

Once a Muslim Always a Muslim: The Rise and Fall of the Muslim American Protagonist in Ayad Akhtar's *Disgraced*

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Abstract

The post 9/11 atmosphere of terror made Muslim Americans highly visible in the U.S. and they have been viewed as potential terrorist suspects. Therefore, in the light of these circumstances, Ayad Akhtar's Play *Disgraced* is most apropos to be revisited as his works focus on the existence of Muslims in America as a post-colonial contact zone. In fact, the play puts the interracial marriage of Amir, and his wife Emily, a White American woman on center stage and makes it fall down before our eyes. Despite the fact that Amir's credentials qualify him to be a model minority citizen, and reach the American Dream, he falls out of grace as soon as he appears in court to show support as a pro bono lawyer to a Muslim Imam who is tried for raising fund for a mosque in the Middle East. This paper belabors the reasons that led to the reversal of the hero's fortune from prosperity to misery in the wake of the collapse of New York twin towers.

Keywords: *Disgraced*, Muslim, Model Minority, Identity

1. Introduction

The post 9/11 climate of terror in the US has converted Muslims from relative invisibility to hypervisibility and made them be viewed as possible terrorist suspects. Despite the fact that they have always been regarded as 'other' due to orientalist assumptions of Islam and the East in general (Said, 1978), 9/11 has magnified the anxiety, towards Muslims as active national security threat (Shams, 2018, p. 2). Consequently, the post 9/11 U.S. administrations have set up a number of policies and programs into operation thus targeting Muslim immigrants and communities in particular.

Commenting on the image of Islam in the West, Jamil Khoury (2015) states that in the West Islam is depicted as the antithesis of liberalism. He writes:

In popular culture, Islam gets depicted as the antithesis of liberalism: not only incompatible with liberal values, but at war with those values. And this adversity is not simply ideological, or even theological; it may in fact be biological. Muslims possess an innate, inborn aversion to all things liberal. They are, by nature, authoritarian, tyrannical, void of empathy, averse to self-criticism and introspection, volatile, and understanding only for force. Pluralism, power sharing, tolerance for opposing viewpoints, and respect for the other are all signs of weakness in the 'Muslim mind' (p. 3).

Apparently, and in line with Edward Said's debate, Jamil Khoury holds that the West views Islam as irreconcilable with its liberalism, and with the balance between collective responsibility and individual interests.

Given the fact that the label 'Muslim' connotes a mosque going identity, it can also function as a race category that may homogenize Arabs, North Africans, Middle Easterners and Blacks as well (Shams, 2018, p. 2). It can also include Muslim-looking people wherever they are. Realizing the repressive nature of the previously mentioned policies, Muslim community leaders, intellectuals and creative writers have tried to foster resistance techniques to curb the negative effect of these policies on their communities. Consequently, Ayad Akhtar's Play *Disgraced* (2013) is most relevant to revisit. He (1972-) is a Pakistani-American actor, novelist, playwright and screen writer whose work focuses on Muslim existence and issues in America as a post-colonial contact zone and on the negative effects of Islamophobia, not only on the individual, but also on the collective levels. Following the great success and fame his first play brought him, he wrote a number of other plays; *The Who and the What* (2014), *The Invisible Hand* (2015), and *Junk; The Golden Age of Debt* (2016). His two most famous novels are

The Muslim Dervish (2012) and *Home Elegies* (2020). As a matter of fact, Ayad Akhtar's play *Disgraced* earned him the Pulitzer award for drama in 2013. Despite the fact that Ayad Akhtar writes on the issues of Muslims in America, his drama is well grounded in the Western dramatic canon as he gets inspiration from Western canonic playwrights and sometimes models his dramatic plots on some of Shakespeare's plays. *Disgraced* for instance echoes *Othello* and is tailored, outlined and designed on it.

1.1 Plot Summary

In fact, the play puts the interracial marriage of Amir, and his wife Emily—a white American Christian woman who shows interest in oriental art—on center stage. It has also provoked a hot controversy among drama critics and scholars because of a number of short scenes where Amir claims that the Quran is kind of a long hate email, takes pride in the collapse of the Twin Towers and beats his white American wife severely until she is bloodied on stage. Akhtar's play explores multiple topics and themes that vary from Islamophobia, new orientalism, integration in mainstream America, racism, and bigotry in his attempt to explore Muslim Americans' identity rupture. Hence, the critical and textual analysis of the play can help us understand the nature and danger of the phenomenon of Islamophobia, the status and future of Muslims as a minority in America, the evasiveness of the notion of the American Dream, and the tricks White America uses to maintain white supremacy in the country.

In an attempt to make the play impactful on the audience, the playwright sets up the world of Amir, and his wife Emily and makes it fall apart in front of our eyes. They are weird couples. He was raised as a Muslim in America, but denounced his religion deriding Islam as old fashioned and out of place in the New World. He seems to have jettisoned his heritage by changing his name to another one that sounds more like Hindu; Kapoor. Emily on the other side is a Christian American and tends to romanticize Islam and Islamic art in her paintings. With two more racially and culturally diverse couple, they all get together for a dinner hosted by Amir and his wife, in an enviable upstate apartment in Manhattan, New York. Amir, his wife Emily, Jory, Amir's African American coworker and her husband, Isaac, a Jewish art curator who wants to help Emily participate in an art show in New York. The dinner is supposed to be a celebratory occasion where Emily intends to celebrate the news that her work is included in the art show. In that event we know that Amir's firm owners have summoned him to investigate his appearance in the suspect Imam's case as his pro bono public defender and that this has associated the law firm with Islamic radicalism.

Jory and Isaac know that the company has decided to pass Amir over and make Jory a partner instead of him as the owners view Amir as duplicitous. Emily and Isaac are aware of what Jory is ignorant of; that they had a brief affair in London. In fact, betrayal works at many levels in the play. Amir denounces his faith and is betrayed by it in the Imam's case. Emily cheats on him and Isaac betrays his wife. Bigsby (2020) argues that, "Beyond this there are other betrayals as religion and politics conspire to turn belief into destructive action" (p. 17). Amir, who has denounced his faith has concealed his true identity from his firm owners pretending and claiming to have been born in India, and not Pakistan whose 97% of her population are Muslims. Therefore, his Jewish coworkers send him a bottle of fine wine and a small stature of the Hindu God, Shiva. It seems it is not done inadvertently. When he tells about his sister, we know that his parents sent her back to Pakistan to marry and then comes back with her husband to America to become citizens and be frequent adherents of the community mosque. Emily we are told, had a black Spanish boyfriend before dating Amir. Perhaps, Akhtar is giving the audience a proof of her (American) liberal openness which parallels her desire to incorporate Islamic art into her own, though her husband prefers her landscapes because, she acidly suggests, 'they have nothing to do with Islam' she has also had a brief affair with Isaac, the man she hopes to impress with her work and secure a place in the Whitney Exhibition, (Bigsby, 2020, p. 16).

1.2 A Spot Light on the Muslim American Protagonist

Claudia Nordinger (2019) comments on the character of Amir as he conducts himself in the exposition of the play saying:

Amir's Us-American self-conception at the beginning of the play is based not merely on his life, a second generation migrant's version of the American dream, but on having cut his ties with what he considers the shameful Muslim heritage that governed his childhood. To Amir it is a matter of intelligence and human progress to disassociate himself from the religion of his upbringing. However, in the aftermath of 9/11, it became clear that ties of religious membership cannot be chosen, freely, as Amir would like to pretend... for him there is no home country to return to and no alternative community to claim membership of. The cultural and religious membership assigned to him is, tragically, one he has spent his adult life pathologizing. His wife's religious themed art continuously forces Amir to reassert his position between a discarded Muslim past and all American success story. His absolute repudiation of Islam appears to be a

defense mechanism (pp. 62–63).

