

Is There a Way Out?

—the possible reconciliation between conflicting ideas

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The present presentation analyses two plays addressing the conflicts between the West and the Islamic world, both of which were staged at Chinese Grand Theater, Shanghai, in August 2018. One is adapted from a novel written by the Nobel Prize winner Orhan Pamuk titled *Snow*, which is a story set in the volatility of today's Turkey with its clashes between tradition and change and religion and modern atheists. The other one is an American play *Disgraced* written by novelist and screenwriter Ayad Akhtar. Set in Manhattan New York, the play is centered on sociopolitical themes such as Islamophobia and the identity crisis of Muslim-Americans.

Both plays end tragically. The protagonist in *Snow*, Ka, who seeks salvation through love is disillusioned and overwhelmed by the conflicting ideologies and political polarities. His death denies the possibility of striking a balance between these conflicting powers. In *Disgraced*, racial and ethnic prejudices stubbornly persist in even the most progressive cultural circles in the United States, and the major character Amir Kapoor and his wife Emily end up splitting up because the post 9/11 political and social circumstance and public discourse in America do not support their marriage.

Although fundamentally different in terms of their cultural sentiment and political concerns, two common themes the two plays share are the identity issue and the exploration of the ways of achieving reconciliation between antagonist forces.

In *Snow* directed by Blandine Savetier, the theatrical conflicts involve people's disagreements about the governance of the country, the secularization process and the revitalization of Islam as well as the national identity versus western influences. Pamuk considers himself a westernized Turk who tries to be an impartial mediator between east and west. According to him, the politicians and elites should create an organic combination of east and west. He wants combination, not slavish imitation of the west. He wants the combination of "the Eastern past and the Western present,"¹ a state of golden balance between the two worlds.

In *The White Castle*, Pamuk presents the east-west encounter through Hoja and the Venetian slave. Hoja, a Turkish, represents east and the Venetian slave represents western civilization. The two live together and collaborate on an incredible weapon. This relationship represents collision as well as collusion between east and west. Finally, the east and west identities exchanged. Hoja leaves Turkey replacing the Venetian slave and living in Venice and the

¹ Haryana. *Conflicts in Orphan Pamuk*, p9.

http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/193662/9/09_chapter%202.pdf

Venetian slave has acquired Turkish identity, since their striking resemblance is able to make them so. The conflict ends with a solution with east-west exchanging their knowledge and values.

Twenty years after the *White Castle* was written, Pamuk seems less sure about his romantic expectation. In *Snow*, the reconciliation fails which indicates that the experimentation of building a harmonious society may not succeed under the present situation.

In the play, the fundamentalist Islamists stand vehemently against the westernization of Turkey, which they believe would lead to the mental and intellectual enslavement of Turkish people. The western mindset sees Turkey as ignorant Other and the western press misrepresents the incidents taken place in Turkey and twisted them to conform to their stereotypes.

Ka comes to Kars (a remote Turkish town) to report about the suicide incidents of young girls over the matter of headscarves. As a journalist and an outsider, he is supposed to be objective and “impartial,” yet he soon finds that “impartial” is a dubious conception since the inscriptions of cultural heritage and a person’s past experience work constantly to challenge such a posture, not only on the conscious level but also on the unconscious level. Ka’s embrace of western thinking and his Islamic heritage confuses him and puts him in a moral dilemma. He can’t tolerate the superstition and the violence there in Kars nor does he find his isolated presence in Europe agreeable. His efforts to bring different communities together and bridge their differences are crashed miserably and his attempts to escape also end up in failure. He gets himself involved involuntarily in betrayal, police violence, coup and murder.

In the last scene of *Snow*, the inhabitants of Kars tells the audience/readers not to believe a word anybody says about them because “no one could understand us from far away.” This statement further diminishes the hope of bringing understandings to peoples from different cultures and ethnic groups.

