*Disgraced*: An Analysis of Gender Bias and Sexuality

It is apparent that the play *Disgraced*, by Ayad Akhtar, brings to light heavy themes about politics and race. What is not so apparent is how Akhtar uses *Disgraced* to make the audience confront their unconscious gender biases. I found myself sympathizing with the male protagonist, Amir, more than his wife Emily, despite the fact that Amir is abusive towards his Emily. This quote, from Akhtar, explains his intentions for the domestic abuse scene between Amir and Emily, “I want the audience to be so fully humanly identified with a protagonist who acts out in an understandable but tragically horrifying way, that no matter what text you put on top of it, you cannot dissociate yourself from him.” (Akhtar, 92) Akhtar means for the audience to sympathize with Amir. This quote makes the audience accept the fact that he struck his wife, and we may blame her for his violent action. Emily is portrayed as many things, but a character trait of hers that is brought up multiple times in the play, is her unapologetic sexual nature. The fact that the audience sympathizes with Amir, and has disdain for Emily, does not reflect Akhtar’s beliefs, but America’s bias against overtly sexual woman.

Women who openly display their sexuality are often seen in a negative light. The play opens with Emily painting Amir in the likeness of Velazquez painting. “Amir: You sure you don’t want me to put pants on? / Emily: I only need you from the waist up. / Amir: I still don’t get it.” (Akhtar, 6) This scene has Emily painting Amir without his pants, which puts the male protagonist in a vulnerable position. Usually, the woman is the object that is desired or gazed upon in a sexual way, not the male. “In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female.” (Mulvey, 6) In this scene, there is a gender role reversal, Emily takes the active role and Amir takes the passive role. Emily is made out to be the sexual aggressor in comparison to Amir. In American society, there is an obvious double standard when it comes to gender and sexuality. Women are meant to suppress their sexual desires, and men are allowed to be open and flaunt their sexuality. Women with open sexuality are seen as “whores” and labeled as such. From the conversation between Emily and Amir, it is apparent that Amir is uncomfortable being the “sexual object” for Emily’s gaze. The audience recognizes this vulnerability in Amir and may sympathize with him. Emily may be seen in a negative light for putting Amir in the vulnerable situation, and this begins the audience’s apprehension towards Emily.

Emily’s sexuality is again displayed in the beginning of scene three. “Emily approaching him. Sexual. / Amir: Honey. / Emily: What? / Amir: We’ve talked about this. (Beat) It doesn’t help. / Emily: I miss you, Amir. / Amir: I know.” (Akhtar, 34) This scene implies that Emily uses her sexuality to fix her problems. Akhtar could have used many other adjectives to describe how Emily was approaching Amir, but he chooses “sexual.” This was not an accident, he wants the audience to see Emily using her sexuality to get what she wants and hiding from her own problems. Akhtar uses the “(beat)” or pause in this scene to make the audience dwell on what just took place. After a pause, the audience has time to think about Emily acting sexually, and Amir being turned off by it. The audience starts analyzing what problems they are having. Amir says that “We’ve talked about this before”, letting us know that Emily has tried being sexual to diminish their marital problems before. The audience may be turned off by Emily’s behavior because we see how the male protagonist is turned off by it. The audience’s sympathies are with Amir, so we as the audience take on his emotions and are in turn, repelled by Emily’s behavior.

It isn’t until the end of scene three that the audience can finally justify why they feel disdain for Emily. In this quote, Isaac reveals a trying secret about Emily: “Isaac: 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. / Emily: Isaac. / Isaac: And then one day you’ll leave him. Em. I’m in love with you. / Isaac leans in to kiss her. Emily doesn’t move. In or out.” (Akhtar, 70) The audience is now in on the secret that Emily has cheated on Amir. Isaac tells her “You will cheat on him again”, and this statement is so strong that it stays in the audiences mind. We see Emily as having the capacity to cheat on Amir again; she has already been portrayed as overt in her sexuality, so it makes sense that she will stray again. When Isaac leans in to kiss Emily and she doesn’t move away the audience judges that as her willingness to be promiscuous. Sex is a commodity for Emily, and her promiscuity mirrors her value of sex. These thoughts linger with the audience throughout the climax of the play when Amir strikes Emily: “Amir: Em. / Something in Amir’s tone-vulnerable, intense-stops her in place. / Are you sleeping with him? / Pause.” (Akhtar, 74) Again the audience sees Amir in a vulnerable position and sympathy for him is expelled. Emily admits to Amir what the audience already knows, that she has in fact cheated. Amir swells with anger which causes him to strike Emily, “All at once, Amir hits Emily in the face. A vicious blow. The first blow unleashes a torrent of rage, overtaking him. He hits her twice more. Maybe a third. In rapid succession.” (Akhtar, 75) Amir hits Emily for cheating on him, and he hits more than once to represent her capacity to cheat more than once. The audience is shocked at Amir’s actions, but we sympathize with Amir for being cheated on. In Akhtar’s quote from the introduction, he wants the audience to acknowledge that Amir hitting Emily is horrifying, but he also says it is understandable. Emily may be the victim of domestic abuse, but she brought it on by being unfaithful is the mentality of which the audience sees the situation. The audience is able to forgive Amir, but not Emily; which mirrors how American society forgives males for their sexual promiscuity, but not females. “When a boy has sex for the first time at a young age he gets a "high five" for coming into his manhood. A girl on the other hand is considered overly promiscuous if she's sexually active at a young age.” (Gayle, n.pag.)

Emily’s open sexuality has been noted, but in scene one there is a discussion that not only targets Emily’s sexuality, but all white women’s sexuality. “Amir: White women have no self-respect. How can someone respect themselves when they think they have to take off their clothes to make people like them? They’re whores. / Emily: What are you saying? / Amir: What Muslims around the world say about white women.” (Akhtar, 17-18). Amir saying this, foreshadows Emily’s discrepancy with Isaac. Emily represents all white women, and she ends up “taking off her clothes” to make Isaac, her curator, like her. She then becomes “the whore” with no self-respect that she was judged to be anyway. The Muslim mother’s judgment of white women represents America’s bias toward women’s sexuality. Women are viewed as either being the Madonna or the whore. Women are either seen as motherly and pure, or sexual and deviant. The audience sees Emily as impure and deviant, so she is stigmatized as the “whore”.

Gender bias based on sexuality is heavily present in our society and it reflects in our media and entertainment. Emily’s overt sexuality is her crutch in *Disgraced*; it makes the audience dissociate themselves from her. She is seen as responsible for Amir’s rage and violence towards her. At the end of the play, Emily admits, “I had a part in what happened.” (Akhtar, 86) The audience’s judgment of Emily is validated at this point. Akhtar makes the audience aware of their biases by their reaction to the play and what characters they sympathize with. “My contention is that your reading of this play tells you a lot about yourself.” (Akhtar, 92)

Works Cited

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