

Navigating Postmodernism as Predicament and Promise: A Critical Analysis of Akbar S. Ahmed's Thought

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we critically analyze Akbar S. Ahmed's views on postmodernism as a predicament and a promise for Muslim societies. For Ahmed, postmodernity is a “two-sided sword” that challenges the authority of the past and presents the possibility for new avenues of dialogue and reinterpretation of Islamic values. In the postmodern context of today, which is characterized by doubt, disintegration and a pervasive global media, Muslim identity, community and tradition are facing significant challenges. Some of these problems involve a loss of certainty, an identity crisis caused by cultural fragmentation and the misrepresentation of Islam as a singular “other” in the western imagination. Meanwhile, Ahmed argues that there is a positive side: postmodern plurality can open up new room for pluralism, tolerance and intercultural communication. In this paper, Ahmed's key ideas are explored: a search for authentic identity, the role of representation in media and politics, and the promise of a more inclusive global discourse. He calls for a cosmopolitan ethic of compassion and understanding as a way to deal with the fundamental uncertainties that confront today's Muslims.

Keywords: Akbar S. Ahmed, Postmodernism, Muslim Identity, Cultural pluralism, Predicament, Promise.

1. Introduction

The post-modern era brings to Muslim societies a complicated intellectual and cultural situation in which the issues of identity, representation, plurality, authority and communication have become more prominent. It is within this context that Akbar S. Ahmed's encounter with postmodernism becomes significant: he does not employ it as a subterfuge for a traditional Islamic critique of modernity nor as an unthought-about framework to be embraced. Instead, his texts have construed a plight and a potential for Muslim societies in the postmodern. The challenges come from the fragmentation, uncertainty, distortion of the media, dislocation of culture, and the

destabilization of existing structures of meaning, and the hope is that there will be a greater sense of self-representation, critical reflection, tolerance, and intercultural dialogue.

But, it is important to keep a conceptual difference in mind when reading carefully through Ahmed. This positive attitude towards postmodern plurality does not mean that he affirms strong epistemological relativism. Islam accepts that there is a revealed truth, and is therefore not simply "reconcilable" with philosophically based ideas that do not accept or will not acknowledge final claims. To be tolerant does not mean to be a relativist, coexistence of pluralism does not imply epistemological pluralism, and dialogue does not mean the rejection of theological conviction. So, perhaps Ahmed's best defensible reading of the "promise" of postmodernism is to be read not as a philosophical fusion of postmodern relativism with Islam, but as a selective appropriation of some elements of postmodern plurality, an ethical or sociological one.

This division is corroborated by the very discussion of Ahmed as presented in *Postmodernism and Islam*. This division is endorsed by Ahmed's own discussion in *Postmodernism and Islam*. His attitude is that the postmodern era had made it possible not only to hope for "understanding and toleration," but also to sense its cynicism, irony, fragmentation and potential destructive powers. Overall, his analysis does not finally reduce Islamic normativity to postmodernism's relative ethical or moral permissibility. Rather, it is an effort to consider the possibility of Muslims engaging in a plural, changing world without compromising upon their allegiance to the revealed truth. The key interpretive statement of this study is thus that social pluralism is not to be confused with epistemological relativism, nor is dialogical openness to be identified with theological surrender.

This separation too offers a justification for rethinking Ahmed's reflections on representation and media. Much of the discussion that was part of his work took place in a time when television, newspapers, movie, and other comparatively centralized mass media were in control. Ahmed was well aware that media was instrumental in reinforcing images of Islam and Muslims, and in determining the relationship between Muslim societies and West. The issue of representation continues to be of great importance, but the context of communication has undergone an enormous transformation. Representation of Islam has been remodeled by social media, algorithmic recommendation systems, decentralized production of content, digital networks and very fast-moving visual narratives. Therefore, Ahmed's analysis of the broadcast media needs to be critically rethought in the context of today's platform-based media landscape.

Previous scholarship has explored various aspects of Ahmed's interaction with postmodernity such as issues of Muslim identity, cultural fragmentation, media representation, globalization and the dialogue between Islam and the West. However, there are two interrelated issues that need clarification. First, the concept of "promise" of postmodernity must be reconstructed in a manner that retains the difference between social and cultural plurality, and epistemological relativism. Second, the "continuing relevance" of his media and representation analysis needs to be evaluated in the context of the shift from "centralized" broadcast communication to "social media/algorithmic" communication. These two questions are combined here to allow a clear assessment of Ahmed's position, both strong and weak.

Therefore, the four main questions that this article explores are as follows: What is postmodernity in Ahmed's view, as a predicament for Muslim societies, and as a promise? How does identity, fragmentation and media representation feature in this narrative? Is it possible to uphold his call for tolerance and plurality without compromising the claim of revealed truth in Islam with epistemological relativism? But how might his approach to representation be rethought in today's platform-based and algorithmic contexts? The article attempts to go beyond simply describing the arguments of Ahmed and their criticisms by answering the following questions: It makes sense of the internal history of his relationship to postmodernity and formulates a reading of what can perhaps be considered its best advocated version. It maintains that there is something still very relevant about Ahmed's approach, in a sense: his focus on a postmodern plurality, specifically in relation to the challenge to monopolies of representation, the potentials of Muslim self-representation, the call for critical reflexivity, and the possibility of intercultural dialogue, alongside the Islamic affirmation of revealed truth and theological norms.

In this respect, Ahmed's work is not helpful because he attempts to integrate Islam into postmodernism's relativism but because he gives us materials to use in thinking about the way Muslim societies can deal with plurality, representation and dialogue without giving in to postmodernism's epistemological and theological beliefs.

