

## Parsing Disgraced : An Assault, A Critique, and A Truce

### *Parsing Disgraced*

#### **: An Assault, A Critique, and A Truce** By Jamil Khoury

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The staff at Silk Road Rising crafted a set of questions for me about Ayad Akhtar's play *Disgraced*. I found them immensely cathartic to answer. Many of the ideas and opinions expressed below will be elaborated and integrated in a forthcoming larger piece that I've been developing with South Asian American scholars Fawzia Afzal-Khan and Neilesh Bose.

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 time 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 initial condemnation of the play has given place to a more complicated and nuanced view of it, a process which is explored in the course of the following interview.

Jamil Khoury, November 2015.

**Question: You first encountered Ayad Akhtar's play *Disgraced* in its World Premiere production at Chicago's American Theater Company in 2012. It was an experience you've described as being "deeply disturbing." What exactly transpired?**

We attended a Saturday matinee. If I remember correctly, it was a full house. After the performance, my husband 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.

Needless to say, I was livid. The play had created a climate of racist hostility towards a South Asian male audience member. The intrusive and disdainful stares of the ostensibly "liberal" white racists in attendance that afternoon hadn't materialized before at ATC, at least not for us. Was this arraignment propelled by what unfolded on stage? It's hard to conclude otherwise. Were people projecting onto Malik the same racialized fears affirmed by the play's protagonist, Amir Kapoor (the "apostate" Muslim with the Hindu name)? I'm inclined to think so.

Malik and I love theatre. We see a lot of plays. What happened at *Disgraced* represents a uniquely horrible violation of an otherwise sacred space for us.

**Question: In many respects, neither you nor Malik fit the profile of the “typical” theatre maker and yet you’ve co-founded Silk Road Rising, you champion playwrights of Asian and Middle Eastern backgrounds, and you advocate for Muslim representation within American theatre. Isn’t it then fair to surmise that *Disgraced* is “your kind of play?”**

*Disgraced* certainly fulfills our mission requirement that the playwright and protagonist be of a Silk Road background. But in terms of our politics, the play is highly problematic. For the record, we have always maintained that we’re not interested in Muslim characters who are angels or demons, but rather those that are complex, conflicted, and three dimensional. On that front, Akhtar delivers. But does *Disgraced* challenge Islamophobic perceptions of Muslims? No, not in any discernibly effective way. Does *Disgraced* affirm societal fears about Muslims? Yes, particularly if you already inhabit those fears. Mind you, I’ll be meddling with those statements shortly.

In my ideal world, the play delivers a searing critique of the liberal racism and “righteous” Islamophobia it all too often indulges. Which isn’t to deny the many merits of the existing play. *Disgraced* is, by all accounts, an intriguing, provocative, well-written play with some fascinating characters and sharp, compelling dialogue. It is the creation of a talented playwright with an incisive mind. If handled responsibly (i.e. without an ax to grind against Muslims), it has the potential to incite important dialogue.

But in a cultural climate imbued with anti-Muslim racism and fear, it satisfies the status quo more than it helps us evolve. And that matters. A lot. You can make the case that Akhtar bears no responsibility for challenging racism, and I will respectfully disagree. With representation comes responsibility. Or, as I wrote in my essay *Mass Media Muslims*, “Criticize, call out, air dirty laundry, demand change, by all means, but success needn’t come at the price of ‘authenticating’ arguments peddled by those who inflict harm on Muslims.”

**Question: Critics of *Disgraced* have been accused of not appreciating the nuance, complexity and sophistication of the play. These accusations have been somewhat effective at intimidating and silencing critics, particularly those who are not “traditional theatre goers” and specifically those of Muslim, South Asian, and Arab backgrounds. How do you respond to the “nuance defense?”**

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.

