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EXPLORING THE THEME OF NEO-ORIENTALISM IN AYAD AKHTAR'S *DISGRACED* AS A
REPRESENTATION OF THE ARAB-ISLAMIC WORLD

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ABSTRACT

The goal of this study is to explore Ayad Akhtar's "*Disgraced*", as a Neo-Orientalist account, portraying the injustice and prejudice of the American society towards Muslims and Arabs, and how it considers them as a threat that must be othered and excluded. The main objective of this study is to reflect on how *Disgraced* tackled Neo-Orientalist ideology, and consequently how this critical trend has widened the gap between East and West. Intentionally, the West had imposed a Stereotype figure on Muslims throughout their myopic lens, and consequently created distorted image of Islam and Muslims in their writings. Since 9/11, the situation has worsened. The classical orientalism has taken a new, and more negative approach. Neo-Orientalists now see Muslims as terrorists, lunatics, fundamentalists, and blood-thirsty beings. The stigmata September 11th attached to Islam and Muslims drove many second generation immigrants playwrights to do something about it. They could not turn a blind eye to the injustice Muslim Americans are facing in the American society. Akhtar's "*Disgraced*" famous play was published in 2012, and it is considered to be a clear example of such an argument.

The study sheds lights on Akhtar's exposition of the domestic harassment Muslim Americans are facing, particularly after the devastating September 11th horrific episode. By applying Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as an approach to the analysis of language, it proves how the linguistic exercise of language reflects the so called binary of West and Islam, and portrayed them as irreconcilable entities.

Keywords: Orientalism, Neo-Orientalism, Discourse, Identity, Reductionism, Stereotype

The drastic event of 9/11 and its ramifications have largely brought into surface the hatred, discrimination, and prejudice against Islam and Muslims, galvanizing it by reinstating a "clash of civilization" discourse. The West-and-Islam's binary has a long, and pretty complicated history since the Crusaders. It has been described and analyzed by Edward Said (1979) in his work *Orientalism*, that it is created by the orient to legitimize his domination over the others. It has gained much notoriety after the September 11th crisis in demonized the race of Muslims, isolating them, and considering them as the "others". Edward Said in his masterpiece, "*Orientalism*" has defined it (1978) as "a manner of regularized (or Orientalized) writing, vision, and study, dominated by imperatives, perspectives, and ideological biases ostensibly suited to the Orient." Also, he describes Orientalism as a style of thought based upon the distinction made between "the Orient" and "the Occident". He also concludes that the inferiority that the West adheres to the East directly establish the West's

superiority. The West is always considered the "center" and the East is the "other", the marginal that is inferior that its existence confirms the West's centrality and superiority (Bertens 2001). Therefore, Muslims/ Arab Americans have found themselves in a critical situation, and had to stand up against their disfiguration "in terms of inferiority, suspicion, otherness, and foreignness" (Jamal, 322).

In fact, the crisis of the 9/11 has rubbed in the fear and hatred towards Islam and Muslims woven into western society. Such events repackaged of the old version of Orientalism, vociferously targeting only Islam and its followers. Lopamadra Basu in his book "South Asian Racialization and Belonging after 9/11: Masks of Threat" comments on Edward Said's Orientalism in 1979 that "The discourse of orientalism led to the dehumanization of Arabs and other non-western cultures and a proliferation of negative images and stereotypes about Arabs and Muslims." (85) Also Jack Shaheen in his book "Reel Bad Arabs" 2001 concludes that "image-makersdepicting Arab Muslims as hostile alien intruders" (Shaheen 2001,9) which is "grave injustice" (11) that distort the true image of Muslims and their culture.

Also, Samuel P. Huntington's in his thesis of a 'Clash of Civilizations' describes the reasons of the clash of the west and east. "In the new World", Huntington argued (1996),

...the most pervasive, important and dangerous conflicts will not be between social classes, rich and poor, or other economically defined groups, but between people belonging to different cultural entities. Tribal wars and ethnic conflicts will occur within civilizations... And the most dangerous cultural conflicts are those along the fault lines between civilizations... For forty-five years the Iron Curtain was the central dividing line in Europe. That line has moved several hundred miles east. It is now the line separating peoples of Western Christianity, on the one hand, from Muslim and Orthodox peoples on the other (28).