2. Methodology

This study uses critical interpretive textual analysis and conceptual analysis to explore Akbar S. Ahmed's perspective of postmodernism, postmodernity and globalisation in the context of Islam and Muslim societies. It draws its main material from "Postmodernist Perceptions of Islam: Observing the Observer" (1991), *Postmodernism and Islam: Predicament and Promise* (1992), "Islam in the Age of Postmodernity" (1994), and *Islam Under Siege: Living Dangerously in a Post-Honor World* (2003). These texts are purposefully and sequentially arranged to reflect the evolution of Ahmed's ideas from postmodern plurality and fragmentation, to globalisation, identity, inclusion and civilizational dialogue. Other interlocutors are Ernest Gellner, Ziauddin Sardar, Xiaorong Li, Shirin Akter, Mohammed Arkoun, Tomas Gerholm, Mohammed Sharafuddin, who help shed light on relativism, religious truth, cultural diversity, Western epistemological dominance and Islam's interaction with postmodernity. The analysis can be done in four steps: conceptual reconstruction, interpretive thematic reconstruction of the predicament, reconstruction of the promise, and critical evaluation. It conceptualises postmodernism as a type of thinking, postmodernity as a social and historical phenomenon, and globalisation as an economic, technological, political and cultural phenomenon. The assessment of Ahmed's framework is based on the precision of its concepts, its internal consistency, theological compatibility, contemporary explanatory value, especially regarding the topic of Muslim identity, media representation, tolerance, relativism, cultural plurality, epistemological pluralism, revealed truth, intercultural dialogue, and the predicament–promise relationship framework.

3. Literature Review and Discussion

The works of Akbar S. Ahmed are at the border of Islamic studies, anthropology, and postmodern theory. It is not in vain to sketch the lines of his work and the intellectual environment before going to his particular arguments. His previous book *Discovering Islam* (1988) had given a non-scholarly introduction to the history and society of the Muslims that had appealed to many Western critics. In recollection of the reviews, Ahmed has indicated a changed attitude which he calls postmodernist perceptions of Islam. In his opinion, some other critics demonstrated a fresh wave of insight and avoided the ancient Orientalist tropes. Ahmed noted:

"expresses the need to understand Islam on its own terms and within the framework of a common humanity. Significantly absent are allusions to the traditional Orientalist stock-in-trade criticisms of Islam."¹

It is in this remark that Ahmed implies that in some circles of Western intelligentsia a more sympathetic and pluralistic approach to Islam was taking shape - a process which he explains by the postmodern pressures on the old colonial discourses. In order to understand how Ahmed refers to the term postmodernism, it is possible to refer to his article titled *Postmodernist Perceptions of Islam* of 1991. This is where he presents a functional definition of the postmodern age. Ahmed describes the postmodern condition by stating that it is important to learn about the condition, he writes:

presuppose[s] a questioning of modernity; it is to turn toward a spirit of pluralism, an increased assertiveness of local or folk identity; it involves exposure to a plethora of discourses and the consequent dangers of culture schizophrenia, a heightened skepticism of traditional orthodoxies, and finally a rejection of looking at the world as a universal totality, of final solutions and complete answers.²

¹ Akbar S. Ahmed, "Postmodernist Perceptions of Islam: Observing the Observer," *Asian Survey* 3, no. 3 (1991): 219.

² *Ibid.*, 213.

In a different formulation he writes that: postmodernism is aimed at: "*the richness of meaning rather than clarity of meaning, to avoid choices between black and white, to evoke many levels of meaning and combinations of focus.*"³

This language is reminiscent of postmodern theorists, and demonstrates that Ahmed imagines postmodernity as a period of contradiction, uncertainty, and disintegration, a dramatic departure between the assurances of the previous modern period.

One major theme is the dilemma of the faithful Muslims in a secular, relativistic society combined with an assurance that pluralism of postmodernity may turn out to be as tolerant and just as Islam. Later, in 1994 Ahmed edited *Islam, Globalization and Postmodernity* with Hastings Donnan as additional contexts in which to view these problems. The preface to that book, which Ahmed co-authored states that:

"The processes of globalization have influenced traditional cultures and in such a dramatic way that they have raised issues for Muslims which can no longer be ignored. Muslims are forced to engage with these issues and to formulate a response to them."⁴

The high rate of penetration of the satellite TV, the internet (by that time still in its infancy), and other communication technologies ensured that even the most closeted Muslim home was no longer able to stay a closed off environment. This compilation was a compilation of case studies in the world of Muslims in general, implicitly the thesis of Ahmed was put to test in various local contexts.

Postmodernism and the Other: The New Imperialism of Western Culture (Pluto Press, 1998), The work is considered to be the first significant evaluation of postmodernism through the non-western lens. Sardar, in his work, critically examines such aspects of postmodern culture as architecture and literature, the consumer lifestyle and new age spirituality and contends in each instance that every supposedly pluralism turn of the enlightenment is a reproduction of Western ethnocentrism.

Islam and postmoderism: Akbar S Ahmed's vision of Islamic adventis. (1995)

In this article Mohammed Sharafuddin appreciates Akbar S. Ahmed's *Postmodernism and Islam* as a useful work for understanding "connections between cultures and the role of contemporary Islam."

However, he criticizes Ahmed for merging Islam and postmodernism in a way that sometimes appears too optimistic and unclear.

According to Sharafuddin, Ahmed reduces postmodernism to "an intentionally obscure fascination with anything new," especially by giving too much importance to mass media.

