

**Cultural Appropriation  
in Ayad Akhtar's *Disgraced***

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## Cultural Appropriation in Ayad Akhtar's *Disgraced*

### Abstract

This paper, "Cultural Appropriation in Ayad Akhtar's *Disgraced*," defines cultural appropriation, discusses its benefits and drawbacks, and examines how the play deals with this topic. It is divided into two sections: (a) The theoretical part provides a brief overview of the concept of cultural appropriation and how it is a debatable one; (b) the practical section deals with actual applications. The study concludes that, due to the absence of offensiveness, harm, stereotypes, immorality, property violation, and misrepresentation, the heroine's borrowing from the Islamic culture is not regarded as cultural appropriation. However, Amir's denial of promotion and Imam Fareed and Abe's punishment for upholding their Islamic heritage constitute what is known as cultural appropriation. The misinterpretation of the Holy Qur'an, in addition to Amir's portrait, is considered cultural appropriation. Cultural appropriation needs not always be negative; it could result in something incredibly innovative and successful. Misconceptions and stereotypes are sometimes the fault of some immigrants due to their shameful deeds. Islam has been addressed in terms of racial prejudice, impassion, and political objectives. Finally, in order to avoid losing their unique identities, immigrants should integrate rather than assimilate.

**Keywords:** Ayad Akhtar, cultural appropriation, *Disgraced*, Holy Qur'an, identity, Islamic tiling, Islamophobia, September 11's Attack.

## الاستلاب الثقافي في مسرحية المخزي للكاتب إياد أختر

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### مستخلص

تحاول هذه الورقة البحثية، الاستلاب الثقافي في مسرحية المخزي (2012) للكاتب إياد أختر، تعريف الاستيلاء الثقافي، ومناقشة أنواعه وطرقه، وفوائده وعيوبه، وأخيراً دراسة كيفية تعامل المسرحية مع هذا الموضوع. تنقسم الدراسة إلى قسمين: يقدم الجزء النظري لمحة موجزة عن مفهوم الاستلاب الثقافي وكيف أنه مثير للجدل، ويتعامل القسم العملي مع التطبيقات الفعلية لهذا الموضوع. توصلت الدراسة إلى الاستنتاجات التالية. نظراً لغياب الإساءة والضرر والقوالب النمطية والفجور وانتهاك الملكية والتضليل، فإن استعارة إميلي من الثقافة الإسلامية لا يعتبر استلاباً ثقافياً. ومع ذلك فإن عقاب الإمام فريد وأبي على التمسك بترائهما الإسلامي وريح إميلي من الاستلاب على الفنون الإسلامية يشكل ما يعرف باسم الاستلاب الثقافي. ويعد التفسير الخاطئ للقرآن الكريم بالإضافة إلى رسم أمير على هيئة عبد استلاباً ثقافياً. إن الاستيلاء الثقافي ليس دائماً سلبياً؛ إذ يمكن أن يؤدي إلى أشياء مبتكرة وناجحة بشكل لا يصدق، وأعمال وليام شكسبير من خير الأمثلة على ذلك. المفاهيم الخاطئة والصور النمطية هي في بعض الأحيان خطأ بعض المهاجرين بسبب أفعالهم المخزية. لقد تم تناول الإسلام (دائماً) من منظور التحيز العنصري والعاطفة الملتهبة والأهداف السياسية. أخيراً يجب على المهاجرين أن يتبنوا مفهوم الاندماج بدلاً من مفهوم الذوبان الثقافي من أجل تجنب فقدان هوياتهم الأصلية.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** إياد أختر، الاستلاب الثقافي، المخزي، القرآن الكريم، الهوية، فن كسوة الجدران بالخزف الإسلامي، الإسلاموفوبيا، ما بعد 11 سبتمبر.

## Introduction

This paper examines cultural appropriation in Ayad Akhtar's *Disgraced*. Cultural appropriation is the physical or intangible act of utilizing a minority group's culture to achieve financial and social gains. It is a contentious topic since nothing is really pure or genuine, as postmodernism stresses. This study employs both theoretical and analytical approaches. On the theoretical level, it discusses the definition of cultural appropriation, its various manifestations and (de)merits. On the analytical level, it examines such ideas as the heroine's commercialization of Islamic tiling; the immigrants' punishment for adhering to their own culture that encompasses values, institutions, items, ideas, attitudes, conventions, languages, and even institutions themselves; the significance of Amir's portrait; and the play's misinterpretation of the Holy Qur'an.

## Cultural Appropriation

According to the editors of *Encyclopedia Britannica*, the term "cultural appropriation" first appeared in the 1980s, and was first used in academia to discuss issues such as colonialism and the relationships between majority and minority groups, before making its way out of academia and into popular culture, as with many of these terms. Cultural appropriation is the term used to describe the act of individuals from a dominant group adopting cultural elements of a marginalized group in a manner that exploits, humiliates, or perpetuates stereotypes. In other words, using objects or elements from a non-dominant culture to reinforce oppression or stereotypes while ignoring their original meaning or failing to give credit to their true owners is described as cultural appropriation. It also addresses the unauthorized exploitation of components of their culture, including arts, literary works, clothing, dancing, and other practices (*par.* 1). According to Richard Roger, there are four types of cultural appropriations: cultural exchange between approximately equal cultures (symmetrical and voluntary), cultural dominance (lack of choice, assimilation, integration, intransigence, mimicry, and resistance), cultural exploitation (degradation, distortion, deprivation, and preservation), and multiculturalism (ongoing,

circular, hybrid, and globalized) (477). Cultures may melt and mix naturally when individuals from different origins interact and converse. In reality, the fusion of such civilizations has led to many amazing inventions and works of art.