Nordinger states that this defense mechanism manifests itself in his constant attempt to efface his religion-based identity and by viewing Islam by its most radical stereotype.

1.3 Other Muslim American Characters

Despite Amir's intentional divorce from his cultural heritage, Akhtar introduces another Muslim character, Abe, who is also struggling with issues of assimilation and religion in America. He is born in Pakistan and is described by Akhtar that he conducts himself in the society "as American as American gets" (*Disgraced*, 2012, p. 11). Abe asks Amir to help Imam Fared. As soon as Amir appears with the Imam in the court he is exposed to the public and his name as well as his company's name wind up in the local New York times newspaper. That event finally leads to his downfall from grace. In fact, Abe follows in the footsteps of Amir and changes his name from Hussein to Abe telling the latter that "you know how much easier things are for me since I changed my name? it's in the Quran. It says you can hide your religion if you need to" (*Disgraced*, 2012, p. 13). Unlike Amir, Abe did not abandon his connections to his cultural roots. Following 9/11, it turns out that name changing and the American style clothes he wears were only nothing more than a pragmatic play-acting which Claudia Nordinger calls a kind of "Inoutsider's performance that apparently left the core identity unchanged" (2019, p. 63). However, the two characters are different despite of the fact that their name change and American style clothes serve as symptoms of the struggle between their interior and exterior lives that associate them both with their longing for model minority status and ambition.

1.4 Betrayal and Loss of Control

Again, it is in the dinner party that Akhtar quickly shifts the focus from the sociopolitical to the personal sphere as Amir is aware of his betrayal romantically and professionally. It is here that Amir mimics his mother and spits on Isaac's face who has cockled him with Emily. As Isaac gets offended he returns back to offensive language and tells Amir that "there's a reason they call you people animals" (*Disgraced*, 2012, p. 73). Additionally, it is here that the characters tear off any veneer of civility. They all go back to their tribal characteristics. The play is skillfully interlacing issues of terrorism, identity, and religion in the four characters' conversation where the Jewish art curator provokes Amir to elaborate on his views of the Quranic text and the so-called Islamic radicalism. As they consume alcohol, the argument gets heated and trenchant. Consequently, Amir loses all control over his unconsciousness and vents out criticism of Islam by claiming that the Quranic text sounds like, "one very long hate-mail letter to humanity" (*Disgraced*, 2012, p. 55). To which, Isaac accuses him of being overwhelmed by self-loathing, (*Disgraced*, 2012, p. 61). This shames him of harboring tribalistic pride when he confesses that he felt joy in the fall of the twin towers. Thus Akhtar's portrayal of Amir's conflicted identity appears in the protagonist's change of rage towards Islam to taking pride in the collapse of the twin towers. The aim is to describe the depth of rupture in the model minority identity. In fact, Amir's life style, job, residence and marriage to a white American woman qualify him to be a model minority protagonist. However, Akhtar examines how islamophobia, racism, and media discourse on terrorism threaten South Asian Muslims' endeavors to identify as a model minority in America. Despite the fact that the play's setting fits well into the economic-leap forward myth of the American Dream, Akhtar makes this facade fall to pieces in the dramatic course of the action.

1.5 The Play's Setting and Structure

The play from beginning to end is made up of four scenes with no intervals or pauses. The action pacing is breathtaking, and it never falls. Nevertheless, there are a number of time skips in the narration between the four scenes. Furthermore, the narrative timeline runs from late 2011 to Spring 2012 at the peak time of 9/11 backlash. In addition to the four characters that attend the dinner party, we also have Abe, Amir's nephew. Other off-stage events are recounted in a diegesis-based approach. The fact that all the action takes place in Amir's opulent apartment creates a feeling that it is a microcosm of the macrocosm that the world of the play is referring to. Amir's abode with all its wall-mounted oriental paintings, lord Siva (Indian deity) statue above the fireplace and the liquor bottles on the table forecasts a character with a perplexed interior life, while delineating his constant endeavor for assimilation. Akhtar's discloses his insecurities not only by revealing the change of his surname from Abdullah to Kapoor that sounds more like a Hindu name, but by Amir's accepting of Lord Siva's statue from his boss to obscure his Muslim heritage, efface his identity and acknowledge his mistaken identity as of Hindu origin.

1.6 The Protagonist's Flaw and Dilemma

In fact, Amir disaffection with his Islamic faith is deliberate and calculated as he does not enlighten his boss

about his name change and his postulation that Amir is Hindu. When Emily asks him if his boss is aware that he is Hindu, he answers, “he may have mentioned something once” (*Disgraced*, 2011, p. 11). In fact, his decision to estrange himself from his legacy is taken with no consultation with his wife. She sounds naïve as she has no idea of work place racial prejudice. He thinks that entering the new world requires a disregard of the world he came from. Shams (2020) holds that part of his dilemma is that he belongs to a color group whose racialized positionality in America joins forces with their stigmatized religious identity. This gave rise to a sense of vulnerability and self-doubt thus unsettling their hybrid identity and its constant grapple to reach new heights on the social ladder. This notion, she says, drives the narrative of the play and is incorporated within the design of the play’s plot; via the setting, the characters’ dialogue, flashbacks and reporting the off-stage events that come from outside the world of the play. One thinks that the climax is extended or broken into two consequent sub scenes; a minor climatic event that takes place during the dinner party when he becomes shockingly aware of being passed over as a partner in his company for the less qualified coworker Jury, and a major turning point when he beats his wife at the moment he discovers that she has cheated on him thus fulfilling the worst stereotype of Muslim husbands.

2. Literature Review

In hindsight, one can claim that in the aftermath of the phase of colonialism, the western notion of the East has continued to depend upon orientalist legacy. The Orient remained to be primitive, irrational, credulous and immature as opposed to the more rational, mature and sophisticated West (Said, *Orientalism*, 1978, p. 48). Following 9/11, this view took a new guise in the form of American Islamophobia and has left its impact on the way South Asian Americans are perceived there. Khaled Beydoun calls this ‘structural Islamophobia’ (2019, p. 170). Indeed, Akhtar’s play and his portrayal of ruptured identities make postcoloniality a significant tool for understanding this type of representation. This term, due to Bill Ashcroft, probes the representational depiction of the colonized subject whether in post-colonial, new colonial contexts or contact zones (1995, p. 169). Said (*Orientalism*, 1978) firmly asserts that politics is the center of the Western representation of the East. Hence, globalism reinforced the dichotomy and maintained its respective characteristics between the Orient and the Occident. Additionally, Homi Bhabha (1994) argues that cultural identities of the diaspora are usually characterized by a kind of fluctuation between their original culture and way of life and the host country’s life and culture as well. Such diasporic cultural identities, says Bhabha, are sometimes backed up and authenticated by notions like plurality and multiplicity. Therefore, hybridity alludes to the formation of identities that are transcultural within contact zones. However, there is no guarantee that hybridity is free from the hierarchical nature of the imperial process. In a nutshell, hybridity is the process through which a powerful colonial power works to change the indigenous identity of the colonized subject/people in a global framework/contact zone with the intention of producing something new and recognizable. In brief, hybridity is liminal and is an articulation of colonial anxiety. Therefore, it can be described as a third place that combines both home culture and host country culture.

