

Generational Gap of Pakistani-American Muslims in Ayad Akhtar's Homeland Elegies

Muhammad Latif Busyeiri^{1*}, Atikah Ruslianti²

^{1,2}Universitas Negeri Jakarta, Jakarta, Indonesia

Email: ^{1*} latifbusyeri259@gmail.com

Abstract: Immigrants must adjust since they are fundamentally different from those around them and confront several difficulties. Due to their differences in appearance, culture, or beliefs, they frequently encounter discrimination from others. The problems that various immigrant generations confront also influence their attitudes and stances. This research aims to investigate the generational gap that exists between first generation and second generation Pakistani-American Muslims immigrants as portrayed in the novel *Homeland Elegies* by Ayad Akhtar. This research is descriptive analytical research using Said's postcolonial theory of orientalism. The findings indicate that there is a generational gap between first- and second-generation immigrants as they encounter different challenges and adapt differently.

Keywords: Generational Gap, Pakistani-American, Muslim Immigrants, Literature

1. Introduction

Throughout the history of humanity, poetry, prose, theatre, fiction, and other literary forms have all existed for a very long time. The kinds of literature have also changed with time and place. Because it allows readers to feel something they have never felt before or will never feel, as well as opening doors to other information or even entire worlds, literature has remained relevant and appealing for people of various ages and socioeconomic backgrounds. Another argument that might be made is that certain literature can act as social record due to its mimetic nature (Busyeiri & Dinanti, 2021). The mimetic nature of literature also makes it a prime research object as it can provide insight regarding a certain subject or phenomenon.

Identity is a crucial component of the human psyche because it informs individuals' thoughts about who they are as people and what they need to accomplish. When taken to its logical conclusion, identity may as well govern every aspect of our lives as we frequently base our choices on who we are as individuals. Hall (1996) states that identity is a process of becoming rather than being, in which someone poses questions based on historical, linguistic, and cultural resources that have affected how they have been represented and how they could represent themselves. However, the concept of identity is much more complex than that as it needs to take accounts the person background, ideology, age, and so on.

Identity negotiation, according to Ting-Toomey (2015), is the capacity to compromise between two or more different cultures in order to integrate with the majority population

within a given cultural context. Identity negotiation helps immigrants establish a balance between several cultures in their daily lives. People from collectivistic cultural backgrounds, such immigrants from Asia or Africa, may be more preoccupied with communal identity issues, which typically draw attention to how other people are involved in a person's predicament. On the other side, people from individualistic cultural backgrounds, like those of European immigrants, could be more obsessed with their own problems than those of others. Identity negotiation can help immigrants in Western countries adjust to the prevailing culture so they can successfully interact with the majority population while living in a different cultural environment, and it can help to reduce this imbalance.

Immigration has always played a significant role in the history of first-world nations like America. Many immigrants continue to reside in America even now. For years, thousands of individuals from all over the world have immigrated to America in quest of a better life. Whether or not their dreams are realized depends on the individual. These immigrants hail from a variety of continents, including Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. Prior to Pakistan's independence and when the country was still ruled by the British, the first wave of Pakistani immigrants to the United States started between 1893 and 1917 (Moore, 2011).

Immigrants would often create their own identity and community and experience something called diaspora. The term "diaspora" refers to the dispersion of a people group outside of their own area. However, according to Clifford (1994), the term "diaspora" refers to political battles to define the local as a unique group in historical circumstances of displacement, not only transnationality and migration. The idea of diaspora emphasizes the effort for those involved in forging an identity and community, whether they are the displaced or the residents in the diasporic location. Generally speaking, diasporas can create their own imagined homes in homeless conditions and they can also construct numerous social connections and communities away from home. Their idea of homeland is imaginary, and thus home is merely referred to symbolically or metaphorically (Alghaberi, 2018).

While the majority of immigrants faced discrimination, Muslims from the subcontinent also encountered it because of their practice of Islam. One of the most pervasive myths about Islam that predominated in America is that Muslims are polygamists and hence unfit to immigrate there; there have even been requests to deport Muslims who are already citizens. Numerous Muslims in the United States have encountered bigotry not just as immigrants but also as Muslims. Islamophobia, according to the Council on American-Islamic Relations (2010), is the treatment of Muslims unfairly based on their faith.

