

The Qu(ee)r'anic Verses:

A Close-Reading of Bilal Baig's *Acha Bacha*

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“aayegaa, aayegaa, aayegaa, aayegaa aayegaa aanewaalaa
aayegaa, aayegaa, aanewaalaa”

“Aayega Aanewala” is a Hindi song from the Bollywood film, *Mahal* (1949). The title of the song roughly translates to “He will come back” in English.

Bilal Baig's two act play entitled, *Acha Bacha* examines the story of Zaya and his transformation from a young child into a teenager and then into his twenties. The play focuses primarily on his sexual awakening as a gay man, but it also delves into a myriad of other topics, such as the on-again off-again friendship he maintains with Mubeen (or Moo/Kusra) over the years as well as his complicated relationship with his mother (simply referred to as Ma in the play). *Acha Bacha* was initially workshopped in a playwriting class taught by two time Governor General's award winner, Judith Thompson at The University of Guelph. She introduced him to me, as I was editing a collection of South Asian Canadian plays. I encouraged him to apply to the Paprika Festival, as he was of eligible age at the time (in his early twenties).

The play was selected for the youth theatre festival, and was further dramaturged by Governor General's award winner, Djanet Sears who along with Thompson was impressed with the script. Baig has recently informed me that Brendan Healy, former Artistic Director of Buddies in Bad Times Theatre will be directing a workshop of the piece in the near future. This

is his first play, and it hasn't so far received a full production or been published. For this purpose of this paper, I will examine the overt and covert connotations between the depictions of queer sexuality and the environment of Islamic religious discourse, rhetoric and identity that also frames the piece. *Acha Bacha* (a Hindi term, which translates as 'good boy' or 'well-behaved child' in English) opens with a scene that depicts a jerking off encounter and another of oral sex. The latter sex is consensual, the other is not. One takes place in a taxi, whereupon a taxi driver takes advantage of a visibly intoxicated Zaya ("He takes SWEET BOY's hand and places it on his thigh. When they drive off, SWEET BOY looks straight ahead and starts to rub TAXI DRIVER's thigh." [Baig 2]); The other takes place, with Zaya's Muslim boyfriend, Salim as . In the latter case, their episode of fellatio is punctuated by an interruption by Zaya's sister. This familial interjection into the play's sexual play is met by Salim's declaration that, "No, he's with me! I'm a man! We're both gay! And Muslim! [Kisses the other nipple]" (4).

A constant refrain in the play is that homosexuality and Islam aren't compatible and are fundamentally different conceptions, but instead are intrinsically linked to one another in a variety of ways. Queering Islam/ Islam queered is a made to reflect a natural way of expressing one's own innate nature and beliefs; one that runs counter to the various repressive homophobic elements characterized by such parental figures as Maulana, and Ma, as well as the taxi driver. This is expressed by way of, for instance, Zaya's sense of play. Both Zaya and Mubeen (or Moo) enact out fantasy sequences from the basement of a mosque in Toronto, that Moo's father is the head of. One such fantasy, invokes the setting of the mosque's

basement as a site of same-sex pleasure framed within the confines of the religious environment, “Don’t tell his daddy but I want him to touch my pee-pee so much up there. Don’t tell his daddy but when he touch my pee-pee before, it got all big. So big. Don’t tell his daddy but there’s so much lava inside me going vaah vaaah vaaaah I wanna show Kusra!” (16).

Maulana who leads the prayer, and holds Islamiyat classes there is contrasted with Zaya and Moo’s sexual fantasies involving ejaculated semen erupting like lava from their penises; “And guess what maybe maybe I have so much I can make his whole basement on fire where all the bad guy stuff happen and when his daddy see he just gonna get so sad. He gonna hafta take more of of everyone’s money to fix the whole basement and then maybe the masjid get close at least for a little while. Oh my god and that means I can play Scary Islands all day and dance and smile and tryta fly! And Kusra gotta tell him I did it. I make the whole basement on fire cuz I got a big pee-pee. Tell him that!” (16-7). As well, Zaya and Mubeen enact out superhero tropes, whereupon Zaya needs to be rescued from the erupting volcano that is the mosque’s basement (which is akin to their swollen penises), but can only do so through a kiss, “Oh but but I dunno how to. Mr. Doctor doesn’t even know how! Hmmm... Maybe... Maybe... True love’s kiss? You want that? You think that’ll save you? Okay! Here it goes! [Sits next to CHUNIYA and leans over to kiss him]” (19).

