Escaping the Inescapable: Cognitive Dissonance in Ayad Akhtar's *Disgraced* (2012)

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Abstract:

Ayad Akhtar's *Disgraced* (2012) dramatizes the journey of a Muslim Pakistani-American protagonist inside the post-9/11 American society attempting to gain complete fulfillment in it by assimilating to the mainstream culture and turning his back on his Islamic cultural heritage. Through this pursuit, however, he falls prey to a nagging sense of cognitive dissonance, that is to say inconsistency between his behaviour and belief. Superficially, Amir claims a secular American identity, yet deep within he still yearns for his true Islamic Eastern one. Such a sense of dissonance causes a state of psychological discomfort that requires immediate action to reduce it; therefore, the hero resorts to defense mechanisms, denial and rationalization, to get rid of his dualism and its accompanying sense of uneasiness. However, the exaggerated use of these defenses drifts him into a world of illusion in which he imagines himself a full American though in reality he remains a mere ethnic Other. Towards the end of the drama, however, two unexpected incidents violently shake the illusionary world of the protagonist and get his consciousness back to him. This paper critically hypothesizes, then, that *Disgraced* revolutionizes the consciousness of the audience by removing the masks that blind them to seeing the truth of themselves and their status in the world as they discover through the story of Amir and his self-discovery journey in the United States that the right path towards self-consistency and social fulfilment lies in espousing one's true identity and cultural heritage rather than assimilating to another alien culture and that one cannot escape one's true self forever. For critically investigating this thesis, the researcher uses the psychological approach to literature with specific reference to Leon Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance. By exploiting this approach, the researcher aims to dig

deep inside the psyche of the protagonist to uncover the reasons beyond his choice to conform, the justifications he provides for this decision, and his un/conscious preference for illusion over reality. In other words, the writer attempts to arrive at an understanding of what is going on inside the main character's mind in his journey of self-discovery.

Key Words: Cognitive Dissonance, Leon Festinger, Ayad Akhtar, Disgraced, Defense Mechanisms, Institutionalized Racism

الهـ وب مـ ا لا مهـ ب مـ هـ: الـ افـ الـ عـ في مـ حـ ة "مـ صـ م" (٢٠١٢) للـ اتـ إ اد أخـ

د. مـ د جاب عـ الفـ

اسـ اذ مـ اعـ ق اللغة الإنـ لـ ة – لـ ة الـ ة– جامعة عـ شـ

ملـ عـ ي

تتناول هذه الورقة البحثية بالنقد والتحليل مسرحية "موصوم" للكاتب الأمريكي من أصول باكستانية إياد أختر والحائزة على جائزة بولتزر لأفضل عمل درامي في أمريكا للعام ٢٠١٣ ، وترصد المسرحية دراميا رحلة بطلها أمير كابور وهو محامي امريكي ذو أصول باكستانية لتحقيق ذاته والترقي اجتماعيا ومهنيا داخل المجتمع الأمريكي فيما بعد احداث الحادي عشر من سبتمبر وذلك من خلال محاولاته الحثيثة لتبني النموذج القيمي الأمريكي وتمثل الهوية الثقافية الأمريكية على حساب هويته الباكستانية الإسلامية الأصيلة التي يدير لها ظهره ويتنكر لتراثها الثقافي والديني، إلا أن اختياره هذا يولد لديه حالة نفسية تعرف بالتنافر المعرفي ويقصد بها الانفصام النكد بين السلوك الظاهري من جهة والمعتقد الداخلي من جهة أخرى حينما يتعامل الشخص في الحياة بطريقة تخالف ما يؤمن به ويعتقده في قرارة ذاته، وتؤدي به تلك الحالة الى الشعور بعدم الراحة النفسية مما يدفعه للبحث عن وسيلة يحاول من خلالها الحد من ذلك الإحساس بالتناقض وهوما يجده في ميكانزمات الدفاع النفسي مثل الإنكار والتبرير، حيث يحاول أمير طيلة العمل الدرامي تجاهل كل ما يثير في نفسه هذا الإحساس بالازدواجية ويسعى الى تبرير سلوكه التكيفي بكل الطرق، إلا أن المبالغة في اللجوء الى تلك الحيل النفسية تجعله يعيش حالة مزمنة من الوهم يتخيل فيها أنه قد أضحى مواطنا أمريكيا حقاً على الرغم من أنه لا يعدو أن يكون أخر مهمش ومنبوذ على أرض الواقع، ثم يكتشف أمير بنهاية المسرحية خيانة زوجته له مع صديقها اليهودي وحصول زميلته في العمل على المنصب الذي لطالما كان يطمح اليه فيعود اليه وعيه الغائب وتنكشف الحقيقة جليه أمام ناظريه بأنه أخر

منبوذ حتى على الصعيد الأسري، إلا أن هذا الوعي سرعان ما ينطفئ وهجه امام رغبة أمير الحميمة في معاودة الكرة في اعتناق الهوية الثقافية الأمريكية بدلا عن هويته الأصيلة، وهنا تظهر أهمية مسرحية "موصوم" في كونها تنتمي الى المسرح الثوري الذي يسعى حثيثا الى مساعدة الجمهور قارئا كان أو مشاهدا في استعادة وعيه الغائب بهويته الحقة وتراثه الثقافي والديني الأصيل وأن يعلم أن الطريق القويم نحو السواء النفسي والانسجام السلوكي المعرفي والتقدم على الصعيد الاجتماعي والثقافي والسياسي لابد أن ينطلق من معرفة الذات واعتناق الهوية الأصلية بدلا من السعي الكاذب وراء هوية غريبة وثقافة مغايرة، ويتبنى الباحث خلال هذه الدراسة المنهج النفسي في تحليل الأدب وخاصة نظرية ليون فستنجر عن "التنافر المعرفي" بغية الوصول الى ما يعتمل في نفس البطل خلال رحلته لاكتشاف ذاته داخل الولايات المتحدة والكشف عن مبررات سلوكه التكيفي وحيل الدفاع النفسي التي يستخدمها للحد من احساسه المرير بالتناقض وكذلك معرفة السبب الرئيس وراء تفضيل البطل لأن يحيا الوهم بسرابه عن أن يحيى الواقع بمآسيه.

