

## Caught in the Propagandist Media: The Pro-Colonialist Discourse in Ayad Akhtar's *Disgraced*

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### Abstract:

This study argues that Ayad Akhtar's play *Disgraced* (2013) falls into the trap of the prejudiced post-9/11 propagandist media in presenting a colonialist, over-deterministic view of the Muslim identity, irrespective of its hybridity. This misrepresentation, achieved by means of intertextual relations to Shakespeare's *Othello*, is argued to be consistent with the typical demonic representation of Muslims as racial others, and in satisfaction of the US transition to the Homeland Security State and the pertaining foreign policy towards the Muslim world. This trajectory, it is believed, guarantees for Akhtar a good deal of popularity and artistic recognition. The argument is grounded on both Stuart Hall's notions of 'cultural identity' in his essay "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" and Gilbert and Tompkins' strategies of a canonical counter-discursive text in *Post-colonial Drama: Theory, Practice, Politics*. The study draws on a set of postcolonial concepts such as 'mimicry', 'the beyond space' and 'hybridity', among others, as re-negotiated by Homi Bhabha.

**Key Words:** Ayad Akhtar, *Disgraced*, Cultural Identity, Religious Identity, fixity, canonical counter discursive.

### Introduction:

Misrepresentation of Muslims in America's post-9/11 mainstream media has helped reductive images resurface in what is now lumped under Neo-Orientalism. Among many clichés, Muslims have been represented as villainous outlaws, uncivilized, fanatical, terrorist, misogynist and hostile to American interest (Said x, xv; Shaheen 7; Bazian 6-7; Alsultany 229). Meanwhile, Muslim Americans suffered the consequences of the government's abuse of power. They were systematically vilified, otherized, subjected to the surveillance mechanism of the state, victimized by legal and extra-legal measures and stamped as a gathering threat (Noureiddin 6, 17). Moustafa Bayoumi explains in *This Muslim American Life* that the US "reinscribed, through a legal mechanism, the cultural assumption

that a terrorist is foreign born, an alien in the United States, and a Muslim, and that all Muslim men who fit this profile are potentially terrorists” (56). Bayoumi adds that these strategies “created a race out of religion” (56). Islam has thus become a racial signifier.

In representation of this dilemma, most Muslim-American artists became engaged in opposing such demeaning images by presenting counter-narrative, reactionary and corrective art which bears witness to Muslims’ share in humanity and, *en passant*, criticizes US domestic and foreign policies. Those writers, however, were not welcomed by the media industry which deemed their work unpopular and as such not meeting mainstream production and publishing standards (Najjar 57). Other writers fell into the trap and spell of the propagandist media producing works masquerading as reflections of - as well as on - the American experience while in the process reinforcing rampant perceptions about Muslims as dangerous and racially other. Their works, autobiographical and cynical to the greatest extent, served as perpetuation of stereotypes and resurrection of a more poignant West-East dualism in which the Muslim individual was essentialized as a site of signifiers encoding difference and enmity. Through such works, artists could jumpstart their career and rise to overnight stardom.

Arguably, the works of the Pakistani Muslim-American Ayad Akhtar (1970-) fall into this last category. In different registers, Akhtar “puts contemporary attitudes toward religion under a microscope, revealing how tenuous self-image can be for people born into one way of being who have embraced another” (Isherwood, para. 3). Akhtar’s protagonists are portrayed as flawed by their religious identity and ethnic affiliation. Rather than escaping into a beyond area or a “third space,” which Bhabha calls “hybridity”, where they can form new perspectives and new values, or create a counter discourse of hybrid expressions opposing those of the colonizers, Akhtar’s *anti*-heroes embrace the antagonistic Eurocentric view about the different other (“Cultural Diversity” 209). Internalizing a colonial mentality, Akhtar’s characters highly value Eurocentrism as a sign of Americanness, modernity and power. They, on the flip side, devalue their own native culture, which they perceive as inferior and a curse. They are depicted as engaged in self-hatred, distancing themselves from native identity and trying to become as much like the colonizer as possible.

