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The Politics of Polyvocality in Ayad Akhtar’s *American Dervish*

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Abstract

This essay examines the politics of polyvocality in Ayad Akhtar’s *American Dervish*, a novel that shares with many others the aim to showcase the diversity of voices within Islam. While polyvocality is often celebrated as a challenge to representations of Islam as a monolith, *American Dervish* illustrates that it is neither a neutral concept nor an end unto itself. Written in the bildungsroman form or the story of formation of a Muslim protagonist into a national citizen, the novel orchestrates polyvocality toward specific ideological ends. The bildungsroman’s insistence on reconciling Islam with national belonging necessitates a univocal resolution to polyvocality, which requires the novel to draw distinctions between the Islamic approaches, legitimize hierarchies between them, and privilege select voices that reinforce national agendas. *American Dervish*, specifically, draws on Sufism’s embattled and marginalized position within Islam to project it as amenable to national inclusion, and dismisses and discounts other Islamic voices, sanctioning hatred against them.

Keywords: polyvocal, bildungsroman, pluralism, Sufism, distinction

Introduction

In response to the cultural stereotypes of Muslims as a monolithic community of fundamentalists and suspect terrorists, Muslim authors and creative artists have highlighted the diversity of this faith community. They have countered the mainstream culture's homogeneous abstraction called the "Muslim World" by projecting a polyvocal community that speaks with multiple voices. The novel has indeed emerged as the preeminent form that showcases the plurality within the Muslim community. Mikhail Bakhtin (262) defines the genre of the novel as "a diversity of social speech types . . . and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized." That is, the genre's capacity to establish polyvocality or elaborate the relationships between "the heteroglot, multi-voiced, multi-styled, and often multi-linguaged elements" (265) is the quintessential "prerequisite for authentic novelistic prose" (264). Polyvocality is, therefore, never simply a thematic focus in the novel but is integrated into its very form and has implications beyond its textual universe. The struggles and lives of multiple communities in the Muslim diaspora have found their voices in this genre. For example, Hanif Kureishi's *The Black Album*, set in Britain, depicts a range of clashing and overlapping voices in the Muslim community: Chad and Riaz are fundamentalists who also protect impoverished Muslims; Chili is the Hollywood-loving Thatcherite; and the protagonist is a young college student Shahid, who thinks of his love for American pop icon Prince as an alternative form of religion. Mohja Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* presents a diverse cast of characters with varying approaches to Islam – moderates, literalists, hypocrites, in a multiracial, multinational community that includes African Americans, Syrians, and South Asians.

This essay focuses on a more recent polyvocal Muslim novel, the Pulitzer Prize-winning Pakistani American playwright Ayad Akhtar's *American Dervish*. Written by a male author and featuring a male protagonist ostensibly seeking to assimilate in America, *American Dervish* lends itself easily, and problematically, to popular proclamations of being the "Great American Muslim novel" (Boyagoda: 54) as compared to, say, the women-centric work of Mohja Kahf. Even though the novel's setting is narrowly focused on Milwaukee's Muslim community of the 1980s, its polyvocality, based on a broad cast of characters – an "unruly mass" with "various hues of brown" (Akhtar: 301) lends it the halo of an epic, a grand and new kind of American text that interweaves Islam with the fabric of the nation. Because of the contradictions they engender, proclamations of the novel's greatness and polyvocality deserve further analysis in the current historical moment that views Islam and America as vehemently opposed. *American Dervish* is also important because it is, like the other Muslim polyvocal novels, written in the bildungsroman form or "the narrative of development of an individual person to maturity and meaningful membership in collective life" (Cheah: 237) of the nation-state. The bildungsroman does not simply reflect or dramatize polyvocality. Instead, the politics of polyvocality extend beyond the novel's pages because this form plays an active role in the formation of the national community. Since the bildungsroman specifically invites the readers' "specular identification with the protagonists" (Cheah: 244) and the novel, more generally, is an "analogue of the idea of the nation" (Anderson: 26), the genre establishes the choices that the nation demands of Muslims in order to integrate them into American citizenship. The form disciplines and regulates the protagonist according to the nation's demands and recruits the reading public into its political agendas, making a

novel such as *American Dervish* a vital and urgent text to study (on the regulative function, see Lloyd; Culler).

