

British-Pakistani Diaspora and the Crises of Identity: Depictions from Azma Dar's Play *Chaos*

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ABSTRACT

This paper studies Azma Dar's play *Chaos* (2005) that is written in the wake of 9/11 attacks; an era that witnessed visible increasing numbers of Islamophobic attitudes in Britain. The playwright is of Pakistani origins and has experienced diaspora with its problematic sense of self-identification and belonging to a certain geographical territory that is called homeland. The play highlights political, social and cultural issues confronting diasporic Muslim Pakistanis, particularly of the new generation born in Britain. This is a postcolonial study of the play (*Chaos*). The paper highlights the "ambivalence" discourse of political parties and media that labels Pakistanis with various forms of "otherness" such as "Pakis", "Asians" and most recently and radically "terrorists". Similar to the classic discourse of colonialism, the aims are achieved through the medium of stereotyping and generalization. It is necessary to mention that the last mentioned label (terrorists) marks a shift in the strategy of the construction of "otherness" compared to the political context of pre-9/11 attacks.

1. Introduction

In a world that societies of most regions and countries are becoming multiethnic, multicultural, multiracial and above all multi-religious, people are striving to maintain originality of self and group identity. In post-9/11 era, a shift has emerged in world politics towards Muslims in terms of identification. The rise of fundamental groups, specifically those fighting in the name of Islam, led the Western powers into a counter war called "the war on terror" in Afghanistan and Iraq. As a result, and along with racial and ethnical forms of otherness (that exist for a long time), the difference appears in religious beliefs and practices. Once again, the strategies of stereotype and generalisation play major role in assuming that all Muslims are terrorists. In what is called 'the war on terror' in UK, a social group of diverse ethnical backgrounds and races has been targeted due to their religious affiliations. In this concern, Arianne De Waal (2017) maintains, "In the post-9/11 and post-7/7 context in the UK, numerous scholars have argued that British Muslims have been discursively framed as the new suspect community". The term "new suspect community" confirms that the term "fixity" has been applied, and that there are always suspects that are represented as the enemies of the Western civilisation.

Perhaps, 9/11/2001 attacks of America are considered the most significant political event of the twenty first century so far. It is central to the construction of what Edward Said (1978) calls it "binary oppositions"; a strategy that is critical for the goals and the aims of the colonial discourse to be fulfilled. Those attacks have become the cornerstone to all anti-Muslim policy and attitude, not only in the United States of America, but globally. Once again, the political map of the world has changed, and its peoples and nations are divided between those who are with or against us. During the first day of the attacks, George W. Bush, the president at the time addressed the nation, and the terms like us and them were immediately emphasised when he stated "None of us will ever forget this day. Yet we go forward to defend freedom and all that is good and just in our world" (Bush, 2001). There is no place in between, no choice to stay neutral; you are either good by "nature²" or a natural born terrorist (precisely a Muslim). The increasing numbers of reported anti-Muslim incidents of violence and abuse in Britain, both verbal and physical, are frightening. A constructed hatred and Islamophobic wave of anger, precisely in the

² In his very first reaction to the attacks, George Bush the President of The USA at the time delivered a speech on the attacks where he declared war on terrorism and described the attackers as "Today our nation saw evil, the very worst of human nature" (Bush, 2001).

recent years, is getting more fashionable. Women are largely targeted and deemed as victims of this anti-Muslim hostility based on their costume or garment of *Hijab*, *niqab* or *burqa*. In 2018 Boris Johnson a columnist for *The Telegraph* at the time, and was elected in the next year to become the Prime Minister of Britain, compared Muslim women wearing *burqa* or *niqab* to “letter boxes” and “bank robbers”. Such kinds of remarks led to a “surge of anti-Muslim attacks by 375% - from 8 incidents the previous week to 38 in the following” (Tell MAMA, 2019). The image of Muslims has been transformed from that fairy figure of European fictional stories into ordinary neighbours, and finally into a violent and turbulent creature. Damian Howard (2016) confirms that “the consequent phenomenon of Islamophobia is real, has traumatic consequences for those on the receiving end of it who find themselves rejected and humiliated, and readily occludes other, more positive aspects of the modern Muslim experience of Europe”. After decades of racial and ethnical based abuse, it is now time for a more radical norm of exclusion which is religion. As a doorway to the construction of “otherness” towards British South Asian population in general, and Pakistanis specifically, the next section highlights the context that the work of playwrights of the mentioned ethnical backgrounds are situated into.

