

Cultural Identity as an Epistemic Construct: Ali's *The Domestic Crusaders* and Akhtar's *The Who & the What*

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Abstract: This research argues that in the two plays, *The Domestic Crusaders* (2004) by Wajahat Ali and *The Who & the What* (2014) by Ayad Akhtar, cultural identity is dramatized through the epistemic spatiotemporal values which the colonial subalterns have experienced. As such, the essentialist and postmodernist views about identity, which cannot but see identity as either predetermined or purely arbitrary, are demoted in favor of the experiential foundations of identity. These experiential foundations provide knowledge which influences the construction and the reshaping of identity in an ongoing process. Based on this vision, the identity of the principal Muslim American women characters in the plays under study is dramatized to be constructed epistemically; that is, in relation to the epistemic contexts in which they have grown. This dramatization aims to expose both the fallibility and inadequacy of the pre and post-9/11 anti-Muslim epistemic violence. The two plays feature the Muslim women protagonists as exhibiting varying degrees of cultural and intellectual orientation, which is attributed to the differing epistemic experiences of the concerned protagonists. The argument draws on Satya P. Mohanty's 1993 lead article "The Epistemic Status of Cultural Identity . . .," in which the metaphysics of post-positivist realism is applied to the realm of cultural identity formation, providing a mediated approach to experience and knowledge.

Keywords: cultural identity, experience-mediated knowledge, *The Who & the What*, *The Domestic Crusaders*

Introduction

This research argues that the two Pakistani Muslim American-authored plays, *The Domestic Crusaders* (2004) by Wajahat Ali and *The Who & the What* (2014) by Ayad Akhtar, mobilize cultural identity not so much as a fixated category but as a radically revisionary and transformative act inspired by experience-mediated knowledge. In the two plays, the female Muslim protagonists are delineated not as sovereign subjects with an autonomous agency over their consciousness, but as the epistemic product of personal experiences. Cultural identity is thus presented as constructed discursively by the shifting personal experiences, which exercise the power of divinity on individuals' ideological orientation. This focus on the external epistemic formation of cultural identity serves as guidance "to new patterns of salience and relevance, teaching us what to take seriously and what to reinterpret" (Mohanty 56). It is also used in the two texts to dismiss as false the monolithic and reductive representation of Muslim communities, both in America and elsewhere, by establishing a relationship between their cultural identities on one side and the acquired knowledge from personal experiences on the other.

At the risk of sounding repetitive, it is useful to refer to the post-9/11 America in which cultural heterogeneity, once deemed evidence of liberal tolerance, has turned out to be more feared than celebrated. Muslims in America, who always kept a low profile and exercised less leverage on American culture, moved under light to become, unfortunately, more of a threat than a contribution to the American cultural mosaic. Being identified as Muslim, particularly of a certain color or race, casts aspersions on one's loyalty and justifies eviction from the realm of civil rights. It is a matter of fact that Muslims, in post 9/11 America, faced, in the words of Moira Perez, precarious attacks of "epistemic violence," which took the form of aggressive legal and extralegal measures, and in which Muslims were coerced

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into the sphere of the objectified inferior other (83). This violence developed markedly to “have ushered in a new age of Islamophobia in the annals of history,” producing waves of hatred and neo-Orientalism which, unfortunately, have not yet diminished (Asif 13). Meanwhile, the American media embraced hostile attitudes against Muslims, casting them in the neo-orientalist images and molds of “the terrorists, the lunatics, fundamentalists, and bloodthirsty beings” (Bagato 122). Other unflattering images of the oppressive Muslim patriarchy and the objectified silenced females were propagated in forceful ways to position Muslims as objects of exclusion from the nation-state. This racialization of the religious belongings of Muslim Americans, evidently influenced by Huntington’s view that “it is more difficult to be half-catholic and half-Muslim,” overlooked the epistemic formation of Muslim Americans’ cultural identities (27).

In view of this cultural and political battle, the issue of identity politics captured writers’ interest. Some played into the hands of the hegemonic narrative, viewing Muslims’ identity through pre-social essentialist lenses as a fixated category. This vision, pro-colonialist as it is, looks for overnight success and contributes to the heated rhetoric of Muslims’ foreignization. Other writers focused on the epistemic status of identity formation, arguing for the fluidity of identity, and the relevant transformative power of cultural and historical interventions. This vision serves to naturalize Muslims’ existence in America, as it contests anti-Muslim narratives and clichéd images. Wajahat Ali (1981-) and Ayad Akhtar (1970-), both Pakistani Muslim Americans, shared the debate with works of art which stage private and public tensions, and bring center stage the epistemic formation of cultural identity.

