

## Re-orienting Orientalism: From Shafik Gabr's What Orientalist Painters Can Teach Us About The Art Of East–West Dialogue to Ayad Akhtar's Disgraced

Re-

orienting Orientalism: From S

hafik Gabr's

*What Orientalist Painters Can Teach Us About The Art Of East–West Dialogue to Ayad Akhtar's Disgraced* by Fawzia Afzal-

Khan *Arab Stages,*

Volume 1, Number 1 (Fall 2014) ©2014 by Martin E. Segal Theatre Center Publications

*Abstract: This paper traces the iterability of Orientalist performativity in a post 9/11 world by looking at the cultural interventions of Egyptian millionaire art-collector Shafik Gabr and the Pulitzer prizewinning play, Disgraced, by Pakistani-American Ayad Akhtar. The paper explores the differences between “orientalism” and “exoticism” to ask whether, how and to what degree liminal positionalities can be productively used to create space for a dialogue between the West and its others, particularly its Muslim agonists.*

*Key words: Orientalism; performativity; Islam; iterability; exoticism*

### **The Iterability of Orientalism: Performing Islam in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century:**

Working with the notion of performativity, which is to say, a subjectivity called forth by and through repeated performance, or what Judith Butler termed “iterability”<sup>[1]</sup> in the realm of gender performance—I will focus on the performativity of the raced, “religiously” subjects of the Muslim world and their circulation within the 9/11 discursive habitat.<sup>[2]</sup>

As Butler has shown, idealized norms of gender can only be provisionally recited/reiterated, thus opening up the possibility, however slim, of transforming and challenging the citational effects and affects of iterable performativity. In this article, I would like to use her analytic insights and methods to trace the Orientalist performativity called forth in the work of Egyptian millionaire and art collector Shafik Gabr, as well as Pakistani-American actor-playwright Ayad Akhtar, dating back in a citational chain to nineteenth-century (and even earlier) European Orientalist art—and ask, to what degree, if any, does their performance of “Muslimness” issue a challenge to previously established Orientalist tropes and stereotypes of the Muslim “barbaric Other.”

I'd like to get provisional answers by first looking at recent critiques of Edward Said's thesis on Orientalism, by a generation of academics who feel Orientalism is, as a term, outdated and provides too narrow a framework of interpretation to be of much theoretical use in today's complex, hybrid, globalized world.

Much recent scholarship has focused on how Orientalist paintings (and painters)—were the product of an open-minded desire to “know the other” in all of his/her reality or truth, without the imposition of any Western biases which postcolonial critics a la Said are too quick to assume, in simplistic error, according to this spate of critics. Thus, for example, the editors of *Interrogating Orientalism*, a book of essays meant to re-habilitate/make productive the concept of Orientalism in Literary Studies, write in their introduction about the Europeans, like Lady Montagu Wortley, Richard Burton, and Lord Byron that:

[They] were not seeking some “Oriental Other” to appropriate or control (as Edward Said has claimed in *Orientalism*). They were doing something much more interesting and complex: they were hybridizing (as Homi Bhabha has defined the concept) and modernizing. In fact, to understand where critical approaches to Orientalism are now, one needs to consider the valuable observation made by Timothy Powell [\[3\]](#)

And the editors go on to cite Powell, who claims that:

It has become clear in recent years . . . that a binary form of analysis that collapses a myriad of distinct culture voices into the overly simplistic category of “Other” defined in relationship to a European “Self” is theoretically problematic. The time has come, therefore, to initiate a new critical epoch, a period of cultural reconstruction in which “identity” is reconfigured in the midst of a multiplicity of cultural influences that more closely resembles what Homi Bhabha has called the “lived perplexity” of people’s lives.[\[4\]](#)

This sounds like a good idea on the face of it (and indeed is hardly a new one)—but it crucially leaves out the problematic of history and the will to power/knowledge inherent in all artistic and scientific endeavors to know the world and ourselves and others in it. Nor does this alternative citationality to Said’s take into account the very iterability of Orientalist discourse that gives it its enduring appeal and hence, its performative power. That is, when looking to the “real” of the performative, what is being overlooked in these decontextualized postmodern “new” (old!) critiques of Orientalism is the Austinian—and later Derridean and Butlerian refinements of Austin, as those of Foucault and Said himself—which show how performatives (and I would most certainly call Orientalist discourse a performative)—do not so much represent the Real as they call into being the Real itself, through the very act of citational iterability, which in turn, depends for its efficacy on certain favorable conditions—what Austin had termed “felicity conditions.” In our day and age, those felicity conditions are produced by the affective environment of 9/11 and its ongoing social and political aftermath. The call for a reconstructive Orientalism, then, is itself an iterative performance called forth by, and complicit in, its own politico-cultural-historical context. Yes, Said’s totalizing claims of Orientalist hegemony need to be questioned to allow for the Butlerian and Bhabhian “interstitial agency” and space of alteration/challenge of the performative, and yet, we must be alert to the modes and functioning of reiterative citationality that delimit and constrain those moments of disruption/difference—nay, even encourage audiences to see that which is “other” from the point of view of the ideologically “normative,” because the supposedly “different” is also ultimately infused with the “sameness” of the hegemonic normative. Indeed, Julia Kuehl[\[5\]](#) in her essay “Exotic Harem Paintings,” wherein she discusses the ways in which women painters of the heyday of Orientalist art (she wishes to call it “exotic” art to signal its difference from Said’s limited and static view of this art and its representational regime as “Orientalist”) in fact challenged the reigning tropes of male Orientalist