Thus, in Akhtar's *début* novel *American Dervish* (2012), Hayat Shah, the principal character, is portrayed in confrontation with radical Islam, which he sees as the reason for his alienation in secular America. Akhtar's subsequent plays follow suit. Zarina in *The Who & the What* (2014) condemns Islamic values as non-human, misogynistic and self-contradictory. She struggles to write an *exposé* on women in Islam, arguing that there are inherent contradictions in the message and messenger concerning women's position. Amir Kapoor in *Disgraced* (2013) is staged as going 'beyond' his ethnoreligious cultural identity, seeking identification with the Judeo-Christian values of America. In this play, Islam is associated with "hostility and aggression" and is introduced as a racial signifier and a rigid determinant of one's cultural identity, regardless of any historical interventions (Chaal 14). The dramaturgy of the play is constructed in a way to suggest that Amir's Eurocentrism is merely a performative act. In intense situations, Amir is revealed as unable to escape the savagery and radicalism associated with Muslim culture.

In this light, this research presents a deconstructive reading of Ayad Akhtar's Pulitzer Prize-winning play *Disgraced* (2013), showing how far its dramaturgy credits and enforces the historical Colonialist/Orientalist discourse. Countering Akhtar's insistence in many of his interviews that he merely writes about a human experience, this research argues that *Disgraced* painstakingly reconstructs the old-age mythical representations of Muslims (Akhtar, "Islam Hasn't Had", para. 15). The play crafts a pro-colonialist fable which establishes as natural and absolute the fixity and rigidity of the Muslim's cultural identity, while in the meantime overlooking its hybridity within the new historical contexts. This representation is dramatically achieved by means of intertextual relations to a canonical colonialist narrative, Shakespeare's *Othello*, which is established in critical scholarship to promote an over-deterministic view of racial identity.

### **Theoretical Framework:**

Useful theoretical groundworks for this research's argument are Stuart Hall's notions of cultural identity in his classical essay "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" and Gilbert and Tompkins' strategies of a canonical counter-discursive text in *Post-colonial Drama: Theory, Practice, Politics*. The study draws on a set

of postcolonial concepts such as ‘mimicry’, ‘the beyond space’ and ‘hybridity’, among others, as re-negotiated by Homi Bhabha.

Stuart Hall introduces two conflicting notions of cultural identity. The first looks at cultural identity as static; that is, it is unchanging because it is thought of as ideal, “a sort of collective one-true self.” A group of people with the same history, same set of traits and “cultural codes,” Hall explains, shares this fixed cultural identity. It thus represents “stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning” (223). According to Hall, this form of cultural identity is what postcolonial societies are to seek and rediscover in order to decolonize their minds from the cultural effects of colonization. Hall states, “it is this identity which a Caribbean or black diaspora must discover, excavate, bring to light and express through cinematic representation” (223). The second notion, which can better explain the diasporic people’s condition, views cultural identity as dynamic, ever transforming and “subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power.” According to Hall, this notion of cultural identity is “a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'” (225). In other words, diasporic identity is fluid and keeps evolving, as it does not deny the role of historical interventions in its formation. In this study, cultural identity is used to refer mainly to religious/Muslim identity. Needless to say, religion for Muslims constitutes the major source and reference of their cultural codes. This paper argues that *Disgraced* demotes Hall’s latter notion in favor of promoting the former by presenting the protagonist’s transcultural, ethnoreligious belonging as having control over his adopted diasporic identity. Elements of the diasporic/American identity are reduced to mere performance and ‘mimicry’ of the idealized other. Such representation in the context of the anti-Islam sentiments is meant to present the Muslim American protagonist as trapped in his native culture and so unable to transform into the diasporic identity.

Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins expand on Helen Tiffin’s theorization of the canonical counter-discursive literature which they define as

a process whereby the post-colonial writer unveils and dismantles the basic assumptions of a specific canonical text by developing a ‘counter’ text that preserves many of the identifying signifiers of the original while altering, often allegorically, its structures of power. (98)

In other words, the post-colonial counter-discursive text writes back in opposition to an inherent supremacist ideology of colonialist literature, interrogating its logic, shaking its mental foundations and destabilizing its power structures. *Disgraced*, as a postcolonial text intersecting with Shakespeare's colonialist narrative in *Othello*, does not employ these strategies. It rather validates and re-centers *Othello*'s colonialist discourse affirming an essentialist view of the colonized cultural identity and presenting the status quo as natural and inevitable. Put straightforwardly, in its re-writing of *Othello*'s core narrative idea and its affirmation of the colonialist structures of power, *Disgraced* advocates a similar pro-colonialist discourse.

