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Art and Violence in Ayad Akhtar’s *Disgraced*: Reading Western Domination over Muslim Representation in Amir and Emily’s Relationship

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Abstract

Ayad Akhtar’s Pulitzer Prize-winning play, *Disgraced*, grapples with Islamophobia, post-9/11 racialization of South Asians, and the possibilities of Muslim identity. The play recounts the tragic descent of Amir, a New York Lawyer and South Asian Muslim, from his precarious belonging in upper-class New York society to the devastating fulfillment of violent racial stereotypes about Muslim men. This paper considers Amir’s relationship with his wife Emily, a white artist, as a location of multifaceted and mutually inflicted violence that invites audiences to interrogate stereotypes about Muslim men and confront the harm of white domination over Muslim representation. Emily’s well-intentioned yet problematic control over her husband’s identity and appropriation of Islamic art traditions reflect Western domination over Muslim representation. By highlighting these tensions within Amir and Emily’s marriage, Akhtar deftly locates the impact of Islamophobia and post-9/11 racialization of South Asians in the realm of the personal, confronting audiences with their devastating consequences.

Keywords

Disgraced; Post-9/11 Racialization; Orientalism; Muslim Representation; Drama

Peer Review

This work has undergone a double-blind review by a minimum of two faculty members from institutions of higher learning from around the world. The faculty reviewers have expertise in disciplines closely related to those represented by this work. If possible, the work was also reviewed by undergraduates in collaboration with the faculty reviewers.

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Ayad Akhtar's play *Disgraced* assesses the conditions of post-9/11 U.S. society through the story of a tragically flawed and profoundly complex protagonist: over three scenes, we watch the unraveling of Amir, a successful New York lawyer of South Asian descent and Muslim heritage. The play opened in Chicago in early 2012 and received the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 2013, later going on to be the "most-staged play of the 2015-16 season according to *American Theater*" (Field 49). In an interview with Madani Younis, the artistic director at the Bush theater in London where the play was produced in 2013, playwright Akhtar explained: "Look, at the end of the day, art's capacity to change the world is profoundly limited. But what it can do is change the way we see things individually. I aspired to accomplish with this structure a kind of shattering of the audience, after which they have to find some way to put themselves back together" (*Disgraced* 95).

To evoke this shattering effect within his audiences, Akhtar breaks down the world of *Disgraced* as he created it. A racially and culturally diverse quartet of upper-class professionals gathers in a posh New York apartment—Amir, his white wife Emily, his African American coworker Jory, and Jory's husband and Emily's art dealer Isaac, a Jewish man—and on the surface, the scene fits perfectly into the American dream of socioeconomic mobility for people of all races and genders. Through the progressively intensifying violence of the play, Akhtar highlights hairline cracks of tension crisscrossing this idealized tableau of multicultural Western liberalism before his characters' violence destroys this façade entirely. The tragedy of *Disgraced* disturbs audiences by revealing the precarity of this Western fantasy and laying bare the impacts of racism, Islamophobia, and Orientalism on South Asian Muslims in post-9/11 America.

The explosive violence of *Disgraced* triggers an avalanche of shattering that resonates from the largest level—the failure of the dinner party—all the way down to the implosion of Amir's performance of identity. One level of this tragic dysfunction of particular interest is the central romantic relationship between Emily and Amir. If we read *Disgraced* as a microcosm of the world it depicts, upper-class liberal America, how do the dynamics of Amir and Emily's relationship reflect the conditions of Muslim identity and multiracial relationships in post-9/11 America? In this paper, I will closely examine the violences and tensions of Amir and Emily's relationship to glean greater insights into the implications of Islamophobia and South Asian racialization for Muslim masculinity in contemporary U.S. society. To consider the greater meaning both Amir and Emily's characters attain through the resonances of their relationship, I will examine Emily's portrait *Study After Velasquez's Moor* as a symbol of her power over Amir's representation, consider her art career as an embodiment of Western domination over Muslim identity, and read Amir's violent battery of Emily as a multivalent political act that reflects the tragedy of the limitations on Muslim masculine identity.