painters. Nevertheless, Kuehl too is forced to acknowledge the looping back to the normative references and worldview that these female artists' works shore up in the final analysis. Thus, while Kuehl tells her readers that in the paintings *A Visit* and *A Flute Player*, French female painter of the late nineteenth century, Henriette Browne “debunked then-prevailing cultural and sexual myths about the harem by delibidinizing and domesticating the site, turning it from a primarily phallic into a gynocentric place,”<sup>[6]</sup> Kuehl nevertheless also admits, citing several contemporary reviewers of Browne's paintings, that while the subject matter of Browne's paintings certainly makes an attempt to present the harem space as one of ordinary domestic activities, the painter's aesthetic execution still retains the impression of difference and remoteness. Note how the painter of *A Visit* and *A Flute Player* remains a distant and supposedly objective observer; at no moment does she enter *into* the harem painting or the harem scene: Browne's gaze remains detached in both cases, while she is both a consumer of the scene and an agent of its representation.<sup>[7]</sup>

In maintaining this supposed “objectivity” and realism of painterly style, Browne paradoxically embodies *both* the Orientalist impulse of maintaining the “Us-Them” divide at the expense of the “less civilized others” who are subject to her “objective” and “realist” imperializing/controlling gaze—and maintains the fantasy element of “foreignness” of this other, depicted in ways less than strictly “realist” such as in the wrongful details of depicting the three visitors who listen to the musical performance in *A Visit* as fully clothed in outdoor gear, who, if one were to be ethnographically correct, would, inside the harem drawing-rooms, have relieved themselves of their *yash maks* and *feredges*. However, as Kuehl observes, “Browne's own fantasy and desire to portray an Oriental music scene that differs from an English drawing-room recital seems to have taken the upper hand.”<sup>[8]</sup> The retention of certain elements of fantasy in her paintings, then, underscores the point about performativity I have been making: that even as the concept of iterability (upon which performativity rests)—retains some degree of malleability or changeability over time/space, it ultimately must reiterate itself with a degree of “sameness” from one epoch to another in order to be recognized as a successful performative. Thus, even as she argues for a rehabilitation of the “exotic” in these paintings by Browne, a site or descriptor that Kuehl insists is more amorphous, less rigid and thus more productive than the rigid and binaristic universe of Said's Orientalism, she concludes her essay by stating that:

Despite Browne's historical and verifiable access to an actual Ottoman harem, and despite the documentary realist nature of her paintings, which debunk a number of cultural and gender myths by portraying the harem as domestic and social, she in the end preserves a central cliché about the harem, which is that of its mystery. [For example in] . . . *A Flute Player*: the prominent curtain, which makes up a third of the background behind the musician, remains drawn. The viewers never learn what instills these women's curiosity behind the body of the female slave, and they will never see the curtain open. Browne may have opened the door to the harem and pulled the veils off (some of) its women's faces, revealing some of the harem's mysteries . . . but she refuses to unveil *all* the mysteries that might strip these scenes of their Orientalist or exoticist character.<sup>[9]</sup>

Kuehl is forced to stipulate, therefore, that:

In conclusion we can say that Browne adheres to principles of documentation, but with a discernible nod to the established tradition of so-called Orientalist paintings *and the expected viewer horizon*: the harem's secret must be preserved, and perhaps even a sense of its sensual and

sexual titillation.[\[10\]](#)

### Shafik Gabr's *The Art of East-West Dialogue*:

The evocative phrase “expected viewer horizon” brings us to the question uppermost in my mind that cold December day in 2012 when I managed to get myself invited to attend the symposium to launch Shafik Gabr’s “Art of East-West Dialogue” at a fancy Park Avenue address in Manhattan—after which I was scheduled to attend a sold-out performance of Ayad Akhtar’s play, *Disgraced*, at the Claire Tow Theater of Lincoln Center which later won a Pulitzer, arguably the most prestigious drama award for “new writing” that seeks to honor “a distinguished play by an American author, preferably original in its source and dealing with American life.”[\[11\]](#) What, I asked myself, did audiences of both events/performances think they were going to see and why? What were each of these arguably different “performances,” performatives of?