الكلمات الفاتحة: اياد اختر، التنافر المعرفي، ليون فيستنجر، مسرحية موصوم

Escaping the Inescapable: Cognitive Dissonance in Ayad Akhtar's *Disgraced* (2012)

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Since its first production on stage in 2012, Ayad Akhtar's *Disgraced* has been the subject of diverse critical readings. The fame it has rapidly gained – the winner of the 2013 Pulitzer Prize for the best drama in America and the nominee for the Tony Award for Best Play in Britain – and the variety of themes it covers – ethnicity, Muslim-American identity, Islamophobia, social mobility in post-9/11 America, and institutionalized racism, to name but a few – have contributed to the diversity and richness of its readings. Through the story of a Pakistani-American lawyer's psychological, social, and professional journey in the US, the drama delineates how politics, religion, sociology, and psychology are overlapping circles that cannot be easily separated from one another in the attempt to understand the effect of each on one's identity.

In one act and four scenes, *Disgraced* tackles the story of Amir Kapoor who, by denying his cultural heritage, hopes to move up the social ladder in America to the top. Understanding the rules of the game in America, he chooses from the start to assimilate to the mainstream American culture hoping to have his share in the American Dream. After making such a choice, he works hard to uproot himself from whatever connects him to his birthplace and the culture associated with it. He denounces Islam and accuses it of being the source of extremism and backwardness in the Middle East. Yet, a dinner gathering in his house one evening including his Caucasian wife, Emily, his African-American colleague, Jory, and her Jewish husband, Isaak, divulges the fact of life in the US naked in his face. Through the intense discussions that take place between the four about such hot issues as the September 11th events, Islam, and Israel, Amir discovers that institutionalized racism extends deep in the American society and penetrates even the lives of the elite

members. Towards the end of the play, he realizes two important facts: he has wasted his life living the illusion of being American by denying his roots and that the only way to fulfil himself as a human is to identify with his cultural roots and be himself.

This paper assumes that protagonist of *Disgraced* suffers from a state of cognitive dissonance, i.e., disharmony between his different cognitions. Put simply, Amir behaves in a way that contradicts, or at least differs from, his beliefs and attitudes. The reason beyond this dichotomy lies in a choice he made earlier in his life to comply with the American mainstream cultural values, tolerant and inclusive on the surface yet racist and exclusive at the core. Amir's external assimilationist behaviour, however, collides with his internal belief in his cultural heritage; on the surface, he struggles to be American, yet deep within he still feels proud of his native Pakistani origins. Such discrepancy between behaviour and belief generates a psychological state of discomfort that necessitates instant and effective strategies to reduce it and reach an alternative condition of inner peace that results from the should-be consistency between one's different cognitions. Accordingly, Amir exploits a number of defense mechanisms, namely denial and rationalization, to eliminate his dissonance. He overlooks each situation in which he is treated as an Other and does his best to explain away his conformist actions. The exaggerated use of these defenses drowns him, however, into a world of illusion in which he imagines himself a fully American citizen, whereas in reality he is a mere ethnic Other. Yet, towards the end of the play masks fall off on the discovery of the affair between his wife and her friend. He realizes that he has spent his life escaping from what is inescapable, that is his true cultural heritage as a Pakistani Muslim. Now he fully comprehends that he cannot escape his true identity for so long and cannot live the illusion forever.

Central to this study is the researcher's attempt to raise and seek answers to the following questions: what is cognitive dissonance? In which situations do people feel such inconsistency?

What follows the sensation of discrepancy among cognitions? How do people attempt to reduce their sense of ambivalence? What is the relationship between making a choice and cognitive dissonance? In what way does the protagonist in *Disgraced* suffer from cognitive dissonance? What choices has he made that have led him to this psychological state of discomfort? What strategies does he exploit to lessen his irritating sense of discrepancy? Why does Amir choose to live in illusion instead of living life truly? What does the affair between the two white Americans in the play reflect about the American culture in general? Does Amir restore his consciousness fully at the end of the drama or is it mere partial recovery? What is the difference between Amir and his nephew in this regard? What is the only available avenue in front of the hero to get rid of the tormenting feeling of dissonance he suffers from?

For critically investigating the thesis of the present paper and getting answers to the above questions, the researcher uses the psychological approach to literature with specific reference to Leon Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance as elaborated in his 1957 seminal book, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*. In this book, Festinger proposes the main tenets of the dissonance theory: What is meant by cognitive dissonance? What causes it? And how is it reduced? The rationale beyond the choice of this approach, in general, and such a specific theory, in particular, is that the researcher attempts in this study to dig deep inside the psyche of the protagonist to uncover the reasons beyond the choices he makes, the justifications he uses to explain away such choices, and his preference for illusion over reality. In other words, the writer attempts to arrive at an understanding of what is going on inside the main character's mind in his journey of self-discovery. This objective cannot be reached but through the use of the psychological approach in the light of Festinger's theory on dissonance.

The concept "cognitive dissonance" is composed of two terms that need to be defined individually before understanding what they mean in combination with each other. The adjective "cognitive" is

derived from the noun "cognition" that Festinger defines as "any knowledge, opinion, or belief about the environment, about oneself, or about one's behaviour" (3). In his seminal book, *Cognitive Dissonance: Fifty Years of a Classic Theory*, Joel Cooper agrees with Festinger by defining cognition as "any 'piece of knowledge' a person may have. It can be knowledge of a behavior, knowledge of one's attitude, or knowledge about the state of the world" (6). The relationship between two cognitions or more is either consonant or dissonant. "If, considering a pair of elements, either one does follow from the other, then the relation between them is consonant" (Festinger 15). In such a case there is harmony between what a person does and what he knows and, therefore, a state of psychological peace overwhelms the person. On the other hand, "Two elements are dissonant if, for one reason or another, they do not fit together. They may be inconsistent or contradictory, culture or group standards may dictate that they do not fit, and so on" (Festinger 12-13). Cooper puts it simply in the following formula: "If a person holds cognitions A and B such that A follows from the opposite of B, then A and B are dissonant" (6). For example, being married and feeling happy are consonant cognitions, but being married and feeling unhappy are dissonant ones. Simply phrased, cognitive dissonance is a state in which one behaves in a way that contradicts his beliefs for one reason or another.

