



DENVER CENTER FOR THE
PERFORMING ARTS
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INSIDE OUT

A STUDY GUIDE FOR EDUCATORS

DISGRACED



Illustration by Kyle Malone

DISGRACED SYNOPSIS

Raised Muslim in the U.S. by his Pakistani-born parents, Amir Kapoor has left his roots and his family's religion behind and worked hard to fit into mainstream American life. He's married to a beautiful and talented (white) artist and he's about to be made partner at his law firm. At the start of the play, his nephew Abe and his wife Emily ask him to meet with an imam they believe has been falsely accused of terrorism. He agrees, even though he thinks it's a bad idea, and a misleading quote appears in *The New York Times*. His friends and colleagues start asking questions about his background, his name and his faith. Amir and Emily invite Jory, an African American lawyer at Amir's firm and Isaac, Jory's Jewish husband and curator interested in Emily's work, to a dinner party at their apartment. Things get out of hand when Amir discovers Jory has been made partner instead of him, despite having far less experience at the firm, and he expresses some controversial opinions on world politics, religion and identity, opening up the door to some explosive arguments about the assumptions we make about each other's religion and skin color.



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DISGRACED

By **Ayad Akhtar**

Directed by **Carl Cofield**

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ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT – AYAD AKHTAR

Ayad Akhtar is an actor, novelist, playwright and screenwriter. He was born in New York (Staten Island) and raised in Milwaukee by parents who immigrated to the United States in the 1960s from Pakistan. *Disgraced* is not an autobiographical play, but it did start with a real dinner party and Akhtar's awareness of how people's perception of him changed based on things he said about being

Muslim. (Akhtar identifies as a "cultural Muslim," which means he feels greatly influenced by a Muslim worldview, but doesn't necessarily embrace the doctrinal elements of the faith.) Akhtar was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Drama for *Disgraced* in 2013, and has also written the plays *The Who & The What* and *The Invisible Hand*.

THE ISLAMIC WORLD: HISTORY, ART, MATH AND SCIENCE

Islam is a religion. The *Islamic world* is a significant part of the globe that has been greatly influenced by Islamic thought, both historically and currently. It is important to distinguish between elements of Muslim faith and cultural practices of nations in which the majority of the population are Muslim. It is equally important to distinguish between Muslims, who practice Islam, and individuals who are from nations or ethnicities that are majority Muslim, or who speak languages generally associated with the Islamic world.

For example, Amir in *Disgraced* was born in the United States and raised as a Muslim. He does not practice the religion, but changed his last name to avoid assumptions people would make about him based on a Pakistani family name.

Historically, the Islamic world made major contributions to how we understand math and science. The word "algebra" comes from the Arabic "al-jabr," which means "to find the unknown." Muslims had advanced understanding of astronomy (a 14th century timekeeper in Damascus observed characteristics of the moon and the planet Mercury two centuries before Copernicus), and invented navigation instruments that influenced European methods. We even call our numbering system (base ten with numerals 0-9) as "Arabic numerals," which replaced "Roman numerals" (letters standing in for various quantities — I, V, X, L, C, D, M).

The primary book of Islamic scripture is the Quran (also spelled Koran, Qu'rān, depending on who is translating from the original Arabic). Muslims believe the Quran to be the direct Word of God, or Allah, revealed to the Prophet Muhammad by the angel Gabriel (or Jibril) between 610 and Muhammad's death in 632 CE. The Quran consists of 114 *surahs* (or chapters) and was originally revealed in Arabic, which is key to its meaning when recited or read in print. It has been translated into many languages worldwide, but these translations are considered interpretations or approximations of the Quran —

not the Quran itself. In Arabic, the word *quran* means "recitation," as it was originally recited by Muhammad to his followers and scribes. The act of memorizing and reciting the Quran is considered both beautiful and sacred.

Muslims also embrace *hadith*, which are collections of things the Prophet was reported to say during his lifetime, providing additional wisdom and context to the Quran. As the words of the Prophet, *hadith* are revered, but are still secondary to the Quran, which is the Word of God.

The Quran forbids depicting Allah or the Prophets in art. Most interpret this prohibition to apply to depicting people in general. Idolatry, or the worship of religious objects, was common when Islam originated, and the restrictions on human representation in art relate to prohibition against idol worship. Also, Allah is revered as the ultimate Creator — artists depicting people (who were created by Allah) is seen as competing with Allah or taking his role as Creator on oneself. As a result, art in the Islamic world focuses primarily on calligraphy and geometric design (though a tradition of portraiture does exist in some parts of the Islamic world). Calligraphy developed from a desire to write the Quran — the words of Allah — in the most beautiful way possible.

