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## On the Orientalism and Neo-Orientalism in Ayad Akhtar's *Disgraced*: Analysis on the Dynamics of Amir and Emily's Relationship

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### ABSTRACT

This study analyses the three essential elements of the interracial relationship between Amir and Emily in Ayad Akhtar's Pulitzer Prize-winning play, *Disgraced*. They are: Emily's painting of Amir, her husband, in the style of *Portrait of Juan de Pareja* by Diego Velázquez; Emily's White Saviour Complex; and the violence she suffered in the hands of Amir. The first two parts of the analysis will utilise the combination of Identity Construction theory by Stuart Hall, Edward Said's Orientalism, and the post 9/11 discourse of Neo-Orientalism. The last part of the analysis will foreground the entire elements by utilising Stuart Hall's theory of Articulation. It will be proved that Amir's violence is an act of retaliation towards Emily's domination over the production of his identity through representation and her influence in his crucial decisions concerning his relationship with his family. Emily's victimisation and the emphasis on Amir's 'tribalistic bond' risk a reductionist Neo-Orientalist reading of the text. By acknowledging Emily's White Saviour Complex, the text can be read as a re-articulation of the Neo-Orientalist stereotypes of 'barbaric brown man' and 'free white woman.'

**Keywords:** *identity construction; orientalism; neo-orientalism; articulation; drama*

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### INTRODUCTION

The current political climate in America, consumed by the polarization of issues concerning race and religion, has increased the prevalence of acts of prejudiced violence, promoting concern worldwide. The discourse of rising authoritarianism becomes a daily occurrence in the mainstream and alternative news, across every platform. Minority voices and their allies whom denounce hate in popular culture, such as Hollywood, consume headlines. The same behaviour occurs in the theatre as shows such as *Hamilton* that champion diverse or majority non-white cast receive massive popularity<sup>1</sup>). In the midst of such circumstances, the relevance of Ayad Akhtar's Pulitzer Prize-winning play, *Disgraced*, is important to revisit. The play put an interracial relationship between a South Asian-American man and a White American woman on centre

stage and has stirred controversy due to a scene depicting domestic violence after the husband finds out that his wife was cheating on him. In the wake of the recent changes to government policies under President Donald Trump, the risk of this particular minority being generalized and mis-represented has grown. Trump's policies have sought to encourage the generalization of minority groups as was demonstrated by his administrations Muslim Ban, fueling Islamophobic discourse. In this climate, a textual analysis of this particular popular theatre production (opened in Australia and Singapore in 2016 and still performed throughout America in 2017) is highly relevant for the contemporary audience.

The play itself was written by Ayad Akhtar, a Pakistani-American novelist and actor, as his first venture into playwriting. Since then, he has written several

other plays such as *The Who and the What* (2014), *The Invisible Hand* (2015), and *Junk* (2016). A common link between most of his plays is that the inspiration behind the structural narrative comes from some of Shakespeare's famous drama. *The Who and the What* is influenced by *The Taming of the Shrew*, while the director of *Junk* called it "A cross between *Henry IV, Part 1* and David Mamet's *Glengarry Glen Ross*" (Pressley, 2016). *Disgraced*, the play that brought him the 2013 Pulitzer Prize Award for Best Drama, Akhtar drew inspiration from *Othello* and the undertone of violence in the works of V.S. Naipaul and William Faulkner (Akhtar, 2013). The whole play is seemingly designed to contain every sensitive subject in racial and religious relations that could exist in an interaction between four people, each representing a different demography: A South Asian-American man (Amir), a White American woman (Emily), a White Jewish-American man (Isaac), and an African-American woman (Jory).

*Disgraced* consists of 4 scenes and performed with no intermission between. The setting of the entire play is in Amir and Emily's apartment in Upper East Side, New York City. There are several time jumps between scenes, but mainly the timeline throughout the play stretches from late summer 2011 to spring 2012. Another character that appears in the story is Amir's cousin, Hassan, who has changed his name to 'Abe'.

In brief, the play brings various controversial racial and religious issues to light through the relationship between Amir and Emily. Amir was raised a Muslim but has renounced his faith. His wife, Emily, is interested in Islam due to her connection with him and his family. Throughout the play, Amir criticised Islam as a 'backwards' religion, naming several of his personal experiences that lead him to such conclusion. Meanwhile, Emily tries to be the more open-minded person by defending it. The major climax of the story happens when Amir finds out that Emily has been cheating on him with Isaac and beats her. It is this scene that has divided audiences and critics' opinions.

