| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Males are Toxic: A Masculine Critique of Ayad Akhtar's Play *The Who & The What*

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| ABSTRACT

Hegemonic and toxic traits of masculinity are complex concepts that have affected personal relationships and social hierarchies for centuries. The play *The Who & The What* by Ayad Akhtar presents these traits through the male character, Afzal, a Pakistani American citizen whose traditional culture and modern American lifestyle, lead him to adopt these forms of masculinity. Therefore, the present study basically aims to examine the impact of Afzal's masculinity in Akhtar's play *The Who & The What* on his daughters, Zarina and Mahwish, as well as on Zarina's husband, Eli. *The Who & The What* centers on Zarina, the female protagonist, who challenges her society by writing a novel titled *The Who & The What,* exploring the personal life of the prophet Muhammad (PBUH). As the play progresses, her father, Afzal, opposes her and anyone who crosses the limits set by their traditional Arab-Muslim culture. However, employing the notions of Hegemonic Masculinity by R. W. Connell and the Toxic Theory of Masculinity as proposed by Terry A. Kupers provides new lenses to analyze the text of the play. Thus, the present study reveals that Afzal's actions reflect certain hegemonic and toxic aspects such as authority, domination, control, superiority, and making decisions for others.

1. Introduction

Arab-American men, under the pressure of protecting their own identity after 9\11 attacks, often encounter various social factors that lead them to adopt other forms of masculinity as a means of asserting control and resisting marginalization. This shift is not only a reflection of their own cultural values but is also influenced by broader American cultural norms, including strength, assertiveness, and stoicism (Cainkar, 2009). Arab-immigrants embrace a different masculine identity, known as masculine hybridity, that combines tenets of traditional Arab masculinity, such as protection and family honor, with Western values of independence and individualism (Inhorn, 2012). Ayad Akhtar, a Pakistani-American writer, prefers to reflect these experiences in his literary works, as he insists on saying that in an interview, "But everything I write is drawn from personal experience, whether it's observed or lived" (Trussel, 2014). Ayad Akhtar gained recognition for his previous play, *Disgraced*, which tackled the topic of Muslim identity in America. Because of its witty and compelling comedy, he received the 2013 Pulitzer Prize for Drama and established Akhtar as a powerful voice in American theater. Born to Pakistani immigrants in New York City and raised in Wisconsin, Akhtar brings a unique perspective to his works by giving voice to a community rarely represented on stage (Raymond, 2014). Akhtar's literary works gained global attention after the September 11th attacks, as religious issues and Islamophobia became worldwide concerns. As a Pakistani American, Akhtar experiences a unique and unprecedented condition. Additionally, very few Muslims, including Akhtar, have dared to share their thoughts and experiences, and he is now one of the most significant Muslim writers in America (Asif, 2015).

In his play *The Who & The What* (2014), Akhtar indirectly portrays a form of masculinity in which Afzal, Zarina's father, embodies traits of both hegemonic and toxic masculinity, influenced by his traditional cultural background. *The Who & The What*, which takes place on February 19, 2014, at La Jolla Playhouse in La Jolla, California, is described as a " fiery-flavored stew" that tackles matters of faith and family, gender and culture (Isherwood, 2014). The play has received significant attention for its distinctive portrayal of Muslim-American identity and its complex treatment of the interactions between men and women. Akhtar's play revolves around the protagonist, Zarina, who questions the perspectives of Islam on women by exploring the life of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) (chaal, 2018). *The Who & The What* illustrates the clash between two generations, highlighting the cultural and social tensions that emerged in the aftermath of the 9\11 era. In introducing the play, Akhtar declares that, "Indeed, one of the perplexities of writing this play was the long process of coming to understand the fight at the heart of it, not just that of a daughter with her father, but that of my love and my battle with my heritage, my family, my tradition" (Akhtar, 2014, p. XII).

The present study aims to focus on how the male character, Afzal, in the play *The Who & The What*, reflects elements of both hegemonic and toxic masculinity, affecting both men and women. It explores how cultural traditions influence gender roles and expectations while also considering the role of Western culture in shaping masculine identities. To provide a deeper understanding of these dynamics, the present study is analyzed through the concepts of Hegemonic Masculinity by R. W. Connell and The Toxic Theory of Masculinity by Terry A. Kupers. However, through an analysis of dialogue, character development, and interactions between characters, we will gain insight into the complexities of male identity presented in *The Who and the What*.