He also argues that Ahmed's vision depends heavily on the hope that East and West can meet through media and cultural exchange.

Sharafuddin's major critique is that Ahmed does not clearly show how Islam's positive values can practically solve the postmodern predicament.

3.1 The Muslim predicament in a postmodern era

Akbar S. Ahmed eloquently explains what he terms as the Muslim predicament, during the beginning of the postmodern era. In the preface to *Postmodernism and Islam*, he puts the problem into a personal perspective by envisioning the world that his infant daughter will grow up in. He writes:

"Nafees will live, as a Muslim, in the postmodern world which is just beginning to shape our lives; therein lies the Muslim predicament: that of living by Islam in an age which is increasingly secular, cynical, irreverent, fragmented, materialistic and, therefore, for a Muslim, often hostile."⁵

This one sentence summarizes the main issue: devout Muslims want to live according to Islam, following the religious faith and ethics in the environment which does not only disavow many of the values but also attacks

³ Ibid.

⁴ Akbar S. Ahmed and Hastings Donnan, "Islam in the Age of Postmodernity," in *Islam, Globalization and Postmodernity*, ed. Akbar S. Ahmed and Hastings Donnan (London: Routledge, 1994), 15.

⁵ Akbar S. Ahmed, *Postmodernism and Islam: Predicament and Promise* (London: Routledge, 1992), Preface, x.

them. The phrasing by Ahmed points out several details of the dilemma: secularism (the exclusion of religion out of the social life), cynicism and irreverence (the disrespect to the sacred norms, which is typical of a skeptical postmodern thinking), fragmentation (the disintegration of the traditional social structures and social certainties), and rampant materialism. The climax of these characteristics is a setting that tends to be unfriendly to a Muslim who wants to exercise his or her religion. The illustration of Ahmed is well represented by examples that he talks about in his work.

The Muslim of the late 20 th century is being blown about by ideologies and lifestyles which are totally different with what his forefathers were like. An example is the popular culture and mass media that would normalize practices or attitudes that are contrary to the Islamic teachings, which cultivates the spirit of alienation. The growing disrespect of the society towards the authority (be it religious or not) translates to the fact that Muslims that express traditional opinions are likely to be considered narrow minded or retrogressive. In the Postmodernism and Islam, Ahmed poses a very relevant question:

“How can Muslims retain their central Islamic features—family life, care for children, respect for elders, concepts of modesty and so on—in the face of the contrary philosophy of the postmodernist age?”⁶

This question highlights the fact that the fundamental Islamic principles (family harmony and modesty) are put to test by such postmodern tendencies as individualism and libertine societal standards. The other aspect of the Muslim predicament is the feeling of being under a constant scrutiny or pressure. Ahmed points out that the post-Cold War commentators in the West adopted a position that Islam as a religion was the emerging danger to the whole world. Old animosity was served up in new wrappings:

“Islam, from the time of the Crusades, has been seen as barbarous, licentious, the enemy of Christianity; in our age, in addition, it is seen as anarchic and monolithic. The Islamic peril is now seen by many as the greatest threat to the West, beside which the Red and Yellow perils pale into insignificance.”⁷

Here Ahmed applies to the terminology of the western press (Islamic peril) to show the external aspect of the crisis that is the mistrust and fear of Muslim people just because they are Muslim. Words such as Red and Yellow are dangerous allusion to the cold war and racist 19 th century cliches; through analogy Muslims have taken the place of the dehumanized Other in the slick postmodern western mind. This external animosity is further added to the internal difficulties of the believers: they have to live in a morally bewildering world, and at the same time, they must be stigmatized by this world. It should be noted that Ahmed does not consider this dilemma as something utterly novel. He puts it in a historical progression of fitna (trials and tribulations) experienced by the Muslim community.

To conclude, the dilemma as stipulated by Ahmed is the deep sense of disorientation and pressure that Muslims are going through to stay faithful to their faith in a time that is insistent on challenging the absolute truth, promoting cultural fusion, and often presenting Islam as an issue. This lays the background to the other themes which Ahmed addresses namely identity crises, disintegration of social order, and misrepresentation all aspects of this general predicament.

3.2 Identity Crisis and Fragmentation

One of the main points of the analysis by Ahmed is that postmodern era disintegrates identity and creates the crisis in Muslims. The process of modernity already started to undermine the traditional collective identities (tribal, ethnic, religious, familial), postmodernity does it on an entirely new level. Ahmed notices that in a postmodern world, the disintegration of social and political concepts and thought transformation, causes the feeling of dislocation; established structures are torn into pieces, and people are on the search of new sources of belonging. Among the results, one of them, which appears to be paradoxical, is the emergence of revivalist or fundamentalist movements. He argues that: “postmodernists fail to link this process with the revival of ethnicity

⁶ Ibid., 6.

⁷ Ibid., 3.

and religious fundamentalism... Where nothing is sacred, every belief becomes revisable. Thus fundamentalism is the attempt to resolve how to live in a world of radical doubt. It is a dialogue with the times, a response to it.”⁸ That is, even the circumstances of skepticism and relativism that characterize postmodernism can also give rise to a reactionary response: a search of certainty, typically in the form of a renewed or re-discovery of the so-called fundamentalist religious or ethnic identity that offers a feeling of security and clarity. The definition of fundamentalism provided by Ahmed is especially remarkable. He does not demonize it as sheer fanaticism but rather puts into perspective as an unadaptive resolution to the fear of fragmentation.

