

The Collapse of the Dreams in Ayad Akhtar's *Disgraced*

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ABSTRACT

The Collapse of the Dreams in Ayad Akhtar's *Disgraced* (2012) is a study that examines the theme of shattered dreams within the context of the play. Focusing on the protagonist Amir Kapoor, a successful Pakistani-American lawyer, and his journey from assimilation to self-discovery. This study explores the consequences of denying one's cultural heritage and the disintegration of personal aspirations. Through a close analysis of Amir's interactions with his wife, friends, and colleagues. This research investigates the underlying factors that contribute to the collapse of dreams and the unraveling of identity. By employing literary analysis and cultural criticism, the research sheds light on the complexities of cultural assimilation, racial identity, and the pursuit of success in contemporary America. This study aims to deepen the understanding of the play's exploration of shattered dreams and its broader socio-cultural implications.

Keywords: The Cruel optimism, impasse, crisis ordinariness. Ambivalence. The good life

إنهايار الأحلام في مسرحية العار لإياد أختار

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الملخص:

إنهايار الأحلام في العار (2012) لإياد أختار هي دراسة تبحث في موضوع الأحلام المحطمة في سياق المسرحية. بالتركيز على بطل المسرحية أمير Kapoor، المحامي الباكستاني الأمريكي الناجح، ورحلته من الاستيعاب إلى اكتشاف الذات، تستكشف هذه الدراسة عواقب إنكار التراث التراثي وتفكيك التطلعات الشخصية. ومن خلال التحليل الدقيق لتفاعلات أمير مع زوجته وأصدقائه وزملائه. تبحث هذه الدراسة في العوامل الأساسية التي تساهم في إنهايار الأحلام وتفكيك الهوية. ومن خلال توظيف التحليل الأدبي والنقد التراثي، يسلط البحث الضوء على تعقيدات الاستيعاب التراثي، والهوية العرقية، والسعى

لتحقيق النجاح في أمريكا المعاصرة. تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تعميق فهم استكشاف المسرحية للأحلام المحمضة وأثارها الاجتماعية والثقافية الأوسع.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التفاؤل القاسي، المأزق، أزمة الاعتياد، التناقض، الحياة الجيدة

1.1 Introduction

In literature, dreams serve as symbolic representations of the subconscious mind, offering insights into characters' innermost desires, fears, and conflicts. They often function as narrative devices, allowing authors to explore themes of identity, memory, and the human condition in a deeply psychological manner. Dreams in literature can take various forms, including actual dreams experienced by characters during sleep, as well as metaphorical or symbolic dreams that reflect their innermost thoughts and emotions. As Sigmund Freud defines the dreams as "symbolic representations of the subconscious mind, offering insights into characters' innermost desires, fears, and conflicts. They often function as narrative devices, allowing authors to explore themes of identity, memory, and the human condition in a deeply psychological manner." (1983, p. 30).

The Collapse of Dreams is a research topic that delves into the representation and exploration of dreams, aspirations, and their eventual failure or disillusionment in literary works. This research investigates to depict the fragility and vulnerability of human dreams, as well as the reasons behind their collapse. It explores the psychological, social, and cultural factors that contribute to the downfall of dreams, whether they are personal ambitions, societal ideals, or collective dreams of a community or nation.

The research aims to analyze the thematic significance of the collapse of dreams in literature, examining its impact on characters, plot development, and overarching themes within literary texts. It seeks to understand the implications of failed dreams on characters' identities, relationships, and motivations, as well as their broader implications for society and human existence. It also sheds light on evolving attitudes towards ambition, disillusionment, and the pursuit of happiness. Overall, "The Collapse of Dreams in Literature" research offers valuable insights into the human condition, exploring the complexities of hope, aspiration, and the harsh realities that often lead to the shattering of dreams in the literary imagination.

1.2 The Collapse of Dreams in Literature

The collapse of dreams in literature encapsulates a profound exploration of human aspirations, their pursuit, and ultimately their unraveling. This thematic motif reverberates across various literary works, serving as a poignant reminder of the fragility of ambition and the complexities of the human condition.