In addition, because all Muslims are stereotyped as dangerous and terrorists in the west, there is a greater fear of hate crimes committed by the majority population. In addition, Muslims in America constantly experience worry, tension, and insecurity as a result of prejudice and hate crimes, which makes them feel these emotions frequently. Since society will presume, they are terrorists before they are Americans, they could even question their nationality.

The prejudice that the immigrants experience would impact them consciously or subconsciously in thinking that they are inferior compared to the westerners. as stated by Said (1978) that generalization might lead the Orient to believe that they are the same as manufactured Western images, which makes them feel inferior to their own native cultures and beliefs. These feelings of inferiority would cause the immigrants to feel uncomfortable or unsatisfied with themselves and would make them question their own identity.

1.1. Objectives

This research aims to investigate the generational gap that exists between first generation and second generation Pakistani-American Muslims immigrants as portrayed in the novel *Homeland Elegies* by Ayad Akhtar

2. Methodology

This study employs the qualitative approach and Said's post-colonialist ideas of orientalism. In keeping with that, the author uses descriptive analytical study. According to Glass & Hopkins (1984), descriptive research entails acquiring information about occurrences before organizing, tabulating, illustrating, and describing the information gathered. The source of the data for this study is a novel written by Ayad Akhtar entitled *Homeland Elegies* which was published in 2020 by Little, Brown and Company. The data from *Homeland Elegies* comes in the form of narrations, dialogues, and plots in the form of words, phrases, and sentences that indicate generational gap will be evaluated based on interpretation, and then the data will be categorized and analysed using the theory of Orientalism by stated, producing a result in the form of descriptions.

3. Results

The word "orientalism" is used to describe how the Orient (East) and its civilizations appear to westerners (Said, 1978). The phrase first appeared when westerners started to link themselves with whatever characteristics they had not previously connected to the east. The implication is that the West is a better race than the East. As a result of repeated generalization based on individual behaviours without considering any logical grounds, this mode of thinking has become a source of bigotry and racism from the West towards the East. Unfortunately, Said (1978) also states that generalization can cause the Orient to see themselves as being identical to fabricated Western representations, making them feel inferior to their own local cultures and religions. This narrative revealed that Ayad and his family, notably his father, Sikander, as first and second generation Pakistani-American Muslims, felt inferior to their own Pakistani-Muslim identity, particularly when exposed to American traditions. After experiencing Islamophobia with his parents, Ayad believes that his life would have been lot simpler if he had just been a regular American citizen like his contemporaries, without needing to seem like an easterner or Muslim.

The generational gap between first generation and second-generation immigrants is apparent in their experience and opinion regarding the west and themselves as an orient.

The East has been subjugated and reshaped by the West. This dominance has lasted for years because the Eastern saw their local cultures and faiths as inferior to the Western, as well as making broad generalizations that the West was superior in many ways (Said, 1978). There are significant cultural distinctions between Eastern and Western cultures that might have an impact on people's everyday behavior, attitudes, and lifestyles. Each of these cultures had its own set of values, which were typically passed down through generations within families, causing people to behave differently when they encountered new cultures that were extremely different from their own. As a result, immigrants frequently acculturated their native and dominant cultures in order to successfully socialize and adapt to shifting situations. Immigrants, on the other hand, frequently maintain certain ideals from their original cultures while they engage with the dominant community (Inman, Beaumont, & Walker, 2007). Despite the fact that Ayad and his parents, Sikander and Fatima, had hybridized their numerous separate cultures, they kept their Pakistani Muslim ideals while they interacted with American customs

Second generation immigrants portrayed by Ayad in the novel is shown to be critical and has a better understanding regarding the history and relation between the east and west.

We, Muslims, were constantly besieged by a culture that didn't understand us, that didn't want us. It was why I only ever voiced my thoughts indirectly, through that particular prevarication called art. I didn't see the point of harping on "our" issues in public when it was evident "their" mishaps and blind spots were so much more pressing (Akhtar, 2020, p. 120).

Ayad knowledge of the tension between the east and the west would lead to him to keep to himself. The west and the east certainly vary in many ways, including look, clothes, culture, and many other factors. These variations, on the other hand, are frequently perceived as unusual or less by the western world. The east is frequently perceived as being completely distinct from the west, and is referred to as "the other." In other words, the east is frequently regarded as inferior to the superior west (Nurbaity, Busyeiri, & Kurniati, 2021)

One of the things that separates the east vs west especially in the context of the narrative is Islam or religion. While religions, especially Christianity, exists and is prevalent in the western world, the narrative doesn't put much emphasis on it as it creates a distinction between the east and west.

