

# STUDY GUIDE



## DISGRACED

BY AYAD AKHTAR

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# ABOUT AYAD AKHTAR

Ayad Akhtar's (Playwright) plays include *Disgraced* (LCT3/Lincoln Center Theater, 2013 Pulitzer Prize for Drama and 2013 Obie Award for Extraordinary Achievement), *The Who and The What* (LCT3/Lincoln Center Theater and La Jolla Playhouse), and *The Invisible Hand* (The Repertory Theater of St. Louis).

Also a novelist, Akhtar is the author of *American Dervish*, published in 20 languages worldwide. He co-wrote and starred in *The War Within* (Magnolia Pictures), which was released internationally and nominated for an Independent Spirit Award for Best Screenplay. As an actor, Akhtar also starred as Neel Kashkari in HBO's adaption of Andrew Ross Sorkin's book *Too Big to Fail*. He studied at Brown University and Columbia University's School of the Arts.

## SYNOPSIS

Corporate lawyer Amir Kapoor is living a wonderful life: he is happy, in love with his wife, and about to land the biggest promotion of his career. But when he briefly helps his nephew with a case defending a man of Muslim faith, Amir's career and personal life begin to slowly unravel. When Amir and his artist wife, Emily, host an intimate dinner party with their two colleagues and friends, he begins to realize that the life he has built for himself may be a façade. Does achieving a Western ideal of happiness mean that Amir has denied his true Pakistani heritage? The friendly dinner party soon escalates into an intense conversation involving religion, race and violence. Accusations are spoken, truths are revealed, and Amir's life will never be the same again. The Pulitzer Prize-winner for Drama in 2013, *Disgraced* questions whether we can ever truly escape the confines of our upbringing and our heritage



Photos from **VIRGINIA STAGE COMPANY's** production of **DISGRACED**, April 2018.

DIRECTOR **KHANISHA FOSTER** | SCENIC DESIGNER **BLAIR MIELNIK** | COSTUME DESIGNER **MEG MURRAY** | LIGHTING DESIGNER **AKIN RITCHIE** | SOUND DESIGNER **MARTHA GOODE** | FIGHT DIRECTOR **GREGG LLOYD** | PRODUCTION STAGE MANAGER **BRIANA VALDERREY**  
CAST: AMIR **ROM BARKHORDAR** | EMILY **ANNA SUNDBERG** | ABE **TAHA MANDVIWALA** | ISAAC **SIMON FEIL** | JORY **JOY JONES**

# CHARACTERS

**Amir** – of South Asian origin. A corporate lawyer at odds with his Muslim heritage. Emily's husband

**Emily** – Caucasian. A painter whose work focuses on the spiritual roots of the Muslim faith. She strives to be even-handed and level-headed in both her personal and professional relationships. On the verge of a major breakthrough, she finds herself and her marriage increasingly threatened by her husband's complicated relationship to his Islamic roots and faith.

**Isaac** – Caucasian. Jewish. A successful art curator married to Jory. A vibrant and seductive personality, he draws people in with his charmingly quick wit, easy manner and passion.

**Jory** – African American. Recently made partner in Amir's firm. Married to Isaac. Very forthright and sharp. An articulate and confident woman who has wrestled her way to the top.

**Abe** – Pakistani American. Amir's nephew. As mainstream American as they come. Becoming somewhat of a young Muslim activist in his community. He is passionate, headstrong, and devout in his beliefs. He loves his uncle and seeks his approval, while at the same time, the two of them are at idealistic odds regarding the Muslim faith.



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# GLOSSARY OF TERMS

**Anderson Cooper 360** – News show; the anchorman brings his prickly but often witty perspective to current events and personalities in the news

**Annie Hall** – Woody Allen movie in which comedian Alvy Singer (Woody Allen) examines the rise and fall of his relationship with struggling nightclub singer Annie Hall (Diane Keaton).

**Al-Qaeda** - Militant Islamist organization founded by Osama bin Laden. Its origins are traceable to the Soviet war in Afghanistan.