The present study centers on Ali’s *The Domestic Crusaders* (henceforth *The Crusaders*) and Akhtar’s *The Who &*

the What(henceforth The Who). Akhtar launched his playwriting career under the influence of the American propagandist media; his play *Disgraced* (2013) reveals Muslims' cultural identity as rigid and stable (Noureiddin). Yet, his play *The Who* (2014) marks a palpable shift towards a more nuanced representation of cultural identity as an epistemic product of lived experiences. In the given order of the published scripts, *The Who* (2014) does not only share but also develops *Crusaders'* (2004) dramatization of the evolving transformative power of the experiential foundations of cultural identity. Both plays are thus engaged with the impact of the socio-cultural contexts on the protagonists' ideological orientation. The female protagonists in the two plays exhibit a revisionary form of cultural identity, which is the product of knowledge mediated through their personal experiences in America. This experience-mediated knowledge, which is analogous to divinity in its epistemic influence, prompts the Muslim subalterns to embrace new evaluative insights about the self and the other. In the two plays, the dramatists portray the female Muslim subalterns as converted subjects, expressing cultural orientation that stands in stark contrast with the age-old damaging images. These female Muslim subalterns have gained the agency to speak, rebel and author their own fables.

The research focuses on the dramatic portrayal of Fatima in *The Domestic Crusaders*, and Zarina in *The Who & the What*. Zarina is argued to be a transformed extension of Fatima, or Fatima at a later stage in life, exposed to more profound personal American experiences, which accounts for her more assertive and rebellious identity. In other words, although the two female protagonists share the same native cultural belongings, they display varying degrees of cultural attitudes and beliefs nourished by their distinctive personal experiences in America. This disparity in the epistemic status of cultural identity is the reason for choosing the two plays in this study; the disparity dismantles, as well, the production of Muslim communities in

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collective, monolithic cultural images. Additionally, the two plays share Arthur Miller's tradition of the kitchen-sink drama, in which food, dating, intergenerational tension, humor and pathos, are celebrated. Both plays evoke Eugene O'Neill and Lorraine Hansberry in portraying the rising agency of the subaltern characters, registering their movement towards visibility and centrality. In the two plays, the principal female characters express varying degrees of tension and rejection of their parents' native cultural tenets. They expose a distinctive form of cultural identity, which defies the orientalist mythical representations. Fatima and Zarina are no longer objectified, docile bodies; they insist on having a room of their own and speaking in a powerful vocabulary that merits a hearing by both their native and adopted cultures.

Theoretical Framework

For the purpose of this research argument, Satya P. Mohanty's article on the epistemic status of cultural identity is employed, as it offers a more rigorous and materialist account of cultural identity formation. Mohanty embraces a post-positivist account of identity, which foregrounds the epistemic values of personal experiences as foundational forces in cultural identity formation. For Mohanty, experiences have a cognitive, epistemic component, and therefore, can generate reliable, objective knowledge which provides the raw material for constructing identities (32). In so arguing, Mohanty asserts that identities "can be both real and constructed;" that is, they can be "politically and epistemically significant, on the one hand, and variable, nonessential, and radically historical, on the other" (Moya 12). They are, as Mohanty explains, "theoretical constructions that enable us to read the world in specific ways," since "in them and through them, we learn to define and reshape our values and our commitments, [;] we give texture and form to our collective

future” (43). As such, personal experiences play a role that is “analogous to that of divinity or the sacred in negative theology,” and sometimes assume phenomenological and new Hegelian dialects to become “the mainstay of a secular mode of thought that is even sharply separated from religion but may in important respects be its displacement” (LaCapra 529).

Mohanty transcends the limitations of the essentialist and postmodernist accounts of identity, which cannot but see identity as either predetermined or purely arbitrary. Mohanty, by contrast, draws on an interactively dialogic relationship between personal experiences-mediated knowledge on the one hand, and the epistemic construction of one’s cultural identity on the other. This dialogic relationship stresses the powerful impact of the various historical interventions on the epistemic formation, and transformation, of cultural identities. Given this argument, three significant assumptions are to be noted. The first is that any materialist account of identity formation is to be always examined “in direct relation to social structures,” which “configure, condition, limit and constrain agency” when “that agency has the potential to transform social structures,” as noted by Rosaura Sanchez (32). The second, which is a direct result of the first assumption, is that rigid stereotypical representations of categories of race, ethnicity, religion, and gender crumble down, as bodies belonging to these categories (named subalterns by Gayatri Spivak) become epistemically different according to the various experiences and social structures they have come through. The third is that the cultural identity of a certain social or religious group should not be considered collectively; it changes according to each individual’s distinctive interaction with the knowledge gathered from personal experiences. This collective view of cultural identity, as Mohanty argues, is “seriously misleading, since it ignores historical changes and glosses over internal differences within a group by privileging only the experiences that are common to everyone” (30). Thus,

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distinctive personal experiences lead to distinctive epistemic construction, which, as Mohanty observes, is reflected in a sort of “increase both in our personal experiences and in knowledge” (57).