**Question: *Disgraced* is not the first play written by a Muslim American playwright featuring a Muslim American protagonist. Yet it is the first to achieve such critical and commercial success, including the 2013 Pulitzer Prize for Drama and a 2015 Tony Award nomination for Best New Play. Why this play?**

I think it important to note that the 2015-16 theatre season represents a first in American theatre history. Unprecedented, really. A play written by a Muslim American playwright of Pakistani heritage will receive more productions nationwide than any other play. And it’s been quite the illustrious journey. From American Theater Company, to Lincoln Center, to London’s West End, to Broadway, to scheduled productions at over 30 US theatre companies, to an HBO film deal, to foreign language translations, *Disgraced* has become nothing short of an international phenomenon. And as noted, my recent revisiting of *Disgraced* in its production at Chicago’s Goodman Theatre (Fall 2015) caused me to rethink some of my earlier views, a handful of key questions still nag at me:

Why is a play that affirms people’s worst fears and biases about Muslims the toast of the American theatre season? With all the hurt and fear being experienced by so many Muslim Americans today, why are America’s theatre leaders piling on more? Shouldn’t they know better? Why is America celebrating a play that triggers racist paranoia and incites racial profiling within the hallowed halls of our theatres? Why have many of our nation’s leading theatre companies embraced a play that activates Islamophobic anxieties without contextualizing and deconstructing those anxieties? Why is it that so many theatre critics and scholars continue to lionize a play that indulges many of the worst Orientalist stereotypes and clichés? Why is it that artistic directors and producers who have demonstrated almost zero interest in Muslim American stories are so suddenly drawn to *this* story? In a climate of profound anti-Muslim racism and hatred, in which talented, courageous, and provocative Muslim playwrights are routinely ignored by mainstream theatres, I cannot help but wonder about the intentionality behind this embrace.

**Question: In fall of 2015, you and Malik saw *Disgraced* for the second time in a production at Chicago’s Goodman Theatre. Your experience of the Goodman’s production was significantly different than your experience of the World Premiere back in 2012. Please explain.**

In many ways my thinking about *Disgraced* can be divided into two distinct time periods: Before Goodman and After Goodman. Before Goodman I was firmly in the “not a fan” camp. Now I’m conflicted and torn. Maybe that’s the point. Today, in the After Goodman phase, while many of my political objections 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, dare I say, more nuanced. 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. The earlier assault gave way to an engrossing journey, at times jarring, at times illuminating.

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. Otherwise, God help us. I'm eager for Muslims to begin directing it.

*Disgraced* also requires 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.

**Question: You attended the Goodman performance as a guest of director Kimberly Senior. Senior also directed that first production at American Theatre Company as well as the Lincoln Center and Broadway productions. After the performance, you had a chance to discuss the play with Senior. Anything to share?**

Can I just say that Akhtar has a true friend and champion in Kimberly Senior! I was very moved listening to her describe her attachment to his play. It rang like a love letter of sorts and helped me appreciate the

multiplicities of subjectivities people bring to the play. It was clear that this play has consumed her, artistically and intellectually, in the best possible ways. No, I don't agree with all of her opinions about *Disgraced*, but I can respect how she's arrived at those opinions. We wouldn't have seen the Goodman production had Kimberly not invited us. In fact, we were studiously avoiding it. She performed what I would call a diplomatic intervention and we're grateful that she did. In a follow-up email exchange with Senior, I asked her what she thinks the play accomplishes. She wrote back:

“It feels like such a contemporary play! We get to examine the climate of a post 9/11 landscape and have an active dialogue in a domestic setting where the discourse is equally matched with humor and passion. What *Disgraced* accomplishes most notably is that it forces us not to see cultures, genders, races as monolithic entities but rather as diverse, ever shifting populations. Our preconceived notions are challenged and we leave the theater with more questions than answers and an eagerness to dig deeper. One doesn't have to agree with everything in *Disgraced*, but the opportunity to discuss, rehash, and reinvestigate makes it a play for the ages.”

**Question: It's been argued that the infamous wife beating scene towards the end of the play is necessary in order to demonstrate the pent up rage and humiliation of the play's protagonist. How do you respond to this argument?**

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 US, 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 (I've never bought it), 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.