Among the reasons of cognitive dissonance and, most important of all, is the process of taking a vital decision. Having to choose between two options with each having its positive and negative aspects puts the individual in a state of conflict before making the decision and a state of cognitive dissonance after it. Before choosing, the person is torn between two options and is in an unstoppable process of comparing and contrasting both for the sake of choosing the best of them, especially if both alternatives are desirable. After making the choice, one falls prey to cognitive dissonance: "There will be some cognitive elements corresponding to the positive aspects of the unchosen alternative and some

elements corresponding to the negative aspects of the chosen alternative which will be dissonant with the cognition of having chosen one particular alternative" (Festinger 36). This contradiction in cognitions leads the person to seek ways of maximizing the privileges of the chosen alternative and the defects of the left one in an attempt to reduce the amount of the nagging psychological tension that follows the process of decision making.

Another reason for the inconsistency among one's cognitions is when one is obliged to publicly behave in a way that collides with his private beliefs and attitudes in what is known as "forced-compliance". Forced-compliance is elicited through a reward offered for compliance or a punishment inflicted for failure to comply. When this happens, dissonance between behaviour and attitude inevitably follows. A final cause of the state of cognitive dissonance is the discovery that the effort exerted for fulfilling a certain goal is not worth the result obtained. This usually occurs when the person is after a vital target whose achievement would change his life altogether, yet in a certain moment in the course of his life he discovers that for attaining such an objective, he has exerted too much effort that is incomparable to the quantity and quality of the results achieved. "Efforts were not worth the result obtained," Benoit Monin summarizes the whole case (599). Therefore, his cognition of the result is dissonant with his cognition of the effort invested.

Cognitive dissonance is by nature responsible for triggering psychological tension that naturally pushes the individual to try to eliminate it and achieve instead a state of psychological peace that can never be reached but through creating an opposite state of harmony, even imaginary, between one's different cognitions. As soon as the person feels that there is some sort of inconsistency between his behaviour and attitude, he is driven by an overwhelming psychological force to reduce it. "Persons are motivated by the unpleasant state of dissonance to engage in 'psychological work' so as to reduce the inconsistency," Harmon-

Jones argues in this regard (7). Such constant "psychological work" to reduce dissonance is what marks Festinger's theory as distinctive among the other theories from Monica K. Miller's perspective: "Unique to Festinger's approach was the proposal that cognitive dissonance is an aversive mental state that motivates individuals to reduce the dissonance." Through case studies, Festinger observed three ways one usually resorts to for reducing his sense of dissonance. The first is to change the dissonant cognition, that is to remove the cause of dissonance altogether usually by changing one's behaviour. The second way is to work to add more consonant beliefs to one of his cognitions so as to make the consistent cognitions more than the inconsistent ones. Finally, a person can eliminate discrepancy by reducing the importance of the dissonant belief through rationalization. The first of these strategies is realistic, yet difficult as one's actions become habits that are resistant to change by the passage of time. The second and third ways are much easier, yet are based on illusion rather than reality. In one's pursuit of adding more harmonious cognitions or reducing the importance of the dissonant ones, the individual is indulged in an unstoppable process of explaining away one's actions and choices to the degree that, step by step, one finds himself leading a life of illusion that he has created for himself. Illusion here functions as an alternative version of reality. The person unconsciously prefers illusion over reality for two reasons: he does not have any other choices in life and he wants to soothe away the painful experience of cognitive dissonance that results from the limited choices available for him.

Ayad Akhtar's *Disgraced* is better understood in the light of the cognitive dissonance theory. The protagonist, Amir Kapoor, suffers from a state of discrepancy between his behaviour and beliefs due to a life-and-death decision he made. In an early stage of his life, he was met by two alternatives he had to choose from. He had either to stick to his Middle Eastern identity and, therefore, dispense with his dreams of a stereotypical American life, or to

assimilate to the dominant American culture with all its requirements and, thus, uproot himself from whatever reminds him of his origin, be it homeland, religion, or name. He decides to have the second option: to renounce his true Islamic Pakistani identity and claim a false secular American one. Ever since his life has turned into a continual process of adapting to the American model and disparaging his own heritage. However, despite these relentless attempts to immerse himself in the American culture, deep in his heart he is still anguished by the other option he has left behind, that is, his Islamic Pakistani identity. He has come to sense what W.E. B. Du Bois calls "double consciousness": "One ever feels his two-ness … two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one dark [brown in the case of Amir] body" (9). In other words, Amir's psyche has been torn between the duality of being American or being Pakistani. Deep in the recesses of his heart he sticks to his roots far in the Middle East, yet on the surface he has to comply since this is the only available avenue in America: to speak like Americans, act like Americans, and believe in what Americans do. This creates a state of post-decision cognitive dissonance. "Cognitive dissonance occurs following decisions … [and] the more difficult the decision, the greater the dissonance" (Cooper 14). In the case of Amir, by choosing to Americanize himself, he has left behind all the privileges of the left option: his oneness, religion, and autonomy and, at the same time, has taken all the demerits of the chosen one, namely, to be an ethnic, racial Other. As stated in the theoretical background, this inconsistency between the overt behaviour of assimilation and the deep attitude of adhering to the roots results in psychological tension that compels the hero to employ various devices to calm it down. Among the means he uses in this regard are the denial of dissonant beliefs, rationalization of the choices made, and justification of the actions taken. These defenses, however, fossilize Amir into a world of illusion that lessens his sense of ambivalence in the short run yet aggravate his dilemma and distance him from his true identity in the

long run. He withdraws unconsciously into a world of illusion that soothes away his bitter sense of twoness but just for a while, for at the end of the play, on the discovery of affair between his wife and Isaak, a moment of epiphany occurs when masks are removed, illusions cleared, and the bitter truth revealed naked in the eye that the choice made has been the wrong one from the start.

