

Self and Other in Ayad Akhtar's Disgraced play

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ABSTRACT

This study argues that Ayad Akhtar's play *Disgraced* (2012) 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, and Politics*. The study draws on a set of postcolonial concepts such as „mimicry“, „the beyond space“ and „hybridity“, among others, as renegotiated by Homi Bhabha.

Ayad Akhtar's play *Disgraced* asks its audience to examine the “place” of minorities in the United States. This essay argues that the play deliberately invokes certain stereotypes about Islam and Muslim men in order to interrogate essentialized notions of identity. Akhtar persuasively demonstrates how Amir simultaneously believes his identity to be a performance he can script, but also an inheritance and imposition over which he has little control. Amir's reliance upon essentializations about others, however, underscores the irony that he cannot escape from participating in the very system he tries to subvert. *Disgraced* demands that viewers confront their own worldviews and possible prejudices about Islam and Muslim men, race and racial identity, and asks whether we can fashion our own identities or whether our identities are inextricably linked to race, religion, or nation-state.

This study analyses the three essential elements of the interracial relationship between Amir and Emily in Ayad Akhtar's Pulitzer Prize-winning play, *Disgraced*. They are: Emily's painting of Amir, her husband, in the style of *Portrait of Juan de Pareja* by Diego Velázquez; Emily's White Saviour Complex; and the violence she suffered in the hands of Amir. The first two parts of the analysis will utilise the combination of Identity Construction theory by Stuart Hall, Edward Said's Orientalism, and the post 9/11 discourse of Neo-Orientalism. The last part of the analysis will foreground the entire elements by utilising Stuart Hall's theory of Articulation. It will be proved that Amir's violence is an act of retaliation towards Emily's domination over the production of his identity through representation and her influence in his crucial decisions concerning his relationship with his family. Emily's victimisation and the emphasis on

Amir's 'tribalistic bond' risk a reductionist Neo-Orientalist reading of the text. By acknowledging Emily's White Saviour Complex, the text can be read as a re-articulation of the Neo-Orientalist stereotypes of 'barbaric brown man' and 'free white woman.'

INTRODUCTION

The current political climate in America, consumed by the polarization of issues concerning race and religion, has increased the prevalence of acts of prejudiced violence, promoting concern worldwide. The discourse of rising authoritarianism becomes a daily occurrence in the mainstream and alternative news, across every platform. Minority voices and their allies whom denounce hate in popular culture, such as Hollywood, consume headlines. The same behaviour occurs in the theatre as shows such as *Hamilton* that champion diverse or majority non-white cast receive massive popularity¹). In the midst of such circumstances, the relevance of Ayad Akhtar's Pulitzer Prize-winning play, *Disgraced*, is important to revisit. The play put an interracial relationship between a South Asian American man and a White American woman on centre stage and has stirred controversy due to a scene depicting domestic violence after the husband finds out that his wife was cheating on him. In the wake of the recent changes to government policies under President Donald Trump, the risk of this particular minority being generalized and mis-represented has grown. Trump's policies have sought to encourage the generalization of minority groups as was demonstrated by his administrations Muslim Ban, fueling Islamophobic discourse. In this climate, a textual analysis of this particular popular theatre production (opened in Australia and Singapore in 2016 and still performed throughout America in 2017) is highly relevant for the contemporary audience. The play itself was written by Ayad Akhtar, a Pakistani-American novelist and actor, as his first venture into playwriting. Since then, he has written several other plays such as *The Who and the What* (2014), *The Invisible Hand* (2015), and *Junk* (2016). A common link between most of his plays is that the inspiration behind the structural narrative comes from some of Shakespeare's famous drama. *The Who and the What* is influenced by *The Taming of the Shrew*, while the director of *Junk* called it "A cross between *Henry IV, Part 1* and David Mamet's *Glengarry Glen Ross*" (Pressley, 2016). *Disgraced*, the play that brought him the 2013 Pulitzer Prize Award for Best Drama, Akhtar drew inspiration from *Othello* and the undertone of violence in the works of V.S. Naipaul and William Faulkner (Akhtar, 2013). The whole play is seemingly designed to contain every sensitive subject in racial and religious relations that could exist in an interaction between four people, each representing a different demography: A South Asian-American man (Amir), a White American woman (Emily), a White Jewish-American man (Isaac), and an African-American woman (Jory). *Disgraced* consists of 4 scenes and performed with no intermission between. The setting of the entire play is in Amir and Emily's apartment in Upper East Side, New York City. There are several time jumps between scenes, but mainly the timeline throughout the play stretches from late summer 2011 to spring 2012. Another character that appears in the story is Amir's cousin, Hassan, who has changed his name to 'Abe'. In brief, the play brings various controversial racial and religious issues to light through the relationship between Amir and Emily. Amir was raised a Muslim but has renounced his faith. His wife, Emily, is interested in Islam due to her connection with him and his family. Throughout the play, Amir criticised Islam as a 'backwards' religion, naming several of his personal experiences that lead him to such conclusion. Meanwhile, Emily tries to be the more open-minded person by defending it. The major climax of the story happens when Amir finds out that Emily has been cheating on him with Isaac and beats her. It is this scene that has divided audiences and critics' opinions.