Indeed, one can state that Bhabha’s insightful theory of hybridity furnishes us with a lens for assessing the model minority myth as Akhtar is appropriating it as a framework within which he is describing racism in America. Besides, Steven Vertovec (1997) states that “there is an inability or unwillingness {among diasporic groups} to be fully accepted by ‘host societies’—thereby fostering feelings of alienation, or exclusion or superiority or other kinds of difference” (p. 279). In fact, Vertovec is stating that the circumstances these people are subjected to, and the perplexed feelings they harbor, breeds a kind of divided self or blurred loyalties to both home countries and host societies at the same time. As South Asian diaspora is not a monolith, so one cannot pass a generalization on them. However, religion is a significant factor in determining differences within this diaspora. As a result, in the aftermath of 9/11 South Asian Muslim Americans were targeted due to the wide-ranging backlash that based its attack in religious stereotyping. During these tough moments, the damage from the model minority scheme has taken new proportions as it has fortified a bunch of stereotypical attributes about South Asian Muslims; that is to say being resident aliens or cultural aliens and consisting of religious minorities. This new addition to the old stereotypes created new binaries and is religion-based. The most horrible of these stereotypes is that it is linked to the Muslim faith. Adding this to the other characteristics of the model minority has triggered them to push their assimilation efforts forward. Nevertheless, despite the fact that their merits and credentials qualify them to attain the American Dream, it is their ‘Muslimness’ that seems to disqualify them from maintaining their material success and relegates them to lower social levels and ranks, (Shams, 2020, pp. 653–669).

Moreover, in the wake of 9/11 the process of Muslims’ identification took more proportions and moved into a new territory via inventing a new binary between what the media and American politicians called ‘good Muslims’ and ‘bad Muslims’ (Mamdani, 2005). As Islam was then associated with political radicalism and

violence, Muslims tried to get detached from anything that labels them as terrorists. Hence, T. Shams (2020) argues that this correlation between Islam and religious extremism, seen in the light of the model minority scheme, has produced a more sophisticated three-layered and race-related construction that is based on religious categorization. That is to say, Muslims with secular interests and dispositions can be the buffer group between whites at the top level and Muslim fundamentalists at the bottom of the new structure. These secular Muslims were functioning as a counter power and opposition force that is opposed to and filtering out 'bad Muslims'. In fact, the model minority scheme gave a fake feeling of security to Muslims who were vulnerable to fall from grace if they digress from the well-established stereotype of attaining success in America. Consequently, South Asians being Muslims and having brown skin affiliated them with violence and extremism and made them be viewed as terrorist sleeper cells. On the other hand, they also felt insecure and were fearful of deportation and random terrorist accusations. In fact, the key reason for categorizing Muslims as others in America following 9/11 is rooted in islamophobia. As a result, the strain resulting from this discriminatory climate usually drives characters to do their best to become model minority seekers. In order to manifest how this assumption works and operates in the literary text, we need to briefly outline the core and characteristics of this model minority scheme and its nature.

Vicar Bascara (2006) claims that the model minority scheme is an invented type of U.S. new imperialism and that racial groups could attain the American Dream despite challenges. It is pointless to state that the model minority concept has come to light in the 1950s and 1960s in America and has been associated with achieving the American Dream by adopting the philosophy of the model minority scheme (Chou & Feagin, 2016, p. 18). Indeed, the model itself tends to describe Asian Americans as upward mobile, workaholic, smart, affluent, deferential, complaisant, law-abiding and having a do-not-disturb the status quo mindset. However, it has come under attack in the 1980s by Asian American intellectuals as it is believed to have been more counterproductive than gainful. They have been in a belief that it is serving a white American political agenda, that it hammers a wedge between people of color and finally that it includes a lot of fallacies. Therefore, the model minority pattern tends to maintain a white supremacy system where the whites are on the top while negatively categorizing other minorities. Hence, the myth was used for nurturing and advocating the idea that Asians had made it in America by defeating racism and achieving a certain degree of success via their self-designed assimilative endeavor. Therefore, they have become partly like whites (Chou & Feagin, 2016, p. 10). In fact, the model minority-based acceptance of these citizens into mainstream life and culture is contingent. If they step out of the stereotype or line, they are immediately silenced and castigated. It presents racism as a problem that falls on individuals and not as a structural scheme. Indeed, the model minority myth intends to shift the accountability from the oppressor to the oppressed and to also put a huge pressure on Asian Americans to play down racial incidents, offences, and harassments.

3. Thesis Statement and Method of Research

Indeed, Ayad Akhtar's Play *Disgraced* interrogates how Muslim identities went through a process of re-definition in the wake of 9/11, sheds light at how the environment of suspicion and scrutiny has complicated their existence in the U.S. and portrays the tension in the South Asian Muslim diasporic identity resulting from the strife for assimilation in the American society. Akhtar does this through three approaches. First, describing the new postcolonial context in which they try to fit themselves. Second, evoking the internalized identity crisis that results from the struggle between the need to assimilate to the new culture and the cultural traces of the old way of life that develops into identity rupture. And, finally highlighting how the post 9/11 circumstances have increased the challenges these characters face in their new localities. Accordingly, this research paper undertakes to investigate the struggles and hardships of South Asian Muslims in general and the sociocultural, political and personal factors that have caused the Muslim American protagonist of the play in particular to fall down in view of the schema of model minority. Consequently, the endeavors of Amir and other Muslim characters to achieve material success and attain the American Dream have all come to a halt due to racial profiling, suspicion, self-doubt, surveillance and deportation threats of Muslims.

Additionally, the research paper intends to investigate the multifaceted relationship of Amir and Emily in the light of Edward Said's writings on Orientalism and Franz Fanon's interpretation of the relationship between black/Brown men and white women in colonial or post-colonial social spaces. However, *Disgraced*, unlike *Othello*, is not a return to or a replica of the tragic end of *Othello*, but through a realistic description of the complexities of post 9/11 America and the appeal it makes to the theatre goers' sensibilities, the play calls for change in the current interracial and religious relations in the United States. Akhtar, in an attempt to reinforce the negative influence of Islamophobia on South Asian Muslims, relocates the impact from the political to the personal so as to exhibit its devastating outcomes.

As Akhtar's play has destabilized the binaries that 9/11 has reinforced in the U.S., therefore, the analysis of the text will draw upon the model minority scheme, cast light on Amir as a model minority protagonist, and intends to manifest how feigned assimilation and the attempt to fit into the model minority categorization results into a ruptured identity. In fact, Akhtar's text conducts an enquiry into the price paid for attaining the American Dream. Hence, the play can be viewed as a counter narrative to the myths of model minority as well as the American Dream. The play depicts options made available to the South Asian Muslim Americans in particular and Muslim Americans in general who try to associate themselves with white mainstream American society; these are either a retreat from one's Muslim identity in the guise of assimilation or picking up a kind of radicalization by rejecting the model minority scheme and turning into radical extremism.