One needs first to understand the reasons latent beyond Amir's choice of assimilating rather than being himself before investigating the illusionary world he chooses to live in. Born to Pakistani parents who emigrated to America when he was still a kid, Amir has found himself in a racial society par excellence. To have his share in the American Dream and to ascend the social and financial ladder up to the top, the protagonist has to comply to the American ideals, claim an American identity, and merge into the American cultural melting pot. In this sense, *Disgraced* can be considered a modern tragedy as it represents the plight of a modern man who is compelled on all levels to reject his own identity and adopt an alien one instead in order to be admitted into the American society. Amir discovers from the beginning that the espousal of his ethnic identity is not a viable choice amidst the institutionalized racism that dominates America. On the other hand, he finds, or rather imagines, all avenues open in front of his ambition in case he embraces the American cultural norms even if they are alien to him. Such a case is known as "forced compliance" as the person is forced, either by the offer of a reward or the threat of a punishment, to comply with something that contradicts his beliefs and attitudes. Forced compliance, thus, is a direct cause of dissonance and "the more important the opinions or behaviour involved, the greater will be the magnitude of dissonance accompanying forced compliance" (Festinger 92).

The American society obliges Amir to comply by offering him, on the one hand, a license for acceptance and promotion. By complying, he can marry an American beauty, be on the partnership track in a big law firm, live in New York Upper East Side, and wear the most brandy shirts. Monetary, social, and personal growth is all

at hand by the mere idea of claiming an American identity and denouncing his own. On the other hand, refusing to adapt and sticking to his true identity deprives Amir of his share in the American Dream and blocks the paths to success and achievement in his face. By offering Amir such rewards and threatening him with such penalties, the American society ensures Amir's conformity to the mainstream culture. Fully aware of the rules of the game as stated above, Amir chooses to comply under the pressure of the rewards offered and the prices to be paid. He denounces his name, religion, culture, and heritage and lives the illusion that he is an American citizen or that, at least, one day he will be accepted into that society. He dispenses with the "defiant tone" that *The Times* criticizes the Imam for speaking in inside the court: "The defendant, surrounded by a gauntlet of attorneys, struck a defiant tone. He spoke eloquently of the injustices he'd experienced, and what he called an unconscionable lack of due process," and decides never to speak of the "injustices he'd experienced" (*Disgraced* 22). For Amir, this compliance is "intelligence" on his side as he names it to his nephew, Abe; he conforms to the American style of life to gain acceptance and avoid rejection in the other case.

The setting of the play reflects Amir's choice to Americanize himself on all levels and the continual strife following this decision to melt into the American society. He lives in a luxurious apartment on New York's Upper East Side, the district of the most affluent American families. He speaks a "perfect American accent", wears a "six-hundred dollar Charvet shirt", and lives the American dream to the utmost. Later on, we discover that he has manipulated his surname, faked his birthplace, and forged his social so as to hide his true identity from others. As such the uprooting process goes on. when Emily urges him to represent the Imam in court reminding him that he is one of his people, Amir yells that, "I am not one of his people" in an attempt to divorce himself from whatever relates him to the past (*Disgraced* 19). He even goes to the extreme when he "volunteers himself. Goes right to the agents and offers himself

up" to be searched at airports, something that his African-American counterpart is astonished of: "Never heard of anyone doing that before" (*Disgraced* 50). All such attempts to be American are accompanied by a severe attack on what is Islamic and Eastern. He attacks his culture calling it a backward one and rejects his religion and calls himself an apostate, imagining that by doing as such he will be licensed into the American society.

Once Amir finds himself compelled indirectly to conform to the American style of life through the subtle means the American society exploits to generate forced compliance from those who would like to be accepted into it, he decides to assimilate. However, this decision does not solve the problem; rather, it initiates it. Now that he has chosen to acclimatize himself to the dominant culture and forget his own, dissonance arises between his cognitions. On the surface, he is the American Amir version: the successful and financially-stable lawyer; yet, deep within he is still the Pakistani Muslim who cannot be himself. He still rejoices at hearing Ahmadinejad threating to wipe "Jews into the ocean" and "can't help but feel just a little a bit of pride." on hearing about September 11th events (*Disgraced* 64). His behaviour and the cognitions related to it are targeted towards assimilation whereas his attitudes are for rejection and confrontation. These two separate selves are in a malignant conflict with each other throughout the play and that state of dissonance must be calmed down by immediate actions that aim at lessening its hardness and arriving at a state of harmony between what he does and what he believes in. Actions taken in this regard usually swing from changing behaviour to altering attitude. "If my knowledge of my behavior and my knowledge of my attitudes do not match," Cooper maintains, "I can change one or both" (7). Yet, in most cases the change of behaviour is much more difficult than the change of attitude and thought, partly because changing behaviour may involve loss or pain as it has become a group of deeply-rooted habits by the passage of time and partly because behaviour itself is more satisfying to the person than the attitude

itself. Accordingly, in almost all cases of discrepancy between behaviour and attitude, "the direct reduction of dissonance by attitude change is the most likely and predictable means," and therefore, the theory of Festinger can be described very simply as a theory of attitude change (Cooper 8).

As such, The protagonist in *Disgraced* finds it easier to change his attitude than altering his behaviour. The reason is that beyond this assimilative conduct lies all the prizes offered by the American society to those who willingly assimilate and the punishments inflicted on all those who refuse to conform. Among the rewards is personal, social, political, and financial advancement, whereas marginalization, racism, and othering head the list of penalties that threatens whoever refuses to merge into the American life. As a result, Amir decides to reduce his inner sense of dichotomy in the easiest possible way; he refuses to put an end to his dissonance on a realistic level by changing his conforming behaviour and being himself. Instead, he endeavors throughout his life to transform his attitude towards his original culture and be someone else other than his real self. Yet, since Amir's cognition of his attitude is related to his indigenous culture and true Islamic identity, the change of attitude to match his behavior is not such an easy matter as it may seem. He resorts to more than a mechanism to repress his Eastern identity imagining that by doing as such both his behaviour and attitudes would match. Among the strategies he uses to fulfill such a difficult mission is to explain away his decision to assimilate, rationalize his actions, re-evaluate his self-image, adding more consonant beliefs, and finally avoiding or denying dissonant ones. yet, all such mechanisms do not succeed but in drifting the protagonist into a world of illusion in which he imagines first that he is a real American citizen in the fullest sense of the word and second that he has managed to abolish his sense of ambivalence forever. However, two last moments of epiphany in the play, the discovery of the love affair between his Caucasian wife and the Jew curator and the nomination of Jory as a partner in the law office,

bring his consciousness back to him and ruins the unrealistic image he has deliberately built up of himself. He discovers that he has been an Other throughout, even in the eyes of his wife and employers, and he finally reaches the conclusion that to reduce his psychological dissonance he should have been himself from the very beginning instead of wasting his life trying to be somebody else.