Akhtar's novel traces the life of the young Pakistani American Hayat Shah from a youthful eleven-year-old to his college years, a journey of discovering himself "not only as a man, but as an American" (345). His family, much like the rest of the characters, is part of a South Asian community of professional elites. Highly educated, wealthy, and upwardly mobile, this immigrant religious community, historically formed in response to the state's need for professional labor, exemplifies the Asian American racial formation of "model minority."¹ Hayat is surrounded by stock characters, each representing a different strain of Islam, and together, they make competing claims on his Islamic faith. According to Akhtar (Reader's Guide), these multiple voices fall under three broad categories: the "rationalist-humanist" rejection of faith, the "literalist-orthodox" acceptance of it, and Sufism's "personal mystical exploration of faith as a vehicle to a deeper sense of the present." Hayat's father, Naveed, is a secular neurologist who thinks religion is for fools (320). For his mother, Muneer, a believer in Jewish exceptionalism, the question of religion is less connected to daily rituals or religious practice and more about adultery and treating women with respect. In the face of Naveed's string of affairs with white women, she thinks that Muslim men fail where Jewish men are steadfast and respectable: "They understand how to respect women . . . they understand how to give a woman attention" (117). Ghaleb Chatha, the pharmacist, is a Quran literalist. He is immensely wealthy and well-integrated into the American social fabric, but he wishes destruction on American non-believers. Sonny Buledi, the psychiatrist, proclaims himself an atheist after he is ex-communicated by the Muslim community for marrying an Austrian woman. Adnan Souhef, a chemist from Jordan, has relatively limited knowledge of religion but is a hate-mongering anti-Semite imam at the local mosque. Hayat has a teenage crush on Mina, his mother's friend who arrives in Milwaukee after escaping an abusive relationship in Pakistan and steers him toward Sufism or Islamic mysticism. The bulk of the novel comprises Hayat's struggles in sifting through these various voices of American Islam in a way that allows him to "merrily play at becoming the sort of American boy – embracing a bright future unhampered by his Muslim apprenticeship" (333). The novel compels us to question: What imaginations and politics emerge when we reckon with American Islam's intense "internal differentiation" (Boyagoda: 55)?

The question of diversity within Islam has not been explored with any depth or consistency in scholarly work. Scholars and activists such as Tariq Ramadan, Rosemary Hicks, and Eboo Patel have focused on the philosophy and role of diversity between religions, usually in the context of religious tolerance and interfaith dialogues, but have largely ignored the vexed question of intra-faith pluralism. Even when discussions take up

¹ Historically, the term "model minority" emerged in 1965 and applied to the professional immigrants such as those in Hayat's community who had arrived in America in response to the state demand for highly educated labor. While both South Asians and Asian Americans are quite diverse in terms of education and income levels, the term "model minority" continues to be used to stereotype these communities because it serves the ideological purposes of denying them resources and silencing them while also putting them in conflict with other minorities (for more on the history and politics of model minority in South Asian Americans, see Prashad; for a broader Asian American perspective, see Fong; for how the state uses model minority racial formation to manage diversity, see Osajima).

the issue of internal plurality within Islam, they often assume that the showcasing of such diversity is an end in itself, a value and ideal that counters the mainstream culture's reductive assumptions about all Muslims as cut out of the same cloth of jihadist fundamentalism. For example, Boyagoda suggests that the "multiple iterations of Islamic faith" in Akhtar's novel appear "stark, even pointed," in the face of "outsiders' usually simplistic, reliably critical assumptions," the most prominent of which is that "Islam itself usually figures as an inert, exotic monolith" (54). In contrast to these approaches, Kambiz Ghanea Bassiri suggests that "the diversity of Islamic beliefs and practices has been a central problem of Islamic studies" (2013: 209). American Islam straddles the boundaries between blackness and whiteness – and in the eyes of the dominant culture, between civilization and primitivity – such that the Muslim Americans "speak out of a poly-religious, polyethnic world in a polysemous tongue, one which we have yet to comprehend" (Ghanea Bassiri 2010: 381).