William Shakespeare's body of work is often cited as a notable example of appropriation. Scholars such as Kenneth Muir argue that Shakespeare borrowed extensively from existing literary/historical sources and incorporated them into his own plays. This practice of appropriation allowed him to draw inspiration from a wide range of works and shape them into his unique creations: "Shakespeare thus combined variety of different sources in the texture of his verse . . . The main plot [of *The Comedy of Errors*] is taken from the *Menaechmi* . . . Shakespeare's conception of his villain-hero, Richard III, came ultimately from Sir Thomas More's *History of Richard III*" (11,14, 32). According to Geoffery Bullough, Shakespeare drew inspiration from Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* in order to create his own plays exploring themes of horror and revenge such as Hamlet, Macbeth, Othello (22). However, while Shakespeare took inspiration from various influences, he ultimately forged his own distinctive style and methodology in crafting his plays. Furthermore, Anna Lindhé highlights another aspect of appropriation related to Shakespeare's plays. She emphasizes that his works have been subsequently appropriated by various individuals, groups, and institutions for different purposes. These purposes include serving imperial, colonial, and national projects, as well as advancing commercial, economic, and political interests (11). In other words, Shakespeare's plays have been used as a means to further specific agendas or ideologies. They have been employed as tools to promote and reinforce concepts of power, dominance, and national identity. Additionally, his works have been utilized for commercial gain and political manipulation. By appropriating Shakespeare's plays, these entities have taken advantage of their cultural significance and widespread recognition to further their own interests and objectives. Overall, the appropriation of Shakespeare's works, both by the playwright himself and by subsequent writers, actors, directors, and institutions, has contributed to the multifaceted and ever-evolving

legacy of his plays, making them not only literary masterpieces but also significant cultural artifacts subject to interpretation and manipulation in accordance with different social and historical contexts.

James O. Young argues that in order to understand cultural appropriation and its repercussions, we must first have a fundamental knowledge of what it is to be a part of a culture that has historically proven difficult to define. The first and most popular definition is attributed to the English anthropologist Edward Burnett Taylor, who stated in 1871 that culture comprises knowledge, faith, art, morals, law, tradition, and any other skills or routines that a person develops as a part of a society. It is not inherited biologically; rather, it is something that a person learns and practices when they are a part of a particular group. He defines culture as the shared characteristics of a group of people, and he sees it as fluid, intertwined, and entangled (10-13).

Young believes that some artists from various cultures participate in cultural appropriation regularly. Picasso is well-known for the motifs that were inspired by African sculpture. The poet Robert Bringham retold the works of the indigenous writers and artists of North America; Goethe, in his *Divan East-West* (1814–1819), drew inspiration from the Persian poet Shams al-Din Muhammad Hafez; and Paul Simon included musical elements from some tribes/places in South Africa. Numerous novels by authors like Tony Hillerman and W.B. Kinsella have as their central theme the indigenous cultures of North America. Cultural appropriation affects many things, including the arts, literature, human remains, archaeological discoveries, anthropological data, scientific knowledge, genetic material, land, and religious beliefs. When appropriated items have ceremonial or spiritual importance in their native cultural context, they can occasionally cause sacrilege. Every society values goods for their aesthetic qualities, according to anthropologists, but whether the idea of art is universal is up for debate. Although the concept of art is universal, anthropologists emphasize that each culture has its own distinctive aesthetic features. Eric Clapton appropriates Blues culture and uses it in his works;

however, since Clapton's culture is not the one where blues music first appeared, his works are regarded as cultural appropriation. Despite not being a Haida, Robert Bringhurst appropriates and retells classic Haida lyrical stories (1-3).

Regarding the moral and aesthetic concerns that arise when cultural appropriation occurs within the context of the arts, there has been much discussion and controversy. Some consider it to be morally repugnant, aesthetically flawed, or both, and worry that it harms members of the estranged culture. It might, for instance, negatively harmonize the original culture. Some others make the distinction between cultural appropriation and cultural borrowing or exchange, which is not objectionable, but many instances of cultural appropriation are morally acceptable and even result in highly valuable aesthetic works of art.

### **Types of Cultural Appropriation**

According to Young, cultural appropriation has been documented in at least five distinct types of activity. The first is the direct appropriation of material (tangible) objects that happens when ownership of a work of art or antiquity (e.g., Egyptian monuments or paintings) is transferred from one culture to another. However, not all instances of this kind of appropriation are as dramatic; for example, buying a piece of locally-made tourist art while visiting Egypt is not cultural appropriation. The second is that of appropriating an intangible content. This could be a song, a poem, a story, or a concept/motif first presented in the work of an artist from a different culture and then reused when this form of appropriation takes place. For example, the plots of the Shakespearean plays are appropriated by Akira Kurosawa in his relevant films. The third is on occasion, rather than copying works, which occurs when artists borrow some stylistic features from a different culture and build new works upon in order to present to their national culture afresh. It might be argued that musicians, who create jazz or blues, though are not a part of the African-American culture, have committed an act of appropriation in a sense. The fourth is that of ideas and/or motifs. This happens when artists draw inspiration from an artwork of a

culture other than their own, without creating pieces in that same style. Although Picasso did not paint in an African-inspired manner, African sculpture inspired some of his ideas, such as those in *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*<sup>1</sup> (1907). Similarly, Henri Matisse's *The Green Stripe* (1905) borrows elements from African art while adopting a style resembling Fauvism (wild animals). The fifth type is that of the subject that could be culturally appropriated. Joseph Conrad, for example, frequently wrote about cultures different from his own, as many of his novels elaborate on the issue. Kipling's *Kim* (1901) is another well-known example of this type, for despite the fact that Kipling was born in India, his own culture is hardly Indian. The cultural appropriation of the subject was thus perceived as a theft (4-9).

### **Achieving Cultural Appropriation: Possible Methods**

It is derived from a predominantly American perspective that *Encyclopedia Britannica* illustrates various ways cultural appropriation can be accomplished. The first sign of cultural appropriation is when a member of the majority benefits financially or socially from the culture of a minority group. The second sign of cultural appropriation is when a member of the dominant group trivializes or mocks the culture of the minority group. Thirdly, when a member of a majority group alters a cultural artifact from a minority group so that it no longer conveys the original meaning, this is known as cultural appropriation. Finally, it happens when a member of a majority group adopts a component/element of a minority culture without impunity and punishment while individuals of minorities have a violent response to the same cultural component (*paras.* 7-9).

*Encyclopedia Britannica* disregards the potential for members of marginalized groups to appropriate cultural elements, as they appropriate elements of the dominant culture and alter or distort them in order to serve a particular purpose. According to Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*, Postcolonialists rewrite history,

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<sup>1</sup> *The Ladies of Avignon*

particularly the colonial era, to highlight the power and resistance of formerly colonized and oppressed people. Sahar Al-Mougy also rewrites two well-known fictional female characters—Amina Abdel-Gawad from the renowned Naguib Mahfouz's *The Cairo Trilogy: Palace Walk, Palace of Desire, Sugar Street* (1956-7) and Catherine Earnshaw from Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* (1847)—in her brand-new book, *Misk al-Tal*<sup>1</sup> (2017) in order to give them the opportunity to be centered.