Obviously, the minute I read the November 30, 2012, quarter-page advertisement in the *New York Times* for the “East-West: Art of Dialogue Symposium”[\[12\]](#) heralded as an “Initiative of the Shafik Gabr Foundation,” I wanted to know who Gabr was, what were the putative aims of his Foundation, and who were the speakers for his symposium. Gabr is an Egyptian national who has amassed millions as chairman and managing director of the Artoc Group for Investment and Development. The glossy pamphlet handed out to audience members of the symposium proclaim him as “a leading Egyptian investor with global reach and a committed philanthropist recognized as one of the world’s premier collectors of Orientalist art.” The same pamphlet describes the Shafik Gabr Foundation’s mission as one to “promote greater mutual understanding between the peoples of the Middle East, Europe and the Americas by fostering dialogue and the exchange of ideas.” The *New York Times* advertisement provided a brief answer to the latter question as well as a breakdown of the event itself. It proclaimed the symposium as a two-part panel discussion, drawing its inspiration from “Orientalist Travel painters,” and to be moderated by Erin Burnett, described as an “expert on international and diplomatic issues.” Panel 1, beginning at 10 am, was entitled “Early Globalists? What the Orientalist travel painters have to teach us today.” Panelists for this first round included Mr. Nayan Chandra, editor of *Yale Global Online* from the Yale Center for the Study of Globalization; Sanford Climans, president of Entertainment Media Ventures; Hussein Fahmy, Egyptian actor and regional goodwill ambassador to the Special Olympics; and Lord Poltimore, deputy chairman of Sotheby’s. Panel 2 entitled “Beyond Government Diplomacy: How Can We Address East-West Challenges and Contribute to Bridge-Building” featured more portentous names such as Sir Graeme Lamb of the Jackson Institute for Global Affairs at Yale and former commander of the UK Field Army at Land Command; Brian Sullivan CNBC co-anchor; Senator John Sununu; Lally Weymouth, senior associate editor of the *Washington Post*; and last but surely not least, Mr. James Zogby, president of the Arab American Institute. Elite educational, media, government, civil society, and art/auction house personalities had been assembled to perform—you guessed it—an encomium on the power of Orientalist art and artists through their talismanic iterations of a great game (still being played to the tune of “The Sun Shall Never Set on Queen Britannia” and her partner-in-crime, “Pax Americana!”)—whose citationality was what we, the audience, had been brought in to witness/participate in, in all of its performative glory. Thus, implicitly citing some of the critics I have outlined in my discussion above, Lord Poltimore (reiteratively peddling Sotheby’s power to acquire and sell high art)—described Eugene Delacroix’s paintings as “exotic” and “authentic” (read: realistic) by virtue of their depiction of “everyday life in North Africa.” Admitting that John Frederick Lewis’s paintings may have exhibited some “colonial overtones,” the good Lord nevertheless advocated that these paintings and

others like them ought to be studied in our primary and secondary schools because of their “storytelling potential” (he did not ask or question what kind of stories about these “other” cultures such paintings might be telling, or from whose point of view)—and also, he went on to proclaim, because these paintings exhibit “such warmth” toward their subject-matter! Mr. Hussein Fahmy, not to be outdone as the willing subject of Orientalist art, immediately followed suit with breathless admiration of “these western painters who went and lived with North Africans, traveling for over 6 weeks . . .”—one understood from this that Mr. Fahmy himself had probably never “gone native” amongst his own people in quite the same way as the Orientalists did. Sir Graeme Lamb then proceeded to offer some reasonably insulting remarks about Arabs in general, stating, utterly without irony, that Churchill knew that “*handling Arabs* is an art, not a science” (emphasis added). Quite obviously, Churchill has remained a heroic figure for the English nobility which had seen better days under his premiership, one hopes, than the present come-down in fortune as evidenced by Sir Lamb’s somewhat disheveled appearance and missing front teeth. The latter lisped in conclusion that the world is formed by “unreasonable people” by which I took it that he meant good old Churchill had failed in his attempt to master the “art of handling Arabs” and hence, we were now in a world overrun by their more unreasonable specimens. Zogby tried to present the most “balanced” commentary on the topic of the day, but as is his usual wont, proved ineffectual. His plea for “better knowledge of the Arab and Muslim world” on the part of largely ignorant Americans was met with a brilliant suggestion by former Senator John Sununu that the need of the day was for “members of Congress to develop the same attributes as Orientalist painters.”

Even if one were to adopt the most generous of approaches to the question of Orientalist performativity here, exchanging a more unstable and hence liberating “exoticist” understanding or labeling for the old, tired, one-dimensional, a-historical trope of Orientalism as Said’s critics claim, it seems rather incontrovertible that the iterability of Orientalism consists in its accessibility (and vice versa) for a diverse audience, in the “expected audience horizon” that references to Orientalist art and other similar tropes invariably open up. Even a glance at the “diverse” audience seated in plush chairs that December 3 morning at 583 Park Ave, NYC, confirms such expectations: from journalists of big and small media houses (I ran into an editor of the *Daily Beast*), to well-heeled matrons of the Upper East Side glitterati wearing expensive pashminas and furs, from curators of small art houses to directors of established museums including the Smithsonian, to board members of philanthropic enterprises such as IRF (International Rescue Fund)—which bring scholars from “troubled areas of the world” for a reprieve to study and write in the West (which has ironically helped make their countries unsafe in the first place!)—to Princess Margaret of Kent sporting one of those god-awful ubiquitous hats of the British royalty. Ultimately the audience was hardly diverse in its class iteration. It represented the elites and wannabes of upper-crust Manhattan society, who seemed only too happy to clap and cheer on every conventional piety mouthed by the speakers, who, in their turn like the painter Henriette Browne discussed earlier, worked to advance an understanding of Orientalism that despite calling itself a historicist revision of Orientalist art, was understandable and palatable to the Lords and Ladies of the audience that were being hailed or interpolated by a representational regime of Orientalism precisely because they have been immersed in the continuing, and therefore ahistorical, iterability for centuries. What is being hailed as “new” or “different” in today’s re-iteration of this label is the fact that the owner/acquirer of Orientalist or “Exotic” art is an Arab man, and as an Arab, is calling on his western and Arab alliance of elite connoisseurs and world movers and shakers, to re-iterate Orientalist art as a pathway to dialogue between East and West—a dialogue, that is, between equals. But of course we all know such projections of equality (the grounds upon which dialogue is predicated)—are the realm of fantasy.

