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The "Islams" of Muslims in Post-9/11 Fiction: Ayad Akhtar's *American Dervish*

Priyadarshini Gupta

ABSTRACT

The attacks on the Twin Towers have politically categorized Muslims as "good," "bad," or "moderate" in post-9/11 United States. These categories are reductive when it comes to understanding complex Muslim formations in a post-9/11 world as they impose a politicized ideal of what it means to be a Muslim. The "ideal" American Muslim is supposedly an American first and a Muslim second. While there is significant scholarship against such reductive categorizations, what remains largely unnoticed is a Muslim's subjectivity in relation to Islam in everyday life: the ways in which a Muslim interacts with Islam on a day-to-day basis are often idiosyncratic in nature. This paper introduces the concept of "everyday Islam" as a key tool to resist Muslim essentialism. Drawing on the works of Saba Mahmood, Santiago Sia, and Nadia Fadil among others, it analyzes Ayad Akhtar's *American Dervish* (2013) and argues that the novel displays different sensibilities that Muslims bring to their interactions with Islam on a daily basis. By focusing on the character of Mina, Akhtar's female protagonist, this paper examines how an interplay of moments, situations, and contexts shapes her day-to-day practices of Islam. In doing so, it challenges the reductive political categorizations of Muslims as "good," "bad," or "moderate," and expands our understanding of the diverse ways in which Muslims make sense of Islam in often incongruous ways. (PG)

KEYWORDS: Muslim subjectivity, Muslim identity, Muslim-American, 9/11, Islam, Other

Introduction

What makes a good Muslim or a bad Muslim? This question remains relevant in the United States even twenty years after the World Trade Centre attacks, which encouraged academic and non-academic debates on the nature and the spirit of Islam. Muslim lives became over-politicized—their relationship with the United States, issues of immigration and citizenship, and the racialization of Islam became a part of American life.[1] While some Muslims embraced Islam to protest against Muslim discrimination, others succumbed to the

pressure of proving their loyalty to the American creed, a dynamic that Steven George Salaita argues forces Arabs and Muslims to perform what he calls "imperative patriotism." Speaking against the foreign policies of the United States is considered unpatriotic and is subjected to governmental suspicion. As Salaita observes, "[i]mperative patriotism assumes (or demands) that dissent in matters of governance and foreign affairs is unpatriotic and therefore unsavory" (154). At the same time, the racialization of Islam has created what Baljit Nagra calls "reactive ethnicity," a Muslim's coping mechanism when experiencing racism (148). She identifies a few types of "reactive ethnicity": Muslims are either scared to acknowledge their religion publicly, or they openly embrace their religion as a protest against discrimination, or develop a strong sense of Islamic faith in an Islamophobic America (Nagra 160). Nagra concludes that such a myriad "reactive ethnicit[ies]" have complicated a Muslim's identity in relation to the American essentialism of Islam: "Both personal and *political* motivations play a part in their decisions as well, making reactive identity formation a complex social process, involving both societal and self-ascription" (Nagra 170, emphasis added). Therefore, self-affirmations of Muslimness further complicate the understandings of a "good," "bad," or "moderate" Muslim.

While there is significant scholarship against such reductive categorizations, what remains largely unnoticed is a Muslim's subjectivity in relation to Islam in everyday life: the ways in which a Muslim interacts with Islam on a day-to-day basis are often idiosyncratic in nature.

This paper introduces the concept of "everyday Islam" as a key tool to resist Muslim essentialism. Drawing on the works of Saba Mahmood, Santiago Sia, and Nadia Fadil among others, it analyzes Ayad Akhtar's *American Dervish* (2013) and argues that the novel displays different sensibilities that Muslims bring to their interactions with Islam on a daily basis. By focusing on the character of Mina, Akhtar's female protagonist, this article examines how an interplay of moments, situations, and contexts shapes her day-to-day practices of Islam. In doing so, it challenges the reductive political categorizations of Muslims as "good," "bad," or "moderate" and expands our understanding of the diverse ways in which Muslims make sense of Islam in often incongruous ways.

The "good," the "bad," and the "moderate"

A week after the Twin Tower attacks, George W. Bush addressed the nation politicizing what Mahmood Mamdani critiques as **"**good**"** Muslims and "bad" Muslims. In an overarching sense, a "good" Muslim is a "loyal"

American who contributes to American welfare by speaking against Muslim terrorists and sees Western human rights violations in the Middle East as acts of righteous warfare. A "good" Muslim also believes that Muslims need to be liberated from their oppressive, tribalistic, and anti-democratic governments (24). Mamdani elaborates:

> "Bad Muslims" were clearly responsible for terrorism. At the same time, the president seemed to assure Americans that "good Muslims" were anxious to clear their names and consciences of this horrible crime and undoubtedly support "us" [non-Muslim Americans] in a war against "them." . . . But this could not hide the central message of such discourse: unless proved to be "good," every Muslim was presumed to be "bad." (Mamdani 15)

Bush's post-9/11 America popularizes a pluralist and liberal American Islam. American Muslims are expected to align themselves with the American version of an "acceptable" Islam. The American version of "acceptable" or progressive Islam advocates embracing diversity in Islamic discourses, pluralism of ideas, and goes against dogmatic faith and injustice around the world. Sunaina Maira calls the idea of a "good" Muslim a part of the imperial liberal order in which a Muslim American has to prove their "good citizenship" and practice "acceptable Islam". Therefore, according to Maira "acceptable Islam" adjudicates American totalitarianism against Muslims. It is compatible with American liberal democracy that relies on Islamic faith and tolerance, and resists, as Maira would have it, "surveillance and repression of political speech [for Muslims] in the Patriot Act Era" (634).