### **Disadvantages of Cultural Appropriation**

Cultural appropriation can perpetuate stereotypes, exploit groups that are discriminated against, and can also cause disorientation for marginalized groups who want to learn about their culture and identities. For example, the game of Yoga is a free devotional practice, but when some people exploit it and employ it as a sport that maintains human fitness, the trainees are asked for sums of money that may be very high. The cultural alienation of this practice distances it from its origins, rules, and good intentions. In short, cultural appropriation causes damage, distortion, harassment, sacrilege, and finally expresses theft, lack of originality, absence of uniqueness, falsehood, and deception.

### **Advantages of Cultural Appropriation**

Coercive appropriation, the reinterpretation of a weak culture by a strong culture for the purposes of artistic license, financial gain, and cultural pillage are examples of cultural appropriation. It is therefore regarded as stolen, damaging, wicked, and offensive. Shakespeare, who gave us universal works despite his cultural appropriation, represented the Moroccans in *Othello* and the Jewish culture in *The Merchant of Venice*. He has captured the artistic content of many cultures, including the ancient Greeks and Romans; however, some appropriated works seem morally benign, where we find some artists who fit the content and create masterpieces. Some Shakespearean elements have been translated into languages used by

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<sup>1</sup> *Misku Al Tali* [Musk of the Hill]

cultures worldwide, including the Sami language of northern Finland and the Inuktitut language of the native Greenlanders. Cultural appropriation, according to Osman Ahmed, may be both positive and harmful, for it fosters cultural innovation and promotes cross-cultural dialogue, which broadens the expressive boundaries of designers, painters, filmmakers, architects, writers, and philosophers: "It can be an engine that drives culture forward and breaks down borders and divisions, rather than dividing them" (*par.* 1). For instance, critical theories like New Criticism, Post/Structuralism, Post/Modernism mix and overlap with one another, giving the reader a variety of views. Globalization, multiculturalism, and emigration from one ethnic group to another have profoundly affected cultural dynamics. Opportunities for bidirectional or perhaps multidirectional intercultural connection have been made possible by these advances, and they have the potential to bridge the gap between East and West and alleviate the current lack of all forms of conversation in some nations.

### Application Study

*Disgraced*, the Pulitzer Prize-winning play by Ayad Akhtar, delves into the life of corporate lawyer Amir Kapoor, who appears to have it all—a fulfilling career, a loving wife, and promising prospects. However, when Amir gets involved in a legal case defending a Muslim man, his seemingly perfect life begins to unravel. As Amir and his artist wife, Emily, host a dinner party with friends, the evening takes a dramatic turn as they confront issues of religion, race, and violence. Through intense conversations and revelations, Amir is forced to question whether he has denied his true Pakistani heritage in pursuit of a Western ideal of happiness. The play explores themes of identity, cultural assimilation, and the impact of upbringing and heritage on an individual's life choices. Ultimately, *Disgraced* challenges the notion of escaping one's roots and prompts reflection on the complexities of personal and cultural identity.

Akhtar's play has numerous depictions of cultural appropriations. As a member of the hegemonic and dominant

culture, Emily incorporates an element of Islamic culture into her artwork and gains material profit and social standing. She, however, may be accused of Orientalism for being adherent to the culture of the East. Another allusion in the play is to the artists, Henri Matisse and Diego Velázquez, and how much they profited from Mongolian and Moroccan arts, respectively. Immigrants, whether of Islamic or other origins, face persecution, detention, and, in some cases, expulsion as a result of attempting to benefit from their cultural heritage. This is quite seen in the denial of promotion to Amir and the incarceration and interrogation of Fareed, the mosque's imam, and Abe Jensen (Amir's nephew). This is also more related to the themes of American-Muslim identity and Islamophobia. The performance illuminates the reason for the unfairness of cultural appropriation by allowing those who do not suffer from racism to benefit from a culture that is not their own, while stigmatizing people who belong to that culture. Emily and a few other characters interpret various verses from the Holy Qur'an in ways that may deviate from their true meanings and outrage the Muslims audiences/readers. Mort, for instance, misinterprets Yoga as a tool to lose weight and lower cholesterol rather than as a spiritual devotional sport. Um Amir also misinterprets and distorts some white women's activities in a way that disfigures and degrades them. This is called mutual stereotyping and misconception. Amir also spits in the faces of two Jews, Revekah and Isaac, emphasizing the subject of anti-Semitism. According to Charles McNulty, each character in the story embodies both stereotypes and their subversion, creating a captivating portrayal of flawed individuals whose contradictions mirror the complex conflicts ingrained in their histories and cultures. Emily, for instance, remains oblivious to the intricate politics surrounding her privileged acts of cultural appropriation. While her aim is to elevate her husband's identity, her actions inadvertently expose a less noble aspect of her own persona. Ultimately, these characters are a fusion of idiosyncrasies and ancestral influences, influenced by both their own choices and the impact of their surroundings (*Pars. 4, 12*). Finally, Emily's depiction of her husband shows inferiority and indicates the failure

of cultural assimilation that immigrants attempt embracing at all hours.

### **Emily and Islamic Tiling**

Islamic tiling refers to the use of ceramic tiles or marble mosaics to cover the interior and exterior walls of buildings. Various plants, writing, geometric forms, and living beings are shown on these ceramic tiles, glued together and mounted to the walls, particularly the facades and entrances. Muslim artists created ceramics with metallic brilliance in reaction to the tenets of Islamic law, which forbid luxury and excess in the use of utensils and plates made of gold. Muslims acquired this skill from earlier civilizations and arts, mastered it, and refined it. Regardless of political or geographic boundaries, arts transcend all eras and locations. Civilizations and nations may crumble, but the arts endure. According to Mahmoud El Gendi, Islamic arts have borrowed from ancient Coptic and Egyptian art, Byzantine art (in the Levant and Asia), and Sasanian art (in Iran). All of these factors have been combined to produce new forms of art with Islamic aesthetic as well as Sharia-compliant expressions and components. This in turn validates the idea of artistic mutual influence and intertextuality (*Whatsapp*).

According to Erum Naqvi, Emily is a young, talented white American artist who has started her lucrative painting career by incorporating Islamic tiling techniques into her works (6). This activity is termed cultural appropriation since she embraces a culture that is not her own and benefits from it with her coworker Isaac, the art gallery curator. Although Emily's use of Islamic culture is exploitative, it does not offend those who genuinely are a part of that culture. A type of profound surrender is required in order for Emily to consider Islamic arts as a starting point and a doorway to greater liberation. In her situation, it is not about surrendering to Islam obviously, but rather to the official language of stability and tranquility. Islamic arts have served a useful purpose for a thousand years since they are full of beauty and wisdom: "EMILY. It's time we woke up. Time we stop paying lip service to Islam and Islamic

Art. We draw on the Greeks, the Romans— but Islam is part of who we are, too" (20; act 1.2). Isaac eventually comes to the conclusion that her use of some Islamic motifs is significant, novel, and should be viewed in a wider context despite his initial reluctance, because Islam is rich, universal, and a part of a spiritual and artistic heritage from that we can all learn and advance (27-9; act 1.3). According to Edward Said's *Covering Islam*, many authors, including Goethe, Gerard de Nerval, Richard Burton, Flaubert, and Louis Massignon, were fascinated by Islam and drew inspiration from it for their writings (13).