Huntington adds that in the west, they believe that modern civilization is the Western one. Hence, the Western dominating belief is that "To be successful you must be like us, our way is the only way" (73) which is quite biased, and is just an illusion created by the West. In a recent study by Mais Qutami, he describes the negative attitude towards Muslims and Arabs is oriented "to erase contexts and histories to create misunderstandings of certain demonized cultures, especially in representations of Muslim cultures" which resulted in considering "Arabs and Muslims not only as different from the mainstream but also as constituting a "despised difference" that heightened binary of "us" and "them" (Qutami, 159). Hence, such trend has intensified their sense of belonging and alienation. Also, Alam (2006) has commented that "European writers presented Islam as a Christian heresy, a devil-worshipping religion militarist cult crafted for Bedouin conquests". He adds that thinkers of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment have described Islamic societies "as despotic, fatalistic, fanatical, irrational, uncurious, opposed to science, and inimical to progress." and after the European militarily conquer of the west the "Orientalist ideas would be used to justify the conquest and colonization of Islamic lands."

Literally speaking, Orientalism basically static and unanimous but, it has shifting attitudes and perspectives towards the orient. The Orient is always considered as eccentric, ignorant, uncultured, backward, violent and less human. Unfortunately, Islam has been attacked by waves of prejudice and hatred from numerous enemies to intensify the picture that Islam is backward religious unfit for modern societies. The crisis event of 9/11 has aggravated a deep sense of prejudice, malice, and discrimination towards Muslims. Consequently, it produced the worst kind of orientalism, resulting in considering them as terrorists.

A new form, neo-Orientalism has emerged post 9/11 to mark a shift in the classical Orientalism. In his paper "From Orientalism to neo-Orientalism: Early and Contemporary Constructions of Islam and the Muslim world", Salim Kerboua defines neo-Orientalism as "the prism through which some intellectual circles produce and disseminate new distorted knowledge about Islam and the Muslim world. Though not alone in doing so, neo-Orientalist knowledge feeds the social phenomenon of Islamophobia within the West and towards the Muslim world" (ibid,24). He asserts that "contemporary neo-Orientalism originates from the neoconservative school of thought and other right-wing pro-Israeli circles." Hence it "deliberately wishes to impose some kind of distorted, ever hegemonic, and intersubjective representations of Islam and the Muslim world." (ibid,27). Also, Kerboua concludes that "Neo-Orientalist discourse and knowledgeaggravate the divide between the West

and Islam in the sense that they fail to deliver nuanced and objective understanding of the Muslim faith and peoples. “.” (ibid, 27) This renewed Orientalist knowledge hides the reality of the existing diverse scholarly Islamic debates within the Muslim world. It also prevents the Western public setting from justly addressing pressing present issues, such as the Palestinian question and the political and social roots of religious fanaticism. Finally, it forecloses any lucid interreligious and inter-civilizational understanding. (ibid, 27) He adds that the terrorist attacks that occurred after September 11, 2001 “has been constructing a neo-Orientalist image of contemporary Muslims not only as backward and inferior but more importantly as violent and threatening.” and he asserts that it “operate within a “clash of Civilizations” paradigm ”and “the outcome being the emergence of an identity-related social phenomenon called Islamophobia.” (ibid, 20) He also believes that “The Western-centric vision of the Orient, Islam, and the Muslim world is perceived through the lens of a renewed Orientalism or neo-Orientalism, far from giving an accurate representation of Islam and Muslims, emphasizes exclusively on what are considered negative dimensions and components of the Islamic faith and culture, or the alleged behavior of the Muslim.” (ibid, 24)

Many Arab-Americans post-9/11 had faced the stark realization that their relatively invisibility is gone! They became under the spotlights and unfortunately, not in the good sense of the word! They were viewed as demeaning, dangerous, violent, in short, they were considered to opponents who are a threat to the peace of society. Such ideology of considering Muslims as others is induced by the fabricating binary rhetoric division of “us” and “them”. In his article “Neo-Orientalism and the Neo-Imperialism Thesis”, Mubarak Altwaiji states that “neo-Orientalism is more tied to the post-9/11 American cultural changes and the retaliation that took place after the attacks. The 9/11 attacks and the so-called “War on Terror” brought the Middle East and the classic Orientalist discourse, with its binary division of “us” and “them” into focus once more” (114).

In his paper “Neo-Orientalism and the New Barbarism Thesis: Aspects of Symbolic Violence in the Middle East Conflict(s)” (2003), Dag Tuastad argues that neo-Orientalist discourse has intertwined with the thesis of “New Barbarism” which is defined as “presentations of political violence that omit political and economic interests and contexts when describing that violence, and present the violence as resulting from traits embedded in local cultures” (592). According to Tuastad, these presentations which highlight the violence of the Arabs serve as homonymic strategies that legitimate American political projects in the Middle East.