## METHOD

There are three elements of action and motive selected by the writers to be analysed textually as the essential parts of the dynamics between Amir and Emily as a couple. They are Emily's painting of Amir entitled *Study After Velázquez's Moor*, Emily's White Saviour Complex as the driving force behind some of her actions that influence Amir, and the violence suffered by Emily at the hands of Amir. These three elements have been chosen based

on the common link between them: the multiplicity of meanings and how they are entwined together within the narrative of the whole play. There are two major schools of theory in this analysis, post-modernism (Stuart Hall) and post-colonialism (Edward Said & Homi Bhabha). The first two analyses of the elements will be conducted with a post-colonial approach and the last will incorporate Stuart Hall's theory of articulation as the foreground that connects all the theories. Hall's theory of representation and identity construction will also be applied to the analysis of Emily's painting and the analysis of the power dynamics between her and Amir throughout the play.

## DISCUSSION

The 3 parts of the discussion are determined as the essential points of analysis in Emily and Amir's relationship. The first is her artistic response to a particular event where Amir was discriminated against by a racist stranger. The second is the motive that drives her to 'save' the people of colour in the story, which are Amir and the jailed imam. The third is the culmination of the story where Emily becomes the victim of Amir's violence. The Orientalist theme exists throughout all 3 parts on different levels, tied together in the scene where Amir eventually beats Emily resulting in her leaving him.

### Identity Construction and Orientalism in Emily's Painting of Amir

The most important symbolism in *Disgraced* is contained in Emily's painting of Amir in the style of Diego Velázquez's *Portrait of Juan de Pareja*. The audience is presented with this image both in the beginning and at the end of the play. This particular piece is a framing device which holds together the narrative of the story. It triggers points of conflict and serves as an important metaphor for the central relationship between Emily and Amir.

The significance of this piece lies in the reason behind its creation as much as in the image itself. The painting is Emily's response to a waiter's racist treatment to Amir at a dinner the day before. The first thing the audience will see in the play is Emily in the middle of sketching Amir, who is half-undressed in his underpants and a collared shirt. A book with Velázquez's painting is present in the scene. The same book will appear again when Jory and Isaac come to visit the couple's apartment. Later, in the ending, Emily's finished painting can finally be seen. It depicts Amir as a regular American businessman, with his suit and tie. A vision that Emily claims as Amir's "real self" and something that Amir is not comfortable with.

Figure 1. Velázquez, D. (1650). Juan de Pareja (1606-1670).



- Emily : A Man, a waiter, looking at you.  
Amir : Looking at us.  
Emily : Not seeing you. Not seeing who you really are. Not until you started to deal with him. And the deftness with which you did that. You made him see that gap. Between what he was assuming about you and what you really are.

(Scene 1, p. 7, bold by writer)

This is an instance in which Emily would enunciate Amir's identity from her own experience, which brings complications to the way his identity is constructed. A layered act of identity construction is present because the "'position(s) of enunciation' of the one who is doing the act and the one being the subject are 'never identical, never exactly in the same place'" (Hall, 1990, p. 222). Emily's representation of Amir in the painting is an act of ascribing a meaning of identity to this object which serves to define her husband to the world as *she* sees him. As the complex "production of identity" is "always constituted within, not outside, representation" (Hall, 1990, p. 222). Furthermore, this painting is also an expression of Amir and Emily's relationship as she later states when explaining it to Jory:

Emily : It's a study after the Velázquez. I'm using the same palette, the same composition. But it's a picture of Amir.

Amir : Your own personal Moor.

Emily : *Muse* is more like it...

(Scene 3, p. 45, italic by Akhtar)

From the excerpt above, Emily as an artist sees Amir as her *muse*. She twists the antiquated and derogatory term for Muslims, *moor* (indicating the position of Juan de Pareja who was a slave at the time he was painted), into something she sees as more positive in terms of the relationship between artist and subject. Meanwhile, Amir, being in a different position, does not quite agree with this ascription. He is disturbed by Emily's decision to liken him with a slave, no matter how she tries to romanticise it.

There is a degree of appropriateness in Emily's regard for Amir as her muse in general, not only for this painting. Her other works that are described in the story are inspired by Islamic art. It indicates an influence that can only be inferred by her relationship with Amir and his family or his mother in particular. This relates to Emily's 'White Saviour' desire which will be elaborated upon in the second part of the analysis.