Throughout the drama, Amir refuses to admit the conspicuous fact that he is viewed as an Other, a mere slave, even by the closest persons around him. He ignores the significance of each hint in this regard deluding himself into the belief that he is a full American in hope of harmonizing his attitude with his behaviour which, in turn, would reduce the torturing dissonance he feels deep within. "The greater the dissonance, the greater will be the intensity of the action to reduce the dissonance," Festinger argues, "and the greater the avoidance of situations that would increase the dissonance" (18). In the same way Amir acts. He avoids each situation and neglects each piece of information that may intensify his dissonance. Yet by such avoidance he does not manage to eradicate his dichotomy altogether but rather creates a world of illusion for himself in which he merely imagines that his cognitive dissonance does not exist. This avoidance mechanism Amir uses is psychologically called "denial". Denial is a defense mechanism in which "an unpleasant reality is ignored" (Defense Mechanisms 169). This unpleasant reality may be feelings or events or both. In the case of Amir, he ignores each situation that shakes his illusion of being American and denies each bit of feeling that is stirred by such a situation. Though denial can help the individual to cope with dissonance for a while, it is so harmful when it "become[s] a person's primary mode of responding to problems" (168). It is this addiction to avoidance and denial that turns Amir's life into a big illusion.

The most striking example of Amir's use of the denial mechanism is his reaction to the portrait Emily is painting of him. She is working on a canvas of her husband after Diego Velázquez's

famous *Portrait of Juan de Pareja*. Having in mind the fact that Juan de Pareja was a Moorish slave painted by his master, the Spanish artist Diego Velazquez, the significance of Emily's portrait becomes crystal clear: Amir is her slave. "This portrait raises questions around the relationship between Juan de Pareja … and Amir, as well as both subjects' place in the world, being portrayed through the eyes of members of the dominant, privileged culture" (Vazquez). Both Amir and De Pareja wear the clothes of their masters and adorn themselves with the ornaments of their victimizer's culture; strikingly enough, they do this proudly as if they belong to that culture, or as such they imagine. Amir realizes that "his wife is painting a portrait of her brown slave," (Yeghiazarian 2), yet he does not object for two reasons; first, he wants to proceed in the assimilation process to the end in hope of being fully accepted into the American culture by satisfying its dominant members; and second because he does not want to face the naked fact that he is no more than a slave even in the eyes of his spouse. If he admits this fact, he will aggravate his dissonance and, therefore, will feel much more uncomfortable. Instead, he prefers to deny his feeling of being a slave. Though he initially shows his astonishment at the idea of being painted after Velazquez's composition, he does not refuse to be in a similar position; rather, he quickly agrees to the idea describing it as "It's a good painting. I'll give you that" as if he is the Subject not the Object (*Disgraced* 5). When the stage directions read that Emily is "assessing her model," we feel how all the Amirs of colored skin will remain models, playthings, or slaves in the eyes of all the Emilys of American origin (*Disgraced* 3). When Amir reminds his wife that De Pareja was a mere slave, she answers him, "Until Velazquez freed him," signifying that immigrants will remain the slaves of their white masters waiting for them to bestow freedom on them (*Disgraced* 5). Amir, however, denies such a conspicuous fact and insists that he is the source of pride for his wife even after his discovery of the love affair between Isaak and her: "I just want you to be proud of me. I

want you to be proud you were with me" (*Disgraced* 90). As such, Amir prefers to ignore the situations that support his belief of being an ethnic Other and denies his feelings of inferiority and subordination that are aroused by such situations. He, thus, chooses to live in a world of illusion that is built on the mechanisms of denial and avoidance rather than live the real world of being an alien striving to be himself.

Amir does not only ignore the situations that stir dissonance in his mind, but he proceeds in the denial mechanism far enough to deny his own self. The institutional and individual racism that he is exposed to in the American society results in an energy of resentment and anger that is, unfortunately, directed into the wrong path. Instead of directing his rage against his victimizers, he rather vents it on his self and everything related to it. He speaks disparagingly against his religion, community, and culture at large. "The facing of so vast prejudice," Du Bois argues in a similar situation about the African-American experience in America, "could not but bring the inevitable self-questioning, self-disparagement, and lowering of ideals which ever accompany repression and breed in an atmosphere of contempt and hate" (12). According to Du Bois, then, the victimized person begins, even unconsciously, to re-evaluate his self-image and his position in the world under the pressure of bias that he is exposed to every day. This re-evaluation however usually ends in condemning one's self and culture rather than criticizing the racist atmosphere in which he lives. The cause of not leveling criticism at the victimizer may be attributed to one's previous knowledge that by censuring the real cause, victimization may intensify even more; so, one finds it much easier to attack oneself and one's cultural heritage accusing them of being the source of othering and backwardness. Jonathan Shifflett and Oscar Garza argue in this regard that "the process of becoming American is learning how to make fun of yourself and becoming self-critical. That's the whole point." In other words, Americanization requires one to hate himself on all levels; otherwise, he will not have his

share of the American Dream. It seems that Amir understands this rule from the very beginning. As a result, he chooses to be the Americanized Amir rather than the Pakistani one, and he does whatever is needed for attaining this goal.