This essay then begins the process of comprehending the problem of polyvocality, especially its politics in cultural texts. Drawing on Akhtar's *American Dervish*, I argue that pluralism and polyvocality are not simply neutral concepts that showcase the peaceful confluence of difference in the Muslim American community. Instead, literary representations of polyvocality orchestrate pluralism toward the specific ideological ends of privileging those selected religious voices and class positions that enable reconciliation of Islamic difference with the nation-state, and resurrecting the "good Muslim/bad Muslim" distinction such that it legitimizes Islamophobia by normalizing hatred for certain versions of Islam. Specifically, the bildungsroman's insistence on reconciling Islam with "an idealized 'national' form of subjectivity" (Lowe: 98) requires polyvocality's pluralism to be turned into distinction, in Pierre Bourdieu's sense of the term to mean a hierarchical ordering of social differences. Bourdieu's assertion that "social subjects classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make" (6) rings true for Hayat. To distinguish himself as an American, Hayat draws distinctions between approaches to Islam and orders and legitimizes hierarchies between them. He privileges Sufism as the sole voice amenable to national assimilation and dismisses or displaces other approaches.

American Dervish, therefore, offers a complex understanding of polyvocal Islam. First, it demonstrates how polyvocality actively catalyzes power relations within the Muslim community and is not simply the product of pre-existing hierarchies. Second, polyvocality within Islam signals neither egalitarianism nor democracy but produces its own privileges, hierarchies, injustices, erasures, and even failures.² It is indeed ironic that while Muslim novels, including *American Dervish*, showcase polyvocality to challenge commonly held stereotypes about Muslims, they do not seriously engage with all the voices. The nation's demand for a univocal resolution to the bildungsromane mandates that they curtail or contain this very polyvocality.³ That is, the depiction of pluralism within Islam, while clearly a challenge to "monolithic essentialism" is no guarantee against "silencing the multivocality of the Muslim articulations" (Malik: 1).

² For a discussion from the feminist vantage point of Hannah Arendt's argument that pluralism is the "starting point for politics" because of the hierarchies and privileges it creates, see Mann and Keller.

³ Jonathan Culler (24 n.3) similarly argues that a novel's national parameters mandate a "streamlining" of "social polyphony" into a "national language."

The Muslim Bildungsroman: A Univocal Resolution to Polyvocal Conflict

The privileges and erasures of polyvocality in *American Dervish* emerge from a unique dialectic between the individual and the community. Governed by a triangular relationship between the individual, the Muslim community, and the American nation, the novel challenges the Western literary construction of bildungsroman as a genre of bourgeois individualism. This relationship is a telling variant of the trinity of “God, individual, and community” that Ghanea Bassiri identifies as the core of “understanding of Islamic praxis in the United States” (2013: 213), for it replaces, and thereby equates, the vertex of the omnipresent all-knowing “God” with America. In the following passage that details Hayat’s view of Muslim diversity on display at Mina’s wedding with Sunil, the aforementioned triangulation reveals the uneasy intersections of consumerist capitalism, histories of colonialism, and American racial hierarchies:

The hall was filled with folks like us, and so was the lobby: Our various hues of brown, our baggy clothes, our skullcaps and beards, our shawls and head scarves on full display. If the help behind the desks and at the doors hadn’t been white, one could have imagined being in Cairo or Delhi or Baghdad: some architectural remnant of colonial times repossessed by the natives for their own inscrutable purposes. The young man in tuxedo was looking on unhappily. “Keep! It! Moving! People!” he shouted as if addressing a crowd he wasn’t sure understood what he was saying. “To! The! Back!” he yelled again, exasperated. But the crowd paid him no mind. It was a growing, unruly mass, jabbering and moving about aimlessly (Akhtar: 301).