Most critics have noted the close and direct relation between neo-Orientalism and American new imperialism in the Middle East. The 'new barbarism' thesis implies explanations of political violence that omit political and economic interests and contexts when describing violence, and presents violence as a result of traits embedded in local cultures. New barbarism and neo-Orientalist imaginaries may serve as hegemonic strategies when the production of enemy imaginaries contributes to legitimize continuous colonial economic or political projects, as can be witnessed in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict

Recently, as a result of this fierce attack on Arab-Muslims, many writers raised their voices to represent Muslims, deconstruct stereotypes and to clarify the misconstructions of Islam and its doctrines. A new generation of Muslim American playwrights took upon their shoulders the duty of highlighting the changing demographic of American society. The theater brought into account the multiplicity of cross- or trans-cultural experiences especially that most of these playwrights are /were born and raised with various cultures, ethnicities and races. Simpson comments by saying that :

“ The children of the growing number of interracial marriages in this country, or were raised in homes with adoptive parents of different races, or were white kids who grew up listening to hip-hop and socializing and dating across color lines—all of which makes for still other stories with differing but still informed perspectives on race.” (Simpson 33)

Akhtar, a second generation playwrights have challenged the misconceptions attributed to Muslims and Islam. He introduced a new type of character who are rarely presented on stage and story in an attempt to display the danger of representation the Muslim’s negative stereotype. *Disgraced* by Ayat Akhtar illustrates the playwright counteracted the accession of Muslims as terrorists by incorporating the Orientalist Theory elaborated by Edward Said.

Disgraced, by Ayad Akhtar, presented at the American Theatre Company in Chicago in 2012, and won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 2013. *Disgraced* action takes place about 10 years after the crisis of 9/11, yet the specter of 9/11 hangs heavily upon the play. Not only does it tell you about the failure of immigrant assimilation, but also it presents the immigrant figure as a resistant subject.

Theatre critic, Charles Isherwood describes *Disgraced* as a “dialogue that bristles with wit and intelligence” before offering his interpretation of the spine of the play: “Mr. Akhtar, a novelist and screenwriter, puts contemporary attitudes toward religion under a microscope, revealing how tenuous self-image can be for people born into one way of being who have embraced another” (“Beware Dinner Talk on Identity and Islam”). *Disgraced* thematically centers upon myriad subjects, mainly among them the cultural and religious differences as well as the difficulty of assimilation, or perhaps better stated, a Muslim in the United States.

One of the main themes of *Disgraced* is to display what it means to be Muslim in the United States, and to expose how Muslims are being hegemonic and dominated by other racial groups. Playwright Akhtar, of Pakistani descent, was born in New York, spent his childhood in Milwaukee. He received high degrees in theatre and film directing from two different prestigious Ivy League universities, Brown and Columbia.

The entire plot of the play revolves in a spacious apartment on Manhattan’s Upper East Side, late summer, 2011. “*Disgraced*” centers around the downfall from grace of Amir Kapoor. He is of a Pakistan heritage, a US-born, Muslim-raised and acquisitions lawyer, working in a Jewish law firm. Amir, an apostate, who is a strong critic of anything Islamic, believes that Islam “comes from the desert .From a group of tough-minded, tough –living people” (Akhtar.33). This happened in an attempt to free himself of the burden of the Islamic cultural weight in order to fit into the American society. Raised as a Muslim, Amir rejects his religion. He recalls an event as a young boy when his mother threatened to “break [his] bones” (ibid.13) after she found him exchanging love notes with a Jewish classmate named Rivka. “You will end up with a Jew over my dead body” (ibid.13), she asserted and spat on his face so he would never forget. Amir recalls with disgust that the next day he spat on Rivka’s face because she was Jewish. The religious hatred thrust upon him by his mother – one that he barely understood as a young boy – leads him to reject Islam as an adult. The reason that makes him think that this way of thinking is “a backward way of thinking. And being,” (ibid.32). His wife, Emily, is an artist and painter who constantly contradicts his criticism towards Islam and believes in the “Islamic tiling tradition .Is a door to the most extraordinary freedom”.(ibid.20)

During the course of the play, two events put Amir in confrontation with his Islamic heritage and with his identity that reflects the American social environment post 9/11. Amir’s nephew, Abe, arrives at the apartment in the hope of convincing Amir to help her with a trial of an imam she knew, accused of collecting money to give to Hamas, a terrorist-supporting groups. Abe asserts the imam is a victim of religious persecution, and Emily tries to convince Amir to lend support, but he refuses. Amir worries that it would bring him into trouble, especially with his Jewish partners, and it would negatively impact his work at the law firm. Against his will, and under pressure, Abe and Emily convince him to attend at the court, just to be there without any commitment. Unfortunately, the New York Times made it look like as if he were there on the legal team for the imam. Soon after, his position at the law firm where he is due for partnership becomes endangered, with a Jewish boss questioning his past. It is discovered that Amir had changed his surname and that he has lied about his parents’ background. He claimed that they were Indian, while the truth of the matter is that they grew up in Pakistan. Consequently, Amir loses his credibility at the workplace.