**Apostate** - A person who renounces a religious or political belief or principle.

**Bigot** - a person who is intolerant toward those holding different opinions.

**Bodega** - a small grocery store, especially in a Spanish-speaking neighborhood.

**CIA** – (Central Intelligence Agency) a civilian foreign intelligence service of the U.S. Government, tasked with gathering, processing and analyzing national security information from around the world, primarily through the use of human intelligence

**Charvet** - A highly expensive men's wear brand. Typical Charvet shirts cost anywhere from \$400 to \$600.

**Chorizo** - A type of pork sausage.

**Christopher Hitchens** - an English author, religious and literary critic, orator and journalist. Hitchens later spent much of his career in the United States and became an American citizen in 2007.

**"Confidentiality"** – a confidentiality agreement is a legally binding contract in which a person or business promises to treat specific information as a trade secret and promises not to disclose the secret to others without proper authorization.

**"Constables at the Tate"** - John Constable, RA was an English Romantic painter who lived between 1776 and 1837. Tate Gallery is a family of four art galleries in London, Liverpool and Cornwall. Constable's work is at the London gallery.

**Cordoba** - a city located in the geographical center of Argentina.

**Cubs** - The Chicago Cubs are an American professional baseball team located on the North Side of Chicago, Illinois.

**Denial of Death** - a 1973 work of psychology and philosophy by Ernest Becker. It was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for General Non-Fiction in 1974, two months after the author's death.

**Fulbright in Seville** - The Fulbright Program, including the Fulbright-Hays Program, is a program of competitive, merit-based grants for international educational exchange for students, scholars, teachers, professionals, scientists and artists, founded by United States Senator J. William Fulbright in 1946.

**Fundamentalism** - As pertains to religion: a similarly strict adherence to ancient or fundamental doctrines, with no concessions to modern developments in thought or customs.

**Ghetto** – a term originally used to describe a part of the city of Venice to which the Jewish community was segregated. This term now refers to a section of a city where because of economic and social pressure, a minority group lives.

**Goldman Sachs** - A leading global investment banking, securities and management firm.

**Hamas** - Hamas is a Palestinian Islamic organization, with an associated military wing

**Hanif Saeed** (HAWN-IF SIE-EED) - Fictional character.



John Constable. *Willy Lott's House*. [www.tate.org](http://www.tate.org)



Cordoba.

**Henry Kissinger** - American Secretary of State from 1973 to 1977 under Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford. He pioneered several controversial foreign policies during his tenure, including the detente with the Soviet Union and the bombing of Cambodia.

**Ibn Arabi** - Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi is a spiritual teacher. His work is rooted in the Quran and focuses on the belief that each person has a unique path to the truth, which unites all paths in itself.

**Idiosyncrasies** - a mode of behavior or way of thought peculiar to an individual.

**Imam** (E-MAM) – As used in the Koran, Imam means leader, symbol, model, ideal, example, revelation, and guide. Historically, the term refers to the religio-political leader of the Muslim community, but for various sectarian and historical reasons the term has been interpreted and applied in different ways throughout Islamic history and into the modern period.

**Insurance Arbitration** - The settlement of a dispute or question at issue by one to whom the conflicting parties agree to refer their claims in order to obtain an equitable decision.

**Islamofascism** - The advocacy or practice of a form of Islam perceived as authoritarian, intolerant, or extremist; specifically Islamic fundamentalism is regarded in this way.

Martin Amis (AH-ME) - British Novelist whose particularly radical views on the Islamic world have gone under heavy fire.

**“Jerry”** – Jerry Saltz has been an American art critic and senior art critic/columnist for New York magazine since 2006.

**Jihad** - A term referring to struggle against those who do not believe in Allah.

Joseph Smith and Mormonism - Joseph Smith, the founder of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, commonly known as the Mormons, claimed to be a prophet of God.

**Knicks** - The New York Knickerbockers, commonly referred to as the Knicks, are an American professional basketball team based in New York City.

**Kufi Hats** – a brimless, short and rounded cap that Muslim men wear.

**La Tur** - a dense, creamy blend of pasteurized cow, goat and sheep milk

**Landscapes** - the depiction in art of landscapes – natural scenery such as mountains, valleys, trees, rivers, and forests, especially where the main subject is a wide view – with its elements arranged into a coherent composition.