Baig conveys the site of the mosque as a space of same-sex desire and intimacy that is represented also in a spiritual light. This conjoining of Islam and queerness conjures up an interruptive force in the machinations that govern the running of the mosque. It furthermore

presents the views of the iman and parental figure (both him and Ma) as observers of a perverted interpretation of what constitutes a 'good Musilman' (or acha bacha) that they'd like Zaya and Mubeen to be, as Ma states, "I want him no dance. I want him, meh sirf usko ek acha bacha, acha Musilman, bana na chahathi hoon. Humare religion ki values usko sikhana chahathi hoon. I want him good boy. Likhen meri paas koi – " (14). Maulana uses the Islamiyat lessons to entrap and prey on children (including his son) that attend the classes as he purposefully times a recording of Bollywood music, for instance, to play during prayer, "*They go into rukhu: bodies bent over, hands on knees. CHUNIYA starts to hear upbeat, Bollywood music playing lightly from another room upstairs. They go back into their standing position. CHUNIYA starts to fidget, trying to resist the urge of dancing as the music gets louder. MAULANA opens his eyes slightly and notices*" (12). Zaya's dancing to the Bollywood tune, while others are conducting separas, causes him to break out into laughter, which is used by Maulana to punish the child. The concept of dancing is figured as a tool in Zaya's sexual awakening especially as it counters dominant narratives of masculinity that his parental and religious figureheads espouse.

Ma attempts to cure Zaya of his feminine behavior by pleading with Maulana, the iman at the mosque, to make him into a 'man.' Maulana agrees to have private sessions with Zaya (or 'sweet boy' as he's referred to at the beginning of the play and as a nickname garnered to him in his childhood),

MA:

I want him no dance. I want him, meh sirf usko ek acha bacha, acha Musilman, bana na chahathi hoon. Humare religion ki values usko sikhana chahathi hoon. I want him good boy. Likhen meri paas koi –

MAULANA:

Meh kar sakta hoon. [Opens his agenda.] Meh uske liye private Islamiyat classes dey sakta hoon... Har Monday, Wednesday aur Friday at five p.m.? Aur Sunday full day is group Islamiyat, boys and girls mix.

(14).

The irony here is that Maulana uses the classes to become closer to Zaya, and encourages him to dance (a stand-in for his effeminacy) as it sexually arouses him, “Pehle dance karo. Mere liye, okay? I want to see it. *He takes the separa and throws it away. MAULANA sits down and watches CHUNIYA. He is uncomfortable dancing at first but later relaxes. Garmi lag rahi hai?* [Beat.] Eh, tumko garmi lag rahi hai? Hot? Uthar do. Kameez uthar do. *CHUNIYA reluctantly takes off his shirt and keeps dancing. Very nice. Bahothi acha. Zabardust! Idhar aao. Eh, idhar aao. Darna mat. No worry. Just for me. Mere saamne dance karo*” (25). This is further detailed through using the pretense of ‘free’ private classes in extorting Zaya’s mother for money for his own personal financial gain; an insight that Mubeen later acknowledges in the play as he accused his father of stealing funds from unsuspecting members of the mosque; “If your mom or anyone ever donated to this masjid, tell them my dad used that fucking money to pay off his bills and credit cards and shit cuz he’s that fucked. So that’s why I’m saying fuck this whole basement, you know man. LIKE FUCK THIS WHOLE BASEMENT GOD DAMN IT!” (40).

The sexual fantasia played out in the basement of the mosque, figure Maulana into the scenario, as there's a demarcated line created by the bad guys and the good guys as Zaya exclaims, "Kusra walk with me and we get push in the snow together only Kusra fall first so I fall on him so he save me like that too. He say when he older he gonna beat up the bad guy in the world" (16). In the light of Maulana's authoritarian and oppressive presence, Zaya and Mubeen's penises figure as the erupting volcano, smothering Maulana, the iman, in lava or cum if you will. Zaya's mother's denunciation of his effeminacy, is compounded when she catches him adorning her jewellery and makeup whilst dancing in her bedroom, "*MA approaches CHUNIYA and pulls the veil off. She gasps and takes a step back when she sees him with all her jewellery on. Then, she gets angry. MA takes the veil and reaches for CHUNIYA's neck to take her necklaces back*" (17). His admission to her of his rape at the hands of a desi taxi driver in Toronto, signals her own violent homophobic reaction, similar to his dressing up in her attire, as an affront by Zaya, that in her eyes, not only connotes his homosexuality but also castigates him as not being an 'acha bacha,' 'good son' or 'good Musilman' as she says, "Tho he leave me because you. He know when you five how you are, how you talk, how you play with boy, how you dance aur wear my jewellery tho he leave me for it likhen I don't know I stay. Aur you ask it for bad thing because who you are. Har din, meh tumhare liye pray karti thi, every day meh ne Allah'tallah se kaha ke please make you be good boy, ab you be good boy. Likhen woh right tha. Meh sab kuch kar sakti hoon – aur sab kuch kiya – likhen you never be my good boy, good man, good Musilman. Ab jao yahan se. Jao aur phir woh mere liye aayega" (80-1).