By attacking his religion and the culture of his own people, Amir seeks to add more beliefs that are congruent with his primary choice to be an American rather than a Middle Eastern. "In the presence of such dissonance," Festinger maintains, "a person might be expected to actively seek new information that would reduce the total dissonance" (22). He fiercely attacks Islam and firmly declares himself an apostate. He describes his people in such tough words as, "These people, they cling to the past. It's how they deal with things. But that's not what this country's [America's] about. It's about moving forward. And not looking back" (*Disgraced* 20). He corrects Isaak when he describes him as a Muslim as follows: "I'm not Muslim. I'm an apostate. Which means I've renounced my faith" (*Disgraced* 58). Such insistent renouncement of Islam raises an important question: Does Amir actually deny his cultural heritage out of a firm belief in its invalidity in modern life or does he merely attempt to do so to facilitate his Americanization though deep within he still believes in it? The answer to this important question is arrived at later on when the heat of the discussions at the night party flares and Amir expresses his true stance by asserting that he feels proud of September 11th events or when Ahmadinejad threatens to wipe Jews into the ocean. Such pride he feels indicates that deep within his psyche he clings to his people's ideas and hates America that he strives to get admitted into. However, he resorts to the denial mechanism on the superficial level for more than one reason. First, rampant American institutionalized racism generates an overwhelming energy of anger that finds outlet towards the self rather than the Other because it is the easiest and safest way to express it. Second, the more selective the society is in its acceptance of membership, the more assimilationist the individual becomes in search of inclusion. Assimilation, by nature, requires giving up with

whatever is original and native. Third, by denying his own cultural heritage, Amir seeks from others similar disliking views about this heritage. In other words, he seeks to gain more consonant beliefs in the same direction of his original choice to renounce his own culture and, thus, reduce his psychological dissonance. "A person would initiate discussion with someone he thought would agree with the new cognitive element but would avoid discussion with someone who might agree with the element that he was trying to change," as such claims Festinger (30). For that reason, Amir deliberately attacks Islam in the presence of both Emily and Isaak from whom he expects approval of his opinions and support of his choice to be American. This justifies his fury at both Emily and Isaak when they speak in favor of Islam as he expects their backing in his assault on the Islamic culture and, thus, the reduction of his sense of discrepancy. When they defend the principles of Islam at the expense of its practitioners, his dissonance is intensified as contradictory cognitions to his primary decision to denounce his Islamic heritage are added rather than consonant ones that consolidate his decision. Festinger maintains that after decision-making, the person is in a constant search for information that may support his decision or "get others to agree with his actions" (45). When Amir fails to get his wife's and her friend's agreement on his assimilative behavior, his dissonance aggravates and, thus, searches for additional means to reduce it.

Among these means is the attempt to rationalize his actions. By rationalization is meant the mental endeavor to explain away one's behaviour and find a strong rationale for it. "Usually more or less successful attempts are made to rationalize them [inconsistent actions]," Festinger describes how the person suffering from cognitive dissonance would fight to reduce his inconsistency and achieve harmony among his cognitions (2). *The Gale Encyclopedia of Psychology* defines rationalization as a "type of defense mechanism … an attempt to deny one's true motives (to oneself or others) by using a reason (or rationale) that is more logical or

socially acceptable than one's own impulses" (Defense Mechanisms 170). The reason beyond the search for a rationale beyond one's actions is "to assign socially acceptable motives to one's behavior or to mask disappointment" (Rationalization 683). The definition and purpose of rationalization have a strong relationship to the denial mechanism that has been discussed before; Amir uses both mechanisms to delude himself into consistency between his beliefs and his deeds with the aim to lessen his sense of dissonance. He resorts to denial so as not to expose his psyche to challenging situations that shake his belief in the choice he has made to Americanize himself, and at the same time he relentlessly attempts to find a strong rationale for his actions to justify his decision for himself first and for others second. Since he knows that giving up one's true identity to assume another alien one is a socially unacceptable attitude, he seeks to assign socially acceptable motives for this behaviour so as to gain people's approval of what he does and to silence the inner voice that comes from within telling him that the decision made has been the wrong one and the exerted effort does not suit the achieved outcome. If he manages to strongly rationalize his conduct, he may reduce the dissonance he senses. However, rationalization drives him, in the same way denial does, into a world of illusion that is exposed towards the end of the play.

One of the justifications Amir provides for his behaviour is that America is not a neutral world as usually expected. "When you step out of your parents' house, you need to know that it's not neutral world out there," he tells his nephew (*Disgraced* 53). Imparking on the biased nature of the American society, Amir finds a good excuse for his assimilative, self-loathing behaviour. The rationale he presents that the American society is a biased one that only accepts whoever conforms to its ideals assigns him the role of the victim that gains people's sympathy rather than stirring their anger. The reason he provides for his assimilative conduct helps, at the same time, to disguise his own disappointment. The source of this disappointment is the imbalance of the efforts exerted for

getting involved in the American culture and the results achieved on the ground. Amir spends most of his life striving to be American, yet in every situation he feels that he is still viewed as an alien. To conceal the resulting disappointment, he keeps clinging to the notion of unfair America. In other cases, he rationalizes his assimilative attitude by claiming that, "There's a reason your father came here. Same reason my father did. They wanted to make a better life for themselves and their families" (*Disgraced* 85). Most people, including himself, would like the idea of somebody sacrificing everything dear, even if it is his own identity, for getting a better life opportunity not available in his homeland. And since "They [Americans] make the rules," it would be a must to adapt to these rules in search of acceptance and a better quality of life (*Disgraced* 85). By providing this justification, nobody may put blame on him; and he himself will escape the tormenting senses of guilt that accompany his decision to renounce his cultural heritage.

However, such defense mechanisms as denial and rationalization do not put an end to the vicious circle of cognitive dissonance that Amir is entrapped in. Instead, they drive him into a world of illusion into which he deludes himself seeking psychological comfort for his divided self. By overlooking each segregationist situation that he encounters in every domain, be it familial, social, or occupational, and through striving to provide socially acceptable reasons for whatever he does and says, Amir deceives himself into being a fully American citizen. Married to a white woman and holding a distinctive position in a prestigious law firm give the wrong impression that he has got his full rights and has been accepted into the American culture in the full sense of the word. Throughout his life, he has never stopped for a while to question his position in the US and his place in the community he has chosen willingly to plant himself in. Rather, he neglects each hint that gets him face to face with the fact that he is and will remain an Other forever and justifies his assimilative behavior on the

ground of having a better life in a biased world that lays down its own rules while others are to conform to them.