Identity Construction and Orientalism

The most important symbolism in *Disgraced* is contained in Emily's painting of Amir in the style of Diego Velázquez's *Portrait of Juan de Pareja*. The audience is presented with this image both in the beginning and at the end of the play. This particular piece is a framing device which holds together the narrative of the story. It triggers points of conflict and serves as an important metaphor for the central relationship between Emily and Amir. The significance of this piece lies in the reason behind its creation as much as in the image itself. The painting is Emily's response to a waiter's racist treatment to Amir at a dinner the day before. The first thing the audience will see in the play is Emily in the middle of sketching Amir, who is half-undressed in his underpants and a collared shirt. A book with Velázquez's painting is present in the scene. The same book will appear again when Jory and Isaac come to visit the couple's apartment. Later, in the ending, Emily's finished painting can finally be seen. It depicts Amir as a regular American businessman, with his suit and tie. A vision that Emily claims as Amir's "real self" and something that Amir is not comfortable with.

Emily: A Man, a waiter, looking at you. Amir: Looking at us. Emily: 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. (Scene 1, p. 7, bold by writer) This is an instance in which Emily would enunciate Amir's identity from her own experience, which brings complications to the way his identity is constructed. A layered act of identity construction is present because the "position(s) of enunciation" of the one who is doing the act and the one being the subject are "never identical, never exactly in the same place" (Hall, 1990, p. 222). Emily's representation of Amir in the painting is an act of ascribing a meaning of identity to this object which serves to define her husband to the world as she sees him. As the complex "production of identity" is "always constituted within, not outside, representation" (Hall, 1990, p. 222). Furthermore, this painting is also an expression of Amir and Emily's relationship as she later states when explaining it to Jory: Emily : It's a study after the Velázquez. I'm using the same palette, the same composition. But it's a picture of Amir. Amir : Your own personal Moor. Emily : Muse is more like it... (Scene 3, p. 45, italic by Akhtar) From the excerpt above, Emily as an artist sees Amir as her muse. She twists the antiquated and derogatory term for Muslims, moor (indicating the position of Juan de Pareja who was a slave at the time he was painted), into something she sees as more positive in terms of the relationship between artist and subject. Meanwhile, Amir, being in a different position, does not quite agree with this ascription. He is disturbed by Emily's decision to liken him with a slave, no matter how she tries to romanticise it. There is a degree of appropriateness in Emily's regard for Amir as her muse in general, not only for this painting. Her other works that are described in the story are inspired by Islamic art. It indicates an influence that can only be inferred by her relationship with Amir and his family or his mother in particular. This relates to Emily's 'White Saviour' desire which will be elaborated upon in the second part of the analysis. The next point of significance for this painting is the main inspiration whence it was originated, which is Diego Velázquez's 17th century creation. Rodini Chaki in his 2016 dissertation *Desis in the House: South Asian American Theatre and the Politics of Belonging* made an observation based on the words of an 18th century art critic, Antonio Palomio, about the original Velázquez piece: There is a quiet resistance to the Eurocentric fetishization of racial others and/or inferiors in Juan's steady gaze and his head held high. It is perhaps noteworthy that Velázquez allowed Juan this power in capturing it on canvas, though it has historically not been the prerogative of the powerful in colonial and racial discourse to represent the minorities in such light. (p. 184, italic by Chaki) Chaki then made a comparison between Velázquez's