**Question: You have been privy to conversations about Akhtar's motives for writing *Disgraced*. What are some of the theories and speculations you've heard?**

For starters, Akhtar wrote a play and a lot of us took notice. That's testimony to the gravity of his writing. Why else would I be writing this response? Yes, I have been privy to theories and speculations about his motives. 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 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). That's one theory.

More sardonically, I've heard him called "the anti-Muslim Muslim of the American theatre," snatching access and opportunity at any cost. And I recall one person referring to him as the "Ayaan Hirsi Ali of playwriting" (and not as a compliment, mind you). Some have said that he's angry at his community and is lashing out. Accusations such as "sell-out," "traitor," "Uncle Tom," and "self-hating Muslim" have also been bantered about, as well as claims that he exploits his Muslimness and uses it to credentialize caricatures and gross generalizations, thereby ingratiating himself to powerful Islamophobes. These arguments proceed from the assumption that for a Muslim artist to be accepted by America's cultural arbiters and critics, he must first establish anti-Muslim bonafides.

Let's give the man some benefit of the doubt! Ascribing these motives to Akhtar is cynical and conspiratorial, not to mention 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. But 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*. And it ought to inform how we approach the play.

**Question: You have compared *Disgraced* to William Friedkin's 1980 film *Cruising*, inasmuch as both provide lessons about the politics of representation and the burden of being the "only" story. Why this particular comparison?**

My sense is that *Cruising* can provide historical hindsight for those of us who've been critical of *Disgraced*. The film's protagonist, 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 goes, as opposed to *a* Muslim story among many, is a difference mainstream theatres should be striving to identify and correct.

For the record, I believe that *Cruising* and *Disgraced* share a good many more commonalities, particularly in their respective socio-cultural contexts, but I'll leave those analyses to others. An exhaustive comparison of the two needs to be made.

**Question: If you had the ear of all the artistic directors, producers, and literary managers across the country who've championed *Disgraced*, what would you tell them?**

Produce more Muslim American playwrights! Produce Yusef El Guindi's *Our Enemies: Lively Scenes of Love and Combat*. Seriously. It's a brilliant, provocative, rousing play that would make a fascinating companion to *Disgraced*. It won the Osborn New Play Award yet never received its due. We're living in a golden age of Arab, Muslim, and South Asian American cultural production in this country and you wouldn't know it looking at the programming of America's regional theatres and mainstream arts institutions. We at Silk Road Rising are happy to provide leads and make introductions. I want all the theatres that are producing *Disgraced* to follow up by producing more Muslim, Middle Eastern, and South Asian American plays. There are some truly fantastic, underappreciated, underproduced, and largely unknown playwrights out there who deserve your attention and care! Let this not be a one-off but rather the beginning of a new artistic era.

In the coming decades, Islam is on track to become the second largest religion in the United States. The number of Muslims living in this country has doubled in the past ten years. These are communities with stories to tell that the rest of us need to be hearing. An inclusive theatre is a reflective theatre. We can all be doing better. Looking forward to your upcoming season announcements! Please don't let us down.

**Jamil Khoury** is the Founding Artistic Director of Silk Road Rising. Promoting playwrights of Silk Road backgrounds (Asian and Middle Eastern) is a passion that dovetails well with Khoury's experiences living in the Middle East and his eleven years as a cross-cultural trainer and international relocations consultant. A theatre producer, essayist, playwright, and film maker, Khoury's work focuses on Middle Eastern themes and questions of Diaspora. He is particularly interested in the intersections of culture, national identity, and citizenship. Khoury holds a M.A. degree in Religious Studies from The University of Chicago Divinity School and a B.S. degree in International Relations from Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service. He is a Kellogg Executive Scholar (Kellogg School of Management, Northwestern University) and has been awarded a Certificate of Professional Achievement in Nonprofit Management. Khoury is the 2015 recipient of the Community Leader Award from the Association for Asian American Studies, the 2013 recipient of the Actor's Equity Association's Kathryn V. Lamkey Award for promoting diversity and inclusion in theatre, and the 2010 recipient of the 3Arts Artist Award for Playwriting.

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