### ***Disgraced*: Re-centering the Core Narrative Idea of a Colonialist Text:**

Defying Gilbert and Tompkins' strategies of the canonical counter-discursive text, *Disgraced* is consciously constructed in mimicry of Shakespeare's pro-colonialist narrative in *Othello*. Both plays endorse the fixity of the principal character's cultural identity. Both stabilize the colonialist structures of power in which the protagonist, as the racial other, is staged as unassimilable and inherently villainous. To meet the supremacist white audience's expectations and demands, Shakespeare's Othello should 'turn Turks' (*Othello* II.3.164) and finally kill his white wife Desdemona honoring Iago's racist claim that "these Moors are changeable in their wills. ... The food that to him now is as luscious as locusts shall be to him shortly as acerbic as the coloquintida" (I.3.342-3). Despite Othello's social and military ascendancy within the Venetian community, he is constructed to behave naively and to be easily manipulated, matching the stereotypical images propagated about Moors or black people. Iago and the other Venetians constantly refer to black Othello in bestial and racial tropes and so do not acknowledge his marriage to white Desdemona. Thus, Othello is "the thick-lips," the bombastic, arrogant and undiscerning commander; the "gross" and "lascivious Moor" who has flouted "the sense of all civility;" and the "Barbary horse" or the "old black ram" who is now "tupping" the beautiful daughter of a distinguished Venetian nobleman (I.1.67,12-18,127,132,112,89-90). Othello is portrayed as victim of his roots and inability to control his emotions.

In parallel with Othello, Amir is a person of color, of Pakistani-Muslim heritage, who enjoys a prestigious position as a successful corporate lawyer and

who is married to the white American Emily. In emulation of Iago and the Venetians, Isaac, as representative of white America, cannot see Amir beyond his rigid cultural identity; thus, he refers to him using racial slurs. To Isaac, Amir is “the fucking closet jihadist,” the “anti-Semitic,” and the “slave” who “finally has the master’s wife”, among many others. (*Disgraced* 65, 69,70). Yet, unlike Othello who falls into the trap of a romantic image of himself, Amir is staged as self-colonized. He detests his cultural heritage and rejects his ‘hybridity’ as an American of Muslim Pakistani roots. Amir is cast in a ‘beyond space’ in which he recreates himself in funny and cynical self-loathing images. He indulges in verbal renunciation of his native Muslim culture. Unlike the loving Desdemona, Emily is depicted as realizing her husband’s flaw as a racial outsider and a person of color. She retains the agency to represent her husband meta-fictionally in a painting modelled on the Spanish painter Diego Velázquez’s drawing of his slave Juan de Parejo. The painting is placed at the center of the play serving as a visual reminder of Amir’s fixed exoticism and a justification for Emily’s infidelity, as will be explained.

Shunning signifiers of his ethno-religious identity, Amir is created in a semiotic manner emulating the dominant culture in lifestyle, ideology and prejudices, a strategy through which he seeks total assimilation. In identification with the colonizer’s values and norms, Amir is shown to live in an opulent and tastefully decorated New York apartment marked by its “*high ceilings*” and “*parquet floors.*” Signifiers of Americanness are made visible through “*the marble fireplace*” and the pricey “*bottles of alcohol*” (5). Amir is dressed elegantly and expensively in an “*Italian suit jacket and a crisp, collared shirt...He speaks with a perfect American accent*” (6). He has also defied the dietary taboos of Islam; he is seen throughout the play drinking wine and eating pork. In the manner of Othello’s penetration into the Venetian society by means of marriage to Desdemona, Amir’s interracial, interfaith marriage to the white American Emily is both a way to identify with white masculinity and a sign of merging into the dominant secular culture as an ideal object. It is also a challenge to his native endogamous marriage tradition. In this regard, gender theorist Todd W. Reeser argues that through the medium of a desired object, the non-white may upgrade to white status. Reeser points out: “by desiring, attaining, or loving the white woman, the non-white man imitates white masculinity in the framework of desire and may gain access to white

privilege or to whiteness itself.” Reeser further argues: “by loving me [the white woman] proves that I am worthy of white love. I am loved like a white man. I am a white man” (209). In the play, Amir’s attachment to Emily breeds in him power and self-satisfaction. He denies the waiter’s puzzlement over seeing him in the company of white Emily: “the guy’s a racist. So what?” (7). Throughout the play, Amir appears busy on business phone calls through which he validates his power and self-worth.

