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Performing Anti-Muslim Racism; Or, Muslim Self-Fashioning in Ayad Akhtar's Plays

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Article abstract

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Performing Anti-Muslim Racism; Or, Muslim Self-Fashioning in Ayad Akhtar's Plays

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Abstract: Ayad Akhtar claimed in an interview after a performance of his Pulitzer-winning play *Disgraced* that the play was about the ways Muslims "are still beholden on an ontological level to the ways in which the West is seeing us." The point is for Muslims to free themselves from those networks of symbolic identification by reclaiming their voices and telling their own stories. The claim, then, is that the performance of Muslimness that Akhtar is initiating on the American stage with his critically acclaimed plays allows Muslims to escape the rules and demands of the hegemonic play of identities. How, then, does one redefine Muslimness while performing it? Situated in this context, this paper examines the narrative possibilities and possible narratives that are available to Muslim characters on the American stage. This article will read two of Akhtar's plays, *Disgraced* (2013) and *The Who & The What* (2014), through the lens of this purported claim of ontological reconstruction. Following Akhtar's admission that the latter was inspired by William Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*, I will extend the same principle of adaptability to read the former as a contemporary retelling of *Othello*. As a critique pivoted on the triple axes of class, gender, and form, this article will argue that by deploying the same ideological positions and stereotypical narratemes that legitimize anti-Muslim racism in America in the larger project of the US Empire, Akhtar leaves his self-endowed task of ontological reconstruction both politically and ethically wanting.

Keywords: *Ayad Akhtar, Disgraced, Performance, Anti-Muslim Racism, Islamophobia, Muslim Women*

In his 2018 book on contemporary identity politics and its relationship with the atavistic resurgence of ethno-nationalist populism across the world, Francis Fukuyama (2018) marked the breaking up of society into "smaller groups by virtue of their particular 'lived experience' of victimization" as the primary reason behind the shift of identity politics towards the Right (p. 164). The alt-right, in Fukuyama's analysis, was a consequence of American politics moving away from catering to its largest constituency of working-class white Evangelicals. The focus on tackling systemic problems of racism, anti-Semitism, homophobia, and other forms of majoritarianism led to this inevitable backlash. In this discourse of political pragmatism, there is a special place reserved for what Fukuyama calls

"Islamism," an undefined and uncontested signifier that finds itself alongside and equivalent to white supremacy and xenophobia. In the chapter on "Nationalism and Religion," Fukuyama locates originary commonalities between nationalism and Islamism and argues that "they both appeared on the world stage at moments of social transition from traditional isolated agrarian societies to modern ones connected to a broader and more diverse world. They both provide an ideology that explains why people feel lonely and confused, and both peddle in victimhood that lays the blame for an individual's unhappy situation on groups of outsiders" (p. 73). The locus of that predicament is shown in the figure of the second-generation Muslim immigrant who has been alienated from the tolerant variations of their parents' religion and the intolerant variations of liberalism in Western democracies.

Working with the universal category of "Muslim" as a window to understanding all Muslims, Fukuyama identifies this crisis in identity as the leading cause of Islamism. Fukuyama's work is often critiqued for its sweeping analysis and totalizing methods, but what his commentary also underscores is the prevailing assumption of an unbridgeable chasm between Muslims and the West. In a narrative that preaches integration and assimilation, the figure of the Muslim is not only seen differently but also inevitably and ineluctably tied to Samuel Huntington's thesis on the clash of civilizations. Fukuyama's main claim to fame, of course, came from declaring the victory of capitalism as the end of History. At the end of one grand narrative, however, what we see instead is the opening of another one. As the *New York Times*, the unwavering mouthpiece of American anxieties, declared in its headline on January 21, 1996, "The Red Menace is Gone. But here's Islam" (Sciolino, 1996). In what was meant to be a victory parade, the 1990s began with a feeling of impending doom. In 1990, Bernard Lewis published his notorious essay, "The Roots of Muslim Rage," which was meant to remind his victorious compatriots that the battle had been won, but the greater war remained to be fought. Presenting Muslims everywhere as a monolith, Lewis claimed that Muslim rage would lead to "no less than a clash of civilizations—the perhaps irrational but surely historic reaction of an ancient rival against our Judeo-Christian heritage, our secular present, and the worldwide expansion of both" (1990, p. 60). The root of Muslim rage, therefore, was not local or political. Instead, rage stemmed from Muslims' faith, and the problem—the civilizational threat—came from Muslimness. As such, it was not just rational but sensible to be afraid of the unassimilable Muslim Other. As Peter Morey (2018) argued, "In the first decades of the twenty-first century, Islamophobia has emerged as the dominant mode of prejudice in contemporary Western societies. In North America and across the nations of Europe, concerns about 'the Muslim problem' are central to political debates and policies ... Muslims and Islam have emerged as the focal point of anxieties about citizenship, loyalty, and liberal values" (p. 1). In this dialectic of the West and its illiberal Other, the figure of the Muslim is always already placed in contradistinction with the incontestable secularism of their Western surroundings.