In the case of Mr. Gabr and his East-West Dialogue, what we have is a dialogue between *men* of different ethnicities posited as enemies in a post-9/11 discursive habitat, who are in fact friends and equals by virtue of their similar access to the neoliberal world of wealth, privilege, power, where, to maintain the façade of change and increasing equality of opportunity and access, they must scratch each others' backs, preferably in the presence and full frontal view of women—mostly white, upper-class women at that, but with a requisite sprinkling of brown wannabes in fancy dress and hats to bring in the element of “difference” that is part of a successful performative. Interestingly, I do not recall a single black presence in a 500-strong audience.

### **Ayad Akhtar's *Disgraced*: Orientalist Exoticism?**

And this brings us to the final example of Orientalism (or is it Exoticism?) Reiterated, the Pulitzer prize-winning play *Disgraced*, by Pakistani-American Ayad Akhtar. If we grant with Thevoz, that, “exotic representation [is] a constant negotiation between the modalities of ethnographic documentation on the one hand, and fantasy on the other”<sup>[13]</sup> then certainly Akhtar's play and its reception, both by some of the main actors (whom I interviewed informally after a performance)—as well as a handful of audience members whom I questioned similarly, would suggest the combative terrain of the play itself as a useful site for the citing and re-citing of Orientalist tropes with a difference. These comments ranged from several of the actors stating they thought the play exposed all of the characters equally as “tribal-minded” in the final analysis, to a group of South Asian audience members (male and female) saying they saw the main theme as a self-loathing that bubbles beneath the surface of the most cosmopolitan of liberal Muslims . . . which bothered a few of them though it also felt “true” to them; to a couple of liberal white women from Dartmouth who felt the play catered to stereotypes of Muslims. Thus, the liminal or border space opened up between the ethnographic impulse for “authentic” documentation of a multiracial and multi as well as anti-religious post 9/11 American “reality,” rubs up uncomfortably against not just the fantasy of the white and black, Christian/Jewish/atheist/secular characters of the play toward the Muslim(s) in their midst—but, more importantly perhaps, against the self-Orientalizing fantasy that the main character, a Muslim who has changed his name to the Indian/Hindu moniker, Amir Kapoor, succumbs to, with tragic effect. I would say that his character's final come-uppance (or downfall)—ultimately reiterates and in the process reifies a white, western, Judeo-Christian fantasy: the iconic image of the Moorish slave, a “Morisco” named Juan de Pareja, who was painted by Velasquez in the sixteenth century, and later freed by his erstwhile master. Kapoor's wife, an upper-class “liberal” white woman who is an ambitious painter, is painting a portrait of her husband Amir based on Velasquez' portrait of his slave—but, with a difference: her husband is a well-clad (he wears cotton shirts with a ridiculous thread count—“Charvets” costing \$600 a pop, she says proudly at one moment during the dinner-party scene in the play), well-heeled, lawyer on the make in a New York law firm specializing in—what else—mergers and acquisitions. Scholars Freller and Herget remind us of the historical context that brought forth the performative of the Morisco as a “suspicious subject” of Spain:

When on the 2 of January 1492, the last Moorish ruler of Granada, Boabdil, surrendered the city to the *reyes catolicos* Isabella and Fernando, the so-called *Reconquista* had come to an end in Spain. The problems of integration and identity of the remaining Moorish communities in Spain—especially in the country of Andalusia and the region of Valencia- remained unsolved . . . , under the reign of Philip II, the situation of the Moriscos, as the newly Christianized Muslims living in Spain became known, created conflicts and tension. This in turn, gave way to a period fraught with psychological undertones, fear and enmity. As several recent studies have made clear, a person recognized as “Morisco” at the height of this obsession with *limpieza di sangre*

(“purity of blood”) during the second half of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth century [the time of Velasquez and of Kings Philip III and IV], meant the exclusion from all military and many of the religious orders, from the prime positions within the state bureaucracy and from all university colleges.[\[14\]](#)

Like the Orientalist painters that scholars like Kuehl would have us refer to as painters of the “Exotic”—Velasquez became famous for his “realism” especially after painting this portrait—where details of physiognomy and clean but battered clothing (befitting a servant/slave’s station)—were praised by the most important European painters of the day as “exhibiting an impressive economy of brushwork” and according to the gallery label at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City where the picture hangs, this portrait of the Moor “gained such universal applause that in the opinion of all the painters of the different nations *everything else seemed like painting but this alone like truth*” (my emphasis).