Amir’s Muslim self-loathing is evidenced in his change of name. He has jettisoned his traditional Muslim name Abdullah to the more Hindu-sounding Kapoor, a process through which he masks his shameful Muslim Pakistani identity (Selod 3). Amir hides his Pakistani roots in his job application for the Jews-managed law firm ‘Leibowitz, Bernstein and Harris’ lest this lineage should destroy his career plans. Along the same lines, Amir’s acquaintances are of non-Muslim backgrounds. His co-worker Jury is an African-American sharing Amir’s hopes for being made partner at the law firm. Jury’s husband, Isaac, is an American Jew working as an art curator at Whitney Museum. He also happens to be Emily’s *de facto* promoter in the art world. Amir’s boss is the Jewish Mort who, Amir claims, treats him like a son. These acquaintances are for Amir the achievement of ‘the blue eyes’ desire of Toni Morrison’s protagonist. Through these relationships, Amir distances himself from his native roots, crosses racial and faith borders and casts himself as part of the American Judeo-Christian cultural fabric. He cuts off any ties with the people of his race or faith. He rejects his wife’s plea to defend Imam Fareed who is accused of raising money for a terrorist group in Palestine; he assures her: “I am not one of his own people” (21). His only connection now is with his nephew Abe Jensen who, like Amir, has dropped off his Muslim name Hussein and is, as the stage directions indicate, “*as American as American gets*” (12).

Amir is portrayed as the most aggressive critic of Muslim identity. Reminiscent of Jimmy Porter’s anger in Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger*, Amir’s indictment of his native culture occupies the largest part of the linguistic space of the play. Thus, he aligns himself with the Eurocentric view which deems the Muslim culture primitive, anti-modern and clashing with the American progressive mentality. Reiterating the media Islamophobic rhetoric, Amir, invoking Salman Rushdie’s hate speech in *The Satanic Verses*, refers to Islam as a sickness from

which he has to flee. He unapologetically renounces Islam: “I’m not Muslim. I’m an *apostate*” (57). He blames his wife Emily for drawing inspiration from Islamic art. Islam, Amir argues, lacks spirituality; it is “a backward way of thinking. And being” (52). To him, Muslims are monolithic, single-minded and unable to see beyond the textual and literal reading of the Quran. As the Quran is the center of Muslims’ cultural identity, Muslims, from Amir’s perspective, cannot evolve or accommodate differences; in fact, differences are mere anomalies for them. Amir condemns this centrality and denies as mere facade the attempt to recreate a modern society in the light of an outdated book written in a specific society fifteen hundred years ago (61). The Quran, Amir claims, is “like one very long hate-mail letter to humanity” (55). Amir coins the term ‘the Muslim psyche’ which, he finds, feeds on a ‘tribal mentality’ that epitomizes a classical orientalist mindset:

**Amir:** My point is that what a few [Muslim] artists are doing, however

wonderful, does not reflect the Muslim psyche.

**Isaac:** *Muslim psyche?*

**Amir:** Islam comes from the desert.

From a group of tough-minded, tough-living people.

Who saw life as something hard and relentless.

Something to be suffered... (53)

This ‘tribal mentality,’ Amir explains, is essentially exclusivist and cannot see beauty in art or other creatures. He misquotes Prophet Muhammad as saying, “angels don’t enter a house where there are pictures and/or dogs” (53). Not surprisingly, Amir’s demonic representation of Islam and Muslims is juxtaposed with a romantic image of Jews whom he sees as multidimensional, rational and civilized. Here, Amir is oblivious of the fact the Jews, like Muslims, came from the desert. Amir explains:

...Jews reacted to the situation differently.

They turned it over, and over, and over...



I mean, look at the Talmud. They're looking at things a hundred different angles, trying to negotiate with it, make it easier, more livable... (54)

Amir attributes his attitudes and those of his family towards others of a different faith to this tribal mentality. He recalls how in his childhood his fundamentalist mother spat in his face upon discovering that he was trading notes with a Jewish girl called Rivkah. He, in turn, spits in Rivkah's face for hiding her Jewish origins. He commits the same offence towards Isaac, who cuckolded him. Humorously, Amir anticipates that his career plans to be one of the partners of the Jews-run law company would make his mother "roll over in her grave" (11).