Hayat’s consciousness is not simply his individual terrain but has the capacity to reflect a “panoramic view of society” (Cheah: 244) with its various boundaries and divisions of race and class.⁴ Beneath the polyvocality of “our various hues of brown,” Hayat discerns common histories of colonialism that evoke Muslim diasporic sites as varied as Cairo, Delhi, and Baghdad. He sees their markers of wealth and consumer capitalism, scarves and clothes, as efforts to repossess the dignity denied them by racial subjugation. The crowd has a complex relationship with the “white help,” who in spite of a lower class standing are racially dominant and therefore retain some authority to contain the Muslim crowd. “To! The! Back!” are simple instructions that can sound ominous to a group often asked to “stay in the back” or to “go back home.” Akhtar devotes the rest of the novel to untangling this inscrutable, interpretive knot of hierarchies that prompts him to refer to the multivalent Muslim community as an “unruly mass,” sorting out approaches that can be more incorporable into the nation.

⁴ Cheah writes that the relationship between the individual protagonist and the community portrayed in ethnic bildungsromane challenges the Western canon’s emphases on inward-looking bourgeois individualism: “[Postcolonial ethnic bildungsromane] undo the distinction between bildungsroman’s individualistic psychologism and the social novel’s realism and panoramic view of society precisely because their protagonists’ Bildung must involve the interiorization of viewpoints from different social classes and religious groups. These protagonists must undertake a cognitive mapping of the boundaries, strata, and contents of the entire social world to qualify as model protonational subjects . . .” (244).

Hayat begins to untangle the “unruly mass” that he externally identifies with and parses its boundaries and fault lines by interiorizing in his psychology the various Muslim voices of this mass. The internalization of plural viewpoints by a Muslim teenager required to mature into American manhood reduces polyvocal Islam to a conflict in need of a resolution into a single, clear voice that can speak the language of the nation, and religion into a state of apprenticeship from which one must graduate into national belonging. For example, toward the close of the novel, Hayat says, “My soul was outgrowing the child-sized raiment with which my Islamic childhood had outfitted me” (Akhtar: 332), words that signify that maturity means telescoping out from the narrow confines of Islam into the wide-eyed American future. In another instance, he says, “I could merrily play at becoming the sort of American boy – embracing a bright future, unhampered by his Muslim apprenticeship in the necessity of pain – that my childhood would not have promised” (333). The phrase “Muslim apprenticeship” indicates that the novel views religion as a period of training, reserved for novices, and not as a state of achievement or fruition. Hayat’s internalization of polyvocal Islam then becomes merely a dalliance at best, a painful encumbrance at worst, that needs to be shed to thrive as “American dervish.”

The novel aligns the hate-mongering, exclusionary version of Islam with a teenager’s point of view, rendering the literalist orthodox approach as nothing more than a childish proposition, something only believed by immature, gullible people and not by mature adults. Hayat’s internalization of this exclusionary strain within the religion is an extension of his teenage crush and possessiveness of Mina, who is in love with Nathan Wolfsohn, a Jewish neurologist and Naveed’s partner in medical practice. When Nathan goes to the mosque to explore the possibility of converting to Islam in order to marry Mina, Imam Souhef delivers an anti-Semitic sermon intended to rattle the possible convert. While the adults Naveed and Nathan are resistant to Imam Souhef’s hate-mongering, Hayat wholeheartedly believes the sermon. He believes that this hatred should motivate Nathan to continue with his plans to convert in order to disprove the hateful rhetoric in the first place. Otherwise, he says “The Quran is right . . . [The Jews] will never change” (Akhtar: 210). When Mina challenges Hayat’s literal reading of the Quran, the source of his venomous comments about Allah’s hatred of Nathan by saying, “It’s not what is written in the Quran,” Hayat responds, “yes it is Auntie – it says it in –,” to which Mina responds that a literal reading is childish and that “the Quran says many things. And some you will not understand until you’re older” (236). That the darkest deeds and villainy of ending Mina’s and Nathan’s relationship are attempted by the very young Hayat, who only partially understands the consequences of his own actions, makes the reader dismiss his interiorization and acting out of the literalist approach as mere childish behavior, not worth engaging with enough to define or understand its hazily-defined contours. But most importantly, this approach to delegitimize and dismiss the literalist orthodox voice also simplistically, and contradictorily, provides “legitimate” reasons or “factual roots of misconduct by Muslims” (Asif), thereby sanctioning hatred against this approach. That is, the project of distinction in *American Dervish* denies the literalist orthodox approach any complexity or humanity, and sustains Islamophobia by portraying its followers as deserving of hatred.