The story of the second-generation Muslim immigrant in America is the cornerstone of Pakistani-American writer Ayad Akhtar's literary oeuvre. Most of his work explores this subject position and, as is typical of post-9/11 literature, often oscillates between assimilation and radicalization as the two poles defining Muslim existence in the West. When asked what young Muslims should take away from his play *Disgraced* (2012), for instance, Akhtar remarked that his play was about the ways Muslims "are still beholden on

an ontological level to the ways in which the West is seeing us" (Akhtar 2014). The point young Muslims should recognize, he argues, is that they need to move past the aporia of contested realities that seek to define and essentialize the Muslim subject and should thereby try to become the "dominant voice" in redefining their identity. Focusing on this vision, which Akhtar has reiterated in various interviews, this paper will analyze his Pulitzer-Prize winning play *Disgraced* (2013) and its thematic sequel *The Who & The What* (2014) in relation to his injunction for ontological reconfiguration.

Both these plays deal with questions of Muslim identity in post-9/11 America. *Disgraced* focuses on Amir Kapoor and his struggle to dissociate himself from what he sees as the horrors of his religion to realize the American dream; *The Who & The What* looks at similar themes from the subject position of a Muslim woman. I began this article with Fukuyama despite his notoriety as a spokesperson for American imperial ambitions because of the convergence between his rationale and the logic in these plays; both grow on the premise of an irredeemable and unending crisis at the heart of Muslim subjectivity that struggles with and against the said and unsaid rules of assimilation into purportedly secular modernity. In this larger context of global Islamophobia (and the swapping of Islam for Soviet Communism as the biggest threat to the West) where the figure of the Muslim becomes the locus of Western anxieties about liberal values, this paper will focus on the manner in which that identity defines and delimits the narrative scope in Akhtar's plays *Disgraced* and *The Who & The What*.

To Pass or Not to Pass: Unbecoming Muslims to/for Becoming Americans

Amir Kapoor and Zarina are the two protagonists in *Disgraced* and *The Who & The What*, respectively, and they have much more in common than their Pakistani origins. Both born in the United States, they represent second-generation Muslim immigrants who see themselves as Americans and, more importantly, are driven by the desire to be seen by their fellow Americans as being adequately American. The process of achieving that recognition is one which, through the hegemonic understanding of their pragmatism, requires them to shed their Muslimness first. Sartorial choices are one of the most obvious and effective ways to communicate this ecdysis on stage. Over-fastidious with his clothes, Amir is first introduced "in an Italian suit jacket and a crisp, collared shirt, but only boxers underneath" as he poses for Emily's painting (p. 12). We are told that he is in a spacious apartment on New York's Upper East Side. When the "As-American-as-American-gets" Abe first appears in Scene One, he is described as "wearing a Kidrobot T-shirt under a hoodie, skinny jeans, and high-tops" (p. 12). When he returns as a radicalized Muslim in Scene Four, the directions tell us that, "He is wearing a skullcap. And his wardrobe is muted. Unlike the vibrant colours of the first scene" (p. 77). Since he cannot possibly hope to terrorize America in a Kidrobot T-shirt and a hoodie, Abe must embrace the drabness that comes with being a fundamentalist. The important point to take away from this is that the muted colours are what represent who he really is once she sheds his Americanness. This is not Akhtar's invention. Here, Akhtar is borrowing from images of the stereotypical "angry young Muslims" that abound in popular culture. As Peter Morey and Amina Yaqin (2011) have observed in their study of Muslim representation, "When it comes to their

representation in contemporary film and television, the tendency is for individuality and specificity to retreat behind the all-encompassing signs of "Muslimness"—clothes, skin colour, ritual. And, always, the attempt to comprehend the Other simultaneously marks that Other's distance from 'us'" (p. 119). When Abe appears at Amir's doorstep in these clothes, we already know that he is now a lost cause. Freed from his Americanness, he can now authentically perform his Muslimness. Abe is the only character for whom we are given a sartorial description in the play.