4. Discussion and Text Analysis

The first scene opens on Amir striking a pose in a charmingly stylish suit jacket and in boxers for Emily to portray him in their upscale apartment in Manhattan where upper middle class professionals and lovers of the city's art and cultural scene reside. This tableau vivant where Emily is portraying her husband originates from a racial remark made by a white waiter about Amir in a restaurant while dining with his white wife. The living picture of Emily and her husband is loaded with multiple political interpretations. Emily is trying to make meaning of the moment and register her experience of it in the portraiture. The scene seems to invite the audience to understand the forces at work in her relationship with her brown-skinned Muslim husband. L. Basu (2016) is in the belief that Amir is following suit of Juan de Pareja in seeking the approval of his white master for gaining acceptance into mainstream America. She writes:

Emily's painting does not alter the status quo of power relations vis-a-vis the minority ethnic group of South Asian Muslims and mainstream white America. Emily may be a female artist reversing the long tradition of the male gaze by directing her 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 the white American society and his gaze is directed at Emily and the other representatives of that group who hold power and whom he is always trying to appease. In general, this reversal of traditional gender roles of male artist and female model to a female artist and male model, would have carried with it the possibility of reversing previous gender inequality and injustice. However, within the overall context of post 9/11 American society, this is not a liberating move. This is because in the public sphere, the South Asian and particularly, the Muslim man's body has already been turned into an object of society's gaze. The male body at the overt level is an object of fear and surveillance as a suspected terrorist by mainstream media. In the days following 9/11, the brown body and the turban became synonymous with terrorism and led to many acts of racial profiling and violence (pp. 89–90).

In fact, Akhtar takes popularly common ideas-racialization, islamophobia and the motifs of assimilation—and embeds them in the body of his play text. The intimacy of the home sphere is reinforced by Amir's half-naked, half-clothed state. Furthermore, his boxer pants state suggests a kind of reluctance in being portrayed by his wife. Again, the dissimilitude between the boxers and his elegant upper half dress may refer to a ruptured identity between two cultures. Additionally, the fact that Emily's painting of her husband from the shoulder level up reinforces her monopoly over his identity representation. She is the one that has the perception, the gaze and the brush. L. Basu (2016) remarks that the representation of the protagonist as a sexual object makes the Muslim male body lie under the monopoly of white society and denies its autonomy.

4.1 How the Idea of Portraying Amir in the Style of De Pareja Started?

Robin Field (2017) remarks on the waiter's racial remark that was reported in the dialogue between Amir and Emily and which gave her the idea of portraying her husband in the style of de Pareja saying that the waiter's perception of Amir's ethnicity gives him a wrong impression that his white racial identity grants him power over Amir. The waiter, says Field, does not believe that Amir is American enough to pass off as a model minority American citizen (p. 52). Emily's reaction, he adds, reinforces her white savior complex towards brown-body Muslims as she informs Amir that "a man, a waiter looking at you. Not seeing you. Not seeing who you really are. Not until you started to deal with him. And the deftness with which you did that. You made him see that gap. Between what he was assuming about you, and what you really are" (*Disgraced*, 2012, p. 5). Her discussion of the incident speaks to a kind of reversal of gender roles to establish a savior/victim dynamic or dichotomy. The conversation goes in the following way between them:

Amir: Just sounds like plain, old fashioned prejudice to me.

Emily: Okay. But I started to think about the Velazquez painting. And how people must have reacted when

they first saw it. They think they are looking at a picture of a moor. An assistant.

Amir: A slave.

Emily: Fine. A slave. But whose portrait-it turns out-has more nuance and complexity and reality than any rendition of even a king. And Velazquez painted more than a few portraits of the royal family (*Disgraced*, 2012, p. 5).

In fact, it seems that Emily matches up this slavery positioning to her husband by focusing on his brown skin in the way Pareja's portraiture does. Furthermore, she rejects any discontent from Amir by highlighting the historical importance of the Renaissance portrait rather than on her husband's protest being racialized. This attitude is an enduring pattern throughout the play.

On the other hand, Amir is continuously resisting and rejecting the racialized roles he is pushed to fill up. This happens when Abe asks him early in the first scene to defend the Muslim Imam because his defense team is consisting of Jewish attorneys and that he will feel more at home with Muslim attorneys. To which, Amir claims that his religion is not Islam. Additionally, in a telling conversation with Emily as she asks him to defend the Imam, she reminds him that he is a model minority achiever. She cuts him off saying:

Emily: You told me. So what? So a man who has nothing left but his dignity and his faith is still trying to be useful in the only way he knows how? I mean, if he feels he needs one of his own people around him.

Amir: I'm not one of his people.

Emily: You are. And in a way that's unique. And that can be helpful to him. Why are you so resistant to seeing that? (*Disgraced*, 2012, p. 19).

Emily's use of the vocabulary 'unique' to her husband is another way of emphasizing her husband's model minority status. In fact, he is unusually positioned within the legal business. Such status is based mainly on his estrangement from his religious heritage as the play indicates. In fact, the act of painting Amir in the same manner as de Pareja and her disregard of his resistance to be portrayed in this pattern manifests her ignorance of the power dynamic in the Renaissance painting and her ignorance of her husband's positionality in the America society. Furthermore, Amir's disinclination to be painted in this way demonstrates his awareness of the racialization he is subjected to in the society.

M. Cain (2022) argues that Emily's conception of the personality of Amir seems to depend upon his capability "to demonstrate his successful assimilation into mainstream American society and his elevated socioeconomic status" (p. 2). Similarly, L. Basu (2016) also contends that the very few options left for Muslim men in the post 9/11 circumstances have contributed to the downfall of Amir. This partly manifests in the play through his wife's reductive notion of who Amir really is. Her interpretation of the small racial profiling incident of the waiter traps Amir's identity between the hard rock and the deep blue sea; he would either fulfil racial categorizations or defy them through evidences and proofs of his successful incorporation into upper class via flair and self-assurance. In an attempt to downplay the wide-spread misjudgment of South Asians such as her husband, she decides to come up with her own version of the identity of her husband in a visual form. Nevertheless, her attempt falls short of its good intentions. To Emily, Amir fits into her American upper class world. What she is unmindful of is that by establishing an interrelation between Amir and Juan de Pareja, she is making him a modern counterpart of the Spanish slave who is seeking asylum into a host country or a moor working for assimilation into the more civilized Venetian society.

4.2 The Portrait as a Form of Cultural Appropriation

In fact, Emily's attitude resonates with the painfulness of colonial history and she herself is unaware of the damage the portraiture may cause to Amir's sense of self identification. Additionally, Charles McNulty (2016) also argues that Emily's artistic appropriation is more damaging than beneficial. He writes, "Emily is blind to the complicated politics of her own privileged acts of cultural appropriation" (*Los Angeles Times*, June 12th, 2016, art review section). Consequently, two points here are worth mentioning about Emily's interest in oriental art. First, these artistic curiosities are part of her condescending identity, and second they are at the same time beneficial for her market-oriented artistic success as she is in the belief that eurocentrism has placed Islam-motivated artifacts in an inferior position. She says, "We draw on the Greeks, on the Romans, we should be drawing on the Islamic tradition as well. Islam is part of who we are. And we don't even know it" (*Disgraced*, 2012, p. 31). When reminded by her art curator that she might be blamed for her interest in oriental art, she answers back saying, "Yea, well, we've all gotten way too wrapped up in the politics. The way we talk about things. We've forgotten to look at things the way they really are" (*Disgraced*, 2012, p. 30).

In the same vein, Putri contends that Emily's declaration that oriental art is underestimated in the West discloses her white savior complex. That is an ideology which is pursued from a position of superiority when other racial or non-white people are in need of help or support. The white-savior-mentality people usually presume that they can solve the problems of other people around the world without the need to figure out the reasons that have originally led to these problems in the first place. The concept is as old as the hills and is still alive around the universe and in America as well. It focuses on the immediate needs and not on long term solutions (2019, p. 284). Over and above, Nalini Iyer (2023) holds that in the West, oriental art is more appreciated and valued when mediated by white dealers, scholars and artists. Therefore, Emily's attitude seems to echo the liberal views and attitudes of the American privileged class who are prone to admire and acknowledge Islam only in well-mediated and moderated abstractions. She proclaims that the Islamic religion survives and has life only as artistic representation in liberal-minded upscale Manhattan which pulls back from the worldly and corporeal conditions of Muslim lives (pp. 32–46). Emily undertakes to defend Islamic art without knowing the reasons for this art being undervalued in the West. By defending oriental art, she has taken the agency of the art makers, original artists and creative geniuses of that art tradition without living or experiencing the art tradition itself.

