



CULTURE,  
SHOCKED.



HARI DHILLON GRETCHEN MOL  
DANNY ASHOK KAREN PITTMAN  
& JOSH RADNOR

# DISGRACED

THE 2013 PULITZER PRIZE-WINNING PLAY  
BY AYAD AKHTAR

DIRECTED BY  
KIMBERLY SENIOR

Photos by Andrew Eccles

The Lyceum Theatre

# CONTENTS

## **ABOUT THE PLAY**

Characters.....	1
<i>Disgraced</i> Synopsis .....	2
About the Playwright: Ayad Akhtar.....	3
Meet the Director: Kimberly Senior .....	4

## **THE WORLD OF THE PLAY**

Glossary .....	5
Islamic Principles and Culture.....	8
An Abbreviated History of The Partition of Palestine .....	12
Art History.....	13

## **SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIALS**

Symbols and Themes in <i>Disgraced</i> .....	16
Literature inspiration .....	17
An interview with Ayad Akhtar.....	19

# ABOUT THE PLAY

## DISGRACED CHARACTERS



### AMIR

Of South Asian origin. A corporate lawyer at odds with his Muslim heritage. Emily's husband.



### EMILY

Caucasian. A painter whose work focuses on the spiritual roots of the Muslim faith. She strives to be even-handed and level-headed in both her personal and professional relationships. On the verge of a major career breakthrough, she finds herself and her marriage increasingly threatened by her husband's complicated relationship to his Islamic roots and faith.



### ISAAC

Caucasian. Jewish. A successful art curator married to Jory. A vibrant and seductive personality, he draws people in with his charmingly quick wit, easy manner and passion.



### JORY

African American. Recently made partner in Amir's firm. Married to Isaac. Very forthright and sharp. An articulate and confident woman who has wrestled her way to the top.



### ABE

Pakistani American. Amir's nephew. As mainstream American as they come. Becoming somewhat of a young Muslim activist in his community, he is passionate, headstrong, and devout in his beliefs. He loves his uncle and seeks his approval, while at the same time, the two of them are at idealistic odds regarding the Muslim faith.

## IN THE CLASSROOM

1. What's in a name? How do our names contribute to the world's perception of us? Have students explore the origins of their names.
2. The word "taqiyya" (tah-kee-ya) is an Islamic word that refers to the act of concealing one's true religious beliefs in order to prevent death or injury to oneself or other Muslims. Have students cite incidences in the play where characters have intentionally or inadvertently practiced this act.

# **DISGRACED SYNOPSIS**

*Disgraced* is the story of an American-born, Muslim raised Manhattan mergers and acquisitions lawyer and his Caucasian wife Emily who host a dinner party at their Upper East side apartment. Emily is a painter with an affinity for Islamic art. The story is told in four scenes. At the top of the play, Amir's assimilated nephew, Abe (also Pakistani American) arrives at the apartment in the hopes of convincing his uncle to come to the aid of a local imam who has been imprisoned on charges of financing terrorist-supporting groups. Emily convinces her husband to appear in court to support the imam, who Abe believes to be a victim of religious persecution. His appearance (which is reported in the New York Times) becomes a topic of dinner conversation when Amir and Emily host Jory (an African American work colleague at the law firm) and her husband Isaac (a Jewish curator at the Whitney) at their home. Tensions mount, as polite dinner conversation turns into direct confrontations between the four over religion and race. The night becomes more heated when two secrets are revealed: 1. Jory has been made partner at the law firm over Amir (supposedly due to the other partners' suspicions of Amir being duplicitous) and 2. Isaac and Emily have been having an affair. As Charles Isherwood said in his New York Times review, "A howl of rage" ensues. The dinner guests leave the apartment, and Amir brutally beats his wife (a terror that Abe is witness to as he is coming into his uncle's apartment uninvited). In the final scene, six months later, Amir is packing up the apartment (which has been sold) when the now estranged Emily shows up with Abe who is in need of legal advice. Abe and his radical friend Tariq have been stopped by the FBI as a result of their mouthing off and taunting a barista at Starbucks. It is clear that Abe's wide eyed love of America has shifted to radical suspicion as he tells his Uncle that he suspects the FBI is using him as bait to root out terrorist plots. When Amir tells Abe he needs to be smart and not make trouble with the FBI, Abe confronts his Uncle on his lack of loyalty to his "people." With the final words of "they disgraced us. I will handle this myself," Abe storms out of the apartment. Emily admits to Amir that her art was selfishly naive, a testament to her realization that his casting aside his Muslim heritage was a desperate survival mechanism, and she asks him not to contact her again. She leaves, and Amir stares gravely into the image of the painting that we first saw Emily making at the beginning of the play.

## ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT: AYAD AKHTAR

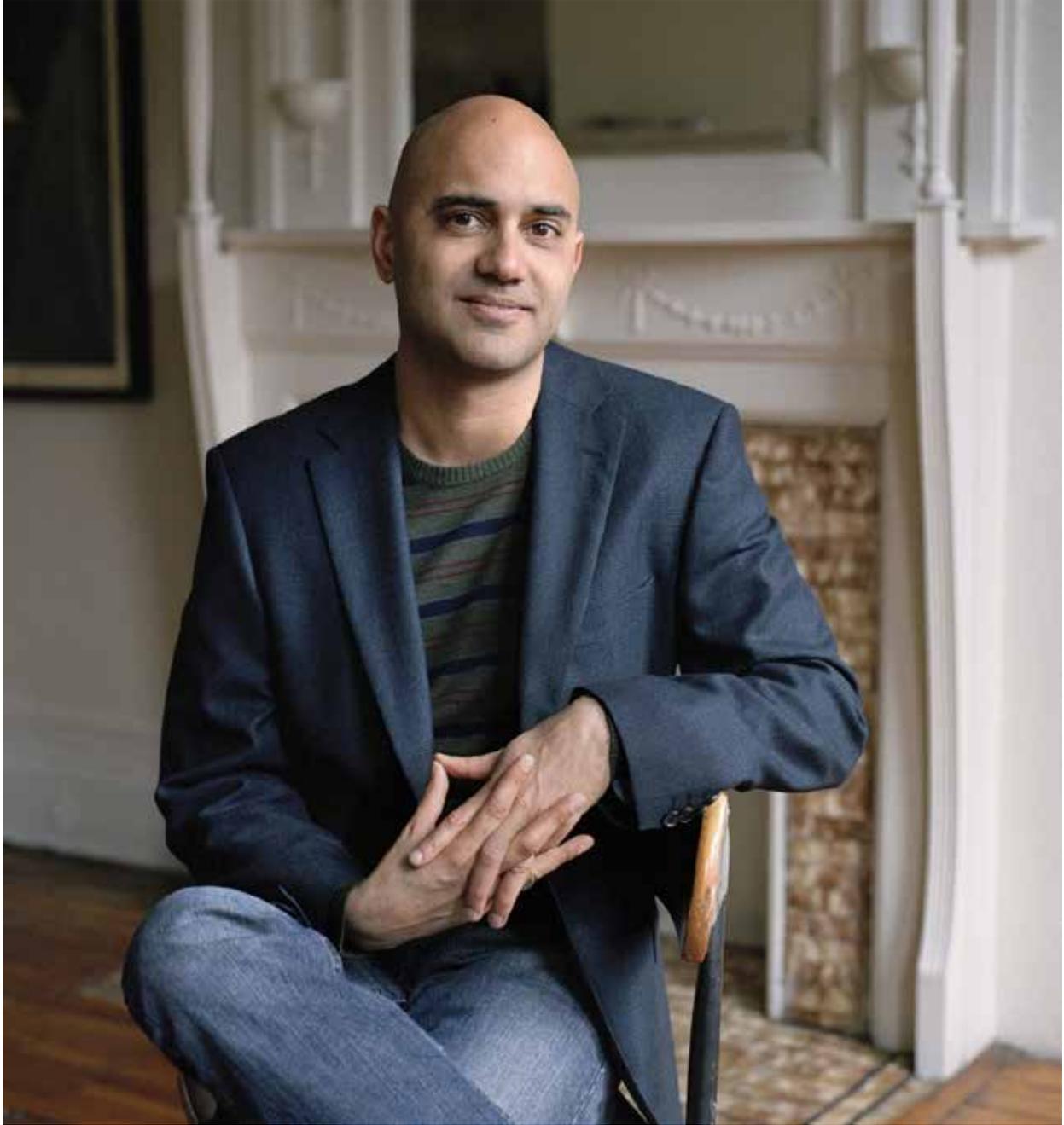


Image by Morgan Moroney

**Ayad Akhtar**'s plays include *Disgraced* (LCT3/Lincoln Center Theater, 2013 Pulitzer Prize for Drama and 2013 Obie Award for Extraordinary Achievement), *The Who & The What* (LCT3/Lincoln Center Theater and La Jolla Playhouse), and *The Invisible Hand* (The Repertory Theater of St. Louis). Also a novelist, Akhtar is the author of *American Dervish*, published in 2012 by Little, Brown and Company, published in 20 languages worldwide. He co-wrote and starred in *The War Within* (Magnolia Pictures), which was released internationally and nominated for an Independent Spirit Award for Best Screenplay. As an actor, Akhtar also starred as Neel Kashkari in HBO's adaptation of Andrew Ross Sorkin's book *Too Big to Fail*. He studied at Brown University and Columbia University's School of the Arts.

# MEET THE DIRECTOR: KIMBERLY SENIOR



Image by Brandon Dahlquist

**Kimberly Senior** is a Chicago based freelance director and the director of the 2013 Pulitzer Prize winning play *Disgraced* by Ayad Akhtar. (Lincoln Center Theatre/LCT3, American Theatre Company). She also directed Akhtar's *The Who and The What* (Lincoln Center Theatre/LCT3). Chicago credits include: *After the Revolution*, *Madagascar*, *The Overwhelming*, and *The Busy World is Hushed* (Next Theatre), *Hedda Gabler*, *The Letters* (Writers Theatre), *4000 Miles*, *The Whipping Man* (Northlight Theatre), *Want*, *The North Plan* (Steppenwolf), *Waiting for Lefty* (American Blues), *Old Times*, *The Conquest of the South Pole*, *Uncle Vanya*, *Cherry Orchard*, *Three Sisters*, *Fuddy Meers*, and *Knives in Hens* (Strawdog), *Cripple of Inishmaan*, *Bug* and *The Pillowman* (Redtwist Theatre), *Thieves Like Us* (The House Theatre), *All My Sons* and *Dolly West's Kitchen* (TimeLine Theatre) among others. Regional: *The Who and The What* (La Jolla Playhouse), *Little Gem* (City Theatre), *Murder on the Nile*, *A Few Good Men* (Peninsula Players), *Mauritius* (Theatre Squared, Fayetteville, AR). Upcoming: *Rapture*, *Blister Burn* (Goodman Theatre), *The Diary of Anne Frank* (Writers' Theatre), *Asher Lev* and *Inana* (TimeLine Theatre) and the upcoming *The Who and The What* (Victory Gardens Theater). She is also a 2013 Finalist for the SDCF Joe A. Callaway Award and Zelda Fichandler Award. Kimberly is an Artistic Associate at Northlight Theatre, Next Theatre, Strawdog Theatre, and Chicago Dramatists. Her work has received multiple Joseph Jefferson nominations. Kimberly lives in Evanston with her husband, scenic designer, Jack Magaw, and her children, Noah and Delaney. Kimberly is a proud member of SDC.

# WORLD OF THE PLAY

## GLOSSARY

### MERGERS AND ACQUISITIONS

The combination of a commercial company, institution, etc., with another; or the consolidation of two or more companies into one.

### PUBLIC DEFENDER

A lawyer or staff of lawyers employed by the government to represent in a criminal action a defendant unable to afford legal assistance.

### IMAM (E-MAM)

As used in the Koran, Imam means leader, symbol, model, ideal, example, revelation, and guide. Historically, the term refers to the religio-political leader of the Muslim community, but for various sectarian and historical reasons the term has been interpreted and applied in different ways throughout Islamic history and into the modern period.

### PATRIOT ACT

This 2001 Act of U.S. Congress, a response to the terrorist attacks of September 11th, dramatically increased law enforcement agencies' abilities to search telephone, e-mail communications, medical, financial, and other records; eased restrictions on foreign intelligence gathering within the United States; expanded the Secretary of the Treasury's authority to regulate financial transactions, particularly those involving foreign individuals and entities; and broadened the freedom of law enforcement and immigration authorities in detaining and deporting immigrants suspected of terrorism-related acts.

### IBN ARABI

Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi is known as one of the world's great spiritual teachers. His work is rooted in the Quran and centers around the thought that each person has a unique path to the truth, which unites all paths in itself.