However, what the play, adroitly accomplishes, is a subversion of the trope of moral authority based on conservative ideals. Ma, is initially constructed as a sympathetic figure only to become reflected as a manipulative, psychically stunted obstacle in Zaya's quest for spiritual guidance and enlightenment. Her health troubles that consistently land her in the hospital, aren't the result of a weakened heart and ill-caring and undevoted son, but a conscious self-destructive tendency to inflict harm onto herself, by intentionally falling down a steep staircase. Zaya eventually confronts her about this, saying,

ZAYA:

He left us twenty-two years ago and you've been throwing yourself down the stairs every year since but he never came back, ma. I was six ma, and Laila was eleven the first time you fell down, remember? We were just kids. What were you thinking?

MA:

Bas, Zaya! / Ab jao yahan se.

ZAYA:

We would run home from school every day because we thought if we left you for too long we might lose you. [Reaches for MA.] How could / you do that to us, ma?

(81).

Her rejection of Zaya, is further demonstrated by her still ever-present devotion to her husband, who had abandoned the family years earlier. She cites Zaya's apparent homosexual leanings at an early age as evidence that propelled her husband and Zaya's father to leave. The abandonment of her husband is connected to her own self-worth. Her life is consistently caught in the past, whereupon she's unable to move forward. This is most aptly illustrated through the Bollywood, *Aayega Aanevala* that she sings repeatedly throughout the course of the play – the title roughly translates as “He will come back.” Part of the mother's refusal to let her husband

go, is partially filtered through her conservative ideals which are driven by the opinions of fellow community and mosque members. Her portrayal, stands in stark comparison to Zaya's present-day partner, Salim whose mother was banished by community members for leaving her husband and son (a reversal of Zaya's father). She also left Islam, and stopped wearing the hijab, an element that Salim found uncomfortable and foreign; "We bumped into her one day, a couple of years ago actually. And that's when we found out she didn't identify as Muslim anymore. It was so weird seeing her without her hijab... She told us she didn't really believe in anything anymore. She said that. She was different. [Beat.] She's flying in to Montreal soon to take care of my dad for a bit cuz he's getting sick... And they're going to celebrate Eid together too so she invited me. And then he invited me. And I said no" (30).

However, she later returned back to the family and Islam, even though Salim remarked that it could be a sin to do so. Through Zaya's efforts, Salim found himself being connected to his mother and open to her way of living as she is supportive towards him. This progression of their relationship, one that is focused around a family that is LGBT inclusive and supportive, is in contrast to Zaya and his mother's eventual failed relationship that is perpetually figured as belonging in the past. Zaya eventually moves past the dissolution with his mother, by reflecting on and embracing ideals structured around Islam, that subvert the conservative ideals he's been brought up with. Those ideals imparted by Ma and the iman, view Allah as a foreign entity, one that is outside the self and governs over an obedience of laws and guidelines dictated through his name, which are unfamiliar to the young queer men. Allah is instead

perceived at the play's close, by Salim, as a being that resides within the person, and as a result is attuned to their own set of beliefs, and what is considered 'natural' or familiar to them as he states, "You know how they say we can't see Allah because He lives inside all of us? But I don't know about you but sometimes I can feel Him, when something good happens, I mean when something that's meant to be happens, you know? Am I making sense? Cuz that's the feeling I got – when I saw her – something inside my body, something big, something great, said „okay, this is right' you know?" (86). In this regard, Zaya's spiritual awakening, brought upon by consistent dreams of floating upwards towards the sky is illuminated in part, through his sexual awakening and his disavowal of the repressive elements in his life, from his mother, to the imam, to the taxi driver of his youth.

There's a monologue earlier in the play delivered by Maulana regarding how a mother went to him at the mosque to complain about her son not praying or reading the qu'ran; how she can make him be 'good'; "One of our sister come to advice for me two three week before. She has cute boy son don't pray. He don't read Qur'an, don't even touch it, don't even fast this month. And he seven year of age. My son nine aur he very good good boy. He collect the donation for this masjid so give donation please. Now what I say... Oh haan, this cute boy is very big problem but she want him to make good Musilman boy so I know how to. I know how to fix by teach how to prayer through separas in private, one-to-one, free of charge Islamiyat class" (10). Baig's subversion of this notion of 'good' and what quantifies 'goodness' is filtered throughout the text. It's referenced in the aforementioned passage regarding the notion of god

from within, but it's also determined through the concept of speaking up and utilizing one's voice for dissent. Mubeen constantly tells Zaya to 'speak up' about the abuse suffered by Maulana in the mosque's basement, as he says,

KUSRA:

Why didn'tja say nothing?