Building on this, the quest to define Muslim identity is the primary literary trope in post-9/11 fiction. These novels focus on Muslims adapting to a "fallen" America. As Tim Gauthier argues, the United States can fall—hence US self-sufficiency is false (16). Post-9/11 novels, therefore, call for empathy to understand complex situations, incidents, and dynamics which supersede simplistic portrayals of a perpetrator and a victim in a tense cultural milieu: "The attainability of any cosmopolitan engagement is contingent upon our abilities to understand the other, knowing always that the otherness of the other remains beyond our grasp, and the best we can do is to imagine some version of it. It is primarily in this capacity that the novel has a role to play" (2). Therefore, as Gauthier notes, individual tales of tragedy and heroism are both pertinent to "us" and "them" characters, which, in turn, invites the recognition of each other's suffering (16). Post-9/11 fiction creates conditions of similarity between the "self" and the "other" that are polarized

in Edward Said's *Orientalism*. We should not forget that a "fallen" America has led to the estrangement of a Muslim other within an Islamophobic society. As a result, some novels, as Carol Fadda-Conrey argues, depict Arab American hardships with US assimilation politics. The heterogeneity of Arab-Americans in terms of nationality, class, educational, and religious backgrounds have problematized their relationship to US legal citizenship (Fadda-Conrey 536). Hence, fiction captures the racial, ethnic, and religious variability of Arab-Americans demonstrating how select individuals (that is, those with light skin and a Christian identity) are acceptable in a racially stratified America (540). The novels become anti-essentialist responses to public culture and paranoia about Arabs, and, by extension, Muslims.

The discursive strategies of writing back against Muslim vilification are varied when describing Muslims in fiction as perpetrators of violence. Md Abu Shahid Abdullah criticizes post-9/11 fiction's attempt to describe Muslim violence, noting that post-9/11 fiction has "denigrated Muslims and Easterners by portraying them as marginal and insignificant" (52). For Abdullah, even though Muslim fundamentalist masterminds caused the cataclysmic incident, ordinary "Muslims were the worst sufferers of the 9/11 attack on the Twin Towers" (58). Anna Hartnell advances Abdullah's argument stating that even though post-9/11 fiction sympathizes with the discrimination of the Muslim other, it follows clichéd stereotypes of an innocent Western subject and a fanatic Islamist. Such novels, as Hartnell argues, attempt to make realistic portrayals of the terrorists and their bombings but in turn perpetuate the national trauma that the United States needs to heal from (483). Ahmed Gamal cuts through these simplistic understandings of Muslim violence arguing that the post-9/11 terrorist depiction is an intermesh of individual frailty, Islamic radicalism, and Western modernity. He notes that "religious radicals feel challenged by pluralistic creeds and norms, the most significant of which is the? secular rationality of modernity" (101), but he also argues that the depiction of terrorists supersedes Eastern backwardness and a debilitating Eastern cultural system (96). Terrorists, in Gamal's choice of fiction, come from middle-class families with degrees in architecture, urban planning, and engineering.[2] Hence, their depiction is neither uncivilized nor barbaric, as Said suggested—they are educated, have achieved academic prowess, and are capable of making a decent living. Therefore, these writings show a cultural ambivalence towards the Muslim other: the Western subject is traumatized but it is the ramification of the non-Western subject's consistent existential crisis. Gamal ultimately

concludes with a nuanced understanding of the terrorist, rather than a simplistic one.

American Dervish

This article, similarly, takes its starting point in a novel that refines generalized categorizations of Islam and, by extension, simplifies Muslim identities in a post-9/11 cultural milieu: Ayad Akhtar's *American Dervish* is a Bildungsroman depicting a Pakistani-American boy, Hayat, growing up in a Milwaukee suburb, who is very fond of Mina Suhail née Ali, his mother's friend from Pakistan. The novel narrativizes Hayat's relation with Mina and the ways in which she shapes Hayat's understanding of Islam. Mina's Islam is different from Hayat's Islam, though: for the boy, being a true Muslim means practicing scriptural Islam. For Mina, however, personalizing Islam to meet her emotional and spiritual needs is necessary for being close to Allah. Therefore, although the novel is set in the 1980s, Mina in *American Dervish* brings forward a sense of "everyday Islam" or the day-to-day workings of Muslim lives in relation to Islam that is characteristic of post-9/11 sensibilities. In Milwaukee, Muslims practice doctrinal Islam: Adnan Souhef, the local imam of the Milwaukee Mosque, Ghaleb Chatha, the Pakistani local pharmacist, or Najat, Chatha's wife believe that piety lies in Islamic scripturalism. For Mina, it is Quranic scripturalism that is very much a part of her Muslimness. At the same time, she also believes that "everyday Islam" gives her a sense of self. Nadia Fadil and Mayanthi Fernando describe "everyday Islam" as the performativity of piety in doing different things every day that creates spaces of "flexibility, spontaneity, ambiguity, and ultimately secularity" for Muslims as compared to fixed assumptive constructs (76). The novel not only deals with complex Muslim identities, but it also sheds light on the ways in which a Muslim shares an idiosyncratic relation with Islam within the bounds of the religious rules of the *ummah*, a commonwealth of Muslim believers. Moreover, it argues against individualistic constructions of post-9/11 Muslim identity as products of American materialism. The novel takes into account the collectivism of ummah and the ways in which it converges with and diverges from the lived experiences of every Muslim individual.

