

## On Ayad Akhtar's *Disgraced*

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By Torange Yeghiazarian

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"I can't help but feel conflicted when I hear Muslim audience members outraged at the way they feel they are being represented on stage, and hearing other audience members (mostly white) continuously quoting the universality of the play. I just can't help thinking the privilege that lies in being able to see the play as universal, especially when you are not the one being represented on stage..... And I wonder who is this play really serving when the voices of those who feel they have been robbed of a great opportunity to redeem their diverse and rich cultures to wide audiences are being overwhelmed by applause and standing ovations and rave reviews." - See more at:

<http://howlround.com/universality-in-disgraced-by-ayad-akhtar-does-the-intent-justify-the-impact#sthash.lqdWiEUe.dpuf>

I am a playwright, a director and producer. I grew up in a predominantly Muslim country, and have for the past 35 years lived in the US, a country that has been bombing predominantly Muslim countries for the last 20 years. Of course our relatively liberal administration reminds us that we're not at war with Muslims. Which begs the question, who are we at war with? But that's another story. Naturally, when a play like *Disgraced* comes along that garners the kind of national attention unprecedented for any other play with a Muslim man as its lead character, we ask why? Many brilliant colleagues have written informative articles about the play which I recommend reading. Chief among them is Arlene Martínez-Vázquez' comprehensive and thoughtful analysis published in *HowlRound*, quoted above. While I acknowledge the challenges of producing *Disgraced* in the US in these times, I actually see the play as a step forward. Here, I attempt to explain why.

When I read the play in the *American Theatre Magazine*, it moved me and frightened me and made me uncomfortable, the way I like theatre to make me feel uncomfortable. Last December, I saw the play at Berkeley Rep. It brought up a lot of thoughts and emotions. I felt exhilarated, having witnessed the courage of a playwright to expose his insides in a most vulnerable manner. I applaud him. But I also understand the concerns expressed about this play and its wide exposure. I sit down to examine my own experience of the play.

During the performance I felt a wide range of emotions, disgust, fear, rage, and I realize, no love. By the end of the play, we hate everyone in *Disgraced*. We hate the Muslim man who confirms our assumption that all Muslim men are violent, particularly toward women. We hate the white, presumably Christian wife who exotifies her brown husband. We hate the seemingly progressive Jewish man who betrays his wife and his friend. And we hate the black woman who takes opportunity away from another brown person without batting an eye. As beautiful as the outsides of these characters maybe, as successful and together as they may seem, by the end of the play we have seen enough of their disgusting insides to want no more.

At the center of the play is Amir, a successful lawyer with an eye on a partnership in his firm. He is tall, dark and handsome. And Muslim. His white wife adores this about him. Emily is a painter enamored with Islamic visual art; it has freed her artistically. Yet when the play opens, she is not busy with one of her geometric abstract pieces influenced by the intricacies of Islamic tile designs but a portrait of her husband, an adaptation if you will of Velasquez' portrait of Juan de Pareja, his slave of Moorish decent. In the opening scene, we meet Amir trouser-less but holding his head high, a proud brown man in a crisp expensive white shirt and red silk tie. Much like de Pareja, Amir wears the clothes of his masters proudly. He is aware of the ironies of the moment; his wife is painting a portrait of her brown slave- but the adoring wife playfully dismisses his "accusations." The charged sexual moment that follows is hand-picked out of Othello. Their racial difference seems to fuel their love-making. He is powerful and virile. She is fragile and hungry for his passion. For a moment, we wonder, who is whose slave? Before we can fully determine this, duty calls –the office on Amir's cell phone - and love is left unrequited.

As if the above interaction was not enough to make anyone who has read Edward Said's Orientalism puke, Emily becomes a bleeding heart advocate for the Muslim community when Amir's nephew, Abe enters pleading Amir to represent the local Imam who has been arrested. Amir refuses fearing it would disturb his Jewish partners at the law firm. Both Abe and Emily accuse Amir of rejecting his Muslim heritage. He is turning his back to his community, they cry, at a time his community needs him most. But Amir doesn't consider himself a Muslim. Does that mean he is in denial of his heritage or just exercising his right to live a secular life?

But in *Disgraced*, no one is afforded the luxury to live their own life. The characters are stuck with their skin color and/or religion. This becomes painfully apparent in the dinner scene with guests Jory, Amir's black American colleague, and her husband Isaac who is an art curator and Jewish. Theoretically, this could be an amazing friendship. These people should really get each other. Amir and Jory are ambitious professionals of color who one would assume share a panache for beating racism in America. Isaac is a curator who was introduced to Emily by Amir and is now showing her work at a gallery in London. Four successful presumably liberal – as evidenced by their choice of mixed marriage – secular professionals sitting down to dinner. This could be good.

But it isn't. It isn't because the delicately balanced universe has been upset. Consequently, the veneer of polite liberalism comes off and everyone says a little too much. Amir begins the evening pissed because he learned earlier that he lost the coveted partnership. We see him reach for the bottle a little too frequently. When Jory and Isaac walk in, and are left alone for a moment, we learn that the partnership went to Jory, a fact unknown to Amir as of yet. Later when Emily and Isaac are left alone, we learn that they had an affair in London when they were there for the opening of the art exhibit featuring Emily's work. It's a tightly woven net of deceit and betrayal. The resulting anger and frustration is expressed through a debate on religious and national affiliations but that is not in fact the heart of the matter.

