Safe Scholarship

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ABSTRACT: *This article attempts to construct a theoretical category that can be applied to knowledge production within the fields of culture and identity politics. To extrapolate the category, safe scholarship, the work of Akbar S. Ahmed and its intellectual ramifications are examined and unpacked. Identity, religion, and culture are not fixed concepts but regulatory regimes and safe, uncritical intellectuals seek to keep the fluid constructs in a state of (imagined) fixity. Safe scholarship helps perpetuate the epistemic as well as political status quo. The article builds the argument that production of critique, in contrast to safe scholarship, opens up social and public spaces for those subjects and social conditions usually relegated to the margins. The hypothesis that emancipatory potential of critique is greater than safe scholarship is examined in relation to the work of Akbar S. Ahmed.*

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Safe scholarship can be defined as knowledge production that does not challenge dominant assumptions about the concepts being analyzed. In other words, safe scholarship tends to be complicit with prevalent ideologies rather than with critique. From this perspective, Edward Said's conceptualization of Orientalism (Said 1978) as a field of study that is always complicit with Western global power effectively challenges the assumptions of "neutrality" of Western knowledge of its Others and, thus, can be categorized as critical scholarship. Whereas, Samuel P. Huntington's theory of the clash of civilizations (Huntington 1996), Fukuyama's theory of the end of history (Fukuyama 1992), and Bernard Lewis's essentialized explanations of Islamic animosity towards the West (Lewis 1990) seek to substantiate, instead of criticizing, the Eurocentric views of Hegel, Hume and others.

The use of the word 'safe' is strategic for two reasons. First, the particular circumstances of knowledge production in postcolonial Islam make certain kinds of critique unsafe for the lived realities of Muslim intellectuals. One can cite the example of Mahmud Muhammad Taha (1987) who was executed by the government of the Sudan for his attempts to recuperate liberatory discourses from within Islam. Second, after the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), the violent repression of emancipatory discourses within Islamic societies became a question of civilizational difference: criticism of Islam became complicit with Orientalism. The alterity of Islam became a source of the celebration of difference. In *Orientalism,* Edward Said's source of inspiration was Foucault's exposition of the complicity between knowledge and power. At this point, it is important to note that Edward Said's deployment of Foucauldian concepts was a critical enterprise that aimed to unveil the complicity of Western knowledge production with Western imperialism. Said also criticized the authoritarianism and obscurantism prevalent in many Islamic societies and supported Rushdie's right to critique Islam (Said 1986). Because of his persistent and rigorous critique of Western and non-Western oppressive formations and his support of the Palestinian cause from a secular perspective, Edward Said became a target of assassination threats (Ahmad 1992, 160). While Said continued to produce critical scholarship throughout his professional life, many scholars have justified their production of safe scholarship by employing the Saidian critique of Western Orientalism. Safe scholarship conflates the possibility of generating an effective critique of Islam with the discriminatory politics of Western Orientalism.

This article seeks to examine the work of Akbar S. Ahmed by applying a new conceptual category, safe scholarship, which is also being produced in the analysis. There are many producers of safe scholarship within the various academic disciplines which study the relationship between Islam and the West; for example, Abul ala Maududi, Ziauddin Sardar, Bernard Lewis, and Akbar Salahudin Ahmed. This article focuses on the work of Akbar S. Ahmed to illustrate specific issues with safe scholarship and to outline its contours as an analytical tool.

Akbar S. Ahmed is an anthropologist by training and has occupied various positions as a civil servant of the Government of Pakistan. The choice for selecting Ahmed's work for analysis has two important reasons. First, it seeks to demonstrate that Ahmed's oeuvre contributes towards the production and maintenance of a specific type of discourse within the realm of postcolonial Islamic intellectuality. For Akbar S. Ahmed, the West and Islam constitute two separate epistemic conditions with an apolitical play of difference. Ahmed's work is ironically neutral and therefor apolitical to the extent of being non-liberatory and therefore hegemonic.

The choice of Ahmed's work is determined by the heuristic notion that his *oeuvre* constitutes a distinct type or category of intellectual engagement with the ideas of Islam and the West for the following reasons: Ahmed's work does not critique the hegemony of Western knowledge as the work of Edward Said does, nor does it Occidentalize the West in an essentialist manner like Ziauddin Sardar's work, nor does it seek to mobilize Islam as the exclusive and most valid interpretation of the world as does the work of Abu Ala Maududi. Ahmed's work is descriptive and marked by an absence of critique of the dominant episteme, whether Islamic or Western. Still, this type of knowledge production about Islam and the West is not without its political ramifications. My contention is that the work of Akbar S. Ahmed can be read as a symptom of a condition of contemporary knowledge production by Muslim intellectuals — the condition of complicity with the status quo in postcolonial Islamic spaces. Intellectual complicity with the status quo produces safe scholarship. Therefore, to be able to define safe scholarship we must first have a definition of what the status quo is and then what constitutes intellectual complicity with the status quo. As the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines "status quo," it means "the existing state of affairs" (*NSOED*). The existing state of affairs in the postcolonial state of Pakistan specifically and other Muslim

countries and Islamic civilization generally, which are considered Ahmed's constituency, is a difficult state of affairs to be represented in totality. Therefore, any representation will be selective and not exhaustive. Nevertheless, one must speak and in order to speak one must select something about which one can speak. Therefore, here is the construction of the status quo in Pakistan which relies on other scholarly representations. Regionally, the state of Pakistan constructs itself as the Self in the binary where the Other is India and attempts to construct India as the state that is be signified by the trope "the enemy:" the "subject of hate in Pakistani [public] educational material is [the] Hindu and India"[1] (Nayyar et al. 79). Globally, the postcolonial state of Pakistan is a client state embedded in the global politics of American neo-imperialism from the Cold War to the present entanglement in Afghanistan. Tariq Ali, in his book *The Clash of Fundamentalisms: Crusades, Jihads and Modernities,* describes Pakistan as a country where the army has been in control of the state longer than any political party (2003, 202). The annual reports by the Human Rights Watch released in 2002 and 2003 are indicative of the fact that the concept of freedom remains an unrealized aspiration for the people of Pakistan (Human Rights Watch 2002, 2003) Thus, the status quo in the Pakistani context can be described as a nexus of various versions of Islam, which are manufactured differently with the rise and fall of every government, the army as the surrogate state, and the absence of social justice and personal freedoms while the state itself provides a mercenary army to the American global empire.

Akbar S. Ahmed's Safe Construction of Islam and the West:

Akbar S. Ahmed's scholarly career begins with sociological and anthropological essays which deal with various topics in Western and non-Western social spheres. A collection of essays titled *Pieces of Green: Sociological Change in Pakistan, 1964-1974* (Ahmed 1976) offers Ahmed's earliest interpretation of Islam in South Asia. In the first essay titled "Weberian Concepts of Authority in Pakistan," Ahmed employs Weberian terms such as charisma and authority for a sociological analysis of Islam and Pakistan. Ahmed's text does not examine why Weber's concepts are being chosen to perform this analysis; hence, the politics of the terms of analysis being employed remain unexamined. The question why Weber's terms are being applied to Islam is not broached. The political and material conditions through which Weber's terms become globally relevant are not discussed. The

terms employed are assumed to be self-explanatory, transparent, and operative without any ideological content.