Personal experiences, for Mohanty, produce knowledge, or new knowledge, which works for conscious raising, through which structural transformation of the individual may take place. In Mohanty’s article, Alice’s engagement in the conscious raising feminist group amounts to a personal experience from which she gathers knowledge about her oppression as a woman and her justified anger as an oppressed individual. It is this kind of experience-mediated knowledge which, in Mohanty’s logic, accounts for the reshaping of Alice’s ideological (that is, cultural) growth and awareness; the effect of which is cultural transformation of epistemic salience. Thus, through this personal experience, Alice acquires a feminist identity which serves as grounds for a revised form of cultural identity.

Similar to Alice’s engagement in the conscious-raising groups which impart new knowledge about her status and rights as a woman, Fatima and Zarina’s upbringing within the American sociological and educational institutions provide them with the epistemic agency to confront multiple axes of oppression. As will be explained in the discussion section below, both women are markedly different from the stereotypes, which is evident in their invective at their parents and native cultural heritage. In many instances in the dramas, their Americanness is more valued than their other cultural belongings, especially the religious ones. In dramaturgy, they fill up much of the linguistic and staging space, a visual reminder of their visibility and centrality. The imagined docility disappears in favor of a revolutionary spirit that is most apparent in their unremorseful challenge of patriarchal and religious regimes. This portrayal serves to destabilize the imposed subalternity of Muslim

Americans at large; it also aims to build a bridge towards more understanding.

Discussion: The Subaltern as a Rational Subject

The American setting as a cultural location and a site of knowledge is foregrounded in both plays. Ali's *Crusaders* features "a contemporary suburban home" inhabited by three generations of Pakistani American family gathering over a birthday celebration of the youngest son (2). As the stage directions indicate, the adult children, the third generation, are all American born and educated. They are predominantly dressed in American stylish outfits and speak American English. The voice of authentic American news is present in all the scenes. Fatima is dramaturgically centralized; her stage presence binds together location, theme and action. She is a law student, an avid reader of Noam Chomsky's revolutionary political theses, an eloquent speaker and an active member in oppression resisting groups (2, 42,102). Akhtar's *The Who* takes place in Atlanta, Georgia. Both Zarina and her sister Mahwish "are American-born, both speak without any accent" (5). Zarina is described as a Harvard graduate, with a degree in literature and philosophy; she has also an MFA in creative writing (25, 60). Like Fatima, Zarina takes up the largest part of the theatrical space. She is dramatized as endowed with the ability to debate and battle with her native cultural heritage.

As such, this cultural context offers the promise of transformation and reinvention. It also offers the potential knowledge which leads to a rupture from the old world for the renewal of the self in the new one. In the two plays, this rupture is staged as more celebrated than mourned. In the words of Christopher Bigsby, second generation Muslim Americans find themselves acutely and "deeply embedded in a culture itself intent on asserting its unique identity with an insistent pull towards an assumed center, its myths regularly celebrated. With

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no necessary loyalty to a distant world, only refracted through parents themselves ambiguously located, the impetus is towards seeking inclusion” (9). This inclusion is staged to be natural and authentic as the two plays move center stage discourses which counter those of the center to prove as illegitimate the imposed “stereotypical judgements” (Butler 94). The female protagonists in the two plays present themselves as epistemic agents, capable of challenging all types of epistemic abjection. The imperial image of “the white men saving brown women from brown men” is decentered as both female protagonists are shown able to speak for themselves and author their own fables (Spivak 93).

The Crusaders dramatizes the movement of the margin towards the center as it “works for a revival of neglected discourses” (Schmidt 24). In the play, two discourses of power are stressed as clashing. The first is that of the American dominant discourse of the war on terror. It is mainly expressed through the media forms of NPR and T.V. voice-overs, a dramatic strategy which functions as a narrative guide, interrupting the action and yet presenting the audience with influential powerful subtexts on characters’ position. The media betray a sense of surveillance and an exercise of power, in which a growing Islamophobic atmosphere is markedly painted. The other discourse, the marginal one, is that of the American Muslim Pakistani family, presented in three generations: the grandparent, the parents and the adult children. The family members are all engaged in domestic conflict over issues of belonging and visibility. The simultaneity of the two discourses is theatrically recognized. The voice of the *adhan* (the Muslim call to prayer) intermingles with western music by Tom Jones. The two inter-texts are yet meant to draw attention to “the bicultural, fragmented nature of the Pakistani American community” (Saeed 525).