The next point of significance for this painting is the main inspiration whence it was originated, which is Diego Velázquez's 17<sup>th</sup> century creation. Rodini Chaki in his 2016 dissertation *Desis in the House: South Asian American Theatre and the Politics of Belonging* made an observation based on the words of an 18<sup>th</sup> century art critic, Antonio Palomio, about the original Velázquez piece:

There is a quiet resistance to the Eurocentric fetishization of racial others and/or inferiors in Juan's steady gaze and his head held high. It is perhaps noteworthy that Velázquez *allowed* Juan this power in capturing it on canvas, though it has historically not been the prerogative of the powerful in colonial and racial discourse to represent the minorities in such light.

(p. 184, italic by Chaki)

Chaki then made a comparison between Velázquez's treatment of his subject and the case of Emily making her husband as a reluctant subject of her own painting. He stated that she certainly holds the authority in assigning the labels by referring to Juan de Pareja as Velázquez's "assistant", not "slave" even though at the time the painting was made, he was still an indentured

servant. Chaki likened this to the authority of Western subjects to assign labels such as “terrorist” to a South Asian subject like Amir (p. 185).

The power dynamics between Emily and Amir are revealed in the production of this painting. This is a representation within discourse produced by historical process because “there is no power relation without a correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute, at the same time, power relations.” (Foucault as cited by Hall, p. 76). Here, the consistent binary opposition of Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1979) theory is present with Emily dominating the way Amir’s identity is enunciated within the representation of him by assigning the label of “muse”, objectifying him as an exotic artistic inspiration, and connecting his image to Juan de Pareja, the slave-assistant. Meanwhile, Amir, who shows some objection to his wife’s painting (“Your own personal Moor”) and sees it as someone who is being positioned, becomes the submissive as he sits down to be her model.

In further analysis concerning Amir’s representation and identity in the painting, it is important to note that despite Amir’s discomfort because of the original artistic source of inspiration, the painting is, to an extent, an accurate image of him as a lawyer in a successful firm in New York. This image is of a suited brown man in a baroque-style painting that exists in an intertextual relationship with Velázquez’s *Juan de Pareja*. It is a perfect visualization of what Bhabha (1994) called **mimicry**, an act of imitating the colonizer by the colonized which makes them seem alike and different at the same time. In Amir’s case, this is a reflection of himself that he undeniably sees in the mirror every morning and the same one his wife meets at the breakfast table. It is the persona he presents to Emily in their everyday life.

Furthermore, considering the revelation of Amir’s development of his identity throughout the story, he has taken conscious actions to a certain degree to integrate into the American society. He is a South Asian-American who purposefully changed his name from Abdullah (a Muslim name) to Kapoor (a Punjabi name), most likely to avoid certain scrutiny in relation to his legal status or employment application. He voluntarily offered himself to be searched by airport security, a group which tends to racially profile. He had denounced Islam as a backwards religion based on his prior personal experiences. Yet, at the same time, he also feels “pride” for his people (“we”) at the time of 9/11, which he admits stems from seeing America finally being defeated.

Emily’s artistic sensibility drives her to project this Amir, who is in conflict with himself, the one who

Hall (1992) would refer to as “the **post-modern subject**” with multiple identities (p. 277), into the man depicted in her painting which is eventually named *Study After Velázquez’s Moor*.

Isaac, the Jewish-American character in the play, aptly sums the dilemma of Amir’s conflicting identities:

- Isaac : So, there you are, in your six-hundred-dollar Charvet shirt, like Velázquez’s brilliant apprentice-slave in his lace collar, adorned in the splendours of **the world you’re now so clearly a part of...**  
And yet...
- Amir : Yeah?
- Isaac : **The question remains.**
- Amir : The question?
- Isaac : **Of your place.**  
For the viewer, of course. Not you.  
It’s a painting, after all...

(Scene 3, p. 46, bold by writer)

The question Isaac is referring to is directed towards Amir and the viewer alike. He is suggesting that Amir’s likeness in the painting, with his businessman attire, makes him somewhat out of place in the eyes of the contemporary American viewers who are the target audience of this painting. Meanwhile, Emily, trying to do justice to a representation of her husband, is indeed an active enabling agent who produces this connection between Velázquez’s painting and the way she regards her brown husband. As she emphasises the likeness between the defiant look in Juan de Pareja’s face to her husband’s character as she knows him—a bold, brash lawyer who has distanced himself from the religion assigned to him at birth—one can assume that she possibly recognises what Bhabha (1994) called as the “slippage”, “excess”, or “difference” in the “discourse of mimicry” which is “constructed around an *ambivalence*” (p. 86), the *ambivalence* that is Amir and his successful act of mimicry which gives him a considerably good place in American society. Huddart (2006) stated that such a high degree of effectiveness is a sign of resistance towards the colonizer. Something that Chaki (2016) agrees as present in Velázquez’s *Juan de Pareja* painting. The condition for this resistance, however, is for the colonized subject to have recognised the domination of the colonizer over him and deliberately transforming into their not-quite-likeness as a form of defiance, highlighting the differences they have as they imitate the dominating force. This is what Emily sees in Amir when he deliberately submitted

himself to racial profiling in the airport, challenging the authority by singling out himself voluntarily as a Person of Colour.