The climactic point of conflict in the play occurs, when Amir and Emily invite their friends Jory, an African-American, who works with Amir in the same firm and her husband Isaac, a Jewish Whitney curator, who is interested in Emily’s work. The friendly getting together gradually drafted towards arguments about race, culture, religion and sex. Between Amir, Emily, Isaac, his wife Jory, Amir openly and violently criticizes the Quran and its principles, voiced from a Muslim is odd. According to Amir the Quran is a 1500-years old book with precepts written for “desert people” that reads “like one very long hate mail letter to humanity”, (ibid, 34). Also, Amir voices some of the most common myths about the religion that circulate in the media today. Amir’s Jewish

partner at the law firm, rejects his partnership plea, calling him “duplicitous” for hiding his Pakistani roots and Jory gets the partnership at the firm.

Also, Emily and Isaac sexual relationship is revealed, which bowls the situation. The evening ends in a disaster and accusations are exchanged. Truths are revealed, and Amir loses both his job and wife. Amir’s response to the revelation that he lost his job and increasingly with the other revelation about Emily’s affair with Isaac brings to the fore suppressed instincts from what he had earlier termed the “Muslim psyche”. The events provoke anger and frustration in Amir that leads to open violence. Amir spits in Isaac’s face and beats Emily, a chunk of physical violence that shocks the audiences, which harks back to a previous discussion about how the Quran mandates that disobedient wives be punished. At his point Amir completely represent the enraged backward Muslim with the long beard and short thobe that represent the worst stereotype of “Muslim” in most of the mainstream media today.

In the final scene, six months later, Amir is packing up the apartment. Emily arrives with Abe, who wants to get Amir’s help. Abe has been caught by the FBI after being in Starbucks with a noisy friend who was using a loud voice to predict that America had more coming in the way of 9/11 attacks. It is a scene that underscores that Amir’s life is hopeless. There is no hope for him in the American society. The play questions whether Muslims and Arabs who try to hide and escape their origin and heritage can really find a place in the American society. It also raises challenging questions about the nature of relationships between the white society and the brown Muslim races in contemporary American society, and whether they can belong together. Akhtar is a very bright playwright in portraying the character of Amir. He brilliantly displayed the long suffering of an immigrant and the causes and how it impacts his responses. Amir’s actions of violence is a reflection of the injustice he receives in a hypocritical society.

The title “*Disgraced*” has several layers of meanings. Disgrace might imply that grace is removed or taken away from someone, but in Ayad Akhtar’s play, it is obvious that grace never really existed. Also, it may be interpreted as how West disgraces the East. In addition, it may mean that it is disgrace for all Muslims to attempt to adapt themselves in the American society, while losing their roots. Overall, the title of the play portrays the relationship between the scammer and victim, where Islam has been victimized and disgraced by another party, in which Amir’s character is a representation of this disgrace.

Disgrace is a shocking play in which Ayat Akhtar presents the stereotypical Muslim with all negative traits: a successful lawyer who splits, insults and beats his wife in order to let the audience think about the reasons that led him to act in such a violent way. Digging deep reading the play, it is obvious that Amir, the south Asian Muslim protagonist in the play, is a victim of different ideologies that contributed to forming his character and actions. The play demonstrates how discrimination against his race, religion, as well as the political climate that was not only against South Asian Muslims, but against all American Muslims post 9/11 America ruined his life.

Due to promises of the American Dream of a better life, many Arabs and Muslims immigrated to America in the last decades of the twentieth century, and many had really achieved wealth and success. However, most new immigrants were not fortunate that they lost all hope of a better life. Recently, the devastating calamity of September 11th, 2001 and the American global war on terror and the war on Iraq had drastically affected Arabs and Muslims and had ended all hope of assimilation in the American society. Such a message is delivered by Akhtar in *Disgraced*;

Abe: Maybe that’s the problem. Maybe we never should’ve left. Maybe we never should have come to this one”. (ibid.49).

“*Disgraced*” mainly presents the dilemma of American Muslims who cannot harmonize with American cultural, civil and political life. “*Disgraced*” brings to light one of the most critically contemporary issues to discussion especially the position of Muslims in the post 9/11 American society. The play reveals the troublesome situation of Muslims in the American society and exposes the hegemony of racial groups excising on the “other”. I will try to prove that *Disgrace* brings to light the worst kind of orientalism, which is the neo-orientalism by exposing the sociopolitical environment of the American society and its hypocrisy. In addition,

this paper will attempt to highlight the historical deconstruction ideologies and myths created against Islam, and how it is the source of neo Orientalism that is still actively in effect.