The paternal grandfather, Hakim, and the parents, Salman and his wife Kulsoom, appear to be at home with their native cultural belongings. They immigrated to the US for better life opportunities and chose to lead an insular life limited to Pakistani immigrants' circles. Their mentality has not undergone significant change. This is reflected in their speech, which is always peppered with Urdu words, a suggestion that English language is insufficient to fulfill their linguistic, and cultural, needs. Hakim is visually portrayed in the attire of the practicing Muslim; he is usually seen holding his dhikr (prayer) beads, and he lives on dates, milk and honey following the traditions of the Prophet. Lamb Biryani, a traditional Pakistani food, occupies a central place on the stage, as it is served by Khulsoom in celebration of Ghafur's birthday. Khulsoom is depicted "*wearing the hijab*." After the adhan ends, she gets engaged in supplication rituals; she "*raises her hands for about five seconds, and then blows on her chest and quickly rubs her hands over her face*" (2). Salman maintains his share in the American dream; his first stage appearance features him "*wearing his business clothes: white business shirt, black khakis*" (22). Nevertheless, he expresses resentment at the media's incessant demonization of Muslims. In reaction to a media news item on why Muslims hate America, he mutters saying: "tired of this goddamn heat . . . Goddamn media. Same nonsense every day! Blame Islam. Blame Muslims. Blame immigrants for everything! Tired of the daily propaganda!" (23). The adult siblings embody antithetical attitudes as they interact with the media in a polyphony of voices. Though bearing Muslim-sounding names, they defy belonging to a cultural identity which relates to the past and the parents' home culture. This native cultural identity exists only at the level of memory, naming and a few of the outfits the children wear. The elder brother, Salahuddin, accepts and defends the logos of the American dominant discourse. Performing Americanness, he dates white American girls and has an appetite for American

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food, McDonald's burgers and fries. The younger son, Ghafur, rejects, upon his sister's influence, his parents' plan for him to be a medical doctor; he rather adopts the role of the Messiah, planning to be a Middle East history teacher to reclaim Muslim images.

It is Fatima, their only sister, aged twenty-four, who is dramatized as epistemically more powerful and expressive than other family members. She occupies much of the theatrical space and is much engaged in constant encounters with all other characters, speaking in a defiant and authoritative language that reflects moral growth and a transformative form of cultural identity. Similar to Mohanty's example of Alice's newly acquired identity through engagement in a conscious-raising organization, Fatima's personal experiences as an American law student, and avid reader of Noam Chomsky's revolutionary political theses and an active member of activist groups protesting race, gender and religious biases grant her the knowledge to re-evaluate her adopted and inherited cultural tenets and beliefs.

Against the expectations of the Asian Muslim community which cannot but see Fatima as an American-born confused desi, as her mother finds, Fatima sets out to disavow such an image and present herself as a rational being, empowered enough to challenge gender and racial profiling. She is dissatisfied with the media news associating Islam with *extremism*. "*Visibly disgusted, turns it off,*" this is how the stage directions register her reaction (5). Fatima is staged in contrast with her mother. She is portrayed as no longer confined within the traditional bars of gender and ethnoreligious politics. She is drawn in the attire of a revolutionary reformer, capable of subverting the traditional wisdom of marriage and the portrait of a good woman being light-skinned, good looking and skillful at cooking activities.

Interestingly, her new knowledge is grounded on ethical and moral values:

Ami, for the last time, I really don't care what "men" like. Muslim men are all boorish, sexually frustrated, horny juveniles. Plus, we all know they don't like "a good Muslim girl who can cook." All these FOB guys want is (in one breath) a good Muslim girl with *light* skin tone, an *MD* degree, long hair, *stunning* looks, among her other *assets*, and who must cook like their *mother*. Life doesn't revolve around marriage. Tell that to your gossipy aunty squad. (6-7)

Like a radical feminist, Fatima does not accept marriage as a should-be priority for young women, particularly when those young women cherish more significant purposes than merely serving a man under the cover of marriage. Adamant in her self-assertion, she distinguishes herself from other Pakistani 'aunties' who find her weird: ". . . The aunties all whisper behind my back . . . backbiting as they always do, because I wear the hijab and they just stick some tissue paper on their heads when they hear the call to prayer. They can't stand it that I'm actually making something of my life instead of becoming an obese, wrinkled, backbiting gossip hag" (32). In a Marxist rise, she refuses to be a mere commodity in someone's hand. She so rebels at her grandfather's rendering of women as 'jewels': "That's exactly it. People treat us like 'jewels' – like we're some sort of commodity to be traded on the stock market" (29).

Fatima is deep enough to differentiate between true and false religiosity. While her parents hold a shallow vision of religiosity in the form of rituals and outer appearance, she sees it in the form of active social engagement. Thus, she refuses to succumb to "that insincere, plastic nonsense" of young Muslims who attend prayers once a week, and affect piety and modesty at Pakistani family gatherings, while they "go clubbing and binge-

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drinking every Saturday night” (31). She firmly believes that religion is race free: “There is no color barrier in religion,” she asserts. She herself dates a black American convert called Aziz whom she praises by saying: “He’s such a good person And he’s smart and kind and he’s passionate. He doesn’t drink, and even before converting he never messed with girls or drugs or any of that. And he knows Arabic . . .” (69).

