A Contrarian View: Race, Representation, and Islamophobia in Ayad Akhtar’s Disgraced

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The 2015-16 theatre season represents a first in American theatre history. A play written by a Muslim American playwright of Pakistani heritage will receive more productions nationwide than any other play. In fact, Ayad Akhtar’s *Disgraced* is the first play ever to feature a Muslim protagonist (apostate or otherwise) to have garnered this level of attention and acclaim. From Chicago’s American Theatre Company, to Lincoln Center, to London’s West End, to Broadway, to a Tony nomination, to scheduled productions at over 50 U.S. theatre companies, to an HBO film deal, to foreign language translations, *Disgraced* has become nothing short of an international phenomenon. And yet, the play’s resounding success begs an obvious question: Why is a play that affirms so many popular fears about Muslims the toast of the American theatre season? More specifically, why is that Islamophobes and anti-Muslim bigots are leaving this play feeling validated and vindicated? *You see, that’s exactly how those people are. Even one of their own says so.* Shouldn’t they instead leave feeling challenged and uneasy, knocked out of their comfort zone?

Given the increasing and seemingly never-ending instances of racism and violence directed at Muslims at points throughout the Global North, this forum discusses the politics of representation and recognition in the context of an old, but growing Islamophobia in the Western world, where *Disgraced* is getting produced and recognized.

The protagonist in *Disgraced* is Amir Kapoor, a Muslim-American lawyer climbing the professional ladder in the upper echelons of New York City. Amir, the audience learns quickly, has changed his last name to a “Hindu” one to avoid being linked with Muslims. Early in the play, he clarifies to his more Muslim- and Pakistani-identified nephew, Abe (later Hussein), why he, Amir, will not rise to the defense of a Muslim cleric accused of funding terrorism. In short,, he can’t stand being linked with Muslims or Islam. He explains to Abe this rather aggressive
opposition to Islam through a description of his first schoolboy crush; this is how the exchange goes:

*Amir*: Rivkah was the first girl I ever got up in the morning thinking about. . . She was a looker. Dark hair, dark eyes. Dimples. Perfect white skin.

*Emily [Amir’s white American wife]*: Why didn’t you ever tell me about her?

*Amir*: I didn’t want you to hate my mother. . . (Off Emily’s perplexity) Just wait. . . (Back to Abe.) So Rivkah and I’d gotten to the point where we were trading notes. And one day, my mother found one of the notes.

Of course, it was signed, ‘Rivkah.’

*Rivkah? my mom says. That’s a Jewish name.* (Beat.) I wasn’t clear on what exactly a Jew was at that time, other than that they’d stolen land from the Palestinians, and something about how God hated them more than other people. . .

I couldn’t imagine God could have hated this little girl.

So I tell my mom, *No, she’s not Jewish.*

But she knew the name was Jewish.

*If I ever hear that name in this house again Amir, she said, I’ll break your bones. You will end up with a Jew over my dead body.*

Then she spat in my face.

*Emily*: My God.¹

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*Disgraced*, Scene 1, p. 13.

**FAWZIA**: What does this scene so early in the play signify for you both? I felt tremendous unease seeing it on stage when *Disgraced* had its first—and sold out—NYC production at Lincoln Center in the late fall of 2012 because though I felt the play had something important to say in our contemporary moment, this particular scene felt over the top and quite dangerous.

**NEILESH**: This scene establishes the potentially “heinous” nature of a character like Amir and establishes how he has been “brainwashed” by hateful parents. The stark contrast between Amir’s rigid opposition to Islam (presented as an opposition born out of this nearly ridiculous

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anti-Semitism) and the radical Abe only shows how Amir himself is less complicated than one
would expect out of a highly educated bourgeois gentleman of the West.

JAMIL: One thing that always jumps out at me in the Rivka story—aside from the spitting and
vulgar anti-Semitism of course(!)—is the line about Jews stealing the land from Palestinians. The
positioning of the line, or perhaps the flippancy with which I’ve heard it delivered, acts to conflate
the very legitimate grievances of Palestinians with the hatred and violence that is anti-Semitism. It
trivializes Palestinian suffering as some convenient talking point for Muslim Jew-haters. In my
frame of reference, Muslim criticism of Israel, including criticism of forcible land expropriation, is
grounded in the language of justice and redress, not racist hatred.

Responsible pro-Palestine activists are resolute in their opposition to anti-Semitism. The
violence and humiliation that Palestinians endure under Israeli military occupation gets summarily
erased in one short quip and becomes but a vehicle for revealing the bigotry of the protagonist’s
parents. This sort of offhand anti-Palestinianism serves to reify the entrenched cultural biases that
so many of us have been fighting against for decades. I’ll also add that having married into South
Asian American Islam over nineteen years ago, I have never encountered anti-Semitism within the
community. That’s not to say it doesn’t exist, but the Rivka story feels very contrived and
out-of-context for me. What I have encountered is anti-Black racism.