**“late Bonnard”** – Pierre Bonnard was a twentieth-century French painter. He preferred to work from memory, and his paintings often had a dream like quality to them. He was a founding member of the avant-guard group, Les Nabis.

**London Frieze Art Fair** - One of the world’s leading contemporary art fairs that takes place each October in Regent’s Park.

**Lower Manhattan** - the southernmost part of the island of Manhattan, the main island and center of business and government of the City of New York.

**Mazel Tov** - a Jewish phrase expressing congratulations or wishing someone good luck.

**Macallan** - One of the world’s most expensive and coveted single-malt scotch whiskeys. Sotheby’s once auctioned off a \$460,000 bottle of WWII Macallan scotch.

**Mahmoud Ahmadinajad** - The sixth and current president of the Islamic Republic of Iran. He is criticized in the West for being anti-Semitic and pro-Palestinian in his opinions of Israel.

**Mahmoud Ahmadinejad** - an Iranian politician who was the sixth President of Iran from 2005 to 2013. He was also the main political leader of the Alliance of Builders of Islamic Iran, a coalition of conservative political groups in the country.

**Matisse** - Henri Matisse was a French artist who later in life frequently chose oriental topics for his paintings.

**Mergers and Acquisitions** – the combination of a commercial company, institution, etc., with another; or the consolidation of two or more companies into one.

**Michele Bachmann** - an American politician. A Republican, she is a former member of the United States House of Representatives, who represented Minnesota’s 6th congressional district, a post she held from

2007 to 2015.

**Minimalism** - a trend in sculpture and painting that arose in the 1950s and used simple, typically massive, forms.

**"Mughal miniatures"** – Mughal paintings are a particular style of South Asian painting, generally confined to miniatures either as book illustrations or as single works to be kept in albums, which emerged from Persian miniature painting, with Indian Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist influences, and developed largely in the court of the Mughal Empire.

**Moor** - Originally: a native or inhabitant of ancient Mauretania, a region of North Africa corresponding to parts of present-day Morocco and Algeria. Later commonly: a member of a Muslim people of mixed Berber and Arab descent inhabiting north-western Africa (now mainly present-day Mauritania), who in the 8th century conquered Spain.

**Mulla Sadra** - An Iranian Islamic philosopher who led the Iranian cultural renaissance in the 17th century.

**Mujahideen** - Term used by Muslims to describe Muslims who struggle in the path of Allah. Recently, this term has been closely associated with radical guerrilla fighters in Islamic countries, especially those who are fighting against non-Muslim forces.

**Netanyahu** - Benjamin Netanyahu is an Israeli politician and the current Prime Minister of Israel.

**Orientalism** - A term used for the imitation or depiction of Eastern cultures by writers and other artists from the West.

**Paella** - A Valencian rice dish.

**Pathos** - A quality which evokes pity, sadness, or tenderness; the power of exciting pity; affecting character or influence.

**Patriot Act** - This 2001 Act of U.S. Congress, a response to the terrorist attacks of September 11th, dramatically increased law enforcement agencies' abilities to search telephone, e-mail communications, medical, financial, and other records; eased restrictions on foreign intelligence gathering within the United States; expanded the Secretary of the Treasury's authority to regulate financial transactions, particularly those involving foreign individuals and entities; and broadened the freedom of law enforcement and immigration authorities in detaining and deporting immigrants suspected of terrorism-related acts.

**Port** - A sweet wine, most often consumed after dinner with desert.

**Public Defender** – A lawyer or staff of lawyers employed by the government to represent in a criminal action a defendant unable to afford legal assistance.

**Quran** - the Islamic sacred book, believed by Muslims to be the word of God as dictated to Muhammad by the archangel Gabriel and written down in Arabic.

**Racial Profiling** - the use of race or ethnicity as grounds for suspecting someone of having committed an offense.

**"Ran with the bulls in Pamplona"** – The Running of the Bulls is a practice that involves running in front of a small group of cattle, typically six, of the toro bravo breed that have been let loose on a course of a sectioned-off subset of a town's streets. The most famous running of the bulls is the eight-day festival of Sanfermines in honour of Saint Fermin in Pamplona.