Ahmed's choice of analytical terms betrays its politics when his text constructs Islam as identical to the Pakistani state's official construction of Islam, which is found in state-sponsored textbooks. According to Ahmed, South Asian Muslims demanded a "separate homeland" in order to construct the public sphere according to Islamic teachings and, to support this argument, Ahmed cites Liaqat Ali Khan, the first prime minister of Pakistan (Ahmed 1977, 4). Ahmed's scholarship substantiates the officially sanctioned interpretation of the world instead of challenging it. Safe scholarship operates as an instrument for maintaining the epistemic status quo. Ahmed does not question the validity of the official interpretive grid that is imposed on the social text. Islam as the master narrative of the Pakistani state, as Ayesha Jalal has argued, appeared as a technique of ideological control from above and has been a contested concept since its deployment (Jalal 277-294). According to Ayesha Jalal, Islam in Pakistan was deployed from above, by the elite managers of the nascent postcolonial state, to contain the potential of fragmentation on linguistic and ethnic lines (Jalal 280). Ahmed's acceptance of the official ideology perpetuates the process of marginalization of ethnic, linguistic and religious minorities which began with the creation of the state from above. Thus, Ahmed's scholarship provides an example of the complicity between safe scholarship and authorized knowledge.

Ahmed assigns an immutable and omnipresent Islamicness to the state through statements which betray the uses of Islam: the "Pakistani mind, steeped in Islamic lore, welcomes a strong charismatic leader, accepts traditional authority, and is indifferent to legal democracy or rational bureaucracy" (1977, 6-7). Through this essentialized reading of an amorphous category "the Pakistani mind" which is "steeped," a verb denoting saturation, in another imagined category called "Islamic lore," Ahmed seeks to reduce the multiplicity of the people to the officially constructed narrative of the state, betraying his complicity with, to recall Ayesha Jalal's reading (1990), the ideological uses of Islam by the elite. Moreover, he, in a double manoeuvre, substantiates the Orientalist view of the despotic Muslim as a figure indisposed to democracy as well as justifications of indigenous dictatorial figures who assign similar essences to the populations they are anxious to govern. The complicity of Ahmed's reading of "the Pakistani mind" becomes more obscene when one compares it with the way General Ayub Khan justified his martial

law rule: we "must understand that democracy cannot work in a hot climate. To have democracy we must have a cold climate like Britain" (cited in Ali 1970, 87). Ahmed, while analysing authority and charisma, corroborates oppressive interpretations and contributes to further marginalization of emancipatory or liberatory politics.

The intellectual complicity of safe scholarship with authoritarian discourses, especially in officially Islamized postcolonial formations, operates as a homogenizing tool that produces governable essences. Authoritarianism, according to Ishtiaq Ahmed, has produced a "lean" intellectual condition in Pakistan (Ahmed 1996, 176). Because of its complicity with official structures and governmental practices, safe scholarship not only contributes towards appropriation and assimilation of Otherness but becomes an extension of legalized authority. In this way, one can argue that safe scholarship participates in political and legal power because of its own apparent neutrality. Safe scholarship, thus, becomes a normative discourse because it makes statements that are already legitimized which, in turn, legitimize the prevalent condition of knowledge production. In other words, safe scholarship is not interrogative, in the sense that it does not question the condition of knowledge production that makes certain statements valid and legitimate.

In another essay titled "Social Symmetry and Asymmetry" in *Pieces of Green,* Ahmed attempts to construct a liberal interpretation of Islamic authority by selecting lenient verses from the Quran (Ahmed 1976, 50), for example "There shall be no compulsion in religion" (Surah 2: Verse 256), and, therefore, eschews critical inquiry of the uses of Islam as the official discourse and of the Quranic content that seeks to punish the un-Islamic Other: "We will put terror in the heart of unbelievers." (Surah 3: Verse 151). Ahmed attempts to demonstrate that fanaticism is not the essence of Islam (1976, 49-50) without discussing the discursive conditions that generate fanaticism. The type of Islam that is constructed in *Pieces of Green* (Ahmed 1976) is synecdochical Islam, represented through stereotypical images, with lacunas and anxieties that demonstrate that the author is constructing an empire of selective interpretation. It is possible to counter this observation by arguing that all interpretations are selective, but still, I argue, an intellectual's silences are as politically important as his or her vociferations. For example, while discussing Baba Farid, Ahmed compares the Sufi concept of *fana* (annihilation) to the Buddhist concept of *nirvana* only to declare "Sufism is more positive and dynamic than Buddhism which in contrast is more relaxed and resigned" (1976, 88). The Buddhist concept of *nirvana* is

invoked for an apparently inclusive analysis of two different religions but, as soon as a religious dyad becomes possible and the Other acquires the resembling of the Self, the Other is inferiorized without offering the reader any explanation of the attitudes and characteristics which make Sufism "positive and dynamic." Because Ahmed does not define what it means for a mode of religiosity to be "positive" or "dynamic," one can only proffer the Nietzschean analysis of Buddhism found in *The Anti-Christ* as a contrastive example: "Buddhism is the only genuinely positivistic religion in history. This applies even to its theory of knowledge…it stands *beyond* good and evil" (Nietzsche 2005, 16). In Ahmed's scholarship, the non-Islamic Other serves its comparative and differentiating purpose only to be relegated to the hierarchical order constructed by the Islamic Self. Safe scholarship privileges the security of the similitude offered by the Islamic Self over the religious and civilizational Other.

From *Pieces of Green* onwards, sociological analyses of Sufism appear in Ahmed's work which construct a particular essence of Islam. The Sufic essence of Islam, according to Ahmed, originates from the idea of *sulh-e-kul* (peace with all). But this idea of *sulh-e-kul* becomes another strategy of accommodating religious difference: the "spiritual policy of 'peace with all' (*sulh-e-kul*) genuinely encouraged proselytizing" (Ahmed 1976, 86). [2] 'Peace with all' is an invention for assimilating the Other and for undermining the arguments of the opponents of Islamic imperialism in non-Islamic societies.[3] Moreover, the choice of Sufism as an ideal type of Islam appears to be compatible with the production of safe scholarship: Sufism, despite its proselytizing potential, does not offer a radical critique of the text of the world. In his book *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, Muhammad Iqbal posits the Sufi as the binary opposite of the prophet. The Sufi, Iqbal argues, is concerned with the transcendental dimension of revelation as an end in itself, whereas the prophet generates a worldly political program through revelation. While, for "the mystic the repose of "unitary experience" is something final, for the prophet it is the awakening, within him, of world-shaking psychological forces, calculated to completely transform the human world" (Iqbal 1962, 124). Foucault's use of the phrase "spiritual politics" to describe the Khomeinite revolution of Iran is similar to Iqbal's interpretation of prophethood as a radicalizing force, though Foucault, unlike Iqbal, is cognizant of the new marginalities that revolutions produce (Foucault 1988, 210-224). Akbar S. Ahmed's choice of Sufism is another aspect of safe scholarship. In the absence of a radical interpretation of the text of the world, Sufism is a

device for the production of safe scholarship in postcolonial spaces. With its insistence on the esoteric, Sufism has thus far not produced an exoteric politics. Sufism, as Katherine Ewing argues in her article "The Politics of Sufism: Redefining the Saints of Pakistan," has been co-opted and defined or redefined by three successive governments— of Ayub Khan, Zia-ul-Haq, and Bhutto— in three different ways but for one political purpose: "[Each of these three rulers] identified the supporting doctrines as "pure" Sufism and claimed they were compatible with the sociopolitical structure he was trying to construct" (1983, 252). The easy co-optation of the sites of Sufism within governmental discourses, as demonstrated by Ewing (1983), substantiates the argument of Iqbal that Sufism does not provide an effective critique because Sufism does not constitute a site of resistance in the social formation of Pakistan.