2. Literature Review
Very few studies have been conducted on Ayad Akhtar's play *The Who & The What,* shedding light on certain themes, including Muslim identity, female subjugation, and diaspora studies. The notions of hegemonic masculinity and Toxic masculinity, as they are associated with male-female domination, provide a new framework to understand the controlling behavior of male characters in the play *The Who & The What*, particularly Afzal, over both women and men. As highlighted by Chaal (2018), the central issue in the play is the hybrid identity of Muslim immigrants living in America, particularly after the attacks of September 11th. The above study addresses the challenges faced by Arab-Americans in reconciling cultural and religious traditions with modern American social values, such as feminism and secularism. According to Muhi (2023), Akhtar's play deals with the complexities of diaspora in characters who struggle to coexist with the host homeland. All the characters in the play possess dual identities shaped by their cultural heritage and American culture. Thus, *The Who & The What* investigates how Muslim-American identity is continuously evolving, as they come from somewhere with history.

2.1 Theoretical Framework
"Masculinities are configurations of practice that are accomplished in social action and, therefore, can differ according to the gender relations in a particular social

(Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 836).

In *The Who & The What*, Ayad Akhtar indirectly presents the concepts of hegemonic and toxic masculinity through the male character, Afzal. Afzal's treatment of his daughters, Zarina and Mahwish, is toxic. He symbolizes a male-dominated society characterized by power and control. The present study aims to understand Afzal's behaviors as per Connell's Hegemonic Masculinity and Toxic Theory of Masculinity by Terry A. Kupers.

2.2 Hegemonic Masculinity
Traditionally, hegemony has been used to describe the dominance of one group over others (Glăveanu, 2009). The term "hegemony," which originates from Antonio Gramsci's examination of class dynamics, refers to the social mechanism by which a group maintains a dominant role in society (Gramsci, 1971). Holub (1992) discusses Gramsci's concept of hegemony, noting that it can be interpreted at two levels: first, it illustrates how institutions such as the police, the state, and others in power may force individuals into accepting their status. Second, it examines how organizations like families, schools, and religious institutions shape the values and beliefs of society.

Masculinity, on the other hand, alludes to the social dominance of men over women in a given society. Certain characteristics, such as power, control, aggression, authority, courage, and strength, formed masculinity through cultural and biological influences. It is not only associated with the relationship between men and women but also with relationships among men. Men show power over both men and women (Connell, 2005). The meaning of masculinity has been constantly debated, and its understanding varies according to the social, cultural, and historical context of its upholders. Connell signifies that masculinity may not exist in every culture, and each society views it from a different angle. Today, it is often understood as a reflection of one's behavior. In a broader meaning, an unmasculine man is perceived as behaving differently- preferring peace over violence,

conciliation over dominance (Connell, 2005). For some theorists, masculinity is defined as a set of beliefs, philosophies, thoughts, or experiences. These characteristics define the real identity of man and provide justification for extending his dominance over women and children with an excuse of protecting them (Khan & Khandaker, 2017). Generally, masculinity reflects the qualities and behaviors associated with being a man and having control or dominance over women. It is commonly viewed that violence is a prominent characteristic of masculinity. Violence is seen as a means of expressing manhood, and historically, men have been responsible for the greatest number of violent actions (Hearn, 1998).