As a matter of fact, art in the play can be taken as a symbol of Amir's multifaceted identity and it underscores the conflicts unsettling this character from within and without. Furthermore, the painting is modelled on Diego Velazquez's Renaissance portrait of his slave and assistant Juan de Pareja (1650) where Amir is similarly posing while Emily is painting him. One can claim that the play's entire structuring depends on the trope that the portrayal provides and which plays a major role in understanding the model minority protagonist.

4.3 *The Association Made to the Portrait of De Pareja*

Pareja is a Moorish slave and a painter in his own right who was set free by his master. In fact, the act of painting Amir in the manner and style of Velazquez sets up a number of similarities that can be remarked in the light of oriental and new oriental tones. Pareja and Amir parallel each other as being objects of representation. They are both posing for their painter/master. If Amir is paralleling Pareja, so Emily is paralleling Velazquez. However, Emily seems oblivious to the power dynamics operative in the Pareja/Velazquez portrait where Akhtar transfers this power dynamic in the Amir/Emily situation where the colonized subject (Amir) is the object of white subject/Emily gaze (Western gaze). Apparently enough, Pareja's needle-worked dress and the lace collar seem similar to Amir's Italian-styled suit jacket and the crisp-collared shirt. In the Renaissance painting, Pareja seems to focus his gaze at the painter/owner who is outside the portraiture frame with a potential request to set him free. In the same way, Amir's gaze on the other side reflects the same power dynamics. The reversal of the gender roles in *Disgraced* in the portraiture scene and in the play puts into reverse the long-standing male gazing at women in the western art tradition. Emily belongs to the dominant racial group, and hence the connotation is that Amir/the subject is under the surveillance of white America that is quite aware of his half civilized/covered, half naked/uncivilized status as a hybrid American Muslim. Hence, Akhtar seems to be rewriting the old story of the master/slave dichotomy in the light of another dichotomy; that is the savior/sufferer relationship.

4.4 *Amir's Tribalistic Legacies*

Despite the fact that Amir has made it in America, he is still at odds with the culture he came from. Simply, he is enslaved by his tribalistic legacies. Isaac, the Jewish art curator, calls him a 'slave' in the middle of the dinner party tension, (*Disgraced*, 2012, p. 70). He even conveys that view to Emily by telling her that Amir puts her at a pedestal and that he is looking at a viewer/master in the portrait. He symbolically draws the relationship between Fanon's black man and Amir. He tells her that:

Isaac: He does not understand you. He can't understand you. He puts you on a pedestal. It is in your painting.

Study after Velazquez. He is looking out at the viewer-that viewer is you. You painted it. He's looking at you. The expression on that face? Shame. Anger. Pride. Yeah. The pride he was talking about. The slave finally has the master's wife (*Disgraced*, 2012, p. 73).

Isaac draws Emily's attention that Amir looks at her in a blend of "shame, anger and pride". Furthermore, Amir's facial expressions in the portrait, says Isaac, discloses the pride he feels that he has married a white woman, "the slave finally has the master's wife". Diana Benea (2015) holds that Amir's choice to marry a white American woman can be interpreted as a technique for facilitating his incorporation into upper middle class American society.

4.5 *The Black/Brown Man's Attempt to Achieve Whiteness*

In the same spirit, Fanon (1988) comments on multiracial relationships in the postcolonial context saying that

black men may try to achieve whiteness by entering into passionate, sensual and carnal affiliations with white Caucasian women. He writes imagining how this type of black men would think saying: “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, (and) white whiteness” (p. 63). Similarly, Bigsby states that the fact that Akhtar asserts that Emily is white and lovely reinforces the idea that she is “not so much a trophy as a means of entering the world to which he aspires” (2020, p. 16). Emily is a key of Amir’s access to the white world. Can Amir’s relationship with Emily be his catalyst to efface his race and religion and be assimilated into white society? In fact, the disappointment and repentance he reveals in scene four and the closing good bye, says Cain, “reflect the loss of authentic connection” (2022, p. 5). However, Amir defies the stereotype he falls under with his complicated character and wife beating act. On the other hand, Emily’s marriage to a Muslim man is an opportunist move to promote her art profession, says Benea (p. 59). In reality, the question raised here is does the play cater for these stereotypes as defined by Isaac or is it a portrayal of Fanon’s ‘bipolar/dual self’ of the colonized subject or finally is it an appeal to invert those stereotypes in the current neocolonial/postcolonial spaces? One assumes that all the previously brought up questions can be probable readings of the play in gear with each other at one and the same time.

Furthermore, one can claim that what is really disturbing about the Muslim hero is his obsession with white America and all that being white symbolizes. Additionally, one of the topics the play foregrounds is the protagonist’s desire for white women. He is too preoccupied with them. He moves from Rivkah the childhood admiration to Emily the WASP (White Anglo Saxon Protestant). It is a constant effort that culminates in marrying the latter. Obviously enough the white woman is a means to an end. This fondness in her is a blend of both fear and desire for what has been described as the psychoneurotic symptoms of the black/brown man in a colonized space. Beyond the shadow of a doubt, the theme as explored by Frantz Fanon (1952) seems to provide insight in understanding the play. Furthermore, Fawzia Afzal-Khan (2015) holds that the play also casts much light on the Muslim protagonist’s psychological ambiguity as explored by Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks*. She writes: “*Disgraced* also thematizes the psychosexual conflict of Amir, his internalization of the black man’s ‘split’—which could simply be a revelation of the psychological symptoms of one possible response to the complex historicity of the present Muslim socius—without endorsing it” (Contrarian, p. 11).

In fact, Fanon’s chapter “Man of Color and the White woman” in *Black Skin, White Masks* (2008) is highly apropos to this paper. It is here that Fanon gives an account of a black man who has a false feeling of being denationalized in Europe—in the same fashion Amir felt in *Disgraced*—finds out that his colonizer views him as nothing further than a nigger. He delineates his/their rage upon recognizing that saying:

furious at this humiliating ostracism, the common mulatto and the black man have only one thought on their mind as they set foot in Europe: to gratify their appetite for white women. Most of them, including those of lighter skin who often go so far as denying both their country and their mother, marry less for love than for the satisfaction of dominating a European woman, spiced with a certain taste for arrogant revenge (p. 51).

4.6 The Representation of Muslims and Arabs on the American Theatre

Furthermore, Youssef El-Guinidy (2020) comments on how Arabs and Muslims are represented on American theatre and how this portrayal reflects a more horrible social reality. He states:

Artistically speaking, Arabs and Muslims are in a predicament in the theatre. We cannot walk on the stage unburdened by the political framework in which we exit off stage. As a group we are fraught with all the accrued bad news heaped on us. As characters in a play, regardless of what we do, it’s hard to shed the manufactured political narrative we’ve been assigned. Existentially, and dramaturgically, we’ve become politicized. While other characters can come on stage with a question mark hanging over them as we wait to find out who they are and what they want, with Arabs and Muslims our entrance sets up a set of expectations, usually all negative -which these characters will either subvert (at which point the political agenda accusations might be brought up) or confirm (at which point the play might then be safely celebrated, since the audience’s prejudice have been validated) (p. 3).