In case individuals no longer can count on a coherent worldview (since the post modernity is subverting the grand narrative and absolutes), some will be drawn to the seeming firmness of literalist religion or ethnonationalism. Even he opines that this revivalism is a cause and effect of postmodernism - in that the more divided and skeptical the environment, the greater the revival of atavistic loyalties, which only in turn oppose the modern state and pluralist society. Ahmed gives a vivid example of how identity crisis may be violent in *Islam Under Siege*, which he wrote ten years later. He looks at the example of Osama bin Laden as representative of hyper-asabiyya (an exaggerated group solidarity) due to interest in identity as a result of perceived threats. Ahmed writes: “Bin Laden identifies excessively with his group as the traditional markers of identity—family, nation, religion—appear under threat. He blames others for their plight... To correct the situation and reclaim honor he plans to inflict violence on Americans. He does not care if innocent people, including women and children, are killed.”⁹

This gruesome account reveals the psychological process: when the family, the nation, and the religion all appear besieged (as a result of the geopolitical events, globalization, and the cultural invasion of modernity) one person such as bin Laden narrows his identity to one dimension (a fighter of the faith) and transfers the responsibility to an externalized other (Jews, Christians, America). Ahmed views such extremism as a distorted act to reestablish some sense of honor and integrity that the postmodern world has destroyed.

It is a sad display of the dilemma -is a path that would not bring salvation but rather senseless violence, it means that there would be little honor or even no honor left of the world. Even on top of these extreme examples, fragmentation is a problem that has more insidious yet widespread impacts on ordinary Muslims. The disintegration of traditional social units is frequently mentioned by Ahmed. Migration and urbanization undermine the extended family and close-knit community, which previously was an individual identity.

Globalization in many Muslim societies has seen the mass labor migration (e.g. the migration of the village to the megacity or to the Western nations), which in turn has caused the splitting up of families (e.g. the woman leaving the home etc.), in other cases the tribe (e.g. parts of the tribe migrating), in other cases the state (e.g. political and economic change), and in other cases the religion (e.g. the materialism and...[moral disruptions]) which is putting the traditional values and practices under stress. The net result is that people are getting lost: they are everywhere and nowhere and their self-identity is somewhere in between fractured loyalties. It is what Ahmed (stealing a phrase of other people) refers to as culture schizophrenia - a disordered sense of self brought about by the attempt to balance out several, and often conflicting, cultural influences.

However, Ahmed does not consider fragmentation only in such a negative way; fragmentation has a creative potential too. He admits that the blending of cultures and ideas can result in the syntheses that are rich. By being as enthusiastic about high- and low-brow, the serious and the frivolous, postmodernity forms a collage of images and ideas that is to be bewildering, but also liberating in its lack of the ability to be bound by old boundaries. To Muslims, it may imply the liberty to redefine identity that goes beyond the traditional nationalistic or sectarian boundaries- perhaps more cosmopolitan Islamic identity that survives on diversity. But Ahmed is careful that a weak ethical base can more frequently result in disorientation and insecurity, and propel individuals into defense.

In conclusion, the postmodern identity fragmentation is a significant challenge to Muslim people, which in certain situations may result in crisis and radicalism. The analysis presented by Ahmed points to the fact that the

⁸ Akbar S. Ahmed, *Postmodernism and Islam: Predicament and Promise* (London: Routledge, 1992), 13.

⁹ Akbar S. Ahmed, *Islam Under Siege: Living Dangerously in a Post-Honor World* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003), 15–16.

revival of fundamentalism, in turn, is not a medieval resurgence in a strict sense of the term, but a contemporary (or postmodern) one; that is, a response to the uncertainties of the present. The interpretation of this, according to him, is key when one seeks to solve the main causes of extremism or the illness of identity among the Muslim people who are young. It is not the inability of Islam to cope but the unstable situation that should be controlled and preferably with the searching of identity venturing into constructive and inclusionary, but not the violent paths.

3.3 Representation, Media, and the Other

There is little in postmodern life with which Akbar S. Ahmed is more interested than with the strength of mass media and the influence on the perceptions. During the postmodern era, images and stories spread around the world faster than ever, very often without context and subtlety. Ahmed argues that this has greatly misrepresented the face of Islam in the international front, making the Muslim predicament worse.

He states that most of the time the Western media paints a caricature of Muslims and as a result of such efforts, there is a scenario where a regular Muslim is easily left as a virtual mute and a misunderstood individual.

There is no way an ordinary Muslim can make his views known in the media, which floods hostile words and images over and around him. He is portrayed as a fanatic over the [Rushdie] book, politically unstable through the dictator and corrupt by the actions of the Bank. In the end, unable to convey his arguments, helpless and impotent, he is as disgusted as he is confused with his own sense of impotence in shaping reality around him; he can no longer challenge what is real or unreal, no longer separate reality from the illusion of the media.¹⁰

This is one of the strong lines of Postmodernism and the Islam that creates a grim picture. Ahmed invokes three stereotypical media figures of the late 1980s the fanatic (the Muslim incensed by Rushdie, the novel), the dictator (e.g. Saddam Hussein as the embodiment of Muslim politics), and the Bank (the BCCI scandal, which implies that Muslims are corrupt businessmen). These stereotypes were sent into the heads of the Western audience over and over again, and they were made to link Islam with rage, oppression, and deception.

3.4 The Promise of Postmodernity: Pluralism, Representation, and Dialogue

Ahmed's account of postmodernity cannot be reduced to predicament. Alongside fragmentation, secularization, consumerism, cultural dislocation, and the disruptive power of mass media, he identifies openings for representation, pluralism, communication, and ethical encounter. The constructive side is explicit in *Postmodernism and Islam: Predicament and Promise*: "postmodernism also promises hope, understanding and toleration—and this is where it connects with Islam."¹¹

The promise is therefore integral to Ahmed's framework, not an optimistic afterthought. Across his writings from 1991 to 2003, it develops through four related possibilities: weakening Orientalist monopolies of representation, pluralizing intellectual authority, using media to bridge cultural distance, and moving from plurality toward dialogue and inclusion.