FAWZIA: I did, nevertheless, think that there were some productive avenues of inquiry opened
up by this scene, but which were unfortunately foreclosed in how the scene and play unfolded.
I’d love to hear your thoughts on that . . .

NEILESH: I think the scene presents a well-orchestrated set-up for a rising dramatic tension, but
it forecloses the opportunity to explore what happens when a relatively familiar character in
Western, metropolitan theatre—the bourgeois man of color (à la Amiri Bakara’s Clay in *Dutchman*)—appears in the shape of a Muslim American man of color, whose South Asian origins are important (adopting a “Hindu” name to hide his Muslim family name, in a manner that briefly hints at the complexity of Muslim politics in South Asia) in post-9/11 U.S. upper-crust Manhattan. The opportunity was right there for an interesting dramatic arc, but was unfortunately obscured in the portrayal of an anti-Semitic mother—just the sort of Muslim that feeds the fears of that upper-crust Manhattan, the very place where the Broadway production was held. The dramatic tension leads to predictable places and the stark contrasts appeal to a reductive version of the conflicts stirring inside the Muslim-American landscape, shaped as it now is by racialization and racism, sexism, and Islamophobia.

The presentation of this issue demonstrates anxiety over the transition between social history (lived experiences and anecdotal narratives that live in the minds of real people) and narrative in a manner that could transcend particularity. As I interpret Ayad’s intentions, his goal was to create a story that transcended these particularities and spoke rather to a modern epic version of the rise and fall of a colonized male subject in a post-colonial, post-9/11 society. It is a Fanon-ian dystopia as a metaphor for the modern world. For Aasif Mandvi, the celebrated actor who performed Amir in the Lincoln Center production, the anti-Semitism did not resonate, nor did it resonate for Fawzia Afzal-Khan.

Ayad vigorously defended his depiction, dismissing critiques as knee-jerk political correctness. But whether resonant or not, it seemed to me to avoid the broader issue posed about whether or not the story touches a transcendent note. In my own reading, I think the depiction of the mother’s anti-Semitism is a caricature of a politics that is odd, given Amir Kapoor’s South
Asian Muslim placement in the world. Pitching him as the product of a deeply intensified and violent anti-Semitism conflates South Asian Muslims with Arab Muslims in the U.S. popular imagination.

As we know very well, tropes about Islam and Muslims in the U.S. in the contemporary age frequently conflate “Muslim” with “Arab,” (and at that, “real bad Arabs”) simplifying and violating the histories and cultures of Muslims throughout the world. The vast majority of Muslims in the world historically and in the present day exist in South and Southeast Asia, and the experiences of South and Southeast Asian Muslims are quite particular to a context of syncretistic identities, minoritization, and a multi-religious cultural landscape. In U.S. theatre, film, and television, South Asians have frequently been cast as Arabs and rarely the other way around (with a few exceptions), yielding a particular asymmetry in the representational reservoir of Muslims in the U.S. imagination. It is hard to find images of specifically South Asian Muslims—qua South Asian and Muslim—and their particular identities, cultures, and livelihoods outside of references to violence and terrorism. Here we have a South Asian Muslim (but hiding behind a “Hindu” name and identity to deflect attention from his Muslimness) and displaying characteristics associated with Arab Muslims, which quite obviously caters to this sort of popular discourse.

That said, the playwright skillfully weaves in Amir’s South Asian existential predicament as a constituent part of the drama, but the anti-Semitism of his upbringing shows a world that the Western metropolitan theatre audience can easily consume, as the inherently (or in this case, secretly) violent Muslim has a long pedigree in U.S. popular culture from cinema, television, and images bombarding the West on a daily basis. Amir’s conflict between a deeply anti-Semitic

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cultural brainwashing and its obverse, a rabid hatred for all things Muslim, simply does not speak to the empirical experiences of our social history of South Asian Muslims. This is noticeable when the character is written to be a South Asian Muslim. Indeed, being a South Asian Muslim is central to the story! Of course, speaking to South Asian Muslims and their particular social history is not necessarily the playwright’s burden, and does not seem to be the playwright’s interest. But the humanity of South Asian Muslims does happen to be a casualty in the play and all of the ensuing discussions and critical reception. The fact that South Asian Muslim experiences are so noticeably left out simultaneously caricatures what could be a political sensibility—a critique of Israel, of Zionism, of settler colonialism, of violence, etc.—but simply presents a Muslim who is, by the character’s own admission in the play, “tribal.”