CHUNIYA:

What?

KUSRA:

In there! [Whispers.] When he touch you – why didn'tja say nothing? [Beat.] Hello!!! I'm axing you a question!

CHUNIYA:

[Beat.] I dunno.

KUSRA:

You gotta say something next time! Else it's gonna get worse... Trust me. I see lotsa the other kids before leaving here just crying and crying but they don't say nothing so he keeps on doing it. So you gotta say something next time, okay?

CHUNIYA:

Why don't he just stop?

(12-3).

This support aids Zaya in determining what is right and wrong outside the confines of the mosque, and away from its figurehead in the form of Maulana. The concept of 'praying' in itself is conceptualized through a double-entendre. Praying is akin to 'preying'; an act that explicitly links Maulana's leading the segregation to prayer, by also simultaneously preying on the children in his presence with the Islamiyat classes eventually being held in his bedroom. Zaya

himself is preyed upon by not just Maulana, but the taxi driver, and even the men on Craigslist who he receives money from;

I mean, I watch a lot of porn just so I'll know what to do when I get fucked. And so, there's this one that kind of haunts me cuz he's like thirteen – and I'm seventeen but he's like thirteen – only you don't realize it til the end when the camera finally zooms in on his face with cum all over it. So he's getting fucked in this RV van thing while it's moving and they're on a bed that like belongs to a five-year-old. I haven't been getting enough shifts lately and Mother's Day is coming up so I sold a couple of naked pictures of myself offa Craigslist. Laila and I are getting her a diamond ring cuz I know that's what she wants. I mean, they were only body shots and I'm seventeen so - but there was this one guy who said he loved that I look thirteen. But I'm seventeen..." (22-3).

Additionally, the taxi drivers' repeated maxim to Zaya, to 'clean me' is echoed in his mother's insistence on 'washing away the sins.' This perversion of notions of purification become integrated by Baig by focusing on how their concept of purifying one's self is cast through a prison of the character's own repressive desires being thrust onto Zaya.

The representation of queer male sexuality is meted out through three different guises; through Zaya (the main character), Salim (his partner) and Mubeen (his childhood friend and confidante). Zaya and Salim both eventually come out to their own respective families, only to be met with different reactions. Zaya's mother disowns him, whilst Salim's is supportive as both him and his mother reconcile at the end – in contrast to Zaya and his ma being cast apart by the play's close. Mubeen is afforded a more complicated characterization. He's attracted to Zaya and enjoys the charade of playing the superhero to Zaya's damsel in distress routine. However, this is shortly curtailed after Zaya encounters Moo kissing a female classmate at school (who he would eventually go on to marry). When Zaya sees Mubeen, at a later stage in their lives, the

latter confronts Zaya regarding the rumors of his sexuality. His aggressive prodding eventually gives way to an intense need to have oral sex with Zaya;

MOO:

[Starts to take off his pants.] Yeah I fucking thought so you want it as bad as me man. Fuck we gotta find a way to do this more often man but fuck man it's not even allowed. [Starts to take off SWEET BOY's pants, then stops.] Wait, you're not telling no one about this eh?

SWEET BOY:

No.

MOO:

Cuz I know you're gay and shit but you can't tell no one okay?

SWEET BOY:

I know.

MOO:

Good. [Takes off SWEET BOY's pants and flips him over onto his stomach.] Fuck guy I'm gonna fuck your pussy so good. Wait, can I call it that? [Beat.] Man?

SWEET BOY:

No.

(53).

Their relationship become further complicated when Zaya refuses his advances, and Mubeen decides to get married. Mubeen's repressed sexuality comes to a head when his father's (Maulana) repeated taunts of 'kusra' (meaning faggot) as well as his implication that he will prey on Moo's future children propels Mubeen to harm him by pushing him in the bathtub which results in his death. What metaphorically places Zaya and Mubeen in the same psychic space, is the thought that these figures will do harm to additional scores of innocent children,

as Zaya remembers the statement that the taxi driver has done this, 'to other boys.' The second generation of Muslim Canadians in Toronto, as exemplified by Zaya and Mubeen reflect on a changing of the guard, in which not only ethics and moral obligations can be dictated by a sense of empathy and not causing harm to others, but also advocates a different way of approaching faith; having faith in one's self and the ability to discern 'right and wrong' be it through sexuality, identity and a sense of ethics.

REFERENCE:

Baig, Bilal. *Acha Bacha*. April 30, 2016 draft. Unpublished.