In recent years, scholars have taken multiple approaches to this complex novel. Kyle Garton-Gundling, for instance, considers its relationship to a post-critical mode of literary analysis that privileges readerly experience—joy, frustration, pleasure—over skeptical reading practices (137). Garton-Gundling notes, however, that post-critical scholars remain

secular pluralists, and his study questions whether a post-critical reading practice can make space for stories about religious people who are truly committed to their religion. Meanwhile, Syrrina Haque suggests that the narrative "delineates the power dynamics of a South Asian community" (1), one in which people express multiple, overlapping identities. In other words, Haque claims that Muslims in Akhtar's novel are affiliated in variegated and complex ways. Finally, Anna Guttman posits that the key tension in Akhtar's work is central—specifically between Muslims and Jews (911). Each of these scholars has recognized in Akhtar's writing a profound attempt at the exploration of the complexity of Muslim experience in post-9/11 United States. However, none have considered at length how Akhtar offers a potent critique of the way in which American Muslims were categorized as good, bad, or moderate in the post-9/11 era. Akhtar's Muslims personalize Islam; their sensitivities toward it show the absurdity of such state categorizations.

When exploring the category of "moderate Islam" and, by extension, any taxonomies that typify Muslims, I suggest that Muslim subjectivity does not function within the entrenched parameters of moderation. Rather, as Akhtar's character, Mina demonstrates, Muslim subjectivity is often unique and dynamic, and it is shaped by individuals' day-to-day understanding, perception, and application of Islam. My view is informed by the works of philosophers of religion, such as Akeel Bilgrami, who claims that identity formations of any kind (liberal, moderate, conservative, or otherwise) adhere to a larger ideological value system that helps people accept "their inferences and transformations that the theory sanctions" (823). Therefore, categories help individuals to "embrace their locality with some methodological right" (Bilgrami 823). Bilgrami ultimately asserts that identity formation is a fluid process, hence categorizing religious experience with narrow ideological descriptions is myopic. His statement contravenes those of scholars such as Dilshod Achilov and Sedat Sen, Rosemary Corbett, and Marcia Hermansen, who propagate "moderation" as "acceptable" to a pluralist society. These views on Islam should be contrasted with an earlier line of criticism, associated with scholars such as Randa Abdel-Fattah and Mehal Krayem, Murat Somer, Tazul Islam, and Amina Khatun, who have explored the discussion surrounding "good" (secular, pluralistic, moderate) and "bad" (conservative, illiberal, fanatical) forms of Islam and, by extension, Muslims. I intend to further nuance these approaches by demonstrating that an individualist understanding of Islam goes beyond institutionalized versions of religious and political Islam, since individual Islam in *American Dervish* functions as a self-transformative, knowledgeable, and experiential

hermeneutics in everyday modes of living. I also suggest that the novel provides the ideal space for understanding how religious experience and identity formation are individual, contextual, and particularistic phenomena, and yet, they follow collective rules of piety without falling into binaries of good or bad, pluralist or fanatical. Finally, I argue that Akhtar's *American Dervish* illustrates how Islam in the United States is localized and contextualized, suggesting that the novel grapples with the lived experiences of American Muslims compared to a mythologized national understanding of Muslim identities.

Islam as a religious ideology

Before turning to the analysis of *American Dervish*, I would like to consider how previous scholarship on Akhtar's novel has treated its religious content. Garton-Gundling reads the novel from a post-secular lens, exploring the ways in which it has appealed to Muslims and non-Muslims alike. He argues that the novel treats the Quran as a source of enchantment accessible to both types of readers (138). Haque, on the other hand, contends that the novel simplifies Muslim subjectivity and sees Muslim subjectivities as part of a collective Muslim identity. She posits that the Muslims in the book enjoy the economic benefits of American society but do not see themselves as members of the larger American community. Haque, in a way, rebukes the characters of *American Dervish* as "bad" Americans who use Islamic "knowledge based on their ideological discourse" to distance themselves from the American society that they live in (535). Anna Guttman takes a different approach to Muslim identity politics by arguing that exploring Jewish–Muslim relationships is key to understanding Akhtar's novels (7). While Garton-Gundling, Haque, and Guttman discuss the complexity of Muslim identity politics, they also treat Muslim identity as an essentially religious phenomenon. Although their works respond to universally recognized principles of Islam, they do not engage with the individual Muslim experience that operates in tandem with these doctrinal rules. The constitutive elements of Muslim subjectivity—emotion, volition, habits, and tradition, among others—play an influential role in the performativity of Islam (both as a code of conduct and as a set of Islamic principles) that manifest in diverse ways across different locales and contexts.