### MULLA SADRA

An Iranian Islamic philosopher who led the Iranian cultural renaissance in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

### MATISSE

Henri Matisse was a French artist who later in life frequently chose orientalist topics for his paintings.

### INSURANCE ARBITRATION

The settlement of a dispute or question at issue by one to whom the conflicting parties agree to refer their claims in order to obtain an equitable decision.

### MACALLAN

One of the world's most expensive and coveted single-malt scotch whiskeys. Sotheby's once auctioned off a \$460,000 bottle of WWII Macallan scotch.

### "ON THE ROCKS"

Pouring an alcoholic beverage over ice.

### "NEAT"

Pouring an alcoholic beverage in a glass at room temperature with no ice.

### PORT

A sweet wine, most often consumed after dinner with desert.

**SUBLIME**

Of things in nature and art: Affecting the mind with a sense of overwhelming grandeur or irresistible power; calculated to inspire awe, deep reverence, or lofty emotion, by reason of its beauty, vastness, or grandeur.

**MOOR**

Originally: a native or inhabitant of ancient Mauretania, a region of North Africa corresponding to parts of present-day Morocco and Algeria.

Later commonly: a member of a Muslim people of mixed Berber and Arab descent inhabiting north-western Africa (now mainly present-day Mauritania), who in the 8th cent. conquered Spain.

**PATHOS**

A quality which evokes pity, sadness, or tenderness; the power of exciting pity; affecting character or influence.

**THREAD COUNT**

Technically, thread count means the number of threads woven together in a square inch. The higher the thread count, the softer—and more expensive—the fabric.

**CHARVET**

A highly expensive men's wear brand. Typical Charvet shirts cost anywhere from \$400 to \$600.

**SOTHI SIKANDER**

Fictional artist.

**RUMI**

Prolific 13th century Persian poet, jurist, theologian, and mystic. His highly spiritual works have been translated into many languages.

**HANIF SAEED (HAWN-IF SIE-EED)**

Fictional character.

**TALMUD**

A central text of mainstream Judaism. It takes the form of a record of rabbinic discussions pertaining to Jewish law, ethics, philosophy, customs and history.

**ISLAMO-FASCISM**

The advocacy or practice of a form of Islam perceived as authoritarian, intolerant, or extremist; specifically Islamic fundamentalism is regarded in this way.

**MARTIN AMIS (AH-ME)**

British Novelist whose particularly radical views on the Islamic world have gone under heavy fire.

**HENRY KISSINGER**

American Secretary of State from 1973 to 1977 under Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford. He pioneered several controversial foreign policies during his tenure, including the detente with the Soviet Union and the bombing of Cambodia.

**CHORIZO**

A type of pork sausage.

**PAELLA**

A Valencian rice dish.

**Mahmoud Ahmadinajad**

The sixth and current president of the Islamic Republic of Iran. He is criticized in the West for being anti-Semitic and pro-Palestinian in his opinions of Israel.

## **FUNDAMENTALISM**

As pertains to religion: a similarly strict adherence to ancient or fundamental doctrines, with no concessions to modern developments in thought or customs.

## **NETANYAHU**

Benjamin Netanyahu is an Israeli politician and the current Prime Minister of Israel.

## **MUJAHIDEEN**

Term used by Muslims to describe Muslims who struggle in the path of Allah. Recently, this term has been closely associated with radical Islamic militant groups.

## **AL-QAEDA**

Militant Islamist organization founded by Osama bin Laden. Its origins are traceable to the Soviet war in Afghanistan.

## **JIHAD**

A term referring to struggle against those who do not believe in Allah.

## **GOLDMAN SACHS**

A leading global investment banking, securities and management firm.

## **ORIENTALISM**

A term used for the imitation or depiction of Eastern cultures by writers and other artists from the West.

## **LONDON FRIEZE ART FAIR**

One of the world's leading contemporary art fairs that takes place each October in Regent's Park.

## **THE RENAISSANCE**

A new enthusiasm for classical literature, learning, and art which sprang up in Italy near the end of the Middle Ages.

## **JERRY SALTZ**

American art critic and senior art critic/columnist for New York magazine since 2006.

## **THE TATE**

A family of four art galleries that house the UK's national collection of British art.

## **BONNARD**

Pierre Bonnard was a twentieth-century French painter. He preferred to work from memory, and his paintings often had a dream like quality to them. He was a founding member of the avant-gard group, Les Nabis.

## **GHETTO**

A term originally used to describe a part of the city of Venice to which the Jewish community was segregated. This term now refers to a section of a city where because of economic and social pressure, a minority group lives.

# ISLAMIC PRINCIPLES AND CULTURE

## Who is Allah?

Allah is the standard Arabic word for "God" and is used by Arab Christians as well as by Muslims. To a Muslim, Allah is the almighty creator and sustainer of the universe, who is similar to nothing and nothing is comparable to him. The prophet Muhammad was asked by his contemporaries about Allah; the answer came directly from Allah himself in the form of a short chapter of the Quran:

*"In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate. Say (O Muhammad) He is God the One God, the Everlasting Refuge, who has not begotten, nor has been begotten, and equal to Him is not anyone."*

## Who is Muhammad?

Muhammad is the last of the prophets sent by God and he lived in the 7th century. According to Islamic tradition, Muhammad went out into a desert cave to meditate and was visited by the archangel Gabriel, who relayed to him the text of the Koran, thereby making him the author of the Koran.



## The Koran

The Koran, or Quran, is the central religious text of the Islamic faith. It is believed to be the true word of Allah. It is the Final Testament, the culmination of the Old and New Testaments, handed down from the angel Gabriel onto Muhammad over a period of approximately twenty-three years, beginning in 610 CE and concluding in 632 CE, the year of Muhammad's death.

The Koran describes itself as a book of guidance, sometimes offering detailed accounts of specific historical events, and often emphasizing the moral significance of an event over its narrative sequence.

Muslims regard the Koran as the main miracle of Muhammad, the proof of his role as a prophet and the culmination of a series of divine messages sent by Allah. These messages were first revealed to Adam, regarded in Islam as the first prophet, continued with the Scrolls of Abraham, Torah of Moses, the Book of Psalms of David, and the Gospel of Jesus.

# FUNDAMENTAL RELIGIOUS PRINCIPALS

## FIVE PILLARS OF ISLAM

### **Belief (Iman)**

The first Pillar is to testify in Arabic that "There is no god but God and Muhammad is His messenger." This is known as the shahada (sha-HEH-da) or Profession of the Faith. The shahada appears in a variety of ways in daily life. It is proclaimed in the call to prayer and also inscribed on flags and coins.