In *Disgraced*, the conflict between the Islamic heritage and the prevalent discourse in America exists on several dimensions simultaneously. Amir is a traitor of Islamic community; he casts aside his Muslim identity for his career and openly criticizes Muslim for promoting intolerance. He was born in the United States and has climbed to the elite status through his own effort and has never identified himself as one of his own people, whereas his nephew Abe thinks that the west has “disgraced” Islamic world, but that they will take it all back one day.

On a larger social space, Amir finds himself inseparable from his ethnic heritage. Although Amir is married to a white wife and is on a partner track for a distinguished law firm, a self-made man like Benjamin Franklin and a specimen of America Dream, he is still under constant suspension just because of his color and his Islamic affiliation. He is forever one of his own

people. He is forever one of his own people and his individual being has been erased for either convenience or deliberate discrimination. The presence and success of Muslim population in general are vastly underestimated and underreported.

Amir's wife Emily is fascinated with Islamic artistic traditions and claims Amir to be her muse. Different from Amir's self-loathing and Abe's radical stance, Emily attempts to establish a middle ground. This beautiful yet naive ideal is stretched out by the pulling power of the opposing extremes. Emily's effort to have Amir reconcile with his heritage, and her ultimate failure is an embodiment of the struggle between the rational and extreme interpretations of Islam.² Emily views Islam as a religion rich in cultural achievements despite Amir's stubborn refusal to see Islam as nothing more than a collection of outdated, "backward" ideas that promote savagery. The conflict between the couple recapitulates a struggle of competing interpretations of Islam on a broader scale: the appreciation of Islam's contribution to the world civilization and the radical and politicized interpretation. The rift is intensified at the dinner party at Amir's apartment where heated discussion of political issues soon leads to confrontation and physical violence as Amir finds out his friend's betrayal and his wife's affair with her curator. Out of rage, Amir beats his wife, an act which damages their marriage and repudiates the audience.

Torange Yeghiazarian, a playwright, director and producer, states as follows:

Disgraced can be seen as a modern day *Othello*. the difference being that in *Disgraced*, Amir has internalized Iago. What has been lost after 500 years of so-called enlightenment is Honor. No one is honorable in this modern day *Othello*. They cheat and lie to advance the value system of a society that has enslaved them for centuries. And in the process, they hurt and demonize one another verbally, emotionally and physically; leaving the audience wounded and beguiled.³

Both *Snow* and *Disgraced* are attempts to address the wound—the most sensitive issue in the contemporary political discourse: Islam and identity. Both plays lay bare the complexity that arises when nationalism and religion are put into an antagonistic positions, and compete for the allegiance of their subjects. While the endings of *Snow* seems to be bleak and pessimistic, *Disgraced* remains open-ended, leaving hope for change and future improvements, which raises the question: Is there a way out of this trap of racial, cultural and ideological collision? How to reconcile the irreconcilable?

² John Borelli and Drew Christiansen, S.J., "America's Muslims: Mainstream and Middle Class," *America Magazine*, August 29, 2011. <https://www.americamagazine.org/issue/785/article/americas-muslims/>

³ Torange Yeghiazarian, "On Ayad Akhtar's *Disgraced*," *Arab Stages* 2, no. 2 (Spring 2016) <https://arabstages.org/2016/04/on-ayad-akhtars-disgraced/>

Re-conceptualization

French Philosopher Francois Jullien, in his speculation about European and Chinese interactions, proposes to not view culture through cultural gap or differences. Since gap alludes to a divide that separates. Instead he uses the word “*écart*” which has an ability to create tension and maintain the opposites in a vis-à-vis relationship. According to Julian, “*écart*” asserts a productive tension between two things or thoughts, where neither one nor the other are dropped but both remain in a sort of interactive presence. Both parts, which constitute the tension of the “*écart*,” scrutinize each other, look at each other.⁴ He then proposes to use cultural distance to replace cultural difference. Also he thinks people should avoid talking about cultural values because values are always related to power. He says,

I don't think that there are cultural characteristics and a definition of a specific cultural identity in opposition to another. The peculiarity of culture seems to be its mutation—otherwise, culture is dead. Culture is at the same time homogenising and heterogenising itself... There is not Culture in the first place and then afterwards, there are different cultures.⁵