Emily's defense of Islam highlights a complex issue related to the representation of Islam and Muslims in Western societies, particularly in the context of art and cultural appreciation. It suggests that Islam and Muslim culture are more readily accepted and valued when filtered through white artists, scholars, and art dealers in the West. It also implies that well-intentioned individuals like Emily, who may seek to promote understanding and appreciation of Islam, unintentionally perpetuate a form of Orientalism. Despite her genuine desire to promote understanding, her perspective is limited by her cultural background and privileged position within Western society. By defending for Islam and Muslim culture, she inadvertently perpetuates a skewed and mediated portrayal of Islam that caters to Western expectations and preferences. The statement also suggests that the appreciation of Islam in Western societies often remains confined to the realm of art and cultural symbolism, rather than engaging with the lived realities and material conditions of Muslim lives. Islam, according to Nalini Iyer, becomes an abstract concept that can be easily commodified and consumed as a cultural product, detached from the multifaceted experiences and challenges faced by Muslims on a daily basis. This dynamic is further influenced by the broader socio-political and economic structures in which art and cultural production operate. Western societies, particularly liberal elite circles like Manhattan, often have the resources and platforms to showcase and disseminate cultural representations (*Chapter Two*). Consequently, the Western art market becomes a space where Islam and Muslim culture are

predominantly encountered, but these representations may be divorced from the diversity and complexity of Muslim experiences. It is essential to recognize and challenge these dynamics by promoting diverse and authentic voices within the representation of Islam and Muslim culture. By amplifying the perspectives of Muslim artists, scholars, and individuals, we can move beyond Orientalist stereotypes and foster a more nuanced and inclusive understanding of Islam that reflects the rich tapestry of Muslim lives and experiences.

Although Emily claims that her appropriations are not damaging but rather enjoyable, she may be accused of Orientalism for being a foreign person who does not have the right to borrow aspects of other cultures in order to further her career and get social standing: "ISAAC. You know what you're going to be accused of? Orientalism. It's inevitable. I mean, hell. You've even got the brown husband" (20; act 1.2). According to Said, Muslims/colored immigrants have been stereotyped as violent outlaws, primitive people, radicals, terrorists, misogynists, and opponents of American interests, to name just a few. They are routinely labeled as a group threat, exposed to legal and illegal measures, denigrated, discriminated against, and monitored by the state. These images have been carefully chosen to appeal to European and American interests. Said demonstrates how terrorism and wars may result from these misconceptions and stereotypes; Islam can be endlessly classified using a few carelessly broad and frequently utilized clichés: "Islam has always represented a particular menace to the West. . . . Colonialism brought tranquility . . . Iranians were reduced to "fundamentalist screwballs.". . . Americans were by definition innocent and in a sense outside history (Li- Lii- Liv- Lxii- Lxvi). The misuse of power by the government, asserts Haris Nouredin, has negative effects on Muslims in America, as they are routinely demonized, made to feel strange, put under the state's monitoring system, the target of illegal and unlawful actions, and labeled as a growing threat. Additionally, it goes against how the arts may be global and how they can inspire one another: all art forms are mutually reliant (6-17).

On the other hand, Amir—the American of Pakistani origin and the apostate Muslim—prefers Emily's artworks that depict natural settings to her paintings that draw on his former identity. Isaac concurs and expresses that it may not be a particularly fruitful path for her to pursue (29; act 1.3). However, he changes his mind in response to the acclaim, compliment, adulation and admiration that her works receive for drawing inspiration from and incorporating Islamic aesthetics. Amir's remarks tend to perpetuate stereotypes and revive a more pronounced division between the West and East, where individuals of Muslim faith are simplified and reduced to symbols of otherness and animosity. Hares Nouredin thinks that these writers succumbed to the allure and influence of sensationalist media, creating pieces that claimed to represent or provide insights into the American experience. However, in doing so, they unintentionally reinforced prevailing notions that Muslims were inherently threatening and culturally distinct. Their works, whether autobiographical or laden with cynicism, only served to perpetuate stereotypes and revive a stark division between the West and the East. In this divisive framework, Muslim individuals were reduced to mere symbols embodying differences and animosity. By producing such works, these artists were able to gain sudden fame and rapidly advance their careers. The public's fascination with sensationalism and the reinforcement of existing biases allowed these writers to captivate audiences and rise to overnight stardom. Unfortunately, this came at the expense of perpetuating harmful stereotypes and furthering a problematic narrative that marginalized Muslim individuals and fueled cultural divisions (24).

To conclude, Emily has benefitted from Islamic arts without demeaning those who practice them, but Abe, Tarek and Imam Fareed are punished for upholding Islamic culture. Emily also angers her husband by depicting him as a slave and offends certain Muslims by misinterpreting some Qur'anic verses. These actions are therefore regarded as cultural appropriation.

Double Standard: Stereotyping and Demonization of Islamic Immigrants

When people from Muslim backgrounds identify with Islamic culture, they experience shame rather than admiration. According to the play, white people, who gain from the portrayal of non-white cultures, are more likely than non-white people to obtain favorable acknowledgment or opportunity to use their culture. This explains why cultural appropriation, like the work of Emily, may be unjust and hurtful.

Emily, for instance, gains from her exposure to Islamic culture, but Amir is not recommended for a promotion at work when his superiors learn of his Islamic ancestry and lineage though he is a fully assimilationist and secular person and homosexual. His bosses read the article where Amir is cited in the press as having backed Imam Fared, a Muslim religious leader who has been unjustly implicated in the financing of terrorism/Hamas. They are concerned with Amir's connections to the Muslim community as a result of learning that he is from a Muslim background and choose to replace him as a partner in the legal company with Jory, a less competent individual. While Emily is lauded for her adherence to Islamic tradition, Amir is criticized for his purported affiliation with it.