2. Literature Review

British South Asian Drama bring on stage stories of populations that were absent on the British stage except for stereotypical representations. Women of South Asian descent have played major role in establishing theatrical companies in Britain that were critical in nurturing new talents whether performers or writers. Tara Arts, established in 1977, was the first Asian theatre company. The variety of topics they tackle enriches British contemporary drama and adds a universal taste to it. In that regard, Neilesh Bose (2009) states that “The Theatre of the South Asian diaspora reflects a highly diverse set of socio-political and aesthetic concerns, such as the engagement with the classics of various forms as well as questions of the “homeland”. Sadly, the study of the work of British-Pakistani playwrights was restricted within the context of the peoples of Indian subcontinent in late twentieth century and early twenty first. Unfortunately, their works did not attract considerable attention on the academic level. In the early 1990s, many commentators started shifting focus onto Asian Theatre, and in the recent years, the works of British South Asian dramatists have been central to many studies.

The only academic work in which Dar’s play *Chaos* is being studied is in Abdulla Aqeel’s PhD thesis “*Representations of Muslim Women in Contemporary British Theatre*” (2016) at the University of Exeter. Aqeel uses Islamic feminism theory for the analyses of the play along with the work of other playwrights who are of the same ethnical backgrounds. The play has also received a respectful range of positive criticism from prominent British critics; however, a lot of criticism approaches the play from feminist perspectives, and rarely been central to any study. For instance, in an article “British Muslim Feminism on Stage”, Meenakshi Ponnuswami features the works of three women playwrights of Pakistani origins, including *Chaos*. She describes these performances as “subverting Islamophobic stereotypes and conservative efforts to define or delimit Islam, they provide intimate views of diverse, self-critical, and adaptable subcultures” (2018). In post-9/11 British drama, unlike other non-Muslim minorities from the Indian subcontinent, besides racial and ethnical designations, Pakistani Muslims become subject to religious discriminations and derogatory labeling; a theme highly reflected in the work of British-Pakistani dramatists.

3. Methodology

The study of Azma Dar’s play *Chaos* (2005) will be carried out through reading the work, and then identifying the related themes that serve the main objective of the paper. This paper studies Dar’s play *Chaos* from a postcolonial perspective with reference to some postcolonial theorists like Homi K. Bhabha and Edward Said. Bringing in direct quotations from *Chaos* and connecting them with postcolonial viewpoints will be central to analysing and interpreting the underlined themes. Due to the limitation of this paper, I couldn’t include all the works of Dar. Thus, I have chosen a play that addresses certain issues within a period of time that ranges from 2001 to 2005. It is the era that witnessed considerable socio-political changes in the British society in general and the Pakistani diaspora in Britain specifically. Around the end of the last century, Britain witnessed the flourishing of South Asian Drama, and Pakistanis were no exception. Similar to what intellectuals from once colonised countries like Chinua Achebe, Edward Said, Frantz Fanon, Homi K Bhabha and many others who studied colonial discourse, these performances attempt to represent their communities after ages of marginalisation and stereotypical representations.