[John Ruskin](#) has said of him that “everything Velazquez does may be taken as absolutely right by the student.”[\[15\]](#) One might argue that Velasquez’s famous portrait of Juan de Pareja oscillates between a realistic exterior of a Man, a Moorish slave to be precise—who is painted in a dignified manner, with a demeanor that looks at the audience in a straight-up honest fashion, and thus at one level could be meant to destabilize the fantasy stereotypes of unkempt, dirty and untrustworthy Moors—while simultaneously reactivating another level of “truth” that is beholden to the realm of a white, western Christian power fantasy of Empire. The iterative traces of a previous phantasmagorical painting Velasquez created in 1627 cannot be erased from this latter “realist” portrait. That earlier painting, which was destroyed in a fire in the palace in 1734, won him the competition that set his career as a court painter in motion. The subject of the competition set by King Philip had been the expulsion of the Moors from Spain. Recorded descriptions of Velasquez’s prize-winning painting say that it depicted Phillip III pointing with his baton to a crowd of men and women driven off under charge of soldiers, while the female personification of Spain sits in calm repose.[\[16\]](#)

It is this same oscillating world view, a feeling of being caught between competing ideologies and that in-between space of an orientalist exoticism or exotic orientalism, which permeates *Disgraced* and causes at least two different kinds of reviewer responses. On the one hand, according to a review in *Variety*, “Playwright Ayad Akhtar really sticks it to upper-class liberals in *Disgraced*, his blistering social drama about the racial prejudices that secretly persist in progressive cultural circles”[\[17\]](#). On the other, Charles Isherwood writing for the *New York Times* notes,

In dialogue that bristles with wit and intelligence, Mr. Akhtar, a novelist and screenwriter, puts contemporary attitudes toward religion under a microscope, *revealing how tenuous self-image can be for people born into one way of being who have embraced another...and what will ultimately tear apart at least one of the relationships in the play — is who they really are and what they stand for, once the veneer of civilized achievement has been scraped away to reveal more atavistic urges.*[\[18\]](#)

Thus, the *Variety* reviewer sees the play—and playwright—as “sticking it to upper class liberals”[\[19\]](#)—in which circle he presumably does not include the Johnny-Come-Lately Mr. Amir Kapoor or his nephew-turned-fundo, but focuses rather (and sees the play as focusing its ire)—on the other three characters,

Kapoor's white upper-class artist wife, Emily, a snooty art curator named Isaac who is Jewish, and his African-American "bougie" wife, a competitive colleague of Amir's at the swanky Manhattan law firm he works at. Isherwood, on the other hand, sees the play's animus as directed against the Muslim male at the center of the quadrangle. The "one relationship" that Isherwood sees as "torn asunder" most obviously is that between Amir and his waspy wife Emily, and when Isherwood states the cause as a "scraping away" of a "veneer" of "civilized achievement" which "reveals" "atavistic urges" denizens[20]—one is put in mind immediately of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, where all of the achievements of western civilization are under continuing threat of extinction by the forces of darkness, those savage urges of primal man located in the black jungles of Africa and its primitive. Clearly, the most obvious example in the play, of someone whose "self-image" is tenuous because he was "born into one way of being"—that of the Muslim brown man from Pakistan—and who has "embraced another" mode of being—one where he is hell-bent to distance himself from his "atavistic" past and enter the rarefied and aspirational realms of white, upper-class, "civilized" America—is Amir.[21] The play reverses the nineteenth century Conradian journey of the civilized white man into the jungles of Africa, where he turns into the worst of the savages he encounters whilst taking a black woman as his mistress—to a contemporary fable where the black (or brown) man comes to the Heart of Civilization in the twentieth century—New York City—to achieve the glories of a well-heeled "civilized" life in the West, acquiring his white "trophy" wife to cement his virile success. In the process, it isn't he who turns into a likeness of those he aspires to—rather, he exposes the darkness lurking in their hearts—but ultimately, this being the USA and not the Congo (or Pakistan)—civilized norms prevail for the three "natives" (white/black/Christian/Jewish), who were "born" (or at least "bred" from an early age), into their proper "classed" roles which subsume/smooth over presumed differences of race, gender, ethnicity and religion, whereas poor Amir regresses back into the savage he always/already was. And of course the savagery has a gendered/sexual dimension, or the Orientalist trope would not be complete. Upon learning that his wife has had an affair with Isaac, he exhibits the Moor's innate and uncontrollable jealousy (think *Othello*[22])—and all the lovey-dovey cooing and gentle bickering with the wife earlier in the play, gives way later to rage expressed in a symbolic slap across Emily's face, followed by some vicious kicking thrown in for extra measure as Emily writhes on the floor of their sophisticated living room. This being twenty-first-century Manhattan and Emily a twenty-first-century, modern woman with means of her own—rather than sixteenth-century Venice or—which amounts to the same thing in the play, twenty-first-century Pakistan—she leaves rather than wait to be disfigured or killed by the jealous Muslim male now giving full reign to his long-repressed savage instincts that, as he himself has reminded his wife and dinner guests earlier—are sanctioned by the Qur'an. In this interpretation of an (in)famous Qur'anic verse, he had ironically been challenged by the same wife who is now the victim of his abuse. The scene where the play enacts the thin and essentially non-negotiable difference between the exotic and the Orientalist is the final one which collapses into the sameness of a recognizable iterative performativity: that of the slave/Moor/Muslim gazing forlornly as his white mistress/wife slips, like the civilization she represents, always and already beyond his grasp. As he is packing up his belongings to move out of the apartment they had once shared, and listening to the story of harassment by the FBI of his nephew who had changed his name from Hussein Malik to Abe Jensen to "fit in" at the play's beginning, and now has re-embraced his Muslim identity by changing his name back again to Hussein and donning a Kufi (skull) cap—Amir's ex-wife shows up. She is there to hand him the Portrait she had been painting of him in the opening scene of the play. What exactly is she "returning" to Amir here?