Muslim and Arab characters come to the American theatre politicized and loaded with a falsely fabricated political narrative and expectations that are negative in their essence. They, contends Guinidy—even in the eyes of the liberal West— “have come to embody the sins of patriarchy, sexism, religious fanaticism, mindless violence, and machismo of a kind that is seen as particularly dark and menacing. Never mind that these sins are as rampant in other groups all over the world. In Jungian terms, Arabs and Muslims are (currently) the groups upon which others get to project their ‘shadow’ elements” (2020, p. 4).

By the same token, Jamil Khoury (2015) argues that Muslims in America are portrayed and represented through three lenses; national security, patriarchy and liberalism. He writes:

Discourse on national security tells us, implicitly or explicitly, that Muslims threaten us. Muslims are violent. Muslims will kill us. They're prone to terrorism. They blow things up. Muslims pose an existential threat to our nation and our way of life. Even a liberal Muslim and a moderate Muslim are but extremists-in—waiting” (p. 2).

This political freight that is assigned to Arabs and Muslims is overflowing with other people's junk. Therefore, the American theatre adds to the defaming of Arabs and Muslims in the American society. What materializes on the stage, rarely begins on stage. Images, categorization, and stereotyping gestate and have a cause to be born in mainstream mass media before they gain dramatic authorization. In fact, the American mass media devise and manufacture the image of Arabs and Muslims and playwrights draw the framing context of the categorization.

4.7 *The Visit to the Imam and its Ramifications*

In fact, Amir's disruptive visit to Imam Fared and the complication it generates can be read in the light of what the previously mentioned two critics have said and in view of Edward Said's concept of oriental discourse. Said asserts that the history of orientalism is characterized by a spirit of anti-Arabs and anti-Islam. Furthermore, the notion of the West about the East is highly politicized. For many oriental scholars, Islam is intolerant and raucous (Orientalism, 1978). Akhtar seems to refute this view by making Amir join a Jewish company to unload him from the *so called* the anti-Semitic upbringing referred to through his mother's blaming in his childhood for having a crush over a Jewish girl. He seems to follow in the footsteps of Isaac by secularizing his dispositions. However, Akhtar counterpoises Amir's reluctance to support the Imam by the Jewish boss intolerance. The investigation into his religious background exhibits the challenges of the model minority identity in the wake of 9/11. The model minority status is only short lived and precarious. The illusion of white proximity through the model is delusional. Isaac tells Emily that Jory was quoted as saying “your husband broke down. Was crying at a staff meeting. And apparently shouting something about how if the Imam had been a rabbi, Steven wouldn't have cared” (*Disgraced*, 2012, p. 72). The idea is that had his visit to the Imam been paid to a rabbi, the company would not have cared. However, the dinner party heated debate sheds light on the level of damage he has inflicted on his identity by attempting to pass himself off as a model minority citizen. Thus, one can claim that Amir's acceptance to defend the Imam is the first disturbingly unsettling event in the fall of the hero. His peripheral reconnection with his heritage was at odds with his law firm. The next day the local *New York Times* newspaper accuses Amir of sympathizing with terrorists and he unfortunately loses the long-anticipated promotion in his law company and is finally fired. M. Cain remarks that Emily sounds “ignorant to the politics and precarity of Amir's positionality as a Muslim man” (2022, p. 4).

4.8 *Verbal and Physical Violence*

It is in the dinner party that two revelations add insult to injury and lead to more hostility in the play. These are the discovery of the sexual affair between Isaac and Emily and the fact that Jory has replaced Amir as a partner in the law firm business though he is more qualified than her. Surprisingly enough, these moments in the play are characterized by physical and verbal violence. In a remarkable sign of contempt, Amir spits on Isaac's face “suddenly... Amir spits in Isaac's face”. In return, the latter “Wipes the spit from his face” and replies by saying to Amir that “there is a reason when they call you people animals” (*Disgraced*, 2012, p. 77). Furthermore, Jory calls Amir, “duplicitous. That's why you're such a good litigator. But that it's impossible to trust you,” (*Disgraced*, 2012, p. 77). That is to say, he deliberately pretends one set of sentiments and acts under the influence of another. As soon as Emily admits having an affair with Isaac, Amir gets involved in beating his wife. Akhtar writes:

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 discharge of a lifetime of discreetly building resentment (*Disgraced*, 2012, p. 79).

Amir being upset by his wife disloyalty and deceit hits his wife repeatedly. The middle age man who had earlier criticized Islam's approving of domestic violence against women now does the same thing in a brutal way.

Bigsby comments on the stage directions saying:

Resentment at what? Resentment at the necessity to masquerade as what he is not, to feel obligations others do not. Resentment that he has had to work harder than others, to play a game whose rules are not of his devising, accommodating to values at odds with his instincts. Resentment at having been raised in a faith

whose strictures he rejects even as he grudgingly acknowledges its cultural force. Resentment at ever being on the defensive, at a wife whom he loves but whose symbolic significance to his own ambitions he senses. Resentment now that that wife has not only had an affair but with one who embraces a religion he had been taught to despise. Resentment that he might feel such. He stands between two worlds while not at home in either and not fully accepted by either. For a few seconds, Emily is a symbol for all these and his world disintegrates (Bigsby, 2020, p. 18).

The act of Emily leaving him, getting fired by the company and watching the collapse of his entire life before his eyes, aligns with Shams's assertion that South Asian Muslims always feel insecure in America as they are aware of the temporariness of the model minority stereotype positionality and status (2020, p. 2). Despite all Amir's attempts to assimilate himself in white mainstream America, denouncement of his faith and heritage and his "perfect American accent" he is brought back to the status of "other". Amir suffers from the loss of a coherent self. His entire being and views are suited to life that has been robbed from him and do not match the new role he is cast in. In fact, he neither dissolves in the melting pot, nor maintains his color and flavor in the salad bowl.

It would appear that Amir's abhorrent wife-beating act goes along with the islamophobia-based stereotype of the savage, intemperate, wild, rowdy and unruly Muslim male. Jamil Khoury (2015) remarks on how Muslim husbands are represented in the West saying:

Patriarchy, we were told, has a best friend in Islam. So much so that Islam and patriarchy are commonly conflated. Think male subject, female object, and our subject is possessive, controlling and cruel. There may be misogyny and sexism in all religions, but Islam is patriarchy on steroids. If men beat and rape women, then Muslim men beat and rape women even more. Common wisdom purports a consensus: Islam is bad news for women, Muslim women are universally oppressed, and Muslim feminists are rarely to be found (2015, p. 2).

It is pointless to state that this scene might have invoked all these manufactured lies in the imagination of the American theatre goers. The circumstances that gave rise to these aggressive acts may have proceeded from the nature of the interracial and marital relationship between Amir and Emily.

In hindsight, one can claim that it is Emily's deeds that may have put the butterfly effect in use. From the beginning of the play Emily is portrayed as the antihero in an insinuated fashion. This being said, makes Amir's domestic violence sound like an administration of justice. In fact, the portrayal of Muslim men acting in this way is sometimes employed to cross examine the misrepresented notions of identity. No doubt, Akhtar evokes this stereotype about Muslim men with an intention to test it out in public. The violence executed in scene three of the play changes the characters of Amir and Emily into two stereotypical archetypes; Amir becomes the savage Muslim man and Emily becomes the helpless white woman falling at the mercy of the brown Muslim men. Robin Field states:

This marks a reversal of the power dynamic in the relationship when Emily exercised control over Amir's identity and representation. The violence Emily practices over her husband across the previous scenes looked to be blurred entirely by the revulsion of his violence against her. The fact that these two types of violence (psychological and physical) are juxtaposed is meant to interrogate these archetypes rather than crediting them (quoted in Cain, p. 4).

