

ISLAMO- PHOBIA IN AYAD AKHTAR'S *DISGRACED*

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DOI: 10.37648/ijrssh.v10i01.034

Received:28th October 2019; Accepted:4th December, 2019; Published:27th December, 2019

1400 year earlier Prophet Muhammad, a messenger of Allah announces the advent of Islam, the second most popular religion over the world. Islam follows set of rules in regard to human rights and women specifically, who used to be enslaved and murdered by the pagans. Islam also, emphasizes on peace, coexistence with the other, the lenient treatment of parents and rewarding them kindly. Moreover, the continual familial relationships, praying, donating, and helping all needy people. In return there are many prohibitions like killing without any justified reason, stealing, lying, gossiping, and committing adultery. Sin and punishment is the core of any divine religion, however, some of extremist representatives of Islam distorted its real image and misinterpreted the real meaning of this religion. As a result people all over the world obtained a very negative prejudice about it and the term Islamophobia coined to reflect this phenomenon.

The Qur'an is the official book of Islam.

Islamic rules tend to be misunderstood and wrongly interpreted in the western community since many Christians saw Islam as a religion of the sword. Therefore Muslims in Europe suffered in order to prove the reverse. Especially, after the spread of many extremist Islamic movements, this distorted the image of Islam all over the world. Islam considers a very controversial topic to be tackled in media, magazines, and even the literary works. Recently many writers spend their time and efforts to write about Muslims plights in Europe; their identity, existence, and self assertion in a community they do not belong to. One of those playwrights is Ayad Akhtar, who sheds light in his play *Disgraced* upon the treatment of Islam in America, Muslims identity, and Islamophobia.

Ayad Akhtar was born on October 28/1970, Staten Island New York city and raised in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, a Pakistani American playwright, novelist, screenwriter, and actor. He is the author of the novel

American Dervish and was nominated for 2006 independent spirit award for best screen play for the film *The War Within*. He is best known for his play *Disgraced*, it received the 2013 Pulitzer Prize for drama. It was nominated for Tony Award for best play and was named the most produced play in America for the 2015-2016 season. *Disgraced* was produced in 2012 and its first performance was in Chicago. The play won the Pulitzer Prize for drama, and nominated for Tony Award for best Drama. It is a one act play divided into four scenes without intervals. The main event in the play is about dinner party takes place at an apartment on New York's upper east side.

Akhtar's work covers various themes including the human condition, love, responsibility, relationships, the American-Muslim experience, economics, immigration, aspects of culture, hybridity, identity crisis, and inferiority complex. Akhtar's interest in writing was initially started and sparked in high school when a teacher introduced him to European

– modernism . he graduated from brookfield central high school in 1988 the attended brown university where he majored and specialized in theater as he began acting in student plays. After graduation he moved to italy and studied acting with Jerzy Grotowski for a year eventually becoming his assistant. When he came back to the states , he got his master of fine arts degree in film directing from colombia university of arts.. His active years are from 2002 till the present time.

The setting of *Disgraced* is a spacious flat , time 2011-2012 late summer. Amir is the protagonist (40 years old) and central character. He works as a lawyer. Emily (30 years old), an artist, is his wife. Issac(40years old), the third charcter, is the jewish art dealer of Emily and Amir’s antagonist. Jory,(african – american) issac’s wife and Amir’s colleague. She works as a lawyer. Abe, Amir’s nephew 22 years old .

The first scene is about the exposition of life of the main character Amir and his wife Emily , its also about the settings and their orientations. The oriental environment is described as “The stage left wall is covered with a large painting: A vibrant, two- paneled image in luscious whites and blues, with patterns reminiscent of an Islamic garden”. (Akhtar 5). Emily and Amir invited their friends and started to discuss many issues especially Islamo-phobia from different point of views. Issac and Emily were talking about the orient and as usual Emily is biased to her husband’s culture so Isaac tells her.

Issac: you know what are you going to be accused of Orientalism. I mean hell. You have even got the brown husband.

Emily: the Islamic tiling traditions, Issac? Is a doorway to the most extraordinary freedom? And which only comes through a kind of profound submission. In my case, of course it’s not submission to Islam but to the formal language. The pattern. The repetition and the quit that this work requires of me? Its extraordinary. (Akhtar 31)

Emily the protagonist’s wife is depicted in the play as an open-minded western woman who accepts, loves,

and proud of her husband’ eastren roots. In the sense that she decorates her flat in an oriental way. Since she is an artist she focuses on islamic themes in her art and she has an affinity for islamic artistic traditions. She is baised to his culture in one way or another. the events mainly about her husband, Amir Kapoor , an american born , muslim raised. Works as a corporate lawyer in mergers and aquitions p14. He is brown and descended from a pakestanie family, who sufers from identity crisis due to his inferiority complex like any other doubled citizices.