"The Romans created the corporation. It enabled them to protect assets from being redistributed after an owner's death. Which meant money could have the time to really grow, take on its own center of gravity. We had no way to do that. Muslim inheritance laws are very clear. After death, the estate has to be divided among the wives and heirs. Because there was no loophole to get around it, businesses didn't outlive their founders" (Akhtar, 2020).

During a conversation with Ayad and Riad, the discourse had gone from the apparent failures of the Muslim community into the reasoning on why Muslim's power had fallen on ever since the golden age of Islam. Riad tells Ayad that his goal in life were to empower Muslim people, especially in the western world where Muslim are often

oppressed. Ayad gives in an input in which he believes that the shortcomings of the Muslim community also fall on the shoulders of the community itself as they are too obsessed with the golden age and that some of the rules of Islam constrained them from competing with the western world. The western world through the romans have enriched themselves for ages as they used the concept of capitalism in the form of corporation which is believed to thoroughly be a roman concept, it allows their family to still be rich even when the main owner has passed away and such maintain the capital and power balance that they hold. This capitalistic system is what allowed the western world to stay in power for the majority of humanity's modern history and maintain that power (Petrosyan, 2021). Ayad notes that the Muslim community had always been behind on the race to capital because in Islam, the wealth is required to be redistributed when the owner of it passes away. This creates a competition in which the east would always lose in the long run against the west

Sikander would also notice this notion of east vs west in which more often than not, the east would be seen as inferior and the west as more superior. As stated by Sawant (2015) the "occident" was seen to be logical, developed, compassionate, and superior, whereas the "orient" was thought to be strange, undeveloped, inferior, and unchangeable.

The referent would slip again, a new "we"—now referring to us as Americans—opposed to the older one, which was now the "them" he wanted nothing to do with, namely, Muslims: "It makes you wonder, beta. Maybe that's what they really want. To fail (Akhtar, 2020, p. 36).

This mindset of occident being more superior than orient is prevalent throughout western society, it would affect Sikander's mindset in his pursuit of being an American. Sikander was already obsessed with American and its cultures as he idolizes many American famous people such as Trump and Stallone. The concept of east vs west and knowledge of the Orient is handled by the West to construct a power operation between them (Moosavinia, Niazi, & Ghaforian, 2011). Sikander's pursuit of trying to become an American would then made him try to distance himself with the east by using 'we' when talking about Americans and using 'them' when talking about eastern people or Muslims. Sikander's action of talking good about the west and talking bad about the east could be seen as an attempt to gain favor of the westerners and become equal to them or at least escape the oppressions. However, these attempts are never likely to succeed because the colonized nation is a marginal group or group that is considered as the other and marginalized by the holder of power, the marginalized society tends to be a society that is ignored, oppressed or despised by the superiority of the colonizer (Sungkar, 2013).

Fatima's opinion regarding east vs west is quite different from the others as she took the side of her homeland the east and disapproved of the west whole-heartedly. Her dislike towards the western world, specifically America, is not baseless and it is based on her real experience of the attack of eastern world by America.

Mother was distraught at the news. She took to bed, and she didn't leave her room for days. Father was worried and asked me to come home. I obliged, but my presence did nothing to comfort her. She didn't want comfort. I date my mother's intensifying anti-Americanism to that summer, the summer when, in response to attacks on two US

embassies in East Africa, Bill Clinton bombed a Sudanese medicine factory (Akhtar, 2020, p. 36).

Fatima being the only one who still held her Islamic faith closely as the Akhtar lived in America shows that Fatima had the most understanding of her eastern heritage. Fatima knows about the everlasting in the east that is financed by the western world, specifically America. The fact that she saw the horrors of conflict as she grew up coupled with the fact that she had lost someone she loved, Latif, by the hands of the United States government means that her hatred would be intensified as she heard the more atrocities committed by the United States. Her strong beliefs in her heritage gave way for her dislike as orientalism still exists between the West and the East, especially in presenting Middle Easterners—Muslims in general—as the orient. From the perspective of the West, Islam is seen as the “orient,” and it sprang from the long-lasting trauma of the Ottoman conquerors, who threatened European Christian culture in the Middle Ages (Said, 1978).

