



Ambivalence in Ayad Akhtar's Play Disgraced

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ABSTRACT

This research paper aims to explore ambivalence in Ayad Akhtar's play Disgraced. It explores racial and religious prejudices in even the most developed cultural societies and leads people toward ambivalence. It is based on sociopolitical themes such as the ambivalent state and the self-identity of Muslim American citizens. This research paper intends to highlight how Disgraced uses its diverse set of characters and their conversation to bring up details that are often avoided in everyday conversation and considered taboo due to the fear of being offensive such as people living in a third space, cultural appropriation, racism and prejudice against culture and religion. The theory of ambivalence is applied to focus on the conflicted identity of individuals within the U.S. and the discrimination against Muslims. This research paper explores the behavioral, social, and psychological change and stress that people experience during their encounter with a different culture and society.

1. About Ambivalence in the Work of Ayad Akhtar

This research paper examines the theme of ambivalence in which someone likes as well as dislikes other cultures. It is one of the major aspects of post-colonialism and came into being after the physical and mental subjugation of the colonized. The fusion of post-colonial and American cultural existence creates ambivalence in people, such as Homi. K. Bhabha describes the colonial discourse theory of ambivalence as the complex mixture of attraction and repulsion that decides the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. In his book The Location of Culture, he highlights that colonial authority is empowered, whereas hybridity and ambivalence are just a means for complete dominance. The relationship is ambivalent because a person who is adopting a new culture is not simply and completely opposed to foreign people and their culture.

Amir who is in America is in an ambivalent state, he wants to privilege the West because he wants to get American citizenship, but does not let anyone disgrace his religion and culture. In one of his interviews in 2019, Ayad Akhtar talked as a member of a Muslim family when they were exposed to various forms and degrees of emerging hostility towards his faith and his religious and cultural background. He experienced ambivalence towards American society as he wanted to assimilate into its lifestyle, but he often felt a sense of non-belonging and identity of a Muslim American citizen just like Amir in the play.

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2. Literature Review

Mostafa Bayoumi explains *This Muslim American Life: Dispatches from the War on Terror* that a terrorist is foreign-born, an alien in the United States, and a Muslim, and that all Muslim men who fit this profile are potential terrorists” (56). Bayoumi adds that these strategies “created a race out of religion” (56). Islam has thus become a racial signifier. Kapoor has rejected his Muslim upbringing, his Muslim identity, and even his surname just to better assimilate into his law firm but he still feels occasional tug toward his culture and hatred against foreign cultural values and way of living.

Disgraced is a diaspora play which is published in 2012. The critical theory related to the Pakistani Muslim diaspora in the U.S. and Islamophobia is still however in the making. A bird’s eye view of the critical mass of literature concerning identity crisis and ambivalence of Muslim diaspora writing in the U.S. may be of avail. There seems to be eagerness and urgency in the stance of some analysts concerning Islamophobia and diasporic fiction. Stuart Hall introduces two conflicting notions of cultural identity. The second idea, which can better explain the status of the diasporic people, considers cultural identity as dynamic and ever transforming. The first idea regards cultural identity as static, meaning it is completely unchangeable. When the identity of any person changes, not only does his social, psychological, and mental inclination change but also it causes conflict in his or her liking and disliking (Rafaq et al., 2025).

Rabiya Amir who is a Ph.D. scholar has written her article (Aamir, 2016) and she says that the post-9/11 incident has redefined the boundaries of South Asian literature. She discusses “how post 9/11 events and Islamophobic effects have penetrated the writers of Pakistani English fiction writers and explores, how by integrating all the major themes discussed around the world, in post 9/11 milieu all Pakistani writers are redefining South Asian literature” (Amir, 2016).

Craig Considine wrote an article on ‘(Considine, 2017)’. This paper examines how the racialization process negotiates with Islamophobic discourses and actions in American society. He wants to say that this discrimination in every field is due to certain historical events such as the 9/11 incidents, and social and geopolitical issues surrounding American Muslims, and people who look like Muslims. He supports the idea that race serves as a symbolic justification for Islamophobic incidents in the United States (Considine, 2016).