treatment of his subject and the case of Emily making her husband as a reluctant subject of her own painting. He stated that she certainly holds the authority in assigning the labels by referring to Juan de Pareja as Velázquez's "assistant", not "slave" even though at the time the painting was made, he was still an indentured servant. Chaki likened this to the authority of Western subjects to assign labels such as "terrorist" to a South Asian subject like Amir (p. 185). The power dynamics between Emily and Amir are revealed in the production of this painting. This is a representation within discourse produced by historical process because "there is no power relation without a correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute, at the same time, power relations." (Foucault as cited by Hall, p. 76). Here, the consistent binary opposition of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1979) theory is present with Emily dominating the way Amir's identity is enunciated within the representation of him by assigning the label of "muse", objectifying him as an exotic artistic inspiration, and connecting his image to Juan de Pareja, the slaveassistant. Meanwhile, Amir, who shows some objection to his wife's painting ("Your own personal Moor") and sees it as someone who is being positioned, becomes the submissive as he sits down to be her model. In further analysis concerning Amir's representation and identity in the painting, it is important to note that despite Amir's discomfort because of the original artistic source of inspiration, the painting is, to an extent, an accurate image of him as a lawyer in a successful firm in New York. This image is of a suited brown man in a baroque-style painting that exists in an intertextual relationship with Velázquez's Juan de Pareja. It is a perfect visualization of what Bhabha (1994) called mimicry, an act of imitating the colonizer by the colonized which makes them seem alike and different at the same time. In Amir's case, this is a reflection of himself that he undeniably sees in the mirror every morning and the same one his wife meets at the breakfast table. It is the persona he presents to Emily in their everyday life. Furthermore, considering the revelation of Amir's development of his identity throughout the story, he has taken conscious actions to a certain degree to integrate into the American society. He is a South Asian-American who purposefully changed his name from Abdullah (a Muslim name) to Kapoor (a Punjabi name), most likely to avoid certain scrutiny in relation to his legal status or employment application. He voluntarily offered himself to be searched by airport security, a group which tends to racially profile. He had denounced Islam as a backwards religion based on his prior personal experiences. Yet, at the same time, he also feels "pride" for his people ("we") at the time of 9/11, which he admits stems from seeing America finally being defeated. Emily's artistic sensibility drives her to project this Amir, who is in conflict with himself, the one who Hall (1992) would refer to as "the post-modern subject" with multiple identities (p. 277), into the man depicted in her painting which is eventually named *Study After Velázquez's Moor*. Isaac, the Jewish-American character in the play, aptly sums the dilemma of Amir's conflicting identities: Isaac : So, there you are, in your six-hundred-dollar Charvet shirt, like Velázquez's brilliant apprentice-slave in his lace collar, adorned in the splendours of the world you're now so clearly a part of... And yet... Amir: Yeah? Isaac: The question remains. Amir: The question? Isaac : Of your place. For the viewer, of course. Not you. It's a painting, after all... (Scene 3, p. 46, bold by writer) The question Isaac is referring to is directed towards Amir and the viewer alike. He is suggesting that Amir's likeness in the painting, with his businessman attire, makes him somewhat out of place in the eyes of the contemporary American viewers who are the target audience of this painting. Meanwhile, Emily, trying to do justice to a representation of her husband, is indeed an active enabling agent who produces this connection between Velázquez's painting and the way she regards her brown husband. As she emphasises the likeness between the defiant look in Juan de Pareja's face to her husband's character as she knows him—a bold, brash lawyer who has distanced himself from the religion assigned to him at birth—one can assume that she possibly recognises

what Bhabha (1994) called as the “slippage”, “excess”, or “difference” in the “discourse of mimicry” which is “constructed around an ambivalence” (p. 86), the ambivalence that is Amir and his successful act of mimicry which gives him a considerably good place in American society. Huddart (2006) stated that such a high degree of effectiveness is a sign of resistance towards the colonizer. Something that Chaki (2016) agrees as present in Velázquez’s Juan de Pareja painting. The condition for this resistance, however, is for the colonized subject to have recognised the domination of the colonizer over him and deliberately transforming into their not-quite likeness as a form of defiance, highlighting the differences they have as they imitate the dominating force. This is what Emily sees in Amir when he deliberately submitted himself to racial profiling in the airport, challenging the authority by singling out himself voluntarily as a Person of Colour. The painting’s purpose according to Emily is to disarm the audience (such as the racist waiter or Isaac) who regard Amir as someone who is out of place. A better informed Emily would have given a clearer depiction of this resistance in her portrait of Amir and yet, her choice of inspiration—which is the centre of Amir’s disapproval— emphasises her ignorance and naivety. The simple fact that she attempts to re-create a completely different power dynamic between Velázquez and Pareja in the most apparent visual symbolisation that her relationship with her husband is born out of the ego of a white artist who sees the discourse she produced without considering the perspective of viewers from different backgrounds. She is oblivious to the relevance of historical context in race relations that can possibly give an unfavourable meaning to the rendition of Amir—a South Asian-American— based on Juan de Pareja. Isaac enlightens her about her ignorance and complicates Amir’s identity further in this exchange: Isaac: He doesn’t understand you. He can’t understand you. He puts you on a pedestal. It’s in your painting. Study After Velázquez. He’s 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. Emily: You’re disgusting— Isaac: It’s the truth, Em. And you know it. You painted it. (Scene 3, p.69-70, italics by Akhtar) The lack of understanding here goes two ways; Emily and Amir simply do not see eye-to-eye on their positions concerning their identities and the power relation between them. Isaac, of course, is biased in his observation of the art because he desires to be with Emily and to drive her away from her husband. Yet, he delivers a revelation to Emily concerning the multiplicity of imbalance of power in her relationship. Moreover, as another interpretation of the defiance of the artistic subject towards its painter/master, it is possible that the look Emily considered as Amir’s resistance also shows his cruel pride of ‘possessing’ her, as Isaac said. After all, duality and contradiction are a certainty in a postmodern subject. Emily’s painting of Amir depicts their different and conflicting positions of enunciation in regards to his identity as a brown man in New York City. Emily attempts to present the ‘resistance’ of Amir’s act of mimicry, but ended up highlighting her domination over the representation of Amir’s identity. It is proven by the connection she made between her husband and the slave-assistant. She enforces her vision of Amir’s defiance towards the people who thinks he does not belong without considering the complicated history of his identity development. Therefore, she ends up inciting disapproval from Amir and revealing her desire to become a White Saviour for him.