Islamic art flourished in many locations and time periods throughout the Islamic world, with different specialties. The Andalusia region in southern Spain, for example, was ruled and influenced by Muslims for almost 800 years. The Great Mosque-Cathedral of Cordoba is a spectacular example of Islamic architecture (including hundreds of arches), tile mosaics, and overall design. Parts of modern day Iran were known for beautifully designed carpets with intricate patterns throughout the 16th century, and calligraphy throughout the Arabian peninsula and the Ottoman Empire (centered in modern day Turkey) is recognized as some of the most intricate and beautiful in the world.

ISLAM BY THE NUMBERS

Some numbers from the Pew Research Center (pewresearch.org) regarding Islam:

- 1.6 billion: the number of Muslims worldwide (as of 2010). This represents about 20% of the world's population.
- 317 million: the number of Muslims residing in North Africa and the Middle East.
- 986 million: the number of Muslims residing in Asia and the Pacific (62% of the world's Muslim population.) Despite our association with Islam and the Middle East, the majority of worldwide Muslims live outside of that region.
- 12: The number of Anti-Muslim assaults in 2000.
- 93: The number of Anti-Muslim assaults in 2001 — the year the World Trade Center and the Pentagon were attacked.
- 55: The number of Anti-Muslim assaults in 2011 (the year *Disgraced* takes place).
- 91: The number of Anti-Muslim assaults in 2015 (as reported to the FBI — the actual number is probably higher).
- 70%: The percentage of American Muslims born outside the US who have become US citizens.
- 28% of Muslim Americans report that people have acted suspicious of them (post-9/11)
- 22% have been called offensive names.

HISTORY OF PAKISTAN AND INDIA

Starting in the early 17th century, the British began trading with parts of India. By 1850, they had essentially taken over what is now India, Pakistan, and beyond; the British Empire ruled the entire region as a colony. Under British rule, tensions between Muslims (about 20% of the population in 1881) and the dominant Hindus escalated. Once it became clear that the British would be leaving India in the early 20th century, violence broke out between Hindus and Muslims over Muslim autonomy in parts of British India where they were the majority. The British opted to create two independent nations:

India (primarily Hindu) and Pakistan (primarily Muslim). Both nations gained their independence from Great Britain in 1947. The border between the two new nations divided the Punjab region between India and Pakistan and left millions of Muslims on the Hindu side of the border and vice versa — the resulting border conflicts left 1 million dead and about 10 million refugees. Both sides deeply resent the partition, fought wars over the border along the Punjab division and Kashmir territory (in 1948-9, 1965, and 1971), and still contest the border between the two nations.

GLOSSARY

(words and phrases you might not know)

Śiva is a Hindu god associated with both creation and destruction.

Diego Velázquez was a Spanish painter (1599-1660), known for his portraits. One of his famous paintings is **Juan de Pareja**, a portrait of his black assistant, who was both a capable painter in his own right and Velázquez's slave.



Whitney Museum of American Art, located in New York City, was founded in 1930 to display only the work of American artists — a somewhat radical idea at the time.

Imam is Arabic for leader or guide, and generally refers to the leader of a Muslim community. Imams are not formally ordained like the leaders of many Christian congregations.

Taqiyya is a tenet of Islam that allows a Muslim to lie about his/her faith in order to save his/her life.

Patriot Act was passed shortly after the September 11, 2001 attacks, and greatly increased law enforcement's ability to conduct electronic surveillance without a court order, among several other provisions. Within a few years, critics on both ends of the political spectrum argued that it severely violated American civil liberties, privacy, and gave the government far too much power with too little oversight.

The Moghul (or Mughal) Empire was a Muslim empire that ruled large parts of modern day India from the 16th to the 18th century, bringing Persian tastes and artistic styles with them. The Taj Mahal was constructed during this period, and intricate miniature paintings flourished.

2008 financial crisis A combination of factors in the finance world (particularly overconfidence in financial markets after years of steady growth and stability, irresponsible home loan practices, insufficient regulation) led to a major financial crash in 2008.

Goldman Sachs is a New York-based investment bank that was heavily criticized for profiting from the 2008 financial crisis and later paying out significant bonuses while receiving a significant government bailout (which they paid back, with interest).

Pierre Bonnard (1867-1947) was a French painter. Toward the end of his career, he focused on intimate portraits using bold and rich colors.

Victoria & Albert Museum is an art museum in London.

John Constable (1776-1837) was an English painter famous for his landscapes.

Tate refers to two art museums in London. Tate Modern, which houses a large collection of modern art, and Tate Britain, which focuses on specifically British artwork from a wider time line (such as landscape painters J.M.W. Turner and John Constable).

Frieze is an annual art fair in London's Regent's Park featuring work from leading art galleries worldwide.

