Disgraced Study Guide

Disgraced by Ayad Akhtar

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

This play, set in New York City circa 2011/12, is the story of an ambitious South Asian lawyer who, over the course of several months and as the result of several personal confrontations, is faced with several unsettling truths about himself, his situation, and his perspectives. The play asks challenging questions about the nature and purpose of faith, about relationships between white and non-white races in contemporary America, and about the process and responsibilities of creating art.

The play begins with Amir, a busy thirty-something lawyer in a prestigious New York firm, taking work-related cell-phone calls while being sketched by his Caucasian artist wife Emily. Inspired by a racism-defined encounter with a waiter the night before, Emily sees visual and thematic parallels between Amir and the subject of a centuries-old painting by Spanish artist Diego Velazquez. Amir and Emily's conversation, and the sketch work, are interrupted by the arrival of Abe, Amir's hip nephew who has changed his name and style of dress in order to seem more American and/or less of a potential terrorist threat to white Americans. Abe asks Amir to support the case of an Imam (Islamic religious leader) who has been imprisoned without cause. At first Amir refuses, but Emily convinces him he should do so. Later, when a picture appears in a local newspaper of Amir with the Imam, he worries about how he (Amir) will now be perceived at his conservative law firm.

Meanwhile, the similarly ambitious Emily is working towards getting her artwork shown at a prestigious gallery, with the help of Jewish curator Isaac who, one evening some months after the sketching scene takes place, comes to have dinner with Amir and Emily, accompanied by his African-American wife, Jory. Initially friendly conversation soon takes a dark and confrontational turn, as the increasingly drunken Amir (who has just learned that his past is being investigated / questioned by senior members of the law firm) confronts everyone in the room (Emily, Isaac, and Jory) about their beliefs about him and his people.

Eventually, tensions mount to the point where Emily feels she has to calm Amir down. As she takes him out of the room, conversation between Jory and Isaac reveals that Jory has something to tell Amir about his relationship with the rest of the firm. Un-soothed by his conversation with Emily, Amir storms out, followed by Jory who sees an opportunity to tell him what's going on at work. While they're gone, conversation between Isaac and Emily reveals that they had an affair while attending an art fair in England a short time before. As they approach each other again, Jory returns, sees them together, and erupts into anger. Amir also returns, having just learned that Jory has been promoted over him. Amir's drunken, enraged rant triggers physical violence, first between Amir and Isaac and then between Amir and Emily, who is assaulted.

The final scene of the play sees a now conservatively dressed Abe telling Amir that he (Abe) is in trouble with the law because of a racism-fueled confrontation with a young white woman. Even though Amir offers to help him, Abe is still bitter and angry. After he leaves, Amir attempts a reconciliation of sorts with Emily (who came with Abe) but she

refuses. After she's gone, Amir is left alone with a full painted version of the sketch Emily drew earlier … he looks at it / himself closely as the lights fade, and the play ends.

Scene 1

Summary

Part 1 - South-Asian corporate lawyer Amir, dressed from the waist up in a suit and from the waist down in only boxer shorts and socks, is being sketched by his wife, Caucasian artist Emily. They both liken what Emily is drawing to a painting (of a black slave that the artist eventually freed) by the classical Spanish painter Velazquez, commenting that Emily's inspiration for her drawing seems to have been triggered by an encounter with a racist waiter that they had last night. As the sketching continues, businessman Amir takes calls on his cell phone – including one from his boss / partner Mort – about an important deal that he (Amir) is about to close.

There are also references to an impending weekend visit Amir and Emily are scheduled to make to the home of a man named Isaac, and Emily nervously referring to how Isaac could help her career. Further conversation refers to how Amir's conservative Muslim mother would react to his being made partner at the law firm where he works: on the one hand happy at his success, and on the other hand not really caring that his last name (Kapoor) is listed alongside the many Jewish ones in the firm's name. The occasionally sexy conversation is interrupted by the arrival of Amir's very Americanized nephew Abe.

Part 2 – Abe and Amir bicker about what name Abe wants to be addressed by, with Amir saying he's known Abe as "Hussein" all his life and Abe commenting that life is easier if he says his name is something more white sounding. Emily calls him Abe.