Since 9/11, moderate Islam has been the "acceptable" version of American Islam which, in mainstream media, aligns with American identity; indeed, moderate Muslims are considered one of "us" in American society. However, what defines moderation and where it should be applied in

everyday Muslim life remains ambiguous: should Muslims be moderate in religious practices or in their political ideologies, in their cultural dispositions or in public practices? Achilov and Sen argue that politically moderate Muslims do not support sharia law or advocate for the superiority of religious identity in political leadership (1). On the other hand, some scholars believe that Sufism itself epitomizes moderation, which, Rosemary R. Corbett argues, is a key element of individual Sufi experience. Sufism not only stresses the centrality of personal experiences with God, but it also brings believers into contact with a "worldliness" that is inclusive of various racial, ethnic, and cultural perspectives (88). Sufism recognizes the legitimacy of the diversity of Muslims and non-Muslims (53). She explains that Sufis are less focused on Islamic Law and are open to a mode of transcendentalism that integrates spirit and matter (59). And yet, as it has been noted, Americans have often misunderstood Sufism, regarding it as more compatible with American culture than it actually is. Hermansen, for instance, observes that "religion in America is characterized as being individual rather than institutional, and shaped by voluntarism, individual choices of loyalty and allegiance" (38). According to Hermansen, "[t]he American preference for all things 'lite,' including religious demands," has led many Americans to misunderstand and commodify Sufism (39). Additionally, she also notes how Sufism has been marketed in the United States through the "extensive use of media such as computer networks, exploitation of radio and newspaper coverage, and Sufi dancing" (45). However, these have little or no relation with how Islam diversely manifests itself in the everyday life of Muslims. The manufacture, commodification, and representation of Sufism have become the antidote for the American demonization of Islam.

Islamic tradition, in short, contains moderate elements, yet this moderation is different from what secular Americans imagine when they describe Islam as "moderate." Tazul Islam and Amina Khatun, for instance, argue that moderation is a part of Islamic theology. Moderation—*wasatiyyah* in Arabic—has several shades of meaning, including "justice or balance (*al-adl*), merit or excellence (*al-fadl*), better (*al-khairriyah*), median (*al-bainiyyah*)" (quoted in Al-Sallabi, 1999). Abdel-Fattah and Krayem, however, argue that the idea of the moderate Muslim is a response to white anxiety. They contend that the call for moderate trends constitutes a radical attempt to silence Muslim voices of dissent that speak against white hegemony (430). They suggest that a moderate Muslim is conditioned to live a meaningless existence, emptied of their authentic ideology, voice, and religious inclination. Therefore, moderate Muslims are simply a cosmetic addition to the

democratic Western polity. They help construct "a normalcy around particular types of Islam whilst demonizing those who differ" (433). These scholars and others have suggested that the moderate Islam imagined by Western commentators is either entirely fictitious or at least profoundly different from the moderate forms of Islam envisioned by Islamic scholars.

Murat Somer amplifies this point by arguing that moderation is more than a Muslim's adaptation to the State's interest. It is a variable set of behaviors that depend on individual context and national policy. Somer sees moderation as an ideational concept, one that depends on the relation between the Muslim and what he calls the country's "centre" (247), an institutional body that makes national and international laws. While he sees the country's center as static, he sees individual responses to the country's policies as variegated methods of achieving moderation. He writes, "the crucial question is *which* ideas, norms and types of behaviour a moderating actor is adopting. These, I maintain, are significantly determined by the nature of a country's centre" (247). In other words, Somer regards moderate Islam not as a fantasy invented by westerners but as a set of contingent practices pragmatically adopted by Muslims themselves. These practices will vary by country and by context.

Such ideas of a moderate Muslim, however, belie an evolving Muslim selfdom. Islam is a transcultural and transhistorical phenomenon that can be a central force in a Muslim's life, but the way in which it manifests itself in everyday corporeality is different from categorizations of Islamic discourse. In an interview with the Idaho public television program *Dialogue: Conversations that Matter*, Akhtar spoke against pigeonholing Muslims into particular categories. He told the host of the show, Marsha Franklin, that his work explores a Muslim's subjectivity in a particular given moment. He explained, "We know who a person is by what they do, not by the traits that we think they have. They come from here, they are woman, they are man, their IQ [is] this, that doesn't tell us who the person really is. What tells what a person really is what they actually do" ("Playwright Ayad Akthar on Dialogue," 00:21:14–00:21:34). In short, he suggests that actions define people more than ideology. Similarly, Akhtar's Mina shows multiple selves in different contexts and situations. I, therefore, read the character of Mina through the lens of everyday Islam and seek to answer two questions: 1) How does Mina's Islam help her make sense of her everyday life? 2) How does Mina's Islam challenge institutionalized categorizations of post-9/11 Muslim identities? The next section compares Mina's everyday Islam to Hayat's and Adnan Souhef's doctrinal Islam. Each comparison explores Mina's

subjectivity in relation to her religion: her ethical righteousness in treating Muslims and non-Muslims alike, her Sufi practices to experience the sacred in new ways, and her feminist interpretations of the Quran for an idiosyncratic pious self. The paper then concludes how everyday Islam should become an antidote for Muslim essentialism in post-9/11 America. In essence, Mina's everyday Islam challenges Milwaukee's understanding of Islamic life, and, by extension, the formulaic constructions of Islam.