**Rumi** - Prolific 13th century Persian poet, jurist, theologian, and mystic. His highly spiritual works have been translated into many languages.

**Shiva** – Hindu god; the destroyer.

**Sothi Sikander** - Fictional artist.



17th-century Mughal painting

[wikipedia.org/wiki/Mughal\\_painting](https://wikipedia.org/wiki/Mughal_painting)

**South Park** - an animated series that follows the adventures of Stan, Kyle, Kenny, and Cartman. The writers satirize political issues, religious organizations, famous people, etc.

**Staten Island** - one of the five boroughs of New York City, in the U.S. state of New York

**Sublime** - Of things in nature and art: Affecting the mind with a sense of overwhelming grandeur or irresistible power; calculated to inspire awe, deep reverence, or lofty emotion, by reason of its beauty, vastness, or grandeur.

**Talmud** - A central text of mainstream Judaism. It takes the form of a record of rabbinic discussions pertaining to Jewish law, ethics, philosophy, customs and history.

**Taqiyya** - an Islamic doctrine that allows Muslims to deceive non-Muslims

**Thread Count** - The number of threads woven together in a square inch. The higher the thread count, the softer and more expensive the fabric.

**The veil** - also called Hijab is a head covering worn in public by some Muslim women

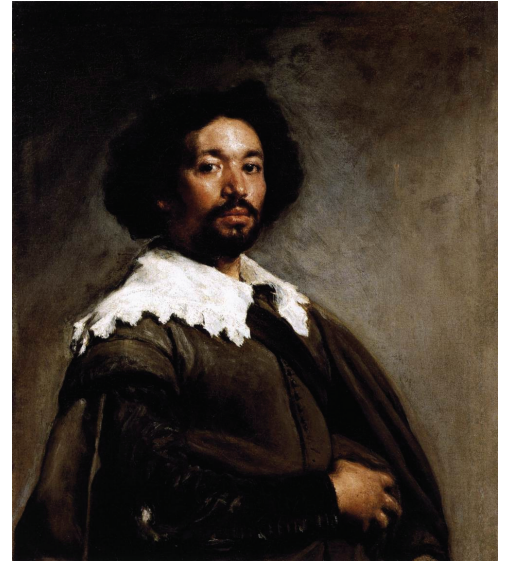
**Velázquez's "Portrait of Juan de Pareja."** - a painting by Spanish artist Diego Velázquez, dating from around 1650 and currently on display at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City.

**"Victoria & Albert. Room 42"** - Victoria and Albert Museum in London. Room 42 is dedicated to Islamic Art.

**WASP** - White Anglo Saxon Protestant; an informal, sometimes disparaging term for a group of high status and influential White Americans of English Protestant ancestry

**"The Whitney"** - The Whitney Museum of American Art; located in New York City, New York

**Van Gogh** - Vincent Willem van Gogh was a post-Impressionist painter. A Dutch artist whose work had a far-reaching influence on 20th-century art.



Diego Velázquez. *Portrait of Juan de Pareja*.



Victoria & Albert, Room 42, The Jameel Gallery. [www.vam.ac.uk](http://www.vam.ac.uk)

# DISGRACED IN THE CLASSROOM

## Pre-Show Questions

1. What is the difference between individual and systematic racism? Which do you believe is harder to overcome?
2. Which do you value more: personal freedom or national safety? Why?
3. Should your religion be a factor in whether or not you are hired in certain jobs? Why or why not? Which jobs?
4. Is there a difference between cultural appropriation and inspiration? How can you differentiate between the two? Is cultural appropriation always wrong?

## Post-Show Questions

1. In *Disgraced*, Emily was inspired by Velázquez's "Portrait of Juan de Pareja." Have you ever been inspired by a work of art? What was the result?
2. Amir insisted that he should not assist Abe's friend, Imam Fareed. Emily and Abe insisted he should. Which do you believe is the right choice? Defend your position with textual support.
3. What do you believe was the main factor in Amir losing his promotion to partner? Could he have done anything differently to ensure his promotion?
4. In the play, both Amir and Abe change their names. Do you believe this was necessary for them to be successful in life? Is it dishonest for them to change their names?  
According to The National Bureau of Economic Research, "Job applicants with white names needed to send about 10 resumes to get one callback; those with [ethnic sounding] names needed to send around 15 resumes to get one callback." Does this statistic impact your opinion at all? (<http://www.nber.org/digest/sep03/w9873.html>)
5. Was Emily participating in cultural appropriation by painting works using Islamic forms? Defend your position.