FAWZIA: True, and yet one could also argue that Disgraced shows each of the characters—a “representative” Jewish male, a WASP woman, and African American woman—as all “tribal” at core. I think what for me was really troubling about the tribalism of the Muslim protagonist was its equation with a desperate desire for “whiteness”—and all that being white symbolizes. Certainly one of the tropes that Disgraced centralizes is the protagonist’s desire of white women. His infatuation moves from Rivkah the Jew to Emily the WASP, and ends well for him with his marriage to the latter and all that this “move up” into rich, white society implies for him in terms of his career and his psychological self-acceptance. It is a mixture of fear and desire for the white woman that has been accepted as the neurotic symptom par excellence of the Black man in a colonized world. Both the trope and its analysis by Fanon, seem to apply rather well to the play.

NEILESH: My critique of the tribalness of Amir, along with all the other characters, is that such banal equivalence of group-think across all “tribes” is unproductive in actually confronting the
nature of power and violence in the world. Are all tribalisms really variants of the same process in our current Islamophobic world condition that is so particularly hostile to migrants, non-citizens, and non-whites in the Global North, and which reproduces the internalized racism learnt by colonial training in the Global South? Pitching tribalism in this way avoids any discussion of the structural violence of Islamophobia today, the ways in which certain types of violence are coded as necessary or acceptable and others not. The play, therefore, to me doesn’t take any sort of interesting stand within what could be a thought-provoking inquiry into the tribalisms of the present day.

JAMIL: It’s worth noting that I have now seen Disgraced twice: the first time in February 2012 during its world premiere run at Chicago’s American Theater Company and the second in October 2015 at Chicago’s Goodman Theatre. I’ve also read the play in its published version. Over the course of the two viewings, my assessment of the play has gone from thoroughly oppositional to something more complicated. In many ways my thinking about Disgraced can be divided into two distinct time periods: Before Goodman and After Goodman. Before the Goodman production, as indicated above, I belonged firmly to the “not a fan” camp. Now I’m conflicted and torn. Maybe that’s the point. Allow me to provide some context.

In our first encounter with the play in 2012 at American Theatre Company, my husband, Malik Gillani, and I attended a Saturday matinee performance that turned out to be the worst theatre going experience either of us can remember. After the performance ended, Malik, who was the only visibly brown person in an otherwise all-white audience, received suspicious, fearful, and contemptuous looks from various white patrons. The antagonistic and not so subtle nature of their stares caused us to quickly exit the theatre and jettison plans to greet colleagues in the cast.
That Akhtar’s play created a climate of racist hostility toward a South Asian, presumably Muslim, male audience member speaks volumes about the play’s subliminal and suggestive impact on the ostensibly “liberal” white racists in attendance that afternoon. Were these individuals projecting onto Malik the same racialized fears affirmed by the play’s protagonist? I’m inclined to think yes.

Today, in the After Goodman phase, while many of my political problems with *Disgraced* remain intact, I’ve seen new possibilities arise. Indeed, the second time around was nothing like the first. We actually found lots to like in the play. Perhaps it was the shock and distress (trauma really) of the first viewing that cleared the way for us to engage a story shaded more in grays than in black and white. This time it felt like an invitation, a springboard to further inquiry, not an abrupt dead end. The unbridled anger and untamed outbursts of that first production had given way to something more complex, more complicated and more open-ended. It had grown into a play riddled with human challenges and desires, self-doubt and discovery, internalized discord and externalized fears. The play was both confident and tormented. And the anti-colonial, anti-imperialist pleas of the protagonist’s nephew, Abe, popped for me in very meaningful and powerful ways. All in all, it was an excellent production of a waiting-to-not-be-problematic play: a dynamic, engaging, beautifully acted, brilliantly directed, intellectual sparring session, rife with ideas—good, bad, and debatable.

And while we’ll never forget the ugliness of the racial profiling that occurred that Saturday afternoon in 2012, nor excuse the play’s culpability in spurring that offense, we’ve arrived at a truce. We’re ready to negotiate with *Disgraced* from a position of moral power. *Disgraced* demands vigilance, scrutiny, interrogation, and rigorous questioning. It should never be let off the hook. Not with all the attention and accolades it’s received and the dozens of productions still in
the pipeline. Hate crimes and discrimination against Muslim Americans continue to rise, the causality for which can be traced largely to representation. Let us never dismiss the seriousness and urgency of this crisis. *Disgraced* is having real impact and that impact needs to be checked and balanced. In its current state it’s still far from inhabiting a counter-narrative.