4. Pakistanis between Britishness and Alienation

“So why have you stayed all this time?” (Dar, 2005)

This is the question Babar asks his father, Mr. Rizvi when he speaks of all the sacrifices given and hardship he has been through after he decided to stay in Britain forever. It is the question that every diaspora identity might be asked or he/she must ask him/herself. Yet, an adequate and precise answer to it appears not to be that simple. In postcolonial studies,

homeland is a complex term that exhibits difficulty for oneself to feel affinity to a certain geographical territory. Avtar Brah (1996) defines home as a:

“Mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. In this sense [the homeland] is a place of no return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of ‘origin’. On the other hand, home is also the lived experience of a locality. Its sounds and smells, its heat and dust, balmy summer evenings ... all this, as mediate by the historically specific everyday of social relations”.

Dramatically, the terms by which each nation defines its borderlines, entail the process of social exclusion of those who are positioned outside national boundaries. Social categorisations of groups within one nation and the borderlines it draws are crucial in defining an individual's situation within any social group. In that regard and inquest to bridge the gap that separates these two oppositional entities, many diaspora identities tend to “mimic” the West, as it is argued by Bhabha. That memetic behavior is considered as an aim to domesticate an alien creature that stands in opposite to what the West resembles. Sadly, these aims are “never fully met” from Bhabha's perspective.

In *Chaos*, Salim speaks to his brother (Babar) about the “valid points” their father can make during the electoral campaign. In contrast, Babar identifies the kind of people who vote for their father and what that voting is based on: “Please. Do you think the people voting bother to find out what they are? He's a brown face – that's all that matters to them – and his ‘supporters’ know it” (Dar, 2005). The “people voting” and the “brown face” of Mr. Rizvi, Babar speaks about tells the bitter truth that a Pakistani candidate is being voted for based on his skin colour, and by peoples with similar physical traits, without taking into consideration any other criteria or qualifications. Homi K. Bhabha (1994) describes such kind of sensation as the invisibility of colonial subjects in the eyes of the coloniser. He states that “[‘you’] are continually positioned in the space between a range of contradictory places that coexist. So that you find yourself at the point at which the Orientalist stereotype is evoked and erased *at the same time*”. The drama continues and takes conspicuous turn when at the beginning of Scene two, Mr. Rizvi rehearses his speech while addressing an imaginary audience. He shows desire to escape the cultural zone in order to gain political position and support. Mr. Rizvi tells his life story as he started back in Pakistan and unexpectedly he shows no compassion and love to the mother country, stating

My story has a very humble beginning. Born in the backstreets of Karachi, I knew from childhood that I wanted to leave the droning, fruitless toil of that place behind me. And so, at the age of twenty-one, I left. I came to the city of industry...and ball games...thirty years ago. I had nothing but the shirt on my back and a suitcase full of dreams (Dar, 2005).

At this point, Dar rejects assumptions supposing that migrants of the first generations are more nostalgic and more intimate to be identified with the country of origin than those born and raised in diaspora. Mr. Rizvi lives a moment of denial and is plagued with a sense of shame towards his own cultural identity that connects him with mother land. As the guests arrive to the party he is having, he asks Babar to “put some music on”. Babar replies unconsciously “You always listen to Ghulam Ali”. Mr. Rizvi's response is devastating as he says “Don't be silly. I think there's a Mozart CD in there somewhere” (Dar, 2005). There is secrecy in the relation between him and Pakistan, as if Pakistan is a secret lover listening to Mozart when at the presence of white folks, and Ghulam Ali when by oneself. Obviously, his contradictory sense of belonging “between roots and route” (McLeod, 2000), traps him between two entities that stand at odd to each other. What bounds Mr. Rizvi with Britain is of interest not of pertinence. By submitting to the dominant culture of the white-mainstream, the colonial subject must be re-born or regenerated. The cultural and traditional transformation coincides with neglecting own past in various walks of life and brings forth the devastating experience of the colonial subject.