At its core, the collapse of dreams represents the disillusionment that often accompanies the failure to achieve one's aspirations. Whether it manifests as the shattered dreams of a protagonist striving for success, the dashed hopes of a community yearning for utopia, or the thwarted ambitions of a generation seeking fulfillment, this theme resonates with universal human experiences. It speaks to the inherent vulnerability of human desires and the inherent risks of pursuing the

seemingly unattainable. Literature offers a rich tapestry of narratives that illuminate the collapse of dreams from various perspectives and contexts (Bayat and Taqizadah, 2023, p.7).

One of the most iconic examples of the collapse of dreams in plays is found in William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (1623). The titular character's relentless pursuit of power and glory leads to his ultimate downfall, as his unchecked ambition and moral corruption ultimately consume him. Through Macbeth's tragic trajectory, Shakespeare offers a searing commentary on the corrosive nature of unchecked ambition and the dire consequences of succumbing to the allure of power (Majeed, 2015, p.6)

Similarly, in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949), the collapse of dreams is depicted through the tragic plight of Willy Loman, a struggling salesman whose relentless pursuit of the American Dream ultimately leads to his demise. As Willy grapples with feelings of inadequacy and disillusionment, the play poignantly explores the gap between the promise of success and the harsh realities of failure, exposing the inherent contradictions of the American Dream (Corrigan, 2011, p.101).

Moreover, the collapse of dreams serves as a narrative device employed by authors to probe deeper into themes of identity, society, and existential angst. In addition, the collapse of dreams in literature underscores the transient nature of human existence and the impermanence of worldly pursuits. Characters often find themselves caught in a perpetual cycle of striving and disappointment, grappling with the futility of their efforts in the face of external forces beyond their control (Shaan, 2020, p.3).

1.3 Ayad Akhtar: Biography and Literary Career

Ayad Akhtar is a renowned Pakistani-American playwright, novelist, and screenwriter born on October 28, 1970, in Staten Island, New York. He grew up in a Pakistani immigrant family, which greatly influenced his work. Akhtar graduated from Brown University with a degree in theater and then went on to earn his Master of Fine Arts from Columbia University's School of the Arts (Chatterjee, 2008, p. 114).

His breakthrough came with the play *Disgraced*, which premiered in 2012 and won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 2013. The play explores themes of identity, religion, and cultural assimilation through the lens of a successful Pakistani-American lawyer. *Disgraced* garnered critical acclaim for its provocative and thought-provoking examination of contemporary issues (Ibid).

Akhtar continued to make waves in the theatrical world with works like *The Who & The What* (2014), *The Invisible Hand* (2015), and *Junk: The Golden Age of Debt* (2016), which further showcased his talent for tackling complex social and political themes. In addition to his work in theater, Akhtar has also ventured into the world of literature, publishing novels such as *American Dervish* (2012) and *Homeland Elegies* (2020), which further explore the nuances of Muslim-American identity and the complexities of contemporary society (Benea, 2015, p. 57)

Throughout his career, Ayad Akhtar has been recognized with numerous awards and honors for his contributions to the arts. His works continue to resonate with audiences around the world, sparking important conversations about culture, religion, and the American experience. Ayad Akhtar's works often delve into the complexities of identity, particularly the tension between cultural heritage and assimilation in the American context. His narratives frequently explore the disillusionment and the collapse of dreams (Trussell, 2014).

1.4 *Disgraced*: A Close Look

Disgraced (2012) is a gripping play that delves into complex themes of identity, religion, cultural assimilation, and the American Dream. Its events revolve around the character of Amir Kapoor, a successful Pakistani-American lawyer living in New York City. The story unfolds during a dinner party hosted by Amir and his wife, Emily, where tensions quickly escalate as conversations turn to religion, culture, and identity. Amir, who has distanced himself from his Muslim heritage to assimilate into American society, grapples with his identity and struggles to reconcile his past with his present (Naqvi, 2020).

As the evening progresses, secrets are revealed, and the characters' prejudices and biases come to the forefront. The play explores themes of assimilation, prejudice, privilege, and the complexities of modern identity. Throughout the play, Akhtar masterfully navigates the dynamics of power and privilege, highlighting the subtle ways in which systemic inequalities manifest in everyday interactions. The characters' interactions are fraught with tension, as they confront their own assumptions and biases. Amir's internal conflict between his cultural heritage and his desire for success in the corporate world drives much of the drama (Olson and Cooper, 2021).