### **Worship (Salat)**

The second Pillar of Islam is to worship God five times a day: at dawn, noon, mid-afternoon, sunset, and nightfall. To do so, the believer washes according to a particular ritual and prostrates himself or herself on the ground in the direction of Mecca, while reciting certain phrases. This rite takes only a few minutes to perform and can be done anywhere.

In addition to the five daily prayers, all male believers are enjoined to gather on Friday for the noon prayer and listen to a sermon, or a *khutba* in Arabic, delivered by the leader of the community. Due to the different poses practiced in prayer, many Muslims believe men and women should pray separately, removing distraction and allowing complete focus on prayer and Allah.

Video Resources Regarding Salat:

The following web address links to a youtube video explaining the different poses practiced in salat. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cBzAtcFcnVQ&feature=related>

This youtube video documents millions of Muslims praying together in Alexandria on the 27<sup>th</sup> day of Ramadan. It is an excellent example of the power of prayer that Emily discusses during the second scene at dinner. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MooqSi8a5LA&feature=related>

### **Fasting (Sawm)**

Muslims abstain from food, drink, smoking, and sex between sunrise and sunset during the month of Ramadan, the ninth month in the Muslim calendar. Abstinence during Ramadan brings Muslims to greater awareness of God's presence and helps them acknowledge their gratitude for God's provisions in their lives. It serves to heighten a sense of community among believers as Muslims around the world join together in the performance of this ritual. Ramadan starts the moment the eye can distinguish a white thread from a black one, and ends at dusk, when the eye is again no longer able to distinguish the difference. At the end there is a great feast called *Id al-Fitr*, or break-fast feast.

### ***Almsgiving (Zakat)***

The fourth Pillar of Islam is to give alms to the poor. Muslims are to give a fixed percentage of their earnings to charities such as soup kitchens, hospitals, schools, libraries, and mosques.

### ***Pilgrimage (Hajj)***

If physically and mentally able, Muslims must pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in their lifetime during Dhu'l-Hijja, the twelfth month of the Muslim calendar. They must wear a special garment made of two seamless white cloths before entering Mecca. The ceremonies of the pilgrimage are associated with the prophet Abraham and center on the Kaaba, which Muslims believe to be the house that Abraham erected for God. Once going to Mecca they travel to Arafat, a plain some 12 miles east of the city, where the ceremonies culminate on the tenth day of the month in the Feast of the Sacrifices.

## **RELIGIOUS PLACES OF WORSHIP**

### **Mosque**

The Masjid or Mosque is the base and the corner stone for Muslim society and is a place dedicated to the worship of God. Islam emphasizes that congregational prayers should be said in the Mosque. Muslim Mosques or houses of worship are intended not only for the purpose of worship alone, but also serve as the center for various social, cultural, and political activities. There is no special design or structure for a Mosque. Any building erected or used for congregational prayers is a Mosque.



Mosque in Egypt



Mosque in Manhattan

## ROLES OF MUSLIM MALES AND FEMALES

The Koran states that all believers are equal, and only righteous deeds can elevate one person above another. Muslims therefore have an immense respect for righteous and pious men *and* women. Historically, Muslim men and women have served in many capacities—as teachers, doctors, leaders, and even as soldiers in battle when Muslims were under attack.

Islam also recognizes, however, that such equality does not mean that men and women are the same. It notes their different physical and emotional strengths and in view of this, sets out their key roles in life. These roles are not a question of superiority or inferiority, but are intended as a categorization of natural capacity and proper functioning. For example, men have been assigned the duty to work and provide for their family, while women have been assigned the role of motherhood and of looking after the household.

Islam places equal importance on both men and women and also stresses that the roles are neither exclusive nor inflexible. The Koran does not forbid women to work or serve society, nor does it claim that men are exempt from duties or responsibilities to their children or their household.

### **INCLUDED BELOW ARE SEVERAL QUOTES FROM THE KORAN DISCUSSING MALE AND FEMALE ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES IN THE ISLAMIC FAITH.**

“The man, once he reaches the age of puberty, is responsible for performing all salats, fasting, and the performance of Hajj when he is financially and physically able. It is mandatory on him to attend all prayers at the mosque in congregation if he is physically able to do so.” In regards to marriage, the husband has a duty to consort with his wife in an equitable and kind manner for the Koran has commanded kindness towards women.

“Men are the protectors and maintainers of women, because Allah has made one of them to excel the other, and because they spend from their means. Therefore the righteous women are devoutly obedient and guard in the husband’s absence what Allah orders them to guard.”

“One person does not come before the other, one is not superior to the other, and one is not the derivative of the other. A woman is not created for the purpose of a man. Rather, they are both created for the mutual benefit of each other.”

### **The Veil**

The purpose of *hijab* (veiling) in Islam is primarily to inspire modesty in both men and women. In covering the body one shields the heart from impurities. Men are instructed to avert their eyes from women, and women are expected to wear loose outer garments and to cover their heads and bosoms. The veil affords women modesty, respect and dignity and protects her from harm and the evils of society by covering her beauty.

These head coverings come in many shapes and styles, some leaving the face uncovered and some not, though all cover the hair completely. The *burqa* is a variety of veil that covers the head, face and body of a woman from head to toe, allowing her to see from a gauze like material over the eye area. This style of veiling is seen in the Middle East more so than in the West.

# AN ABBREVIATED HISTORY OF THE PARTITION OF PALESTINE

Towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> C, Palestine (then defined as the geographic region between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River) was inhabited mostly by Arab Muslims. At that time most of the Jewish population worldwide lived outside Palestine. There was a Jewish aspiration to return to Zion (Zionist movement) leading to a call for the establishment of a nation state for the Jewish people in Palestine. As a result of the extent of the Zionist enterprises that arose, the Arab population in the Palestine region began protesting against the acquisition of lands by the Jewish population, resulting in the controlling power of the Ottoman Empire authorities banning land sales to foreigners. When the Ottoman Empire joined the Central Powers in WWI, Britain's communications with India were threatened, and it became an aim of the British strategies to conquer Palestine. The British defeated Ottoman Turkish forces in 1917 and occupied Ottoman Syria. The British Mandate for Palestine was a legal commission, administering the Ottoman Empire into two parts- Palestine (to include a national home for the Jewish people, under British rule) and Transjordan (under the rule of the Hashemite family). In 1947, the United Nations proposed a resolution entitled The Partition of Palestine, which divided Palestine into two states, one Jewish, one Arab, with the UN protecting the Jerusalem-Bethlehem area.