Abe, Amir's nephew, has a similar occurrence when out at Starbucks with his buddy Tariq. They are both wearing oriental-inspired outfits that represent their Islamic culture. The Barista becomes suspicious of their presence and worries that they may be terrorists. As a result, she phones the police, and after questioning Tariq and Abe, the FBI request that Abe disclose his friends so that they might be reported (46-48; act 1.4). Abe and Tariq face harassment when they attempt to publicly promote their Islamic culture, unlike Emily, who succeeds by embracing aspects of Islam.

The differential benefits Emily receives from Islamic culture compared to South Asians like Amir, Abe, and Imam Fared contribute to the ongoing argument that American society unfairly penalizes ethnic and religious minorities who endeavor to represent or promote their cultural heritage. The inability of the play's Muslim background characters to assimilate into American culture is further supported by these instances.

Amir divorces his wife after beating her severely for having an affair with Isaac. His violent beating of his wife is emblematic of his hypocrisy, as the act embodies the draconian violence against women that he earlier abhorred. He even cites how the Qur'an is widely interpreted as allowing men to beat their wives when they disobey orders: "*Men are in charge of women . . . if they don't obey ... talk to them. If that doesn't work . . . Don't sleep with them. And if that doesn't work . . . Beat. Them*" (36; act 1.3). In his 2016 dissertation, Rohini Chaki explores the play's depiction of violence, both in words and actions, and highlights its connection to various political narratives. Chaki argues that the violence portrayed in the play is intertwined with a larger political history that encompasses several significant aspects. Firstly, Chaki discusses the impact of global capital and how it contributes to cultural violence. Secondly, Chaki examines the gendered violence associated with religion (194-5). In other words, Global capitalism, with its emphasis on profit and exploitation, can lead to the erasure or commodification of cultural identities. This can result in a sense of trauma and displacement for postcolonial societies, as their cultural heritage becomes marginalized or distorted. Religious ideologies, when taken to extreme or misinterpreted, can be used as tools of oppression and perpetuate violence against specific genders. This can be seen in the context of religious fundamentalism or rigid social structures that restrict and harm individuals based on their gender. Additionally, Akhtar discusses the violence depicted in the play as a response to a long history of persecution. This suggests that the characters in the play may be driven to violence as a means of self-defense or as a reaction to the systemic injustices they have experienced over time.

Emily points out that the translation could also mean "leave" their wives, but Amir insists that Islam is fundamentally misogynistic. In brief, this act symbolizes Amir's hypocritical embodiment of the stereotype of Muslim males he has tried to distance himself from. He is fired from his work due to his duplicity and hypocrisy, and the play closes as he packs up to leave his opulent home and confront the unknown. Strangely, his wife paints him as a slave who benefits from American civilization, and Isaac

sees him as a foolish jihadist. His name changes from Amir Abdullah to Amir Kapoor and his apostasy from his religion are not enough to make him a first-class American. This makes his wife and colleagues see him as a second-class citizen. According to Robin E. Field, Akhtar convincingly illustrates the coexisting beliefs in Amir that his identity can be crafted like a performance, while also being an inherited and imposed aspect that he lacks control over (49). Lastly, his happiness upon the demolition of the two skyscrapers is significant, "Your very own personal Moor . . . Emily emerges into full view, on the ground, her face bloodied" (28- 45-47; acts 1.3-4). Here we commemorate Kirpal Singh, the protagonist of Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* (1992), an Indian immigrant who commits to the English and gives his life for them. However, the secretary informs him that he is not an Englishman but a second-class citizen. He then goes back to his country of origin after bombing Japan with the American nuclear weapons and killing seven million victims in addition to the deportation of a whole nation to set up a homeland for Israel (Zidan 38-42).

As for Abe, he regains his original identity, but unfortunately he adopts the jihadist ideology after seeing the abject failure that has dominated his uncle, Amir. By the beginning of the play he is dressed in American style, and has changed his name from Hussein to Abe, "Vibrant and endearing . . . From Hussein Malik, he goes to Abe Jensen" (10-11; act 1.1). After being interrogated, he starts to lose hope in American society, which is still riddled with bigotry of all kinds, especially towards Muslims while stifling and savoring the Jews:

ABE. That's what they've done. They've conquered the world. We're gonna get it back. That's our destiny. It's in the Quran. (*Emily appears at the door, listening. Neither Abe nor Amir notice.*) For three hundred years they've been taking our land, drawing new borders, replacing our laws, making us want to be like them. Look like them. Marry their women. They disgraced us. They disgraced us. And then they pretend they don't understand the rage we've got?" (50; act 1.4)

Amir and Abe are vastly dissimilar. The former can be categorized as a second generation immigrant while the latter is a first generation one. Abe still retains his original tongue, cultural norms, and even Pakistani identities. He feels more resolute and enthralled by his roots. As a result, it is likely that he embraces either assimilation or radicalism, but he chooses the second for being discriminated. According To J. Edward Mallot, Aslam's *Maps for Lost Lovers* (2004) parallels a number of works examining the development of radical Islam among young British Asian people. In Hanif Kureishi's "My Son the Fanatic" (1997), the story delves into the experiences of a Pakistani immigrant who strongly identifies with secularism but becomes deeply disturbed when his son embraces fundamentalism. Interestingly, the narrative bears an eerie resemblance to the events of the September 11 and July 7 terrorist attacks, almost appearing as a prophetic reflection. Kureishi further explores related themes in his second *The Black Album* (1995), primarily focusing on the intense anger and resentment that young individuals harbor towards white Britain as a whole (301).

### **Mocking and Ridicule: Portraying Amir as a Slave**

This section discusses the degree of hostility, disdain, and conflict between the play's characters, who stand in for the three monotheistic religions, through an image appropriated from the Spanish artist Velázquez. Other things discussed in this section include spitting in the faces of Revkah and Isaac, referring to white women as prostitutes, endorsing Jury instead of Amir, and finally demonizing Amir as a fascist jihadist. According to Said, Muslims and Arabs are primarily described as "oil suppliers or as potential terrorists," for they are "fatalistic children" haunted by their dictators and scholars; however, America disregards Israel that is "fully willing to mandate its actions by religious authority and by a very backward-looking theological doctrine" (28, 30-1). Those issues highlight misconceptions, stereotypes, and (un)voiced clashes between civilizations, either unintentionally (Emily's portrait) or intentionally (spitting on faces/describing white women as whores).