Haris A. Noreiddin talks about the colonization of Muslims on a religious basis. Reductive imagery has returned in what is now categorized as Neo-Orientalism, in part due to the inaccurate portrayal of Muslims in America’s mainstream media following 9/11. Muslims have been portrayed in many clichés as evil outlaws antagonistic to American interests, fanatical, terrorist, misogynistic, and uncivilized. Akhtar puts contemporary attitudes toward religion under a microscope, revealing how tenuous self-image can be for people. How much Muslims are suffering throughout the world not only due to racial discrimination but also due to religious discrimination? (Norreidin, 2020)

3. Research Methodology

This paper uses qualitative research methods, and primary text is Ayad Akhtar’s play *Disgraced*. This research paper explores ambivalence through the textual analysis of the play and the characterization of Amir who is the main character of this play. This research paper is going to explore the theme of ambivalence by highlighting gender, social, and class discrimination in American society. Social background and historical aspects of the play as well as of the writer are kept in view during the analysis. By showing different aspects of Amir’s character, this paper will explore identity issues and xenophobia due to which Amir is in an ambivalent state of mind. When Amir tries to assimilate into another culture and society and begins to shun his values, he loses not only himself but also his relations.

4. Discussion

Disgraced by Ayad Akhtar is “taut, engrossing and powerful; an examination of our post-9/11 western world, played out in one tastefully decorated, spacious Manhattan apartment” (Dow). The title of the play suggests a perpetrator-and-victim relationship where Muslims and their culture have been victimized and disgraced by foreigners. It is a continuously engaged play about thorny questions of identity and religion in the contemporary world. At the start of the play, in the setting of scene one, the stage is being decorated with patterns reminiscent of Islamic culture. Zarina in *The Who & the What* (2014) denounces Islamic principles as non-human, sexist, and inconsistent. She finds it difficult to write an exposé on women in Islam because she claims that the prophet’s and the message’s positions on women are inherently contradictory. The play begins with Amir who is a prosperous corporate attorney in a major law firm, an assimilated forty-year-old New Yorker who is raised as a Muslim taking work-related phone calls, and is being sketched by his Caucasian artist wife Emily. Emily asks him about his colleague Mort and reminds him that on his birthday, he gave him a present of a book instead of a Hindu statue because he does not know that Amir belongs to Hinduism. She says this because Amir has changed his last name, and his social security number and has rejected the religion of his parents.

Moreover, he typically criticizes his parents' religion. He tells Emily that his name in the firm is Amir Kapoor which shows that he is a Hindu and that by changing his name his mother will be happy. He says, "My mother will roll over in her grave" (Akhtar, 2012). This shows that for getting a job in the U.S he has changed his name because the foreigners don't think well of his religion and his culture. By changing his name, he wants to hide his identity as a Muslim. When they are talking about this issue Abe, the nephew of Amir comes to see them. He has also changed his name from Hussein Malik to Abe Jensen. Amir in a very ironic tone says "I never get used to it and I can't take it seriously" (Akhtar, 2012). As he comes, Amir immediately says that Abe should not talk about the matter of the imam and he can't do anything for that imam and says "I went to see that imam in prison. What more does he want" (Akhtar, 2012). By this statement of Amir, we can predict that he does not want to do anything for the imam who is in prison because of a fake terrorist case. Because now he does not like his people. Abe has changed his name because of prevailing hatred against their religion and culture in the U.S. As he says "How much easier things are for me since I changed my name" (Akhtar, 2012)

The major reason why he has changed his name is that he wants to hide his religion and identity. His name, Hussain Malik shows his Muslim identity and it has become very difficult for him and for all Muslims to live in America after the 9/11 incident. He wants to better assimilate into the American culture, but some values of that culture are very irritating for him. He backs up his act by saying "The Quran says it's okay to hide your religion if you have to". Amir has also changed his name and Abe says to him that he is lucky because he does not have to change his first name, Amir. After all, it "could be both Christian and Jewish. Abe wants Amir to support an imam and assures him that the imam has done nothing wrong as every church in the country collects money, Imam Fareed has also done the same to keep his mosque running.

Through different arguments, he supports the imam, and Emily also convinces him that if he is collecting money, it does not mean that he is supporting terrorists. This shows that Abe is in an ambivalent state and wants to hide his identity but loves the people of his land very much. But Amir sticks to his stance and says, "What does any of this have to do with me" (Akhtar, 2012)? After this, Emily, and Amir battle over their conflicting perception of Islam. Amir does not want to support the imam's case because he still maintains a hostile radical view of Islam while Emily shows a moderate and appreciative stance. As she asks Amir "It does not matter to you that an innocent man is in prison" (Akhtar, 2012). Here Ayad Akhtar wants to present the two stark choices that many Western Muslims are facing when confronted with the hostility of American culture and society. Abe has concerns regarding the propriety of the arrest of the imam but the demand of Abe to support the imam in the court case puts Amir in a very conflicting position. He says to Abe, "I am not gonna be part of a legal team because your imam is a bigot" (Akhtar, 2012). He wanted to help his family, but he also wanted to separate himself from Islam as much as possible to assimilate into American society as well as to preserve his livelihood.