Similarly, there is only one instance in *The Who & The What* where we are told what the character is wearing, and we are told with some specificity. When Afzal goes to scout Eli for the first time—when Eli had come with the expectation of meeting Zarina—we are told that Afzal is wearing "a Georgia Tech Yellow Jackets sweatshirt" (p. 13). At this moment when Afzal is potentially meeting his future son-in-law, the sweatshirt works to highlight Afzal's uncouthness. This is complemented by, we are told, a very noticeable Indo-Pak accent," that is seen in direct contradistinction with what the Harvard-educated Zarina represents (p. 13). Interestingly, the accents also go a long way in establishing not just who the characters are but also who the play is for. The characters are described from the perspective of an American audience, where they are marked by their individual deviations from the American-as-norm. While Amir Kapoor is described as speaking "with a perfect American accent," Zarina and Mahwish are described as speaking "without any accent" (2013, p. 8; 2014, p. 5). When Amir is positioned alongside his white wife, we know instantly that he is a second-generation immigrant—an American. In relation to Amir, it is rather odd that the two sisters from the second play are defined through the absence of an accent. The standard of reference in their assessment is not that they have American accents, but that they do not have South Asian ones.

We find another variation of this difference in the spatial configuration in the two plays and the number of objects that are placed on the stage. *Disgraced* opens with a setting featuring both Islamic art and a Siva statue, a contradiction that is further accentuated by the rather conspicuous presence of "a half-dozen bottles of alcohol" sitting on a small table (p. 7). This stage setting sets a visibly secular tone in harmony with what one would expect from an Upper East Side New York apartment with all "the works" and multicultural affiliations with subtle flourishes of the Orient. Set in Atlanta, Georgia, the stage setting in *The Who & The What*, in contrast, is completely devoid of any particularizing details that might hint at the presence of multiple influences. The setting simply states, "A kitchen" (p. 5). There are no other objects on the stage that are pointed out as possible repositories of meaning. This difference can be read as a reflection of two class identities where noteworthy things only appear in a particular setting when they perform a secularity that is particular to its constituting and constitutive class. The Afzal household has no point to prove. The defining conceit in both these plays, and, indeed, the very concept of Muslim personhood in the West, is the double consciousness that pervades the very core of Muslim subjectivity. As a result, much of what happens on the stage can be broadly categorized under the two headings of, first, how the Muslims perform Muslimness and second, how Muslim characters perceive themselves as performing Muslimness through the eyes of their non-Muslim counterparts.

One of the pitfalls of falling back on this secular filter for Muslim characters' self-assessment is the inevitable inculcation of the Muslim vs. the West dialectic such that the desire to be perceived as American preordains the negation of their Muslimness. There's a

degree of common sense attached to this performance of Islamophobic tropes, as a result of which the axioms of anti-Muslim racism are passed off in their everydayness as obvious facts of our contemporary reality. Hoping to open more avenues for himself as someone who understands the ways of the world, Amir Abdullah changes his name to Amir Kapoor in a bid to pass as Indian so he could enhance his chances of passing as an American. The attempt signals a graded marginality within multicultural America where some minorities are more acceptable than others. On the colour spectrum, for instance, a Muslim brown person is radically different from a non-Muslim one. The Siva statue works as an excellent device to symbolize this social disguise. When Emily asks him, "Why'd he get you a statue of Siva? He doesn't think you're Hindu, does he?" Amir responds with, "He may have mentioned something once … You realize I'm going to end up with my name on that firm" (p. 11). In dodging her question and redirecting her attention to his hopes for the future, Amir also displays not only his career ambitions but also his plan to achieve these as Amir Kapoor, as someone who belongs with the others at that echelon of the firm. His pragmatism is countered by his wife's idealism; she expects him to embrace his religious identity despite what anyone might have to say about it. Emily's performance of a putatively liberal idealism, however, also works to deny the facticity of what the world is like away from the Upper East Side. This is captured in a short exchange where she expresses her disgust with a racist waiter from the previous night, although we are not given the specifics of what happened. This brief exchange between the two displays that discrepancy in a surprisingly telling fashion:

> AMIR: It's a good painting. No idea what it has to do with what happened last night. I mean, the guy was a dick.
> EMILY: He wasn't just a dick. He was a dick to you. And I could tell why.
> AMIR: Honey, it's not the first time—
> 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.
> AMIR: The guy's a racist. So what?
> EMILY: Sure. But I started to think about the Velasquez painting. And how people must have reacted when they first saw it. They think they're 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 than his rendition of kings and queens (p. 8).