The painting's purpose according to Emily is to disarm the audience (such as the racist waiter or Isaac) who regard Amir as someone who is out of place. A better informed Emily would have given a clearer depiction of this resistance in her portrait of Amir and yet, her choice of inspiration—which is the centre of Amir's disapproval—emphasises her ignorance and naivety. The simple fact that she attempts to re-create a completely different power dynamic between Velázquez and Pareja in the most apparent visual symbolisation that her relationship with her husband is born out of the ego of a white artist who sees the discourse she produced without considering the perspective of viewers from different backgrounds. She is oblivious to the relevance of historical context in race relations that can possibly give an unfavourable meaning to the rendition of Amir—a South Asian-American—based on Juan de Pareja.

Isaac enlightens her about her ignorance and complicates Amir's identity further in this exchange:

- Isaac : He doesn't understand you. He can't understand you.  
He puts you on a pedestal.  
It's in your painting.  
*Study After Velázquez.*  
He's looking out at the viewer—that viewer is you. You painted it.  
He's looking at you.  
The expression on that face? Shame. Anger. Pride.  
Yeah. The pride he was talking about.  
The slave finally has the master's wife.
- Emily : You're disgusting—
- Isaac : It's the truth, Em. And you know it. You painted it.

(Scene 3, p.69-70, italics by Akhtar)

The lack of understanding here goes two ways; Emily and Amir simply do not see eye-to-eye on their positions concerning their identities and the power relation between them. Isaac, of course, is biased in his observation of the art because he desires to be with Emily and to drive her away from her husband. Yet, he delivers a revelation to Emily concerning the multiplicity of imbalance of power in her relationship. Moreover, as another interpretation of the defiance of the artistic subject towards its painter/master, it is possible that the look Emily considered as Amir's resistance also shows

his cruel pride of 'possessing' her, as Isaac said. After all, duality and contradiction are a certainty in a post-modern subject.

Emily's painting of Amir depicts their different and conflicting positions of enunciation in regards to his identity as a brown man in New York City. Emily attempts to present the 'resistance' of Amir's act of mimicry, but ended up highlighting her domination over the representation of Amir's identity. It is proven by the connection she made between her husband and the slave-assistant. She enforces her vision of Amir's defiance towards the people who thinks he does not belong without considering the complicated history of his identity development. Therefore, she ends up inciting disapproval from Amir and revealing her desire to become a White Saviour for him.

### Emily as a White Saviour Figure

It is worth indicating for further analysis that Emily's motive behind her painting of Amir appears again in several instances within the drama. It is a drive to become what has been recognised colloquially in terms of popular culture narrative (Hughey, 2014) as the **White Saviour**. This refers to a white character that helps people of colour and makes their life better. Typically, at the end of the story, the titular saviour would learn something more about themselves in relation to their good deeds for the non-white person or the person they helped would rise in society obtaining a happy ending. This is a trope rooted from, as Said (1979) noted, Rudyard Kipling's idealisation of the White Men who feels responsible to civilise the uncivilised Orient (The White Men's Burden). In *Disgraced*, the trope is exhibited within Emily's actions, which represents the perspective of a liberal white woman in a post 9/11 America.

In Emily's character narrative, this desire to be the White Saviour reveals itself in several ways. The first is her impulsive decision to create a painting of Amir after they were encountered by a racist waiter the day before. She feels compelled to immortalise her idealisation of Amir in the form of art, even though its message of resistance was muddled due to its questionable inspiration, as she likened her husband to a slave-assistant.

Next, Emily directly influenced Amir's decision to help the imam who was suspected of collecting money for nefarious purposes through his mosque. The imam, who regards Amir as a Muslim brother, specifically requested him to help with the case despite having a more suitable team of lawyers. Amir calls him a bigot for this reason. He suspects that the imam does not like his lawyers because they are Jews. He also says that when he went to see him

the first time, the imam spent one hour trying to get him to pray again. In the end, Emily appeals to Amir's sense of solidarity because he is one of "his (the imam's) own people":

- Emily : You told me. So what? So a man who has  
(*cutting* nothing left but his dignity and his faith is  
*him off*) still trying to be useful in the only way he  
knows how?  
I mean, if he feels he needs one of **his** own  
people around him—
- Amir : I'm not one of his own people.
- Emily : **You are.** And in a way that's unique. And  
that can be helpful to him. Why can't you  
see that?
- Amir : Can we stop talking about this?
- Emily : We never talk about this. Not really.

