

**From Trauma to Queerness in Kaveh Akbar's *Martyr!***

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**Abstract**

Kaveh Akbar's *Martyr!* offers a profound exploration of trauma, queer identity, and cultural displacement through the experiences of Cyrus Shams, a queer Iranian-American poet navigating grief, addiction, and the search for meaning. This research examines how Akbar employs poetic prose, fragmented narrative, and symbolic motifs to convey the psychological and social dimensions of trauma and identity formation. By applying trauma theory, queer theory, and intersectionality, the study analyzes Cyrus's struggles with parental loss, cultural expectations, and marginalization, highlighting the ways these experiences intersect to shape selfhood and resilience. The textual analysis demonstrates that *Martyr!* transcends conventional trauma narratives and queer storytelling by presenting nuanced, multifaceted characters and emphasizing the interplay of personal, cultural, and historical forces. Ultimately, the research illustrates how Akbar's novel contributes to contemporary literary discourse, providing insight into the complexities of grief, identity, and the search for meaning in marginalized lives.

**Keywords:** *displacement, intersectionality, queer identity, trauma, martyr etc.*

**Introduction**

Kaveh Akbar's debut novel, *Martyr!*, offers a profound exploration of identity, trauma, and the search for meaning. Through the protagonist, Cyrus Shams, Akbar delves into the intersections of queer identity and the lingering effects of personal and collective trauma. This paper aims to analyze how Akbar represents these themes, focusing on narrative techniques, character development, and symbolic motifs. Kaveh Akbar is an Iranian-American poet and novelist, born in Tehran in 1989. His family emigrated to the United States when he was two years old. Akbar holds an MFA from Butler University and a PhD in creative writing from Florida State University. He is the author of two poetry collections, *Calling a Wolf a Wolf* and *Pilgrim Bell*, and the novel *Martyr!* He is also the founder of the poetry interview website Divedapper and serves as the poetry editor for *The Nation*.

*Martyr!* published in 2024, follows Cyrus Shams, a queer Iranian-American poet who grapple with addiction, loss, and self-discovery. The narrative delves into themes of identity, faith, and the human condition, employing a fragmented structure and poetic prose to convey the complexities of the protagonist's experiences. The representation of trauma and queer identity in contemporary literature often lacks depth and authenticity. Many narratives either romanticize or sensationalize these experiences, failing to capture the nuanced realities of individuals navigating multiple layers of identity and trauma. *Martyr!* stands out by providing a multifaceted portrayal of a queer Iranian-American individual confronting personal and

collective histories. However, there remains a need for a comprehensive analysis of how Akbar's narrative techniques and thematic choices contribute to this representation.

The primary objective of this research is to analyze how Akbar's *Martyr!* represents trauma and queer identity, examining how personal loss, cultural displacement, and societal marginalization intersect to shape the protagonist's sense of self. Specifically, the study aims to explore how Akbar uses poetic prose, fragmented narrative, and symbolic motifs to convey the psychological and emotional dimensions of trauma. Another objective is to investigate how queer identity is negotiated within the novel, focusing on the performative and socially mediated aspects of sexuality and selfhood as articulated through the protagonist, Cyrus Shams.

Furthermore, the research seeks to apply trauma theory, queer theory, and intersectionality as analytical frameworks to understand the interplay between individual experiences and broader cultural, historical, and social contexts. By achieving these objectives, the study aspires to contribute to the critical discourse on contemporary literature, particularly in relation to the representation of marginalized identities and the narrative strategies used to portray complex human experiences.

This paper posits that Akbar's *Martyr!* employs innovative narrative structures and symbolic motifs to authentically represent the complexities of trauma and queer identity. Through the protagonist's journey, Akbar challenges conventional portrayals, offering a nuanced exploration of the intersections between cultural displacement, sexuality, and personal history.

This research aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of *Martyr!* and its representation of trauma and queer identity. By examining Akbar's narrative techniques and thematic choices, the study seeks to contribute to the broader discourse on the portrayal of marginalized identities in contemporary literature. The findings may offer insights into the complexities of cultural displacement, sexuality, and personal history, and how these intersect to shape individual experiences.