Even though Emily's misplaced compassion frequently works to misdiagnose the situation at hand, it also works to elaborate the self-serving and ill-informed nature of her liberal discourse that is completely at odds with the realistic undertones of Amir's self-fashioning. Whereas she perceives the waiter as focused on him, Amir is aware that it was his presence with a white woman that was the source of that annoyance. The waiter, according to Emily, could not see Amir, could not see him for what he really was. But what is Amir *really* like when his own identity, as Emily knows, is a fabricated one? Even though she can perceive

discrimination based on skin colour, she is completely oblivious to the anti-Muslim racism that shapes Amir's subjectivity. Between these paradigms of perception, Amir excels at one while failing miserably at the other. He understands what it would take for him to succeed in his field, and he thrives as long as he sticks to his plans for class mobility through assimilation. His tragic flaw is his inability to define his identity to himself. He knows how the world sees him and he works this system to get what he wants from it. However, that knowledge also requires him to deny his own self. It is this psychic fragmentation that spills onto the stage in the form of violence at the end of Scene Three.

The second strand of Muslim subjectivity is elaborated in *The Who & The What*, where all the characters are Muslims and all of them represent different subject positions within the Muslim-in-the-West complex. The two sisters represent the caged and the free Muslim women, respectively, with corresponding abilities for thinking critically and having the courage to act differently. Whereas Afzal represents the conservative practicing Muslim who believes that dissenters should be shot dead, and his daughter's husband should "break" her," Eli is the white converted Muslim who represents the tolerant, egalitarian, and spiritual side of Islam (p. 58). Eli is a particularly interesting construction because his attempts at passing as a Muslim mirror Amir's struggles to not be one. As the outsider to this family in more ways than one, Eli's character also works to offset the Pakistani edges in the other characters' personalities. Appalled by Eli's inability to curtail Zarina, Afzal's sharp invectives also betray his true opinion of converted Muslims. At one point, he yells at Eli, "Bloody fake is what you are!" going on to have the following exchange further along in the scene:

> AFZAL: I told you to shut your bloody mouth!
> ELI: Calm down, sir!
> AFZAL: I'm not going to calm down!
> ELI (Suddenly shouting): Yes you are!
> AFZAL: You nonentity!
> ELI: What she's done is important! She's reminding us that the Prophet was just a man—
> AFZAL: (Over): Us? You're no Muslim (p. 59).

Afzal's rejection of Eli as an authentic Muslim despite Eli being an imam gives us another perspective on the same problem of perceived incommensurability between the Muslim and the American in an evolving Muslim-American identity. Just as Amir's Muslimness stands in the way of him becoming American, Eli's Americanness stands in the way of him being accepted as a Muslim.

Both sets of dramatis personae and their related subject positions in the two plays reinforce the same division—the unbridgeable chasm between being Muslim and being American—that requires an individual to choose between the two identities. To become more American, they need to become less Muslim; to become more Muslim, they need to become less American.

The Neoliberal Burden: Saving the Muslim Woman

Numerous studies have shown how most forms of Islamophobia and Anti-Muslim racism are normalized and legitimized in the name of saving Muslim women from the tyranny of their faith and from the tyranny of Muslim men. As Ghazala Jamil (2018) has argued, no matter what Muslim women do or say, it somehow never constitutes agency (p. 62). Moreover, as Lila Abu-Lughod (2015) records in her pathbreaking study, "Western representation of Muslim women has a long history. Yet after the attacks of September 11, 2001, the images of oppressed Muslim women became connected to a mission to rescue them from their cultures … These views rationalize American and European international adventures across the Middle East and South Asia" (p. 7). In this study, based on years of fieldwork among Muslim women, Abu-Lughod situates her thesis around American intervention in Afghanistan, and she reminds us that, "defending the rights of Muslim women were offered as part of the justification for US military intervention in Afghanistan in 2001" (p. 4). We see resonances of the same logic in the two plays through the two protagonists, who want to not only renounce but also discredit their religious identity. When condemning the many horrors of Islam in *Disgraced*, Amir saves the best for the end in bringing up the position of women in Islam as incontestable proof of the religion's backwardness and incompatibility with the modern world. Blaming his misogyny and sexism on the faith that he has otherwise renounced, Amir ends every discussion on Islam by telling us what all Muslims everywhere think about women—especially white women.