Contesting categorization: Mina and her Islam

In the Milwaukee of *American Dervish*, Muslims have a polarized relationship with Islam. Hayat's parents, Naveed and Muneer are secular Muslims, while Hayat, like other Muslims in Milwaukee, follows scriptural Islam. Naveed believes that religion should be avoided in everyday conversations and tells Muneer to check her religious impulses because religion always disrupts life (Akhtar 49). Naveed also tells Hayat not to touch the Quran until he is eighteen (246) and threatens to burn the Quran should Hayat violate his orders. However, thanks to Mina, Hayat's interest in the Quran rises exponentially as it helps him navigate through the miseries of his everyday life. Raised by an alcoholic father who has a troubled conjugal relation with his mother, Hayat lives in an emotionally unstable environment. Contrary to his parents, following the scriptural Quran gives Hayat an order in an otherwise disordered life. He wants to become a *hafiz*, someone who knows the Quran by heart, as he believes that it would make him a true Muslim. Therefore, when he finds Mina dating Nathan, Naveed's Jewish friend from work, he telegrams Hamed, Mina's former husband in Pakistan apprising him of Mina's relationship with a Jew. In Hayat's Quran a Muslim and a Jew cannot be romantically involved—it is a sacrilegious act. Upon receiving the news, Hamed threatens to take away Imran, their son, from Mina. Hayat is then filled with remorse and asks Allah to not separate Mina from Imran (246). For each of his troubled questions, Hayat finds answers in the Quran and therefore memorizes a few Quranic verses every day (111). Scriptural Islam for Hayat is the answer to life's every question.

Other characters in the novel, including Mina, also rely on a theological interpretation of the Quran. So does Ghaleb Chatha, who is despised by Naveed because he cannot "bear Chatha's religiosity, announced not only by his appearance—a skullcap, box-form Islamic beard, a knee-length Nehru coat he never seemed to take off—but also his conversation" (Akhtar 85). Similarly, Chatha's wife, Najat believes that wearing the full burqa in public embodies Islamic modesty for women (80). Just like Souhef,

Chatha, and Najat, Mina follows Quranic rules as well: she is a devout Muslim who prays five times a day, observes Ramadan, takes pride in knowing stories about djinns from the Quran, and tells Hayat the stories about the Prophet (49). She remembers every little detail about the Prophet's encounters in life (49) and believes that learning the Quran should be the end goal of every Muslim. For her, following the doctrinal version of the Quran is a necessary part of her life, her route to piety, and her identity as a Muslim.

Mina may follow Islamic externalities of piety, but she also has an intimate connection with Allah. For Mina, being close to Allah, which is listening to her soul, gives purpose to her life. While she ardently follows institutionalized expectations of Islamic life as the ummah expects her to do, she also makes room within those rules to embrace religious self-actualization. She is a Sufi and she makes use of her emotional, psychological, and spiritual faculties to be close to Allah. Tanvir Anjum describes Sufism as a dual layered concept: overtly, it is a scholastic method of life, but covertly, it is the sentiment of one's heart and conscience. Anjum observes, "[t]he method involved in this quest for spiritual development is contemplative rather than scholastic. The core practices of Sufism lead to the purification of the self which seeks to regulate and direct the spiritual life of people" (228–29). Practicing Sufism gives her a spiritual power to accept life's difficulties without feeling alienated, lost, and defeated. Mina has a hard life. Since everything is decided for her, she uses Sufism to realize her religious selfdom. Mina's second husband, Sunil beats her, puts her under house arrest, and threatens to kill himself should she decide to leave him. Despite this abuse, Mina cannot go through another divorce because in doing so, she would be looked down on in her conservative society. Muneer asks Mina multiple times to leave Sunil, but she is adamant about not leaving him (Akhtar 336). Therefore, instead of fighting the pain, Mina submits to it, believing that Allah will guide her through. In a Sufi vein, she believes that the pain is Allah and in it the "divine is choosing to express Himself through [her]" (343).

A Sufi life of self-detachment helps her fixate less on her emotional and mental suffering. In this way, Mina distances herself from the pain by either succumbing to it or by making peace with it. For Mina, leaving Sunil is not an option—it falls outside of the boundaries of Islamic modesty. Therefore, letting go of her inner needs becomes a viable solution. Paul L. Heck notes that a Sufi attunes to Allah by being aware of Islamic rulings but letting go of their individual needs: "Sufism would wholeheartedly agree that moral action comes about not simply from knowledge of the outer life (the moral teachings of Islam as set down in doctrinal creed and legal ruling) but

most fully through refinement of the inner life whereby concern for self is no longer paramount" (253). In a Sufi fashion, Mina renounces her emotional needs, tolerating Sunil's relentless atrocities, be it laying a gun alongside silverware on the dinner table, pointing the gun at her should there be excess turmeric in the beef curry, or forbidding Mina to speak to Muneer again (Akhtar 334, 335). Mina makes sense of her suffering by comparing herself with Chishti, a famous Sufi saint. She strongly feels that Christi's bodily pain is similar to her physical pain—her cancer has metastasized to her bone, compounding her existing suffering. She thinks that this pain, too, is Allah's will: "What he meant is that everything, *everything*, is an expression of Allah's will. It is all His glory. Even the pain" (343). She also believes that a Sufi dervish is a true resemblance of God—one who is humble enough to understand that everything is a creation of Allah. She tells another story of a Sufi dervish who has been searching for God for days. After meeting with consistent failure, he sees two passers-by on his way. When he asks them for food, they throw orange peels at him. This humbles the dervish and he realizes one does not need to search for Allah. He is everywhere; be it a human being or an orange peel, everything is the same in Allah's eyes: "He thought he [the Sufi dervish] was different. But now he saw he was no different. He and Allah, and everything Allah created, it was all One" (104). Therefore, submitting to Allah's will helps Mina accept the pain inflicted in a world to which she desperately tries to belong.