Connell defines hegemonic masculinity as "the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" (Connell, 2005, p.77). Hegemonic masculinity refers to the behavior patterns that enable males to maintain their domination over women, rather than merely being a set of role expectations or an identity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Moreover, The process by which a group asserts and upholds dominance over other groups in social life is central to Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity (Hirose & Pih, 2010). However, the idea of hegemonic masculinity can be understood by exploring the roles of men in society. By emphasizing their behaviors and their contributions to the social dynamics, we can see that men hold dominant positions in society. Continuously, understanding only the notion of hegemonic masculinity does not fully explain the power of men over women and other men unless we recognize how culture and social norms work together to construct this dominance (Hearn & Morgan, 1990). The notion of hegemonic masculinity proposed by Connell (1995) has served to emphasize the diversity of male behaviors as well as the supremacy of particular masculine archetypes. Connell provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how these masculinities are socially constructed. In this sense, he exhibits four types of masculinity: hegemonic, complicit, marginalized, and subordinate masculinities (Connell, 2005).
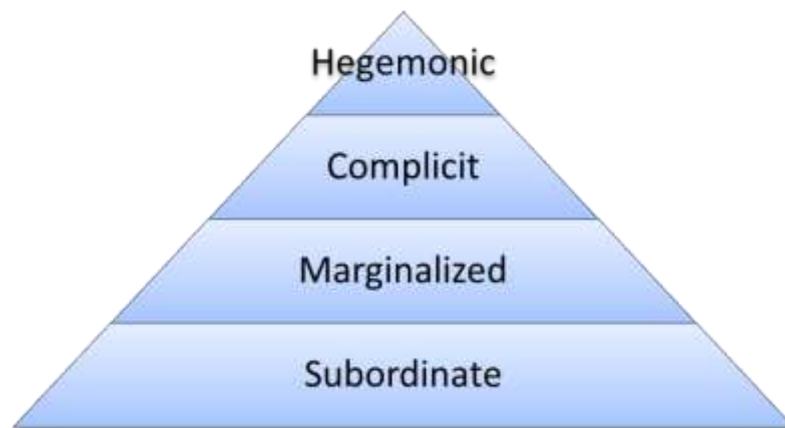

Figure 1. shows the structural hierarchy of different types of masculinity as presented by Connell.

All other forms of Masculinity are different from Hegemonic masculinity. Men who enjoy the advantages of patriarchy without actively exercising a dominant form of masculinity might be considered to have acquired complicit masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). The concept of complicit masculinity is associated with the vast majority of men. These men are not necessarily aligning with hegemony, but benefiting from it (Connell, 2005). Accordingly, investigating the importance of marginalized masculinity is crucial to understand its relationship to the hegemonic form (Connell 1995). The dynamic between masculinities may also include race relations as an essential aspect. Black masculinities serve as symbols for the formation of white gender in a white supremacist setting. For example, black athletes become figures of tough masculinity, and the notion of the black rapist is a popular dream that influences white sexual politics and is heavily utilized by right-wing parties in the US. On the other hand, the establishment of masculinities in black communities has been characterized by the institutionalized oppression and physical fear perpetuated by white hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005). Historically, Asian and Asian-American men have represented marginalized types of masculinity that contrast with those of white Americans. Essentially, Asian men have been perceived as inferior to the idealized version of white manhood. Simultaneously, with the development of the cultural milieu, a paradoxical image of Asian men as hypermasculine kung-fu masters has emerged. Images of Asian males in a Euro-American cultural milieu portray them as both strange and insignificant while also suggesting that they are inferior to whites (Hirose & Pih, 2010). "Hegemony relates to cultural dominance in the society as a whole" (Connell, 2005, p. 78). Within that comprehensive framework, certain gender dynamics of domination and subordination exist among men. Subordinated masculinity refers to masculinities that are positioned as inferior to those who possess hegemonic forms. Hegemonic masculinity is different from Subordinated masculinity, whereas the first justifies the domination of men in society and the subordination of

women and other men. Hegemonic masculinity gains its social dominance not only through the subjugation of women but through the subordination of other forms of masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

2.3 Toxic Theory of Masculinity

The concept of toxic masculinity is ambiguous across the world. The majority of society claims that men must possess a high level of masculinity. This is so because men are viewed as leaders and are expected to lead at all times and places (Nurkinanti, Hidayati, & Chitra, 2024). Hegemonic masculinity is an umbrella term that includes toxic masculinity as a subset. The term "toxic masculinity" refers to these culturally harmful traits of hegemonic masculinity, such as misogyny, wanton violence, aggression, and dominance (Kupers, 2001).