The play also delves into the complexities of marriage and relationships, as Emily grapples with her own identity and ambitions. As the dinner party unravels, the characters' true selves are laid bare, leading to a shocking and thought-provoking climax. *Disgraced* challenges the audience to confront their own prejudices and assumptions, making it a powerful and unforgettable theatrical experience. With its sharp dialogue, complex characters, and timely themes, the play offers a searing commentary on the American experience and the quest for identity in a diverse and divided society (Ibid).

1.5 Misrecognition and Self-deception of Amir's Integration to American Dream

In order to get the American Dream, the main characters such as Ameer Kapoor has attached to some strategies. One of Amir's primary strategies for achieving the American Dream is to assimilate into American society by distancing himself from his Pakistani Muslim heritage. He changes his name from Abdullah to an Indian one, Kapoor, and suppresses outward displays of his cultural identity. By adopting Westernized behaviors and beliefs, Amir deceives himself into believing that he can fully integrate into American society and attain success without acknowledging his roots. Also he has changed the place of his parents' birth from Pakistan to India. (Abdelfadeel, 2020, p. 15).

AMIR: I had a meeting with a couple of the partners today. I mean, if you could call it that. I'm in my office, red-lining a contract due at six. Steven comes in. With Jack. Sits down. Asks me where my parents were born.

EMILY: Pakistan.

AMIR: I said India. That's what I put on the form when I got hired (Akhtar, 2013, p. 36).

The second strategy is the pursuit of material success: Amir's career as a successful corporate lawyer is driven by a desire for material wealth and social status, which he believes are essential components of the American Dream. He prioritizes financial gain and professional advancement over personal integrity and moral values (Abdelfadeel, 2020, p.16).

Amir Kapoor's third strategy to achieve the American Dream involves marrying a white American woman, Emily. By marrying Emily, Amir believes he can further integrate into American society and gain social acceptance. This strategy represents a form of self-deception as Amir convinces himself that marrying outside his cultural and religious background will erase any barriers to assimilation and success (Lee, 2018). According to that he has to behave like an American, to speak like an American and believe in what American beliefs in order to get the American Dream.

On other hand, Abe, Amir's nephew, alters his name as a strategy for security reasons, but from another aspect, he keeps on his religion, making him look more stable and resolute than his uncle Amir.

Abe is greeted by Amir who says, "come in Hussein" (Akhtar, 2013, p.12). The viewer quickly learn that Amir's nephew believing that "things are easier for him with his new identity. He has altered his name from" Hussein" to "Abe Jensen" (Akhter, 2013, p.13) Abe is altering his first name to protect himself "It is okay to hide your religion if you have to "(Ibid). But the difference between Abe and his uncle, Amir, is embodied that Abe does not change his religion, he only hides his original identity.

So this play reveals the character's crisis ordinariness that represents their ambitions to conform to the expectations of the dominant American culture as Berlant defines the crisis ordinariness as" a natural and routine aspect that sometimes organizes life"(2011, p.1). As the play unfolds, Amir's misrecognition of his decisions and his self-deception about the American Dream are challenged by the harsh realities of prejudice, discrimination, and betrayal. He is forced to confront the contradictions in his beliefs and actions, leading to a reckoning with his true identity and values.

Soon, Amir's dreams of integration and achieving the American Dream gradually unravel through a series of traumatic events, ultimately leading to the collapse of his aspirations. These events serve as poignant signs of Amir's disillusionment and the erosion of his sense of identity and belonging.

The first sign of the collapse of dreams is Amir's marriage to Emily, a white American woman, initially represents his attempt to integrate into American society and fulfill the ideals of the American Dream. However, the discovery of

their failed marriage becomes a symbol of cultural dissonance and the limitations of assimilation. When Emily draws a picture based on Velazquez's painting of his slave Juan de Pareja, it serves as a stark reminder of the racial and cultural differences between them, highlighting the superficiality of their relationship and the challenges of bridging the divide between their worlds.

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

EMILY: He was Velazquez's assistant, honey.

AMIR: His slave.

EMILY: Until Velazquez freed him

AMIR: Okay. (Akhtar, 2013, p.6)

Despite his achievements, he is still a slave in the eyes of the people closest to him, such as his wife. The second sign is a betrayal and loss of trust. Amir's dreams of integration are further shattered when he discovers that Emily has been unfaithful to him with Isaac, a Jewish art dealer. This betrayal not only undermines Amir's sense of trust and security in his marriage but also exposes the fragility of his efforts to assimilate into American society. The revelation of Emily's infidelity serves as a devastating blow to Amir's dreams of integration and acceptance, leaving him feeling betrayed and disillusioned.