In the same vein, Fatima subscribes to secular values concerning human relationships; she does not mind interfaith marriage between a Muslim man and a Jewish girl as long as the couples are happy: “That’s what counts, in the end,” she explains (27). However, she objects to the Israelis’ oppression of Palestinians, and their strategic attempts to distort the media, portraying themselves as defenseless and victimized, while they possess “one of the world’s strongest militaries, nuclear capabilities, M16s, and Apache helicopters thanks to direct support from your United States of America!” (28). Along similar lines, Fatima goes against the American surveillance mechanism against Muslim or Eastern-looking people, describing the deed as “blatant racial profiling” (41). Fatima makes fun of America’s interference in Iraq, naming it “a crusade;” in fact, she shares her father’s view about the US involvement in Iraq, which he describes as no different from British colonization as it similarly aims to “rape, loot, destroy, turn brother against brother and countrymen against countrymen just for dhowlat and power” (47). Fatima condemns committing such deeds in the name of Christianity: “How Christian is it to bomb innocent civilians?” (48). She thus invokes Noam Chomsky saying that oppression, racial prejudice and the absence of justice are reasons enough to provoke people to act criminally:

Ghafur: Come on, Sis. Back off. I mean, Bhai has a point—usually people with food and homes don’t go around blowing themselves up.

Sal: Except terrorist suicide bombers—

Fatima: Or a people so brutally oppressed they have nothing left to lose—

Ghafur: Except their lives, or maybe their humanity, I don't know—

Sal: Thank you, Noam Chomsky. (42)

Challenging colonized mentalities, Fatima disapproves of her elder brother's assimilatory tendencies as he flirts with white girls, and does not care about his fellow innocent people, who are severely and strategically murdered:

(very fast, sassy delivery) Ha-ha – very funny, “Sal.” I'm glad someone who spends all his time thinking about cheap, ho-ey white girls- the ones he can never have, by the way- and the stock market, and his gaudy new Versace belt . . . , can lecture me on *my* activities. I can't believe you don't even care your people are being senselessly massacred. (10)

She could also affect Ghafur's career plans. Rather than being a medical doctor as previously planned, Ghafur, to the shock of his parents, opts to be a Middle East history teacher. Under Fatima's guidance, Ghafur ignores his parents' belief in social recognition in favor of having an identity of his own, constructed on moral and ethical grounds. He finds he can play an active role in correcting much of the misinformation about Muslims, Islam and the Arabs, which, he thinks, is the basis of all conflict and mutual animosity. Ghafur, echoing Fatima's views, blames Muslims for accepting victimization and taking no positive action to challenge the “perverted version of Islam” practiced by Taliban and other fundamentalists (49).

Fatima's disenchantment with ethnic culture is significantly spelled out; she unforgivingly condemns her grandfather's murderous acts in defending his fellow Pakistanis during the Indian-Pakistan partition and the concomitant sectarian strife. Espousing the value of peaceful protestation,

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Fatima cannot accept blood-shed as a problem-solving strategy. Her interrogation of her grandparent in this regard reveals moral and ethical values; the very result of epistemic growth:

Fatima: So you would have killed them as well?

Great. Now I understand this family completely. This is why we're so messed up. We have the curse of God knows how many innocent men killed by Dhada on our entire lives.

...

Fatima: Why even tell us in the first place? I mean- I didn't *ask* to know this. I don't want to know this.

Hakim: What you would like to know or know not doesn't matter. What matters is that you know the truth, and that you now confront it and make some peace with your history.

Fatima: This is *not* my history. My history is just being an American Muslim who is in law school, and the worst thing I have ever done is to be arrested for protesting and standing up for what I believe in. And to try to marry a respectable man- even if he is black! (102-103)

This confrontation with the grandparent, the symbol of past heritage, amounts to a rejection of this transnational heritage. Fatima denies belonging to her grandfather's violent past; she emphasizes that her history stands within the geographic boundaries of America and that her Americanness comes before her Muslimness; she is 'an American Muslim' rather than a Muslim American. She joins hands with her brother Ghafur in condemning the grandfather's resort to aggression when there were other alternatives for self-defense: "Or taken them to court.

Or used the justice system. Bribed them, just like the others paid bribes. You could have used diplomacy or talked to them . . .” (102). The confrontation betrays the sense of power and female visibility which Fatima espoused from her experience in the activist groups.

In Akhtar’s *The Who*, as in Ali’s *The Crusaders*, personal experiences, or the epistemic contexts through which persons pass, play a similar foundational role in the construction of cultural identity. Zarina’s sharp criticism of native culture and her wish for individuation are dramatized as the product of different and more profound personal experiences than those of Fatima. Zarina studied literature and philosophy at Harvard university. She got an MFA in creative writing. She is also an avid reader of orientalist readings of the Holy Quran, particularly those which deal with the inferior position of women in Islam, and which paint a picture of the Muslim Prophet as an imperfect human being. The play portrays Zarina as engaged in cultural discourses on humanist and post-humanist tenets. She attends Christian preachers’ organized events on the blessings of being Christian. Eli, her fiancé, meets with her in one of these events led by a black woman from Somalia named Ayaan Hirsi Ali who preaches that all Muslims should embrace Christianity (18). Eli observes that Zarina gets “pretty engaged” in what the woman says (19). Unlike Fatima who speaks English with an accent, as the stage directions indicate, Zarina speaks perfect American English, which contrasts that of her father who “*retains a very noticeable Indo-Pak accent*” (13). This difference indicates a difference in identity orientation and cultural belonging. These epistemic personal experiences have shaped Zarina’s cultural identity in a way to make her deny external authorities or accept any limitations on her choices. They have also empowered her to adopt a secular mode of thought to debate established theological and social beliefs. Throughout the play, Zarina is shown engaged in re-evaluative and revisionary assessment of her Muslim