### **Literature Review**

Mandana Chaffa delves into the novel's exploration of identity in a disassociated world. She discusses how Cyrus Shams, the protagonist, navigates multiple identities—neither fully Iranian nor American, neither Muslim nor not-Muslim, neither sober nor in meaningful recovery, neither gay nor straight. Chaffa emphasizes the novel's thematic focus on the unreliability of external perceptions and the complexities of self-expression in restrictive cultural contexts. Chaffa underscores Akbar's nuanced portrayal of a queer Iranian-American individual grappling with personal and collective histories.

Rahul Singh examines the novel's portrayal of Iranian-American angst and identity crisis. He notes how Cyrus's experiences reflect the dissonance in ideas of nationhood and identity, drawing parallels to Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*. Singh appreciates Akbar's experimental narrative style, blending novelistic and poetic elements to convey the protagonist's internal struggles. The review highlights the novel's exploration of trauma and queer identity within the context of cultural displacement.

*The Guardian* describes the novel as a "riotous tale of a grieving son," focusing on Cyrus's unhealthy obsessions and his quest for meaning in the wake of his mother's tragic death. The author discusses how Akbar's portrayal of Cyrus's grief and identity crisis challenges conventional narratives, offering a complex and multifaceted depiction of trauma and queer identity. It also notes the novel's kaleidoscopic structure and the interplay between humor and pathos in conveying the protagonist's emotional journey.

Junot Díaz's praises Akbar's debut novel as "incandescent with life," highlighting its exploration of identity, trauma, and the search for meaning. He commends Akbar's poetic

prose and the depth of character development, noting how the novel's portrayal of Cyrus's experiences resonates with authenticity and emotional depth. Díaz emphasizes the novel's contribution to contemporary literature, offering a nuanced perspective on the complexities of queer identity and cultural displacement.

Recent studies have explored how contemporary literature represents trauma, particularly in marginalized communities. For instance, Ali Smith examines "how trauma narratives in literature often challenge linear storytelling, reflecting the disorienting effects of trauma on memory and identity" (112). Akbar's use of fragmented narrative structures in *Martyr!* aligns with this literary trend, offering insights into the protagonist's psychological fragmentation.

Studies on diaspora literature have highlighted the complexities of queer identity in the context of cultural displacement. He further discusses how queer diasporic narratives often depict the negotiation of multiple identities and the challenges of belonging to transnational communities (88).

Akbar's portrayal of Cyrus's experiences as a queer Iranian-American individual reflects different themes, providing a literary exploration of identity formation amidst cultural displacement. Junot examines, "the evolution of queer representation in contemporary literature, noting a shift from tragic portrayals to more complex and diverse depictions of queer lives" (56). Akbar's *Martyr!* contributes to this shift by presenting queer relationships as multifaceted and authentic, avoiding the trope of the tragic queer narrative.

While existing scholarship provides valuable insights into the representation of trauma and queer identity, there is a paucity of studies on Kaveh Akbar's *Martyr!* and its narrative techniques. This research aims to fill this gap by analyzing how Akbar employs narrative fragmentation, poetic prose, and symbolic motifs to represent the complexities of trauma and queer identity.

Queer theory, particularly Judith Butler's notion of performativity, provides a framework for understanding Cyrus's exploration of his queer identity. Butler argues that gender and sexuality are not inherent qualities but are constituted through repeated acts and social performances that produce the illusion of a stable identity (25). In *Martyr!*, Cyrus's queerness is intertwined with his identity as an Iranian-American, navigating cultural expectations and societal norms. His queer identity is performative, context-dependent, and continuously negotiated in relation to family, culture, and society. Akbar challenges normative conceptions of sexuality and identity by presenting Cyrus as a multidimensional character whose queerness is neither fixed nor reducible to stereotypes.

Moreover, queer theory emphasizes the intersections of marginalization and the ways in which heteronormative and cultural pressures shape identity formation. According to Michael Warner, queer lives are characterized by a constant tension between societal expectations and self-expression (45). Cyrus's experiences of longing, desire, and alienation reflect this tension. His relationships, struggles with intimacy, and attempts to reconcile his sexual identity with his cultural heritage highlight the complexities of negotiating multiple, often conflicting, identities in a diasporic setting.