The play opens on Amir, a South Asian Muslim lawyer, posing for his artist wife, Emily, in a posh suit jacket and boxers in their stylish Upper East Side apartment. Emily, a white American, is rendering Amir in the style of Velasquez's famous portrait of Juan de Pareja, the artist's assistant and slave. Before any dialogue is uttered, this tableau of husband and wife shimmers with political valences: we see a white woman actively perceiving her brown husband and materializing her interpretation of him through her portraiture. This striking visual triangulates a power dynamic present in their relationship in which the white woman holds power over the perception and representation of the brown man. In her 2016 article "Between Performativity and Representation: Post-9/11 Muslim Masculinity in Ayad Akhtar's *Disgraced*," Lopamudra Basu notes not only Emily's exercise of power over her subject, but also the significance of Amir's participation: "Amir, following his predecessor Juan de Pareja, is seeking approval of white American society and his gaze is directed at Emily and other representatives of that group who hold power and whom he is always trying to appease" (90). Basu aligns Amir's posing for Emily with his day-to-day identity performance towards the goal of acceptance into white America, mapping the broader tensions of assimilation and acceptance directly onto Amir and Emily's relationship. The fact that the entire play

takes place within the same apartment becomes significant here. Akhtar takes big, sweeping themes—post-9/11 Islamophobia, racialization of South Asians, and the impetus to be accepted into mainstream American society—and locates them firmly in the domestic sphere, in Amir and Emily's home, in the intimacies of their relationship.

The intimacy of this domestic sphere is highlighted by Amir's half-outfit: his boxers suggest that he is halfheartedly participating or reluctantly entertaining his wife's desire to paint him on what would be an otherwise relaxing morning. The command of his "Italian suit jacket and a crisp, collared shirt" is contrasted by the humility of his underwear, creating a visual juxtaposition of the subject's active performance and an authentic, nonperforming self that is hidden from view (Akhtar 6). This unconventional getup serves a practical purpose—Emily is only rendering Amir from the shoulders-up, so he may remain comfortable and undressed out of the frame—but it also highlights Emily's control over the production of Amir's identity. Emily has dressed and posed Amir in the stylings of elite Western excellence and refracts his identity through the prism of her Orientalist gaze, leaving half of her husband both literally and figuratively out of view. Through this evocative visual setup, Akhtar conveys a complex and nuanced dynamic of Emily and Amir's relationship that resonates through the dialogue to follow.

Emily and Amir's discussion of the portrait in Scene I confirms this reading of their relationship: we learn that Emily was inspired to create the portrait after Amir received a racist comment from a waiter while out to dinner the night before. While Amir is unperturbed by the incident, Emily is fixated on the waiter's misreading of Amir. She says, "A man, a waiter, looking at you . . . Not seeing what you really are" (Akhtar 7). Emily's anger at the man's racist assumptions about Amir is inflamed by the fact that the comment was made by a waiter of lower economic status than herself and her husband. She celebrates Amir's "deftness" in showing the waiter "the gap between what he was assuming and what you really are" (Akhtar 7). Emily's comment cements a binary between the negative stereotype of the South Asian man this waiter was drawing upon and what Amir "really [is]." We can imagine that it was certain aspects of Amir's presentation—signs of his status such as expensive business clothing, the command of a lawyer, his perfect American accent—that challenged the waiter's preconceived notions of South Asian Muslim men and "closed the gap" of the waiter's assumptions as Emily put it (Akhtar 7). Taken alongside the classist subtext of her disdain for the waiter, Emily's perception of who Amir really is seems to hinge upon his ability to demonstrate his successful assimilation into mainstream American society and his elevated socioeconomic status. Basu considers how the trap of reductive identities for Muslim men in post-9/11 America contributes to Amir's tragic unraveling, writing that "[Amir's] entire attempt at defining his ethnic and religious identity has been from the perspective of negating or opposing dominant discursive trends that provide a pretty narrow and limited range of possibility for Islamic identity" (98). This narrow range of possibility for Muslim identity manifests throughout the play, often through Emily's well-meaning, reductive views of who her husband is. Though Emily is self-righteously offended by the incident of racial profiling, her rationalization of the incident traps Amir's identity in a binary of either fulfilling racist stereotypes or defying them vis-à-vis embodied proof of his successful assimilation—Americanized mannerisms and upper-class panache.