In contrast to Mr. Rizvi, Babar upholds radical ideologies towards the country (Britain) he was born and raised in. When the British government decided to join the USA in the war against what is so called “terrorism”, Babar's reaction to that was devastating to his father. As Pakistani population in Britain, they most likely tend to identify themselves with Islam. Dar also tends to show the strength of the commitment of Muslims towards their religion when Babar decides to join the fight against his country of birth in favour of a country that is not the country of origin of his father which is Afghanistan. It is necessary to mention that at the absence of the physical homeland, many Muslims like Babar identify themselves with an entity that is similar to the Western globalisation. At this point, another entity comes to birth called the *Ummah*. When Mr. Rizvi asks Babar “what fight” is he joining, Babar replies “The one organised by your new friends at Westminster. The one that's turning our brothers and sisters into orphans and widows and corpses” (Dar, 2005). At that moment, Babar does not identify himself with any specific ethnicity or even race, the notion of brotherhood in Islam overcomes Babar's sense of belonging to Britain or any other political entity. He takes any Muslim as his brother and sister; and any Muslim country as his own home. The

idea of home appears more ambiguous when Babar speaks of the place he is ready to die for. Babar talks to Mr. Rizvi “Have you forgotten that God also says protect yourselves from those who attack you and your homes?” Then Mr. Rizvi replies “This is your home, Babar! Here!” Suddenly, and out of nowhere Salim asks “What does home mean?” (ibid).

Babar may represent a whole generation that is subject to various types of discriminations and cultural domination so they seek an alternative reality to homeland. The sense of being rejected and living on the margins of a nation based on racial, ethnical or religious stereotypes might be the main reasons leading to such kind of hatred and solitude. When he wants to convince the family to give him blessings for what he calls a “*jihadist mission*”, Babar says that “I’m not the only one” (ibid). In terms of representation, *Chaos* cannot be read only as a play staging issues of a certain group living in diaspora, but also as a protest against stereotypical assumptions addressing specific religious group, regardless of nationality, ethnicity and race. The quest of diaspora identities for acceptance, recognition within the context of the hosting country comes at the cost of dropping original identity and self-degradation. In his final attempt to make Babar drop the idea of joining the fight in Afghanistan, Mr. Rizvi tries to show Britain as a country that has offered them much, “Doesn’t this country mean anything to you? It’s given you everything. Now we are even accepted as a valuable part of the society”. However, Babar responds with a question that is hard answer, “And how much acceptance cost, Dad” (Dar, 2005)? The “cost” of “acceptance” creates a sense of wariness to Babar that threatens his existence. Unfortunately, any diaspora identity with intentions to be recognised or identified within the context of the mainstream society has to drop original identity, either of ethnic, racial or religious beliefs. As creature of difference, colonial subject constantly lives on the margins of the nation, and is repeatedly described as the “other” or the “invisible”. Mr. Rizvi and Babar draw our attention to one of the most frequent attached designations to the Muslims around the globe, specifically in the last two decades which is linking Islam and Muslims with acts of violence and terrorism. This last point will be discussed in the next section. Additionally, the section will study the existence of contrary viewpoints on critical issues amongst the Muslim diaspora represented by Mr. Rizvi on one hand, and Babar on the other.

5. Britain and The Failure of Negotiation: Depicting Muslims As Terrorist

This section studies the shifting identity of Pakistanis (specifically Muslims), within the political context of Britain from racial and ethnical degrading labels into radical terrorists. During the reign of Taliban over Afghanistan, Muslim women were described as victims of an oppressive patriarchal system that forced them to wearing *Hijab* or any similar Muslim costume. In 2001, a military intervention by the US and its allies was deemed necessary to topple down the theocratic regime in Afghanistan, which eventually led to removing Taliban from power. Ironically, and in contrast to previous allegations, the image of those women (wearing *hijab*) transformed from “victims” to “terrorists”. In that sense, and in protest against such kind of double-dealing, Shakira Hussein (2016) states that: “This modification in attitude towards burqa reflects a shift in representations of Muslim women from that of passive victims in their own societies and communities to active participants in Islamism and the ‘Islamisation’ of the West. Unruly Muslim women must, it seems, be controlled not only in order to liberate them from their own false consciousness, but also to contain the threat they pose to the Western societies”. According to Hussein, fifteen years after 9/11 attacks, the mission of rescuing Muslim women from being forced into wearing *hijab*, *burqa* or *niqab* in certain Muslim countries occupied a remarkable space within Western media and political speech. The mission has dramatically shifted into forcible ban of that costume of desire in certain countries in Europe, North America and The Pacific Ocean. On the other hand, men are judged based on wearing certain costumes, having a beard or how frequent one goes to the mosque.