Mina's autonomous interpretations of the Quran help her deal with her trials and tribulations. For her, having the right intentions when carrying out an action is as important as self-renunciation to Allah. The purity of intent is instrumental to becoming a good Muslim. She tells Hayat that without purity in intentions, one cannot live a good Muslim life: "With everything in life, Hayat, it's the *intention* that matters. As long as you respect the Prophet's memory, that's the important thing" (Akhtar 53). Notably, Mina's understanding of Islam is very idiosyncratic, regularized by her own motives, combining the mythologized understanding of Islamic piety with personal ways of making sense of her problems in a religious context. A lot of her interpretation embraces newer methods of understanding religion—the overlooked accounts of Islam that help her self-preservation. Her Islam pushes against patriarchal interpretations of the Quran.

Amina Wadud posits that Quranic interpretations from a feminist perspective in matters of family and society are often side-lined because male religious scholars ignore the necessity of reciprocity between a man and a woman. That, in turn, encourages the sexist notion that a woman must

continue making sacrifices in the family. She opines, "[i]n patriarchy, women's labours of love and caretaking in the family tend to be exploited, as though such labours flow from some biological predisposition of being female, rather than as reflections of an intense kind of agency" (106). Wadud emphasizes that both men and women need to serve each other in order to serve the Lord. Contrary to that, in Mina's world, psychologically abusive husbands, a scornful father, and hostile in-laws see her suffering as commonplace—they have no role in her emotional welfare. No wonder all her religious actions are self-explanatory: she relies on *ijtihad*, or her personal interpretation of the Quran, a practice considered illegitimate after the tenth century. *Ijtihad* gives her a purpose in life that bolsters her free spirit. Wadud highlights that specific verses of the Quran assert Allah as the ultimate judge of our actions, regardless of gender: "Judgement is on the basis of the individual's faith and actions on earth that follow from that faith, with regard to each other and to all humanity at large" (100). For Mina, faith is not only about exernal rules; it is about applying her *ijtihad*. She never wears a headscarf and she never fasts, despite having a difficult relationship with food. However, she still finds a way to observe Ramadan by depriving herself of the things she likes, specifically reading, to show the solidification of her will (Akhtar 66). Practicing outward manifestations of faith to be part of the Muslim society and practicing *ijtihad* for the soul are Mina's ways of a peaceful existence.

Since Mina is honest with herself, she can exercise her free will. Saba Mahmood calls this free will an ability to exercise "positive freedom," unencumbered by traditions, customs, and rituals but dictated by universal freedom and self-interest (11). Such freedom, says Mahmood, is a subject's protest against repressive social norms, enabling individual autonomy and agency: "In order for an individual to be free, her actions *must* be the consequences of her 'own will' rather than of custom, tradition or social coercion" (11). While Rafiq and Hamid do not allow Mina to work in Pakistan, Mina uses "positive freedom" to justify her salon work in the United States. She exercises her agency when she dresses more American than Pakistani: "[W]ithin weeks of starting her education, the habitual Pakistani garb—the loosely fitting *shalwar* pants, *kameez* tunics, and *dupatta* head coverings—gave way to not-so-loose fitting blouses and jeans" (Akhtar 68). She lives a life completely different from the life she had known in Pakistan; here, she pushes groceries through aisles in a supermarket, tries to understand the ways to make a meal out of frozen dinners, and picks up

magazines from *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar* to *Cosmopolitan* that help her become a beauty professional (68).

However, Mina's free will and Islamic duty are often at odds—her free will brings her happiness but it also reminds her of her perceived failure as a married Muslim woman. Hence her self-actualization cannot exist without her self-detestation. This realization of free will may allow her to forgive herself, but it also reinforces her belief that God is the only source of forgiveness. She tells Hayat, "Allah will always forgive you, no matter what you do. *No matter what you do*" (Akhtar 57). Her free will is emotionally fulfilling, balancing the Islamic expectations she struggles to meet.

In Milwaukee, Muslims are prejudiced against Jews. Ghaleb Chatha thinks lending is a morally bankrupt Jewish invention (Akhtar 125), Mina may love Nathan, but she is also painfully aware that should they be romantically involved, "what will people back home say and what will their children be, Muslim or Jewish" (116). This anti-Semitism is bolstered by Adnan Souhef. As a traditionalist, Souhef uses Quranic revelations to keep generations connected over similar schools of thought and rules upholding the essentials of Muslim life. For Muslims in Milwaukee, Souhef is "Allah's greatest miracle" who has "the very sounds of reality itself" (187). He presents himself as a figure of religious purity, one who tries to teach people the rights and wrongs of practicing Islam. William A. Graham contends that Islamic traditionalists have become the bridge between the Prophet's revelations and the common mass: "with the cessation of active prophetic-revelatory activity at Muhammad's death, the 'recitation,' or Quran, remained the one impeccable source of authority in the world" (504). Therefore, Souhef's Quranic revelations about Jews at the mosque have become prescriptive in shaping the religious beliefs of Muslims in Milwaukee.