The play demonstrates the existence of Neo- Orientalism in the American society, which manifests itself in an East/West divide—demonstrating a long-standing prejudice towards Arabs and Muslims in general—and operates in alienating them. The play embodies post 9/11 social environment of America, every Muslim is suspected to be a terrorist. *Disgraced* is a problematic play because it places the audience in the middle of a dilemmatic situation. The main character Amir, a Pakistani American raised as a Muslim, experiences discrimination in the post-9/11 America, and gets is depressed by being treated as the other in contemporary American Society, which drove him to perform acts of violence that causes the audience to empathize with him.

Disgraced offers a snapshot into the microcosmic impact of being a Muslim, and political rhetoric, have on the daily lives of American Muslims. Amir's situation is a representation for the Muslim Americans trapped in a society that treats him as a threat. The play ends no resolution. With this, the play replicates the situation of being in the middle of a dilemma, of being a Muslim in a hostile society. Akhtar comments that art is a "creative engagement with the world," so it involves the audience to experience the main character's dilemma. Hence, it is a duplication of the dilemma experienced by "upwardly mobile" secular Muslims in the United States. Therefore, Akhtar exposes the dilemma and involves the audience to share the experience of Amir. In doing so, its bold attempt to tackle one of the most complex and sensitive issues dominating today's political discourse: Islam and Identity.

At a first sight, "*Disgrace*" might be understood as if it were antagonistic towards Muslims. Upon close observation, Akhtar is not only against the extremist views of Islam, but also he rejects any societal and cultural events or attitudes that lead to these extremist views. Through Amir, Akhtar embodies the anger and misrepresentation that can lead an extremist view. However, Akhtar is not approving Amir's behavior and views. Akhtar's main message in the play is that rational Islam must free itself from the extremist views, otherwise it will be disgraced.

The play's opening scene, immediately draws focus on the theme of neo-orientalism, or, in other words, of the Western view of the East, which is connecting their hostile past history to the presence. The painting scene portrays the relation between Emily, the Caucasian wife, and Amir, the Pakistani Muslim. In other words, portraying the relationship between the white Americans and Muslims; the others. In spite the fact that Amir is a successful lawyer, enlightened and sophisticated individual, he is still treated as the other. The ongoing dialogue between Amir and his wife simultaneously reveals the insider/ outsider position Americans Muslims live, and it highlights the constant tension and frictions taking place between privileged Whites and "the other", increasing their estrangement and displacement. He feels his inferiority and rejection as an outsider and frequently, which in turn, leads to the widening of the gaps between him and the privileged white society. In spite of the fact that he tries to escape his Muslim origin and identity, he is haunted by it everywhere.

An incident with a waiter behaving rudely with Amir inspires Emily to portray Amir in the style of Velázquez's *Portrait of Juan de Pareja*. It is a painting by Spanish artist Diego Velázquez of his slave and later assistant Juan de Pareja According to *Stoichita, Victor (2010)*. "It is the earliest known portrait of a Spanish man of African descent." He was a mulatto, a person of mix marriage, in his case between a half "moor" and Spaniard father. Emily insists on keeping the same palette and composition as Velázquez's original. Emily definitely chooses Amir to represent de Pareja, as both subjects share the same heritage. Therefore, she also insists on portraying Amir with the same bold stance as Velázquez had painted his assistant. Such bold look of the master at his slave, and vice versa represent the bold look of the west towards the East especially the aftermath of 9/11 events. Both looks signs relation of suspicious, inquiry, dubious and doubt. Emily has decided to draw him in imitation of a slave who had been promoted to an assistant resembles Amir, a moor who got promoted to al lawyer in the 21st century.

In addition, Emily's portrait of him, comes as a response to the waiter's look at Amir. Like Juan de Pareja, he is subordinated, or so Emily considers him. She comments on how the waiter failed to see who Amir "really" is, until the latter "started to deal with him" (Akhtar. 8). She wants the writer to recognize Amir's new status in

society. The signification in this statement is that the waiter soon realized how Amir was less “them” and more “us,” but yet, still Emily imprisons Amir with his likeness to a painting that legitimated his existence. She denies Amir any new identity and position in society for she still fetishizes his Otherness. Ironically, she places him in an inferior rank in society. Hence, Emily’s choice to Velazquez’s major work *The Portrait of Juan de Pareja* establishes their relationship.

Rousseau, who is a French painter of the Barbizon school, believes that “Velazquez had only to please himself, and there was a subject for whom he clearly felt real sympathy and affection” (451). Emily comprehends this irony, that a painting of an assistant, who is a “Moor,” a second-class citizen, “has more nuance and complexity, life” than Velazquez’s paintings of kings and queens”..