In his book *Millennium and Charisma among Pathans: A Critical Essay in Social Anthropology* (Ahmed 1976), Ahmed discusses Sufism in ambivalent terms. While Sufism is "inner-directed," "non-political," and "non-material," it can indirectly function as a tool for Islamic revival (Ahmed 1976, 86). Ahmed's analysis of the politics of Sufism is marked with ambivalences, slippages and discursive anxieties. The Sufis, according to Ahmed, "trace their origin to the Prophet and the Holy Quran" and "the Prophet symbolized Sufi practices" (Ahmed 1976, 86-87). The text traces the etymology of the word "Sufi" to "suf" or wool worn constantly by the Prophet" and then by an unexplained turn, the word is converted into an ism with specific prophetic instructions: "the Prophet insisted that Sufism must not be an ontological escape mechanism but incorporated within it" (Ahmed 1976, 87). There are no references provided as to the origin of this instruction. Afterwards, the place of revelation of the Quran is also appropriated by an analogy: "Sufic retreat and contemplation can be traced to the Prophet's retreat to Mount Hira" (Ahmed 1976, 87). The analogy of the retreat of the prophet is incomplete or selective for it only refers to the retreat and not its social consequences. The retreat of the Prophet resulted in a political text that produced a new set of ethics and a new social formation and, also, new modes of marginalization. Akbar S. Ahmed's work seeks to depoliticize Islam in order to construct "non-political" safe scholarship in the name of Sufism. Moreover, the type of Sufism that is being constructed is also not the Sufism of Al-Hallaj who challenged the legalism of Islam but of *Sulh-e-Kul*, a doctrine constructed by the Mughal Emperor Akbar circa 1562 (Krishnamurti 1961, 8-9) as part of an attempt to syncretize Islam and Hinduism. Ahmed does not mention this specific history of the concept of *Sulh-e-Kul* because it is contains diachronic semantic

contaminations, especially for the state-authorized constructions of Islam in Pakistan, from the faith *Din-E-Ilahi* (Divine Faith) created by Akbar by hybridizing Islam and Hinduism (discussed above).

Ahmed's construction of Sufism is also selective in its analysis of the hierarchical interaction between the *sheikh* or *pir* (saint or spiritual leader) and the *murids* (disciples or followers). According to Ahmed, the "socio-religious organization" of Sufism constitutes a "dyadic" interaction between the sheikh and "his followers" (Ahmed 1976, 87). The use of the word "dyadic" to denote an interaction that is hierarchical, as suggested by the word "followers," is an example of how sociological jargon can be employed as a gloss over undemocratic social processes. Pirs or spiritual leaders in Sufism are products of a rigid hierarchical structures. In Sufism, "access to God for the common man is through a lengthy chain of authority…[and this] spiritual chain of authority is reinforced by heredity" (Ewing 255-256). After choosing sociological descriptors, Ahmed assigns a metaphysical essence to Sufism that does not acknowledge the material and worldly consequences of Sufism:

> [t]he Sufi is in the world but not of it. While the bourgeois-capitalist and the Marxist-socialist stand on the opposite ends of the politico-economic continuum and confront each other, the Sufi stands outside the relationship forming a third mid-way and triangular point. The Sufi is not unaware of the world; he confronts it, comprehends it, and rejects it (Ahmed 1976, 88).

The above statements substantiate Iqbal's argument about the regressive politics of Sufism. Ahmed does not interrogate the political ramifications of the Sufic retreat from the arena of the world but instead valorizes the metaphysics of transcendental escape. The neutrality of the Sufi has political consequences which remain unspoken and un-analysed. Instead, the reader is supplied with encomiums for apolitical Sufic transcendence. We are not informed how the Ahmedian Sufi attempts to reconfigure the social sphere or introduce ideas of social justice, personal freedoms, or human rights, when "he confronts it, comprehends it, and rejects it" (1967, 88).

Without engaging with the political ramifications of Sufism, Ahmed's selective sociological analysis performs three strategic functions: (a) it attempts to depoliticize Islam and assign it the status of an apolitical and homogenized religion; (b) it avoids an analysis of the hierarchies of inclusion and exclusion established within Islamic societies; (c) and through its valorization of an amorphous "peace with all" type of Islamic mysticism, it remains unchallenging to the existing

social formations and state ideologies. By celebrating the "neutrality" of analysis, by assuming that the terms of analysis are self-explanatory, safe scholarship neutralizes its own potentialities of critique and, thus, reifies the effects of governmentality. Critique, as Foucault has argued, is

> the art of not being governed or better, or the art of not being governed like that and at that cost…[in other words] the art of not being governed quite so much" (1997, 29) and "the art of voluntary insubordination, that of reflected intractability [leading to] the desubjugation of the subject in the context of…the politics of truth (1997, 32).

With this Foucauldian definition of critique, it becomes possible to declare that Akbar S. Ahmed's project is not critical but governmental because it does not seek to introduce the process of religious desubjugation of the Muslim subject. It seeks to extend the official regimes of truth against the alterity of the un-Islamic Other. The concept of *Sulh-e-Kul* (peace for all), in Akbar S. Ahmed's work, does not celebrate alterity but rather seeks to assimilate it into the logic of the Self.

In his book titled *Pakistan Society: Islam, Ethnicity, and Leadership in South Asia*, Ahmed performs an Islamocentric sociological analysis of the Kalash people, a non-Islamic tribal formation within the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. Discussing the effects of Pakistani Muslims' practice of forced proselytization of the Kalash to Islam, Ahmed declares:

> the Kafirs have for a thousand years seen one, the aggressive face of Islam. Conquerors have used the sword, priests hurled threats. But there are other faces of Islam, too. These are represented by Sufi masters and sages, gentle and wise, believing in *sulh-i-kul*, peace with all, who preferred to live further south, across river Indus, where greater numbers awaited conversions. For them, of the 99 great names of Allah, the two greatest are — the Beneficent and the Merciful. They are also the most used. Perhaps, their application by Muslims would be the most humane answer to the Kalash problem (1986, 28).

In its encounter with alterity, the logic of the Islamic Self seeks to replace the practice of violent erasure with "peaceful" assimilation so that it can celebrate its own leniency in solving "the Kalash problem." The Self that problematizes the Other, turns the Other into a "problem," seeks to "solve" the problem by constructing discourses of kindness and

compassion. The construction of the non-Islamic Other as a "problem" displays discursive homologies to the ways in which Orientalism attempts to construct the "problem" of the "non-civilized" Other. Similar to Eurocentric Orientalism, Islamocentric knowledge extends the domain of the power of Islam and produces its own marginalia. Akbar S. Ahmed's project becomes an extension of the governmental technologies of management when he adjudges: in "its commitment to Islamization, the Government of Pakistan has not neglected its minorities. A Kalash Foundation has been set up to assist the Kalash. This is a step in the right direction" (Ahmed 1986, 28). The religious Other within the postcolonial state of Islam is not the autonomous subject because the state defines itself as the Islamic state. Ahmed's safe scholarship celebrates when the state takes "a step in the right direction" but when the state begins the jackbooted marathon towards unfreedom by militarizing itself, Ahmed does not produce any critique of the martial law administration.

Moreover, instead of examining the Islamic discursive constructions of the non-Islamic Other, Akbar S. Ahmed reads an *effect* of certain Islamic discourses as an autotelic category and contributes towards a greater entrenchment of the orthodox Islamic construction of the Other while supporting the intervention of the state. The religious Other is not always seen as a subject in need of proselytization or conversion. The Quran itself acknowledges the religious alterity of the non-Muslim as a valid ontology: "Had God pleased, they, [the idolaters], would not have worshipped idols. We have not made you their keeper, nor are you their guardian" (Surah 6: Verse 108). This verse from the Quran demonstrates that it is possible for the Muslim intellectual to construct a discourse about the non-Muslim Other by selecting those verses from the Islamic scriptures which acknowledge the alterity of the non-Muslim subject in this world. By constructing a need for proselytizing even through the display of compassion and leniency, Ahmed attempts to reduce the alterity of the non-Islamic to the logic of the Islamic and, as a result, Ahmed's project becomes ancillary to the systemic erasure of difference within postcolonial Islamic/Islamized spaces. The selection of "the Kalash problem" as an example of the non-Islamic alterity is a strategic move for the following reasons: it is an anthropological representation of a minority within an Islamic polity and, by producing knowledge about the non-Islamic Other, Ahmed contributes to the power of the dominant Islamic Self; though Sufism and *sulh-i-kul* are invoked as idealized ways of engaging the Other, the text implicitly substantiates conversion as a desirable effect of the Sufi way; the text does not offer to extend Sufic peace to other persecuted minority

formations such as the Ahmadis who constitute "an officially persecuted community in Pakistan" since their sect was declared un-Islamic by the state in 1974 (Ishtiaq Ahmed 1988, 179). By choosing one social problem as more suitable for analysis, the producer of safe scholarship also chooses his or her silences. This aspect of safe scholarship is obvious in Ahmed's construction of the Kalash "problem" and reflects the legal structures of the Islamic state of Pakistan. The state does not acknowledge the dignity of the non-Muslim subject to the extent that he or she can become the state. *The Constitution of Pakistan* does not allow a non-Muslim to become the prime minister or the president. The limit of the leniency towards the non-Muslim subject does not extend where the instruments of governmentality are granted to the non-Muslim Other. The state manufactures the identity of the Muslim subject as the subject of the state.