When Emily recalls her fairly unremarkable relationship with her allegedly bigoted mother-in-law, Amir responds by explaining to her that she had actually won his mother over with her generosity. Had she not been that extraordinarily wonderful, Amir is confident that, to his mother, Emily would have been just another white woman who had "no self-respect" because "how can someone respect themselves when they think they have to take off their clothes to make people like them? They're whores" (p. 17-18). For Amir, this is "what Muslims around the world say about white women—" (p. 17-18). Born in the United States to an immigrant family, the Muslimness of his identity allows him to summarize the thoughts and actions of all Muslims. The problem with this uncontested discourse on the stage is that the reason behind this backwardness is associated not with individual cultures or beliefs but rather with the phenomenon that is Islam. This becomes more pronounced during the dinner scene when all the stereotypical conversations about Islam inevitably end up focused on "the woman question." Amir emphasizes the incompatibility between Islam and the modern world by arguing that an Arabic word is generally interpreted as allowing men, even directing them, to beat their wives if they don't act in a manner that is pleasing to them, linking wife-beating to Islam. The irony is not lost on anyone when Amir ends up as the wife-beater in Scene Three and becomes the tyrannical Muslim man that he had been railing against all evening. It also betrays the fact that despite his best efforts, he has not succeeded in completely shedding his Muslimness. His Muslimness also becomes the natural explanation for the violence that erupts at the end of this scene. As his carefully crafted Americanness is slowly snatched away from him, it is his Muslimness that remains behind and becomes visible for all to see in the play's climax.

In *The Who & The What*, Zarina embarks on a Rushdie-esque journey of writing a novel about Mohammad, of humanizing Mohammad, but from the subject position of a Muslim woman. When Mahwish asks her what her book is about, Zarina uses her standard response of "Gender Politics" (p 11). When probed further, she reveals that it is about women in Islam, to which her sister, hoping that it is not just about the "bad stuff," remarks, "Well, I hope not. Cause everyone's always making a big deal about women in Islam. We're just fine" (p. 11). Though it signals an awareness of the larger discourse, this discursive invisibilization of Muslim women is never repeated or elaborated upon in a play that is about the question of women in Islam. Situated between a ridiculously regressive father and an overwhelmingly earnest white converted husband, Zarina is not a "shrew" who will be tamed, and this is the extent of Akhtar's radical politics. Much of what happens in the play is a facsimile of the same discourse on women in Islam. Despite having set herself the task of talking about women in Islam, Zarina's entire discourse is limited to the idea of the veil. This unabated and undivided focus on the veil as the defining image of Muslim women is typical of Western discourse that sees its liberalism at odds with veiling practices (as has been seen poignantly in France). When Boris Johnson refers to Muslim women as letterboxes and Immanuel Macron bans their choice of clothing, they derive their legitimizing principle from the central tenets of anti-Muslim racism that sees all Muslim women everywhere as victims of their faith. Martha Nussbaum (2012) has argued that the motivation behind banning hijabs or freeing Muslim women has nothing to do with any administrative or functional problem with the idea of face coverings but is instead driven by a fear of Muslims. Indeed, when Fukuyama talks about the Muslim problem in the post-9/11 world, Muslim men are seen as becoming radicalized by joining Muslim organizations and women are seen as becoming radicalized by embracing the veil or the hijab. At various points Fukuyama offers different variations of this same logic, for example, when he says, "Many Muslims feel identity confusion and have turned to religion as an answer to 'Who am I?' This turn may take the innocuous form of wearing a hijab to work or a Burkini at the beach" (2018, p. 72).

Zarina's supposed blasphemy against Muhammad is not the only connecting link to the Rushdie affair in Akhtar's oeuvre. The unending controversy surrounding Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* can perhaps be seen as the origin of the Offended Muslim, the ubiquitous spectre of whom continues to haunt any and all discussion on the idea of (in)tolerance especially vis-a-vis literature, thereby making the novel the definitive verbal icon of violent intolerance. On the afternoon of January 14, 1988, 1,000 protesters gathered in Bradford, UK to burn a copy of the novel. As a result, *The Satanic Verses* transcended its existence as a novel to become an event that reformed and deformed global identities, "symbolizing, for many, the ideological chasm between Islam and the West. The underlying shibboleth, it seems, are the West's unabashed embrace of free speech and the Islamic world's uncompromising reverence for its ultimate concern" (Tyler 2008, p 24). In an article published in the *New York Review of Books* (1989) soon after the Bradford burning, Salman Rushdie had claimed, "I also tried to write about the place of women in Islamic society, and in the Koran. It is for this breach of taboo that the novel is being anathematized, fulminated against, and set alight." For the few who have actually read the novel, it is debatable whether Rushdie's championing of women's rights is what the novel is about in any way. However, Rushdie would have us think otherwise. As Talal Asad (1991) points out, "Rushdie is not only the author of *The Satanic Verses*, he has also volunteered its

authoritative reading" (p. 242). In numerous places, including his memoir *Homeland Elegies*, Akhtar has confessed to his admiration for *The Satanic Verses*, recounting in his introduction to Rushdie at a PEN event how he couldn't stop crying for three days after reading Rushdie's controversial novel. In that same speech, he said how Rushdie had shown the PATH (emphasis in the original transcript) to emerging writers (Akhtar 2023). The point to note is that Akhtar's self-fashioning has been, perhaps in a manner that is a little too much on the nose, inspired by the path shown to him by Salman Rushdie. As a result, his portrayal of Muslim culture appears as a homage to Rushdie sans the latter's characteristic style.