Here we can see different perspectives of Emily and Amir on Islam. Abe says that Imam Fareed likes Amir just because he is a Muslim and in response, Amir says Imam likes him because he does not know his repulsive behavior towards Islam. Through every dialogue with Amir, we can see his antagonistic attitude toward Islam. And through Amir, Akhtar is displaying the way animosity and misrepresentation can cause an extremist view. Amir tells his childhood story of how he developed a hate for Jews. Rivkah was a girl whom he loved. She was the first girl he ever kissed and from her name, his mother came to know that she was a Jew. At this his mother's reaction was severe and she said "If I ever hear that name in this house again, Amir I will break your bones" (Akhtar, 2012). When Amir asked that girl about the query of her name, she said, "I have got a Jew name because I am Jewish" (Akhtar, 2012). After listening to this, Amir spat in her face. His purpose in narrating this incident is that it is his mother who aroused hatred in him against Jews. Then he presents Muslim's racist and prejudiced approach toward white women. He wants to say that all Muslims have a very wrong image in their minds of white women. Amir says "White women have no self-respect. They are whores" (Akhtar, 2012).

Despite all these thoughts, he married Emily very happily. These views show ambivalence in Amir. Abe tries to convince him and uses Imam's case as a metaphor for Islam. He strengthens his argument by saying "If you got to know imam better, you would realize" (Akhtar, 2012). He wants to say that Islam is not like that as you think. If you get to know it better, you will come to know that Islam creates love not hatred and prejudice in hearts. Both imams and Muslims are not as conservative and narrow-minded as people of the U.S. think about them. Misrepresentation of Muslims in America's post-9/11 mainstream media has helped reductive images resurface in what is now lumped under Neo-Orientalism. Among many clichés, Muslims have been represented as villainous outlaws, uncivilized, fanatical, terrorist, misogynist, and hostile to American interests (Said, Shaheen, Bazian, Alsultany 229). Emily, again and again, tries to convince Amir of the real spirit of Islam. Her well-intentioned campaigns to have Amir reconcile with his heritage as she says "There is so much beauty and wisdom in the Islamic tradition Amir" (Akhtar, 2012). But Amir very ironically says "It's not just beauty and wisdom that Islam has" (Akhtar, 2012). Here we can see that Amir is a lapsed Muslim and he, again and again, shows his deepest and darkest opinions on issues related to political Islam. Amir has such behavior that he does not even consider the imam a human being and says "he is not one of his people" (Akhtar, 2012).

Our prophet Muhammad (PBUH) said that Muslims are brothers of each other, but he denied this and didn't want to have a relationship with the imam just because of religious prejudice against him. Amir thinks that Muslims are conservative, outdated and they don't know what the modern world is all about. He argues "These people cling to the past. But this country is about moving forward and not looking back" (Akhtar, 2012). Now it is clear that he has such stereotypes and wrong ideas in his mind about Islam and Muslims just because of the society in which he is living and trying to assimilate. When Emily convinces him he agrees to attend the hearing. When he relents and attends the hearing, he is quoted out of context by the New York Times making it appear that he is on the legal team for the imam. Now things begin to crumble. Amir says, "My religious background is not anybody's business" (Akhtar, 2012).

To survive in that society, he wants to hide his religion. He thinks that he has put distance between himself and the prejudices of Islam. We see that again and again Amir says that his religious identification might "affect his livelihood" (Akhtar, 2012). Emily congratulates him on doing the right and makes him realize that it is his religious and moral responsibility and tries to pacify Amir when he is worried about his reading of supporting imam in the newspaper. "Emily attempts conciliatory" (Akhtar, 2012). Issac who is a Whitney curator comes and Emily gives him a verbal essay on the value of Islamic culture. They talk of an art festival in London which they will soon be attending and leave for Emily's studio. She advises about using Islamic values in their art and visiting Islamic galleries in London. She says "We draw on the Greeks, on the Romans we should be drawing on the Islamic tradition as well" (Akhtar, 2012).

Through all the dialogues of Amir in the play, Ayad Akhtar can distinguish the character as an outsider, so integrated into society, yet not wholly comfortable with the way that he lives day to day. He told Emily that in the documents of his job, he said that his parents belonged to India rather than Pakistan. And he has got a job just because of this lie. He explained to Emily that he told India his home ground rather than Pakistan because he had seen the level of islamophobia and xenophobia in Americans against Muslims. Just to satisfy himself he interprets it in a different way before Emily that his parents belong to India and says "It technically was India when my father was born then British chopped it up into two countries" (Akhtar, 2012).