At the conclusion of the ill-fated dinner scene when all civilizational masks had fallen off, and everyone's prejudices and uglinesses had been revealed, the ugliest and most atavistic of all interior

spaces to be denuded was most clearly Amir's. Echoing the sentiments of Pakistani author Mohsin Hamid's protagonist in his Booker Prize short-listed novel, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Amir at that turning point in the play had triumphantly admitted to feeling a sense of "pride" with other co-religionists on 9/11 when the Twin Towers were hit. After such an admission—no matter that he immediately says he felt horrified by feeling this way—there is no redemptive possibility for Amir. When he leaves the party to get a bottle of wine with Jory (his African-American colleague and wife of art curator Isaac), to celebrate the news that his own wife has made it into Isaac's show at the Whitney (after Emily has taken him into the kitchen apparently to admonish him for his bad behavior thus far)—Isaac, left alone with Emily, reminds her of their affair in London, which she then proceeds to insist was a mistake. To this, Isaac's response is that it is her marriage to Amir that is a mistake. After telling Emily that her husband "doesn't understand you," Isaac claims that it is clear from the expression Amir wears in her portrait of him that "he is looking at you . . . [with an] expression [of] . . . shame, anger, pride: the slave finally has the master's wife." When Emily protests weakly at this interpretation of her portrait and Amir's gaze in it, Isaac continues, "A man like that . . . you will cheat on him again . . . and then you will leave him."<sup>[23]</sup>

Arguably what Emily is then "returning" to Amir in the sad, final scene, after the dinner party has ended in catastrophe, in the apartment where he now stands alone, humiliated, and shorn of all of his "civilizational" achievements and aspirations, pleading with her, "I just want you to be proud . . . proud that you were with me . . ."—is that "gaze" which Isaac had described as a slave's gaze combining shame, anger, and pride at finally "owning" the master's wife. If Malek Alloula by writing his *Colonial Harem* claimed that the work of postcolonial critics like himself, following Said, was a belated "returning" of the colonial photographers' Orientalist "gaze" back to the colonizers who tried to colonize and appropriate the lands and the women of the Muslim lands they conquered through their phantasmic portraits of native women (Algerian women in Alloula's case)—then Emily, in a classic double-reversal of the postcolonial returning of the master's gaze, is re-turning the Imperial gaze back on its "subject," and thus re-iterating the Orientalist performative: You, O Slave, will never "own" me, so take back that look of pride, anger, resentment with which you foolishly thought you could lay claim to my domain.<sup>[24]</sup>

If the "exotic" is indeed the space where Orientalist clichés and their attendant power plays can be recuperated through an opening of, and negotiation between, cognitive and affective borders separating the desire to document reality from the realm of reproductive fantasy in Occidental art and culture—then one can see how *Disgraced* does try to work within such a liminal space, to keep the possibility of such a negotiation open. To the degree that the play succeeds in doing so, marks it as a space for postcolonial agency where the "idealized norms" (the affective realm of fantasy/imagination) that defines *both* the common understanding of "Western civilization" *and* "Muslim irrationality and atavism"—are being re-worked, or reiterated/cited/altered "with a difference" (the space of the artist's cognitive desire to document what s/he actually "sees"). Here we can (re)cite examples from the dinner-party scene where the four respectively black, white, and brown, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim characters—all supposedly similarly "liberal" are stripped figuratively naked to reveal their essential "human core" which is tribal, primitive, and dark in its fidelity to irrational norms defining "Us" and "Them." Idealized norms of behavior associated with the culturally "superior" liberal West are shattered to reveal the racism and tribal allegiances of the three Western characters. Even Jory, the black woman, closes ranks with "her kind" (i.e. the other "truly" and "authentically" Western characters, despite being a member of a racial minority with a long history of discrimination dating back to slavery, because in accord with her class position now, she has become a member of the white ruling class). Yet, while earlier in the play we are shown how Amir, in his cosmopolitan outlook, his rejection of the anti-Semitism of his mother and other

undesirable allegiances of the Muslim community from whence he hails, and through his marriage to a white woman of another faith, his drinking, and his eating of pork with great relish—signifies a character whose outlook and behavior challenge the Orientalist trope of the atavistic “Muslim Moor” (after all, by wearing 600-thread-count shirts costing \$600 apiece he is clearly nothing like the Moorish slave of Velasquez’s portrait)—yet, in the dinner party-scene, Akhtar’s desire to challenge the Orientalism of the Occidental masters gives way to a disturbing self-Orientalizing by showing us the “reality” beneath the “vener of civilization” as theatre critic Isherwood had put it. When Amir proclaims to his shocked wife and guests that he felt proud “we were winning” when the Twin Towers were attacked by people he had been at pains to distance himself from up to this point in the play, such an impulse is, as he goes on to admit, “tribal . . . it’s in the bones.” Like the suspicious Moors of Spain he has become “Christianized” only on the surface—at his core, he remains a savage, waiting to bite the hand that feeds him.