That said, *Disgraced* does open up discourse on important problems, and that’s what we need to seize upon. The contextual and subtextual layers of the play offer real opportunities, useful opportunities. *Disgraced* can be easily staged as a racist, hateful indictment of Muslims, and no doubt many such stagings lie ahead. I hope they’re resoundingly condemned. But sincere creative teams will mine it for the meditation and window it has the potential to be. Perhaps they’ll find irony and paradox in some of its more egregious elements, and find ways to challenge, undermine, or decenter those moments. Frankly, this play can only be wielded in the hands of truly smart, politically responsible directors and savvy producers who can facilitate public conversations and solicit community input long before and well after the curtain rises. If you’ve committed to this play, then commit to those communities that may be adversely affected by it. Listen, do not lecture. Develop partnerships and strategies. You’re making a statement by producing *Disgraced*. Now build upon that statement for the betterment of us all.

**FAWZIA:** What about the notion that negative reactions to the play lack nuance and sophistication?

**JAMIL:** There’s been a lot of derision and smug condescension directed against those who’ve expressed concerns about this play and, from what I’ve been told, some reckless attempts to “preempt” potential backlash. If you’ve taken offense or felt yourself maligned by *Disgraced*, there’s a high probability you’ve been accused of “lacking sophistication”: 
Clearly you fail to understand all the nuance in the play. You’re too literal/simplistic/reductive. You can’t see nuance. How unsophisticated you are.

Okay. Let’s see. The protagonist spits in the face of a Jew (twice!), professes pride in 9/11, and beats up his white wife. NUANCE! That savage primate is a Muslim!

We theatre makers should be secure enough to receive criticism without needing to insult people’s intelligence or instruct them on how they should feel. Respect trumps paternalism every day of the week. If there’s going to be genuine dialogue about this play then that dialogue has to include Muslim Americans and their allies, including Muslim critics of this play. Not carefully “vetted” or “managed” Muslims, but individuals who critically engage Muslim representation in arts and media. Making authorial arguments (“But the playwright’s a Muslim!”) and assigning Akhtar the role of spokesman (a role I’m sure he doesn’t covet) fails Muslim and non-Muslim audiences alike, and reveals an ignorance of the community’s broad diversity.

FAWZIA: I just reread (after decades!) parts of Black Skin, White Masks and yes, the chapter on “The Man of Color and the White Woman” is highly apropos to this conversation, as is Tayib Salih’s novel, The Season of Migration to the North, which thematizes Fanonian insights into the Black Man through his character Mustafa Sa’eed—whose double in the novel, the narrator, in fact reacts quite differently to the same set of socio-historical factors. Thus, one of the questions I want to pose is whether Disgraced also thematizes the psychosexual conflict of Amir, his internalization of the black man’s “split”—which could simply be a revelation of the psychological symptoms of one possible response to the complex historicity of the present Muslim socius—without endorsing it.

OR does the play and Amir’s character simply become, again in Fanon’s terms, “reactional” and “negational”? Clearly there are “actional” and “affirmative” responses to the
situation in which Muslims today in the West (and elsewhere) find themselves, circumstances not too different from those of the Antillean Black Man (and woman, though her set of neuroses is under-theorized)—of the era of colonization which Fanon is analyzing in his book. It is the “actional” responses that Fanon seeks to validate, so that we (Blacks, Browns/Others/Muslims) can see that “another solution is possible through a restructuring of the world. Does *Disgraced* lead us to think about the need to restructure the world?

**NEILESH:** I think this question should be posed at a broader level about the contemporary geopolitical neo-colonial world order. Querying the role of Muslims in that world order helps us focus the question on who must take primary responsibility for restructuring it, and what that might look like. What lurks behind this question about Muslims—not necessarily a “good” version as opposed to a “bad” one—is a foreclosing of a Muslim that may very well include violence, aggression, alienation, and doubt, but where Islam may not be the only or primary force behind how so many people from South Asia and the Middle East currently experience the United States in the post-9/11 era.

Two prominent thinkers help us work through this condition, one emblematic of post-1858 India, Mohandas Gandhi and his 1908 *Hind Swaraj*, and the other, a contemporary philosopher, Akeel Bilgrami. Gandhi in *Hind Swaraj*, offers a searing and prescient critique of the world order present at his time, that of what he calls “Western civilization”; Bilgrami in his recent work on secularism, shows that the aims and goals inherent in Western notions of progress, and then their supposed cures (Marxism and on the other side, a version of liberal capitalism, embodied by Ayad Akhtar’s most recent play *The Invisible Hand*), are caught up in a tension between the historically unattainable goals of equality and equity on one hand and liberty on the other. Gandhi sought to
navigate through these two poles in his own thought. Bilgrami in his latest *Secularism, Identity, and Enchantment* seeks to situate Gandhi’s own critique in a broader “Radical Enlightenment,” begun by dissenters in the seventeenth century, within the West’s own vision of itself. The question that remains is whether we are imprisoned within an imagination emanating from elsewhere, in the recent breakdown of all possible universalisms, whether we have access to a universalism (such as Islam) when we realize the bankruptcy of certain forms of Eurocentrism, and what our role in this conversation, aesthetics, and art will play toward building a different future.