Issac: the work you are doing with the Islamic tradition is important and new. It needs to be seen widely.

Emily: we both know why you like landscape.

Jory: why

Emily: because they have nothing to do with Islam .

Issac: what she is doing with Islamic tradition has taken her to another level. A young Western painter drawing on Islamic representation? Not ironically? But in service? It’s an unusual and remarkable statement.

Emily: what’s the statement?

Issac: Islam is rich and universal. Part of a spiritual and artistic heritage we can all draw from. (Akhtar47)

In this conversation Akhtar tries to praise and reflect his religion positively through many characters from different background who are expressing their respect and appreciation to Islam. However, Muslims plights in the United States and other European countries remain controversial. Sometimes some of those Muslims accommodate themselves and assimilate in the new society. Others reject everything about the western society and its influence upon the native culture.

However, the protagonist is presented in a negative way in the sense that he is an apportionate figure who, changed his name in the first place, disowned his original identity. He has cast aside and denies every aspect related to his ancestors and muslim heritage to improve his life in the states and gain a good position and reputation in his career. Amir tries also, to satisfy the americans and his wife who is by origin white anglo-saxon protestant.

Emily: Pakistan.

Amir: I said India. It technically was India when my dad was born.... My father was born in 1946. When it was all one country, before the British chopped it up into two countries in 1947. And my mother born in 1948. So it was not India anymore, it was Pakistan. (Akhtar 35)

The playwright spares no effort to portray the Muslim's predicament in America, since their suffering and self assertion quest obliged them to deny their roots. Amir suffers from identity crisis and had to change his name to survive in the American society as he tells Emily that his name is Abdullah but he change it to make his life easier. Both the protagonist and his nephew reject their names, heritage, religion, and their cultural background. Unreasonably, the protagonist has denied his roots in search for new identity "projection is never a self-fulfilling prophecy" (Bahbaha, 100)

Amir: I- uh- had my security number changed. When I changed my name.

Emily: you did

Amir: yeah, I was before I met you.

Emily: is that legal?

Amir: they all do it all the time. When people go through identity theft. (Akhtar 36)

The colonization of the mind is the most effective way upon Muslims in the west, which have accept it, partly because the colonizer planted deep in the mind of the colonized that they are inferior to them.

Therefore many Muslims denied their heritage to get accepted. As with other colonized people, Muslims were victims of the colonial process in almost every sense. It's not just the loss of control over administration, politics, the economy... These are the more obvious aspects of colonilazation. The essence of the colonization of the mind is how it influences the way in which we see ourselves. How we see the other and the world as a whole, is the way in which we see ourselves, for instance, in the larger hierarchy of things. The Muslim, like the Hindu, or the Christian, or the Buddhist who had been colonized sees himself as inferior to the West.

Amir: the next terrorist attack is probably gonna come from some guy who come or less looks like me.

Emily: I totally disagree. The next attack comes from some white guy who is got a gun he should not have... (Akhtar 50)

Amir says that the real reflection of Islam is through Quran not art and paintings. In the lines above he criticizes Islam severely as an atheist person, who has no limits in his way of thinking. Amir traspass his territories with God. The consequence of 11th of September increased the hatred of the European societies towards Muslims, as a result many non-native people turned into hybrid characters in the Western community to be accepted. He boldly describes his religion as a backward one

Amir: Islam comes from the desert. From a group of tough minded, tough – living people. Who saw life as something hard and relentless. Something to be suffered. (Akhtar 53)

Some critics pointed out that characters like Amir reflected a distorted image about Muslims, who are entrapped between two opposed cultures and turned into blasphemers like the protagonist of the play. Astonishingly enough, that all characters who belong to other backgrounds praise Islam with the exception of the Muslim one. It seems that Muslims plight is reflected throughout their cultural, political, and religious ignorance. Amir doesn't have any

Islamic awareness, he explains to the audience the surface meaning of Quran without referring to the moral and deep meaning of it, which is full of rules, order, love, equality, companion, and coexistence. The world wide use of Islamo-phobia obliged many hesitant Muslims to deny their background and slough their skin trying desperately to adopt new identity, which is eventually the identity of the other.

Amir: whatever they do, it's not what Muslims do. Muslims do not think about it. They submit. That's what Islam means, by the way .submission .

Issac: I know what it means. Look the problem is not Islam . it is Islamo-fascism.

Emily: I will grant you that the Quran sees humanity as stubborn and self – interested- and it takes us to task that. And I can't say its wrong to do so.

