonizer. This inferiority creates an ambivalent third space identity that makes the colonized torn between embracing their own culture which is portrayed as ‘less civilized’ or staying in the same spot of being marginalized while trying to fit into the mainstream.

In Amir’s case, he constantly puts himself into comparison with the mainstream. He cannot change his race or color; however, he tortures himself by comparing himself to his white coworkers and friends. This torturous comparison is what Mel Robbins depicts in her most famous theoretical book *Let Them* as, “upward comparison,” which is the tendency to compare yourself to people that you think are superior to you in some unchangeable aspects of their life. She further explains that research shows that this upward comparison “destroys your self-esteem”. Robbins conveys that one cannot stop from engaging in this self-destructive comparison except when they choose to embrace what they already have and “stop obsessing over the cards in someone else’s hands” or it will make them lose everything (2024, p. 112-113). Therefore, Amir keeps torturing himself by mimicking the whites, in order to nail the promotion at the Jewish law firm.

During the falling action, Amir’s cousin Abe, after several trials of mimicry, fails to balance his third space nor integrate his Islamic origins. He aspires to have an American citizenship like Amir and get as ‘American as American gets’ (Akhtar, 2012, p. 19). He depicts himself as inferior for being born in an Eastern country as Pakistan. He turns to fundamentalism and gets in an FBI interrogation. However, in the last scene, he expresses how the West has disgraced them, as Muslims, as he says:

ABE (CONT’D): For three hundred years they’ve been taking our land, drawing new borders, replacing our laws, making us want be like them.

Look like them. Marry their women.

They disgraced us.

They disgraced us.

And then they pretend they don’t understand the rage we’ve got?
(p. 76)

Abe finally realizes that he has fallen into the trap of his inferiority and realizes that his mimicry has been in vain. When he and Emily seek Amir’s assistance in defending the Muslim Imam at the trial, they turn Amir’s life upside down. As a result, the Jewish law firm regards him as anti-Semitic and promotes Jory, Isaac’s wife, instead of Amir.

In the end, Akhtar represents the dénouement of the plot when Emily exits the stage and leaves Amir. He sits in silence and “takes a searching long look” at Emily’s Portrait of him (p. 78). This long pause symbolizes his isolation, representing his fragmented third space. Amir feels disgraced as well, as he “betrays his faith and is betrayed by it” (Bigsby et al., 2019). He is left all alone after he loses his job and beats his wife for her infidelity. He beats Emily brutally with resentment, blaming her for making him play a role in a game where the rules were out of his control (2019, p. 18). Amir is left in isolation, feeling out of place in both worlds and not completely embraced by either.

This teaches Amir a lesson; he should have created a balanced third space and embraced his identity rather than trying to be something else other than himself. It further highlights that there are things that one cannot change, such as their race, origins, and colour; thus, one should embrace themselves. As a hybrid immigrant, Amir should embrace his race and culture in order to create a third space that has a balanced mixture of both cultures, instead of trying to change what cannot be changed.

Conclusion

Amir, as a hybrid immigrant, could not create a balanced third space by integrating both his new culture and his indigenous one. Thus, he falls into the trap of his inferiority and fails to embrace the two different cultures in his third space. To balance his new third space in his assimilation journey, he could have retained his roots, customs and traditions instead of denying them. However, he assimilates by doing what Bhabha calls “a repetition with difference” (1994, p. 88). Like many minorities, because of his fear of being racialized and outcasted for his religion, he takes the wrong route where he buries his roots and whitewashes himself which turns out as Bhabha says “almost the same, but not quite” (p. 86). He denounces his heritage and marries an American girl, thinking that this would contribute to his mimicry and prosperity in his career, only to find himself trapped by his inferiority complex. Although Amir feels compelled to assimilate to gain acceptance and fulfil the American Dream, when he loses everything, he realizes that his denounce for his culture and religion has been in vain. It becomes apparent that Amir was fooled by thinking he was living the Westernized life he dreamt of. He recognizes that his feelings of self-deprecation and inferiority led to his downfall, as he has turned his mimicry into “mockery” (p. 86). He has lost everything because of making himself a mere copy of the people around him; thus, they no longer respect him.

Finally, Akhtar accentuates the fact that if Amir had self-recognition and identification of his own heritage, people would have approved him, instead of abandoning him for his masquerade and fragmented identity. He maintains that if one disregards their own roots, they shall not expect others to respect them. Amir should have embraced his third space by respecting his culture and heritage. Since Amir has already disrespected his roots and disgraced himself, people around him felt free to cross the line and disgrace him as well. He deprecated himself to please others, but once they had the chance to humiliate him, they did not hesitate to do so. He contradicted himself that he could no longer tell what is right from wrong. He renounced Islam just to seek approval from the host society; thus, he disgraced his own roots multiple times to be accepted; nonetheless, all what he got was rejection from his friends and co-workers. Therefore, Akhtar emphasizes that if one does not respect their roots, nobody will respect them. According to Akhtar and as it is apparent in his play *Disgraced*, to live as an immigrant, one should balance between the new culture and their own heritage, and create a third space that combines both cultures without contradicting their principles or beliefs.

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