Another factor in the orientalism that the Akhtar family experienced is the Islamophobia that exists in the United States. The Islamophobia that Ayad and his parents, Sikander and Fatima, had encountered stemmed from the Western perception of Islam, Muslims, and people from the East as a big terrorist danger. The media's portrayal also contributes to the atmosphere of Islamophobia by instilling fear of Islam and Muslims among the general public. When the attack on 9/11 happened, Ayad felt the immediate impact on public opinion as he was harassed by a mob that caused him to conceal his identity by wearing a cross for years to come. The tension also caused Sikander to forget about America and return to his roots as a Pakistani later on.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, Ayad and his parents, particularly her mother, Fatima, sometimes misunderstand one other as a result of the cultural disparities between Pakistan and the United States. Being born and raised in the United States, as well as being socialized on a daily basis inside an American cultural milieu, encouraged Ayad to have a distinct view on his Pakistani-Muslim customs, such as tradition. Fatima sometimes gets upset with Sikander and Ayad as they do not share the same sentiment regarding the conflict between east vs west. While Ayad takes a more critical approach in which he does not necessarily take any sides, Sikander on the other hand fully supports America and looks down on the people of the east as Sikander recognizes himself being on the side of America.

Despite the fact that the number of immigrants in the United States is growing, society still views them as outsiders. Furthermore, immigrants who have been given citizenship in the United States may face prejudice and discrimination from society because of their ethnicity, nationality, or religion. This condition frequently causes immigrants to doubt their place in society as well as their status in the United States. Furthermore, the second generation's adaptability like Ayad in adjusting to American norms causes them to be viewed as too American for their parents yet too foreign for their peers. As a result, the gap between first and second generations allowed them to continuously negotiate their identities in order to properly socialize in a changing world. The first generation in Ayad is shown to be more open and critical towards American, Pakistani, and Islamic cultures.

Ayad did not feel belonging towards his Pakistani and Islamic culture as he questions each culture on a case-by-case basis in relation to himself.

References

- [1] Alghaberi, J. A. (2018). The Concept of 'Home' in Palestinian Diaspora Fiction: A Critical Study of Randa Jarrar's Fiction. *Langkawi: Journal of The Association for Arabic and English*, 4(1), 13-20.
- [2] Busyeiri, M. L., & Dinanti, N. (2021). Lifestyles during the roaring 20s of America in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. *Lililacs Journal: English Literature, Language, and Cultural Studies Journal*, 41-49.
- [3] Clifford, J. (1994). Diasporas. *Cultural Anthropology*, 38-302.
- [4] Council on American-Islamic Relations. (2010). *Same Hate, New Target: Islamophobia and Its Impact in the United States (January 2009-December 2010)*. California: University of California.
- [5] Inman, G. A., Beaumont, R. L., & Walker, J. A. (2007). Cultural Transmission: Influence of Contextual Factors in Asian Indian Immigrant Parents' Experience. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 54(1), 93-100.
- [6] Moore, K. M. (2011). *Pakistani Immigrants*. Retrieved from UC Santa Barbara: <https://www.religion.ucsb.edu/wp-content/uploads/4148-321-1pass-Pakistani.pdf>
- [7] Moosavinia, S. R., Niazi, N., & Ghaforian, A. (2011). Edward Said's Orientalism and the Study of the Self. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 2(1), 103-113.
- [8] Nurbaity, Busyeiri, M. L., & Kurniati, N. A. (2021). Marginalization of indigenous people in Alfred Russel Wallace's *The Malay Archipelago*. *Proceeding international conference on literature (Konferensi Internasional Kesusastraan - KIK XXX HISKI)*, 9-15.
- [9] Petrosyan, A. E. (2021). The germ of capitalism (Roman business through slave as the primordium of private enterprise). Part II. A counterpart of corporation. *Journal of Management History*, 27(4), 574-597.
- [10] Said, E. (1978). *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books.
- [11] Sungkar, L. A. (2013). The other dalam *Gadis berkulit hitam* Karya Sembene Ousmane. *Jurnal Ilmiah Kajian Humaniora*, 1, 156-167.