

Reading Guide for Wajahat Ali's *Go Back to Where You Came From*

1. In the introduction, Ali begins his book with a traditional Arabic greeting, meaning "Peace be upon you." This is immediately followed by five online messages he satirically calls "fan mail" and his responses to them. Did you find the contents of the messages shocking? How do you feel about Ali's humorous responses? Is humor an effective weapon against hateful ideas?
2. In the first chapter, Ali discusses his love-hate relationship with American popular culture. "At a young age, I looked around and realized America's master narrative does not include a kid like me as one of its superheroes." What lessons about being an American did Ali absorb from popular culture? Growing up, how did you see yourself represented in popular culture? What lessons about Americanness do you think you learned from the popular culture of your youth?
3. Ali discusses the pressures to conform and succeed among the Desi community he grew up in. These include the pressure to excel in specific careers, expectations about marriage and family, and colorism (the belief that fair skin is more desirable than dark skin). He also discusses the judgment he felt about his own weight, behavior, and left-handedness. How do the expectations of the Desi community reflect and differ from the expectations and prejudices of the broader American culture? Within your own community, what expectations are enforced? How do they overlap and differ with the values of the community Ali describes?
4. In Chapter 2, Ali provides a list of justifications he's heard from people eager to prove they are not racist. Of the twelve justifications, seven of them have to do with commercial consumption: the food, media, and clothing choices people make. When discussing the popular culture of his youth, Ali makes the case that representation matters. But in this list, consuming "woke" cultural products is presented as a cover for prejudice. How much does representation matter? How does it impact Ali's own story? What do your own consumer choices say about you? Are there authentic and inauthentic ways to engage with art created by people outside your own cultural and ethnic milieu?
5. Ali discusses two ironic archetypal Muslim figures in the American collective imagination: "rage boy" and "the moderate Muslim." These figures align with the discussion of "respectability politics" in activism from other ethnic groups. What is the value of anger and rage in American social life? What is the value of cautious respectability? How are these reflected in Ali's writing and humor?
6. Ali discusses the importance of storytelling, writing, and improv acting to his sense of self. How did these practices shape Ali and his story? How did his history and culture shape his creative works? What are your creative practices? How do they reflect your unique history and connect to your culture?
7. Ali describes the concept of the "model minority": "We take our shoes off at the door. We are polite, timid, law-abiding, and educated. We study hard, work hard, pay our taxes, and are grateful to America for all of its opportunities. We don't whine, complain, make excuses for our

lot in life, raise our voice, or critique power. We don't rock the boat, we row the boat. Like sugar, we dissolve and assimilate, leaving a sweet, nonthreatening aftertaste." Ali claims this concept "is a dangerous drug manufactured and promoted by the Whiteness." How does the model minority myth serve Ali's community? How does it harm it? How does it harm other minority communities?

8. After 9/11, Ali describes instances of public support for American Muslims, including a speech by then President George W. Bush and the claim by The New Times columnist and Nobel-prize winning economic Paul Krugman that, "Overall, Americans took 9/11 pretty calmly. Notably, there wasn't a mass outbreak of anti-Muslim sentiment and violence, which could all too easily have happened." He then contrasts this with interrogations, public humiliations, and hate crimes the Muslim American community faced. Did Ali's depiction of post-9/11 America resonate with your own memories or understanding of the time? In a time of increased violence by white right-wing terror groups, how does Ali's description of the government's response compare or contrast with the government's response to our current crisis?

9. Describing the alternating good and bad fortunes of his family, Ali's explains the concept of "nazar," or the evil eye. "Nazar" is the belief that success draws supernatural misfortune by arousing the envy of others. How does the concept of nazar play out in Ali's story? How does it connect to the expectations of the Desi community Ali described in his youth? How does the idea of nazar reflect the value and limitations of "respectability politics," as described in the conflict between rage and moderation among public Muslim figures?

10. Ali explains how, in his late teens, he was diagnosed with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) and was surprised by his family's support and openness. In this respect, how did Ali's family differ from what he describes as the norm in the Desi community of his youth? How do the attitudes of his community towards mental health issues connect with the larger expectations of the community regarding success, faith, and health?

11. When he is 21 years old, Ali's parents are arrested for a grab bag of minor illegal activities connected to their, up until then, success business. The result was a protracted legal battle, bankruptcy, and jail time for both parents. Ali and his parents go back and forth on the question of guilt. His mother blames "dumb mistakes done by [their] employees," but also says "there were many things we did wrong that we shouldn't have done." His father claims that he never believed he was in violation of the law. Ali believes that mistakes happened, but his parents were treated with undue harshness. Based on Ali's description of what happened, do you feel his parents were treated fairly? Did their punishment fit the severity of their crimes? How did the myth of the model minority and post-9/11 paranoia influence their treatment?

13. Ali describes the reaction of the Desi community to the arrest and conviction of his parents. How does the reaction of the community shape Ali's sense of belonging? How does the community's reaction reflect his previous discussion of community expectations? How does it reflect the on-going impact of 9/11 on the community?

14. Ali says the creative process behind the writing of his play, *The Domestic Crusaders*, “saved my life.” He also credits author and scholar Ishmael Reed with marching through the process. What role have mentors played in Ali’s story? How have the voices of experience and authority been both positive and negative influences on Ali? Do any of Ali’s experiences resonate with your own experiences with or as a mentor?

15. During his discussion of the campaign to elect Barack Obama, Ali reflects on the complexities of Muslim Americans’ relationship to the two dominant political parties in America. He previously discussed how, before 9/11, many Muslim Americans supported George W. Bush. Discussing the Obama campaign, he reflects that Democrats “want our votes and our money, but you don’t want to date us publicly? Got it.” How does Ali’s experience with the party politics in America compare or contrast to your own? How does the election of Obama influence Ali’s feelings about the American Dream and the place of Desi immigrants and their descendants in America?

16. Ali states: “Nothing is more offensive to an American than being called a racist.” How does Ali support this claim? Do you think he is correct?

17. The book ends with Ali stating that “I never thought I could write or speak in front of an audience, but here I am, with a published book that you have decided to read. There’s no reason why you can’t pick up a pen and write your own.” Then he gives “four wins in life” based on his own experience. What are Ali’s wins? If you were asked to give a win from your own personal narrative, what would it be?