The third sign is the professional setback and identity crisis that Amir has faced. Amir's dreams of achieving success in the corporate world are dealt a severe blow when he loses his job at the company that promotes Jory instead of him. This professional setback serves as a reflection of the systemic barriers and biases that Amir faces as a Pakistani-American in a predominantly white corporate environment. The promotion of Jory, a black woman, over Amir highlights the complexities of race, gender, and identity in American society and exacerbates Amir's sense of alienation and identity crisis. Thus, he tells Jory:

you have any idea how much of myself I've poured into that place? That closet at the end of the hall? Where they keep the cleaning supplies? That was my office! Yours had a view of [...] park? Your first three years? Were you ever at work before anyone else in the morning? Were you ever the last one to leave? Cause if you were, I didn't see it I still leave the office after you do! (Akhtar, 2013, p. 72).

Amir's traumatic events of not being promoted and his wife's betrayal makes him blame referring himself as "a nigger "you think you're the nigger here? I'm the nigger!! Me!!(Akhtar, 2013,p. 70).

As each of these events unfolds, Amir's self-confidence and self-worth are gradually eroded, leaving him feeling adrift and disillusioned. The collapse of his dreams of integration and success in America forces Amir to confront the harsh realities of prejudice, discrimination, and systemic inequality. He grapples with feelings of inadequacy and disillusionment, questioning his own worth and identity in the face of societal expectations and biases.

Overall, the signs of collapse in Amir's dreams of integration and achieving the American Dream in *Disgraced* serve as a powerful exploration of identity, ambition, and the complexities of navigating cultural and societal expectations.

Through Amir's character, Akhtar offers a searing commentary on the challenges of assimilation, belonging, and the pursuit of success in a diverse and divided society.

1.6 Amir's Wake

The revelation of Emily's infidelity with Isaac and the loss of his job serve as wake-up calls for Amir, shattering the illusions he had about his marriage and professional success. He realizes that the dreams of integration and acceptance he pursued were built on shaky foundations, leading to a deep sense of disillusionment and betrayal.

Amir undergoes a period of intense self-reflection and soul-searching. He grapples with questions of identity, belonging, and authenticity, confronting the contradictions in his beliefs and actions. Amir's wake becomes a moment of reckoning as he confronts the harsh realities of prejudice, discrimination, and systemic inequality, especially when he discusses with Abe about their fathers' coming to America.

ABE: Maybe that's the problem. Maybe we never should've left. Maybe we never should have come to this one.

AMIR: There's a reason your father came here. Same reason my father did. They wanted to make a better life for themselves and their families. (Akhtar, 2013, p. 83)

Societal and family disintegration refers to the breakdown of social structures and relationships, both at the broader societal level and within individual families. This break down can occur due to various factors, including cultural clashes, interpersonal conflicts, economic pressures, and ideological differences. Also the differences in values, beliefs, and cultural backgrounds can lead to tension and conflict within society and families. When individuals or groups fail to reconcile these differences, it can result in estrangement and disintegration of relationships (Al-Sammarraie, 2022, p. 41)

Despite the collapse of his illusionary world, Amir is still attached to the illusion of his dreams. He asks his wife for forgiveness and asks her to come back with him, but she refuses.

Conclusion

The collapse of dreams serves as a central theme, illustrating the complexities of identity, assimilation, and the pursuit of the American Dream in a diverse and divided society. Through the experiences of the protagonist, Amir Kapoor, the play explores the consequences of denying one's heritage and the pitfalls of chasing success at the expense of authenticity and integrity.

The gradual unraveling of Amir's dreams reflects the harsh realities of prejudice, discrimination, and systemic inequality that permeate American society. From his disillusionment with his failed marriage to a white American woman, to the betrayal of trust by his colleagues, and the loss of his job, Amir's journey serves as a poignant commentary on the challenges of assimilation and the complexities of navigating cultural and societal expectations.

At its core, *Disgraced* delivers a compelling message about the complexities of identity, the illusions of the American Dream, and the

consequences of denying one's heritage. Through the experiences of its characters, the play challenges the notion of assimilation as a pathway to success and highlights the importance of embracing one's cultural identity and staying true to oneself.

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