This study employs a qualitative literary analysis approach, focusing on close reading and thematic interpretation. The primary text, *Martyr!*, is analyzed alongside secondary sources, including critical reviews, interviews with the author, and scholarly articles on trauma theory and queer studies. The analysis is structured around the novel's narrative techniques, character development, and symbolic motifs, with a particular emphasis on how these elements contribute to the representation of trauma and queer identity.

Cyrus Shams, reflecting on his mother's death, evokes, "My mom died for nothing. . . . My dad died anonymous after spending decades cleaning chicken shit on some corporate farm. I want my life, my death to matter more than that" (46). This poignant reflection

encapsulates Cyrus's profound sense of loss and his yearning for significance. The traumatic deaths of his parents—his mother in the Iran Air Flight 655 disaster and his father in obscurity—fuel his existential crisis. Trauma theory, as articulated by Cathy Caruth, posits that, "trauma is not merely an event but a rupture in the experience of time and identity" (23). Cyrus's desire for his life and death to "matter more" reflects his struggle to reclaim agency and meaning in the aftermath of profound loss.

From a queer theoretical perspective, this yearning can be seen as a desire to assert one's identity and existence in a world that often marginalizes queer individuals. Judith Butler's concept of performativity suggests that identity is constructed through repeated actions and expressions. Cyrus's quest for significance can be interpreted as an attempt to "perform" a meaningful existence in the face of societal and personal trauma. Intersectionality, as introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw, emphasizes how various forms of identity and oppression intersect. Cyrus's Iranian-American background, coupled with his queer identity, places him at the crossroads of multiple marginalized experiences. His desire for his life to "matter" speaks to the intersectional struggles of seeking recognition and meaning in a world that often overlooks such identities.

### **Textual Analysis**

Cyrus, observing cultural tensions, opines, "At the intersection of Iranian-ness and Midwestern-ness was pathological politeness, an immobilizing compulsivity to avoid causing distress to anyone" ( 134). This observation highlights the cultural tension Cyrus experiences between his Iranian heritage and his American upbringing. The "pathological politeness" reflects an internalized conflict where cultural expectations from both backgrounds converge, leading to a stifling sense of self. Trauma theory suggests that such internalized conflicts can result in dissociation and identity fragmentation, as individuals struggle to reconcile conflicting cultural narratives.

Queer theory provides insight into how these cultural tensions intersect with Cyrus's queer identity. The pressure to conform to heteronormative expectations within both Iranian and American contexts can exacerbate feelings of alienation and self-repression. Butler's notion of performativity underscores how societal norms dictate acceptable expressions of identity, and Cyrus's internal conflict illustrates the challenges of navigating these norms. From an intersectional perspective, this literary work underscores how Cyrus's experiences are shaped by the interplay of cultural, ethnic, and sexual identities. The "immobilizing compulsivity" reflects the compounded pressures he faces, highlighting the need for an intersectional approach to understanding his struggles.

Cyrus Contemplating Human Existence reflects, "Humans are just a long emptiness waiting to be filled" ( 187). This stark statement reflects Cyrus's profound sense of existential void and yearning. Trauma theory posits that unprocessed trauma can lead to feelings of emptiness and a fragmented sense of self. Cyrus's acknowledgment of this "emptiness" speaks to the ongoing impact of his unresolved grief and loss.

In the context of queer theory, this emptiness can be interpreted as a longing for connection and authenticity in a world that often marginalizes queer identities. The search for meaning and fulfillment is a central theme in queer theory, and Cyrus's expression encapsulates the universal desire for recognition and belonging. Intersectionality further illuminates this line by considering how Cyrus's experiences of emptiness are shaped by the intersections of his Iranian-American and queer identities. The societal marginalization of these intersecting identities can exacerbate feelings of isolation and the search for meaning.