It is in an act of personal defiance, then, that Emily begins her portrait. To redress the racist misperception of her husband, she inscribes her own perception of his identity into being by painting him. Despite her intentions, the impact of Emily's portrait is more harmful than productive, as Alyssa Syahmina Putri argues in her 2019 article "On the Orientalism and Neo-Orientalism in Ayad Akhtar's *Disgraced*: Analysis on the Dynamics of Amir and Emily's Relationship." Putri writes:

Emily attempts to present the "resistance" of Amir's act of mimicry, but ended up highlighting her domination over the representation of Amir's identity. It is proven by the connection she made between her husband and the slave-assistant. She enforces her vision

of Amir's defiance towards the people who thinks he does not belong without considering the complicated history of his identity development. (286)

Even in her efforts to prove that her husband is *not* out of place in their upper-class American world, Emily's depiction of Amir as a contemporary counterpart of Juan de Pareja highlights his fundamental otherness and celebrates his acts of "mimicry," which refers to "an act of imitating the colonizer by the colonized which makes them seem alike and different at the same time" (Putri 285). Since Amir cannot efface his race, he tries to defy racial stereotypes and earn full acceptance into mainstream American society by performing whiteness in his dress, presentation, and adamant rejection of Islam (which ironically prompts constant criticism from the two white characters in the play, Emily and Isaac). Putri argues that the painting acts as a catalyst revealing Amir and Emily's different "positions of enunciation" regarding his identity as a brown man in post-9/11 New York City, and that Emily's "choice of inspiration—[the] center of Amir's disapproval—emphasizes her ignorance and naivety" (286). Emily unwittingly blurs colonial histories and fails to account for how the portrait may impact Amir's emotions or sense of selfhood. Though she seeks to redress the harm done to him, Amir's approval doesn't seem to be her primary goal. As theater critic Charles McNulty writes, "Emily is blind to the complicated politics of her own privileged acts of cultural appropriation."

Emily's character comes to embody these flaws to the extreme given her vocation as an artist. Her affection for Islamic art traditions is presented as both central to her character's sense of identity and pivotal for her commercial artistic success. Emily's paintings are celebrated for her embrace of Islamic art traditions, and she believes that her work challenges Eurocentrism in the classical canon that has sidelined and undervalued Islamic contributions: "It's time we woke up. Time to stop paying lip service to Islam and Islamic art. We draw on the Greeks, the Romans...but Islam is a part of who we are, too," she says (Akhtar 32). Isaac, her art dealer, chides that she will be accused of Orientalism—"You've even got the brown husband," he says—to which Emily replies, "Yeah, well, we've all gotten way too wrapped up in the optics. The way we talk about things. We've forgotten to look at things the way they really are" (Akhtar 31). Emily's rationale embodies white saviorism, defined as "the emotionally-driven, short-sighted impulse of white Americans to solve the problem of people of colour instantly without assessing the root cause of it and therefore failing to acknowledge the autonomy of the people who are actually experiencing it" (Putri 284). Emily insists that her whiteness is irrelevant and assumes the individual responsibility of elevating Islamic art without interrogating the reasons why it is undervalued in Western art tradition to begin with. Putri writes that "by taking the task to 'elevate' the Islamic art tradition, Emily has taken away the agency of the people who are actually living that tradition, and she has done it to satisfy her own need to help them" (288). She is both profiting off of Islamic art traditions and actively taking up space where Muslim artists may otherwise have the opportunity to control their own representation. Though Emily is the most vocal advocate for Islam throughout the play, it is ultimately her non-Muslim status that propels her art to critical acclaim: as Nalini Iyer points out in her essay "Rewriting the American Narrative of Muslim Men: Ayad Akhtar's depiction of Race, Gender, and Masculinity," the irony of Emily's advocacy is that "Muslims and their culture are palatable and marketable in the West when mediated by white artists, scholars, and their art dealers." Emily's good intentions are eclipsed by her lack of self-awareness, and she comes to represent not only the "quintessential Orientalist scholar" but the liberal-minded American elite who can only appreciate Islam in carefully-mediated abstraction (Iyer). Iyer writes, "Islam only exists as artistic representation in liberal, elite Manhattan which shrinks from the material conditions of Muslim lives."