Findings:

The representation of Muslim Americans in popular culture and media is more important than ever. The impact of Trump’s government’s policies that continue to point to Eastern People and People of Colour as the source of terrorism can be severe for real life Muslim Americans. The political relevance of theatre is becoming more significant with the push to diversify all sectors of society in popular culture and to

include the experiences of the marginalised and the minority. The stage provides a platform for their visibility and acknowledgement in the eyes of the audience. Due to the low levels of Muslim American representation in American theatre, re-examining the relevancy of *Disgraced* as the most popular play with a South Asian-American main character that contains religious debate is necessary to examine the risks that are possessed by its controversial plot and subject matter. The analysis of three elements of Emily and Amir's relationship in the play; the painting, the White Saviour Complex, and the violence; uncovered complex layers of contradiction. The plot of play makes sure that each and every one of them leads to the peaking climax of the violence in the dinner party, with every thread of conflict that reveal themselves in previous scenes revisited during the argument that happens in the dinner party scene. The painting is the source of the power dynamic shift between Emily and Amir. It is also the realisation of Emily's desire to 'save' the image of her husband, which originated from her White Saviour Complex. The effort became problematic because of her deliberate action to position Amir as a 'slave-assistant' in the guise of a wealthy lawyer. That is not to say the image is inaccurate—it is also a part of Amir's identity, him practicing his mimicry. He adopts the image of a successful American, creates a distance between his present state as a thriving lawyer with his past upbringing as a Muslim by denouncing the religion and changing his name. Emily perceives his act of mimicry as resistance and wants to preserve it on canvas, but whether Amir is aware enough of his agency to make it an act of resistance is unclear. Therefore, the differing positions of enunciation create conflict and misunderstanding. Emily's White Saviour Complex shows itself in other instances such as when she influences Amir until he agrees to help the imam's case. Later, the case becomes the reason he lost the promotion in his firm because his superiors were worried that he might be involved in a terrorist case. This resulted in the conducting of a background check on Amir bringing forth information that he had changed his identity. The eventuality of Emily's actions subtly paints her as the antagonist of the story and because of that, the violence suffered by Emily in the hands of Amir is premeditated by the plot to happen as an act of justice for her husband's suffering. Amir's violence uncovers some Neo-Orientalist concepts which are the hierarchical binary opposition of 'barbaric brown man' and 'free white woman,' and the 'new barbarism' motive. Due to the emphasis of Amir's action as a manifestation of the tribalistic bond he feels with 'his people,' the violence Emily suffered risked perpetuating these harmful Neo-Orientalist stereotypes. By looking at the tragic events that Amir experienced and recognising Emily's White Saviour Complex as the driving force in her domination over his identity construction, the superficial reading of these stereotypes can be avoided. Abe, Amir's cousin, points the finger at 'them' (America) as the source of their ('us' = Muslims) disgrace in the last scene. Meanwhile, in the previous scene where the four characters gather as a microcosm of diverse American society, the audience are presented with the fallout of every single one of them. Each of them becomes a villain in some way, showing their ugly side. In the end, the complexity of Orientalist and Neo-Orientalist motives that are present in the story re-articulates this binary opposition. Amir as the tragic character is disgraced by his own action and Emily as the cause of his demise bears the effect of her own ignorance. Her disgrace lies in the machinations of fate that reveals the hypocritical White Saviour ideal she holds in her relationship with Amir. As it is with a tragic play, everyone who has something to lose, ended their story by losing everything.

ENDNOTE

- 1) The hit Broadway musical was criticised for releasing a casting call advertisement that were explicitly asking for non-white actors. Later, the ad was amended and a disclaimer that they “encourage people of all ethnicities” to join the audition was added.

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