Amir also espouses the propagandist media circulation of Islam as misogynistic and sexist. He deliberately ignores context and interpretation to invoke 'wife beating,' 'the veil' and 'polygamy' as testimonies to the vulgarity and barbarity of the faith. When Emily challenges his logic, he sarcastically refers to her as one of those people "who are trying to make Islam look all warm and fuzzy" (58). Amir goes as far as crediting terrorism to rigidity in applying and teaching Quranic revelation:

**Amir:** ...There's a result to believing that a book written about life in a specific society fifteen hundred years ago is the word of God: You start wanting *to recreate* that society.  
...  
That's why you have people like Taliban. They're trying to recreate the world in the image of the one that's in the Quran.  
(61)

Amir ascribes fanaticism to the Islamic creed: "to be Muslim – *truly* – means not only that you *believe* all this. It means you *fight* for it, too. Politics follows faith? No distinction between mosque and state?" (62).

Although Amir is doggedly constructed to have adopted the supremacist white perspective as a means of assimilation into white society, his identity transformation is revealed as fake and superficial. Hall's argument for the rigidity

of cultural identity looms over strongly here. In key moments in the play, Akhtar's dramaturgy re-introduces Amir as unable to erase a fundamentalist Muslim mentality, which seems to lurk in his subconscious. The context of the drama suggests that this mentality pops up in intense situations and propels the Muslim person in him into a trajectory of rage and barbarity. In a heated discussion with Isaac, Amir is shown to have cherished pride and joy when he saw the events on September 11, 2001, and when he heard the Iranian President Ahmadinejad expressing a desire to push Israel into the Mediterranean. He is proud that his kinsmen would die for their "purer – and stricter – and truer" values (62). He links himself with the attackers using the personal collective pronoun 'we' to express power and solidarity: "we are finally winning" (63). Amir attributes this pride to his helplessness to eradicate his tough Muslim identity: "it's tribal, Jor. It is in the bones. You have no idea how I was brought up. You have to work *real* hard to root that shit out" (63). The heated discussion ends with the following statements:

**Amir:** ... And I'm saying it's wrong.  
And it comes from somewhere.  
And that somewhere is Islam.

...

**Isaac:** Fucking closet jihadist. (64-5)

Such an episode is meant to raise among the already anxious American audience fears and suspicions of all Muslim-belonging persons, whether by race or by creed.

The colonialist assumption that Muslims are inherently uncivil and unassimilable is also played out in Akhtar's dramaturgy. Driven by a shiftless mentality, Amir, like Othello, should 'turn Turks,' and his nurture of fundamentalism should take form in both idiom and action. Amir's fixed Muslim identity is foregrounded in a violent scene of him viciously beating his wife. The act is not dissimilar in manner and implication to Othello's murder of his wife. Upon discovering Emily's infidelity, Amir falls prey to jealousy and rashness, ignoring his previous indictment of the wife-beating practice in Muslim culture. He loses self-agency and assaults his wife, acting out the presumed aggression of racial subjects. The stage directions describe the brutality of the act as follows:

*All at once, Amir hits Emily in the face. A vicious blow. The first blow unleashes a torrent of rage, overtaking him. He hits her twice more. Maybe a third. In rapid succession. **Uncontrolled violence** as brutal as it needs to be in order to convey the charge of a lifetime of discreetly building resentment. (75; my emphasis)*

The incident is pregnant with associations and suggestions. It stands against the postcolonial counter discourse and the relevant rhetoric of 'the Empire Writes Back to the Center.' In fact, it asserts a more poignant power structure dichotomy in which the Muslim other remains the fanatic and the fundamentalist, as claimed in Eurocentric discourse. The episode substantiates once again Hall's first notion of identity as unchanging and rigid because it has to do with collective values and ideas that are shared among those who belong to a particular way of thinking and history. In the play, the suggestion is that Amir's identification with and mimicry of white culture cannot camouflage his essentially primitive ethnoreligious cultural identity. Notwithstanding his relentless efforts at assimilation, he unwittingly remains the vulgar, the exotic, and is ever incarcerated in his 'tribal mentality'.