The tension between Amir's career goals and his heritage as a member of a minority Muslim group is shown by Emily's portrait, "Portrait of Juan de Pareja"—who happened to be of Moorish descent . . . So there you are, in your six-hundred-dollar Charvet shirt, like Velázquez's brilliant apprentice-slave in his lace collar, adorned in the splendors of the world you're now so clearly a part of . . . And yet . . ." (28; act 1.3). Emily's well-meaning yet problematic exertion of control over her husband's identity and appropriation of Islamic art traditions highlight the Western hegemony in shaping the portrayal of Muslims: "Emily has dressed and posed Amir in the stylings of elite Western excellence and refracts his identity through the prism of her Orientalist gaze, leaving half of her husband both literally and figuratively out of view. Through this evocative visual setup, Akhtar conveys a complex and nuanced dynamic of Emily and Amir's relationship that resonates through the dialogue to follow" (McCalee Cain 2). After seeing a racist waiter mistreats Amir, Emily feels moved to create the image, so she wants to present Amir as a successful lawyer in his Manhattan apartment, much as Velázquez displays his apprentice Juan de Pareja in a proud position. Her portrait reveals inadvertent bigotry and resentment,

AMIR. That you want to paint me after seeing a painting of a slave.

EMILY. Juan de Pareja was Velázquez assistant, honey. And a painter in his own right.

AMIR. And his slave.

EMILY. Until Velázquez freed him" (8; act 1.1).

The prevalent white American prejudice that stereotypes South Asian males as unemployed immigrants or Islamic terrorists directly opposes this picture. Amir's irritation at being compared to a slave complicates Emily's painting. Amir's irritation is made worse by Isaac's suggestion that Emily's painting, like the original, highlights the issue of a person's status despite the respect attached to the two images. In this sense, Amir's image serves as a metaphor for how, despite his accomplishments, discrimination against his Muslim identity continues to endanger Amir's desire to be respected

and acknowledged as a capable lawyer. Akhtar hints that Amir is asking the same question, uncertain of his position and standing in the mainstream culture of American society, by having him gaze at the artwork at the end of the play, "EMILY. Goodbye. Please. Don't write me anymore. (*She exits. Long beat. Amir notices the painting. He walks over to it, picks it up. Then tears the rest of the wrapping off. He takes a searching long look. Lights out*) (51; act 1.4).

The portrait represents Orientalism, a propensity among American artists to portray immigrants' cultures as exotic, strange, and subtly inferior. Emily presents her South Asian husband Amir in a questionable light by equating him with a freed slave and portraying him as an outsider who is trying to assimilate into American culture, but is not treated on an equal footing with wealthy white people. Located prominently at the center of the set, Emily's artwork is a contemporary reinterpretation of elements derived from the Muslim world. Its presence serves as a stark and unsettling reminder that her attempt to pay tribute to her husband's culture is entangled with her own personal artistic aspirations, raising concerns about cultural appropriation and exploitation. In Scene Three, Amir appears alone on stage with Jory and refers to the two of them as the new Jews of New York, implying that their Jewish bosses never allow them to be elevated or promoted to be equal partners since they are colored and of a lower race (26; act 1.3). When Amir informs his employer that they would not have condemned him if he had been seen in the newspaper with a rabbi rather than an imam, Akhtar furthers his impression of Amir's evident animosity against Jews, "Your husband broke down. Was crying at a staff meeting... Steven thought the comment was anti-Semitic" (42; act 1.3). In the end, it is unclear whether Amir's hostility against his superiors stems from the fact that they criticize his Islamic background or from the fact that he has not overcome the anti-Semitism that his mother has already instilled and implanted in him when he was a little boy. Amir and some other Muslims are to fault for their demise because they occasionally behave shamefully and allow others to misrepresent them.

Anti-Semitism and Islamophobia are brought up through deliberate spitting and deflection/misconception among the play's characters. When Amir tells Emily and Abe about his relationship with the Jewish girl Ravekah and how his mother spits in his face and threatens to break his bones when she learns the story, as well as how he spits in her face when she confirms the information the following day at school, anti-Jewish sentiments first surfaces in the first scene, "Then she spat in my face . . . Amir spits in Isaac's face" (13-44; act 1.1-4). Amir spits in the girl's face, just as his mother spits in his face, despite the fact that he has no strong feelings for Jews prior to his mother's interference. Associating Islam with anti-Semitism and other types of bigotry, Amir uses the tale to support his decision to leave the religion, which he views as wholly negative. The issue of spitting is brought up again near the play's end when Isaac and Amir are on the verge of getting into a physical altercation when Amir starts spitting in Isaac's face, so Isaac makes derogatory remarks by referring to Muslims as "people animals" (44; act 1.4). Shylock is being spit on by Antonio in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. Spitting on someone's face is one of the most painful forms of humiliation and great contempt, and an ordinary person may think his life is worthless in the face of fighting such an insult. According to Azeez Daem, since spitting normally occurs on the ground, it could also imply that the person being spat on has a face that resembles the ground, on which he spits and gets trampled. This could be linked with Prophet Mohamed, who emphasized that spitting on someone's face is not permitted, and also with Christ, who was tortured and spitted on several times by the Jews. The pain of spitting is arguably one of the most painful hurts and has the biggest impact on the soul of all the torments, bodily suffering, and mental anguish that Jesus has experienced: "Some people spit on Jesus after the Sanhedrin condemned him (Mark 14:65) (*My Translation*). In brief, spitting stresses disgust and discomfort, guilt and shame, anger and contempt. Through the recurrent usage of this concept, Akhtar demonstrates how Amir still harbors the anti-Semitic hatred instilled in him by his mother, illuminating the reasons for his failure to assimilate into Western society. Obviously,

Islam does not advocate for it, but rather for tolerance among all faiths: Muslims are one thing, but Islam is another.

Amir argues that conservative Muslims see western women as prostitutes who are always eager to attract others by removing their clothing, "They're whores" (13; act 1.1). Emily's adultery, Jory's inefficiency, and Isaac's lack of a firm opinion highlight how postcolonial literature pursues retribution and revenge; Tayeb Salih's protagonist, Mustafa Saeed, rapes as many British women as he can, "Salih's *Season of Migration* does not adopt . . . colonial iconography or the emphasis on white male explorers invading virgin territory. Instead, the novel presents the reader with the image of a black male explorer, Sa'eed, laying claim to white woman as his virgin territory" (Tomi Adeaga 247). Eastern women were portrayed as very primitive, uneducated, poor, imprisoned/immured, obedient, subjugated, veiled, lusty and physically a part of the home throughout the colonial era. Moreover, in contemporary portrayals of easterners, they are seen worshipping while being gay, having affairs while donning veils, and working as CIA informants or terrorists. The west, however, views Muslims and the Arabs negatively due to their vile, shameful deeds. Amir battles vehemently against Muslims and Islam while Emily vigorously defends both, either faithfully or unfaithfully.