Issac: all I wanted to say that with Islamo-fascism is that there is a difference between the religion and the political use of it. (Akhtar 55)

Terrorism and the wrath of Islamic fanaticism will only continue to worsen as our more moderate Muslim "friends" fail to speak out against these groups and their tactics. The propaganda machine of the terrorists has sadly been very effective in trying to show that their atrocities are the result of the actions of others. The truth behind their productions is that the real basis for motivation of Islamic terrorism is their desire to spread Muslim ideology, destroy the so-called Western infidels, and hasten their ascent to the after-life through an unmatched disregard for human life. Acts of violence committed by groups that view themselves as victimized by some notable historical wrong. Although these groups have no formal connection with governments, they usually have the financial and moral backing of sympathetic governments. Typically, they stage unexpected attacks on civilian targets, including embassies and airliners, with the aim of sowing fear and confusion. Eventually many Muslims willingly have chosen to deny their heritage to live in the Western societies.

Amir represents a hybrid character in the play who lives on the border line neither belongs to his indigenous nor to America. Hybridity does not mean a mixed races people. Naturally any lost person has identity crisis . we can see it in the first scene. When both Amir and Abe try to dissimilate in the American society by changing not only their background, but even their names. Amir's rejection to his background continues when saying many awful descriptions even about his religion .especially when commenting about Imam Faraed's religion saying that he does not know his feelings towards his religion , as if Amir suggesting his denial to Islam, which is his. He refers that Islam is not his religion any more and he is turning his back to his heritage , roots, and values. He is also telling his guests that his mother quarreled with him when he expressed his love to Jewish . p73. Also, his marriage to Emily reflects his tendencies to the west. Even when he knew about the affair she had with Issac he tried to reconcile with her though he has been stabbed in his back and Islamic traditions oblige him to punish her severely. He preferred an adultress Western woman at the expense of the Eastern one. He accepted all the Western negative things that happened to him. He is intelligent , smart, and successful person but suffers from this inferiority complex that ruined his life.

Amir: I'm not Muslim. I'm an apostate. Which means I have renounced my faith.

Issac: I know what the word apostate means.

Amir: do you know that- according to the Quran- it makes me punishable to death. (Akhtar 57)

Amir's nephew Abe (Hussien Malik), the other character who sways between two worlds the Occident and the Western, who also tries desperately to be a citizen in America by all means.

Abe: 22, of South Asian origin. But as American as American gets. Vibrant and endearing, He is wearing kidrobot T-shirt under a hoodie, skinny jeans, and high tops. (Akhtar 31)

But one day he comes to his uncle's flat to visit him they speak about Imam Fareed (p14), a religious muslim and a friend of them, who is arrested for unknown reasons. Both of Amir and Abe agree that imam fareed did not do anything, every church in the country collects money it is how they keep their doors open. He is running a mosque, Emily joins them telling amir that abe has got the right. she encourages Amir to appear in the court and defend imam fareed, but amir is unwilling and hesitated because of his inferiority complex. Emily tells amir that imam fareed has the right to collect money and it does not mean it is for Hamas. Amir replies that it is not of his concern, but Abe encourages him when saying Imam fareed liked him but Amir insists on denying every thing in common with his earlier past life time and religion. (Akhtar, 15)

The words demonstrate that imam fareed is Abe's friend and he is running the mosque where Abe performs his religious duties and rituals. Imam is collecting money from moslems who attend the place. Due to this the american authorities captured him because they suspected him to be the founder of Hamas and any other extremist organization.

Amir rejects his nephew's request and his wife to defend the imam. But he becomes involved in this case which is very controversial case and was the reason behind the starting point of the destruction of his career and his socioeconomic life. The case of imam fareed becomes the starting point of their conversation among these four characters, when amir and emily host issac and jory in a dinner party. The dinner party includes different religious, beliefs, and sociopolitical orientations, which then turned into a fight. Each character in the party sprang from different heritage and cultural background, therefore, they tackled in their conversation many topics about religion, politics, and even social issues in the american society. i.e islamophobia, self assertion in a society they do not belong to it by origin, and the mixed breed people there. The core of their conversations was the american-muslim's identity and existence after the 11th of september events.

The integration of religions like islam, christianity, and judaism. Quran and talmud, racial, social distinction. taliban prophet mohammed, mojahedeen, israel, and qaida. Due to the varied topic in the party, and because of some character's ethnic and religious prejudices, the party was ruined especially when Amir admits that he felt happy and proud of what happened in the 11th of september not only this but he hates israel.

Emily: hi Abe

Amir: hi Abe

Abe: you know how much easier things are for me since I changed my name? It's in the Quran. It says you can hide your religion if you have to.

Amir: am not talking about the Quran. Am talking about you being called Abe Jensen.

Emily: you changed your name too.

Abe: you got lucky, you did not have to change your first name, could be Christian, Jewish.