Sufism and Distinction

While such contradictions as those that plague the literalist orthodox approach might seem out of place in a genre that privileges the “telos of development,” Lowe argues that contradictions, rather than reconciliations, define the ethnic bildungsroman and deserve our close attention for therein lie “the most interesting conflicts and indeterminacies in the text” (45). The contradictions become even more pronounced in the novel’s representation of Sufism. Whereas the central tenet of Sufism is the erasure of distinction, including religious distinction, the novel draws on this Islamic belief and practice to create distinction between not only various Islamic voices but also class and gender divisions. The novel’s central organizing trope of “dervish” underscores distinction as a complex concept and praxis. Mina, the embodiment of Sufism in the text, tells Hayat a story about a dervish or “someone who gives up everything for Allah” (Akhtar: 101). When the dervish cannot locate the intangible that separates him from God’s love, he loses hope and feels exhausted. Two passers-by humiliate the hungry dervish by throwing orange peels at him, but instead of feeling angry, he arrives at an epiphany: “What the dervish found was true humility . . . he realized he was the same as that ground, the same as those peels, as those men, as everything else . . . He thought he was different. But now he saw he was not different. He and Allah, and everything Allah created, it was all One” (103-4). The dervish achieves salvation and enlightenment by the erasure of distinction, through self-effacement rather than pride in being Allah’s “chosen one.”

This story of the dervish reminds Hayat of his own distinguished class status – of being the “chosen one” – and of the wide chasm between his model minority elite standing and working class America. When Mina narrates the story, he mishears the word “dervish” as “gurvish,” which fills his mind with the image of Mr. Gurvitz, the school janitor “trailing a trash can on wheels” (Akhtar: 101). As Mina relates the story of the dervish at the side of the road, Hayat sees Mr. Gurvitz in his mind’s eye: “And I saw him now, in tattered clothes, defeated sitting beside an empty road” (103). This episode mimics the irony of Sufism’s history in that Sufism found its audience in the West among “the artistic and wealthy elites” (Webb: 193) even though this movement was “motivated by discontent with the political and social situation around the ruling class and their legitimators” (Malik: 5). In spite of Sufism’s roots in challenging the wealthy establishment, the novel portrays Sufism to be an appropriate vehicle (although hardly an inevitable one) for the wealthy Hayat to grasp the chasm that separates him from Mr. Gurvitz – the American working class “everyman” – but does not question or challenge this class hierarchy. The logic of Mina’s dervish story should have led him to realize that he is “no better than” Mr. Gurvitz on account of his wealth and “no worse than” him on account of race and religion. But the novel, written from the point of view of the immature Hayat feigns ignorance proclaiming that he “didn’t understand what [Mina] was saying” (104) in the dervish’s story. Mina’s Sufi narrative makes him yearn for a connection with the non-Muslim working-class American, bridging the gap of race and religion that place him at odds with America, but leaves unquestioned his status as wealthy model minority and the promise of America as inclusionary and democratic.