# ART HISTORY

## PAINTINGS OF THE BAROQUE PERIOD

The term “baroque” has been used since the 19<sup>th</sup> Century to describe the period in Western European art/music from 1600 to 1750. The Baroque art style is said to have started in Rome before spreading across Europe. It was heavily influenced by the Catholic church and communicated themes of religion, war, and aristocrats (who enjoyed exuberance). The form was quite melodramatic and celebrated monarchy. Stylistically, the art often depicted natural images, steeped in deep emotions. The most renowned painting artist of the Baroque Period is most likely Michelangelo.

**Portrait of Juan de Pareja**



**Currently on display at the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art**

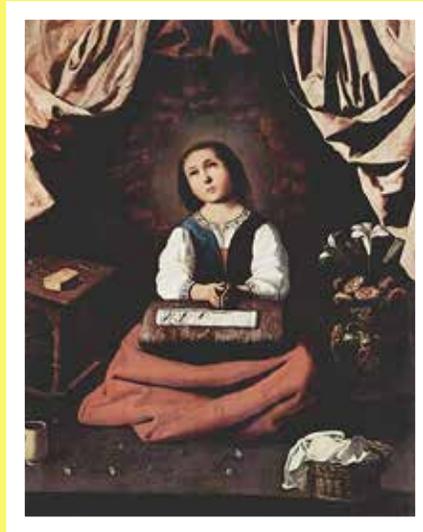
Diego Velazquez was a court painter to Philip IV of Spain and brought the now freed Juan Pareja to Rome with him. During their stay, he painted this portrait of his loyal friend. According to Antonio Palomino’s biography of Velazquez, the painting was applauded for its “truthfulness.” Velazquez was an artist of the Baroque period; he painted many notable European figures. Picasso, Dali, and Francis Bacon have recreated several of his pieces.

Below is a very informative site regarding Velazquez’s relationship with Pareja.

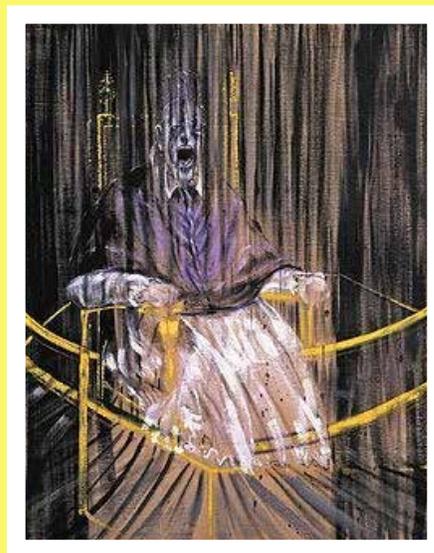
<http://blogcritics.org/culture/article/velzquez-and-the-soul-of-juan/>

## IDEAS IN THE CLASSROOM:

1. A study of the Baroque period
2. An historical overview of Philip IV's reign.
3. A study of impressionistic painting.
4. A look at Picasso, Dali, and Francis Bacon and the works of Velazquez's that they recreated.
5. Study of the religious painters Bartolome Murillos and Francisco Zurbaran (*Young Virgin* below). Have the students write a monologue of the young woman's thoughts.



6. Study the two pictures below (*Portrait of Pope Innocent X*). Notice similarities and differences between Velazquez's original (left) and Bacon's version (right). What was Bacon trying to say with his version? What techniques with the brush made it so? Have students bring in a song to represent the landscape of each photo.



## ISLAMIC ART AND DESIGN

Consistent with the Islamic belief that all creation is harmoniously interrelated, Islamic art explores the geometric systems that depend upon the regular division of the circle. The art has a deep appreciation of geometry. (see below for a Teacher's resource from the V & A Museum):

<http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/t/teachers-resource-maths-and-islamic-art-and-design/>

It has recently been discovered that in Islamic tiling, the patterns were actually made not with the use of a compass and ruler, but by placing different shaped tiles side by side, with no overlap. By the 15<sup>th</sup> C, the system was sophisticated enough such that quite complex patterns were made by irregular patterns.

# SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIALS

## SYMBOLS AND THEMES IN *DISGRACED*

A. Race Identity: This story involves representatives from four different racial communities: An African American woman, a Jewish man, a Caucasian woman, and a Pakistani-American uncle/nephew team.

B. Justice vs. Order

Jory makes a strong case for “when faced with the decision between justice or order, I will always choose order.” Adversely, Emily would always choose justice.

Have students bring in current Newspaper articles where the question of justice or order is at play. In addition, have the classroom stage mock trials exploring these two sides of the coin, using events from the articles.

C. Disgraced as it relates to *Othello*.

There are many comparisons to be made between the Amir/Isaac and Othello/Iago relationships as well as between Amir/Emily and Othello/Desdemona.

Have students read *Othello*. In what way does Iago manipulate his friendship with Othello to achieve what he wants and how is that similar to Isaac’s treatment of Amir in the dinner party scene? Discuss the master/slave relationship between Amir and Emily. If we imagine that Othello’s and Amir’s downfalls become their own doing, and they are not a victims of fate, what parallels can be drawn in the tragic flaws of both Othello and Amir?

# LITERATURE INSPIRATION

*A Peace to end all Peace*, David Fromkin

This book illustrates well how human weaknesses and interpersonal complexities influenced the resolution of WWI in terms of the Middle East. Fromkin makes a valid case that the treaties of 1922 are the current heart of the ongoing conflicts from Gaza to Kabul.

*Orientalism*, Edward W. Said

Said outlines what "Orientalism" is as "a body of ideas, beliefs, clichés, or learning about the East" (205). "Orientalism," during the 1800s and 1900s, was largely based on what many Europeans believed was a division between Occident and Orient, or West and East. The colonialist/imperialist attitude towards the Orient included "second-order Darwinism which seemed to accentuate the 'scientific' validity of the division of races into advanced and backward" (206). People from the Orient were considered subjects. However, a fascination with the East existed. Orientalists' travel literature, which described the great divides between East and West, written by Goethe, Hugo, Lamartine, Flaubert, etc. was particularly popular (99). Perhaps on their bookshelves the wife has some of this old literature from the 1800s. For instance, "Around 60,000 books dealing with the Near Orient were written between 1800 and 1950; there is no remotely comparable figure for Oriental books about the West" (204).