Misogyny can be manifested in several ways, encompassing male authority, gender discrimination, patriarchy, sexual abuse, dehumanizing women, and aggression against women (Ayuretno & Kinasih, 2024). Misogyny stems from the concept of sexism, which is characterized by placing women in a lower position than men, thus producing a patriarchal society(Nurkinanti, Hidayati, & Chitra, 2024). Wanton violence, on the other hand, can be defined as violence that is not controlled by any system and occurs for no legitimate reason. It is distinguished by intentional, unprovoked, and unjustifiable acts of violence. Kupers describes it as a form of toxic masculinity that is used to display strength, toughness, and superiority over others (Kupers, 2005).

Aggression refers to behaviors, such as frustration or feelings of disrespect, that can cause physical and psychological harm to oneself or others (Nurkinanti, Hidayati, & Chitra, 2024). Respect plays a very important role in this context. The desire to be respected is not toxic in any way. Every man experiences this feeling, and they all find different ways to fulfill it. The repeated frustration of a man's need for respect can be toxic, "All I ask for is to be shown a little respect!" (Kupers, 2005, p. 717). Finally, masculinity also embraces dominance as a form to express toxicity. Dominance, which is typically social power, shows control over others (Lukes, 2021). Dominance is one of the socially violent traits of males, including controlling behavior, making decisions for others, and the use of aggression to maintain power dynamics (Kupers, 2005).

3. Afzal's Masculinity as Hegemonic

In any patriarchal society, the question of masculinity is likely to be central. Do all men in every society have the same masculine features? In Ayad Akhtar's *The Who & The What,* the world of masculinity extends beyond presenting only natural masculine traits; as a Pakistani-American, Zarina's Father, Afzal, practices other types of masculinity, including hegemonic masculinity. The very term hegemonic masculinity has been articulated as the form or genre of masculinity that contradicts other less dominant forms of masculinity- complicit, subordinated, marginalized (Carrigan, 1985). From the very beginning of the play, the actions and attitudes of Zarina's father, Afzal, reflect this form of masculinity, as he throws control over his daughters and seeks to maintain authority within the family. Afzal's hegemonic masculinity is extremely influenced by traditional beliefs and views. As a devout Muslim, Afzal embraces conservative ideals that are rooted in his faith. He emphasizes the necessity of maintaining Pakistani customs, which are firmly embedded in his identity (Muhi, 2023). These customs are reflected in his actions and decisions, as he follows the traditions that have been passed down through centuries. Connell emphasizes that gender dynamics are maintained through social mores and cultural norms, commenting on how men obtain their power through societal structures (Connell, 2005).

Mahwish, the younger daughter, is the first victim of her father's domination. She puts in words how she is manipulated by his rigid authority, stating, "Z... if you don't start showing some interest, Dad is not gonna let me" (Akhtar, 2014, p.5). Mahwish's words reveal that her personal decisions regarding marriage, whom and when she can marry, are based on her father. Afzal refuses to let Mahwish marry unless her elder sister is married first, as he adheres to his own cultural values (Muhi, 2023). This shows the greater authority that Afzal exercises over both daughters, where they are influenced by the expectations that their father sets. The patriarchal role of Afzal goes beyond mere guidance and extends into active control over their personal choices, reinforcing the Pakistani tradition of marriage. In Pakistani culture, the younger sisters should not marry before the elder sisters, as it is often considered improper for the family (Shah, 2006).

Accordingly, Afzal's masculinity is characterized by his devotion to traditional cultural mores. His reaction to Zarina's novel *The Who & The What,* which questions the status of the prophet Mohammed (PBUH), reflects his fears of the social and political consequences that would arise because of Zarina's Work, "If anyone sees this, you will never be able to go to Pakistan. We will never be able to go to Pakistan. Never again" (Akhtar, 2014, p.66). He believes that women should conform to specific duties within the family and society. He also thinks that Zarina's challenge of writing such a novel, questioning the prophet Muhammad (PBUH), causes a threat to the established order. His tension is drawn from his belief that the gender norms imposed by society, which privilege men's authority, must remain unchallenged.

Afzal's authority is made clear through his rigid refusal of Zarina's novel, "It's unacceptable! Completely unacceptable! I won't stand for it!"(Akhtar, 2014, p.63). He sees that as an act of rebellion against not just his religious beliefs but also his authority. His commitment to old Pakistani traditions presents him as someone who rejects anything he perceives as a violation of his power. He views a woman writing such a novel to be a violation of the Arabic regulations established by men. In this case, he asks her to destroy the manuscript:

ZARINA: Don't ask me to do that.