Babar describes innocent and helpless families in Afghanistan as “They wait for death to drop out of the sky” (Dar, 2005), which is how they are getting killed during the bombard of the US Air Forces and Allies. The “counter terrorism” strategies of many Western governments and communities shoved many Muslims to show sympathy and loyalty towards radical groups instead of condemnation. A status came to serve the intentions of those Islamist groups that took significant advantage gaining both approval and support to their actions of violence. 9/11 did not only divide the world between supporters and protesters, it also divided the Muslim world between extremists (whose reaction was of violence), moderates (who sought response denying any connection between Islam and terrorism) and those who showed denial of their religion (those who left Islam thinking that it is not applicable in the modern world). Many Muslims are tired and hopeless of how the West represented by political authorities and supported by gigantic media implies an ambivalent discourse in which the whole *ummah* is defined as terrorists.

When Salim tries to convince Babar to quit the idea of joining the *Jihadists* fighting in Afghanistan, and that “there are other ways” to stop the fighting, Babar expresses his frustration and speaks the words of millions of Muslims around the globe regarding the failure of Western political authorities to listen to the “unheard voices”. Babar desperately cries by saying “What other ways Salim? We’ve tried going on marches and writing letters and signing petitions. We see murder every day

and all we do is [shake] our heads change the channel.” (ibid). There is a sense of disappointment and distrust in Babar’s comment that demonstrates the pointlessness of any kind of negotiation. As if negotiations have reached a dead end. On the very same day of London attacks, *Talking to Terrorists* (2005) a play by Robin Soans was performed on stage; a work of drama that shows the other side of the untold stories of those who perceive themselves as “victims” not “assailants”. Soans controversial play features insights from protesting people representing several nations from around the globe who claim to be “freedom fighters” which local governments call “terrorists”. All characters individually justify their deeds, and the way they got involved in acts of violence or better to say how they were pushed towards fundamentalism. Soans criticises the political attitude towards substantial issues and the failure of political talk, mainly because Western governments refuse neither to listen nor talk. Within the play, a former British secretary of state whose name, on his request is shortened to (S.S.1), speaks out on the official attitude declaring that “Tony³ seems to have learned nothing from history. If you want them to change their minds, you have to talk to them. They won’t do it very willingly because they don’t trust you, but yes, you have to talk to terrorists” (Soans, 2005).

Ironically, in the last two decades, Muslims are the only religious group to be linked with acts of terrorism in modern history. On September 27th 2019, Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan gave an impressive speech in UN General Assembly where he addressed several issues including radicalism, Kashmir conflict and nuclear threats. He did not only exculpate Islam from any acts of terrorism, he equally defended all other religions by declaring “Terrorism has nothing to do with any religion, no one did research that before 9-11” (2019). Imran Khan refers to the fact that the link between terrorism and religion did not exist before 9/11 attacks, and that link was fabricated to serve political intentions of certain powerful West. He further notes that Islam is to be the first religion connected to terrorism due to actions of violence by certain armed groups, “The majority of suicide bombers in the world were Tamil Tigers. They were Hindus. No one blamed Hinduism. And quite rightly, what does Hinduism got to do with what desperate people were doing in Sri Lanka” (ibid)? He uses the term “desperate” to refer to the people who believe that armed fight is the only way of negotiation. The Rizvis make an accurate image of modern Muslim family whose members uphold contrasting perspective on social, religious, cultural and political levels. They are divided between moderate (Mr. Rizvi), liberal (Salim) and fundamentals (Mrs. Rizvi and Babar). This makes a typical example of a community as classified by Imran Khan “In all human communities, there are radicals, there are liberals, and there are moderates. All human communities ... no religion preaches radicalism. The basis of all religions is compassion and justice, which differentiate us from the animal kingdom” (ibid).

