

*Ayad Akhtar, the American Nation, and Its Others after 9/11: Homeland Insecurity*

By Lopamudra Basu

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In her timely book, *Ayad Akhtar, the American Nation, and Its Others after 9/11: Homeland Insecurity*, Lopamudra Basu explores the writer Ayad Akhtar's literary production in the context of the post-9/11 era in U.S. American history. Not only is the book well-researched and essential to our contemporary understanding of rising nationalism and the othering of minorities, but this monograph is also well-written and easily accessible to both scholars of South Asian American literature and anyone interested in cultural productions on identity formation.

A Full Professor in the Department of English and Philosophy at the University of Wisconsin-Stout, Lopamudra Basu has widely published on various South Asian (American) authors, across genres, and on a variety of topics. Her expertise includes 9/11 literature and representation of minorities. In the case of her current publication on Ayad Akhtar, Basu has observed several theater productions of Akhtar's work at the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis as well as post-play discussions with the audience. She has also included an interview with the author himself as the last chapter of her book, serving as a personal resource on Akhtar's approach to writing.

Basu situates Akhtar's work in the post-9/11 geopolitical landscape. She interprets Akhtar's texts as an attempt to "humanize Muslim victims of 9/11" (2). Considering the representations of Akhtar's Muslim protagonists, Basu writes that they "are complex and flawed, and very often they fulfill negative stereotypes of misogyny, violence, anti-Americanism, among other characteristics" (2). While Ayad Akhtar has enjoyed mainstream success, especially after winning the 2013 Pulitzer Prize for Drama for his play *Disgraced*, which subsequently became "the most produced play in the 2015-2016 season" (1), the author has also faced criticism for what some have perceived as "pandering to white American Islamophobia" (2). Throughout her book, Basu defends Akhtar's anti-didactic stance in the realm of the theater: "The medium of theater allows for the presentation of complex Muslim American realities, not with the aim of dictating solutions but generating dialogues" (2). Employing theoretical approaches from trauma studies, transnational feminism, postcolonial theory, and performance studies, Basu argues that, "Akhtar wants to provoke thoughtful introspection in his audience to see connections between global capitalism and radical Islam" (2).

The study is divided into five major chapters. The first chapter, "*The War Within: Masculinity and the Making of Muslim Radicals*," analyzes the screenplay of Akhtar's earliest work, a film in which he

also plays the lead. Comparing this film to other examples that feature suicide bombers, Basu explores two central questions: how “the regime of the Homeland Security State” contributes to the making of terrorists and what role the discourse on masculinities plays in this context (33).

In chapter 2, titled, “The Radicalization of Religion in Ayad Akhtar’s *Disgraced* and the Play in the American Public Sphere,” Basu focuses on representations of race in the play. She places the protagonist Amir in a long line of exoticized and racialized Muslims to examine “the dialectical tension between Amir’s performative agency and the visual representational frame that he is cast in” (59). Basu reads the result of this tension as tragedy (59).

Turning the focus to gender, chapter 3, “Unaccommodated Woman: Muslim Women, Spirituality, and the Public Sphere in *American Dervish* and *The Who and the What*,” argues that, “[t]he vision of female agency that is presented in *American Dervish* does not conform to western notions of rebellion and independence...” (108). Basu shows thematic similarities in the play, *The Who and the What*, that “engages with the question of freedom of individual expression, especially when it conflicts with the taboos of Islam” (109).

Chapter 4, “Dangerous Liaisons: The Nexus of High Finance and Terrorism in Ayad Akhtar’s *The Invisible Hand* and *Junk*,” Basu continues to explore Akhtar’s representations of Muslim American identities in the larger context of American capitalism and its economic consequences. The author argues that “Akhtar deliberately blurs borders between Wall Street investors and terrorists, pointing to the common lust for power, disregard for ordinary human life, and self-absorption of both groups” (31).

Finally, chapter 5 presents a previously unpublished interview with Ayad Akhtar that Basu conducted in November 2016 in New York City. While this section cannot necessarily be as analytical as the previous four chapters, the interview does provide a useful insight into Akhtar’s work as a writer of South Asian literature as well as his literary influences.

While the book seems to promise more plurality in the reference to “Others” in its title, *Ayad Akhtar, the American Nation, and Its Others after 9/11: Homeland Insecurity*, Basu addresses the fact that her study cannot cover everything. She points out that she does not provide “an exhaustive introduction to contemporary South Asian American drama” (17). Nor does the author analyze Akhtar’s works as immediate representatives of “the 9/11 literary archive” (9). Instead, Basu situates Akhtar and his texts among contemporary writing and geopolitical circumstances. It is particularly in the introduction (1-32) that Basu’s careful contextualization of Akhtar’s work lays the groundwork for her detailed analyses in the chapters that follow. Supported by such theorists as Donald E. Pease, Judith Butler, Moustafa Bayoumi, and Karen Armstrong among others, the book proceeds to interrogate the “homeland insecurity” that the title addresses. Basu develops this underlying metaphor from Donald E. Pease’s concept of the “homeland security state” as “a state of

emergency or surveillance where the civil liberties of Muslims are sharply curtailed” (2). Her analyses of Akhtar’s works show how literature engages these restrictions and injustices.

A comprehensive examination of Pulitzer Prize winning author Ayad Akhtar’s works was long overdue. With her monograph on Akhtar’s literary productions in post-9/11 America, Basu more than adequately fills this gap. The scope of her book is fittingly narrowed to the author’s oeuvre among other texts relating to contemporary identity formation and the historical context of 9/11. Well-structured and analyzed in detail, Basu provides a rigorous exploration of Akhtar’s work. It is both educating and enjoyable to read this book.