Ahmed's celebration of the Islamic Self in relation to the non-Islamic Other discussed above, is also operative in Ahmed's book *Discovering Islam: Making Sense of Muslim History and Society* (1988). The self-referentiality at work in the construction of the Islamic Self makes Ahmed's enterprise safe and celebratory but does not contribute towards critical knowledge production within Islamic spaces. For example, the fourth chapter seeks to inform the reader about the great Muslim empires. The text is celebratory about the grandeur of the Ottoman empire. According to Ahmed, the sixteenth century was "probably the greatest time of expansion. The North African conquests date from this period — all of North Africa, save Morocco, formed part of empire. It stretched from Budapest to Yemen, from Baghdad to Algeria" (1988, 65). The erasure of difference of the pre-Islamic subjectivities situated in the Islamic imperialist expansion is not broached. "All of Africa" is subsumed under the grand narrative of the Islamic empire with one self-congratulatory phrase. But when it comes to European imperialism, Ahmed declares colonial rule for Muslims was "an unmitigated disaster" and no "arguments about Europe providing railways and the telegraph, or maintaining law and order can conceal or assuage this fact" (1988, 117). If Western colonialism cannot be justified despite the promises of modernity, industrialization and progress, Islamic imperialism cannot be justified either regardless of its contribution to Islamic grandeur. This celebration of the Self at the expense of the Other is perhaps the first step towards an imperialist position. Ahmed's celebration of Islamic "greatness" and expansionism is unsustainable on two accounts: first, his idea of *sulh-i-kul* (peace with all) does not seem

compatible with the imperialist conquests; second, it is difficult to celebrate Islamic imperialism while condemning Western imperialism.

Ahmed's text glosses over these lacunae in the argument by employing various strategies and the slippage of imperialistic vocabulary betrays the anxieties and repressions at the heart of his safe scholarship. For example, in order to dispel the stereotype of Muslim warriors from Central Asia as the main source of the spread of Islam in India, Ahmed attempts to replace the figure of the warrior with the Sufi but the anxious slippages in his text betray a narcissistic celebration of conversion as the ideal outcome, in a manner which is not very different from Ahmed's discussion of "the Kalash problem." According to Ahmed, the image of the Muslim warrior does not represent "the whole picture" and the figure of the Sufi needs to be included in the picture as well. But at the same time, to describe the project of the Sufis, Ahmed employs the phrase "their modes of attack were contrary" to the Muslim warrior and consisted of "absorbent and pragmatic" strategies (Ahmed 1988, 90). It is difficult to ascertain whether the project of Sufism was conversions of the non-Muslims but it is possible to ascertain the contradictions introduced by the use of the word "attack." The textual desire to combat and contain the non-Islamic Other as suggested by the word "attack" makes Ahmed's deployment of the term *sulh-e-kul* a duplicitous enterprise. The non-Islamic Other, in Ahmed's work, appears in need of control or being brought into the realm of the Same with persuasion. The Otherness of the non-Islamic in Ahmed's work appears as a disciplinary problem — in need of correction either through punishment or leniency. Though Ahmed appears to favour leniency or "peace," the alterity of the non-Islamic is constructed as a "problem" and, therefore, the possibility of structural or discursive violence is never remote.

Furthermore, Ahmed's construction of Islam deploys ideas of Sufism, Islam's imperial/imperious greatness and later decline due to Western colonialism as devices to remain silent on critical debates in Islamic societies. For example, the chapter titled "Sufis and Scholars" fuses both the figures together:

> The line between Sufis, saints and scholars is usually a thin one. Identifying and living by the ideal, this group often finds itself in opposition to the rich and powerful. They have acted as strong, if indirect, pressure on the excesses of the rulers. Many a well known clash is recorded between the master of the age and a recalcitrant Islamic scholar (1988, 90).

After assigning a particular essence to the figure of the Sufi, that of "peace for all," Ahmed valorizes the Sufi and, at the same time, employs the Sufic figure as a strategic device to collapse the difference between the Sufi and the intellectual. The opposition between the "master of the age" and the "recalcitrant Islamic scholar" is broached without any discussion of various material conditions that have contributed towards the marginalization of critique within post-colonial Islamic spaces. Ahmed's amorphous descriptor "the excesses of the rulers" does not specify the conditions that produce multiple forms of unfreedom within Islamic social configurations. Though the scholars are recognized as producers of opposition against "the excesses," Ahmed does not discuss the specificities of the oppressive excesses within any particular historical or cultural context and, thereby, divests the figure of the scholar, especially in contemporary Islam, of his or her critical and subversive potential. The readers of Ahmed's text are not informed whether the phrase "the excesses of the rulers" signifies military regimes or whether it hides an engagement with certain specific conditions of unfreedom.

Ahmed's selective, amorphous, and historically non-specific construction of the interaction between the "excessive ruler" and "the recalcitrant scholar" enables him to valorize the scholar without analysing the effects of recalcitrance on many intellectuals' life trajectories. In contrast to Ahmed, Pervez Hoodbhoy and Ibn Warraq cite the names of numerous intellectuals executed for their critiques of orthodox Islam. According to Pervez Hoodbhoy, it is because of these legacies of persecution and prosecution of radicality in Islamic societies that secular modes of knowledge production have remained marginalized (1991). According to Ibn Warraq, in Islamic history "persecutions of heresies and heretics are more common than the modern apologists for Islam are willing to allow" (1995, 241). Though it is possible to read Ibn Warraq and Pervez Hoodbhoy's accusatory and polemical constructions of Islam as signs of complicity with Eurocentrism and of internalized Orientalism, their critiques attempt to recuperate the marginalized history of radicality in Muslim cultures before the arrival of Western colonialism on the social horizon. Akbar S. Ahmed's amorphous construction of radicality in Islam, on the other hand, seeks to essentialize Islam into a non-critical system of social organization by its construction because of its emphasis on dominant narratives and evasive production of "recalcitrance." Without specifying the issues that produced the conflict between the ruler and recalcitrant scholars, Ahmed's knowledge production is uncritical, neutral, and safe and contributes towards the

stasis of Muslim societies. Some of the reviewers of Ahmed's book *Discovering Islam* have also signalled out the absence of critique and the problematics generated by what I have identified as safe scholarship. According to Barbara Metcalf, Akbar S. Ahmed "criticizes, but never too much…He laments the lack of intellectual effort in Pakistan but fails to provide a full-scale critique of the completely politicized culture responsible for the situation he deplores" (1989, 91). "By treating 'the Islamic ideal' as unproblematic and eternal," Donnan Hastings contends, Ahmed "ignores the social, economic and political forces that lead to some particular vision being identified as the ideal" (1989, 350).