Staged as an active agent in Neo Orientalism, Amir cannot accommodate the new cultural practices and the demands of democratic America. When enraged, Amir's native traditions show up and are uncontrollable; he confirms that they reach the core and are so deep in the bones that he cannot root them out. On this pathetic condition, Saljooq M. Asif comments that Akhtar paints "a disturbing portrait of a man who angrily flees from Islamic culture, only to discover it silently lurking within himself" (19). Othello's killing of Desdemona is meant to delegitimize his penetration into white society and to legitimize Iago's indictment of the Moors as 'changeable'. Analogously, Amir's vicious wife beating is not only a perpetuation of the stereotypes but also a re-assurance of the credibility and validity of colonialist discourse. Muslims, as racial persons, harbor tribal and despotic tendencies and lack reason; they are aggressive and misogynistic. Though Emily is apologetic and regretful, Amir is intolerant of her human frailty; he is enmeshed in inherently uncontrollable primitivism and tribalism.

Deeper, Amir's violent wife beating is a cautionary tale against miscegenation. Amir is persistently drawn in the media trope of the bigoted oppressive Muslim who is unable to be a true American. Ironically, the incident

credits Amir's cynical reference to himself as "I'm the nigger!! Me" (72). It validates white society's orientalist view of Amir as "duplicitous", as his boss describes him, and that his hypocrisy makes of him a "good litigator" but not the one to trust (74). The act also justifies the waiter's puzzlement over the interracial, interfaith marriage of Amir and Emily. The aggression legitimizes Isaac's racially charged sweeping conclusion that all Middle Easterners are "animals" (73). It also parallels the 'back'-transformation of Abe from the Americanized Abe Jensen to the fundamentalist Hussein who adopts the discourse of the terrorist organization ISIS in exacting revenge on blasphemous America: "[Americans have] conquered the world. We're gonna get it back. That's our destiny. It's in the Quran" (74).

As hinted above, this essentialist/colonialist view about the rigidity of the Muslim identity operates meta-theatrically in Emily's mocking painting of Amir, which is an imitation of Velázquez's drawing of his slave apprentice Juan de Pareja. Recognizing Pareja's self-deception, Velázquez produces him in the attire and pose of a proud royal of the time. Yet, this royalty, as the portrait foregrounds, is suggested as merely performative. It is contested by the centrality of the slave's dark complexion and coarse facial features, which include the wide nose, the thick lips and the curly hair. All are bodily signifiers of the slave's otherness. Emily captures Velázquez's theme, and reproduces Amir in the same over-deterministic framework. In so doing, Emily establishes her power and agency over the colored Amir. She is the white artist reproducing Amir's fable on her supremacist terms. Amir is thus established in the tradition of the Moorish Pareja, gazing at his viewers and begging for acceptance into white culture. Lopamudra Basu observes:

Emily may be a female artist reversing the long tradition of the male gaze by directing gaze at her husband, but in spite of her gender identity Emily belongs to the racial group that has a concentration of power with regard to representation. Amir, following his predecessor Juan de Pareja, is seeking the approval of white American society, and his gaze is directed at Emily and other representatives of that group who hold power and who is always trying to appease. (66)

Invoking Othello's tragedy, Emily's portrait reinforces, on the one hand, the play's thematic trajectory and serves as a self-reflexive commentary on Amir's

fixed exoticism and debasement as an oriental. The portrait captures white culture's distorted image of Amir as an outsider who is to live pathetically as 'a psychological refugee,' never 'unhomed' by the supreme culture. Isaac recognizes the connection. He draws parallels between Amir's trendy Italian clothes and those of Juan de Pareja. Because of its Orientalist implications, Isaac likes the portrait and decides to exhibit it in the show, which he insidiously titles 'Impossible Heroes.' Apparently, Amir is the impossible hero who will never be acknowledged or given a place in America, or in Emily's life. Basu observes the strict binaries that the portrait re-builds; she comments that the painting "does not alter the status quo of power relations vis-à-vis the minority ethnic groups of South Asian Muslims and mainstream white America" (66). On the other hand, the portrait serves as a resignification of 'double consciousness.' It is a replica of Amir's first onstage appearance when he is introduced as dressed in trendy Italian shirts but undressed from the waist down, a strong visual suggestion of his incomplete American acculturation. As such, the portrait affirms Amir's low position within the anti-Islamic hegemonic discourse. In agreement with this view, Isaac assures Emily that Amir "doesn't understand you. He can't understand you. He puts you on a pedestal. It's in your painting" (69). And, in the same patronizing manner, Isaac addresses Amir in a way that accentuates his difference:

So there you are, in your six-hundred-dollar Charvet shirt, like Velázquez's brilliant apprentice-slave in his lace collar, adorned in the splendors of the world you're now so clearly a part of...  
And yet...  
The question remains... .  
Of your place. (46)

Like Othello, Amir is ever chased by his heritage which thwarts all attempts towards identity transformation.

As is the case with Othello, Amir's successful career cannot atone for his racial origins, a tragedy which Emily forcefully puts forward in her portrait. Emily's cheating on Amir should then be understood within the context of her deep denial of him as equal in humanity and as dominant in the sexual relationship. Isaac, assuming Iago's voice and taking cues from him, perceptively realizes that

Emily will cheat on Amir whenever there is a possibility for it, as such interracial coupling is polluted, unnatural and the result of “mere passing flight of fancy” (70). Not surprisingly, Emily does not resist Isaac’s sexual advances towards her:

**Isaac** (Cont’d): If what happened that night in London was a mistake,  
Em, it’s not the last time you’re going to make it.  
A man like that...  
You *will* cheat on him again. Maybe not with me, but you will.

**Emily**: Isaac.

**Isaac**: And then one day you’ll leave him.  
Em. I’m in love with you.  
*Isaac leans to kiss her.*  
*Emily doesn’t move. In or out. (70)*

Amir also realizes the implication. His rage and aggression towards Emily are not only because of her infidelity, but also because of her over-deterministic view of him as a mere black person who is inadequate for a white woman, as the portrait betrays. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon introduces the concepts of muscular tension and nightly “muscular dreams” of action and self-assertion as expressions of the colonized anger over being physically and psychologically humiliated (15-16). Emily’s infidelity and re-production of Amir in the image of a slave reduce him to an angry physical abuser and as such validate the claimed dominant features of his native identity. It is worth mentioning that Emily insists on breaking off her marriage with Amir; she disregards all his pleas and excuses, which amounts to a state of awakening and a realization of a mistaken union:

**Amir**: I just ...  
*(Long pause, Amir emotional)*  
I just want you to be proud of me.  
I want you to be proud you were with me.  
*Beat.*

**Emily**: Good-bye, Amir.  
Please. Don’t write me anymore. (87)

In Akhtar's pro-colonialist dramaturgy, the romance of Amir and Emily, like that of Othello and Desdemona, should not be allowed to thrive or mature, as that would be offending the sensibilities of a white antagonistic audience and fueling deep-seated anxieties about interracial, interfaith marriage.

The tragic silence of the last scene bespeaks Amir's tragic sense of despondency and displacement. In total contrast to his first stage appearance in his tastefully decorated apartment, the last scene stages Amir's apartment in total desolation, stark and empty except for the haphazardly placed moving boxes. All highlight Amir's sense of loss and decimation. Fired and deserted, Amir is portrayed as taking an ambivalent "*searching long look*" at Emily's portrait of him (87). As such, the scene establishes the theme of non-redemption of the Muslim person. In spite of all his concerted efforts to diminish and downplay markers of his native Muslim identity, Amir, like Othello, remains the racial other and the weaker in power relationships. He is denied the ability to cross the rigid borders of his cultural identity and so cannot come to terms with antithetical self-representation. In the words of Diana Benea, Amir is unable to protest or counter "the ever-complicated dynamics between the definer and the defined, the representer and the represented, and the power relations inherent in it" (63). In this dystopic and despotic context, Amir is not allowed a fair life or a passage to Americanness. The scene sums up the whole meaning of the play, which resonates with the final words in E. M. Forster's masterpiece *A Passage to India*, "'No, not yet,' and the sky said, 'No, not there'." (362).