Not surprisingly, when Nathan goes to the mosque wishing to learn about Islam and to integrate into the community, he meets with embarrassment, hostility, and contempt. What is worse, Souhef weaponizes his position as an Imam and the mosque's pulpit to rationalize his discriminatory piety against Jews. Santiago Sia argues that one does not need to be religious to understand morality; in fact, morality and religion are not connected: "The crimes committed in the name of religion are too many to be ignored but too obvious to be mentioned" (703). Under the guise of traditional Islam, Souhef spews hatred against Jews (Akhtar 201) and uses the Quranic scriptures to promote his religious ideological agenda. Sia argues that the theist (in this case, Souhef) relates morality to God, suggesting that happiness can be found in God's rulings (Sia 704). Souhef, however, uses this

logic to sanctify anti-Semitism. He preaches that Jews betrayed Allah, they are fundamentally corrupt and are never satisfied because "They take and take!!" (Akhtar 200) and should not be trusted. Souhef uses the interplay of the Quranic text and the context of his anti-Semitic views to validate his interpretation of the Quran in social circles.

Compared to Souhef's unconscionable teachings against Jews, Mina's Islam is morally sacrosanct. Her Islam promotes benevolence to herself and to others: for Mina, treating a person right is more important than the Quran's exegetical narrations about their religion. Even though Mina knows that Muslims do not date, and marrying a Jew would be, as Hayat puts it, marrying a *kafir* (Akhtar 115, 240), she allows herself to fall for Nathan. The self-actualization in Mina's Islam resonates more with Edward Scribner Ames's doctrine of self-realization. He describes the concept as an individual's trial and error method of finding one's way in the world: "That which he desires and which he satisfies when obtained he considers 'good'; the bitter, disappointing, unrewarding things are 'bad'" (302). Mina's self-realization through Islam makes her vulnerable to a man who she thinks is "good": Nathan. She considers Nathan "good," and her "purity of intent" to judge someone based on character rather than religion helps her open up to Nathan. Unlike other religious Muslims in Milwaukee, she treats Nathan well. Nathan also responds to Mina's affections: when they begin dating, he agrees to learn more about Islam and is even willing to convert. They treat each other with kindness, care, and respect—a stark contrast to Souhef, whose derision towards Nathan stems from his scriptural dogmatism. Doing what is right rather than adhering to religious dogmas is important for Mina. Hence Mina, as Ames points out, relies on a moral compass that gives her emotional fulfillment: "Morality in this view is the criticized life, developing continually broader and finer ideals and finding means to their fuller realization. It is primarily the work of individuals in reflection upon their own problems of conduct in relation to their place in their social institutions to which they belong" (303). Mina's conservative upbringing would not allow her to date a Jew, but her ethical religion sees Nathan beyond a reductive understanding of the Quran. Mina asks Hayat if he sees Nathan as his uncle because "we're [Mina and Nathan] thinking of getting married" (Akhtar 155). Nathan goes to the mosque and reads the Quran because that makes Mina happy. They spend hours talking, sharing American holidays, and exchanging gifts with each other, but she eventually succumbs to the pressures of her traditional society and decides not to marry him. When Naveed confronts Mina about her decision, she says "he'll never be one of us"; her opinion about Nathan's

kindness does not matter in her Muslim community (234). Mina eventually marries Sunil but remains in touch with Nathan till the end of her life. She adheres to traditional norms but remains true to her own religious system as well.

Since Mina is true to her sensibility of piety, compared to Hayat, her Islam is self-transformative. Hayat's Islam is self-serving. He wants to become a *hafiz,* a Muslim who has memorized the Quran. This aspiration would not only gain him prominence in the Muslim community, but it would also make Mina like him more. He loves the tales of the Prophet and finds the vellum of the thick pages of the Quran "pleasing" (Akhtar 50, 52). Verses of the Quran provide answers to Hayat's relational situations: after accidentally seeing Mina naked, he believes that reciting Quranic verses will resolve his guilt and win back her affection: "I redoubled my Quranic efforts. It was now that I began to strive, in earnest, to become a *hafiz*. It seemed the only sure fire way to earn her love and attention once again" (78). For Hayat, the Quran is a sacred book that should be followed verbatim, without any ambiguous interpretations. He is confident that if Imran reads the Quran, he will be saved from hell: "You're a Muslim, and if you learn your *namaaz* and you learn your holy book, you'll never go into hell" (217). It is not surprising that when Naveed threatens to burn Hayat's Quran, he damns Naveed: "*You…are…go...ing…to…go…to…hell"* (249). Hayat's understanding of the Quran is thus scriptural, reductive, and often driven by personal necessity.