Yet Ahmed does not simply endorse postmodern relativism. He distinguishes Islamic commitments from Western postmodern assumptions and recognizes that Muslims cannot accept cynicism, radical skepticism, or epistemological positions that undermine revealed truth.¹²

His constructive stance can best be understood as one of selective engagement. Muslims may make use of plurality, reflexivity, tolerance, decentered representation, and dialog while holding to commitments to truth, justice, morality, and compassion.

¹⁰ Ahmed, *Postmodernism and Islam: Predicament and Promise*, 3.

¹¹ Ibid., x.

¹² Ibid., 5-6.

3.5 Reopening Representation Beyond Orientalism

The first dimension of the promise is a transformation in how Islam is represented. In "Postmodernist Perceptions of Islam: Observing the Observer" (1991), Ahmed detects not only inherited Orientalist assumptions but also "new ambiguities and new possibilities." Several Western reviewers, he notes on page 219, sought to "understand Islam on its own terms and within the framework of a common humanity."¹³

That is not to say that Orientalism disappeared. Instead, Ahmed discovers a space of representation where the Muslim self-description can be a part of the scholarly discourse, instead of Muslims being the objects of outside interpretation.

Postmodernism and Islam develops this argument through "The new scholars." Around pages 183–185, Ahmed distinguishes a post-Orientalist scholarly disposition characterized by greater sympathy toward studied communities, attention to indigenous voices, less reliance on assumptions of Western cultural superiority, and greater interpretive sensitivity.¹⁴

He sees this as an orientation of people like Lois Beck, John Esposito, Michael Fischer, Barbara Metcalf, Hastings Donnan, Francis Robinson, and Pnina Werbner. His thesis is not that postmodernism is what has brought about such scholarship, but that the loss of faith in a single authoritative voice on the "Other" made more reflexive approaches possible. Ahmed equates this with plurality, equality, tolerance, better communication, and optimism that new technology can diminish prejudices that are held from ignorance. The hope is in the self-reflection of the image: the viewer is reflected, the reflected is explored as a subject; the one reflected is also being reflected, and the reflected can then reflect the categories that were thrown at him.

3.6 Pluralization of Intellectual Authority

The second dimension is intellectual authority. Ahmed's pluralism should not be understood as an assertion that all beliefs are equally true. Instead, it appears that postmodernity undermines the assumption that one civilizational or intellectual center has the unquestioned right to define others. In *Postmodernism and Islam*, he links the positive side of postmodernity to diversity, tolerance, freedom of exploration, weakened structures of authority and greater possibilities of knowing the 'other'.

This argument becomes more sociologically grounded in *Islam, Globalization and Postmodernity* (1994). Ahmed and Hastings Donnan stress that global forces are interpreted through local histories and cultural configurations. Their discussion of local practices, diaspora, hybridity, and global-local interaction complicates both conventional Orientalism and simplistic anti-Orientalism.¹⁵

The promise of pluralization, therefore, concerns the expansion of legitimate voices and interpretive perspectives.

Xiaorong Li provides a crucial philosophical distinction: "The fact that cultures are different and particularistic does not entail cultural relativism."¹⁶

Cultural diversity can be affirmed without concluding that universal moral judgment is impossible. This strengthens Ahmed's position: plurality at the level of representation does not necessarily require relativism at the level of truth.

Ziauddin Sardar, however, introduces an essential qualification: "Pluralism has meaning only when the participants in plurality have equivalence of representation."¹⁷

His critique warns that apparent diversity may conceal continuing inequalities of institutional and cultural power. Ahmed's promise must therefore be conditional: pluralization becomes meaningful only when marginalized

¹³ Akbar S. Ahmed, "Postmodernist Perceptions of Islam: Observing the Observer," *Asian Survey* 31 no. 3 (1991): 219.

¹⁴ Ahmed, *Postmodernism and Islam: Predicament and Promise*, 183.

¹⁵ Akbar S. Ahmed and Hastings Donnan, "Islam in the Age of Postmodernity," 14–16.

¹⁶ Xiaorong Li, "A Cultural Critique of Cultural Relativism," *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 66 no. 1 (January 2007): 151.

¹⁷ Ziauddin Sardar, *Postmodernism and the Other: The New Imperialism of Western Culture* (London and Chicago: Pluto Press, 1998), 38.

communities possess genuine representational agency, rather than merely being included symbolically within structures still controlled by dominant institutions.

3.7 Media as a Possible Bridge

The shape of the treatment of the media is very intentionally neutral and neutralist on Ahmed's side. Mass communication has often been a target of criticism from postmodernism and Islam, for its stereotyping and Islamisation of media; however, Ahmed emphatically argues that there are positive potentialities in media. In the preface he states: "Its capacity to help bridge gaps is immeasurable." This sentence makes it impossible for him to make a solely deterministic analysis of the media. Ahmed notes that the media can give certain voices more authority than others and that it can repeat and sell stereotypical images of Muslims; but he also proposes that "serious Muslim involvement with communication institutions" can improve information, combat ignorance, and broaden the visibility of sympathetic scholarship. Media are thus in the predicament–promise dialectic.