(Scene 1, p. 21, italics by Akhtar, bold by writer)

This is another act of positioning by Emily, asserting her dominance on the production of discourse on Amir's identity (us/them), similar to making the painting. As the story develops, Amir's decision to finally help the imam started a domino effect that leads to his downfall. Scene 2 opens with Emily and Amir pouring over a write-up of the imam's trial in news, realising that it makes him sound like a supporter of an alleged terrorist. His superiors later saw the article and start to reconsider their plan to promote Amir. They then discover that Amir Kapoor was originally Amir Abdullah, and decided not to give him the promotion, feeling that he is duplicitous. The promotion was given to Jory, Isaac's African-American wife. The conflicts cumulated to the climax in the third scene where the dinner party eventually ends with a violent happening.

During the dinner party itself, Emily defends Islam from every undermining argument from Amir. Some of them are: how Amir admits that he is an apostate and could be sentenced to death according to the Quran, the subject of the veil for Islamic women, and, ironically, the matter of wife-beating in the Quran. In two of these subjects (the subject of apostate and wife-beating), Emily considers herself quite familiar with the text of the Quran on those particular issues by offering some alternative interpretations to Amir's. She speaks as someone who has read the Quran but has never really experienced life in a Muslim society.

Emily and Amir's disagreement can be contextualised in what Tuastad (2003) defines as **Neo-Orientalism**, which is caused by the duality of Middle

Eastern society as imagined by American society: the clashing of an anti-democracy totalitarian state and the values of Islam that requires submission and humility. As Altwaji (2014) explained the relationship between Said's Orientalism and the new one:

As classic Orientalism once served the policies of European colonial powers, Neo-Orientalism serves the political hegemony and neo-colonial interests of people who are aware of the need to produce images of aggression and terrorism on the targeted nation.

(p. 321)

In *Disgraced*, the ironic defence of Islam by Emily is prompted by Amir's decision to paint the picture of the violent, backwards Muslim. Therefore, Amir can be said as serving the Neo-Orientalist agenda in terms of discourse. However, that is not to say that Emily is free from her White Saviour Complex when her dominating tendency towards the particularities of Amir's identity is considered.

The third occurrence where Emily's desire to become a White Saviour is revealed is related to her artworks. When Isaac noted that by adopting Islamic Art tradition in her work, Emily would be accused of Orientalism, she responded out of disagreement that people have forgotten to see art as they are. She is the artist who insists her works to be seen as they are despite the identity of who produced them. Essentially, this is a form of enforcing 'equal opportunity' for artists, no matter what their race is. This is one of the 4 frames of colour-blind racism as theorised by Bonilla-Silva (2014), which is **abstract liberalism**. By insisting to be overlooked as a white artist, or prompting a colour-blind consideration from the audience, she neglected to raise attention to the lack of representation by artists of colour. After that, she tries to salvage her work by defending the relevance of Islamic art tradition:

- Emily : The Islamic tiling tradition, Isaac? 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 quiet that this work requires of me? It's extraordinary.
- Isaac : You sound like a midcentury American minimalist, trying to obliterate the ego.

Emily : The Islamic tradition's been doing it for a thousand years. Pardon me for thinking they may have a better handle on it.

(Beat)

It's time we woke up. Time we stop paying lip service to Islam and Islamic art. We draw on the Greeks, the Romans... but Islam is part of who we are, too. God forbid anybody remind us of it.

(Scene 2, p. 31-32, italics by Ahtar)

Emily possesses what novelist Teju Cole referred to in his 2012 article in *The Atlantic* entitled *The White-Savior Industrial Complex* as **American sentimentality**. It is the emotionally-driven, short-sighted impulse of white Americans to solve the problem of people of colour instantly without assessing the root cause of it and therefore failing to acknowledge the autonomy of the people who are actually experiencing it. Cole illustrates this image of the white saviour as a white American who is eager to help starving Africans without considering the role of American government policies in the economic devastation of those countries. By taking the task to 'elevate' the Islamic art tradition, Emily has taken away the agency of the people who are actually living that tradition, and she has done it to satisfy her own need to help them. The question she eludes is how the Western art tradition disregarded the Islamic art in the first place. There is a clear difference between personally feeling responsible to restore the image of Islamic art in American society by adopting it in one's artworks and questioning how it was sidelined in the first place, namely the lack of contact with Islamic artists who are sidelined by the presence of Emily's artworks. As an educated, middle-class white woman, she has overlooked the significance of minority control of their own representation, proving her to be another White Saviour figure.