## **Conclusion**

*Disgraced*, as the above analysis has shown, debunks the myth of a post-racial America devoid of prejudices; it rather affirms that race and religious differences are becoming more enslaving than ever before. In opposition to Gilbert and Tompkins' assumptions about a post-colonial text as counter discursive, the play re-enacts the *Othello* colonialist paradigm. It maintains *Othello's* inherent West vs. non-West structures of power and highlights in the process the rigidity of one's native cultural identity, particularly when nourished by a set of values and ideas that are thought of as ideal and accommodating, as viewed by Hall.

In that vein, the play justifies Eurocentrism, apartheid, and Islamophobia, giving all a sense of sustained validity and naturalness. *Disgraced* dismantles as

false the notion that diasporic identity is multilayered and palimpsestic. It disregards the historical contexts in favor of a static view about the past which cannot be erased in the process of identity formation. Put differently, *Disgraced* rejects Bhabha's concept of the hybrid identity while embracing Said's endorsement of the polarization of identity and the world into self and other. The boundaries that a canonical counter-discursive text is expected to dismantle are established in *Disgraced* as firm, stable and absolute. In this regard, Amir cannot be simultaneously Muslim and American; he is only capable of lamenting the rupture from his old world, but he is never permitted to celebrate the renewal of the self in the new world. He and his fellows are to live 'disgraced' as Abe confirms, and 'impossible heroes' as Isaac insinuates.

In so showing, Akhtar plays into the hands of the post-9/11 theatrical establishment and propagandist media, crafting a dramatic representation of Muslims which justifies the US domestic and foreign policies against the Muslim community and which feeds spectators' fears and biases over the Muslim American plight. It cannot be overlooked that such a presentation by a Muslim author is more likely to place this author, and others who follow the same path, under more critical light and attention. The danger, however, is that such a representation will deepen differences and incite more clashes. It cannot be similarly ignored that Amir is a psychological victim of colonialism. The suggestion that he will never be allowed a safe haven in the American polity is powerful enough to garner for him sympathetic identification. Undeniably, the revelation of a deep-rooted schism within the American society and the force of ethnic affiliations in structuring power relations engage audiences in a re-configuration of issues pertaining to belonging, diasporic identity formation and cultural relativism. The tragic ending of the play with Amir's anguish over his loss of a stable identity encourages audiences to confront these issues and consider ways for salvation.



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## شرك الإعلام الدعائي: خطاب الموالاة الإستعماري في مسرحية المنبوذ للكاتب إياد أختار

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### مستخلص البحث:

تذهب هذه الدراسة إلى أن مسرحية المنبوذ لمؤلفها إياد أختار التي قدمها عام 2013 م قد سقطت ضمن شرك وسائل الإعلام المنحازة النظرة ضد الإسلام والمسلمين خاصة بعد أحداث 11 سبتمبر. فمن خلال تقنية التناص مع مسرحية عطيل لوليم شيكسبير، عمد أختار إلى تغليب وجهة النظر الإستعمارية الحتمية عند تقديم الهوية الإسلامية دونما النظر إلى ثرائها النوعي وتلاحقها الثقافي. على أن طريقة العرض هذه يمكن القول بأنها إمتداد يتناغم مع التقديم المشوه المتوارث لصورة المسلمين، ويغذي إشباع حركة التحول الأمريكي نحو سياسة الأمن الوطني الداخلي، كما يتسق مع السياسة الأمريكية الخارجية نحو العالم الإسلامي؛ وهو المسار الذي يمكن أن يؤمن للكاتب قدراً كبيراً من الشهرة والقبول الفني. أنطلقت الدراسة في تأسيس حجتها على أفكار كل من ستوارت هال عن الهوية الثقافية كما في مقالة المعروف "الهوية الثقافية والشتات"، وكذلك إستراتيجيات كل من جيلبرت وتومكينز المعنية بقانونية النص الخطابى المضاد، كما يظهر في كتابهما "دراما ما بعد الإستعمار: النظرية والتطبيق والسياسات". هذا، وقد استعانت الدراسة بمجموعة من المفاهيم من نظرية ما بعد الإستعمار مثل "المحاكاة" و"الفضاء المابعدوي" و"الهجنة الثقافية"، الى غير ذلك، حسبما وردت في الدراسات التي أجراها هومي بابا .

### الكلمات المفتاحية:

إياد أختار ، المنبوذ، الهوية الثقافية، الهوية الدينية، النص الخطابى المضاد