When I conducted informal interviews with Aasif Mandvi, Heidi Ambruster, and Karen Pittman, who played Amir, Emily, and Jory respectively, they each claimed that the “tribalism” to which Amir admits is actually exhibited by all of the characters in the play. The black woman said to me that she felt African-Americans were too tied to the narrative of victimhood and racial allegiance—which is why she had opted to bring up her kids as “global citizens”—and to not over-identify with their “blackness” because such identity formations lead to tribalism. Each of these actors—and this sentiment was also echoed by some of the audience members I randomly sampled—felt that the play did not repeat Orientalist clichés about Muslims or Islam; rather, it revealed how we are all at bottom “tribal” creatures—including the so-called “civilized” West. Others however, felt that the play did recycle problematic dichotomies between an “Us” and a “Them” and that the self-hatred of Amir was disturbing. Most South Asians I interviewed did feel that Akhtar had documented the reality of what many Muslims had to struggle with in post 9/11 America—especially the suspicion with which Muslims are now routinely regarded in the US by law-enforcement agencies as well as by ostensibly “liberal” Americans. Many seemed thrilled—echoing the *Variety* drama critic—at what they saw as an expose of Western liberals “vener” of self-righteous “civilization” which is so quick to revert to its own form of atavism against the “other” in its midst—who of course remains “other” no matter what.

Perhaps then, Akhtar’s play, inhabits—and thus instantiates—that liminal space of the Exotic rather than the merely Orientalist, where the gesture of Emily returning the portrait to its rightful owner, Amir—the Moor/the freed Slave/the Muslim protagonist and antagonist of the play—becomes both a gesture of Western re-Orientalism, as well as one that questions its own iterability and the power which such a performative gesture reenacts. This is the space between an atonement for her own, admittedly “naïve,” and unwittingly imperial/colonizing gesture of painting a Velasquez-type portrait of her erstwhile husband (wearing a shirt and tie “above,” but only boxers “below”!), and one where the (un)willingly-coerced native subject of her fantasy might reassert his truth. What that truth might look like awaits a different iteration.[\[25\]](#)

---

*Fawzia Afzal-Khan is professor of English, director of the Women and Gender Studies Program at Montclair State University, and a University Distinguished Scholar. She has published extensively on postcolonial feminism, Muslim women, performance, and politics, with a particular focus on Pakistan. She is author of Cultural Imperialism: Genre and Ideology in the Indo-English Novel (Penn State Press 1993), A Critical Stage: The Role of Secular Alternative Theatre in Pakistan (Seagull Press, 2005), co-*

editor of *The Pre-Occupation of Postcolonial Studies* (Duke University Press, 2000), and editor of *Shattering the Stereotypes: Muslim Women Speak Out* (Interlink Books 2005). Her memoir, *Lahore with Love: Growing Up With Girlfriends Pakistani Style* was published by Syracuse University Press in 2010. Afzal-Khan is a trained vocalist in North Indian Classical music, a published playwright in the pages of *TDR* (The Drama Review), a poet, and has worked as actor and singer for Ajoka Theatre Troupe of Pakistan, as well as with the experimental theatre collective *Compagnie Faim de Siècle* of which she was one of the founding members. She serves as contributing editor to *TDR* (The Drama Review) and is founding chair of the South Asian Feminist Caucus of NWSA (The National Women's Studies Association of North America), where she also serves as a member of the Governing Council. She is currently working as creative director, scholar, and producer on a documentary film about Pakistani female singers, for which she won a development grant from the National Endowment of the Humanities in 2011. She has won a Fulbright award to continue research on her book on Pakistani Female Singers as well as to help Kinnaird College for Women, Lahore, set up their Women and Gender Studies Program.

---

[1] Butler, Judith. 1993. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*. London: Routledge.

[2] I would like to acknowledge Graduate Student and Adjunct Instructor of English at Montclair State University, Kyle Kovacs, for his invaluable help in preparing this manuscript for publication.

[3] Hoeveler, Diane Long and Jeffrey Cass, eds. 2006. *Interrogating Orientalism: Contextual Practices and Pedagogical Approaches*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press.

[4] Ibid

[5] Kuehl, Julia. 2011. "Exotic Harem Paintings: Gender, Documentation, and Imagination." *Frontiers* 32, no. 2: 31-63.

[6] Ibid 38

[7] Ibid 40

[8] Ibid 43

[9] Ibid 43

[10] Ibid 43

[11] Trueman, Matt. 2013. "Pulitzer Prize for 2013 Won By Ayad Akhtar's Disgraced." *The Guardian*, June 23, web. : <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2013/apr/16/pulitzer-prize-drama-2013-disgraced>

[12] "East-West: Art of Dialogue Symposium." *New York Times*, November 30, 2012, sec. A 18.

[13] Kuehl, Julia. 2011. "Exotic Harem Paintings: Gender, Documentation, and Imagination." *Frontiers* 32, no. 2: 33.