### Re-articulation of Neo-Orientalism in Amir's Violence towards Emily

The climax of the story stretches throughout the second half of the third scene, beginning with the argument between the four characters during the dinner party, and peaks at the end of the scene. Isaac, the Jewish-American who takes the side of Emily's defence of Islam at the dinner party conversation, ends up calling Amir and 'his people' 'animals'. Jory, the African-American who seems likely to be the most reasonable character, is also largely unsympathetic towards Amir's loss of promotion because she is the one who gained it even though she is aware that he is much more qualified than her. Amir

reaches his boiling point, admitting that despite having denounced Islamic values, he still feels a tribalistic bond when he sees 'his people' winning through the actions that occurred during 9/11. He shows this by spitting on Isaac, the same way his mother once spat on him when she found out he had a crush on a Jewish girl, and by turning into one of the very people he claims as 'backwards' by beating his wife. Lastly, Emily, who eventually becomes Amir's target of violence, is rendered as the victim after the revelation of her affair with Isaac.

Chaki (2016) summed up the entirety of the chaos during the dinner party in his dissertation:

The violence - in words and action - depicted in the play is tied to a political history that chronicles the cultural violence induced by global capital, the trauma of displaced postcolonial identities, the gendered violence of religion, and the violence that is a response to a long and storied history of persecution.

(p. 194)

He then proceeded to give a response to critics who are concerned about Akhtar's portrayal of Amir's aggression. There are other forms of 'violence' in the play, such as Emily's decision to paint Amir as a 'slave.' In the end, he speculated that Amir's violent response to his wife's infidelity is an act of "*counter violence* to perceived institutional violence wrought upon the Muslim body" (p. 195, italics by Chaki).

Considering the development of the story and the multiplicity of layers in character development and motive, to say that violence (both in words and in action) is the central theme of the story is not unreasonable. The conditions that prompt these acts of aggression to happen stemmed from the central relationship of Amir and Emily and the ever-shifting power dynamics between them. Looking back at the whole story from the beginning, it is Emily's actions that propelled the first domino to fall. From the act of making the painting until her insistence to push Amir so that he would help the imam, Emily is being written as the antagonist in a subtle manner. This fact then makes Amir's violent response towards her infidelity as a kind of justice being served. Ironically, justice is part of Emily's reasoning for her White Saviour Complex, the very thing that turns her into the villain of the story.

Abe, Amir's cousin, appears in the last scene after Emily made him ask his uncle for help because he got in trouble with the Police and the FBI was involved. Abe delivers an explanation for the violence in the climax by presenting a historical perspective:

Abe : For three hundred years they've 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. And then they pretend they don't understand the rage we've got?

(Scene 4, p. 85)

There is no question about whether Amir feels the rage; it is the very thing that caused him to beat Emily. His action is consistent with the stereotype promoted by the institutional discourse of the War on Terror, as Khalid (2011) explained in her article, *Gender, orientalism, and the representations of the 'Other' in the War on Terror* in which she analyses various representations of Muslim subjects during George W. Bush's administration post 9/11. She described the Orientalist gender hierarchy at that time as consisting of "the benevolent, civilised and moral masculinity of the West and the backward, barbaric, oppressive deviant masculinity of the 'brown man', the 'free' Western woman and the oppressed, subjugated Muslim woman" in that order (p. 20). Khalid also describes the image of the 'barbaric brown man' "as embodying a dangerous masculinity that is irrational and expresses itself in acts of barbarism, such as the oppression of women" (p. 20). In Amir's case, he goes from abhorring the barbaric act of wife-beating at the beginning of the scene to committing it at the end, displaying his deviation from the values he believes—or trust himself to believe. The irrationality lies in the spontaneity of his action, one that he immediately regrets after doing. Therefore, Akhtar's decision to present the crisis of the story in the form of Amir as the 'barbaric brown man' who tortures the white woman reproduces the image that was used to fuel the political discourse of Islamophobic sentiment and perpetuates its Orientalist gender hierarchy.

To read the climatic violence in *Disgraced* is to peel back various conflicts that happen in different levels due to Emily and Amir's imbalanced power relations. From the act of dominating the discourse of Amir's representation with the painting, to appealing to his sense of belonging with 'his people' to help the imam, and, finally, cheating on him with Isaac, Emily is presented as the face of the civilized western woman of the Neo-Orientalist, post 9/11 era, who is playing the role of the unfaithful lover. Amir's act of violence towards her, due to its role as the defining climax of the play, is an attempt to **re-articulate** the concept of the uncivilised brown man vs. the free white woman.