Abe then tries to convince Amir to take on the case of Imam Fareed, the leader of the mosque that Abe attends. Conversation reveals that the Imam has been arrested on charges of accepting money to be funneled to a terrorist organization, and that both Abe and the Imam want Amir to represent him. Amir comments that the only reason the Imam wants another lawyer is that the lawyers he does have are Jewish, and that he (Amir) won't take the case because he feels so negatively about Islam. When Abe says that his mother (Amir's sister) and grandmother (Amir's mother) used to think that Amir's anti-Islamic thinking was just "a phase", and that they believed he had to go "the other way for a while", Amir tells him how he was schooled by his strongly Muslim mother to avoid Jewish people. He was friends, he says, with a Jewish girl. When his mother found out, she angrily told him to never see her again and then spat in his face – so he would "remember". When he met the girl at school the next day, he spoke nastily to her and spat in HER face.

This attitude, he says, is one of the reasons why he isn't a practicing Muslim any more - it's called, he says, "intelligence". This leads Emily to comment on how the Imam seems willing to respect her for both her femaleness and her whiteness by letting her come into the mosque and sketch, and to remind Amir about how beautiful some of the aspects of the religion are – in particular, its artistic sensibilities. Abe tries one more time to get

Amir to defend the Imam, and Amir refuses sharply. Abe goes, after an attempt at comfort by Emily, who then challenges Amir to remember why he became a public defender – to defend the innocent. When Amir complains that the one time he went to see the Imam, all the latter could do was preach, Emily defends him, saying the Imam is only trying to hold onto his identity. Amir tries to stop the conversation, but Emily reminds him that they never talk about faith … and then, when Amir is suddenly silent, tells him she loves him.

Analysis

The first point to note about this section, and about the work in general, is that because it's a play, and because of how plays are traditionally structured and developed (i.e. with characters pursuing a particular objective or intention, both over the course of the play and scene by scene), the events and actions of each scene are defined by both those objectives/intentions, by the obstacles the characters encounter as they strive to achieve those objectives, and the tactics they employ to overcome those obstacles.

The second point to note is how this section introduces and dramatizes almost all of the work's themes – it could be argued, in fact, that almost every single line in the piece develops one theme or another (not to mention intensifies conflict and relationship) in some way. Discussions of racism and prejudice in various forms drive the action of the scene, those discussions primarily defined by perceptions of Islam, both on the part of the characters in the scene and of the world around them. Meanwhile, thematic comments on the relationship between art and truth emerge subtly and obliquely in Emily and Amir's conversation, as do hinted-at aspects of slavery. Finally, the corruptive influence of ambition is similarly hinted at, in terms of the passing references to Emily's artistic ambitions and the even more subtle indications of Amir's ambition, evident in the intensity with which he pursues his business relationships on his phone.

It's also important to note that in many ways, the action of the play is very much anchored in situations and circumstances of contemporary society – specifically, the fact that much of the world is now dealing with what is often described as a "Post-911" mentality when it comes to relations with Islam and its practitioners. Tense and often confrontational attitudes of various faiths/races/cultures (Caucasians, Muslims, Jews) towards one another play out on the personal level here – individuals enacting the beliefs of entire worldwide communities.

Meanwhile, several incidents in this section foreshadow incidents later in the play, with it being particularly noteworthy that not only are the incidents themselves foreshadowed, but also the revelations of context. For example, the spitting incident referred to by Amir foreshadows an incident later in the play that is similar in both action, emotion, and racism-defined attitude: that later incident, in fact, serving to prove to both the audience, to the other characters, and to Amir himself that he has not moved as far away from the values of his mother and other Muslims as he thinks he has, and so desperately WANTS to be. Other, similarly layered foreshadowings include the conversations about Emily's sketch (which plays an increasingly important role in the story as it unfolds) and

the conversations about Isaac (which foreshadows his eventual appearance and influence).