In the name of predicament, they broadcast pictures of Muslims as fanatics, as dictators, as the "Bank" or "the one who works at the bank"; as promise, they allow Muslims to challenge such images and enter into their representation.

Mohammed Sharafuddin recognizes this optimism but criticizes its breadth. He observes that Ahmed assigns communications technology a significant role in bringing East and West into closer contact, while questioning whether Ahmed's expansive definition of postmodernism justifies the expectation of reconciliation.¹⁸

The criticism is important because it clarifies Ahmed's strongest defensible claim: media do not automatically create understanding. They provide communicative possibilities whose consequences depend on access, power, ethical responsibility, and the capacity of represented communities to speak for themselves.

3.8 Dialogue, Inclusion, and a Global Paradigm

The fourth dimension moves from plural representation toward dialogue. In *Islam Under Siege: Living Dangerously in a Post-Honor World* (2003), Ahmed develops the earlier vocabulary of tolerance into a more explicit ethics of inclusion. On page 19, he contrasts inclusivist and exclusivist orientations. Inclusion does not require the abandonment of religious identity; rather, it enables strong identities to coexist without denying the humanity of others.¹⁹

Ahmed subsequently rejects the inevitability of civilizational conflict. On page 21 he writes that "dialogue between civilizations and within civilizations - promises hope." He adds: "People of good will and good faith can generate dialogue."²⁰

Dialogue is thus neither surrender nor concealment of disagreement. It is a moral relationship in which substantive convictions can be expressed while conflict is prevented from becoming civilizational warfare.

The phrase "within civilizations" is especially important. Ahmed's model is not limited to a binary Islam–West encounter; it also requires conversation among different tendencies, generations, communities, and interpretations within Muslim societies. In "Toward a Global Paradigm," particularly around pages 164–172, he connects dialogue to compassion, justice, the "scholarship of inclusion," *sulh-i-kul* or "peace with all," and forms of solidarity extending beyond tribe and nation toward humanity.

Tomas Gerholm captures Ahmed's distinctive optimism succinctly: "In such a climate, Islam stands a better chance in the West, and perhaps worldwide."²¹

¹⁸ Mohammed Sharafuddin, "Islam and Postmodernism: Akbar Ahmed's Vision of Islamic Adventism," *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies* 4, no. 6 (1995): 102.

¹⁹ Akbar S. Ahmed, *Islam Under Siege: Living Dangerously in a Post-Honor World* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2003), 19–20.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 21.

²¹ Tomas Gerholm, "Two Muslim Intellectuals in the Postmodern West: Akbar Ahmed and Ziauddin Sardar," in *Islam, Globalization and Postmodernity*, ed. Akbar S. Ahmed and Hastings Donnan (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 205–6.

Gerholm's contrast between Ahmed and Sardar also demonstrates that this optimism is not a necessary consequence of postmodern theory; it is Ahmed's particular interpretation of the opportunities created by weakening intellectual monopolies.

3.9 Critical Limits of the Promise: Tolerance without Relativism

The principal theoretical issue is the ability to distinguish between the promise and the dangers of postmodernity from epistemological relativism in the case of Ahmed. Islam proclaims the truth that is revealed and transcendent, while robust postmodern relativism doubts any universal and final truth claims. If the "promise" is interpreted as selective engagement, then Ahmed's position does not necessarily contradict.

There are then three distinguishing features that are crucial. Tolerance is not relativism: tolerance of others' convictions does not involve treating all convictions as equally true. Social and cultural plurality is not epistemological pluralism: pluralism of the community and the co-existence does not mean that truth itself is relative. Dialogue does not mean the rejection of truth statements: it is possible to have meaningful dialogue because substantive commitments are held and yet one is willing to listen and explain, to criticize and live together.

Li's argument supports the first two distinctions,^[8] while Ernest Gellner exposes the difficulty of radical relativism in the statement: "The relativist endorses the absolutism of others."²²

Shirin Akter similarly argues that aspects of postmodernism—including openness to interpretation and alternative viewpoints—may assist Muslims in addressing historically conditioned questions without requiring rejection of God's reality or the revealed status of the Qur'an.²³

Sardar and Sharafuddin, however, demonstrate how Ahmed's pledge needs to be tempered. Discursive plurality does not eliminate unequal power and communication technology does not necessarily lead to reconciliation. The postmodern does not necessarily mean pluralistic, fair representation, tolerant or dialogic – it rather undermines some of the structures that prevented their occurrence. The successful end result relies on the ability to be represented, ethical practices on the part of the media and dialoguing that is able to reconcile respect for difference and substantive truth claims.

Dialectics is therefore the best asset that Ahmed brings to the table. The same postmodern forces that have broken the control of the representational monopoly can take their toll on the representational monopoly; media that transmit stereotypes can generate channels for response; plurality that becomes relativism can challenge theological certainty, but social plurality can provide for a certain co-existence and global interconnectedness can deepen the conflict while making dialogue more and more necessary. The promise is not a negative reaction or the complete rejection of postmodernity but a positive engagement with postmodernity that is informed by balance, compassion, justice, knowledge, tolerance and dialogue; this is done in "Observing the Observer", in Postmodernism, Islam, in "Islam, Globalization and Postmodernity" and in "Islam Under Siege".

3.10 Critical Analysis of Ahmed's Framework

Conceptual Elasticity or Conceptual Vagueness

This is unrestricted adaptability, something that has been mentioned about Ahmed's population more than once on the net. His view that postmodernism could not be firmly defined is quite appropriate for a beginning into Islamic studies, since it enables him to articulate Muslim life in settings of ambiguity, plurality, and transition, all the while keeping him free from the strictures of the disciplines that rigidly contour it. But a critical analysis

²² Ernest Gellner, *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 74.