In contrast, Mina's faith performs a rightful duty and obligation to others. Since morality is rational will to Mina, she tells Hayat that her decision to stay with Sunil is her own, it was not influenced by Hayat's interference. Talking about her relationship to him, she says: "It doesn't change anything *behta* [son]. It was my choice. I made that choice. If I was going to make a different choice, I would have made it anyway" (Akhtar 341). Saba Mahmood argues that Islamic tradition often reflects a personal engagement with the sacred text, the "effect of which is the creation of sensibilities and embodied practices (of reason, affect, and volition) that in turn are the conditions for the tradition's reproduction" (115). For Mina the decision to stick with Sunil reflects a combination of her belief in Allah and societal expectations: "You could say it's who I am, Hayat. What I have experienced in my life, and that made me what I am. Or you could say it was Allah's will for me" (341). She cannot reject her traditional role as a wife but she rationalizes her pain as a part of the performance of piety. While the post-9/11 reader might interpret Mina's actions as advocating for liberal belief in individual rights and in pluralism, Mina's inner life and belief is too complex and varied to fit such

labels. Throughout the novel, Mina continuously rebalances her multiple identities to remain connected to her sense of Islam in an otherwise conservative, patriarchal, and anti-Semitic Muslim society.

Conclusion

Akhtar's *American Dervish* challenges the reductive categorization of Muslim people both in an American and a global context. In the post-9/11 era, American commentators and intellectuals have categorized Muslims according to their religious ideologies, using labels such as good, bad, moderate, liberal, secular, religious, fanatic, or political. Such taxonomies have alienated Islam in novel ways, delineating "acceptable" and "nonacceptable" Islams, which, in turn, perpetuates Muslim essentialism in contemporary times. In the context of American secular democracy, the category of "moderate Islam" has become romanticized, as moderation refrains from a fundamentalist vision of Islam while safeguarding the American belief that religion is a private and individual practice. While the performance of moderate Islam in public and private spheres is debated in intellectual and public circles, the expression of piety differs from the abstract rules that determine the categorizations of Islam. Everyday Islam is filled with abstractions, contradictions, and ambiguities, and Akhtar's depiction of Mina's character is an example of such manifold visions of Muslim subjectivity: in describing her, Akhtar explores the limits of understanding Muslims as liberal or illiberal, pluralist or devout. Mina cannot be understood through any of these sharply drawn distinctions; she is a true Muslim in her own way.

Her Islam makes sense of her trials and tribulations in everyday life. Just like Ghaleb Chatha, Sunil, Najat, and the other characters in the novel, Mina is a pious woman. She practices institutional religion and upholds conservative values in her life. But the need to have a sense of self is necessary for her to uphold her Islamic modesty. Hence her Islam is a combination of her idiosyncratic sensibilities: a Sufi sense of self detachment, a feminist approach to Quranic revelations, practicing moral piety with oneself and others, and finding an identity in a distinctly conservative world. On the outside, she struggles to fit into traditional paradigms of Islamic modesty, but covertly, she navigates her way from "hypervisible" forms of institutional religion to less apparent forms of faith. Throughout this process, we see her imagination, creativity, empathy, openness, and adaptability help her cut through state-prescribed religious convictions. Her Islam determines her

place in the Milwaukee community and, most importantly, provides her with a sense of self in everyday life.

While scholars have either critiqued the categorization of Muslims or have shown the complexity of various religious practices, Mina's multiple approaches to Islam can be read as her constructs of resistance: the Islam of everyday life makes political categorizations obsolete. While political categorizations are constructed on a Muslim's beliefs and ideology, Muslim subjectivity talks about an everyday Islam that relies heavily on a Muslim's epistemological construct that interacts with a local and a global understanding of Islam. Mina finds the recognition of being a "good" Muslim through her traditional category, but she also finds a cathartic release of what a "good" Muslim means to her through her ethical self. Understanding the Muslim self requires acknowledging the inherent complexity of its architecture and its resistance to confinement within rigid political, social, or cultural categories.

Jindal Global Law School, India

Priyadarshini Gupta is an Associate Professor of English at the Jindal Global Law School at O. P. Jindal Global University, India. She works on Orientalism, Techno-Orientalism, and Neo-Orientalism in contemporary global literature and has published in national and international journals such as South Asian Review and Muse India. Her upcoming projects focus on Neo-Orientalism in the contemporary Indian novel.

Notes

1. Major US government institutions, political propaganda, and intellectual debates promoted a public understanding that Muslims are inherently violent in nature. Hence American nativism encouraged Muslim discrimination in the name of national security. Racism such as hijab-pulling, spitting, removal from planes, ethnic slurs, incarceration without a proper trial, creating an atmosphere of fear through illegal monitoring and coercive policies to find terrorist sleeper cells in Arab communities became commonplace in post-9/11 America. See Louise A. Cainkar's *Homeland Insecurity: The Arab American and Muslim American Experience After 9/11* (2009), Gregorio Betizza's "Constructing Civilizations: Embedding and Reproducing the 'Muslim World' in American Foreign Policy Practices and Institutions since 9/11" (2015), and Iqbal Akhtar's "Race and Religion in the Political Problematization of the American Muslim" (2011) for more details.

2. Ahmed Gamal scholarship analyzes John Updike's *Terrorist* (2006) and Don De Lillo's *Falling Man* (2007).

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