How Europeans at the time viewed the Islamic world was tinted by the Orientalist literature. For example, many "travel" articles told Europeans that "Arabs stress conformity; that Arabs inhabit a shame culture whose 'prestige is based solely on the ability to dominate others; that a shame culture – and therefore Islam itself – makes a virtue of revenge" (48). Glidden says that "the Arab value system demands absolute solidarity within the group, it at the same time encourages among its members a kind of rivalry that is destructive of that very solidarity" (48). As well, that "the Arab need for vengeance overrides everything, otherwise the Arab would feel 'ego-destroying' shame" (49).

The fascination with the East, coupled with the learned judgment from the prominent discourse by famous Orientalists, originated from "the West's contempt for what is familiar and its shivers of delight in – or fear of – novelty" (59). Although "to the Westerner, however, the Oriental was always *like* some aspect of the West" (67), in the writings of the famed Orientalists, Mohammed is always the imposter (familiar, because he pretends to be the Jesus we know) and always the Oriental (alien, because although he is in some ways "like" Jesus, he is after all not like him)" (72). Orientalism, during the 1800s and 1900s, incited paranoia about the dangers of the unknown, the Orient (72). However, the fascination was with a faraway, ancient Orient, not with the current, actual reality. For example, "the 'good' Orient was invariably a classical period somewhere in a long-gone India, whereas the 'bad' Orient lingered in present-day Asia, parts of North Africa, and Islam everywhere" (99). Many Europeans thought that the Orient did not change with time.

As Edward W. Said believes that "Orientalism did a great many things. During its great age in the nineteenth century it produced scholars; it increased the number of languages taught in the West and the quantity of manuscripts edited, translated, and commented on. Yet...Orientalism overrode the Orient" (96). Since World War Two, Orientalism still exists, it just is not called by that name anymore. Still, a fascination in the West exists with the Islamic world, and still a certain level of paranoia is present amongst Europeans and Americans. Furthermore, still in the West, the idea exists that "only the Orientalist can interpret the Orient, the Orient being radically incapable of interpreting itself" (289). Ways that the old Orientalism still exists today can be seen in the media and popular discourse on the Middle East that describes the Middle East as fundamentally different from the West, "which is rational, developed, humane, superior" and that "the Orient is at bottom something either to be feared...or to be controlled" (301).

The female protagonist of the play, despite having great respect for Islamic culture and religion, cannot help but approach the subject through the lens of what Edward W. Said calls "Western Orientalism," due to where she grew up, her education, etc. Therefore, even if she is extremely educated about Islam, she probably learned what she

knows about it through American institutions. Edward W. Said explains that since there is no equivalent of Harvard or Oxford in the Middle East currently, the result is that “Oriental students...still want to come and sit at the feet of American Orientalists, and later to repeat to their local audiences the clichés” of “Orientalist dogmas” (324). In this way, “cultural domination” is present. This is why it seems that the female protagonist, with the best intentions of trying to understand Islam, probably has a somewhat skewed version of what she believes it to be. In terms of the set, I know that the husband is a Muslim Islamophobe; however, perhaps the wife would have some items such as old maps from the 1800s or 1900s or an old Qur’an, that conjure up the idea of a romanticized fascination with a faraway, ancient Middle East.

*Denial of Death*, Ernest Becker

## IN THE CLASSROOM

What do we mean by the idea “fully human?”

What things give our life “significance?”

Looking at the following quotes from Ernest Becker, have students gather 5 at a time and create a physical silent image that fully expresses the ideas below:

“Man cannot endure his own littleness unless he can translate it into meaningfulness on the largest possible level.”

“The irony of man’s condition is that the deepest need is to be free of the anxiety of death and annihilation; but it is life itself which awakens it, and so we must shrink from being fully alive.”

“To live fully is to live with an awareness of the rumble of terror that underlies everything.”

“Civilized society is a hopeful belief and protest that science, money and goods make man count for more than any other animal. In this sense everything that man does is religious and heroic, and yet in danger of being fictitious and fallible.”

“Men are so necessarily mad that not to be mad would amount to another form of madness.”

“What does it mean to be a self-conscious animal? The idea is ludicrous, if it is not monstrous. It means to know that one is food for worms.”

“The best existential analysis of the human condition leads directly into the problems of God and faith.”

“Obviously, all religions fall far short of their own ideal.”

# AN INTERVIEW WITH AYAD AKHTAR

“Notes for the Stage”

Aditi Sriram

Guernica Magazine

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Standing over the stove in a baseball hat and sweatpants, the writer Ayad Akhtar is making chai. It’s the perfect antidote to a misty gray afternoon in solitary central Harlem. Chai is volatile—boiling liquids, agitated tea leaves, stinging spices—but also reassuring, always finally settling into a deep brown. It is a blend of tradition and intuition, mood stirred together with habit. And it tastes different every time.

Akhtar’s tea is strong and sweet. More impressively, it retains its heat for the hour that we discuss his writing, prizes, and current projects. Akhtar began his career in acting and screenwriting, but his debut novel, *American Dervish* (Little, Brown, 2012), turned swaths of post-9/11 American readers on to the pre-9/11 Muslim-American experience. Its narrator, the sensitive, ten-year-old Hayat, tells of his childhood curiosities, in particular the allure of Islam, which he gleans from the mystical stories his beloved aunt tells him each night.

In his play *Disgraced*, which won the Pulitzer Prize in 2013, Akhtar’s protagonist is Amir, a South Asian-American corporate lawyer who has long rejected youthful notions of tradition, religion, and even ethnicity. The play’s five main characters are as distinct as cardamom pods from cloves; thrown into a pot on New York’s Upper East Side, they dance and hiss their opinions. Akhtar, who loves drama because it can be experienced in the body, insists that the play he spent four years writing came to life only when it did for the three hundred strangers sitting in the audience with him. “That’s the beauty and disappointment of the theater,” he says.

It is a big year for Akhtar. His latest dramatic production, *The Who & the What*, began previews at Lincoln Center Theater this past Saturday, and its questions—about faith, identity, contemporary America, the possibility of bridging the divide between one’s heritage and modern life—echo those posed in *Disgraced*. The New York Theater Workshop, whose mission is to promote “aesthetically, thematically, and methodologically diverse” productions, will be showcasing another of his works, *The Invisible Hand*, along with three other plays. It goes up in November, and is the centerpiece of the company’s recently announced 2014/15 season.