### **Interpretation of the Qur'an and its Departure from its Original Meaning**

One of the different methods of cultural appropriation is the act of interpreting minority's cultures in an inappropriate/offensive way that may defame their cultural/religious beliefs. Emily and Jory sometimes interpret several Holy Qur'an passages in ways that entirely contradict with their genuine meanings. Amir's peculiarity and deconstructive approach are terribly elaborated throughout the play. He is considered one of the most severe distorters of the Qur'an in order to show to the West that he is more American than the Americans, in addition to presenting a romantic picture of the Jews and the Talmud; as a result, failure always starts within of us, and once that happens, it is simple for the enemy to take control. In

*Covering Islam*, Said emphasizes how the West, and particularly America, views Islam as a continual source of worry, hostility, and terror. It stands for dictatorship, simplicity, and monoethnicism:

From at least the end of the eighteenth century until our own day, modern Occidental reactions to Islam have been dominated by a radically simplified type of thinking that may still be called Orientalist. . . . There are, of course, many religious, psychological, and political reasons for this, but all of these reasons derive from a sense that so far as the West is concerned, Islam represents not only a formidable competitor but also a late coming challenge to Christianity. . . . Only Islam seemed never to have submitted completely to the West; and when, after the dramatic oil-price rises of the early 1970s, the Muslim world seemed once more on the verge-of-repeating its early conquests, the whole West seemed to shudder. (4-5)

Consequently, Muslims are also frequently depicted as being involved in terrorism, oil production, seeking whiteness and more recently, as being violent mobs. Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* delves into the complexities of multiracial relationships within the postcolonial context. One of his arguments is that, for a Black man, achieving a romantic or sexual relationship with a white woman can be seen as a way to attain whiteness. In this context, Fanon suggests that by being loved by a white woman, the Black man feels validated and worthy of white love. He perceives this relationship as a means of assimilating into white culture and embracing its standards of beauty and identity (*Chapter Three* 45). In other words, Fanon contends that within a postcolonial framework, the Black man may believe that his value and desirability are affirmed when he is romantically involved with a white woman. The white woman, in this context, represents a symbol of whiteness and all its associated privileges. By being loved by Emily, Amir believes that he is experiencing a kind of love typically reserved for white men. This perception feeds into the idea that he can "marry" aspects of white culture, beauty, and whiteness, essentially assimilating into a privileged social position.

Some of the characters, whether of Islamic or non-Islamic descent, emphasize Islam's antipathy for art, "it's not as fertile a direction for her . . . Paintings don't matter?" (29-33; act 1.3), Islam's inadequacy for the age because it is resurrected more than 1,500 years ago and comes from the desert, "Islam comes from the desert. From a group of tough-minded, tough living people. Who saw life as something hard and relentless. Something to be suffered" (33; act 1.3), and the Qur'an is not as flexible as it is in Talmud, "I mean look at the Talmud. They're looking at things from a hundred different angles, trying to negotiate with it, make it easier, more livable" (33; act 1.3), Wife-beating, "Wife beating . . . Men are in charge of women . . . if they don't obey . . . talk to them. If that doesn't work . . . Don't sleep with them. And if that doesn't work . . . The root verb can mean "beat." But it can also mean "leave." So it could be saying, if your wife doesn't listen, leave her. Not beat her" (36; act 1.3), prohibition of the niqab, "You're okay with them banning the veil? . . . The veil is evil. You erase a face, you erase individuality. Nobody's making men erase their individuality" (36-8; act 1.3), the Prophet (May God bless him and grant him peace) defending the woman before the revelation, but all that changes after meeting our master Gabriel The Qur'an, "That is exactly what Muhammad didn't do. Here's the irony: Before becoming a Prophet? He was adamant about his followers not abusing women. And then he starts talking to an angel. I mean, really?" (38; act 1.3), like the Taliban, "The Quran is about tribal life in a seventh—century desert. The point isn't just academic. There's a result to believing that a book written about life in a specific society fifteen hundred years ago is the Word of God: You start wanting to recreate that society. After all, it's the only one, in which the Quran makes any literal sense" (38; act 1.3), is proud of fighting and dying for Islam, "Isaac: (*Warmly*) Them's fightin' words . . . It means you fight for it, too. Politics follows faith? No distinction between mosque and state?" (20- 38; act 1.2-3), polygamy, "you can have multiple wives" (38; act 1.3), and prohibiting dogs from entering households, "He used to say angels don't enter a house where there are pictures and/or dogs" (33; act 1.3), and finally, "Let's stone adulterers. Let's cut off the hands of thieves. Let's kill the unbelievers" (38; act 1.3).

All of these violations are examples of cultural appropriation that corrupt the original culture by divorcing the text from its genuine meaning, whether on intentionally or purposefully. Additionally, this disgusts minorities since it desecrates their holy beliefs and cultural heritage. Unfortunately, Islam has always been in a posture of self-defense.

In *Disgraced*, the audience is compelled to question the identity of the individual or individuals who have been labeled as disgraced and the reasons behind it. Is it Amir, a Muslim who has renounced his religion, equating it to the outdated principles of America's founding fathers, as he highlights his wife's conflicting beliefs? Is it Emily, who admires a culture that would harshly punish women for the same act of adultery she committed against Amir? Alternatively, is Akhtar using these characters to make a broader statement about the shamefulness of favoring one culture over another in a multicultural society like America? (Doni Wilson *Para* 8).

## Conclusion

Cultural appropriation refers to the act of utilizing elements from a minority group's culture for personal or societal gain. It can involve both tangible aspects such as objects, clothing, or symbols, as well as intangible elements like customs, traditions, or practices. When examining cultural appropriation, it is often categorized into different types: tangible, intangible, style, motif, and subject-matter. Tangible cultural appropriation involves the appropriation of physical objects or artifacts from a particular culture. This can include clothing, accessories, artwork, or even architecture. Intangible cultural appropriation, on the other hand, pertains to the appropriation of non-material aspects like language, music, rituals, or cultural practices. Style appropriation occurs when elements of a specific cultural style, such as fashion, music, or visual aesthetics, are borrowed or imitated without proper understanding or acknowledgement. Motif appropriation involves taking distinctive motifs or symbols from a culture and using them without consideration for their cultural significance. Subject-matter

appropriation refers to the adoption of themes, narratives, or stories from a particular culture without understanding or respecting their context or meaning. Cultural appropriation is considered harmful, as it can lead to various negative consequences. It can distort the original meaning or significance of cultural elements, causing misinterpretation or misrepresentation. This can be seen as a form of theft, dishonesty, or even sacrilege, as it disregards the cultural value and integrity of the appropriated elements. Additionally, cultural appropriation can perpetuate stereotypes, disrespect traditions, or lead to the commodification and commercialization of cultural practices. Furthermore, cultural appropriation often demonstrates a lack of originality and distinctiveness. By borrowing from another culture without proper understanding or acknowledgement, the appropriator may fail to contribute new ideas or create something truly unique. Instead, it can result in the replication or imitation of existing cultural expressions, which undermines the originality and authenticity of the appropriated culture. In brief, cultural appropriation encompasses the act of utilizing elements from a minority culture for personal or societal gain. It can take various forms and categories, but overall, it is seen as harmful, disrespectful, and lacking in originality. Recognizing and respecting the cultural context and significance of borrowed elements is crucial in promoting cultural understanding, appreciation, and avoiding appropriation.