For every Amir, Abe, Bashir, and Imam Saleem (the first two are characters in Ayad’s *Disgraced*, the latter two in his most recent play, *The Invisible Hand*), eminently recognizable members of the post-9/11 geo-political world order, we have also many other kinds of Muslims in our representational reservoir. Muslims like Abdul Gaffar Khan, the anti-colonial Gandhian activist who saw his non-violence in line with his Islam, or Mohammed Iqbal, the philosopher, critic, the ardent reader of Nietzsche, as well as the man who dreamt up one of the many concepts of Pakistan, or Rokeya Sakhawat Hussein, the early twentieth-century Muslim feminist and author of feminist science fiction story *Sultana’s Dream*.

I could go on and on, but the questions remain: Are these visions of Muslim South Asia, available to us in our imaginations, that will shape the future, as the theatre is poised to do? Does the push toward Hegelian recognition and the devices available to us in the American theatre and its special relationship to the hegemony of the bourgeois form—will these remain vehicles of inclusion without necessarily providing critiques of the structures of violence that enable the bourgeois order? Or rather, to follow Fanon fully, will there be the remaking, and reconstituting of a
selfhood after the colonial wound? This question is activated by the work brought forth by Ayad Akhtar and Aasif Mandvi and the broader communities of Muslim artists working today. Are we going to continue to be shaped by the ghosts of Nirad Chaudhury, the “unknown Indian,” and the dramaturgy of visibility and invisibility in terms recognizable to colonial (and today, metropolitan theatre producing) powers? Are post-colonial people cut off from any alternative imaginations and are those activated by the diverse world of Islam accessible to the theatre of today? I think these sorts of questions need to be posed to any representation of Muslims in our contemporary post-colonial age.

FAWZIA: Those are all very interesting and important historical antecedents to consider when we talk about the representations of Muslims on U.S. Stages today, and I guess I’m still trying to figure out whether Disgraced—which has received the most accolades from Western media and non-Muslim patrons, yet a lot of negative/critical responses from within the larger Muslim American community of audience-goers, specifically Pakistani-Muslim-Americans—thematizes the inner conflict that Fanon explicates so well in Black Skin, White Masks? Or does the play endorse a particularly negative representation of Muslims that simply perpetuates dangerous stereotypes, with Ayad as a Muslim playwright himself performing the role of a kind of latter-day Nirad Choudhury. Thus, not only is his (anti-)hero Amir’s mother an anti-Semite, but deep down, Amir himself is one. We see this when he mimics his mother’s actions at the dinner party in his home by spitting at one of the dinner guests, Isaac, who is—you guessed it—a Jew.

Amir also exhibits atavistic urges for revenge, conquest, and yes, wife-beating, when confronted with the limits of white western liberalism and anti-Muslim prejudice at the hands of his Jewish, Israel-supporting law firm bosses, who pass him over for promotion to partner, giving it,
ironically, to a black woman who is married to Isaac. And when Kapoor finds out his wife has had an affair with Isaac, he beats her. This creates an electrifying moment in the play’s production, when audiences almost inevitably let out a collective “oh my god”—sigh of “recognition”—recognition of the Muslim wife-beater. One could argue that in that instant Kapoor becomes the living avatar of Fanon’s Colonized Black Man, the “savage.” When, as Fanon describes in BSWM, an educated and Europeanized black man (much like Amir Kapoor in Disgraced), discovers that he is in fact, nothing but a “Negro” in the eyes of the white Frenchmen he thought he was like, he, and others like him, are overcome with rage:

furious at this humiliating ostracism, the common mulatto and the black man have only one thought on their mind as they set foot in Europe: to gratify their appetite for white women. Most of them, including those of lighter skin who often go so far as denying both their country and their mother, marry less for love than for the satisfaction of dominating a European woman, spiced with a certain taste for arrogant revenge. (my italics)

Amir Kapoor acts out all of these stereotypes, but the thing that interests me is the degree of self-awareness that Ayad Akhtar exhibits around the postcolonial debates growing out of Fanonian insights into the mind of the colonized Black man who reacts to the inhumanity and arrogance of the white colonizer in an atavistic way. Indeed, Akhtar puts the kind of words into his character Isaac’s mouth that only a careful reader of Fanon could have produced! For instance, here is Isaac telling Amir’s wife Emily, who has been working on a painting depicting her husband as Velasquez’s Moorish slave:

Isaac: He doesn’t understand you. He can’t understand you. He puts you on a pedestal. It’s in your painting. Study After Velasquez. He’s looking out at the viewer—that viewer is you. You painted it. He’s looking at you.