The challenge is to put an end to these two stereotypes as distortions of the actual world of these two characters and to interrogate them as well.

When asked in an interview to elaborate on the violence in the play that is perpetrated by Amir upon his wife Emily and what the moment means to him, Akhtar states:

Well, I want it to mean many different things. It's obviously playing into certain Islamophobia tropes. I want the audience to be so fully humanly identified with a protagonist who acts out in an understandable but tragically horrifying way, that even if you put that Islamophobia text on top of it, it does not change his humanity. That's the subtlest level. But there are so many other levels, too. There is the psychological dimension, there is the gender relationship, the gendered religious relationship, the gendered modern relationship, and of course, on another level there is also the act of political violence. In that respect, it is drawing on a tradition of representation I was very consciously in relationship to, at least in my own head. Shakespeare and V.S. Naipaul and William Faulkner. I wanted that act of violence to be in dialogue with similar acts of violence defined by that lineage (Younis, 2014, Para 11).

Rohini Chaki (2016) is of the same mind with Akhtar. She comments on the noticeable visibility of violence in the play saying that:

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 (pp. 194–195).

Indeed, violence in *Disgraced* is no doubt presented as a symbolic sign of macro-level histories of victimization, oppression and colonization. Given the personal and political history of Amir, one can claim that Amir's violence is unconsciously a kind of counter aggression to procedural, societal and mainstream violence practiced upon Muslim identity and body. In the play, this noticeably encompasses loss of career job, and being denied the right to defend his assertions and claims in the issue of the Imam in that Islamophobic climate. In fact, he fell in the trap of effacing his religious identity round the clock. Furthermore, he goes too far to abandon his faith, change his family name thus setting his past, present and future on fire. From the start of the play in the posture scene, Amir is presented as someone confined to the imminent threat of complying with a stereotype. Cain asserts that in all cases, "Amir remains stuck within an authoritative, narrow western perception" (2022, p. 5). In fact, the crumbling of his interracial marriage can be attributed more to forces that are more commanding than their individual selves.

Cain further argues that there are no diabolically villainous intentions in the relationship between Amir and Emily. The wife's monopoly over her husband's identity and representation, and Amir's battery of Emily are symbolically meant to transfer the influence of macro-scale sociocultural tensions and undertows right into their personal world. The playwright has intentionally done so to caution the audience that these abstractions can creep into our most special settings and make personal relationship collapse. By portraying and writing about western images of Islam and Muslims, representation and identity in the wake of 9/11, and their negative effect on the personal and domestic levels, Akhtar manifests the damaging ramifications and implications of these issues on life in America. L.Basu argues saying that Akhtar's text "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", (2016, p.100). The effect the play achieves is urging the audience to collect themselves back or med with the epiphany of how discriminatory ideologies and policies seep through all levels of the American life and devastate what we love and the need to put questions to them. When Madani Younis (2014) asks Akhtar is there hope? The latter replies saying:

I'm not sure that it's either. What it is, I hope, is an access point to a state of presence. I would repeat: I believe that in Amir's case, as well as Emily's case, and in his own way Abe as well—the events of the play have provided access to the present, to things as they are. The only way we can change the world is by recognizing what it is that we are now, (*American Theatre*, para 11).

Furthermore, Akhtar comments on the trap of reductive and depreciatory identities and the fact that Amir is calling the holy text a long hate email saying:

I do believe personally that the Muslim world has got to fully account for the image the West has of it and move on. To the extent we continue to try to define ourselves by saying, "We are not what you say about us," we're still allowing the West to have the defining position in the discourse." (*American Theatre*, para 13).

4.9 Abe's Backsliding

Six months later following his separation, Amir is shown on the stage packing his belongings from the apartment. He has lost everything including his job. His nephew has walked away from seeking assimilation and has changed his name back to Hussain, changed his brightly-colored clothes of the first scene with one that is more muted and wearing a skull cap. He has been temporarily arrested by the FBI after an argument with a barista in a Starbucks store. Amir counsels him saying, "When you step out of your parent's house, you need to understand that it's not a neutral world out there," (*Disgraced*, 2012, p.83). In fact, the advice means nothing to Abe who picks up a belief that Islam's destiny is to rule the world. Akhtar surely does not associate this point of view, but he believes that the title is now clear enough to what the play is about. Akhtar elaborates more on how Abe looks at the West from his narrow view making him say:

For three hundred years they've been taking our land, drawing new borders, replacing our laws, making us want to be like them. Look like them. Marry their women. They disgraced us. They disgraced us. And then they pretend they don't understand the rage we've got' (*Disgraced*, p.87).

It is quite clear that Abe has changed more than his attire. In fact, it is Abe's depression and distrust in America that makes it clear that the American Dream and the minority model scheme are illusions. Abe backslides to an

extremist version of Islamic ideas and tells his uncle in a clear-cut tone and language,

Abe: You're not one of them! And you never will be! ... You think the Prophet would be trying to be like one of them? He didn't conquer the world by copying other people. He made the world copy him.

Amir: Conquer the world?

Abe: (defiant). That's what they've done. They've conquered the world. We're goanna get it back someday. That's our destiny. It's in the Quran. (beat). I don't expect you to understand. You've forgotten who you are.

Amir: Really? Abe Jensen?!

Abe: I changed it back!

Amir: So now you think running around with a kufi on your head, shooting your off mouth in Starbucks, sitting in a mosque and bemoaning the plight of Muslims around the world is going to --

Abe: (interrupting). It's disgusting. The one thing I can be sure about with you? You'll always turn on your own people. What do you think that gets you? You think it makes these people like you more when you do that? They don't. They just think you hate yourself. And they're right! You do! (*Disgraced*, 2012, pp. 86–87).

4.10 Amir's Exposition of Himself

Alexandra Schwartz (2020) remarks that: "Akhtar was thinking of 'Othello' when he wrote *Disgraced*, nonetheless the play also owes a debt to the American literature of racial passing, in which characters who have managed to escape their origins fear that some unwelcome revealing will cast them out of the white world they have given everything to enter" (*New Yorker*, 2020, p. 18). In *Disgraced*, she argues that it is Amir who exposes himself. In the dinner party the following conversation intensifies the American society's suspicion that looms over him:

Isaac: Did you feel pride on September Eleventh?

Amir: (With hesitation): If I'm honest, yes. I was horrified by it, okay? Absolutely horrified.

Emily: You don't really mean that, Amir.

Jory: Pride about what? About the towers coming down? About people getting killed?

Amir: That we were finally winning.

Jory: We?

Amir: Yeah...I guess I forgot... which we I was (*Disgraced*, pp. 64–65).

4.11 The Pressures of Islamophobia

As the play addresses the broad implications of the myth of model minority on South Asian Muslims, Akhtar investigates the pressures resulting from living in an Islamophobic society. Hence, the evolving anger of these groups usually takes the form of internalized oppression or self-loathing. Penny Rossenwasser (2002) defines the notion of internalized oppression as the way in which a subdued and hegemonized group buys and embraces the repressive message of the dominating group against one's advantage. In this case, the oppressed group accepts and incorporates the negative discourse proclaimed by the oppressor as authentic and truthful. Hence, internalized racism occurs when a group member who is the target of racism adopts a racist attitude towards his own people and group thus losing his own values and assuming the values of his colonizing society. Usually, any dissatisfaction shown by the oppressed group over discriminatory treatment is taken as an evidence to prove their coarseness, vulgarity and uncivilizedness (pp. 53–62). Amir, being aware of how others view him in America—potential terrorist—puts himself at the disposal of security check guards at airports. This conduct does not change even by passing himself off in the guise of a model minority citizen. He is still regarded as a potentially terrorist sleeper cell in the eyes of his colonizers.