## Creative Writing Prompts and Class Exercises

1. Write the conversation Amir and Jory have off-stage when they leave to pick up champagne.
2. Have you ever felt like you suffered an injustice? What was it? How did you remedy the situation?
3. If you were Ayad Akhtar, how would you have ended *Disgraced*? Make sure that the characters are true to who they are.
4. Compare and contrast Shakespeare's *Othello* and Akhtar's *Disgraced*. There are many comparisons to be made between the Amir/Isaac and *Othello/Iago* relationships as well as between Amir/Emily and *Othello/Desdemona*. In what way does Iago manipulate his friendship with *Othello* to achieve what he wants and how is that similar to Isaac's treatment of Amir in the dinner party scene? Discuss the master/slave relationship between Amir and Emily. If we imagine that *Othello's* and Amir's downfalls become their own doing, and they are not a victims of fate, what parallels can be drawn in the tragic flaws of both *Othello* and Amir?
5. Have students bring in current Newspaper articles where the question of justice or order is at play. In addition, have the classroom stage mock trials exploring these two sides of the coin, using events from the articles.

# SYMBOLS & THEMES

## Race Identity

This story involves representatives from four different racial communities: An African American woman, a Jewish man, a Caucasian woman, and a Pakistani-American uncle/nephew team.

## Justice vs. Order

Jory makes a strong case for "when faced with the decision between justice or order, I will always choose order." Adversely, Emily would always choose justice.



# THE PLAYWRIGHT: QUOTES BY AYAD AKHTAR

## Goal of writing the play?

My goal in writing *Disgraced* was "to write a contemporary tragedy that is going to gut the audience in the way that Aristotle talks about when he talks about tragedy. He talks about tragedy as catharsis. Not what we mean by catharsis, but rather using tragedy as a means for catharsis that helps the audience cleanse emotions through an expression of pity and terror. What better way to write a contemporary American tragedy than to terrify the audience in exactly the way that they are already terrified, but to take it to a whole different place. And so that capacity to awaken our fear of life is also a doorway to understanding how to live more deeply.

## What this is about and why now?

All of my work deals with modern Western Muslim identity. The ways in which growing up Muslim or being Muslim in the west is both difficult, but full of opportunity. It is and continues to be my experience. I think the fact that the world has drifted post-9/11, has configured itself in a very militant anti east-west dichotomy means that there's more opportunity in a way for artists like myself to write about these issues in ways that feel significant or feel meaningful to audiences. Higher meaning --pregnant field of associations of character interactions and possible meanings that the audience can play with and decide for itself. I believe that what happens in the theater right now is more vital than it ever has been because in a world where there is semblance of relationship, where there is semblance of presence, the theater only happens now. It only happens in the presence of an actor and the audience. It cannot be mediated by a screen. We experience it in communion and can feel it more deeply than we can individually.

## How he came to write this play:

Came from a dinner party when a couple of friends and his ex-wife were talking about Islam and I started to perceive how my position, my perspective as a Muslim on the question was shifting the idea that some my friends had of me. As if waking them up to who I really was as it were and I thought that would a very interesting premise for a play. That something as simple as a discussion about Islam could shift relationships between people in some irrevocable way. It sort of came out of me in a pretty god-awful state, but the essence of it was there already. I think it was something that had been stewing in me for a very long time. I remember somebody commenting on it as a sort of howl of rage – and I think that the depth of the anger that's in the play (and it's not only anger there are other things as well), but there is this seed of anger in the play, I was expressing something in me that had been building in me for a very long time.

*For more information about DISGRACED and for behind-the-scenes peeks, visit [vastage.org/disgraced\\_divingdeeper](https://vastage.org/disgraced_divingdeeper).*