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background, moving from ridicule to denial of her native cultural values, particularly the patriarchal and religious ones. Indeed, she turns into a thinker, a philosopher, a moralizer, and, above all, a liberal humanist whose invective is unsettlingly sharp and far right wing.

Zarina's father stresses her authoritative character: "She has the power. She has the power she shouldn't have" (56). At the outset of the play, Zarina insists on cutting an avocado for salad against the will of both her father and sister. This serves to emphasize a stubborn and rebellious mentality:

Mahwish (*Suddenly*): Why are you cutting an avocado?

Zarina: For the Salad?

Mahwish: We hate avocados.

Zarina: I love them. (7)

In the play, Zarina is portrayed as a simulacrum of the Shakespearean Katherine in *The Taming of the Shrew*. She thus spits venom on her native cultural heritage, which, in her view, lacks reason. Zarina criticizes her family's matrimonial mores and traditions, and so makes fun of her father's abusive attempts to marry her off before her younger sister: "That's absurd. This is not Pakistan," she says (6). She is also cynical of her sister's having anal sex with her prospective husband Haroun before marriage in order for her to prove her virginity to his parents upon marriage. Invoking Fatima in taking on the mantle of the archetypal self-righteous American woman, she denies her father's interference in her privacy, as he tries to get her a husband through an an Islam-based dating site:

Zarina: Unbelievable.

Afzal: I didn't come to you-

Zarina: You opened an account in my name.

Afzal: I didn't even try. Why not?

Zarina: You posted pictures. You wrote messages

pretending to be me. . . .

Zarina: You're a piece of work! (22)

Zarina challenges her conservative father, who mourns his family's desertion of their native Muslim Pakistani culture; she defiantly declares: "This is not Frontier Province, Dad" (77). The final scene bears another strong witness to Zarina's unabashed challenge of patriarchal authority. The scene is ironic and representational. While Afzal prays for Zarina to have a boy child, Zarina, "(With sass, defiance)," steps forward and says: "Dad It's a girl" (92-3), which points up to Zarina's sincere renewal of the self in the new world.

While Fatima's epistemic status of cultural identity is most evidently seen in her resolute and revolutionary rejection of her grandfather's narrative of violent acts against opponents, Zarina's is revealed in her resolute war at all aspects of native culture, particularly the religious ones. She calls for religious-free relationships. As a philosophy practitioner, she adopts Descartes's rational inquiries in raising questions and doubts about her native religious heritage, viewing it as groundless and vulnerable. She ridicules Eli's recognition of Islam as really about being equal, describing what he says as "bullshit," and that he could have embraced a different vision had he grown up as a woman inside that faith (35). To her, Eli's conversion to Islam is to be interpreted in Freudian terms, as merely a challenge to his atheist father's authority, while bringing him closer to his religious mother in a secret way the father could never compete with (32). Zarina regrets being separated from the only man she loved due to his non-Muslim faith: "I didn't have to listen to you," she informs her apologizing father (26).

In a way similar to Akhtar's philosophy in playwriting, and as evidence of an epistemically constructed cultural identity, Zarina puts Islam and the Muslim prophet under a microscope, in a strenuous attempt to confront uncomfortable truths about women, race, sex and class representation. She does not believe

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in hell, thinking of it as merely a metaphor “for suffering. For the cycle of human suffering” (8). Zarina looks with dismay at the wearing of the veil by Muslim women, which she finds as the result of misinterpretation and a metaphorical suppression of women. Like Hayat Shah, the protagonist in Akhtar’s novel *American Dervish* (2012), Zarina transits from initial faith in religion to skepticism about and rejection of what she believes as irrational aspects of the faith. She thus debunks the divine origin of the Quran, reducing it to mere biographies of the prophet. She supports Ayaan Hirsi Ali who invites Muslims to Christianity. Zarina’s authoritative responses to her father in this regard reveal much of adopted epistemology:

Zarina: Well, I see her point.

Afzal (*Stunned*): What point?

Zarina: She’s just saying Christianity has been around longer than we have. It’s had more time to work out some of the kinks.

Afzal: (*Snickering*): Believing God can have a son is a sign of working out kinks?

...

Zarina: Well, if he’s God he can do anything, right?