²³ Shirin Akter, "Postmodernism and its Reflection on Understanding Islam," *Journal of the Punjab University Historical Society* 31 no. 2 (July–December 2018): 224–25.

plummets hard when it comes to Ahmed's synthesis can become: "an intentionally obscure fascination with anything new."²⁴

The problems with Ahmed's description of postmodernism as a "phenomenon which cannot be pinned down" are not that he is incorrect to call postmodernism so. Sometimes however he turns evasiveness into a technique, but doesn't make the boundary clear. Ahmed and his critics are not fooled by the agreement here: postmodernism is an ephemeral and complex ideology. The criticism is that it is more like a grievance or a critique as opposed to a criticism on terminology. If postmodernism is so open that it can signify media culture, urban fragmentation, pluralism, diaspora, irony, consumerism, and intercultural hope all at once, then the danger is explanatory inflation. Nearly everything becomes postmodern. The unresolved issue is whether Ahmed has produced a compelling concept or merely a compelling mood. In this respect, Sharafuddin's judgement that Ahmed's theorizing is "vague and much too apologetic" should be taken seriously.²⁵

3.11 Hybridity Without Sufficient Social Differentiation

Ahmed's account of diaspora and hyphenated identities is one of the strongest moments, because it recognizes Muslim identity as lived, negotiated, and unstable rather than civilizationally fixed. That is a major intellectual gain. It protects Islamic studies from reductionism and captures something central about Muslim life under globalization. It also allows Ahmed to avoid the false binary of assimilation versus authenticity.

Yet the criticism is that Ahmed sometimes generalizes the Muslim predicament too broadly. Diaspora is not one experience, and the Muslim world is not one social subject. Class, gender, ethnic difference, sect, geography, and legal status shape diaspora differently. Sharafuddin adds a particularly useful objection here when he says that Ahmed: "gives no explanation why women are left out," as if female representation threatened "his intellectual paradigm."²⁶

This criticism matters because a theory of hybrid identity that does not adequately differentiate among Muslim subjects risks reproducing abstraction at the very moment it claims to contest it. The unresolved issue is whether Ahmed's language of authenticity and identity is sufficiently attentive to internal asymmetries within Muslim communities themselves.

3.12 Media Diagnosis and Media Determinism

Ahmed's media analysis remains one of his most compelling achievements. Sharafuddin himself, despite major disagreements, effectively confirms the importance of this part of the argument. He notes that Ahmed shows how Western media systematically provoke Muslims, damage moral confidence, and distort the image of Islam; he even calls Ahmed's discussion of modernity and its aftermath "the most impressive part of the book." That is significant praise from a critic who otherwise resists Ahmed's synthesis.

At the same time, Ahmed's virtue here can become overreach. Media sometimes do too much explanatory work in his framework. They are, at once, the cause of distortion, the vehicle of postmodern fragmentation, the engine of global interconnection, and the possible medium of intercultural sympathy. Sharafuddin captures this paradox when he says that postmodernism comes to Islam through "a sort of marriage between the two," with mass media serving as both "herald and shield." The criticism is therefore not that Ahmed overestimates media importance altogether; it is that he sometimes moves too quickly from the undeniable centrality of media to a quasi-total explanation of Muslim-Western misunderstanding. The unresolved issue is institutional: beyond diagnosing misrepresentation, what concrete political, scholarly, and communicative structures would actually produce the more balanced media ecology Ahmed hopes for?

²⁴ Mohammed Sharafuddin, "Islam and Postmodernism: Akbar Ahmed's Vision of Islamic Adventism," *Critique*, Spring 1995, 102.

²⁵ Ibid., 103.

²⁶ Ibid., 107, 108.

3.13 The Cul-de-Sac Thesis and the Problem of Programmatic Follow-Through

The phrase “cul-de-sac”, in reference to modernity and Muslim ends, is probably the most explicit and forceful understanding we are confronted with in the materials that Ahmed presents. It is persuasive because it brings together two concurrent Muslim critiques of itself, the postcolonial critique. Ahmed is not just playing on anti-West themes: he is outlining the failures of Muslims to have a coherent political and social discourse in a language that has a moral tone and historical concreteness. This portion of this book is truly one that Sharafuddin expressly endorses, making it “the most impressive part.”²⁷ Here there is a significant intersection between the critic-author; on this side.

It's the restriction that comes into play, as Ahmed shifts from diagnosis to remedy. The criticism of Sharafuddin although given in parenthesis, kills it with simplicity: “unfortunately Ahmed does not show how Islam can be positive.”²⁸

He then refines the question even further and muses on why there's not been a change. However, the use of this word does not imply a lack of moral vision in Ahmed. It implies his desirable hope exceeds the support of his institutions. The book's strength is in explaining the reasons for the failure of Muslim modernity rather than its inability to provide clear insights into how a recognizable alternative in law and politics, education, economics, and social reform would be different or better. The question is thus a programmatic one: does Ahmed provide an alternative substantive model or mainly an ethical openness and sensibility of civilizational reconciliation?

3.14 Reconciling Islamic Normativity with Postmodern Pluralism

To assimilate the best of postmodernism, yet preserve the piety, fidelity and transcendence of faith, is Ahmed's greatest dream—and his toughest task. That which is generosity in his work is this ambition. It's fitting that his work finds its balance in that to be honest, it's a balance that Ahmed has proselytized against twice: the puritanical desertion of that which is sacred and the secular celebration of that which is profane. He refuses the notion of “clash of civilisations” as it is also a refusal to have the “irony of postmodernism” render religious seriousness empty.