In the *The Who & The What*, Zarina and Eli first meet at an Ayaan Hirsi Ali lecture. Ali is, of course, famous for her depiction of Muslim women as "caged virgins" who must run away from their homes. As Abu-Lughod records, "[Ali] presents herself as a Muslim woman who has freed herself from the cage, rejecting the 'tribal sexual morality' that she ascribes to Islam and emancipating herself through atheism. She gives step-by-step advice to young Muslim girls about how to run away from home. Mass-market paperbacks about abused Muslim women buttress such views with metaphors of caged birds, trapped flies, and spiders in jars" (p. 19). While retaining this image of the trapped Muslim woman, Ali is discussed on multiple occasions in the play as someone who preaches that "Muslims should all convert to Christianity" (p. 23), thus returning to the Islam vs. Christianity dialectic of the clash of civilization thesis.

The main point behind these analyses is to emphasize that these are deeply ideological and political plays that speak in a particular language and idiom rooted in Western Orientalism. While foregrounding the mutually constitutive nature of gender and politics, this section has shown how the figure of the Muslim woman is a touchstone for contesting ideologies of global modernities, and how this discourse on gender inequality is a legitimizing principle for Islamophobia.

A Tragedy, a Comedy, and Where Akhtar Hides the Truth

In his note prefacing *Disgraced*, Akhtar draws the reader's attention to the distinction between novels and plays. Whereas the novel provides an author with limitless possibilities in terms of what comes in and what stays out, the form-defining economy of the play accords a sense of incompleteness to the work that enables and even invites the audience/reader to make their own connections. This distinction between the two forms makes for an interesting paradigm for reading the play as the ultimate stage or habitable space for studying representation. "On the page," remarks Akhtar, "the language of a play can seem to be pointing always to a kind of absence. After all, so much is missing: the actors, the set, the audience. What's more, in the finest plays, it seems that the dialogue thrives on omission, which is why reading a play can have something of the thrill of detective work, clues emerging line by line, slowly rounding out the picture that is the deeper reason for the play itself" (Akhtar, 2013, p. ix). The author's note, therefore, makes it a point to pre-empt, invite, tease, or perhaps even democratize or de-emphasize the industry of critical readings that always seeks to make those connections and uncover those hidden truths. Of course, the other space for critique is among the audience situated

in the present of the performance. Whether or not Akhtar's plays seek to generate or cultivate critical spectators is the most significant question that this paper has sought to raise. Building on the observations in the previous sections, this section will examine the exacting form of the play with absence as its reigning principle and the theatrical devices used therein to understand the mechanisms that speak, hide, and perform the truth at the same time.

Perhaps the most interesting and effective theatrical devices used are the two works of art, with women at the helm, that frame the plays. *Disgraced* begins with Emily painting a portrait of Amir as a reproduction or refashioning of Velázquez's *Portrait of Juan de Pareja*, and the play ends with Amir observing it as he "takes a searching long look" (p. 87). Similarly, in *The Who & The What*, we are told right at the beginning that Zarina is writing a book about the place of women in Islam and the play ends when she has written and published that book. Apart from adding a thematic foundation to the plot that records the passage of time, these framing devices also work as signposts that chart and symbolize the many changes that take place in the lives of the characters. In *Disgraced*, for instance, Amir's complicated relationship with being the subject of Emily's painting fashioned after Velázquez's portrait of his slave raises multiple questions about Amir's own place as the racialized subject in the play's very white setting. This is addressed by Isaac rather pointedly when he says at dinner, "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 … And yet the question remains … Of your place" (2013, p 46). When the play ends with Amir looking at the painting, it is meant to be a moment in which he can look at his place in the society he so desperately wanted to be a part of. Similarly, in *The Who & The What*, the writing and subsequent publication of the book on Mohammad is used as a device to resolve Zarina's own relationship with Islam and all its male representatives around her.

It is also interesting to note the ways the plays make use of American theatrical tropes to retain the Americanness of the play while making substantive progress in the characters and stories that they are performing on that stage. While *Disgraced* can be described as a dinner party gone wrong drama, *The Who & The What* is very clearly a family drama, and a dysfunctional one at that. What the plays accomplish in both these instances—and it is no small achievement—is that they place people of South Asian origin at the centre of the American stage. Even more significantly, the plays place and normalize Muslim characters at the heart of American theatre's typical dramatis personae. *Disgraced* was the most performed American play at the time.