Discussion Question 1

For each scene or portion thereof, define and discuss what each character wants to accomplish – what is his/her intention or objective? What obstacles does the story put in the way of realizing that intention? What tactics do the characters employ to overcome those obstacles?

Discussion Question 2

What do you think the specific direction of how Amir is dressed relates to the play's themes – the theme of slavery in particular, but the other themes as well?

Discussion Question 3

Based on your experience and understanding, comment on Abe's, Emily's, and Amir's arguments about race relations in general, and about their comments on relations between Muslims, Jews, and Whites in particular.

Vocabulary

lithe, reproduction, "Moor", nuance, complexity, traumatize, paralegal, remorse, litigation, meditation, cholesterol, merger, acquisition, convert, dismissive

Scene 2

Summary

Part 1 – Two weeks later. Emily reads from a newspaper article that describes Amir as "supporting" the Imam who, outside the courthouse, protested his treatment and the lack of due process in the judicial system's handling of the case. As Amir is arguing that the article gives a false impression and might damage his reputation at the law firm, the apartment's door buzzer sounds, announcing the arrival of art dealer Isaac. Tension immediately arises, with conversation revealing that Emily's sketch of Amir is to be included in a showing at Isaac's gallery, and that Amir is concerned it could affect his career. He prepares to leave for work as Emily welcomes Isaac whose wife, conversation reveals, works at Amir's firm. Amir goes, leaving Isaac and Emily to talk business.

Part 2 – As Emily is getting him a cup of coffee, Isaac looks around the apartment – stage directions indicate that he does so "perhaps intrusively". When Emily returns, and after some small-talk about an annual art exhibition in London (the Frieze Art Fair) that Isaac goes to but which Emily has never attended, they resume a conversation begun the weekend before (i.e. when Amir and Emily visited Isaac and his wife) – specifically, the idea that because Emily is white and not Muslim, she has no right to utilize Muslim artistic forms of expression. At various times, Isaac makes comments that, he says, critics of her work are going to make – including a reference to the fact that she has "a brown husband." Emily defends herself and her artistic choices vigorously and passionately, and by the time the scene ends, Isaac recognizes that her arguments have value and power without necessarily agreeing with them.

Analysis

The most noteworthy elements in this short scene are the information it conveys and the number of foreshadowings it includes. One element in particular covers both these bases: the revelation that Amir not only went to see the Imam but appeared in public with him is important information (in terms of story and character) and even more important foreshadowing, given that Amir's decision has significant repercussions for him and the narrative later on. One other piece of information similarly functions as foreshadowing, although of less significant events: this is the reference to Emily's sketch being included in the art show, which plays an important role in the narrative but a less significant role than Amir's visit to the Imam.

Meanwhile, passing references to the Frieze Art fair and to Isaac's wife also foreshadow upcoming events and situations that add considerable dramatic impac to the story.

Discussion Question 1

For each scene or portion thereof, define and discuss what each character wants to accomplish – what is his/her intention or objective? What obstacles does the story put in the way of realizing that intention? What tactics do the characters employ to overcome those obstacles?

Discussion Question 2

What do you think the author is suggesting by making a specific reference to how Isaac is looking through the apartment?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the question of whether, in general, white artists (not just painters like Emily, but writers, composers, choreographers, etc.) do or do not have the right, as Isaac argues, to use the artistic influences of other, non-white cultures in their work. The usual term for this practice is “cultural appropriation”: what are your thoughts on both the principle and the practice?

Vocabulary

defendant, gauntlet, defiant, eloquent, injustice, unconscionable, retract, philanthropy, curator, palpable, intrusive, pilgrimage, compelling, convex, mosaic, perspective, profound, repetition, minimalist, obliterate

Scene 3, Parts 1, 2, and 3

Summary

Part 1 – Three months later. Amir paces alone with a drink on the apartment's terrace. Suddenly he throws his glass on the floor and smashes it … and then he goes to the bar for another drink. As he's fixing it, Emily arrives.