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3 Frantz Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks, Trans. Richard Wilcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008), 51, emphasis mine.
The expression on that face?
Yeah. The pride he was talking about.
The slave finally has the master’s wife.\(^4\)

——Disgraced, Scene 3, p. 61.

Does Disgraced feed these stereotypes (as Isaac’s comments do)—or is it a thematization of the Fanonian “split self” which reveals a colonized subjectivity and, as such, could be seen as a call to challenge and reverse such stereotypes held by those in power in today’s post-colonial, neo-imperialist world, as well as to hold the mirror up to self-hatred in Muslim and other “minority” communities so as to shatter it? I guess I can see all of these possible readings of the play, in play with each other, as it were . . .

JAMIL: In juxtaposing the righteous liberalism of the West with the cruel illiberalism of Islam, and then sealing the deal with misogynistic violence, audiences are fed something familiar, easy, and palatable. If that’s not feeding stereotypes, I don’t know what is. And yet, if I’ve learned anything from discussing this play with other people, it’s how universal my subjectivities are not! I’m even left wondering if my own politics aren’t driving my conclusions—conclusions not nearly as nuanced as some of my more emotional responses to the play. Before Goodman I maintained that Disgraced has clearly identifiable “conversants”: good white liberals who need to feel justified about despising the very Muslims they so desperately want to like. After Goodman, the conversation circle widened and the intended audience became a little less clear.

I have been privy to theories and speculations about Akhtar’s motives for writing Disgraced. Granted, I do not know his motives, and likely never will. The one that gets repeated most often is that Akhtar threw his community under the bus in hopes of gaining mainstream

\(^4\) Akhtar, Disgraced, 61.
approval and acclaim. Perhaps so he could write more honest plays moving forward? The dignity and pride of Muslim Americans would be the price he’d pay to garner fame and establish a platform for himself. Then he’d undo some of his damage down the line (or not). It’s been suggested that in assessing the outlay of power and cultural capital in this country Akhtar embraced the power of Islamophobes over the powerlessness of Muslims, effectively ingratiating himself with the “winning side.” This argument proceeds from the logic that for a Muslim to be accepted by America’s cultural arbiters and pundits, he has to first establish anti-Muslim bonafides. He has to assure us, through his insider knowledge, that all Muslims did indeed celebrate 9/11, assuaging us any guilt for eviscerating Muslim bodies. After that, he’s allowed to be more creative, exercise more artistic license. But it is a conditional acceptance and he knows it. There are limits. A Muslim can be the occasional good guy, but his religion must always be bad.

I personally think that ascribing these motives to Akhtar is cynical, conspiratorial, and mighty ungenerous towards the many artists involved in developing his play. I know several artists who’ve been attached to Disgraced and they are people of absolute integrity. I do not believe that Akhtar set out to align himself, strategically or opportunistically, with anti-Muslim animus. I may disagree strongly with some of his choices, but I’m sure they weren’t made out of malice. By the same token, I can’t dismiss people’s theories and speculations as unrelated to their experiences with the play. They too are people of integrity and many have been hurt by Akhtar’s words. Malik’s experience did not occur in some anecdotal vacuum. His story belongs to the world of Disgraced.

FAWZIA: Yes, absolutely, Malik’s experience is very much part of the affective universe of the play, and must therefore be taken into account in any “nuanced” reading of the play and the
politics of its reception. In that same vein, then, what are we to make of the final scene depicting Amir angrily hitting his wife in an explosion of rage? My son, who took a young white southern woman as his date to see Disgraced in its very recent production in Chapel Hill, NC, expressed to me that sitting beside her when Amir on stage hits his white wife, made him feel extremely tense and awkward, his discomfort at that moment mirroring Malik’s earlier anxiety.

**JAMIL:** Based on what we see of the relationship between Amir and his wife Emily, I just don’t buy it. Admittedly, in sexist, patriarchal societies like the U.S., all men are violent against women in any number of ways. But in the case of this play’s ending, it appears to be feeding more into a racist narrative about Muslim men than making a statement about the accumulated rage of one’s perceived powerlessness or, more generally, men’s contempt for women. There are lots of ways men grapple with betrayal, hurt, anger, rage, and humiliation besides beating up their wives. That scene would be a lot more powerful if Amir were to respond to the deception and injustice in his world without resorting to violence. Ideally, accumulated heartbreak and injury spurs people into action, not fisticuffs. A brown Muslim man beating up a white woman feels like an exhausted trope.