Stuart Hall's theory of articulation (1996/2002) is a way to explain how certain elements are joined in connection, non-connection, or in contradictory relations with others within a structure. In an interview with Grossberg (1986), he illustrates the articulation of discourse:

So the so-called "unity" of a discourse is really the articulation of different, distinct elements which can be re-articulated in different ways because they have no necessary "belongingness." The "unity" which matters is a linkage between that articulated discourse and the social forces with which it can, under certain historical conditions, but need not necessarily, be connected.

(p. 53)

In the Neo-Orientalist context, the cause of violence towards white women by barbaric brown men is typically articulated with their inherent tribalistic nature. Something that is present in this exchange:

Isaac : Did you feel pride on September eleventh?

Amir (*with hesitation*) : If I'm honest, yes.

Emily : You don't really mean that, Amir.

Amir : I was horrified by it, okay? Absolutely horrified.

Jory : Pride about what?  
About the towers coming down?  
About people getting killed?

Amir : That we were finally winning.

Jory : We?

Amir : Yeah... I guess **I forgot... which we I was.**

Jory : **You're an American...**

Amir : **It's tribal, Jor. It is in the bones.**  
You have no idea how I was brought up.  
You have to work *real* hard to root that shit out.

Jory : Well, you need to keep working.

Amir : I am.

(Scene 3, p. 63, italics by Akhtar, bold by writer)

Here, Amir is in a crisis in which he admits being confused by his own position which signals a shift in his perception after Emily had convinced him to recognise his own people when she influenced him to help the imam. It



is a shift that only acknowledges a tribalistic connection between him and ‘his people’. The irrationality of Amir’s pride is something that is meant to be seen in a historical context beyond the text, and the disbelief and revulsion of the other characters is only understandable because they do not understand his position in regard to this history, which up to this point he has enunciated in a paradoxical way.

This is also where Jory pushes Amir to realise that he cannot become an American unless he sheds his connection with ‘his people’—something that is actually encouraged by Emily in the previous scene. Here, Amir is expected to change his identity again to be accepted, just like when he changed his name from Abdullah to Kapoor. However, this bond is much deeper and complicated; it is the *slippage* of **mimicry** that Emily fails to accept. Something that cannot be comprehend as simply as seeing a brown man voluntarily submit to racial profiling as a defiant act. Emily’s failure to acknowledge this reveals her own irrationality concerning Amir’s identity due to the way he positions himself.

The fleshing out of Emily as the civilised white woman with White Saviour Complex and the complex conflict of identities within Amir is an attempt to completely re-articulate the Neo-Orientalist hierarchy. Yet, her victimisation does not serve to aid this. Amir’s ‘tribalistic pride’ is written as something that he admits as the result of his upbringing, just like his memory of spitting on his Jewish girl crush because his mother did the same to him. It stands the risk of being superficially read as **new barbarism** which is what Tuastad (2013) described as how Neo-Orientalists view violence by brown people as the proof of the backwardness of their culture and has no connection whatsoever with other motives such as politics or economics. Amir calls his renouncement of Islam as a phase of being “*intelligent*” while relating his pride of 9/11 as “tribal”. The fact that he can only relate to ‘his people’ in what he himself admits to be a horrifying example is problematic. It risks the association of his violence with what the Neo-Orientalists view as the nature of the uncivilised Other.

There is also the manner of the way Akhtar describes the stage direction of the climactic scene:

*Uncontrolled violence as brutal as it needs to be in order to convey the discharge of a lifetime of discreetly building resentment.*

(p. 75, italics by Akhtar)

The brutality of Amir is highlighted here. The emphasis is on the irony that he, who is very vocal on

the backwardness of some interpretations of Islamic law regarding wife-beating in the previous scene, can conduct such act of violence. There is also the fact that this scene becomes the whole point of the play, the resolution of all the conflicts. Every layer of contradiction between Emily and Amir is resolved in this scene. It is also a catharsis of sorts for Amir who can finally expel all the rage inside of him. In the end, Amir eventually lost his wife and job, while Emily lost her dominance and influence over Amir. When Amir attempts to reconcile with her, she rejects him. Eventually, Emily admits that she was also at fault. Her single-mindedness to pursue her art made her “blind”. Therefore, it is only by drawing the line from Emily’s actions to the hardships that Amir experienced throughout the play that her husband’s subjective authority over his actions can be acknowledged and the reductionist reading of his violence can be avoided.