The idea of distinction then becomes a crucial pivot between religion and nation. Both Hayat’s reconciliation with the nation and acceptance as a legitimate religious subject rely on

polyvocality as the means to establish distinction, or the idea that some are the chosen ones, whether by nation or by God, at the expense of others.⁵ Contradictory to Sufism's counter-cultural history and its "anti-authoritarian" (Malik: 5) stance toward Muslim institutions, which made it popular within America's counter-cultural movements (Webb: 194), the novel deploys Sufism to appeal to the nation as the final arbiter of Muslim inclusion. It is significant that the moment that provides a univocal Sufi resolution, or that distinguishes and chooses Sufism over the other voices, also erases the distinction between Hayat and fellow Americans. When Hayat goes to the library to return his English translation of the Quran to mark the end of his apprenticeship in polyvocal Islam and his dalliance with the literalist orthodox approach, he encounters Mr. Gurvitz, "the bald old janitor...pushing his trash can along on its wheels" (325). Mr. Gurvitz, who entered Hayat's consciousness through Mina's dervish story, recognizes him for the first time and says, "Thing is, I see you around, and I have this feeling about you. Like you're a good kid" (325).

The simultaneity of Hayat's giving up of the Quran and Mr. Gurvitz's approval and recognition of Hayat – the moment that solidifies Hayat's trajectory toward belonging as an American – has two significant implications. First, this cross-class, cross-religion solidarity between Mr. Gurvitz and Hayat, based on their mutual recognition as fellow-Americans no better or worse than each other, is rather superficial and politically vacuous for it does not dismantle either the class hierarchies that separate the two or the authority of the nation-state. The surface nature of this solidarity ultimately reflects the tenuousness and superficiality of Hayat's American belonging, symbolized in the novel by other shallow gestures such as eating a pork sausage forbidden by his Islamic faith. The pork sausage is, troublingly, Hayat's most solid gateway to American freedom, for after eating it, he proclaims: "I felt alive as I moved. Free along my limbs. Even giddy . . . My shoulders looked different. Not huddled, but open. Unburdened . . . I felt like I was complete" (Akhtar: 4-5). The hyperbolic language used to express how a pork sausage ushers in American freedom mocks and satirizes the demands America places on its Muslim subjects. A national belonging based on something as trivial and arbitrary as a pork sausage also reveals the fragility of Muslim inclusion in the nation.

Second, the simultaneity of giving up the Quran and Mr. Gurvitz's approval suggests that it is Sufism's embattled and marginalized position within Islam – as centered on ethics rather than doctrines, a version of Islam that is not really Islam – that allows Hayat to claim legitimacy as both a religious subject and an American. Mina's practice of Sufism clearly reflects this embattled and marginalized position (Malik: 15). On the one hand, there is an overlap between Sufism and the literalist orthodox approach for while she emphasizes "inner dimensions" of faith – a set of narratives, ethics, and values such as spirituality and intention – she also encourages Hayat to memorize the Quran (Shaikh 2012: 10). On the

⁵ The idea of distinction is central to any number of religions. I would argue that distinction is exacerbated in the intersections of religion and capitalism, especially in religion's justification of capitalist inequalities, as seen in the American prosperity gospel or the Hindu doctrine of karma, which has been used to justify American-style capitalism in India. Similarly, the nation too relies on the idea of distinction not only between the dominant whites and other races, but also in dividing compliant subjects from dissidents in the form of good Muslims/bad Muslims, or racially, good African Americans/bad African Americans, good Asian Americans/bad Asian Americans (see further, Mamdani; Melamed).

other hand, the unorthodox aspects of Mina's Sufism are rejected and ridiculed by other Islamic voices. For instance, the Quran that Hayat memorizes under Mina's tutelage is in English and not in the requisite Arabic, because as she explains "it is the intention that matters" (Akhtar: 53) and "[n]ot what language you speak" (323). When Hayat recites from the English Quran to gain the title of *hafiz*, the vitriolic Imam Souhef dismisses the recital as one that does not count while others call Hayat a "moron" (317). Hayat's relinquishing of the Quran is not simply about repudiating the literalist approach. Instead he rejects the most visible manifestations of Islamic tradition in Sufism, such as the Quran, and retreats to the internal world of ethics and spirituality. Faced with the nation's demands for assimilation and rejection by other Islamic traditions, Hayat disciplines his faith to the extent that he becomes a religious subject without God. As Akhtar (Reader's Guide) himself says of Hayat's transformation into an "American dervish," "[Hayat] has to lose all his ideas about God and faith and Islam in order to experience that deepening of the heart that the Sufis identify as the result of closeness to the divine source." But Hayat is an American Sufi not because he gives up everything to attain Allah. Hayat's object of desire is neither divinity nor Sufism but America itself, and it is only when he provides a univocal Sufi resolution to polyvocal Islam and renounces the outward trappings of religion that he can attain the respectability of national belonging. Hayat can belong in America only as a devout skeptic, for whom religion is nothing more than an intellectual pursuit, something to take classes in at college.