We need plays that explore domestic violence within Muslim communities—we need plays written by survivors—but Disgraced isn’t that play and I wish to God that scene were cut. It’d be a much stronger work. But if he has to hit her, I want her to hit him back. Or break something over his head or kick him in the balls or all three. Then again, she does have the courage to leave him, which is commendable and too seldom the case. If I were tasked with drawing up a wish list, we’d also lose the “Muslims are anti-Semitic” and “Muslims are tribal” conceits. Or at least explore those charges differently. Very differently.
But hey, it’s Akhtar’s play to write, not mine. He’ll decide. The great thing about playwriting is it’s never done until it’s done, and I suspect this play’s still in-progress. I hope it is. Oh, what the hell: Ayad Akhtar, if you’re reading this, please revisit the Rivka story from Amir’s childhood, the “9/11 did me proud” blood libel, and of course, the notorious “now I’m going to beat the shit out of the woman I love” outrage. I’m not asking you to slash and burn, I’m asking you to revisit. Wield your power constructively. Your play’s way too good and way too high profile for such dangerous and incriminating content. Forgive me for overstepping boundaries, but the stakes are far too high not to.

NEILESH: It goes without saying that if the imposed anti-Semitism (Rivka), the 9/11 blood libel, and the wife-beating were cut from the play, the choices and actions facing Amir would be starkly different and possibly would have lessened the cache for the theatres producing this play. It would force the choices to veer into territory that does not only confirm the fears of the dominant liberal Muslim-fearing populace, but into the politics of colonized people.

FAWZIA: Well, then, since the play works on so many levels that reinforce stereotypes of “dangerous brown men” from whom not just brown women, but white women too need rescuing—what should South Asian male actors’ response and responsibility be toward performing in a play which does, paradoxically, offer them juicy roles to inhabit?

NEILESH: Yes, I did ask myself how the extreme recognition of this play—the many American regional theatre productions, the European productions, and the HBO film—affects the already fraught nature of limited opportunities for South Asian and Middle Eastern actors in the United States? On one hand, this development offers high-profile professional opportunities for such actors and on the other hand, limits such opportunities to the caricature of the Muslim (here,
conflated with “bad” Muslims) to satiate the appetite of contemporary Orientalism. Such “opportunities” ultimately set the clock back to times before full critiques were available, before the Clays from Amiri Bakara’s 1964 *Dutchman* and Mustafa Sa’eed’s from Tayeb Salih’s 1966 *Season of Migration to the North*. There was a more global critique of race and colonialism at work in those days. In the present moment, *Disgraced* shows no hope for breaking out of the cage that Muslim men of color are put into, no way for colonized men of color to transcend, fight, or challenge the chains of a racialized and unequal world.

At the risk of beating a horse that is unfortunately not dead, Amir Kapoor demonstrates the lack of power, agency, and subjectivity embodied by a colonized man of color, who can only hope to gain approval from a white woman to mark his assimilated entry into the Western world. Lo and behold, he is ultimately destroyed by it. Of course, Amir is defined partially through Hussein/Abe, and the sorts of politics and visions of the world that Amir is blind to through the youth and vitality of his politically minded nephew. However, the crucial element of this narrative is the rise and fall of Amir. Is the characterization of Amir, this dead-end manifestation of the results of colonialism, an “opportunity” for actors? Rather than seen as an “opportunity,” it should be understood as the historical point at which American theatre finally has a mainstream place for the caricature of the Muslim. Amir Kapoor might as well have been wearing a turban, earrings, and “Oriental” costume underneath his Charvet shirts. As we witness more and more racism and violence directed at Muslims in our present moment—whether in the context of U.S. paranoia, or European paranoia, or the shameful treatment of refugees in Europe and wealthy Gulf states—the story of a Muslim man obsessed with white power, privilege and acceptance only to be destroyed by it does not challenge dominant perceptions of Muslims in the West. As the end of the play
showcases Amir trying to pick up the pieces of his destroyed life, looking outward at the painting of him by Emily, the story only deepens such perceptions.

FAWZIA: Your comments again indicate both the promise and the dead-end this play offers to Muslim audiences and actors with roots in South Asian American communities. And, as Jamil mentioned earlier, one of the reasons we seem so invested in teasing out these issues brought forth by Disgraced is because the stakes really are high on so many levels.

Thus, at another dinner party—much like the one in the play—discussion of Disgraced by a bunch of middle-aged Pakistani-American women representing a variety of professions ranging from medical doctor, to visual artist, to banker, to an arts and culture funder, to theatre academic (myself)—threatened to tear apart friendships as it opened up a rift in our reactions to the play that were viscerally raw around the politics of representation and reception. Where one saw a “brilliant” play that deserves all of the accolades it is getting and more (and just shows how pathetic “Pakis” are because so many of them are critical of it/don’t like it, and don’t seem to understand how impressive and important it is for a writer of Pakistani background to be given such an honor as to receive a Pulitzer etc.) another took umbrage at these comments which she felt showed the speaker’s refusal to acknowledge the very real pain caused by the play’s portrayal of Pakistani Muslim men on those of us raising American-born sons in an increasingly Islamophobic environment.