Ahmed's safe construction of Islam is a symptom of Islamic scholarship in postcolonial spaces: it displays a parochial Islamocentrism which eschews internal critique because of the global dominance of the West. For example, in *Discovering Islam*, Ahmed, while examining the impact of Western colonialism on Muslim societies, makes categorical anti-colonial statements: colonial rule was "an unmitigated disaster" and no arguments "about Europe providing railways and the telegraph, or maintaining law and order, can conceal or assuage this fact." Colonialism, Ahmed argues, corrupted "the Islamic ideal" by "contorting" it (Ahmed 1988, 117). "The Islamic ideal" which was contorted by Western colonialism, however, remains an un-examined but contested invocation of an idealized past with the original Arab leaders providing, according to Ahmed, "the highest and best form of Muslim behaviour" (Ahmed 1988, 31). What this best form of Muslim behaviour is is not elaborated by Ahmed. He imagines the past as unproblematic and the invocation of the Islamic ideal operates in an ambivalent fashion and more often than not undermines his own arguments. Ahmed's critique of the "unmitigated disaster" of European colonialism turns upon itself because of his apologism for Islamic conquests. For Ahmed, "Muslim history and society are not free of ignorance and tyranny [but these] are Muslim lapses, not Islamic qualities" (1988, 10). To fix the essence of Islam in his discourse, Ahmed deploys the same verses of the Quran which he cited in *Pieces of Green* (discussed above): "there is no compulsion in religion" (Surah 2: Verse 256) and "your religion for you and mine for me" (Surah 109: Verse 6) (1988, 10). Ahmed's Islam transcends history and becomes an eternal text, possessing one immutable essence of peace, compassion, generosity and leniency. But implicit in the avowal of these benign attributes is the idea of the power of leniency and the subject of compassion. It is the Muslim subject who remains the subject *capable* of extending leniency. The non-Muslim Other has to function as the receptacle of Muslim leniency and this

relationship of power cannot be imagined in an inverse order in the domain of safe scholarship.

The idea of a lenient and peaceful Sufi Islam, as deployed by Ahmed, is not a critical intervention against the oppressive interpretations of Islam but rather operates as an ancillary discourse to the punitive and carceral logic of religious essence. In another book titled *Islam Today: A Short Introduction to the Muslim World* (Ahmed 1999), Ahmed justifies the Islamic punishment of amputating hands with the following words:

> Islamic punishment rests on two assumptions: first, rules are laid down for the maximum limits of the punishment for a particular crime which is designed to discourage its repetition. For instance, the punishment of cutting a thief's hand freezes crime. Because this is practiced in Saudi Arabia, it is still possible to see shopkeepers leaving their shops unattended during prayer time without any fear of theft…The second assumption is that, once the maximum ceiling of punishment has been determined, the spirit of Islam dictates its usage. Compassion and kindness are underlined; the spirit of mercy and balance runs as a theme throughout the Quran (Ahmed 1999, 145).

The above passage effectively demonstrates that Ahmed's argument in favor of Sufi compassion and *sulh-e-kul* does not mobilize itself as a critical practice but instead seeks to perpetuate existing social configurations. His conceptualization of peace (*sulh-e-kul*) does not question the limits of the carceral as authorized and prescribed by the Islamic scriptural. In this way, Ahmed's construction of Sufic peace functions as an auxiliary discourse to the law of the market and governmental control over the circulation of capital in the punitive economy. Ahmed's choice of the market, the site of commodity exchange, to situate his explanation of the moral illustrates that his scholarship (re)inscribes the metaphysical limits in order to facilitate the uninterrupted flow of physical commodities according to the established logic of capital.

The task of the critical Muslim intellectual, as Edward Said argues in his *Representations of the Intellectual,* is not to eulogize Islam but to launch "an interpretation of Islam stressing its complex, heterodox nature" (Said 1994, 29). Ahmed, on the contrary, not only uncritically accepts the juridicial and social logic of *hadd* (the limit) but also essentializes the *hadud* (plural for *hadd*) without acknowledging the fact that the *hadud* are at best contested categories within Islam. Like all

other concepts and categories, the penal logic of *hadd* is a disputed, challenged, often revised and revisable category. According to An-Na'im, the sources of the *hadud* are traditionally *The Quran* and the Sunnah, the set of examples derived from the lived and verbal life of the Prophet, but both of these sources are diverse and defy essentialist explanations and are not universally applicable within a particular social organization (An-Na'im 1990, 101-136). If the source of the hadud is *The Quran*, An-Na'im argues, there is "little guidance in the relevant verses as to the legal definition and specific ingredients of each *hadd*" (An-Na'im 1990, 109). And if the source of the *hadud* is taken to be the Sunnah, or the life of the Prophet, there are some crimes for which the Prophet did not implement any punishment in some instances: for example the crime of drinking alcohol, an offence according to the orthodox jurisprudence (An-Na'im 1990, 108). The above-mentioned contrastive arguments of An-Naim effectively demonstrate that, like other systems of social organization, Islam consists of highly contested social constructs which rarely fossilize into unalterable conclusions. Ahmed's construction of Islam operates in order to reinforce what is at best an imagined ideal and does not correspond to the multiplicities of the world. By subscribing to the imagined Islam, Ahmed's safe scholarship perpetuates the existing modalities of unfreedom in postcolonial Islamic spaces.

Ahmed's celebration of Islamic punishments as conducive to the unhindered flow of commodities displays his refusal to engage with the text of the world as an effect of social organization. The relationship between morality and economic exchange is not autotelic but the result of a specific type of social contract which is often challenged. The social contract that Ahmed accepts as a given and as an adequate justification for the inscription of morality is only valid if all the subjects within a particular social configuration subscribe to it. The moral contract between the social configuration and the subject, as Nietzsche has argued in his *On the Genealogy of Morals*, is a contract between the creditor and the debtor and seeks to organize "the fundamental forms of buying, selling, exchange, wheeling and dealing" (Nietzsche 1996, 45). By uncritically accepting the social contract, Ahmed implicitly supports the notion that the Islamic social configuration, in his example Saudi Arabia, is a flawless creditor to its subjects and, therefore, possesses the right to penalize its subjects for not returning the social debt of morality. The fact that Saudi Arabia creates countless conditions of unfreedom for its subjects and migrant workers (Fédération Internationale des Ligues des Droits de l'Homme 2003) renders the state a spurious creditor in the

moral and social contract and undermines the claim of the Islamic state to demand morality and to penalize its subjects. Moreover, the presence of non-Muslim minorities in Islamic societies further problematizes the right of the Islamic state to extract penalty: "the fundamental Islamic principles of freedom of religion and justice in government clearly indicate that Islamic penal measures and should not be imposed on non-Muslims against their will" (An-Na'im 1990, 115). Exceptions, multiplicities, slippages, fissures and aporias abound within Islamic penological and governmental discourses and make singular interpretations convenient fabrications. As An-Na'im argues "it may seem extremely unlikely that non-Muslims and secularist Muslims would ever accept *hudud* and *qisas* punishments" (An-Na'im 1990, 136). Ahmed's safe scholarship mobilizes itself by excluding ambivalences, textual constructions and contestations within Islam and the way in which dominant constructions of Islam have produced oppressive consequences. By marginalizing the multiple contestations that take place within Islam at each discursive nexus, his project contributes towards a further entrenchment of the conditions of unfreedom that prevail in some Islamic spaces.