Cultural appropriation manifests through several signs. One is when members of the majority group benefit socially or economically from elements of a minority group's culture, exploiting and profiting from cultural expressions without proper acknowledgment or compensation. Another sign is demeaning or trivializing aspects of a minority culture, reducing traditions to stereotypes or fashion trends, disregarding their cultural significance. Altering the meaning of cultural items by members of the majority group is another form of appropriation, disconnecting them from their original context and eroding authenticity. Lastly, cultural appropriation involves unequal consequences, where the majority group adopts cultural elements without facing the same negative repercussions as the marginalized group. These signs expose power

imbalances, calling for cultural sensitivity, respect, and understanding to prevent the exploitation and misrepresentation of minority cultures. Encouraging open dialogue, mutual consent, and amplifying marginalized voices can foster a more inclusive and equitable approach to cultural interactions.

The concept of cultural appropriation is a complex and nuanced one, and opinions on its acceptability vary widely. While some argue that certain instances of cultural appropriation can lead to the creation of meaningful and significant works of art, others assert that it perpetuates power imbalances and can be disrespectful or exploitative. One perspective is that cultural borrowing or exchange, which involves respectful engagement and mutual appreciation of different cultures, is distinct from cultural appropriation. In this view, cultural borrowing emphasizes a collaborative and inclusive approach that fosters cultural understanding and celebrates diversity. It acknowledges the influence and interconnectedness of cultures, promoting a healthy exchange of ideas and practices. Furthermore, proponents of the argument that nothing is truly authentic or pure contend that cultures are constantly evolving and influenced by external factors. Cultural practices and traditions often undergo modifications and adaptations over time, influenced by historical, social, and global interactions. This perspective challenges the notion of cultural ownership or exclusivity, suggesting that cultures are inherently dynamic and influenced by external influences. However, it is important to note that cultural appropriation can still be seen as problematic for several reasons. Critics argue that it often occurs in contexts where dominant cultures appropriate elements of marginalized cultures without understanding or respecting their significance. This can reinforce stereotypes, exploit marginalized communities, and perpetuate power imbalances. Additionally, the commercialization and commodification of cultural elements without proper attribution or compensation are also points of concern. Overall, discussions around cultural appropriation involve a balance between respecting cultural heritage, acknowledging power dynamics, promoting inclusivity, and fostering meaningful cultural exchange. It is essential to approach the topic with sensitivity, awareness, and a willingness to

engage in dialogue about the complexities of cultural dynamics in an increasingly interconnected world.

The topic of cultural appropriation is indeed complex and can encompass various perspectives. In the given context, it is stated that Emily's borrowing from Islamic culture is not considered cultural appropriation due to the absence of harmful intent, offensiveness, stereotypes, immorality, property violations, or misrepresentations. However, it is argued that Imam Fareed and Abe facing penalties for maintaining their Islamic traditions, as well as Emily benefiting financially from utilizing Islamic arts, exemplify instances of cultural appropriation. The statement also suggests that cultural appropriation includes the distortion of both Amir's position and the original meaning of the Holy Qur'an. This highlights how appropriation can alter or misrepresent cultural practices and religious texts, potentially causing misunderstanding or offense. It is acknowledged that cultural appropriation can sometimes lead to inventive and prosperous outcomes, indicating that it need not always be seen as negative. However, the subsequent statement points out instances where modern depictions of Eastern cultures, including Islam, may perpetuate stereotypes or negative perceptions due to the actions of some individuals. This suggests that negative portrayals can influence the Western perception of Muslims. Interestingly, despite Amir's strong opposition to Islam and Muslims, Emily stands up for both. This may indicate a counter-narrative within the story, where the character of Emily challenges the negative stereotypes and assumptions associated with Islam and defends the culture against Amir's prejudices. Lastly, the statement touches on the idea that immigrants should integrate rather than assimilate in order to preserve their distinct identities. This suggests that maintaining one's cultural heritage while adapting to a new environment can lead to a stronger sense of identity and cultural diversity. Overall, the provided text highlights various aspects related to cultural appropriation, including its presence in the story's context, the potential for negative portrayals, the defense of cultural traditions, and the importance of preserving distinct identities in immigrant communities.

Characters in literature, film, or other forms of storytelling can both fulfill and undermine stereotypes. Stereotypes are simplified and generalized perceptions or beliefs about certain groups of people, often based on race, gender, ethnicity, or other characteristics. While stereotypes can perpetuate biases and reinforce societal norms, the portrayal of characters has the potential to challenge and subvert these stereotypes. On one hand, characters may fulfill stereotypes by embodying the expected traits and behaviors associated with a particular group. This can occur for various reasons, including the desire to create familiar or easily recognizable characters, to cater to audience expectations, or even due to the limitations of the storyteller's own biases or lack of understanding. For example, Amir, a character of a specific racial or ethnic background, is portrayed using stereotypical characteristics commonly associated with that group, such as a sassy Black woman or a nerdy Asian student. On the other hand, characters, like Emily, can also undermine stereotypes by deviating from or challenging the expected norms. These characters possess qualities, abilities, or perspectives that defy the stereotypical assumptions commonly associated with their group. They may exhibit complexity, depth, and individuality, thus humanizing and subverting the stereotypes attached to their identity. Through these characters, storytellers have the opportunity to challenge societal prejudices, expand representation, and promote diversity and inclusivity. By undermining stereotypes, characters can challenge the audience's preconceived notions and encourage critical thinking about stereotypes and the harm they can perpetuate. Such characters can demonstrate that individuals are not defined solely by their group identity but are multifaceted beings with unique experiences and perspectives. By presenting counterexamples to stereotypes, storytelling can help promote empathy, understanding, and the recognition of diverse narratives and identities.

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