Cyrus, critiquing moral constructs, opines, "Eight of the ten commandments are about what thou shalt not. But you can live a whole life not doing any of that stuff and still avoid doing any good. That's the whole crisis" ( 207). This critique of moral absolutism reflects

Cyrus's disillusionment with conventional ethical frameworks. Trauma theory suggests that individuals who have experienced profound loss may question traditional moral constructs as they seek new ways to make sense of their experiences. Cyrus's challenge to the commandments underscores his search for a more nuanced understanding of goodness and purpose. From a queer theoretical perspective, this passage challenges normative moral standards that often marginalize queer identities. Butler's concept of performativity highlights how societal norms dictate moral behavior, and Cyrus's critique reflects a resistance to these imposed standards in favor of a more inclusive and personal ethical framework. Intersectionality enriches this analysis by considering how Cyrus's Iranian-American and queer identities intersect with moral expectations. The "crisis" he describes can be seen as a response to the conflicting moral narratives imposed by different cultural and societal forces. Cyrus, reflecting on martyrdom, reveals:

If the mortal sin of the suicide is greed, to hoard stillness and calm for yourself while dispersing your riotous internal pain among all those who survive you, then the mortal sin of the martyr must be pride, the vanity, the hubris to believe not only that your death could mean more than your living, but that your death could mean more than death itself—which, because it is inevitable, means nothing. ( 245)

This philosophical reflection delves into the ethics of self-sacrifice and the search for meaning through death. Trauma theory suggests that individuals who have experienced profound loss may grapple with the value of life and death, seeking ways to imbue their existence with significance. Cyrus's contemplation of martyrdom reflects his struggle to find meaning in the face of overwhelming grief.

Queer theory provides insight into how these reflections intersect with Cyrus's queer identity. The desire to find meaning through death can be seen as a response to societal marginalization and the quest for recognition. Judith Butler's notion of performativity underscores how societal norms influence expressions of identity, and Cyrus's contemplation of martyrdom reflects a desire to assert his existence in a world that often overlooks queer lives.

Kaveh Akbar's *Martyr!* presents a vivid and haunting exploration of trauma, queer identity, and the complexities of cultural displacement. Through the experiences of Cyrus Shams, the novel delves deeply into the fragmented nature of personal and collective trauma, the struggles of negotiating a queer identity in a culturally complex environment, and the search for meaning in the wake of loss. Cyrus's narrative demonstrates how grief, societal expectations, and cultural marginalization intersect to shape identity and influence emotional and psychological well-being.

This paper highlights the protagonist's reflections on martyrdom, moral crisis, and existential emptiness, revealing the profound psychological impact of unresolved trauma. By linking these textual moments to trauma theory, queer theory, and intersectionality, this study illustrates that Akbar's narrative not only represents personal suffering but also critiques social, cultural, and normative constraints that shape and often inhibit authentic self-expression. Trauma theory illuminates the dislocation and psychological fragmentation that define Cyrus's experiences, queer theory underscores the performative and negotiated nature of his sexual identity, and intersectionality emphasizes the compounded pressures of navigating multiple marginalized identities.

Furthermore, this analysis demonstrates that *Martyr!* transcends conventional depictions of queer lives and trauma narratives. Instead of portraying Cyrus's experiences as tragic or one-dimensional, Akbar presents a nuanced, multifaceted account of survival, self-discovery, and resilience. The novel acknowledges the weight of historical, cultural, and social forces while also celebrating the human capacity to seek meaning and assert identity in

the face of adversity. Akbar's work thus expands contemporary literary conversations about grief, queerness, and diasporic identity, offering readers an intimate and reflective window into the complexities of modern human experience.

### Conclusion

Kaveh Akbar's *Martyr!* offers a richly layered exploration of identity in which trauma, displacement, and queerness intersect to shape the protagonist's search for meaning. Set against the backdrop of Iranian-American diasporic experience, the novel portrays how memories of violence, cultural dislocation, and inherited pain become catalysts for self-questioning and self-making. Akbar's narrative traces a journey where trauma does not merely wound but also destabilizes normative categories of belonging, opening space for queer desire, fluidity, and alternative modes of being. In this sense, trauma becomes both a burden and a transformative force that leads characters toward queer self-recognition, spiritual inquiry, and new forms of relationality. This essay examines how *Martyr!* maps the movement from trauma to queerness, revealing Akbar's nuanced understanding of identity as emergent, fragmented, and deeply shaped by personal and collective histories.

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