[14] Freller, Thomas and Stephan Hegret. 1999. "The Morisco and Hispano-Arabic Culture and Malta. Some Highlights On Late Medieval and Early Modern Links." *Meah, Seccion Arabe-Islam* 48: 105-120. <http://digibug.ugr.es/bitstream/10481/2443/1/Freller.99.pdf>

[15] Soy lent Communications. 2014. "Diego Velasquez." NNDB. <http://www.nndb.com/people/913/000071700/>

[16] Johnson, Bruce and Bobbie. 2013. "Diego Rodriguez de Silva Velazquez." [http://hoocher.com/Diego\\_Velazquez/Diego\\_Velazquez.htm](http://hoocher.com/Diego_Velazquez/Diego_Velazquez.htm) (accessed June 24, 2013).

[17] Stasio, Marilyn. 2012. "Review: 'Disgraced.'" *Variety*, October 23. <http://variety.com/2012/legit/reviews/disgraced-1117948621/>

[18] Isherwood, Charles. 2012. "Beware Dinner Talk on Identity and Islam: 'Disgraced,' by Ayad Akhtar, with Aasif Mandvi." *New York Times* October 23. [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/23/theater/reviews/disgraced-by-ayad-akhtar-with-aasif-mandvi.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/23/theater/reviews/disgraced-by-ayad-akhtar-with-aasif-mandvi.html?_r=0) Emphasis

[19] Stasio, Marilyn. 2012. "Review: 'Disgraced.'" *Variety*, October 23. <http://variety.com/2012/legit/reviews/disgraced-1117948621/>

[20] Isherwood, Charles. 2012. "Beware Dinner Talk on Identity and Islam: 'Disgraced,' by Ayad Akhtar, with Aasif Mandvi." *New York Times* October 23. [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/23/theater/reviews/disgraced-by-ayad-akhtar-with-aasif-mandvi.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/23/theater/reviews/disgraced-by-ayad-akhtar-with-aasif-mandvi.html?_r=0) Emphasis

[21] Conrad, Joseph. 1990. *The Heart of Darkness*. Mineola, NY: Dover Thrift.

[22] Shakespeare, William. 2001. *Othello*. Edited by Russ McDonald. New York: Penguin Putnam.

[23] Hamid, Mohsin. 2007. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. Orlando, FL: Harcourt Books.

[24] Alloula, Malek. 1987. *The Colonial Harem*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

[25] Indeed, Akhtar's two more recent plays, *The Who And The What* and *The Invisible Hand*, have begun to mark out new iterative terrains that will be productive for scholars to follow.

---



## *Arab Stages*

Volume 1, Number 1 (Fall 2014)

©2014 by Martin E. Segal Theatre Center Publications

**Founders:** Marvin Carlson and Frank Hentschker

**Editor-in-Chief:** Marvin Carlson

**Editorial and Advisory Board:** Fawzia Afzal-Khan, Dina Amin, Khalid Amine, Hazem Azmy, Dalia Basiouny, Katherine Donovan, Masud Hamdan, Sameh Hanna, Rolf C. Hemke, Katherine Hennessey, Areeg Ibrahim, Jamil Khoury, Dominika Laster, Margaret Litvin, Rebekah Maggor, Safi Mahfouz, Robert Myers, Michael Malek Najjar, George Potter, Juan Recondo, Nada Saab, Asaad Al-Saleh, Torange Yeghiazarian, Edward Ziter.

**Managing Editor:** Joy Arab

## Table of Content

### Essays

- *Brecht's Theatre and Social Change in Egypt (1954-71)* by Magdi Youssef
- *Re-orienting Orientalism: from Shafik Gabr's "What Orientalist Painters Can Teach Us about the Art of East –West Dialogue" to Ayad Akhtar's Disgraced* by Fawzia Afzal-Khan
- *'Now I will believe that there are unicorns': The Improbable History of Shakespeare in Yemen* by Katherine Hennessey
- *Radhouane El Meddeb's Experiments With Gender: In Search of New Bodies* by Omar Fertat
- *Coptic Christian Theatre in Egypt: Negotiations Between The Minority and The Majority* by Mohammed Musad
- *A New Perspective on Mikhail Ruman's Smoke in A President of His own Republic?* by Anwaar Abdelkhalik Abdalla
- *Kheireddine Lardjam, Traveller Between Two Shores* by Marina Da Silva
- *Where Theatre has failed Syrians* by Rolf C. Hemke
- *The Arab Aristophanes* by Marvin Carlson

### Plays

- *Solitaire* by Dalia Baisouny
- *The Imam and the Homosexual* by Jamil Khoury

### Review

- *Struggling Against Insurmountable Odds: Theatre in the Arab World/Theater im Arabischen Sprachraum* A Book Review by Michael Malek Najjar

### Malumat/Information

- **Malumat: Resources for Research, Writing/Publishing, Teaching, & Performing Arts** compiled by Kate C. Wilson

[www.arabstages.org](http://www.arabstages.org)

[arabstages@gc.cuny.edu](mailto:arabstages@gc.cuny.edu)

**Martin E. Segal Theatre Center**

Frank Hentschker, Executive Director

Marvin Carlson, Director of Publications

Rebecca Sheahan, Managing Director