When Emily pays her last visit to Amir in the apartment to give him the portrait, she confesses that she was 'naïve' and 'selfish' and has a part in his fall. Amir, in an attempt to rebuild what has been shattered in the relationship, tries to apologize for what he has done to her saying that "I just want you to be proud of me. I want you to be proud you were with me" (*Disgraced*, 2012, p. 90). Obviously enough, Amir, does not want to part ways with her as he still feels attached to white America. He is left out alone gazing at the portrait as the lights fade following her departure. Emily's refusal to go back to Amir is symbolic as it exhibits a transformation in her approach to life. she changes from an idealistic woman to someone who can stand on her own. She no longer intends to define herself as part of a multi-ethnic group.

In reality, the last scene shows Amir left alone with Emily's portrait that associates him with Velazquez' slave. The question raised to what is Amir a slave? To his past or the future to which he believed he could lay claim? (Bigsby, 2020). The play, says Bigsby, can be:

an expression of the identity politics which color and define individuals trying to locate themselves in a society itself uncertain of its supposed certainties. Authenticity may be proclaimed as an objective, confident views advanced, but public performance may conceal private doubts, social statements belie personal insecurities. A face presented to the world may be a mask adopted for reasons rooted both in individual psychology and social aspirations. Human lives seldom have neat contours, without contradictions, denials, loyalties shifting with circumstance. Betrayals exist both in intimate relations and in the very systems of thought and belief which seem to offer a coherent account of experience. So they prove in *Disgraced*. Religion, in particular, can simultaneously be seen as generative of consolation, rich in cultural expressions, or crudely destructive of the very human relationships which can be the source of meaning (Bigsby, p. 18).

Bigsby holds that the play is structured to disturb and interfere with the normal arrangement of our idea of identity. It reminds us of "the struggle to become something more than a product of external pressures and internal desires", (p. 19). Additionally, Akhtar asserts that "what is so troubling to so many people about the final scene is that it is inconclusive. The play's not going to tell you what's Amir's identity is. He has no idea. Do any of us" (Quoted in Bigsby, p. 19). In fact, neither Amir nor Emily have bad intentions towards each other. Emily's control over her husband's identity and representation and Amir's physical abuse of his wife transfer the effect of larger socio-cultural tensions and undercurrents right away into their domestic sphere. Akhtar is doing this with an intention to convey to his audience how these abstractions sneak into the most intimate setting and destroy relationships. Given the dysfunctionality of Amir and Emily's relationship, the question raised is can genuine passions be a possibility for these tragic couples under the pressures of oppressive colonial histories and contemporary sociopolitical power dynamics that loom over their relationships and opens the door to violence? By portraying and writing about issues of representation, identity and the western perception of Islam in the wake of 9/11 and their effect on the personal and domestic levels, Akhtar manifests the damaging ramifications of these problems in daily American life.

5. Conclusion

Neilesh Bose (2015) comments on the end of the play saying: The fact that the escalating violence directed at Muslims in the West and U.S. and the scenarios of a Muslim subject infatuated with all things white-power, women, privilege, acceptance-only to end up damaged by it all does not seem to challenge the present day representations of Muslims in the West. The end of the play is enigmatically incomprehensible as it describes the hero trying to put together the pieces of his broken life and self, taking a long look at the portrait thus making the insights of the play sound stronger (*Contrarian*, pp. 20–21).

To put it all in a nutshell, one claims that in *Disgraced*, the playwright finds fault with the model minority security net related to South Asian Muslim Americans. He makes that plain by describing how the social and financial achievements of the protagonist fall apart before our own eyes. The threat comes from the cultural identity which he has dumped away to be incorporated in white America. Akhtar drives his readers to recognize that any illusionary sense of being accepted as a full citizen based on the model minority scheme is cosmetic rather than aesthetic. Therefore, he ascertains that the model minority ambitions of the South Asian Muslims are mythic rather than realistic. Shams asserts that "many Asian Muslim Americans' sense of security based on their academic and financial successes are, to some extent, undermined because of their stigmatized Muslim identity" (2020, p. 14).

In fact, *Disgraced* decodes and gets to the bottom of the process of cultural assimilation and adaptation in post 9/11 U.S. by repudiating the lately fabricated and invented secular right-thinking and right-minded "good" Muslims model minority persona. The message communicated is that the only way not to discriminate against them is to accept them as a different cultural group and not to damage their culture through assimilation. Charles McNulty (2016) says: "The brilliance of the play is the way in which identity and perception are shown to be complex and unpredictably related. Characters often fulfil stereotype, but they also underline them. Nobody can be summed up by demographic data alone" (Los Angeles Times, 2016, Para. 2). He continues saying that:

Amir is anything but a spokesperson for the Muslim faith. Rather than argue that it is essentially a religion of peace, he claims just the opposite, offending his wife, a white woman who has idealized all things Islam, and outraging Isaac, who believes he has a monopoly on rational thought.... Akhtar does not take sides, even as he allows the rage inside Amir to grow dangerously. These characters are fascinatingly flawed, and

their contradictions are a reflection of the conflicts pervading their histories and culture (para. 3).

In fact, the play does not provide any outlet from the dilemma of Muslim men in America. In reality, a Muslim American may immediately fall from grace once he deviates from the line. Apparently enough, there is no hope for Amir Kapoor to break out of the shackles that colonized Muslim men of color are tied to. No way for them to break the cages of an unequal human existence. Amir is shown deficient in subjectivity, power and agency to the extent that the only hope left for him is to gain the green color from a white woman to validate his incorporation into white America. The protagonist—with no woman, no job, no home, no social credibility is shown his place; ‘once a Muslim always a Muslim’. The tragedy of the play that is the reversal of the hero’s fortune from prosperity to misery takes place because of sociocultural and political pressures, the illusion of the model minority, the hero’s tribal mentality, self-doubt, and racism. Furthermore, neo Orientalism reveals the precariousness of Western liberalism and the illusion of the American Dream. Indeed, we read the play as a microcosm of the reality it represents.

Obviously enough, Akhtar places the three South Asian characters—Amir, Abe and Imam Farid—at dissimilar social rankings and surroundings. Never the less, their entire lives fall apart and their ends are almost cut from the same cloth. The message Akhtar is conveying is that in the American society where fear, suspicion and surveillance are forcefully dominant, all types of Muslims are vulnerable, unguarded and in jeopardy. Imam Fared is arrested for raising fund for a charity in the Middle East, Abe is investigated by the FBI for expressing doubts about the real perpetrator of 9/11 being America itself, and Amir is accused of sympathizing with terrorists only for appearing with the Imam in the court even on a pro bono basis. Apparently enough, any deviation from white America mainstream media and political discourse is penalized by falling from grace as if one had eaten the forbidden fruit. Akhtar never delivers any one way of solving the problem as long as Muslims are viewed as terrorist suspects and are left under the threat of deportation, arrest and life devastation. However, the only way out of all this is engagement in a collective discourse that shows the extent to which the American citizens are manipulated by social and political forces that are out of their hands. The idea is to promote a counter discourse to the one used against South Asian Muslims in particular and all Muslims in general so as to neutralize and put a stop to that racial and ideological American one that circulates in the mainstream media.

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