Emily, who is a white, Western subject in an advanced liberal democracy, has the privilege to stigmatize him using labels, such as “slave.” On the other hand, even Amir’s South Asian Americanness with perfect American accent, his brown skin and looks still can’t be associated with the notion of an “American” “Western” identity. He is still looked at and considered as a “slave” and a “Moor” who is dominated by his white master.

Amir is well conscious of his inferiority, he repeatedly expresses his bitterness in his conversation with his wife, Emily.

“AMIR: It’s a good painting. I’ll give you that. I just don’t see what it has to do with what happened last night. So we had a waiter who was a dick? I mean --

EMILY: He wasn’t just a dick. He was a dick toward you. And

I could tell why.

AMIR: It’s not the first time --

EMILY: Right. But I’d just seen the painting at the Met. It was fresh in my mind. It gave me an idea.

AMIR: Which was what?

EMILY: A man, a waiter, looking at you. Not seeing you. No 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.

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

EMILY: Okay. But I started to think about the Velazquez painting. And that same gap. And how people must have they’re looking at a picture of a Moor. An assistant.

AMIR: A slave.

EMILY: Fine. A slave.”(Akhter, 5)

In his scene Emily paints Amir with only his boxers underneath, which has obvious sexual implications. In this scene, there is a gender reversal attitude: Emily takes the dominating role and Amir takes the passive role.

“Posing for his wife.

She sketches him. Until...

AMIR: You sure you don’t want me to put pants on?

EMILY (showing the Velazquez painting)

I only need you from the waist up.”(Ibid, 4)

It is obvious, that she belittled him to a figure of just physical pleasure. In addition, Basu’s South Asian Racialization and Belonging after 9/11: Masks of Threat believes that “The Muslim male body is being acted upon by white society and being denied its own autonomy.”(91) It is clear that Amir is not only mentally, but also physically degraded.

This opening scene carries a great amount of suppression that later will lead to explosion and violence. It is clear that Akhtar wants to show the American society that treating Amir as the other is the main reason behind the occurrence of such a violence. Again, he wanted to prove that racial discrimination is still a problem, an acute one.

Amir a high-talented New York lawyer, is not comfortable in his own skin. He detaches himself from his Indian roots, and changes his name. Moreover, he denounces the religion of Islam, in spite of the fact that he was raised up as a Muslim. He tries hard to hide his racial and religious background in order to gain acceptance into the mainstream society; however, his performance does not ensure successful assimilation in society. Unfortunately, his society can't accept his brown skin, his origin, and his Pakistani and Muslim roots. He is the unassimilable other in spite of his perfect American accent.

What happens to Amir in *Disgraced* is that he tries to adapt himself in a society that is hostile towards him. Just as Amir denies his last name to hide his Muslim heritage, so, too, does his Americanized nephew, Abe Jensen who hides his first name Hussein, to avoid anti-Islamic sentiment that he feared the troubles his name would bring. Consequently, he curses Islam and goes very far in announcing his misconceptions of Islam as a result of either weak knowledge of Islam or a way of adaptation to suit his society. Not very much different from Amir, most Arabs and Muslims deny their heritage identity. For example, many women deny their veils, and many men shave their beards and replace their thobes with shorts and T-shirts to adapt themselves in a foreign country. They have reacted in two opposite ways; they either denied their ethnic roots as Kayyali's remarks: "some Arab Americans have reacted to the post-9/11 atmosphere in the United States by distancing themselves from their heritage" (2006, p.144), or asserted their religious identity. The first group choice to reestablish their identity, as Abdo (2006) notes, "Beforehand, the majority of Muslims had generally preferred to maintain a low profile, seeking to blend into the diverse demographic landscape of contemporary American life" (p.83). Most probably, Akhtar's portrayal of Amir's character was based on his own choice of submission to his society. His race, complications and religious keeps him the "other", in spite of his great endeavors to diminish his difference. Ironically, such heavy efforts of surrounding his cultural identity, leads to acts of violence, anger, rage and tragic end of losing his wife and job. As the play progresses, agencies against Amir start to work emphasizing his racial other.