In my view, to redefine some of the basic cultural concepts, such as gender, identity, nationality, language, boarder, as well as culture and sub-culture and to adopt a different set of vocabulary in the discussion of these issues can provide new theoretical lenses from which people can possibly acknowledge the ambiguity of ideological ideas and embrace the alternative cultural resources. The awareness of culture and gender being located in the spectrum of opposing properties can lead people to step outside their fixed mindset and acknowledge the racial and cultural stereotypes on their part, which is the very first step of peace-making process. The redefinition is necessary also because of the evolution of human language. Our language absorbs new words almost on a daily basis. They enrich, refresh and update our understanding and interpreting of major cultural concepts as well.

Re-contextualization

In his research about Chinese philosophy, Francois Jullien finds that Ancient Chinese thought is very contemporary in that it lays emphasis on the process, contingency and the evolution of the ideas, which I think also applies to conflict of all sorts. Chinese *I Ching* sees Yang and Yin as the primary opposites; creating the eternal wheel of change. It takes life as dynamic and focuses on the present moment. The Monarchs created great wealth and long lasting peace in Tang Dynasty in China does not mean it shouldn't be ended in 1911. We now accept cremation

⁴ Karoline Feyertag, “In Conversation with Francois Jullien: Making Ambiguity Fertile is the Present Mission of Thought,” Paris, May 26, 2015. http://on-dizziness.com/francois_jullien/

⁵ Ibid.

as a better way of burying the dead people (in China) but it does not make us condemn people who did not choose to do so 50 years ago. The acknowledgment of the flux of tradition and cultural values will open people to new ideas that significantly depart from the culturally-inherited ideas. Cultural values, traditions as well as conflicts are contextual and circumscribed rather than intrinsic and universal. This is important for there are many substantial errors contained within our culture of birth, which we are unable to discover if we remain ensconced permanently within the mindset of that culture. Also framing narratives in their original picture makes people aware how certain traditions or concepts came into being in the first place, how they were valid in those particular times and circumstances and how they were misused by power.

Initiating Dialogues

In *Communication and the Evolution of Society* and *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Jürgen Habermas explores the ethical principals in inter-subjective communications between agents of different interests, which is emancipated from the traditional power relations. He calls for a dialogue in which secular and religious forms of thought mutually inform and learn from each other. Change can possibly spring from a dialogue concerning the commitments, feelings and practical circumstances of people in dialogue, sharing their reflections on what is right and what is feasible.

But the preconditions that agents must manifest to meet Habermas's conditions as participants in communicative rationality are demanding—common language, shared value systems, inclusive and the recognition of the equal rights of the other, etc. This argument is criticized by American philosopher Richard Rorty, who in his *Universality and Truth* argues that Habermas's discourse ethics holds on to a conceptual ideal of social structure that transcends real cultures and communities. For him, there isn't any objective truth, and neither there is a pre-existing rationality.

Brazilian educator Paulo Freire's pedagogical theory is also inspiring in resolving conflicts. In his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, he highly values freedom in the teaching process and explores the possibility of social justice and conflict transformation through dialogue. Dialogue, Freire argues, is the synthesis of reflection and action. Dialogue can engage people in equal exchanges and creative actions rather than turning the other into receiving objects.

I think that true dialogue is never the one between people who are already on the same page. True dialogues always happen between different positions and viewpoints; otherwise it is more like preaching to the converted. True dialogue is a non-self-centered communication. The word dialogue denotes a position that is beyond the self. It is a dialogue of multiple clusters of ideas, each of which has its own center and structure. The self reaches out and finds a new footing in

other narratives and frameworks. In dialogue, we are open to truth (multiple truths actually). We don't claim to win or possess truth. We let truth possess us.

It should be noted that racial and cultural conflict is a very complicated issue which requires painstaking negotiations. There is no easy way out but the change of mindset will bring about the potential for people to coexist with disagreements and compromise without subjugation.