Ahmed's work revalidates the dominant and orthodox constructions of Islam through sociological, apparently "neutral" and descriptive terms which, without interrogating the politics of their neutrality, speak in the name of Islam. In his book *Toward Islamic Anthropology: Definitions, Dogma and Directions*, Ahmed propounds the argument in favour of Islamizing anthropology because the discipline of anthropology in its present configuration is inextricably linked with Western imperialism (Ahmed 1986, 56). Islamic anthropology, according to Ahmed, is "the study of Muslim groups by scholars committed to the universalistic principles of Islam" and these Islamic principles are "humanity, knowledge, tolerance" (Ahmed 1986, 56). It is not discussed whether and how these categories can exist in non-Islamic social formations, and if non-Islamic social formations can display these humanistic categories, how Islam can claim these categories as its differentiating privilege. Ahmed's argument in favour of Islamizing anthropology does not produce a new configuration of Islam and assumes the Islamic order of things as already given and definitive: for "the Muslim, the rules of marriage, inheritance and the entire code — covering the most intimate details of human behaviour — are laid down explicitly" (1986, 57). By regarding the categories of analysis as autotelic and eternally valid, Ahmed ossifies Islam as the Other of the West and, as a result, reproduces the effects of Orientalism while

constructing Islamic concepts as eternally fixed. In Ahmed's construction of Islam, the "organization of society and behaviour of its members are predetermined." This blessing of predetermination, Ahmed argues, reduces "the dilemmas of this world" and renders debates among different Islamic schools of thought "merely academic exercises" (1986, 57). Ahmed's homogenization of Islam as a source of differentiation from the West produces ambivalent effects. Ahmed's Islam is an Islam of eternal stasis where intellectual debate is relegated to the margins of society. Paradoxically, this argument is posited while an academic discipline is being proven in need of Islamization. After its Islamization, if we extend Ahmed's argument to its logical limit, anthropology would enter the realm of silence because it would become a "merely academic" enterprise inscribed by the eternal validity of Islamic prescriptive discourses. In Ahmed's schema, the task of the intellectual, then, is to describe the effects of the divine text of Islam, and to remain circumscribed and contained by its prescribed limits. The divine text possesses a unified voice that can produce difference but is not subject to difference: there is "only one Islam," Ahmed argues, "…and there can be only one Islam, but there are many Muslim societies" (1986, 58). If there were only one Islam, there would not be any sectarian division, any linguistic and racial discrimination among Muslim subjects belonging to different postcolonial sates. By declaring the numerical plurality of Islamic spaces as external to Islam, Ahmed putatively produces an immutable essence of Islam that maintains its sameness through geographical and cultural difference. Islam, in Ahmed's construction, remains similar to itself when encountering plurality and difference. Islam, for Ahmed, is an empire of similitude in a world of difference. Yet, other Muslim intellectuals do not concur with Ahmed: like "other religions, Islam is not a generic essence, but a nominal entity that conjoins, by means of a name, a variety of societies, cultures, and polities (Al-Azmeh 1993, 60).

Ahmed's project of constructing an immutable essence of Islam is predicated upon the Weberian concept of the ideal type. There are numerous references to the ideal type in Ahmed's work. For example, in *Toward Islamic Anthropology,* after propounding his arguments supporting the grand singularity of Islam, Ahmed argues that, in order to create a "perfect contemporary Muslim society," Muslim intellectuals need to "refer to the original ideal Muslim society at the time of the Prophet" (Ahmed 1986, 64). Similarly, in *Discovering Islam*, Ahmed posits that contemporary Islamic problems — such as the stereotypes created by Western Orientalism and the meaning of the Islamic past —

can be solved by invoking "a model, an ideal type." For Ahmed, "Max Weber's concept of the ideal or pure type is a useful one" and the ideal type of society is "seventh century Arabian society" (Ahmed 1988, 3). The reason for invoking an ideal type is that "the ideal provides an inbuilt mechanism in Muslim society for renewal and revival of faith" (Ahmed 1988, 4). Ahmed deploys the concept of the ideal type to assign singularity to the multiplicity of Islams because categories such as "Pakistani Islam [and] Malay Islam" distort the real Islam (Ahmed 1988, 4-5). Thus, Ahmed chooses the Weberian concept of the ideal type as a cohesive and centralizing strategy without examining the political ramifications of the concept itself because, in Weber's formulation, the concept of the ideal type is a normative technique of analysis. In his book *The Methodology of the Social Sciences,* Weber theorizes the ideal type as a technique for measuring deviation or similitude. The function of the ideal type, Weber argues, is "the comparison with empirical reality in order to establish divergences or similarities, to describe them with the *most unambiguously intelligible concepts*, and to understand and explain them causally" (Weber 1949, 43 original emphasis). Because the ideal type is constructed by the analyst as a normative or measuring device, it is an idealization for the purpose of analysis. As Lewis A. Coser has argued, an ideal type "never corresponds to concrete reality but always moves one step away from it [because] there has never been a full empirical embodiment of the Protestant Ethic, of the charismatic leader" (Coser 223).

        At this point, it is important to note that it is possible to interpret from two distinct perspectives Ahmed's use of the Weberian conceptual tool of the ideal type for describing the prophetic era. From one perspective, it is possible to view it as a strategic postcolonial appropriation of a Western philosophical concept. From the other, his deployment of the ideal type can be read as a hierarchizing tool that inferiorizes the present by situating the ideal in the always receding Islamic past. In Ahmed's work, this idealization of a past that only has a discursively mediated link with the present seems to operate as a device for disengaging the intellect from the present. To support his use of Weber to idealize the Islamic past, Ahmed cites the following *hadith*: the "best of my people are my generation; then they that come after them, then they that come after them" (Ahmed 1988, 33). Thus, by selecting a particular *hadith* and syncretizing it with the Weberian theory of the ideal type Ahmed constructs an interpretive grid for Islamic history in a politically disengaged manner. The ideal social configuration has already passed and the future is emptied of all forms of radicality because, as

Ahmed's argument and selective use of *hadith* implies, it is always already a "deviation" from the ideal. In this way, Ahmed has appropriated a Weberian concept in order to pre-empt an engaged politics of the future. Thus, the use of the ideal type to describe seventh century Islam permits Ahmed to construct Islamic history as a linear degradation and, thereby, absolves his intellectual engagement with the material conditions of the present. Moreover, by employing the concept of the ideal type as an *a priori* category of analysis, Ahmed circumscribes his critique because the process of identifying a particular social organization or effect as the ideal type is not an apolitical process. As Foucault has argued, the ideal type becomes ideal post factum and, therefore, is the product of certain discourses: "the 'ideal type' is a category of historical interpretation; it is a structure for the historian who seeks to integrate, *after the fact*, a certain set of data: it allows him to recapture an 'essence'" (Foucault 1991, 80 emphasis added). In this way, by designating the seventh century Islamic social configuration as the ideal type, Ahmed's discourse posits a safe an idealized/idealizable essence to Islam, thereby relegating Islam to the realm of metaphysical purity instead of the worldly mutations and revisions. For Ahmed, the idea of Islamic identity is predicated upon similitude: Islam has to be similar to its essence as imagined by the producer of safe scholarship to be Islam. In Ahmed's schema, the worldly changes, revisions, and mutations are the Other to the divine text of Islam. Ahmed's version of Islam is situated outside history— in the safe realm of the beyond and the ideal. Islam, as constructed by Akbar S. Ahmed, is in this world but not of this world and, therefore, is apolitical.

The desire to construct an Islamic similitude, the empire of the Islamic Same, manifests itself as the grand narrative of his book *Postmodernism and Islam: Predicament and Promise* (Ahmed 1992) which becomes Ahmed's most extended analysis of the contemporary interaction between Islam and the West. For Ahmed, the contemporary West as a civilization is signified by the media and its global dominance. The Western media represents Islam with Orientalist stereotypes and the representation of Islam, Ahmed argues, betrays homologies to the colonial encounter in the 19th century. Ahmed does not specify the geographical location of the colonial encounter he broaches. In Ahmed's homogenized version of the Islamic world, the whole Muslim civilization was resisting Western colonial aggression "from Sudan in Africa to Swat in Asia" but the superior weapons of the West, "the latest, most deadly guns," contributed to Western dominance (1992, 44). According to Ahmed, despite the colonial dominance of the West, an amorphous

category called "Muslim commitment" survives (1992, 44). Ahmed does not specify the object of the commitment but the argument seems to posit a singular Muslim identity that directs its commitment to preserving its similitude while interacting with the West as its civilizational Other. In Ahmed's formulation, the desire to maintain the Self of Islam mobilizes itself un-problematically across the linguistic, ethnic and cultural multiplicities that constitute the Muslim world.