Emily's art career and portrait of Amir thus come to symbolize hegemonic Western domination over Muslim identity and representation, embodied onstage by Orientalist art filtered through a Western perspective and a white wife shaping the identity of her brown husband. Akhtar

stokes the tension in Amir and Emily's relationship as the play progresses: Emily determinedly convinces Amir to defend a local imam jailed under suspicion of raising money for extremist groups, asserting that he is "one of his own people" despite Amir's protest (Akhtar 21). Amir relents, and when an article in the *New York Times* misrepresents him as one of the imam's attorneys and jeopardizes a long-awaited partnership at his law firm, Emily is ignorant to the politics and precarity of Amir's positionality as a Muslim man. These tensions only continue to escalate when Isaac and Jory join them to celebrate Emily's gallery installation over dinner. Antagonism simmers before boiling over at the revelations that Jory was offered the law firm partnership over Amir and that Emily and Isaac had a sexual affair. The building climax of the play is violent in both words and actions: Amir spits on Isaac's face, to which Isaac replies, "there's a reason they call you people animals" (Akhtar 73). Jory calls Amir duplicitous, and Amir yells the N word. The violence culminates when Amir turns his rage upon Emily after she confesses to the affair, battering her and leaving her face bloodied. The scene dramatically escalates the tensions of Amir and Emily's relationship into a new and harrowing register.

Amir's violent outburst complicates his relationship with Emily significantly. Despite his explicit and adamant condemnation of Muslim men hitting their wives, he tragically fulfills the Islamophobic stereotype of the violent Muslim man. In her 2017 article "'The Question Remains... Of Your Place': Challenging Reductive Identities in Ayad Akhtar's *Disgraced*," Robin Field argues that Akhtar deliberately engages "certain stereotypes about Islam and Muslim men in order to interrogate essentialized notions of identity" (50). Akhtar invokes this insidious stereotype about Muslim men to test it, Field writes, and includes narrative factors that challenge definitive endorsement of any stereotypes. Indeed, the violence of Scene III temporarily transforms both Amir's and Emily's characters into stereotypical archetypes: Amir becomes aligned with the violent, misogynist Muslim man and Emily becomes the vulnerable white woman victimized by a brown man. This marks a reversal of the power dynamic in the relationship when Emily exercised control over Amir's identity and representation. The psychological violence Emily commits against Amir throughout the preceding scenes—unintentional but violent nonetheless—threatens to be obscured completely by the abhorrence of Amir's physical violence against her. The challenge, Field argues, is to reject these enactments of harmful stereotypes as definitive representations of who these characters are and to interrogate these ideological archetypes rather than accepting them. Rohini Chaki writes in his 2016 dissertation, "The violence – in words and action – depicted in the play is tied to a political history that chronicles the cultural violence induced by global capital, the trauma of displaced postcolonial identities, the gendered violence of religion, and the violence that is a response to a long and storied history of persecution" (194-195). Understanding the violence of *Disgraced* as an emblem of larger histories of oppression and persecution allows us to consider Amir and Emily as agents of violence in a conflict bigger than their relationship.

Though it is difficult to get past the brutal violence inflicted upon Emily, it is impossible to ignore the political implications of Amir's outburst. As Chaki writes, "There is the obvious political valence of a colored man unleashing his pent-up anger and resentment upon the figure of the white woman, and there is even more obviously the critique that it is exactly this trope that has appeared in numerous works of art and literature as part of the colonizing mission" (192). Akhtar invokes not only stereotypes about Muslim men but more general racializing stereotypes about brown and black men hallmark to colonial literatures. These stereotypes have been used throughout history both to demonize colonized men in order to maintain colonial and racial hierarchies and to excise the guilts and anxieties of male colonizers. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon addresses multiracial relationships in the postcolonial context directly, arguing that for the Black man, whiteness can be achieved through romantic and sexual relations with white women. He writes, "who but a white woman can do this for me? By loving me she proves that I am worthy of white love. I am loved like

a white man... I marry white culture, white beauty, white whiteness" (63). Fanon considers multiracial relationships as a catalyst for the colonized subject's sense of self, as the means to efface Blackness and their own internalized color prejudice. Cast under this light, Amir's love for Emily becomes intimately tangled with his efforts to assimilate and become accepted into mainstream American society—is his affection for Emily influenced by his desire to efface his race and become white in the only way he can? The play offers no definitive answers, but the sorrow of Amir and Emily's final goodbye in Scene IV reflects the loss of authentic connection. As McNulty writes, "Characters often fulfill stereotypes, but they also undermine them. Nobody can be summed up by demographic data alone." Even as Akhtar invokes Islamophobic and colonial stereotypes about Muslim and non-white men in relationship with white women, Amir remains a dynamic character that undermines the very stereotypes he falls into with his complexity.