Now again the problem of changing the name but now the argument is between his colleague Steven who was a Jew. Amir wants to clear his stance before him by saying that he changed his name from Abdullah to Kapoor because he wanted to change himself socially. He wanted to better assimilate into the society in their culture and didn't want to let his culture and religion in the path of his success. 'I -uh- had my social change when I changed my name' (Akhtar, 2012) he acknowledged that he did this for identity theft not because he liked their cultural values and disliked his own. Isaac is unapologetic and constantly pushes the envelope, undercutting Amir at every turn in an attempt to embarrass him in hopes of winning Emily's love. The two traded increasingly intense insults about each other's heritage as tension boiled over. He is not a character to love, but his cross-questioning with Amir is the most dynamic. Amir says "and guys like Steven and Mort became the establishment. We are the new Jews" (Akhtar, 2012). He tries to remember Issac the time of the second World War when Americans behaved so badly with Jews, and this is the time when Americans are behaving with Muslims in the same way.

Their racist approach and discriminating behavior toward Muslims is the same as it was once with Jews. We see that Issac does not argue with Emily on Islamic tradition but he argues with Amir just to make him feel ashamed of his heritage. Issac progresses with an argumentation streak and presses Amir to justify his politically incorrect views on the Koran and extremism in the Muslim religion. After analyzing Emily's work their reaction to Issac was positive and he says "The work you are doing with Islamic tradition is important and new and it needs to be seen" (Akhtar, 2012). Amir highlights that after the 9/11 incident whole perception of Muslims in the world has changed. They are considered terrorists and think that all violence and extremism is due to Muslims, and wherever terrorist attack will happen it will be done by Muslims because they are associated with it. Amir says "attack is gonna come from some guy who more or less looks like me" (Akhtar, 2012). He is presenting a picture of that society and the mentality of the people of that society.

Emily and Amir both have diverged and opposite views about Islam it is due to this reason that Amir knows the Islamophobia in that society and as a Muslim, he is facing it but Emily who is a non-Muslim cannot feel the piercing attitude of Native Americans against Muslim Americans. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon proposes the ideas of muscle tension and nocturnal "muscular dreams" of action and self-aggrandizement as emotions of colonized rage over being physically and psychologically humiliated (15-16). Emily's adultery and Amir's resemblance to a slave make him an enraged physical abuser, validating the alleged dominant characteristics of his original identity.

It should be noted that Emily persists in ending her marriage to Amir, despite all of his pleadings and justifications. She is imitating Islamic tradition just as art. Jory who is the wife of Issac is an Afro-American woman and she thinks that black people are still exploited in America. And her point of view about the bible is the same as that of Amir about Islam. Because they both are being socially exploited in that society, she thinks that two hundred years ago written Bible couldn't solve their modern-day problems. Issac disagrees with Amir about the conservatism of Muslims as he thinks, "Amir has the same idea of the good

life as I do" (Akhtar, 2012). Amir has the tendency and desire to excel in life and he wants to live a modern life according to American culture and traditions. During dinner Amir attacks Islam, citing the Quran as a source of the Taliban brainwashing.

The hostile attitude of Americans towards Muslims came to light when his law firm stopped his promotion and charged him for raising money for terrorists. When Isaac and Amir were making sarcastic remarks about religion and culture of each other Issac said to Emily "You are married to a man who feels a blush when Ahmadi najad talks about wiping Jews" (Akhtar, 2012). When the issue became more serious and hotter Jory took Amir away and told him about propaganda that was happening against him in office. At that instant, Issac tries to come close to Emily and kisses her. Then it is revealed that both of them have had a love affair in the past. After Isaac and Emily's infidelity, both couples have an uncertain relationship. At the end of the play, Abe comes and tells Amir that he and his friend have been questioned by the FBI just because they have expressed their views about Jihad at Starbucks.

Abe tells Amir that American police have an eye on all their activities because they think that Muslims have links and relations with terrorists. As he tells Amir "It was like they had a file or something. They brought up my immigration status" (Akhtar, 2012). Amir warns Abe to be more cautious and says "When you step out of your parents' house, you need to know that it's not a neutral world" (Akhtar, 2012). But Abe flies into a fit of rage and says that the West has Disgraced Islam, but they will take it back one day. This shows that Muslims who are living in the U.S. are in ambivalent because they sometimes think that they want to adopt their culture and living style, but sometimes feel the special tug of their culture and religion. Amir has failed at both places first at self-acceptance of reconciling Muslim identity with his American one, and second then assimilation into foreign culture leads him towards an identity crisis. He has fluctuated between one cultural values and identity and the other.

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