Plus, you were born here it is different. (Akhtar 13)

Amir and jory went out to buy some drink. when leaving the flat, the audience become aware that emily and issac have an affair in the past and they are secretly in love with each other. When issac was about to kiss emily, jory and amir get inside the flat and saw them. A quarrel sparks each character start insulting the other i.e amir calls jory nigger, especially when he knows that she was nominated to a law firm over him, because of amir's contribution and presence in imam fareed's trial. After the quarrel jory and issac leave, emily confesses her affair with issac to her husband. While preparing his things to leave the flat, emily tells amir that Abe is arrested by the FBI along with his friend Tariq. They went to have coffee in the starbucks, when all of a sudden a girl started asking them about their Kufi hats and islam, then she continues in her questions till she asked them about Qaida. Tariq

responded energetically, that America created such a thing. The woman got pissed and outraged. The boy continues saying that this country deserves what it got, as a result she left, calling them the police. The police cuffed them. Even when his nephew is wrongly accused of nothing, Amir keeps flattering the Western society when telling Abe to be aware and not to offend the Americans. Abe in return becomes very angry telling Amir that the West has disgraced the East and the other way around as they say. For three hundred years the West has been exploiting and enslaving the East. Therefore the boy and others will revenge upon those usurpers.

At the end, Amir is left alone by Emily and Abe. These externalizations result to an exchange of abusive and offensive words, phrases, and sentences that ends with a physical fight. The third scene ends up with the expected end of such a hypocritical materialistic group of four different races and ethnicities. This anticipated end due to the hatred and rejection of each other because of the unsuitability and inappropriateness of their cultural, social, and religious values. Though these orientations were ignored because of the building and the establishment of their relations and marriage was based on and intended for materialistic purposes. The fourth scene and the last that clarifies the disintegration of each other. It also defines the title disgraced.

The meaning of the play is clearly reflected when Abe says to Amir some bombastic sentences trying to awaken and revive Amir to regain his consciousness by telling him

Abe: we were at Starbucks. Just drinking coffee. Tariq starts talking to this barista who's on break. I can tell she's not into him. He's not getting the message ... she starts asking about our Kofi hats and are we Muslims. And then she asks how we feel about Al-Qaeda. So Tariq tells her. Americans are the ones who created Al-Qaeda.

Abe: the CIA trained the Mujahedeen in Afghanistan. Those are the guys that became Al-Qaeda.

Abe: so she got snippy. And Tariq got pissed. He told her this country deserved what it got. and what it was going to get. She goes to work, and before we know it, the police are there. She called them. They cuff us. Take us in. two guys from FBI are at the station, waiting. We sit through the ridiculous interrogation.

Amir: what did they ask you?

Abe: do we believe in Jihad? Do we want to blow stuff up? How often did I read the Koran? Do I have girlfriends? Do I hate America? (Akhtar 80)

The aggressive conversation is indicated by many abusive and offensive words particularly when Amir and Issac talking in scene 3, they become furious and agitated when the situation reaches the climax. Exchanged abusive and offensive phrases are said after Amir's expression of hatred against Israel and his feeling of pride and happiness about the coming down of the towers referring to the 11th of September events which make Issac lose his temper and patience. Amir and Jory go together to bring some champagne for the party, due to the intoxication of Amir, it becomes very easy to be deeply stirred and provoked. So when they get back to the apartment to drink, they got shocked and astonished as they saw Issac and Emily kissing each other. This drives Amir out of his mind saying p72

Abe: it's disgusting. The one thing I can be sure about with you? You will always turn on to your people. You think it makes those people like you more when you do that? They don't. they just think you hate yourself. And they are right! You do! The prophet would not be trying to be like one of them. He

did not conquer the world by copying other people. He made the world copy him.

Amir: conquer the world?

Abe: that's what they have done. They have conquered the world. We are gonna get it back. That is our destiny. It is in the Quran. For three hundred years they have been taking our land, drawing new borders, replacing our laws, making us want to be like them. Look like them. Marry their women.

They disgraced us, They disgraced us (Akhtar 84)

First you steal my job and now you try to destroy my marriage. Issac replies addressing his wife that she doesn't need to listen to this asshole. As a result the insult makes Amir very irritated. Finally Amir spits on Issac, the latter says "there is a reason they call you people animals" 73

CONCLUSION

Akhtar has gained a chance to live in America before and after 11th of September. This event not only affected and changed his cultural identity deeply, but also most of Muslims in the states. The playwright becomes aware of their predicament, therefore, he skillfully portrayed Amir's suffering in a Western society. All Muslims have to face the idea of identity crisis in a society they do not belong to it. The character of the protagonist is described as a hybrid one who sways between two opposed cultures.

Amir is looking for a prestigious life in the American society, by denying his roots and heritage. Some young Muslims care deeply about their religious and cultural identities, but choose to prioritize other parts of life. Others self-define new, non-traditional ways of engaging with their faith. Even young Muslims with traditional religious lives have to toggle between identities. Debates about assimilation often

focus on immigrants, but they overlook the experiences of Muslims who have long been settled in the U.S. like Amir and his quest to construct a new identity to be accepted by his wife and Western society.

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