As a response to a culture that imagines Muslim men as violent Islamists, Hayat's path to national assimilation and inclusion is through an embodied feminine approach, a central battleground between Sufism and the wider Islamic tradition. The novel indicts Islam as "a culture that made no place for a woman" (Akhtar: 17). Its representation of Sufism, however, offers an alternative for it envisions sexuality inextricably interwoven with daily, quotidian religious practices. It is Mina's hypersexualized persona that draws him to her stories of the Prophet and dervishes and ultimately, to the study of the Quran. The overlap between his religious awakening and sexual awakening is complete and total. Hayat recounts multiple encounters when his sexual attraction to Mina leads him to a more pious attitude and rigor in Quranic Studies: "Mina leaned in to turn the page [of the Quran]. Her arm brushed against mine, her touch whispering along my skin and echoing up my arm to the back of my neck" (53). The tingling nerves and "exquisite shudders" (58) become shocking reality when through a crack in the bathroom door, Hayat witnesses Mina masturbating. He says, "I tossed and turned through the night, the verses I'd learned echoing in my mind, the perfect form of Mina's naked body – and that shocking darkness at the top of her legs – haunting my dreams" (72). The scrambling of Mina's body with the Quranic verses reflects Sufism's embattled and marginalized position. While these passages exemplify "ecstatic love mysticism" (Hoffman-Ladd: 82), the sublimation of love and sexual desire seen in Sufi beliefs of the "God as Beloved," the novel also feels compelled to alleviate the palpable sexual anxiety and restore sexual normativity by interweaving two contradictory strains: transgressive sexual desire and patriarchal norms. The novel posits Hayat's religious fervor as nothing more than a teenage crush and the Quran becomes inextricable from Mina, the object of Hayat's unattainable and childish, half-comprehended desire that the reader knows with complete certainty will never come to fruition and is bound to be shed when the

narrator matures into adulthood. The Quran and its teachings too, then, become something to be shed to mature into the American body politic.

While Hayat draws distinctions between Sufism and other Islamic approaches to achieve acceptance in America, the contradictions between the erasure of distinction as offered in the dervish's story and the bildungsroman's imperative to produce distinction are scripted on Mina's body. Hayat describes this contradiction as follows: "that [Mina] herself was a paradox I couldn't resolve, my opposing ideas of her – enlightened and devout; intrepid and passive – only ever colliding, and never sitting comfortable enough for me to hold them at all, let alone function" (Akhtar: 340). Sufism does not censure Mina for harboring sexual desires or falling in love with the Jewish Nathan Wolfsohn, but ultimately the patriarchal domination of the literalist orthodox approach favored by her two abusive husbands extinguishes her desire.⁶ The novel punishes her sexual transgressions and erases the gender egalitarian possibilities of Sufism by representing her body as sick and suffering, decaying with cancer. As in the dervish's story of erasing distinction, God's love and her pure intentions do not make her the chosen one and she suffers a fate no better or worse than that of other voices within the religion. It is Mina who ends up embodying Sufism's embattled and marginalized position because these contradictions are unsustainable for Hayat's nationalistic pursuits, and he finds Mina's Sufi teachings as nothing more than empty stories: "What are all these Sufi tales, I thought, but fictions she's using to shed a redeeming glow on a life scored with pain, pain I caused her, pain [her husband] caused her" (342). Renouncing the intersections between Sufism and Islam and labeling Mina's erasure of distinction as nothing more than "fiction" enables Hayat to distinguish himself from other Islamic approaches, a distinction that renders him acceptable but sanctions hatred and exclusion of others.