Part 2 - The first part of the conversation between Emily and Amir reveals that they are expecting guests for dinner, that Emily has cooked pork tenderloin, and that they're anticipating the good news that Emily will be getting a showing of her art. Conversation also indicates that they've been so busy they haven't had much time for their relationship. Then Amir gives Emily some bad news: that he was visited by two members of his law firm who have discovered some differences between what he put on his job application and the facts of his ancestry. Specifically, he said that his parents were from India, and explains to Emily that when his parents were born they actually DID live in India, but a few years afterwards, the part of India where they came from was partitioned into Pakistan. He also admits to changing his social security number when he changed his name from Abdullah to Kapoor, and reveals his fear that the other members of the firm have been investigating him as the result of his apparent support of the Imam. Finally, conversation reveals that he can't get hold of Mort to talk about the situation. Conversation is again interrupted by the door buzzer – Isaac and his wife are early. Emily runs off to get changed while Amir lets in the guests – Isaac and his African-American wife Jory.

Part 3 – As Jory and Isaac come in, they make several rounds of small talk – about the dessert Jory has brought, about basketball, and about drinks. While Isaac uses the washroom, Amir and Jory make small talk about events at their law firm and about who is taking which case. Amir leads the conversation towards his idea that he and Jory should start their own firm, suggesting that they will never be as successful as its other members because of their respective races. Jory seems intrigued by the idea, asking when he thought of it. Amir's comment that he only came up with the idea that afternoon leads Jory to start to say something else, but she's interrupted by the arrival of Emily. During more small talk about dinner and dessert, and after returns from the washroom, conversation reveals that Emily's work is being included in Isaac's gallery's next show, and everyone congratulates her. Isaac explains that there will only be four or five of her pieces included, and that he's debating whether to include her sketch of Amir. As Amir falls silent, Isaac discusses the parallels between Amir and the "apprentice slave" in the Velazquez painting Emily was inspired by. Amir comments that he liked the landscapes she was doing, leading Emily to comment that he liked the landscapes because they had nothing to do with Islam. This leads Isaac to comment on how inventive and respectful Emily's exploration of the Islamic tradition in art actually is, referring to a comment on the difference between the Western and Islamic art traditions Emily made when they were at the Frieze Art Fair in London together. The conversation concludes with Isaac toasting "Emily Hughes-Kapoor" as an emerging important name in art.

Analysis

The first point to note about this scene relates to its opening moments: Amir's violence with the glass is, as previous moments have been, both an important piece of information (i.e. that all is not well) and an important piece of foreshadowing (i.e. that events later in this lengthy central scene will also involve violence). It's important to remember that in the moment of his eruption, the audience doesn't know exactly what's going on: perceptive audiences might have suspicions, based on what's gone before (i.e. in terms of the reference to potential conflict at Amir's job over his visit to the Imam), but in the moment there is no clear indication of what triggered Amir's outburst.

The second point to note is related, in that traditionally, Muslims are neither supposed to eat meat nor eat pork which, as Emily says, is on the menu for dinner. The fact that Amir is drinking and that he eats pork reinforces the idea that he has gone far away from Islamic practices, which is eventually revealed to be deeply ironic, in that as he himself says later in the scene, there are aspects to being Muslim of which he simply cannot let go. A related irony is that dinner guest Isaac, a Jew, is in a similar situation: Jews are traditionally not supposed to eat pork, but Isaac, like Amir, has moved away from the traditional ways of his faith.

The main point of Part 1 of this scene, however, is Amir's revelation of what happened at work. This functions on several levels: to explain his eruption of emotion at the beginning of the scene; to surprise the audience, who might have been expecting that Amir got into trouble for visiting the Imam; to indicate the depths Amir is prepared to go in order to conceal his Islamic faith; and further along that line, to foreshadow the later revelation from Jory as to why, exactly, he didn't get promoted at work. Meanwhile, it's important to note the implications of Amir's actions: without going into too much detail, Pakistan is regarded, in contemporary geo-political terms, as a hotbed of radical Islam. By telling his bosses that he is from India, Amir is distancing himself from the possibility that just because his parents were from where they're from, he could be considered a terrorist.