As the conversation continues between Mr. Rizvi and Salim, he asks his son to double check if he has sent invitations to all political figures of the Labour Party, Mr. Rizvi expresses his concerns for the hardship Muslim communities experience, he says that “those bastards” referring to 9/11 attackers “have made life difficult for us” (Dar, 2005). The rivalry continues between father and son when Babar comes up with a simple, yet genuine question, wandering who to blame for that? Just like in Soans play *Talking to Terrorists*, each party of the conflict uphold different definition to terrorism and terrorists. Babar observes the situation from different perspective wandering “Who the FBI” (ibid)? Mr. Rizvi’s political position and view as a Labour Party candidate, define to which side he shows loyalty, Mr. Rizvi “No, no, the...perpetrators of that...atrocities. Given us a bad name” (ibid). Pakistani diaspora identities have fallen victims of racism ever since their arrival in Britain. Recently, the focus has shifted from racial/ethnic norms of differentiation such as Asian and Paki into Muslim terrorist orientations. In response to these terminological classifications, many writers, critics and artists have rejected such kinds of skin colour or religious beliefs-based identification. More devastatingly, many young British-Pakistanis join radical Islamist groups, and eventually are misled serving political and economic interests of those groups. At the same time, they fall victims of an unfair strategy that uphold colonial values and mentality. As the play comes to an end, Babar returns from claimed *jihadi* war, and Mr. and Mrs. Rizvi are pacified, all family members are unified despite disagreements and disputes. Dar passes over a message emphasising the importance of negotiation when views and interests cross. Before passing judgements over anyone and positioning him/her into spaces that construct “binary oppositions” (Said, 1978), it is very important to listen to each other. The play could be read as an attempt to eradicate the terms by which both Muslims and Western political authorities identify each other. In other words, Dar brings on stage the failure of political talks and negotiations.

6. Conclusion

To conclude, I would like to say that Dar’s play, *Chaos* stages several issues regarding Pakistani-Muslim diaspora living in Britain at a crucial time in the early twenty first century. However, the play presents two main themes. The first lies in the uncertain political status of a certain religious group that its members are subject to stereotypical misrepresentations. The Rizvi’s, represented by Mr. Rizvi, the family head and son Babar, uphold contradictory perspectives regarding self/group identity. As always within colonial/postcolonial space the notion of homeland occurs with obscurity. The sense of belonging

³ Tony Blair is the former British Prime Minister from 1997 to 2007. He supported The United States of America in wars against Afghanistan and Iraq.

to a certain geographical territory, described within the play is more about what bounds an individual with that place, and birthplace is not integral; taking Mr. Rizvi (born in Pakistan and feels belong to Britain), and Babar (born in Britain and feels belong to every territory ruled by the *ummah*) as examples. Babar's attitude towards Britain appears when he feels rejected, and his identity is under threat. Second, and inspired by Dar's own words "when people stop listening to each other" (Dar, 2005), confirms that the play is about negotiation between "self" represented by Britain and "other" represented by Pakistani Muslim diaspora. The failure of negotiation, Dar speaks of is not restricted to family relation; it also refers to its broader sense as political entities practice power and refuse every kinds of negotiations. From that position of power, colonial discourse appears to function sufficiently as non-white populations are subject to various forms of "otherness". Moreover, the shift of Muslims identity from racial and ethnical minority group into violent "terrorists", gives the impression that the growth of radicalism within Western mainstream communities is a hard fact.

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I.