While Akhtar described *Disgraced* as a tragedy, he has confessed on several occasions that *The Who & The What* is a comedy inspired by Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*. In an interview published with the play, Akhtar shares, "I saw this ad for Kiss Me, Kate and I thought to myself, 'What is this obsession with The Taming of the Shrew?' It makes no sense! The gender politics of that play have no resonance for today's audience. I understand them because that's where I come from, that's my culture. I mean, my mom is basically Kate" (p. 99). There is not much subtlety that needs to be unpacked in this admission where the medieval gender politics of *The Taming of the Shrew* is presented as no longer relevant in the West but resonates with the author because of his cultural background, which feels much closer to the backwardness of medieval times than to the white feminism of his American present. The adaptability of Kate's shrewdness to Zarina's

revisionist project works because she is the liberated, Harvard-educated Muslim woman who needs taming—the brown father wants it, but the white husband won't do it. The white husband will instead win her over by supporting her in her fight. Though neither Akhtar nor his reviewers and critics have drawn that connection, the tragedy of *Disgraced* can also be seen as having been inspired by a Shakespeare play. Amir Kapoor's overzealous attempts to assimilate into his American surroundings instantly remind one of Othello, the Moor in Venice who reprimanded his officers with "Why, how now, ho! from whence ariseth this? Are we turned Turks, and to ourselves do that/ Which heaven hath forbid the Ottomites? For Christian shame, put by this barbarous brawl" (Shakespeare 1603/1903, 2.3.165-168). This dialectic of defining one's self through the negation of the Other is notably manifest in *Disgraced*. Furthermore, like Othello's insecurities about his white wife building to a violent conclusion that restores his Otherness, Amir's assault of his white wife at the end of *Disgraced* also performs a similar function. Zarina and Kate will not tread the same path in a narrative of liberation, but Amir's Othello is condemned to repeating history in what is supposed to be an act of ontological reconfiguration.

This reproduction of the old in the self-advertised garb of newness has been the central concern of this paper. This paper has sought to highlight an unwavering discrepancy between the plays as such and the authorial readings of the plays that frame their publication. To reiterate, one does not assume that the play must have a political ethic or a revolutionary idea that must come through in its performance. This paper does, however, examine the means and the ends of this staging because the playwright presents them to us as a means to an end. These ideological positions—which subscribe to and benefit from a certain topicality in contemporary global discourse—are clearly not neutral. As David Barnett (2015) observes in his reading of Brecht,

> Nothing on stage is value-free. Representation itself can never be neutral: it is always supporting one interest or another. Brecht maintains, "without opinions and intentions one cannot represent anything." This is an important observation because it links representing characters and actions with agendas. It asks directors and actors to be conscious, thinking artists. If one does not have an opinion or an objective when representing a character or an action, one could be merely be reproducing the opinions and objectives of someone with a different agenda altogether (p. 34).

Even though the play does accomplish much in adding more (subject) positions to the American stage, this article reads its much-advertised activism in countering Islamophobia as defined through the language and logic of anti-Muslim racism.

The main reason for this is the absence of any real dialogue on anti-Muslim racism in relationship to the logic of US imperialism over the course of two plays about Muslims in America. Amir and Zarina do not just want to renounce their faith; they also want to discredit it. That there is no polemic, that there is no other perspective that can counter what the protagonists are saying on stage on a topic that has dominated global politics over the past two decades, is what makes the task of ontological reconstruction vacuous and ill-formed. Everything Amir and Zarina point out as a problem with and within Islam has been a subject of serious academic inquiry and discussion, something Akhtar must be aware of since he took classes in Islamic Studies in college (Akhtar, 2020, p. 54). An example of this

omission, for instance, can be seen in repeated discussions among those advancing Islamophobic tropes of Ayesha's age (nine years) at the time of her marriage to Prophet Mohammed whereby she becomes a symbol of the oppressed Muslim woman, with Muslimness being the source of that oppression. The number nine is curiously specific, and as Asma Barlas (2012) has pointed out, has been a key part of the Western Orientalist discourse that arrived at that number from a story in which Ayesha is described as playing with dolls. Barlas points out how that number could well have been nine, thirteen, or even nineteen depending on which archive you cite. To highlight the randomness of this logic, Barlas points out how "Even in the United States, the age of consent for women was between seven and ten as late as 1889 and was raised to eighteen only as a result of feminist campaigns" (p. 126). The point here is not that Ayesha wasn't nine years old, or that it is all right for her to have been nine years old. The point is that this Western Orientalist discourse is repeatedly and unproblematically presented in the plays without any nuance or contestation, and as a result assumes a facticity that propels it as the hidden truth. Akhtar addresses this in his latest novel, recalling how, "This story [Ayesha's age] caused no undue compunction in my community until after 9/11, when we all started to realize how backward it made us look, idealizing what people here could only conceive of as child rape" (Akhtar, 2014, p. 57). This paranoia of being seen by the West in a certain light is exactly the point that is being made through the plays, and indeed the novel. The problem is that the other half of the story—the complexity of it—is so well hidden in the play that it appears to have been lost therein. This could explain why *Homeland Elegies* (2020), published seven years after *Disgraced* and six years after *The Who & The What*, takes it upon itself to provide detailed explanations for the central plots of both plays.