AFZAL: I'll never ask anything of you again. You have to destroy it.

ELI: Absolutely not.

AFZAL: You again?

ELI: You made her act against her heart once before, but you won't do it

Again (Akhtar, 2014, p.69).

By showing his command as something she "has to" follow, he imposes his will upon her rather than simply recommending or advising. This act refers to his hegemonic masculinity, in which a male authority asserts the right to dictate and control the actions and decisions of women within the home. In the meanwhile, his words " I'll never ask anything of you again," show an implicit expectation of obedience from her. It suggests that Zarina owes him loyalty, most likely because of his role as her father. The expectation that daughters should say " yes" to their fathers is a reflection of the hegemonic masculinity that Afzal enjoys. The notion that men have the right to govern and dictate women's choices reinforces gender hierarchies and patriarchal systems (Connell, 1995). Thus, Eli's words also suggest that Zarina is forced to take action against her true feelings or wishes because of her father's authority. At the same time, Eli asserts himself as a protector of Zarina's life and makes a stand against Afzal's attempts to control her.

3.1 Afzal's Protectiveness
Hegemonic masculinity, to some extent, can play a positive part in society. It often alludes to the expectations that women should be protected by men; this protectiveness can be considered a necessary role that men have to fulfill to ensure women's safety (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). Afzal, in a sense, maintains himself as the protector rather than the oppressor of his family, "That's not what I care about! You are what I care about! You think they can't hurt you here? Hmm?", he claims (Akhtar, 2014, p.66). Afzal is extremely aware that the society cannot forgive Zarina for her actions, even if she is shaping the right image of the prophet Muhammad (PBUH). He considers his power as benevolent, with the goal of protecting his daughter and their family from what he thinks to be disastrous repercussions, "In Pakistan? She would be killed for this. Killed. If anybody gets their hands on this, God forbid..." he said (Akhtar, 2014, p.64). This protectiveness can be a form of hegemonic masculinity where men believe they know what is best for women, regardless limiting their freedom or standing against their wishes (Johnson, 2014). "I have made so many sacrifices for this family. I have sacrificed so much for the two of you. For you to be happy" (Akhtar, 2014, p. 69); these words justify Afzal's authority and control over his daughters. He perceives himself as the one sacrificing for the family to maintain peace in their lives. His dominance is framed as an expression of responsibility and care. His role as the family provider, in his view, is a key feature of his masculinity.

4. Afzal's Masculinity is Toxic
The Who & The What demonstrates that both men and women are trapped in the zone of toxic masculinity. Afzal's unilateral mind to get a husband for Zarina assures his belief in male-authority and produces a hallmark of not only hegemonic masculinity but a form of toxic masculinity that is dominance. In general, the term "dominance" describes the state in which one individual or group has authority over another, as well as the ability to issue commands or make decisions for others. It can also mean having the power to dominate, influence, or control, particularly in social relationships (Nurkinanti, Hidayati, & Chitra, 2024). Afzal firmly thinks that it is his responsibility to guide and make decisions for Zarina, particularly regarding marriage. This is evident when he creates an online dating profile for Zarina without her consent:

AFZAL: Zarina, behti. Listen to me. I met seven other young men—

ZARINA: So it was seven?

AFZAL:—all of them good-looking chaps, well employed, perfect son-inlaws...

ZARINA: Unbelievable.

AFZAL: I didn't come to you—

ZARINA: You opened an account in my name.

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

ZARINA (Continuing): You posted pictures. You wrote messages pretending

to be me (Akhtar, 2014, p.20).

The dominance of Afzal leads him to believe that his orders are obeyed, as one that requires submission from women in his family in all matters. He expects obedience from his daughters, regardless of whether he is wrong or right. Afzal's masculinity is not natural but toxic, which is evident when he, without considering Zarina's emotions toward Eli, decides that Eli is a suitable husband for his daughter, "I like you already. Dignified. Restrained. Intelligent" (Akhtar, 2014, p.15). Afzal, through his toxic masculinity, sees himself as the dictator of his daughter's life. He prefers Eli not for the passionate compatibility with his daughter but for how he fits Afzal's own preferences. The traits that Afzal focuses on reflect how toxic masculinity sometimes emphasizes authority and suppression of emotions, extending control not only over his daughters but also over anyone who joins his family, like Eli.