In a social gathering where generally most people—especially women—are loath to come out strongly against any one point of view for fear of “attacking” or alienating others, this was quite the historic “first” to witness, at least for me. I participated as a kind of latter-day (and secular) Pontius Pilate, yes, this, but also that, seeing/speaking to both sides of the debate...
After all, one of the play’s positive attributes for many of us, especially those who grew up in a progressive Pakistan of the 1960s and ’70s, is that the play situates its politics in opposition to the very real danger posed by Islamism in the country of our birth. Obviously, the failure of the play lies in its conflation of that stance with an Islamophobia that is now rampant against Muslims of Pakistani background (and of South Asian and Arab origin more generally) in our adopted country and the country of our children and grandchildren, the U.S. of A.

Thus, I’d like to conclude by asking both of you—Neilesh, Jamil—whether you think boxing this obviously controversial play into a discussion only of representational accuracy does it justice? What do the different types of audience reactions (including our own mixed responses) reveal about the moment within which performances of plays like Disgraced are unfolding?

NEILESH: I think these discussions reflect a palpable anxiety about how to respond to that gap between a thinly documented social history (the experiences of Muslims in American spaces, though tied to the long history of slavery and Afro-Asian migration to the Americas going back to at least the seventeenth century, is only slowly coming into view) and the available modes of narration—positive, negative, sympathetic, critical, or otherwise positioned vis-a-vis Muslim characters. I think what the concern with representational accuracy does (whether deemed ‘accurate’ or ‘inauthentic’) is to distract theater-goers, scholars, critics, and artists from actually examining what is happening when social history and modes of narration come together. Is there an aspect of Muslim experiences that does transcend these particular debates? If so, what is the basis of these moments of transcendence? American assimilation? Class mobility? The politics of the family? The limits of liberalism? Global capitalism and its discontents?
I think the important insights will emerge when we explore precise follow-ups to Ayad Akhtar’s initial response, which entailed pointing to precedents by Philip Roth for American Jews and The Sopranos for Italian-Americans. The question then remains: are the experiences of Muslim-Americans available for narration in a post-colonial, post-9/11 landscape, the equivalents of Italian-American and Jewish-American experiences of other eras? I don’t have a pre-fabricated answer, but I suspect that once we address this question and ask if the content as well as the form of representing Muslims on stages points us in different directions than the ones we already know, we will have moved beyond a dead-end conversation about “authenticity.”

JAMIL: I believe I may be able to provide some historical hindsight for those of us critical of Disgraced by comparing it to William Friedkin’s 1980 film Cruising. The protagonist of Cruising, played by Al Pacino, is a New York City police officer assigned to investigate a series of murders targeting gay men who frequented leather s/m bars. Its release was protested by gay activists who deemed its portrayal of a gay serial killer, and its depictions of leather sexuality, as an indictment of the gay community. The fear in organized activist circles was that mainstream audiences would assume the film to be representative of all gay men and that it would reinforce long held assumptions about homosexual criminality and pathology. Understandable and justifiable for the time.

After the film’s release there were reports of brutal gay bashings in which perpetrators cited Cruising as their main motivation. So it wasn’t until, I believe, 2013 that I actually watched Cruising, having been convinced decades earlier that the film was virulently anti-gay. Then I watched it again recently, with Disgraced very much in mind. I can’t say I love the film (it certainly has problems) but I do like it, and find aspects of it to be quite fascinating (Al Pacino’s
tangled character, for one, and of course those scenes in the leather bars!). I can appreciate the story for what it is and not feel defensive or threatened that it’s somehow assumed to be my story.

Needless to say, 1980 was a markedly different time for LGBT Americans. Cruising was released in an era when honest, complex, three dimensional portrayals of gay men were virtually nil—not unlike Muslim representation today. Pop culture representation of queer lives was overwhelmingly negative and incriminating. We were to be feared, despised and, at best, ridiculed. The dramatic increase in LGBT representation since 1980 is what allowed me to engage Cruising as simply a story as opposed to the story. Now, 35 years later it is widely assumed in this country (parts of this country?) that queers comprise robustly diverse communities—communities that may even include a few serial killers. This is why I believe Cruising has important parallels to Disgraced.

In an America satiated with Muslim stories and Muslim protagonists, with Muslim heroes and not just villains, Disgraced becomes a well-crafted, telling reflection on self-loathing and internalized racism, the psychological projections of an Islamophobic culture, and Amir Kapoor becomes an intriguing, albeit pitiable, thread in a much larger tapestry. Unfortunately, that’s not the America we’re living in. The difference between Disgraced being the Muslim story engaged by mainstream theatre goers, as opposed to a Muslim story among many, is a difference mainstream theatres should be striving to identify and correct.