Orientalism is the assumption by many (white) Americans and Europeans that Western philosophy, political structures, and culture are inherently superior or more evolved than those of Eastern nations and cultures. Whether someone is aware of their bias or not, this underlying belief in Western superiority can cause them to treat members of other cultures or races as if they were children not quite mature enough to live in the adult (read: white) world, or to fetishize cultural objects from non-white / non-Western cultures. This assumption was named and criticized by several critics in the late 20th century, most notably by Edward Said, who was born in Palestine but educated in the United States. In this context, it also means a type of appropriation, in which a white artist is inappropriately adopting an art form or cultural practice they have no right to, or without full understanding of its cultural significance.

Submission is the literal translation of the Arabic word "Islam."

La Tur is an Italian cheese blended from cow's, sheep's and goat's milk.

Food and Drink Practicing Muslims do not consume alcohol or pork.

Moises Alou played Major League baseball for 17 seasons. While playing for the Chicago Cubs, he went after a foul ball when a fan named **Steve Bartman** reached out from the stands to catch the ball, getting in Alou's way. The play was a turning point in the game, and when the Cubs lost, the fans blamed Bartman.

Denial of Death by Ernest Becker, was published in 1973 and awarded a Pulitzer Prize in 1974. Becker argues that we have a fundamental resistance to the idea of our own mortality, and because of that, we like to see ourselves as heroes that can (symbolically, at least) survive our own death. This need to make something eternal out of our finite lives is at the heart of most religion and drives a lot of human conflict.

Charvet is a high-end Paris clothing company. Men's Charvet dress shirts cost \$500-\$600 on average.

Rumi was a 13th century Persian poet and theologian.

Hanif Saeed is a fictional sculptor

Talmud is one piece of Jewish scripture. The Talmud offers commentary and explanation of the *Torah*, which is (in part) the Word of God revealed to Moses.

Islamofascism is a term commonly used to describe militant Islamic movements by equating them with pre-WWII fascist European political systems. Not everyone likes the term — it implies that Islam is the only motivating factor for terrorism and ignores the impact of economic realities and Western (US and European) foreign policy in many developing countries in North Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia — which happen to be majority Muslim nations.

Martin Amis, British novelist, gave an interview in 2006 in which he suggested that the best way to eliminate Islamic terrorism would be to institute travel bans, deportation, and racial profiling of *all* Muslims (or of anyone who “looks” Muslim) so that the Muslim community would be forced to fix the terrorism problem themselves. His comments began a series of debates in which he was repeatedly called Islamophobic and a racist.

Christopher Hitchens was one of the world's most visible and vocal atheists, and he regularly attacked Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. His most popular book is *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (2007). Hitchens was born in Britain, but immigrated to the United States in the 1980s. He died in 2011.

Paella is a Spanish dish usually made up of rice, chicken, seafood, and seasoned with saffron.

Apostate is someone who has renounced their religion. Opinions on punishment for apostates in Islam differ: historically, Muslim apostates were killed or banished, their marriages dissolved and property confiscated. Modern religious thinkers are less vengeful, preferring to let such matters be resolved in the afterlife.

Gabriel or Jibril is the archangel sent to Muhammad to reveal and recite the Quran to him. Gabriel also features in Jewish and Christian traditions.

Joseph Smith founded the Mormon church (the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints).

Moroni is the angel who led Joseph Smith to the text of *The Book of Mormon*.

Henry Kissinger was Richard Nixon's & Gerald Ford's Secretary of State and a major foreign policy influence in United States politics.

Mahmoud Ahmadinajad was President of the Islamic Republic of Iran from 2005-2013.

Jihadist is a word for militant Muslim willing to use violence to promote Islam.

Binyamin Netanyahu is Israel's Prime Minister from 1996-99, and again from 2009 to the present.

Kufi hats are a type of hat with no brim worn by men in West Africa, but the term is often used to describe any head covering worn by a Muslim — all the time, or during prayer.

Mujahideen usually refers to the Afghan resistance movement during the 1979 Soviet invasion and occupation of Afghanistan. The mujahideen were funded and supported by the United States and Saudi Arabia (including Osama bin Laden, a Saudi who fought in Afghanistan and later founded Al-Qaeda and masterminded the 9/11 attacks on the US). The resistance continued for a decade, eventually forcing the Soviets out in 1989. Many historians connect the mujahideen with the rise of hard line Islam in the region, the Taliban, and later **Al-Qaeda**.

STUDY QUESTIONS

Pre-Performance Questions

1. In what ways can visual art or theatre serve as tools to foster discussions about systemic racism and societal roles?
2. What role does the media have in creating and perpetuating stereotypes? In what ways does the media question or resist perpetuating stereotypes?
3. How does the country feel about freedom of religion at this time? Does the freedom encompass all religions or has a gradient scale been adopted?
4. How can one's personal assumptions support or detract engaging with names, rituals, and signifiers within other cultures? How do new generations deal with the opinions of previous generations' in regards to other cultures? Do new generations internalize or rebel against these opinions?