Afzal shuts down any opportunity for Zarina to express her freedom as an individual. When Zarina stands against her father's wishes by refusing to stop writing her novel, he refuses to even hear her name mentioned in the family, "That girl. I don't ever want to hear her name in this house again"(Akhtar, 2014, p.71) . He does not express his feelings directly but instead shows anger to assure his control. Toxic masculinity often restricts men from expressing emotions like sadness, hurt, and disappointment in a healthy way, instead maintaining anger or silence. The expression of weak or unmanly emotions can sometimes lead to anger, dominance, and control (kupers, 2005). Afzal attempts to build a household under his control. He has a desire to dominate the emotional landscape of the home, which is a symbol of toxic masculinity. Afzal punishes not only Zarina, by declaring that her name should not be mentioned in the home, but anyone who stands against his authority.

4.1 The Impact of Afzal's Masculinity on Eli
In *The Who and The What*, Afzal's toxic masculinity affects not only women but also men, particularly Eli, who is Muslim-American. Toxic masculinity creates pressures on men to conform to traditional masculine roles. Afzal's interactions with Eli in the play are a reflection of how these toxic traits are imposed on him, even though Eli's Cultural Background is different. Afzal's attempts to assert dominance over Eli is evident when he orders him to stop encouraging Zarina, "I told you to shut your bloody mouth!" (Akhtar, 2014, p.69). He treats him as someone who must conform to his expectations of what a man should be. Afzal's attitudes support the idea that men must constantly live up to standards set by other men in positions of authority. In this case, Afzal expects Eli to obey his orders, wishes, and decisions despite his different beliefs and attitudes. Moreover, Afzal directly describes Eli as powerless and insignificant in comparison to him: " You nonentity" (Akhtar, 2014, p.70). In a sense, Afzal seeks to manipulate Eli's masculinity by dismissing Eli's value as a man, reinforcing a hierarchy where he is at the top.

Afzal casts doubt on Eli's religion, accusing him of being non-Muslim, "Us? You're no Muslim" (Akhtar, 2014, p.70). In toxic masculinity, men often devalue or dismiss other men based on their objection to meet certain cultural or religious standards (Kupers, 2005). In Afzal's perspective, Eli, despite his conversion to Islam, does not meet those standards. Afzal believes that he, as the patriarch, has the power to decide who belongs and who does not. His questioning of Eli's faith is a direct challenge to Eli's identity and beliefs. Thus, Afzal uses religion as a powerful tool of control to assert his dominance over Eli. Afzal criticizes Eli's masculinity, "You know about this, and you carry it around in your bag? What kind of man are you? What kind of Muslim? You know about it, and you do nothing to stop her?" (Akhtar, 2014, p. 64). Eli, in Afzal's mind, lacks true masculinity, despite his masculine features. Eli is not a man in Afzal's eyes because he does not take action against Zarina's novel. According to Afzal, Eli must also do something that aligns with the belief that men must always be in control when resolving conflicts. His weakness does not define a real man, who must be dominant and assertive.

5. Conclusion
The present study sheds light on the formation of Afzal's masculine identity in Ayad Akhtar's play *The Who & The What* (2014), as shaped by his efforts to maintain both Arab and American cultures. The results suggest that Afzal experiences other forms of masculinity; hegemonic and toxic, since his daughters, Zarina and Mahwish, and Zarina's husband, Eli, are kept under his dominant actions. In fact, Zarina and Mahwish are influenced by their father's traditions of whom and when they can marry, and their actions should meet Afzal's expectations, such as Zarina's novel, which Afzal rejects. Above all, Afzal's masculinity is not always hegemonic or toxic; it is also protective, as he often seeks to put his family under his care. Ultimately, studying the formation of masculinity in terms of place and time offers valuable insights into the complex intersection of identity, gender, and power within immigrants.

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