(23)

The Zenith of Zarina’s epistemically constructed cultural identity is seen through her attack on the Prophet’s sacredness. Inspired by the post-9/11 anti-Islamic rhetoric, she challenges and interrogates Islamic orthodoxy, providing new understandings of Islamic history mediated by her study of philosophy and neo-orientalist writings. Zarina writes a novel in incendiary criticism of the *who* of the Prophet beyond *the what*; that is, the reality of the Prophet as a human being versus his nature as a sacred object, a dangerous territory undoubtedly. Invoking Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses*, Zarina, in her novel, casts doubt on the Prophet’s status as a conduit to a God

who could be a woman (45). Her emerging portrait is of a man capable of doubt and driven by sexual desire, who cannot have immediate access to a deity. She claims:

I'm using that day to show the different influences on the Prophet's life. And how the Quran is the result of all these very human things that are happening to him. His problems with his wives, his community, his own anxieties In a lot of ways, I think it might make more sense to see the Quran more as coming from Muhammad than God. (37)

In her provocative novel, Zarina seeks to see the Prophet from a secular point of view, as a self-conflicted person driven by sexual desire and political advantage. She explains that the Prophet had seen Zaynab bint Jahsh, his adopted son's wife, naked and, following her divorce, married her. Though this narrative has been completely discredited, as Eli asserts, Zarina insists: "The problem . . . is that it's in Tabari and alluded to in the Quran. Everyone is always trying to whitewash the sources-" (36). Along the same story, Zarina goes on to discredit the wearing of the veil by all Muslim women, as she attributes it to the Prophet's wish for personal privacy. She explains that on the Prophet's marriage night to Zaynab, one of the guests follows him to the bedroom. The Prophet gets to the bedroom and pulls shut the curtain covering the entrance. He then recites the famous verses:

Believers.

Do not enter the house of the Prophet at improper times.

Do not engage in familiar talk. This would annoy the

Prophet and he would be ashamed to ask you to go.

If you ask the Prophet's wives for anything, speak to them from behind a curtain. (38)

Zarina explains that this request for privacy had gone into misinterpretation, as it had subsequently been turned into a requirement for all Muslim women to wear the veil.

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Zarina's novel reveals hatred for the Prophet, as Eli observes, which goes in line with the neo-orientalist reductive images of Islam and the Muslim Prophet. Zarina finds that all stories about the Prophet's perfection are merely historical narratives, likely to be constructed and imagined, and aim to subdue people to exalted virtues (49). She, therefore, calls into question the credibility of the Prophet's message and insists on portraying the Prophet as an ordinary human being that is vulnerable to human weaknesses; on top of which is his obsessive desire for and control of women. Nonetheless, she explains that what she hates is "what the faith does to women, for every story about his generosity or his goodness, there is another that's used as an excuse to hide us. Erase us. And the story of the veil takes the cake" (50). What she wishes to do, as she claims, is to humanize the Prophet. She says:

All the stories we hear, that have gotten told for hundreds of years, don't point to a real person. It's like this monument to *what* we have made of him. But *who* he really was? We don't know. . . . That's what I'm calling it. *The Who & the What*. (39)

Deeper, Zarina's epistemic status of cultural identity functions as an epistemic context for other people from which they get new knowledge to re-evaluate previous beliefs. Through closer contact with Zarina as a wife and a liberal writer, Eli gives up his past fundamentalist beliefs to adopt more liberal ones. Eli, who initially denounced Zarina's novel, turns out to defend it on the pretext that it is testimony to the Prophet as a self-conflicted human being:

Eli: What she's done is important! She's reminding us that the Prophet was just a man-

Afzal (*Over*): Us? You're no Muslim.

Eli (*Continuing*): We say we don't worship him, but we do!

Afzal (*Over*): Blah! Blah! Blah! Blah! Blah!

Eli: (*Continuing*): And we are worshiping a fiction!
We have no interest in knowing who he really
was . . .

Afzal: I know who he was!

Eli: No, you don't! None of us do! And all your
daughter is doing-

Afzal: Blasphemy.

Eli: No, testimony. To a complicated and
remarkable man with conflicting emotions. (82)

Taken together, the dramatic situations above bring into view Fatima and Zarina's steely rebellious resolve in the face of their native cultural belongings; an epistemic status of their cultural identity that attests to the impact of lived experiences on their ideological formation. These new cultural identity aspects, as observed by Aminah McCloud, are a general phenomenon of transnational Muslims who came under the influence of western education. McCloud concludes that the sample Muslim young people whom she studied "manifest the western notion of learning to protest any infraction of what is perceived as right" (61). It is in this light that Fatima and Zarina's acquired aspects of cultural identity stand as striking examples of both the fluidity of identity and the illegitimacy of the essentialist notions triggered by persons' racial or religious belongings. Indeed, the portrayal of Fatima and Zarina as epistemic agents is meant to show a different face of Muslim womanhood, and to deconstruct the age-old stereotypical judgements.

Conclusion

The study has revealed that the two plays, *The Crusaders* by Wajahat Ali and *The Who* by Ayad Akhtar, mobilize the cultural spatiotemporal horizons as an enabling force in constructing the Muslim American women's cultural identity. Cultural identities are thus not fixed, or of an enduring nature.