One of the main themes that *Disgraced* deals with the attributed cultural extremist Muslim identity of a villain, that is static throughout history. The most ironic conflict throughout the play is about Islam, and it is between Amir and Emily. Amir Kapuris is an apostate Muslim, and his wife, Emily, who battle over their conflicting perceptions of Islam. Their conflicting perceptions about Islam represents the conflict between the modest and extreme interpretations of Islam. Each character is deeply soaked in his views about Islam. Amir maintains a very critical, hostile, radical view of Islam, while Emily has a rationalist, appreciative understanding view. Each attempt to convince the other of the 'true' meaning of Islam fails. Through Amir the Muslim by birth, he has a flawed understanding of the identity of Muslims and Islam. In spite of the fact that Amir is a successful lawyer, enlightened and critical individual, he has extremist negative views against Islam and Muslims. In his conversation with Isaac he criticizes Islam for prohibiting paintings, raising dogs, and other outdated rules. Amir believes that "Quran is about tribal life in a seventh-century desert." (Akhtar .38) that is limited to specific people in the very past. From his perception, Muslims apply the textual and literal meanings of the Quran for every aspect of life. In fact, Amir is blind to the different interpretations of Quran. His knowledge about Islam is very limited. When the Jewish artist comments that Hanif Saeed, a contemporary artist, "work is an amazing testimony to the power of faith "and that "he carves these monolithic pillar-like forms", which reflects creativity and devoutness, Amir replies: "When it comes to Islam? Monolithic pillar-like forms don't matter...And paintings don't matter. Only the Quran matters" (ibid.33). Also, Amir refers to verses in Quran that allow men to beat women, an action which he will do at the end of the play. Amir views Islam as a negative and unintelligent faith, that created what he terms the "Muslim psyche," generalizing latent tribal thinking among all Muslims, voicing a classical orientalist mindset, which is still current among the exponents of Islam. Amir's deep hate and accusations to Islam, irritates even those who are not Muslim. Most ironically, it is Emily who defends Islam by saying that there are many interpretations to Quran and clarify that even scholars have debated over "the root

verb “beat” can also mean “leave”. In fact, it is very creative of Akhtar as a writer to reverse the situation. Amir’s challenges the audience by shocking them with the extremist’s truth. Voicing anti-Islamic views against Islam to face the audience in whatever they believe against Islam in order to correct it. In presenting Amir’s character as an extremist, he exposes the hidden ideas and the mindset against Islam. Hence, it is Amir who stands for the worst stereotypical Muslim who beats, insults, and who is tough and primitive. It is very surprising that Emily, his Caucasian artist wife, is the one who defers Amir’s wrong conceptions about Islam and emphasizes the importance of focusing on the different interpretations of the Quran.

As the play progresses, Amir fights with forces of racial stereotypes that does not only alienates him, but also does to every other Muslim. The Imam ‘arrest and the act of inquiring, suspecting and criminalizing every act done by Muslims reflects the environment of post 9/11 dilemma. Upon the request of Amir’s cousin Abe and the plea of Emily, Amir attends in court defending an Imam who has been accused under the provisions Patriot Act for collecting money to support terrorism. ABE justifies the Imam’s act by comparing it with every church clergy who do the same thing. Amir’s name is mentioned in a report on *The New York Times* implying that he is his defender. Steven, his Jewish employer, dig into his history and discovers that Amir was born Muslim, and changed his name intentionally to hide his Muslim background. Also, his other employer affirms that Amir is “duplicitous” (ibid.42). They change their attitude towards Amir and eventually fire him. It is surprising that Amir’s years of loyalty and devotion to his firm are not enough to help him keep his position. Being a Muslim and attending court for a Muslim donating money for suspecting terrorist activities are decisive evidence to judge a person, ignoring the fact that Amir gave up his identity, culture, and religion to swim in the mainstream of society. For the employers, Amir, who has a Muslim past, is connected to terrorists. This act of stereotyping denies the fact that not all Muslims are terrorists. Neglecting the fact that, Muslims, like any other sect in any religion, are individuals, who can be different from one another, and many of them criticize one another. This attitude towards Muslims proves the existence of neo-oriental attitude in society.

Also, Abe’s incident presents a microcosm world of hostile climate of the American society after 9/11 in which every Muslim is suspected. Abe, Amir’s cousin has also tried to adapt himself to the American society by changing his name. He has adapted a new name Abe Jensen which had made life and social interactions much easier for him. The event of the arrest of ABE and his friend Tariq had been suspected and reported to the FBI for claiming that “Americans are the ones who created Al-Qaeda” by a barista who first suspected them for being Muslims. When she became positive that they are Muslims, she reported them to the FBI, both men were arrested and put under interrogation. Also, Amir’s complains about the way he is treated at airports, and compares it to a “nightmare” and “unmitigated passive –aggression”.

Also, Amir is a victim of his heritage, cultural, and religious misconceptions. In a conversation with Emily and Abe, he narrates that while he was in the Fifth grade, he was attached to a girl called Rivkah. When his mother discovered that she is Jewish, she threaten him that she would break his bones, and she spat on his face. The next day, Amir imitates his mother’s misbehavior and spits on the girl whom he liked the previous day. His mother’s inappropriate reaction of spitting on him portrays another negative stereotype of a Muslim woman. It is obvious that the mother has no idea about the tolerance of Islam, and worst of all, she had, subconsciously, placed hatred in his heart towards people from different religions. It can be noted that Amir’s mother’s violent behavior had greatly affected him to the extent as a lawyer, he spits again on Isaac at the end of the argument.