The attempt to characterise Amir and Emily to be as complex as possible with every nuance of historical dynamic between their different ‘worlds’ could become an act of re-articulating the harmful Neo-Orientalist stereotypes concerning their interracial relationship. Yet, the intensity of the act of violence that is written as a payback for Emily’s dominance in regard to the power dynamics of her husband’s representation in her art and her influence on his inner identity conflict risks the reductionist reading of **new barbarism** of Amir as the ‘barbaric brown man’ whose oppression of white woman is seen as a given due to his racial identity. Therefore, only by reading the violence in relation to the ever-shifting power dynamics between the two of them throughout the play—with Emily dominating Amir’s representation and identity construction to Amir’s retaliation as a response to it—the re-articulation of this Neo-Orientalist hierarchical binary opposition can be recognised beyond the act of violence.

## CONCLUSION

The representation of Muslim Americans in popular culture and media is more important than ever. The impact of Trump’s governments policies that continue to point to Eastern People and People of Colour as the source of terrorism can be severe for real life Muslim Americans. The political relevance of theatre is becoming more significant with the push to diversify all sectors of society in popular culture and to include the experiences of the marginalised and the minority. The stage provides a platform for their visibility and acknowledgement in the eyes of the audience. Due to the low levels of Muslim American representation in American theatre, re-

examining the relevancy of *Disgraced* as the most popular play with a South Asian-American main character that contains religious debate is necessary to examine the risks that are possessed by its controversial plot and subject matter.

The analysis of three elements of Emily and Amir's relationship in the play; the painting, the White Saviour Complex, and the violence; uncovered complex layers of contradiction. The plot of play makes sure that each and every one of them leads to the peaking climax of the violence in the dinner party, with every thread of conflict that reveal themselves in previous scenes revisited during the argument that happens in the dinner party scene.

The painting is the source of the power dynamic shift between Emily and Amir. It is also the realisation of Emily's desire to 'save' the image of her husband, which originated from her White Saviour Complex. The effort became problematic because of her deliberate action to position Amir as a 'slave-assistant' in the guise of a wealthy lawyer. That is not to say the image is inaccurate—it is also a part of Amir's identity, him practicing his mimicry. He adopts the image of a successful American, creates a distance between his present state as a thriving lawyer with his past upbringing as a Muslim by denouncing the religion and changing his name. Emily perceives his act of mimicry as resistance and wants to preserve it on canvas, but whether Amir is aware enough of his agency to make it an act of resistance is unclear. Therefore, the differing positions of enunciation create conflict and misunderstanding.

Emily's White Saviour Complex shows itself in other instances such as when she influences Amir until he agrees to help the imam's case. Later, the case becomes the reason he lost the promotion in his firm because his superiors were worried that he might be involved in a terrorist case. This resulted in the conducting of a background check on Amir bringing forth information that he had changed his identity. The eventuality of Emily's actions subtly paints her as the antagonist of the story and because of that, the violence suffered by Emily in the hands of Amir is premeditated by the plot to happen as an act of justice for her husband's suffering.

Amir's violence uncovers some Neo-Orientalist concepts which are the hierarchical binary opposition of 'barbaric brown man' and 'free white woman,' and the 'new barbarism' motive. Due to the emphasis of Amir's action as a manifestation of the tribalistic bond he feels with 'his people,' the violence Emily suffered risked perpetuating these harmful Neo-Orientalist stereotypes. By looking at the tragic events that Amir experienced and recognising Emily's White Saviour Complex as

the driving force in her domination over his identity construction, the superficial reading of these stereotypes can be avoided.

Abe, Amir's cousin, points the finger at 'them' (America) as the source of their ('us' = Muslims) disgrace in the last scene. Meanwhile, in the previous scene where the four characters gather as a microcosm of diverse American society, the audience are presented with the fallout of every single one of them. Each of them becomes a villain in some way, showing their ugly side. In the end, the complexity of Orientalist and Neo-Orientalist motives that are present in the story re-articulates this binary opposition. Amir as the tragic character is disgraced by his own action and Emily as the cause of his demise bears the effect of her own ignorance. Her disgrace lies in the machinations of fate that reveals the hypocritical White Saviour ideal she holds in her relationship with Amir. As it is with a tragic play, everyone who has something to lose, ended their story by losing everything.

## ENDNOTE

1) The hit Broadway musical was criticised for releasing a casting call advertisement that were explicitly asking for non-white actors. Later, the ad was amended and a disclaimer that they "encourage people of all ethnicities" to join the audition was added. (Smith, 2016)

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