At the next stage of Ahmed's argument, the homology between nineteenth century colonial aggression and twentieth century Western media is further examined. The temporally unaltered "Muslim commitment" revives itself in England after the publications of Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* and, in its present manifestation, Muslim commitment is equipped not with swords against colonial guns but with match boxes against the Western media: once "again the most advanced Western technology met the Muslim faith, once again it was a massacre, this time of the Muslim image in the West" (Ahmed 1992, 44). Ahmed's argument is typified in the sentence we "witness again two mutually uncomprehending systems collide; monumental contempt and arrogance on one side, blind faith and fury on the other" (Ahmed 1992, 44). Ahmed's construction of the problem of the clash of civilizations posits a binary of mutual incomprehension. In Ahmed's argument, the West is essentialized as a civilization that displays "monumental contempt and arrogance" towards its Islamic Other and Islam as a signifier of "blind faith and fury" towards the secularist West. The terms of Ahmed's analysis assume a "neutral" and "descriptive" position as they analyse the interaction between Islam and the contemporary West. This assumed neutrality of Ahmed's analysis does not inhabit an autotelic rational space but situates itself within the interpretive grid established by the scientific-rational organization of the social. Ahmed's "neutral" position does not carve a new speaking position for postcolonial Islamic subjectivities because the terms of the analysis reproduce the existing power-relations without examining their own speaking position. For example, Ahmed's critique of the ways in which power operates in postcolonial Islamic spaces does not question the legitimacy of power within contemporary Islamic social formations; instead Ahmed merely notes the "failures" of the power: "Muslim rulers are failing in the need to feed and clothe the poor. The greatest emphasis in Islam is given to the less privileged. This, alas, remains a neglected area of attention as leaders prefer to fulminate against their opponents" (Ahmed 1992, 45). The use of Islam's emancipatory potential by Ahmed operates in the same way as the various elite structures in Pakistan deploy the term

"Islam" to legitimize their authority and to undermine political processes. In many postcolonial Islamic spaces, the signifier "Islam" is deployed to legitimize the most obfuscatory and repressive political regimes: in Pakistan, for example, General Ziaul Haq declared the participation of political parties in the elections un-Islamic (Akhtar 2000, 165). In this way, Ahmed's deployment of "Islam" — a multivalent signifier which resists a fixed signified — perpetuates the present conditions of unfreedom in Islamic spaces. It is important to note here that the present critique of Ahmed does not attempt to preclude emancipatory uses of the signifier "Islam" but to examine the politics of deploying "Islam" as a tool for the maintenance of the status quo. The uses of various political discourses are subsumed under the political structures which maintain the status quo to perpetuate their material dominance. According to Rai Shakil Akhtar, "Islam" in Pakistan, along with other systems of social (re)organization, such as socialism, democracy, and modernism, remains contained within the feudal structures which, Akhtar argues, are resistant to democratization or radicalization of the socius (2000, 213, 219). Thus, Ahmed's version of Islam remains unchallenging because it limits itself to the "failures" of so-called Muslim rulers without examining the ways in which the "failures" are produced and perpetuated.

Similarly, Ahmed's construction of the contemporary West in *Postmodernism and Islam* reduces the multiplicity of the West to its mediatic simulacrum: "Western civilization is now the dominant, universal expression of humanity. Its most powerful weapon lies in the media, especially television" (1992, 101). Though Ahmed problematizes "the West" as a volatile signifier, the binary of the West and the East remains operative in most of Ahmed's work, including *Postmodernism and Islam* attempts to offer a different binaristic interpretation of the world: the division between what Ahmed describes as "exploding" and "imploding" societies (1992, 102-103). The "exploding" societies, Ahmed argues, are "reaching out, expanding, bubbling with scientific ideas, economic plans, political ambitions, cultural expression," while the "imploding" ones are "collapsing on themselves with economic, political and social crises" (1992, 103). For Ahmed, Western civilization is "exploding" and the "imploding" parts of the world are "in no position seriously to challenge or offer plausible alternatives to exploding civilizations for world leadership" (1992, 103). In this world of "imploding" and "exploding" civilizations, only Islam, according to Ahmed, is capable of subverting the dominance of the "exploding" civilization of the West because "the Muslim world offers a global perspective with a potential for a role on the world stage" (1992, 103).

The "global perspective" then is defined as being resistant or critical of the West and the Islamic world obtains this "global perspective" because of its leaders such as "Gaddafi to Khomeini to Saddam" and its oil production. In this way, Muslim spaces, as Ahmed posits, are "poised both to implode and explode" (1992, 103). The ambivalence of being implosive and explosive and the fissures that constitute the imagined singularity of the Islamic space are not examined.

Ahmed's analysis of Islamic spaces as resisting or subverting the Western Other performs two safe functions: (a) it homogenizes the Islamic world as the eternally resistant Other of the West; (b) it constructs the leaders of Islamic countries as representatives of the people who are equally resistant to the dominance of the West. The West as an "exploding" civilization is posited as the Other of Islam which, in turn, is defined as the only civilization that is capable of "imploding" and "exploding" simultaneously and is constructed as the possessor of effective resistance and "global perspective." If the West is an "exploding" civilization and Islam is simultaneously imploding and exploding at the same time, does it signify that Islam is half Western and half non-Western? After the attacks on September 11, 2001 on the Twin Towers, does the West become an imploding civilization and Islam an exploding civilization or is it the Western media that represents Islam as an exploding civilization? Even if one accepts the validity of the metaphors of implosion and explosion and the binary divide they are supposed to represent, one still observes that, throughout this analysis by Ahmed, the material conditions of postcolonial Islam remain un-examined and the desire to speak in the name of Islam leads to a homogenized and idealized interpretation of Islam.

The central assumption operative in Ahmed's *Postmodernism and Islam* and other works is a belief in the transparency of representation: Ahmed takes the possibility of representing Islam as a given. Islam is supposed to be an essence that reveals its eternal singularity through various social forms and the representation of Islam corresponds with Islam, a monolithic and simple category, in an unproblematic and transparent manner. For example, in the chapter "Culture and Change" in *Postmodernism and Islam,* Ahmed reproduces the binaristic opposition between Islam and the West but the objects that are chosen to illustrate the opposition reflect the reductive and stereotypical ways in which the media represents the civilizational divide: the first section of the chapter is titled "Your Jeans for You, My Robes for Me" (1992, 192). Ahmed chooses to produce a synecdochic

relationship between "jeans" and the West as a civilization. Ahmed argues that jeans "so universally popular in the West, have failed to catch on in the Muslim world" because "Islam is specific about modesty in men and women" (1992, 192). Because, for Ahmed, jeans as a dress is intended to indicate "the contours of the torso" it "violates" the Islamic injunctions of modesty (1992, 193). Ahmed posits the idea of modesty as an essential feature of Islam in such a way that it appears to be an uncontested idea across the entire temporal and geographical spectrum of Islam and a "true" representation of Islam. By subscribing to the concept of modesty without defining it and without mentioning the contested terrain that this concept inhabits in Islamic thought, Ahmed produces a discourse which is similar to the ways in which Abul Ala Maududi, the founder of Jamaat-e-Islami (Islamic Party) deploys the concept of modesty as a technology of civilizational differentiation and re-inscription of the figure of the Muslim as a modest subject. Maududi, in his book *Purdah*, portrays the West as the Other because it is a site of licentiousness, immodesty, depravity:

> Self-indulgence, avoidance of matrimonial responsibilities, indifference to family life and instability of the marriage bond have combined to almost kill the natural mother love, spiritually the purest and the highest of the female sentiments, the basis of not only civilization but of the survival of the human species itself…In spite of all legal restrictions, every young boy and girl in the United States possesses anti-conceptionist (sic) information and contraceptive drugs and appliances are freely sold in the market (Maududi 1972, 68).