It was a rainy Friday afternoon in mid-April when Akhtar and I met at his book-lined apartment, which sits one floor above his office, in Manhattan’s Hamilton Heights. Akhtar believes his work is “reflective of a kid brought up on TV who spent all of college reading Ibsen and Beckett and Shakespeare.” And he gives his characters the same diversity of thought and experience.—*Aditi Sriram for Guernica*

**Guernica:** You are described in various interviews as an actor, screenwriter, author, and playwright. How do you see yourself and the work you do?

**Ayad Akhtar:** I think of myself as a narrative artist. I don't think of myself as a novelist or screenwriter or playwright. All of those modalities of processing and experiencing narrative are obviously very different, and I'm not sure that I prefer any one to the other. I think the novel gives you the opportunity to have a kind of interiority that you can't have in the theater, which is pure exteriority. That pure exteriority, paradoxically, creates a much more heightened interiority for the audience. So if you want to really deeply touch the viewer or the reader, the theater might be the most powerful way to do it. When it's done right, obviously. When it's not done right it's really boring.

I've had very powerful experiences in movies, but seminal experiences in the theater and as a reader of great novels are the things that have marked me most.

**Guernica:** You've described your play *Disgraced* as "deeply American." Would you use that same phrase to describe your upbringing in Milwaukee? You were raised in a secular home, yes?

**Ayad Akhtar:** Basically. My mom is devotional in a sort of traditional, South Asian pre-Zia Ul Haq [the president of Pakistan from 1978 to 1988] way, before Islam became this big thing in Pakistan. [Islam] changed a lot, and became a much more politically and socially visible phenomenon in terms of its performance after Zia. So my parents' generation was not particularly interested in religion per se as an identity marker. They tried to be more like the West. My mom grew up loving Elvis Presley and reading Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald. She had a poster of Johnny Cash on her wall. She was educated by convent nuns. It was a completely different orientation. And my dad has always been particularly uninterested in matters of faith.

**Guernica:** As a kid, were a lot of your friends churchgoing? Did religion come up?

**Ayad Akhtar:** It did. I've always felt a connection to kids who go to church. I think I'm fundamentally a religiously oriented and religiously minded person. It's very easy for me to communicate with people who have that same grounding, that same vocabulary or modality of thinking and expressing themselves. I wouldn't say that I got interested in Christianity, but I certainly was interested in what they said about their experiences and their faith. My exposure to it as a kid in Milwaukee meant that I found a personal meaning in a lot of it, and in the American tradition of people—Jonathan Edwards, Emerson, Reinhold Niebuhr, Paul Tillich—who've been thinking about Christianity in very interesting ways.

**Guernica:** What about Judaism?

**Ayad Akhtar:** My relationship to Jewish artists and writers began when I was very young. It started with Chaim Potok, and in college I discovered Saul Bellow, Philip Roth, Woody Allen, Seinfeld. All of that stuff was hugely influential in helping me think about my experience. There seemed to be so many commonalities; I found myself and my community in those works, oddly.

I think there is a lot of continuity between the Jewish and the Islamic traditions. We know this historically, though

people don't want to talk about that—especially Muslims. There is a common source for both Judaism and Islam, or let's say that Islam finds its source in Judaism. The commonalities of practice and sensibility, ethos and mythos, create a lot of overlap.

## **GROWING UP, THE ONLY PART OF MY IDENTITY THAT MATTERED WAS BEING MUSLIM, AND I KNEW THAT. BEING PAKISTANI WAS NOT AS IMPORTANT AS BEING MUSLIM.**

Post-9/11, the notion of "Muslims" taking on a potential truculence [corresponds to]—although it's different—ways in which Jews were seen pejoratively within dominant Western cultures. Something about the orientation of faith being your identity marker as opposed to nationality or ethnicity. Post-9/11, that is an issue: folks get labeled "Muslim" no matter where they're from. If you are Muslim, then that *is* part of it, but here's the complicating factor for me: growing up, the only part of my identity that mattered was being Muslim, and I knew that. Being Pakistani was not as important as being Muslim. So the black guy whom I met who's a Muslim, I'm much closer to him than the Christian Pakistani guy who is my dad's friend. We have a closer bond. This was innate to me as a kid.

I don't know what it's like to be Jewish, but I suspect there is some aspect of that: being Jewish is the thing that bonds you as opposed to being Jewish from Poland, or Jewish from Hungary.

**Guernica:** But both *Disgraced* and your book *American Dervish* show a very bitter antagonism between the two faiths.

**Ayad Akhtar:** I think *American Dervish* is much more about the confrontation and confluences between Jewish and Islamic stuff, and I think *Disgraced* is much more about the political dimension: the way that the Muslim *Ummah*, or consciousness, has framed the Jewish question post-Israel. So there is an overlap, but also a huge difference, in the two works.

I want to write a sequel to *American Dervish* that will go much deeper into all of this—less the political and more the spiritual, the religio-historical. I imagine Hayat working with a Kabbalistic master in the sequel, somebody who brings him back to Islam. Oddly, he has to find a Jewish master to bring him back to his own faith.

This is the interweave: you can't even think about the Prophet without thinking about the Prophet as a literary meditation on Jewish tropes of prophetology.

The Quran is many different things, and we also have to see the Quran almost as a secondary source commenting on the Old Testament. I was just reading about Moses in both Exodus and Genesis, and in the Quran. There's a precision with which the Quran is quoting the Old Testament, but also transforming certain details: Moses not hiding his arm in his armpit to show a leper's arm, but a healed arm. The Quran *heals* Moses's arm, whereas the Old Testament is very happy to use that sign in the opposite way. There's such a tight-knit connection between the two texts.

John Wansbrough went through the Quran and demonstrated borrowings at the level of locution from Judaic texts. And so, again, we know that that was part of pre-Islamic Arabia. Part of the mythology of the Prophet pre-visitation by Gabriel for the first time is his exposure to Christian holy men and Jewish holy men.

**Guernica:** What do you make of the American preoccupation with memoir and the autobiography? Novelists will write a book in the first person and many readers will think, "That has to have happened to them in real life."

**Ayad Akhtar:** Especially if you're a writer of color or if you're a woman. Because if you fall into either of those categories, you're expected to be writing of your experience. But if you're not, then you can write about anything.

It's always perplexing to me, the ways in which my own autobiography has found its way into my work. And it's often very misleading. I'll take details, and they are working in the opposite way from which they existed in my life. The story begins to have its own demands: I need this, that, and the other, and I could use this thing, but I have to change it. And so that comes into the story, and it has the register of authentic life, and people think, of course, it must have happened exactly like that.