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They are cast in the realm of the social and historical, a post-positivist strategy that is used, according to the two plays, as a pretext to de-center the imperialist discourses. Drawing on the women protagonist's ideological orientation, which contrasts stereotypes, the two plays assume a defensive mechanism to bring center stage the impact of the epistemic contexts, or in Mohanty's words, the experiential foundations, on the constant shaping and reshaping of cultural identities. In the light of this vision, the two plays re-assert that ethnicity relates to genes, not to culture, and that essentialist notions of cultural identities are groundless. In the plays, the two Muslim female protagonists undergo personal experiences mediating values of self-assertion and visibility. They are thus empowered to speak and defend their individuation. Fatima lashes out against native traditions and values. To her, the true meaning of a woman's life does not lie in capturing a husband, but in playing an active role in defending all minorities' rights. Zarina, who attends more profound and influential experiences than those of Fatima, adopts a secular mode of thought. She moves from skepticism to denial of native cultural beliefs, to the point of adopting extremist views on religious heritage. Both women belong to and are the cultural product of their experiential foundations according to which they are enabled to maintain full control over their bodies and minds.

The epistemic aspects of cultural identity, as the two plays show, cannot be mistaken for those assimilatory tendencies. The latter are conscious and performative in nature and usually result in more confused and unstable identities, while the former are natural, authentic and long lasting. The ending of the two plays supports this assessment. Fatima in *The Crusaders* stands firm and resolute in defying and denying her grandfather's aggressive acts against religious opponents. She will not acknowledge violence as a form of conflict resolution, a cultural value acquired from engagement in peaceful protest activities. In *The*

Who, Zarina continues more assertively. She will no longer live under her father's epistemic custody. She continues her cultural project of the deconstructive reading of Islamic heritage. She makes fun of her father who thinks she is writing fifteen biographies of the Prophet celebrating his achievements, while in reality she nurses an idea to corrupt the image of the Prophet in the name of humanizing him. Her final stage appearance features her being cynical of her father's stereotypical patriarchal wish for her to have a boy child. Zarina appears "*With sass, defiance*;" she declares: "It's a girl" (93). This theatrical portrayal of the epistemic status of the Muslim American women's cultural identity condemns to oblivion the center-margin dichotomy and calls upon the audience to be open to new avenues of understanding and tolerance.

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الهوية الثقافية بوصفها بناء معرفي: دراسة لمسرحيتي "الصليبيون بيننا" لوجهة علي و"الحقيقة والسراب" لإياد أختار
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مستخلص البحث: يذهب هذا البحث، الذي يركز على العملين الدراميين "الصليبيون بيننا" (2004) و"الحقيقة والسراب" (2014) لوجهة علي وإياد أختار، إلى أن الهوية الثقافية يجري تمثيلها درامياً من خلال القيم المعرفية المرتبطة بالزمان والمكان والتي بدورها شكلت توجهات من همشهم الفكر الاستعماري . وعلى ذلك فإن ما جاء إزاء قضية الهوية من الفلسفة الحتمية وفكر ما بعد الحداثة، واللذان لا يريا في الهوية غير أنها أمرٌ قدرِي وتوقيفي بحت، قد تهاوى لصالح تعزيز الأسس التجريبية للهوية؛ ذلك أن تلك الأسس من شأنها إتاحة المعرفة التي تؤثر على بناء الهوية وإعادة تشكيلها ضمن عملية دافقة لا تتوقف. ووفق تلك الرؤية فهوية الشخصيات النسائية المسلمة في المسرحيتين موضع البحث يجري تمثيلها وبنائها درامياً في ظل السياقات المعرفية التي نشأت فيها تلك الشخصيات، على نحو يهدف إلى تفكيك ودحض مبررات العنف المعرفي الذي واجهه المسلمون قبل وبعد أحداث الحادي عشر من سبتمبر، خاصة مزدوجي الإنتماء الثقافي منهم. فالمسرحيتان يكشفان ملامح شخصية المرأة المسلمة حين تتجلى فيها درجات متباينة من التوجهات الثقافية والفكرية، ما يمكن عزوه إلى الخبرات المعرفية المتغايرة التي شكلت تلك التوجهات. وعليه، يركز النقاش البحثي

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على ذلك المقال المهم الصادر عام 1993 بعنوان "المنزلة المعرفية للهوية الثقافية..." للكاتب ساتيا موهانتي، وفيه يجري تطبيق التفسير "الماورائي" للواقعية من منظور فلسفة ما بعد الوضعية على نطاق تشكّل الهوية الثقافية؛ وذلك ضمن مقاربة أو مدخل وسيط تجريبي معرفي.

مفاتيح البحث: الهوية الثقافية، المعرفة القائمة على خبرة وسيطة، "الحقيقة والسراب"، "الصليبيون بيننا".