The embodied feminine approach espoused by Sufism reconciles the protagonist with the gendered ideal of the nation, upholds the American racial formations of model minority, and consolidates class hierarchies. Hayat's achievement of American belonging is, in more ways than one, a return to the mother. After finding American fulfillment in a pork sausage, he says, "I slept soundly that night, held in restful sleep like a baby in a mother's loving arms" (Akhtar: 5). These clichés of America's innocence and freedom belie the conflicts and sacrifices demanded of Hayat to be accepted into meaningful American citizenship. His incorporation into the gendered ideal of the nation is also manifested in his romantic relationship with a white Jewish woman Rachel: "It was in Rachel's arms and it was with her love – that I finally discovered myself not only as a man, but as an American" (345). Contrary to his father's affairs with white women that earn his mother Muneer's wrath, Hayat's relationship can muster his Jewish exceptionalist (literal and figurative) mother's respect. Echoing the Mina-Nathan romance and the Naveed-Nathan partnership, Hayat's self-affirmation as an American finds a firm footing not in the cross-class identification with Mr. Gurvitz but in the interracial romance between a Muslim and Jewish American. Hayat and Rachel's romance bridges the religious chasm between Islam and Judaism because it is

⁶ Shaikh (2009: 783) considers how the "egalitarian possibilities within Sufism" can be used to challenge patriarchal religious paradigms and reconceptualize gender equality within Islamic law and contemporary Muslim societies.

based in Hayat's distance from "God and faith and Islam," and class and racial proximity between South Asian and Jewish Americans.⁷ Asian Americans and Jewish Americans share the historical experiences of systematic discrimination and also the distorting racial designation of "honorary whites" and "model minorities," labels that silence and discipline them while denying the existence of class and gender hierarchies within these communities. The novel's interracial romance, then, reveals the complex ways in which race, religion, and class inflect each other. It resolves religious conflict on the common ground of higher class status and racial partnerships based on compliance with the American racial system. That is, Hayat's American citizenship and belonging are based on his conformity with the national racial, class, and religious hierarchies. His belonging also depends on a move away from intra-faith polyvocality to interfaith solidarity, the more visible and acceptable vision of pluralism.

While polyvocality in the Muslim bildungsroman novel has been heralded as a celebration of difference or as a challenge to representations of Islamic community as a monolith, this essay has argued that it is neither a neutral concept nor an end unto itself. As Akhtar's *American Dervish* illustrates, the bildungsroman's insistence on reconciling Islam with national belonging necessitates a univocal resolution to polyvocality, which requires the novel to draw distinctions between the Islamic approaches and legitimize hierarchies between them. *American Dervish*, specifically, draws on Sufism's embattled and marginalized position within Islam to project it as amenable to national inclusion, and dismisses and discounts other approaches, sanctioning hatred against them. This essay shows that Islamophobia is a product not only of Muslim stereotypes but of the "good Muslim/bad Muslim" binary that compels us to dismiss certain voices within the polyvocal Muslim community. Challenging stereotypes is, therefore, no substitute for a meaningful engagement with the intellectual, political, and spiritual histories of diverse Islamic domains without dismissing them. Such an engagement requires us to analyze the national textures of Islam and intra-faith pluralism in addition to interfaith dialogues. Discussions of "global Islam," often an analogue of or synonym for "global jihad," ignore the intersections between religion, race, and nation, which are often considered to be separate spheres. *American Dervish* reminds us of the extent to which religious conflicts are resolved on the terrain of upholding American class and racial hierarchies. Conflict resolution and pluralism are not causes for complacency or celebration; instead, they require the most vigilance against the privileges and dehumanizing erasures that only dimly glow beneath their surface.

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⁷ For more on literary portrayals of how Jewish Americans and Asian Americans access American belonging through their common racial categorization as model minorities, see Cathy Schlund-Vials. For a sociological perspective on interracial romances and marriages between Jewish Americans and Asian Americans, see Kim, Leavitt, and William.

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