The "political valences" of Amir's violent outburst offer another site of contradictory and complicated identity formation. Chaki writes, "Given personal and political history, it is perhaps worth considering whether Amir's abuse of Emily—horrifying, in every sense condemnable—is violence in and of itself, or a counter-violence to perceived institutional violence wrought upon the Muslim body" (195). Amir's retaliation against institutional violence wrought upon him throughout the play may indeed be warranted—the loss of his job is dubiously connected to his perceived "duplicity" as a Muslim and he has been denied the agency to define himself in an Islamophobic and racializing society. Presented with narrow and binary opportunities for his Muslim identity, Amir is restricted to two options: to defy Islamophobic stereotypes about Muslim men completely or to fulfill them. Amir actively effaces his Muslim identity at every turn in the play, even going so far to change his name and espouse Islamophobic beliefs. The tragedy of Amir's violence against Emily is twofold because it confirms that Amir cannot escape this confining, looming threat of fulfilling a stereotype, at least in the world of *Disgraced*. In Emily's portrait he is successful but marked as an other, and in his violent outburst he becomes more than an abusive husband but tragically fulfills a despicable, racialized stereotype. At his worst and at his best, his representation is refracted through the expectations mainstream American society has of him as a South Asian Muslim man. In his conversation with Younis, Akhtar describes this trap of reductive identities:

The play begins with a Western consciousness representing a Muslim subject. The play ends with the Muslim subject observing the fruits of that representation. In between the two points lies a journey, and that journey has to do with the ways in which we Muslims are still beholden on an ontological level to the ways in which the West is seeing us. And what the play might be suggesting is we are still stuck there. And that being stuck there, this is what we are living in and with, and these are our options. So the play ends with Amir finally confronting that image. (96)

Reading Amir's battery of Emily as a retaliation against the violence he has suffered allows us to appreciate his struggle for agency over his own representation, but the fact that these abuses are mapped on to the body of his wife complicates any definitive interpretation of his outburst as a defiance towards justice. Amir remains stuck within an authoritative, narrow Western perception.

The shattering of Amir and Emily's relationship is a result of forces larger than their marriage that permeate into it and sow discontentment and dysfunction. Akhtar locates the fraught histories of colonialism, post-9/11 Islamophobia, and racialization in a relationship as a microcosm for the possibilities of identity and love for Muslims in modern America. Both Amir and Emily are complex characters with glaring flaws, but it is clear in scene I that they have no intention to hurt one another at the outset. Emily's domination over Amir's identity and representation and Amir's violent assault of her body posit the compounding effect of societal tensions directly into the domestic sphere, into the intimate connection of a romantic relationship. Akhtar maps the conditions of post-9/11 America onto this relationship to locate these tensions in the most intimate

setting and to convey to his audience the ways these abstractions permeate the home and the personal. Fanon writes of multiracial relationships, “it is our problem to ascertain to what extent authentic love will remain unattainable before one has purged oneself of that feeling of inferiority” (71). Emily and Amir’s tragic dysfunction begs this very question: is authentic love attainable for them as the weight of oppressive histories and political power dynamics defines the architecture of their relationship and casts them in a cycle of violence? By presenting complex issues of identity, representation, and the Western imagination of Islam after 9/11 as conflicts playing out within a marriage, Akhtar conveys the harmful manifestations and implications of these problems in everyday American life. As Basu writes, “The play does not provide a vision or path out of the cycle of retributive violence but in exposing the underlying disorder of American society, it is promoting a critical consciousness in its audience” (100). The power play demonstrated in Emily and Amir’s relationship reveals the ways this “underlying disorder” permeates the personal and disrupts genuine connection and love. The shattering effect of *Disgraced* invites audiences to put themselves back together with a more critical awareness of how oppressive ideologies seep through all levels of American life and create hairline cracks in what we love—and to then interrogate them.

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