Post-Performance Questions

1. What is the relationship between how one feels about his/her name (feeling empowered or feeling hindered) and their actions? Why do Amir and Abe change their names?
2. What do you think happened at the restaurant between Emily, Amir and the waiter?
3. Do you share how the play's characters feel about Emily using Islamic visual motifs?
4. How does the Velazquez painting reflect the play's characters and events?
5. How would you describe the relationship between Amir and Emily? How does the relationship change and what causes these changes?
6. The play uses two couples to explore relationships, personal choices, and individual behavior. How do the characters, both as individuals and as couples, react to the secrets that are revealed?
7. Why does Amir put up resistance about helping the Imam? What does the media do that upsets Amir? Do you feel that Amir's actions support the Imam?
8. How does Abe's worldview inform the story?
9. What are Amir's feeling about being Muslim? How does his characterization of the religion inform his character and how do these change? Tribal versus nationalism?
10. What moments are shocking in the play? Why are they shocking and what is your reaction to them?

PERSPECTIVES

Make your experience unforgettable when you join us for one of these insightful, educational events:

Creative Team Perspectives

Mar 31 | 6:00pm | The Jones

Get an exclusive insider's perspective before the show when you join us for a free, professionally-moderated discussion with the creative team.

Perspectives: Higher Education Advisory Council

Apr 9 | 1:30pm

Participate in a topical discussion led by members of our academic community after the matinee.

Perspectives: Theatre & Theology

Apr 25 | 6:30pm

Join Pastor Dan Bollman of the Rocky Mountain Evangelical Lutheran Synod after the performance to examine each show through a theological lens.

Disgraced Talkbacks

After every performance

Join us following each performance for a moderated discussion about the themes in *Disgraced*. Details will be announced at your performance.

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

The Denver Public Library recommends:

Read!

We Too Sing America: South Asian, Arab, Muslim, and Sikh immigrants shape our multiracial future by Deepa Iyer. Iyer, the former director of South Asian American Leading Together (SAALT) and a Senior Fellow at the Center for Social Inclusion, examines the lives of South Asian, Arab, Muslim and Sikh immigrants in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks. With such heartbreaking examples of the 2012 massacre at the Sikh temple in Oak Creek, WI, Iyer highlights the dangerous cultural environment people like Amir Kapoor must navigate.

Watch!

The Namesake (2006). Following the story of Nikhil “Gogol” Ganguli, a first generation American of Indian descent, the Namesake has many parallels to *Disgraced*. While Gogol tries his best to separate himself from the culture of his parents, he pursues an American “lifestyle” with all of his heart, going by Nick, dating a rich white girl, but ultimately like Amir he finds that you just cannot separate your identity from your past. This award-winning movie is a beautiful meditation on culture and identity, adapted from Jhumpa Lahiri’s novel of the same name.

Listen!

American Dervish by Ayad Akhtar. When an old friend of his mother’s comes from Pakistan to stay with his family, 12-year-old Hayat Shah’s provincial 1980s Milwaukee life gets upended. This is in many ways a familiar coming-of-age immigrant novel, with tension set between the new and the old as a typical young teen awakens to his place in the world and the context from which his family came. Video games and baseball are contrasted with Pakistani tradition, and a liberal interpretation of Islam is pitted against a more traditional, and at times, reactionary version. *American Dervish* offers a nuanced look at what it means to grow up Muslim in America, and to navigate an identity that is modern, American, and yet rooted in tradition. This emotional and intimate novel marks Ayad Akhtar’s debut as an author, and as a bonus, the audiobook is read by him, giving the experience of listening to this story an added personal feel.

Download!

Zeitoun by Dave Eggers. *Zeitoun* is an elegantly told and very personal account of the 2005 Hurricane Katrina tragedy in New Orleans. Dave Eggers, of McSweeney’s fame, spent three years interviewing and chronicling the story of Abdulrahman and Kathy Zeitoun, and gives us a true tale of heroism and community alongside a Kafkaesque police state nightmare. Abdulrahman, known to all as Zeitoun, chose to remain in New Orleans after his family and the city was evacuated to watch out for his business and rental properties. After the city flooded, Zeitoun patrolled his neighborhood by canoe, rescuing at least ten of his neighbors and caring for the abandoned dogs he found. Only a handful of days after the levees broke, Zeitoun was arrested at one of his properties by heavily armed National Guardsmen and disappeared to a secret detention center made of chain-link cages hastily constructed at the city’s bus depot. Zeitoun, a practicing Muslim and Syrian national was accused of committing acts of terrorism, was held for 23 days and was denied due process, medical care, and was not allowed to contact his family, who assumed him dead. This is the story of one family’s struggle with disasters both natural and man-made; a parable about what happens when the veneer of society is cast off, with the most noble acts existing alongside the darkly illogical.



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