Thus, Amir is a model of the negative stereotypes of Muslims and also a victim of the cultural, racial, and religious prejudices against Islam prevailing in the American society. As a successful lawyer, working in a Jewish firm, he is aware of the prejudices and paranoia against Muslims post 9/11. Amir’s change of name from “Abdullah” to “Kapoor”, to efface his Muslim identity, an attempt to assimilate and avoid “identity theft”. He also denied his parent’s place of birth from Pakistan to India to for social change. Amir’s change of family name, place of birth, his Islamic criticism and security card are all proofs that Amir is aware of the atmosphere of hostility and aggressiveness that is fighting against Muslims and Arabs. Usually people are proud of their family, name but society has denied Amir’s basic human rights. Although Amir has surrendered his identity to be accepted in post American society, the Jewish owners of the firm he works at, consider it misrepresentation and fired him

without any consideration to his great endeavors to keep it. His bosses also had promoted Jory of African American origin in Amir's position, in spite of Amir's total devotion and loyalty to the firm.

Amir totally disconnected himself from any association with his religion, ethnic origin, race, traditions, and culture. He did that in an attempt to fit in a post 9/11 hostile society, but it did not work, and he is still excluded. Society had denied even his very simple rights. He has been spiritually, mentally and physically abused by post 9/11 American society that denies the existence of any prejudice against Muslims, yet, it practices it to its extreme. Thus, Amir is fundamentally alienated by his society and all his sacrifices and attempts worked against him, and are considered to be a duplicitous act that he should be punished for and be singled out for.

Thus, it is not a surprise that Amir voices his pride after hearing the bombing of September 11th, as the reaction to the injustice and aggressiveness of his society. Under the effect of alcohol, he reveals his real feelings of pride after the events of 9/11 and is delighted to hear that "Ahmadinejad talk about wiping Israel into the Mediterranean" and that "Israel getting wiped into the ocean" emphasizes his cultural belonging when he tells Jory that "It is in the bones" forgetting "which WE I was". It is clear that Amir was compelled to sacrifice his Muslim identity, race and cultural roots to fit in a society that chose to crush him.

Amir's full sense of alienation forms the climax of the play. During the course of the dinner party, his own wife's infidelity is discovered. Amir is already under pressure with the news that he has been made a partner. Alone with Emily, he inquires about her relationship with Isaac in which she confesses their relationship in London. Amir loses his senses and at a moment of uncontrolled violence, Amir hits Emily in the face in rage of anger. An action he criticizes Islam for allowing beating women earlier in the play. Ironically, he becomes the beater whom he ridiculed earlier. At the end of the scene, Abe enters and finds Emily on the ground, her face bloodied. The audience are shocked from such scene of physical violence. Amir is a striking model of the Muslim stereotype who beats, spits and insults.

In the last scene of the play, Emily comes with Abe to take her things. It is clear that Abe is aware of Amir's situation. Abe not only summarizes Amir's problem that he "want(s) something from these people you will never get", but she also summarizes all problems that Muslims face in the west. Abe voice the playwrights ultimate hope that if "They've conquered the world .We're gonna get it back. That our destiny. It's in the Quran. For three hundred years they've been taking our land, drawing new borders, replacing our laws, making us want to like them .Look at them. Marry their women. They disgraced us. They disgraced us. And then they pretend they don't understand the rage we've got?"(ibid .50) It is clear that it is Akhtar message to Muslims.

The play ends by Amir standing in front the painting and staring at it. The play represents the journey of Muslims in confronting the west through ages. In an interview with Madani Younis ,Akhtar summarizes such a journey by saying that "The play begins with a Western consciousness representing a Muslim subject. The play ends with the Muslim subject observing the fruits of that representation. In between the two points lies a journey, and that journey has to do with the ways in which we Muslims are still beholden on an ontological level to the ways in which the West is seeing us. And what the play might be suggesting is we are still stuck there..., so the play ends with Amir finally confronting that image".

At the end of the interview, Akhtar hopes "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.

Disgraced is a unique play. It carries double messages. On the first hand, it clarifies to the audience the dilemma felt by some Muslim Americans which may bring better understanding and empathy towards Muslims' real problem. On the second hand, the play confronts the audience with the worst negative stereotypes, and with most misconceptions attributed to Islam and Muslims voiced by Amir, to let the audiences inquire about true Islam and think about the reasons which led Amir to act in such a violent way. He had surrendered his identity, race and heritage to adopt himself in a hypocrite society that will never accept him.

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