Such a state of absent consciousness in which Amir lives goes on unchecked until towards the end of the play when two incidents bring him back into reality once again. The nomination of Jory as a partner instead of Amir in the law office he has spent most of his life in and the discovery of the affair between Emily and Isaak represent two moments of epiphany that push Amir towards restoring his consciousness and realizing who he is and how the world around him acts. With these two accidents, facts are revealed naked in front of the hero's eyes and masks fall off from every face around him. The first of these events destroys Amir's illusion of a fair and equal social and occupational milieu, whereas the second explodes his imaginary ideal world on the personal level. In taking her colleague's position at work, Jory acts according to Henry Kessinger's quote that she keeps on her disk: "If faced with choosing justice or order, I'll always choose order" (*Disgraced* 61). Yeghiazarian maintains in this regard that Jory prefers to dismiss the values of justice, honor, and fair play for keeping order which is but an alternative concept of the status quo (5). By taking Amir's position, Jory contributes to the circulation of the status quo that is victimizing at essence. The victimizers, Steven and Mort in this case, keep playing with colored people in America in their own way. They allow Amir to advance in their "own" firm and exploit his eloquence in accumulating money and fame for the institution and illusively promise him to be a partner provided that he sticks to their own rules of the game. When he violates these rules by representing the Imam in court, his assigned role comes to an end at once. They dispense with him and begin a new game with Jory, an African American. What Steven and Mort do is understood in contrast to what Jory does. It is comprehensible that victimizers everywhere like to propagate the status quo as it serves their interests, yet it is expected from the victimized to resist this propagation and strive for a better pro quo. What Jory does is the

opposite. She allows herself to be manipulated by the white victimizers in the game of chess they are playing, and by doing so she contradicts one of her own principles she has given one day to Amir: "There is a point at which you just have to say 'no'" (*Disgraced* 63).

The second incident that shocks Amir into full realization of who he really is comes on the discovery of the love affair between his wife and her friend. At this moment, in particular, maybe more than at the moment he knows about Jory's nomination, he realizes that the world he has built throughout his life is but a big illusion. Now, his doubts about his wife's view of him as a slave have come true. It is the same point of view Isaak adopts when rationalizing the affair to Emily. As if attempting to escape her true nature, she defends herself claiming that what happened was a mere mistake. Here Isaak gets her back into the truth of things: "I don't think you really believe that" (*Disgraced* 70). Instead of defending herself back, she surrenders to his words and kisses in a hint that she agrees on everything he says. In a moment of sincerity, Isaak insists on revealing the unspoken truth for her:

> He doesn't understand you. He can't understand you. He puts you on a pedestal. It's in your painting. *Study After Velazquez*. 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 … It's the truth, Em. And you know it. You painted it. … If what happened that night in London was a mistake, Em, it's not the last time you're going to make it. A man like that... You will cheat on him again. Maybe not with me, but you will. … And then one day you'll leave him.
>
> (*Disgraced* 73)

In this quote the real relationship between Emily and Amir is uncovered; it is not a normal wife-husband relationship; rather it is a master-slave one. Each gets coupled with the other for a different

reason. For Emily, Amir represents something new she wants to experiment with, a plaything she uses and then throws away when she gets fed up with, or/and an Eastern model to use for her paintings. She once tells him one of the reasons, keeping the rest for herself, for falling in love with him: "It's not what you said. It was the way you were talking to him. So clearly, so tenderly... That was the moment I fell in love with you. You have this ability. To communicate. With anyone. To move them. To make them see things differently" (*Disgraced* 21). And at the very end of the play, she confesses to Amir that she was so selfish throughout. She was blinded by her desire to produce new artful objects even if it was through representing her husband as a slave. She admits that her painting was utterly true in presenting what she has wanted to present: "There's you. And then there's what I wanted to see through you" (*Disgraced* 89). What she wanted to see through her husband is the lusting slave look he is directing towards her as Isaak describes it. On the other part, marrying Emily, for Amir, was a means to an end; it is the passport to social success and self-fulfillment in the US. Marrying a young white woman means easier and quicker involvement in the American Dream. It seems, then, that all the implicit fight between Amir and Isaak is about "who gets the girl," since the girl is the license to Americanization (Yeghiazarian 3). On the other hand, such a marriage satisfies a deep psychological desire of Amir, to gratify his wounded pride by getting his master's wife, in Isaak's words.

The above shocking situations get Amir back to his consciousness of who he is and to what world he belongs. All the masks he has worn before are thrown away, all the defenses he has exploited to elude himself into unity of action and attitude collapse, and all facts he has struggled to hide are revealed naked in the eye. Now he realizes that he has been deceived by the closest persons to him; he was even betrayed by his own self. His dreams of being American have faded away by what he thinks betrayal from his colleague and wife. Now he reaches the conclusion that he cannot

escape his true identity and the accumulated heritage of institutionalized racism in the US by just choosing to Americanize himself following this decision by trying to explain it away without working first to change his image about himself and then to change society at large. "The play begins with a Western consciousness [the wife painting her husband as a slave] representing a Muslim subject," Akhtar states in an interview, "The play ends with the Muslim subject observing the fruits of this representation" (The Personal Is Political). Between these two points lies a long journey that Amir makes; at the end of this journey he discovers that he has to transform this image first in his psyche, then in society to achieve inner peace and consistency on the one hand and external achievement and success on the other. At the beginning of the journey, both Amir and Abe attempt to assimilate to the mainstream American culture either by getting married to a Caucasian woman, changing one's name, or speaking a perfect American accent, yet, at the end, they realize that they are and will remain an ethnic Other whatever assimilative strategies they use. After the recognition of the failure of their assimilation attempts, "the two Pakistani American characters begin to understand that their current hardships are connected to their own colonial history," Hyeong-min Kang argues, "Thus, they come to realize the fact that if they want to fight back they must construct their true post-colonial identity, and rediscover their own religious and cultural values as Muslims" (1). Amir's belated realization of his true identity and the right path he should have taken from the start raises in him a tremendous power of anger, yet in the wrong direction. Instead of turning his rage into an internal constant redeeming power that corrects his path and reconciles him with his heritage, he just gets it out in temporal bursts of verbal and nonverbal violence towards the agents of his victimization – Emily, Isaak, and Jory; he breaks down at the knowledge of Jory's taking his position speaking of his strife in Steven's firm from the first day he joined it as if blaming himself for doing all that for nothing worthy, assaults Isaak and spits in his