In a particularly charged and painful scene Amir and Isaac go at each other. The argument takes the guise of a political debate, Amir's response to 9/11 and Isaac's position on the policies of Israel. They say ugly

things to each other that they cannot take back. Amir reenacts a prejudiced behavior from his youth which earlier in the play he claims to have outgrown. Isaac responds with a racist comment of his own. We hate them both and convince ourselves that we are better than they are. To the audience who knows about the Emily-Isaac affair it seems that all the shouting is just about who gets the girl. Ishmael and Isaac fighting over the prize, in this case Emily's love, not Abraham's.

Race and religion are major themes in *Disgraced* but they are not the only layers. *Disgraced* is about upward mobility, about the myth of success in America. The assumption is that regardless of your race and religion, if you work hard and pay your dues, at some point you will get that promotion and as a result, the respect of your colleagues and friends. The assumption is that if you can afford a \$600 shirt, you are protected from bias and bigotry. But this is not the case, as Amir learns. His Jewish partners at the law firm are in fact disturbed by Amir's association with the local Imam's case, as reported in the newspapers. Reviewing Amir's employment forms, they are further disturbed by Amir reporting that he was born in India, instead of Pakistan. Did they think he was Hindu and now they realize for the first time that he is Muslim? According to Jory, the partners felt Amir was duplicitous. The partners' rejection of Amir is in fact very practical. They don't want to be associated with an organization that may be funding the Hamas. The partners subscribe to a prejudice most Muslim organizations in the U.S. must defray. The firm can easily meet its minority hire quota through Jory. Here the play switches an ally to a competitor. Amir is a professional liability. It is not racism. Similarly, Jory's acceptance of the partnership can be viewed as a logical professional decision, not betrayal of a friend. But if I were Amir, I would take it as a stab in the back by a friend who should know better. This may be an unfair expectation of Jory. Just because she pulled herself out of the ghetto; just because she is a black woman in America should she empathize with Amir? The answer is in the Kissinger quote Jory keeps on her desk: "If faced with choosing justice or order, I'll always choose order." Through Jory, the play dismisses the value of Justice, and I might add Honor, in favor of order. Which is another way of saying maintain the status quo at any cost, an ironic viewpoint for Jory to uphold.

*Disgraced* can be seen as a modern day *Othello*. the difference being that in *Disgraced*, Amir has internalized Iago. What has been lost after 500 years of so-called enlightenment is Honor. No one is honorable in this modern day *Othello*. They cheat and lie to advance the value system of a society that has enslaved them for centuries. And in the process, they hurt and demonize one another verbally, emotionally, and physically; leaving the audience wounded and beguiled.

Amir's violent outburst at the end of the play seems dramatically justified. It is courageous of Ayad Akhtar, the playwright to push his anti-hero to such a severe breaking point. Some have accused the playwright of affirming negative stereotypes of Muslim men. Some site this as the reason for the play being so widely produced across the US. The assumption here seems to be that violence towards women is the singular purview of Muslim men; a ludicrous notion easily dismissed by a quick survey of statistics on rape and spousal abuse in the U.S. Violence, greed and hypocrisy are the universal themes of *Disgraced*. The fact that much of the discussion is focused on the behavior of the Muslim men says more about where we are as a society than the play or the playwright. Much like Amir, I suspect Ayad Akhtar was surprised by the accusations he encountered. After having accomplished so much as an artist, it must have been disappointing to be reduced to a self-hating Muslim, or even a "native-informant" the term sometimes used for those pandering to the neocolonialist agenda. To hold an artist's success against him seems as unfair as depriving him of it. While artists from under-represented communities cannot afford to be naïve about the impact of our work, we cannot be expected to withhold critical exploration of our

communities.

To expose the ugliest parts of oneself in one's work of art shows a certain level of maturity and confidence both as an artist and as a human being. Proverbially speaking, airing one's dirty laundry in public as the play does, signifies a new phase in the conversation about Islam and Muslims in the U.S. A time when the public discourse is driven from within the community, led by artists. Relieved of the burden to only represent one's community in a positive light, more artists shall take license to explore and display the range of thought and the many facets of the Muslim community in the U.S. Maybe more than the \$600 shirt and the trophy wife, this is the sign that we have arrived at last. Maybe the conversation around *Disgraced* is showing us that we are ready to embrace the ugly and the beautiful. We understand that we are a diverse group of people living within an even more diverse group of people. What we need is more of our stories and more of our diversity represented on the stages across the U.S.

**Torange Yeghiazarian** is the Founding Artistic Director of Golden Thread Productions, the first American theatre company devoted to the Middle East. Torange's plays include *Isfahan Blues*, *444 Days*, *The Fifth String: Ziryab's Passage to Cordoba* and *Call Me Mehdi*. Her articles on contemporary theatre in Iran have been published in *The Drama Review* (2012), *American Theatre Magazine* (2010), and *Theatre Bay Area Magazine* (2010). She has contributed to the *Encyclopedia of Women and Islamic Cultures* and *Cambridge World Encyclopedia of Stage Actors*. Born in Iran and of Armenian heritage, Torange holds a Master's degree in Theatre Arts from San Francisco State University.

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