However, this theoretical dilemma has not yet been solved. But Islamic and Western postmodernism have “very little else in common besides they're coetaneous!”, says Ahmed. If it is, what's the strength of the convergence they are promising? Of particular strength is the incisiveness of Sharafuddin. He calls Ahmed's reconciling a sort of truce and even a sort of marriage between the two, but he suggests that optimism is too much in this book, indeed a quasi-Adventist certainty that somehow on the other side of the future the universe will come to harmonize these tensions. That's why this formula is so deep but so volatile, that's why Ahmed's signature is both deep and unstable. He knows Muslims are accepting of postmodern tolerance and self-knowledge and do not welcome its “cynicism and irony.” What is not settled in his theology is exactly how a belief based in revealed truth can become a permanent partner of a sensibility that questions ultimate truths. The problem is at the core of the book.

4. Conclusion

The great contribution of Ahmed's is that he has rejected the two simple misunderstandings proposed by postmodern thinkers: the guise of the emancipatory moment, as seen from an upbeat perspective and the one of the total civilizational crisis, as conceived by the hardened disencharacter. He makes it a predicament at the same time, and it's sufficient, more more than that, enough to contradict because its language is just suitable to Muslim thought which is more than enough opposite. In his art, postmodernity is represented as a space of moral decay, overabundance in images, fragmentation of society and crisis of the epistemological assumption, but also as a space of opportunities for new forms of dialogue emerging from the rejection of the monopolies of representation that are corrupted in the process. But it is the double vision that is this argument's power. It can be used to let Ahmed talk about vulnerability for Muslims without blaming the victims of Islam, while at the

²⁷ Mohammed Sharafuddin, “Islam and Postmodernism: Akbar Ahmed's Vision of Islamic Adventism,” *Critique*, Spring 1995, 103.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

same time not being accused of being a postmodern game player who has decided to abandon the norms of the faith. In this respect, however, his writing is a continuing effort of self-criticism, in the form of an analysis of anxiety from within the framework of an Islamic ethical discourse and in pursuit of greater global theoretical discussion.

Another strength is the way Ahmed has dealt with the issues of identity and representation. He is aware that the disorientation of Muslims in late-modern life is not just the result of abstraction rather than philosophy; it is enhanced by migration, the disruption of social continuity, the commercialisation of culture, and media caricature. This is why his interpretation of the Muslim subject under stress is the one which is not only religious but also sociological and anthropological. It is most illuminating when he explains the sources of the fragmentation conditions that lead to compensatory searches for certainty – for example, in rigid forms of revivalism. This perspective is important because it effectively challenges the notion that militancy is an exteriorization of the "traditional" ways of living. Defensive absolutism is often the response to postmodern instability which is encapsulated in Ahmed's framework. His interpretation of representation is as force as well. He reveals how Muslims are reduced to caricatures of rage, despotism, or corruption – and how the crisis of identity is as much a political question of who defines reality as it is one of identity in a media saturated time.

But the same broadness that's the reason Ahmed is suggestive is the reason he still has a structure. In his work he will take up too much postmodernism, almost to the point of it being more of an atmosphere than a concept. Being sufficiently secular, consumerist, global, displaced, diasporic, pluralist, ironic or intercultural, it is hard not to inflate the content of explanation. Now the argument carries itself along onto a moral intuition, not by logic. The Muslim predicament can also seem too homogenous at times: related to this is also the danger that the Islamic realities might be tamed or domesticated. However, the impact of these differences – class, gender, sect, ethnicity, region and legal status – on Muslim experiences of modernity are often not directed by either sustained attention or systematic analysis. In the same way, the presentation of Ahmed's media can sometimes include a tendency towards determinism: media are not just presented as a space of distortion but almost as the master source of misunderstandings, divisions, as well as conflicts. Perhaps most important is the action shift from diagnosis to cure is incomplete. In the first place, Ahmed does a better job in detailing Muslim modernity's dead ends than he does in delineating the institutions by which an Islamic alternative might be realized in the field of law, education, politics or social attitudes.

Ahmed's notion of promise does not mean that Islam and postmodern pluralism can be said to be 'already synthesized'. However, the greatest struggle in his mind is unresolved – a trust that derives from revealed truth will not be easily reconciled with a sensibility that is suspicious of final truth-claims. But this unsolved tension is at the same time seriousness of the work. The lasting of Ahmed is that he works as a way of thinking with the contradiction. He asks what Muslims can do to maintain a moral purpose without a siege mentality and what they can do to be part of plural modern publics without a relativist mentality. In that reading, fragment and misrepresentation and ethics are what pose the trouble, while the horizon of dialogue, compassion, and critical self-renewal are what the promise holds in a project of understanding across Muslim-Western divides that is spread across Ahmed's broader scholarly work. If a particular empirical example, gendered analysis or institution isn't explicitly mentioned, this conclusion provides just the general level of text, media and comparative evidence already pointed to, and only states a detail an order of magnitude higher; it does not imply that other details not mentioned materially affect, either add to or qualify the conclusion.

5. Recommendations

- 1 Create Inclusive Dialogue: Educational and cultural institutions ought to establish additional platforms of authentic dialogue between western and Muslim voices.
- 2 Promote Scholarship of Inclusion: Researchers must be motivated and even funded in academic fields to undertake what Ahmed refers to as a scholarship of inclusion.

3 Ensuring Media Literacy and Balanced Representation: Since the media has a significant influence on perception, better media literacy among the audience and better media representation by creators of the content is required.

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