Conclusion: What is the (Hidden) Truth?

> Anti-Muslim racism is about a kind of racialized becoming that is always in flux and is different from other forms of racism that have become part of a racial common sense. Anti-Muslim racism is the incarnation of a shifting conceptual apparatus that comprises racism as a technique and white supremacy as a systemic end. Such is the power of a racialized notion of the figure of the Muslim; to fail to recognize Islamophobia as racism is a central tenet of its ongoing power and its generative form of dominance (Daulatzai and Rana, 2018, p. xvi).

In the absence of another perspective that can complement, impugn, or subvert any of Amir's or Zarina's claims, what we are left with in both the plays are clichés that reinforce anti-Muslim racism in the West. As a result, there is a certain incompleteness that haunts Akhtar's portrayal of his Muslim-American characters. The problem is not in his critique of a particular tradition of Islam. The problem is that he uses that tradition to define and fix the religious identity of everyone practicing Islam. It is the racialization that is the legitimizing principle for all the action that is performed and concretized on the stage. With regard to the conflict faced by the immigrant in the West, Thomas Scanlon (2003) writes, "The result is a form of political gridlock in which the idea of tolerance is a powerful motivating force on both sides: on one side, in the form of a desire to protect potentially

excluded groups; on the other, in the form of a desire to protect a workable system of tolerance" (p. 200). In Akhtar's world of inter-subjective perception, there is absolutely nothing that the immigrant brings to the table except for her backward religious traditions. Arun Kundnani (2007), who has studied the anti-Muslim rhetoric in Britain, has argued, "This anti-Muslim discourse in Britain preceded 9/11 and emerged, in particular, in the wake of the Salman Rushdie affair. It was the same discourse that Edward Said spoke of as based on "an unquestioned assumption that Islam can be characterized limitlessly by means of a handful of recklessly general and repeatedly deployed clichés" (2007, p. 126). Based on the content and context of the two plays, one would be remiss to not historicize them in light of these developments that have contextualized world politics in the first two decades of the twenty-first century.

The theatrical devices and subject positions in the two plays create a model that an unbecoming Muslim must adopt to un-become a Muslim and become an American. This polarity that necessitates the renouncing (often by openly castigating) of one's tradition in order to accept a more putatively modern one, falls right into the purported incompatibility that lies at the heart of the "Islam vs the West" dialectic. The central figure in that dialectic is the Muslim woman who is perceived as being a victim of Muslim men and Islam. It is therefore unsurprising that when Akhtar seeks to talk about Islam in his plays, the discussion is built around this discourse, which works as a legitimizing principle for anti-Muslim racism. The violent generalizations about all Muslims and their true realities that the protagonists are privy to on account of their Muslim identities work to wipe out volumes of scholarship that exists on the subject. For the uninitiated spectator, therefore, there is a ceaseless barrage of propositions that remain uncontested throughout the two plays. The absence of a counter-perspective is further accentuated by that position being performed by a radicalized Abe in *Disgraced* and a shockingly regressive Afzal in *The Who & The What*. This absence further reiterates the cliché of Muslims being incapable of critiquing their faith and traditions. Thus, even though Akhtar's plays make deeply valuable additions to the American stage, these additions are steeped in the rationale of anti-Muslim racism, which does not further the cause of countering Islamophobia. As the ultimate space for studying representation, the form of the play makes that absence even more prominent. To quote Akhtar against him, "For indeed, art seldom provides anything like answers, and yet, sometimes form is answer enough" (Akhtar, 2013, xiii). Thus, it is no coincidence, and should not be read as coincidence, that the Muslims described by the likes of Fukuyama and Lewis find their actual representation in the plays of a Pulitzer prize-winning playwright performing the self-endowed task of saving Muslims from Islam at a time in history when the war machinery of the US empire is performing the same self-endowed task.

Declarations

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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