Similar to the way in which Maududi deploys images of hyper-sexuality constituting the essence of the West (Maududi 1972), Akbar S. Ahmed selects a dress item to construct an essentialized image of Islam: both authors define the West through a negativity—the lack of modesty— and Islam through a positivity— the presence of modesty. For Ahmed, the jeans are "universally present" in the West whereas, for Maududi, it is the universal hyper-sexuality in the West that needs to be Othered. Both authors construct their own cultural identity in contradistinction with the West. The West becomes an identity technology, a house of mirrors for the East to find its inverted image. Islam is defined in negative terms: it is what the West is not. The Islamic Self is predicated upon the lack imagined in the Other. The Other of Islam, even if it did not exist, would have to be constructed so that the Islamic Self can imagine itself as a distinct and singular monad. Ahmed informs his readers before writing

"Your Jeans for You, My Robes for Me" that the chapter "discusses the dangers of crossing cultural boundaries through the examples of Madonna and Rushdie" (1992, 192). The anxiety of becoming Other to the Islamic Self permeates the text while the text itself, without any hint of self-reflexive irony, is written in the language of the non-Islamic Other. The author has already crossed the cultural/linguistic boundaries to "discuss the dangers of crossing cultural boundaries" without risking the familiar territory of thought. Safe scholarship invokes the name of danger without endangering the status quo in any substantial way.

In his latest book titled *Islam Under Siege*, which is written as a response to the contemporary violent reconfigurations of the world after September 11, 2001, Akbar S. Ahmed asks Muslims to visit "synagogues, churches, and mosques" (2003, 169) and launch a process of "interfaith dialogue" (2003, 134). In this book, Ahmed constructs a different prescription for the Muslim subject and the way he or she should interact with the non-Muslim subject: "Muslims need to place themselves in the place of the non-Muslims who see them as a threatening and anarchic force…The Muslim world needs to institute and ensure the success of democracy" (2003, 153). Though the prescription is different, the alterity of the Other is recognized as a valid mode of existence, the technology of identifying the Other remains Abrahamic monotheistic religion. The Muslim subject is "urged" to visit synagogues and churches and launch "interfaith dialogue" but the Muslim subject is not urged to interact with the Kalash people and recognize their alterity because they are outside the Abrahamic monotheism. Though Ahmed's scholarship at times acquires the semblance of critique, it does not radicalize itself by offering any dangerous revisions to the structure of Islamic subjectivity. Hence, it becomes possible to argue, after Foucault's theorization of critique cited above (1997), that Ahmed's scholarship does not become critique in any significant way because it does not introduce the possibility of desubjectification of the Muslim subject as the subject of leniency and compassion. The capacity to extend compassion is not a sign of the Sufic annihilation of the Self, as celebrated by Ahmed, but a sign of self-referentiality and self-validation. The non-Muslim Other, within and without Islamic spaces, continues to haunt Ahmed's safe construction of Muslim subjectivity.

The Muslim subject is not an extra-historical category and is an effect of certain discourses which consolidate the idea of a Muslim self differently in different ages and location. Moreover, the contribution of the British colonial intervention in constructing a Muslim self in South

Asia is difficult to ignore since Ahmed's present constituency is postcolonial Pakistan. The idea of religion as a marker of identity in South Asia is directly enmeshed in the history of colonial governmental technologies and juridical institutions such as the introduction by Warren Hastings of two different sets of legal codes for Hindus and Muslims: the Hindu Law and the Mohammedan Law (see Hastings 1772 cited in Rudolph and Rudolph 2001, 390). In the contemporary world, it has become difficult to speak of a unified Muslim Self without repressing its specific histories of contaminations, influences, constructions, and revisions. Because of the contaminated histories of the definitions of the "proper" Muslim, many postcolonial Islamic states have to contain the dispersal of the Muslim Self by introducing legally authorized definitions of the Muslim subject. The producer of safe scholarship does not challenge the official constructions of the "proper" subject but instead circulates them and validates them by uncritically and repeatedly inserting them in the process of knowledge production, thereby assigning them the effect of truth.

Conclusion:

It is possible to question the critical imperative, or the imperative of critique, that underlies the arguments presented in this article: why is it necessary for the intellectual to produce interrogative and critical scholarship? What are the dangers which are perpetuated by safe scholarship? Why is the production of critique so important? The answers to these questions are complex but necessary if the analysis presented here has to have any significance. The attempt to answer these questions involves two inter-connected arguments. The first argument is informed by Edward Said's formulation of the role of the intellectual from the Islamic world in *The Representations of the Intellectual*:

> Islam is the majority religion after all, and simply to say that 'Islam is the way', levelling most dissent and difference, to say nothing of widely divergent interpretations of Islam, is not, I believe, the intellectual's role.…[The task] for the intellectual in Islam is a revival of *ijtihad*, personal interpretation (Said 1994, 29-30).

Ahmed does not introduce a personal interpretation of Islam but instead foregrounds certain aspects of Islam which construct postcolonial Islamic spaces in an uncritical way: Islam seems to subsume every other form of lived reality. In this context, Ayesha Jalal's distinction between Islam as a doctrine and Islam as a culture can be helpful (1990, 287-294). In Ahmed's work, Islam as a doctrine displaces Islam as a culture along

with other non-Islamic realities within those spaces where Muslims constitute a majority. In this way, Ahmed's Islam is not an egalitarian Islam despite its attempts to simulate generosity and leniency. Moreover, Islam, as constructed by Ahmed, maintains its sameness through different histories and locations and also becomes the Other of the West.

The second argument in support of critique is inspired by Foucault's theorization that critique operates as a challenge for governmentality (1997, 23-82). The modern forms of governmentality in postcolonial Islamic spaces are operative through institutions created by colonial administrations. It means that, without the production of critique, the Muslims in postcolonial Islamic societies will only attain a mere repetition of the colonial forms of governmentality administered through the indigenous elite. And, because contemporary Islamic societies do not have their own forms of governmentality, the relationship between the Muslim subject and the governmental forms is not adequately addressed when the Muslim intellectual launches tokenistic demands for governmental leniency, democracy or human rights. Postcolonial Islam has to develop its own forms of social organization in order to deliver social justice to its subjects (here justice should be understood as an instrument for the realization of the potential of the subject not as a limit or *hadd*).

Islam has the potential to introduce what Anouar Majid has described as a "polycentric world" (2000, 132-156) without acquiring the status of the civilizational Other of the West. But, without a system of critical knowledge production of its own, Islam will abnegate its own historical newness and radicality and, with it, the opportunity to introduce a new way of organizing social life. In its present form, the intellectual who produces safe scholarship about Islam and for Muslims remains complicit with the Western and non-Western elite. Disengaged from the lives of ordinary Muslims because of the total absence of any liberatory interpretive framework and devoid of any radicalizing vision, the intellectual as a producer of safe scholarship is probably one contributing factor in the status of Muslims as being passive consumers of the products of global knowledge economy.

Notes

1. The report *The Subtle Subversion: the State of Curricula and Textbooks in Pakistan* by A. H. Nayyar and Ahmed Salim (Nayyar and Salim n.d.) was simultaneously published in print and electronic format by Sustainable Development Policy Institute, Islamabad and can be viewed on the website <www.sdpi.org>. Both the formats do not have the publication date but it can be guessed from the text of the report that it was published after 2002 because it includes critique Pakistani textbooks published till 2002.

2. At this point, Ahmed does not provide any references to other texts where the reader needs to find further information regarding Ahmed's idea of 'peace with all'.

3. For this perspective see V.S. Naipaul. *Beyond Belief: Journeys among the Converted Peoples*. New York, Random House, 1998.

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