They're going to get confused if they keep reading what I'm working on. They'll think, "How can he be that *and* that? It doesn't make any sense!"

**Guernica:** But *Disgraced* did arise out of an actual dinner party that took place. You saw the potential in that experience.

**Ayad Akhtar:** What I saw, subtly, was the way in which folks' idea of me, even people who knew me very well, changed because I articulated certain things about my experience of being Muslim. And that struck me as an inherently powerful vehicle, or idea, for a story. About three years passed between that dinner party and me even having the thought that I could write it as a play. And when I went back to do that, I had this thought process: OK, here are these characters, and a dinner party, and I remember what we talked about, but I can't have them talk about those things, so what happens if we just put these things into motion? A very early draft of the play was much more talky, and not as driven by backstory, by onstage needs, things that people want from one another. That was something that began to evolve over a very long process.

**I'D SAY FOR THE FIRST TWO AND A HALF YEARS I DIDN'T KNOW WHAT THE PLAY WAS ABOUT. I WAS JUST WRITING, AND AMIR WOULD KEEP TALKING.**

I finished writing *Disgraced* at the beginning of 2009 and it had its first production in 2012, three years later, and I continued to rewrite it through London [in 2013]. So it was basically four years of really, really writing, constantly writing. And I'd say for the first two and a half years I didn't know what the play was about. I was just writing, and Amir would keep talking, and I would keep trying to understand what in god's name he was saying. And it was so strong, and it just kept going, and then I finally got it. But it really took me a whole production to understand that.

**Guernica:** It must have been helpful to have a character yelling at you as you wrote your way into the story. Can you talk more about the workshopping process?

**Ayad Akhtar:** I've been in the theater for most of my life, I just had never written a play. I've written a lot of screenplays, long-form fiction. After I finished *Disgraced*, I actually wrote three other plays back to back, so in eight months, I wrote four plays. And *then* I had the first reading of *Disgraced*. The work that's now coming out all comes from that time, and has all been through workshop, and first production, and I did huge rewrites before we went to Lincoln Center.

I'm still coming to understand my own process as a dramatic writer. But the thing I'm discovering is that there's no substitute for it being on its feet. I could not have imagined the quantum shift in perspective that happens when I'm experiencing the work as embodied by a group of actors, as opposed to imagining it on the screen, on the page. [Seeing it is understanding] its capacity for impact, and understanding what impact means, what action is.

### **I EXPERIENCE THAT STORY FOR THE FIRST TIME WHEN THE AUDIENCE DOES. UP UNTIL THEN, IT'S JUST NOTES TOWARD A STORY.**

**Guernica:** What happens when you see your play come alive, the characters moving and speaking?

**Ayad Akhtar:** I have the experience in my body. My body experiences the work for the first time, and I know when something's missing. I'm like, "Where's this—why did that end there? Oh, because *I* ended it there!" I feel the audience's trajectory. And I'm a very traditional storyteller, it's not like the audience is having radically different experiences of the narrative. They're having one experience, which they like or don't like, or have conflicted feelings about. They're experiencing a thing, which is a story, and I experience that story for the first time when they do. Up until then, it's just notes toward a story. That's the quantum shift that happens for me.

And it's wonderful—my god, it is so wonderful. It's also nerve-racking: I don't really know what I've done, and the first time I'm going to know what I've done is when three hundred people are sitting in the audience watching it with me. "Oh, *that's* what that is...*that's* what the story is... I thought the story was this other thing." It's a beautiful process.

**Guernica:** *American Dervish* ends with "Reading Guide Questions," and *Disgraced* includes your essay "On Reading Plays," as well as an interview about the play at the end. Do you think these contribute to a better understanding of your work?

**Ayad Akhtar:** Here's the problem: we are living in a time when the act of reading is changing. The nature of a reader's attention is changing. The capacity for deep literary engagement is changing. I don't believe that that is a harbinger for a less profound experience with a viewer or a reader, but it means that the terms of that interaction are changing. Enormous prima facie demands on a reader are going to limit, in today's day and age, their capacity

to engage in a multivalent conversation with a work. Folks are not even reading articles on the Internet anymore: you read two sentences, you scan the rest for some opinion or some nugget, and you move on to something else.

I think that the thematic, formal history of the literary form ultimately harkens back to a different political system. That is to say, a feudal order: the aristocratic dispensation of leisure time, the refinements of the self. With the shift from feudal aristocracy to democracy there has been a long process of evolution. I think we're in the throes of a kind of steep, logarithmic shift, and I think that literary forms are losing their capacity to connect people to issues, to the experiences that feel most meaningful to them.

I had a readership, because of *American Dervish*, that I suspected might be interested in *Disgraced*, but I suspected might also not be in the habit of reading plays. And so I wanted to offer some way of conceiving how that experience was going to be different, and what to pay attention to in the process of reading. And then at the end of the play, everyone is always asking me, "What does the play mean?" so I thought, let me offer an interview that talks around what it means, without answering the question, and opens up the possibility for folks to have that conversation on their own.

**Guernica:** Given the guides in your books, do you have a specific person in mind when you write?

**Ayad Akhtar:** No. I've suffered a lot in this business, working as an artist in America. One of the things that I have learned, one of the attainments of the long travails and tribulations, has been, I think, coming to a simpler sense of myself that I think correlates to a simpler sense of others. Something closer to what I now call the simple sense of being human, a sort of Wallace Stevens-esque formulation. I know that I can reach this in the audience, because when they start hearing a story, they wake up in this very clear, simple way. Almost like children. It's the same thing: a child asks, "What's going to happen next?" When they sense that a story is being told to them, they wake up. When they sense that it's not being told anymore, they lose interest. I take this very seriously, because the sacred trust that allows openness is the precondition of the kind of exchange I want to have, the kind of relationship that I want to have. I don't want to test that simple sense of being human. I don't want to transform it.

Arriving at an innate appreciation and capacity to recognize that has been the attainment of my life. I have no interest in problematizing things. So what I am writing to is that simple sense of being human in myself. And if I do that, I *know* that I'm going to do it with others, because it's the same thing: I have it, you have it, everybody in the audience, all the readers, have it. Is everybody going to appreciate it? Maybe not. But that's what I write to. I don't have an ideal reader. I'm trying to reach something simple and, I believe, universal, in every single person.