face, and finally he strikes Emily hard in the face. Such a wave of rage is but an expression of the long-ago repressed anger against institutionalized racism in the US. He realizes, eventually, that he has wasted his life for nothing; his Job has been lost, his marriage broken, and his assimilation turned to be malfunctioning and that "You're not one of them! And you never will be," remains the only truth in racist America (*Disgraced* 86).

Compared to Abe, Amir's recovery of his consciousness is still deficient. Though Abe was much more assimilationist than his uncle at the begging of the play, he soon reunites with his roots and restores his individual and collective consciousness fully at the end. The one who changed his name from the Muslim Hussein Malik to the Americanized Abe Jensen and whom the stage directions describe on his first appearance on stage as "American as American gets. Vibrant and endearing. He's wearing a KidRobot T-shirt under a hoodie, skinny jeans, and high tops," turns radically into somebody else now (*Disgraced* 10). At the end of the play, he is totally reconciled with himself; he knows who he is and how he should go in life. When his uncle warns him against being deported from the US at any time, he shows no care remarking that "Maybe that's the problem. Maybe we never should've left. Maybe we never should have come to this one" (*Disgraced* 85). Then, he pinpoints to Amir the right future path that he and everybody else of color should pursue: "You think the Prophet would be trying to be like one of them? He didn't conquer the world by copying other people. He made the world copy him" (*Disgraced* 86). In a nutshell, Abe's outlet of the dissonance dilemma his uncle and he himself were one day trapped in is to identify with one's cultural heritage and struggle to be oneself rather than somebody else; they should make others copy them not vice versa; they should stick to and celebrate their roots if they want to emancipate their colonized souls and relieve their tormented psyches of discrepancy. Abe realizes this point so fully and restores his collective consciousness up to the maximum. As such, we never meet the person we have met earlier in the play;

rather, we meet up with a different Abe, to-be Hussein once again, who is ready for anything but dispensing with his cultural roots.

Amir, on the other hand, regains his consciousness partially. Although he discovers, in the same way Abe does, that the assimilative track has not been the right one and despite the energy of anger that is begotten on this discovery, he does not take a vital step towards correcting his path in life. He aborts his self-awareness by turning it into a mere violent burst directed the sources of his victimization. As the anger burst terminates, Amir's restored consciousness fades away. He does not get rid of his assimilationist demeanor at once and forever as Abe does, but he still has another try with it; he pleads his wife to remain with him, asks her to be proud of him, and finally keeps the painting instead of tearing it into pieces. Abe struggles to drag him out of this vicious circle by telling him that he is not and will never be a full American, reminding him of the crimes of the West, in general, against his own people, yet in vain. In face of Amir's deafness to his words, Abe declares that his uncle will never change, very simply because "You've forgotten who you are" (*Disgraced* 86). In this sense, *Disgraced* may be considered a tragedy as "it … ends in a symbolic death" (Shifflett). The symbolic death Shifflett means here is the tragic death of consciousness that will never be recovered anymore as the protagonist has forgotten his roots. "It's disgusting. The one thing I can be sure about with you? You'll always turn on your own people. What do you think that gets you? You think it makes these people like you more when you do that? They don't. They just think you hate yourself. And they're right! You do," as such Abe pronounces a death sentence on his uncle's collective consciousness (*Disgraced* 87). And with the death of collective consciousness, there will never be a really effective solution to Amir's problem on either the social or psychological level.

In *disgraced*, Ayad Akhtar has presented a vibrant drama about institutionalized racism in America that roots deep in every cycle of the American life from the family institution to the work one

passing through the social, political, and religious ones, and he has dramatized the journey of a Muslim protagonist inside this society attempting to gain complete fulfillment in it. He presents a Pakistani American trying to climb up the social, financial, and professional ladder in the US by assimilating to the mainstream culture and turning his back at his Islamic cultural heritage, and how through this pursuit he falls prey to a nagging sense of cognitive dissonance that springs from the discrepancy between his cognitions and behaviour. The hero's attempts to eliminate such inconsistency through the adoption of defense mechanisms like denial and rationalization and the resulting illusionary world he finds himself living in are focal points in the drama. How the main character's defenses aggravate, rather than eliminate, his dissonance, how he is cut off from his roots, and how he has never been accepted fully into the American society are also important points tackled in *Disgraced*. Finally, towards the end of the drama Amir restores his consciousness but still partially opposite to his nephew who fully recognizes who he is and what he should do. Throughout the protagonist's journey of self-discovery in the US, Akhtar has attempted to make the audience think in an untraditional way and discover the right path for themselves: "I aspired to accomplish with this structure a kind of shattering of the audience, after which they have to find some way to put themselves back together" (The Personal Is Political). By shattering here, the playwright means shaking their taken-for-granted self-images and casting doubt on their given world views. "My contention is that your reading of this play tells you a lot about yourself," the playwright states, "and … to create a revolution not on the screen but in the audience" (The Personal Is Political). Akhtar's *Disgraced* belongs, then, to the revolutionary theater that aims first and foremost to revolutionize the consciousness of the audience by removing the masks that blind them from seeing the truth of themselves and their status in the world. Through the story of Amir and his self-discovery journey in the United States, the spectators learn that the true path towards

self-consistency and social fulfilment lies in identifying with one's true identity and cultural heritage rather than assimilating to another racist culture, and the message of the play becomes you need to be yourself not somebody else.

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