Part 2 of the scene begins with the arrival of a character whose physical appearance and racial identity adds to the play's thematic considerations without her saying a word. The fact that Jory is African-American is never referred to prior to her entrance, meaning that given the racially-charged themes and situations that have been played out to this point, her appearance immediately suggests that conversations about race and/or identity are about to become a whole lot more … intense? interesting? complicated? nuanced? In any case, it's important to note that Jory is the one character in the piece of whom it could easily be assumed that she has a great deal to say about race, yet she says virtually nothing on the subject.

Other important elements in Part 2 include Amir's idea about him and Jory starting their own firm (which seems to have been triggered by one or more recent events); Jory's interrupted response (which foreshadows eventual revelations about her status at the law firm); the use of the term "apprentice slave" to describe Emily's painting of Amir

(which foreshadows Amir's rant at the end of the scene); and the reference to The Frieze Art Fair, which foreshadows a later significant revelation about Isaac and Emily's relationship.

Discussion Question 1

For each scene or portion thereof, define and discuss what each character wants to accomplish – what is his/her intention or objective? What obstacles does the story put in the way of realizing that intention? What tactics do the characters employ to overcome those obstacles?

Discussion Question 2

Given recent events in his life, what was the most likely trigger for Amir's idea about starting a law firm with Jory?

Discussion Question 3

How does the use of the term "apprentice slave" to describe the subject of the Velazquez painting resonate with the book's various themes?

Vocabulary

ascertain, misrepresent, arbitration, rave (v.), consumerism, cynicism, heroic, palette, composition

Scene 3, Parts 4 and 5

Summary

Part 4 – The reference to the name “Kapoor” leads Jory to recognize it as an Indian name, and to ask Amir what part of India it came from. Amir reveals to her that he was asked the same question in his office, and Jory reacts with what seems like surprise. Emily covers up the subsequent awkward pause by referring to how common a Punjabi name Kapoor is, which leads Isaac to comment that he’s travelling to the Punjab to visit an artist’s studio, and that he hates flying, particularly because of increased security. He then asks Amir what security is like for him, and Amir reveals that when he goes through security, he confronts potential race-defined expectations head on. He knows, he says, that they’re looking at him – so, he adds, he might as well be direct about it. Conversation reveals that Emily doesn’t like this practice, that Jory thinks it’s “kind of admirable”, and that Isaac thinks it could lead to people becoming too comfortable about their “suspicions”.

As Amir is responding to the use of that particular word, and Isaac is responding to his response, Emily’s cell phone rings. She checks it without answering – it’s Abe. Conversation reveals that Abe called Amir, but Amir didn’t call back. Emily goes out to get the first course for dinner, bantering conversation revealing that Isaac does most of the cooking for himself and Jory because he doesn’t really care for Jory’s cooking.

Part 5 - While Emily and Jory are briefly out of the room, Isaac and Amir recognize that there are differences between how Emily and Amir view Islam. Isaac indicates that he agrees with Emily, seeing Islam from the perspective of the art it’s created. As Emily and Jory come in with the first course of the meal – a salad – Amir indicates his belief that art, in the Muslim faith and the Quran, doesn’t matter, and goes on to explain Islam’s roots, which Isaac comments are similar to those of Judaism (i.e. both faiths having emerged from nomadic desert communities). This, in turn, leads Amir to comment on how the Jewish tradition is more about thought and consideration, while Islam is about “submission”.

As compliments are passed about the salad, comparisons are made between Islamic conservatives who believe absolutely in the Quran’s truth and Americans who believe absolutely in either the U.S. Constitution, the Bible, or both. This leads to discussions about the validity of Muslim women wearing veils for their faces, and about similarities between Islam and Mormonism (in which the prophets of both religions got the word of God from angels).

Eventually, as he’s pouring himself another drink, Amir speaks at length of how the Quran’s basic principles are based on a quest for a better life, of how deep faith and tradition runs, and how hard it is to not feel pride in the courage of people fighting for a faith-based better life … even, he admits, in the aftermath of the events of 9-11. Emily goes to Amir, takes his drink away, and goes to make him some coffee. Amir suggests

that Isaac probably feels the same way when he sees Israel “throwing its military weight around”, leading Isaac to ask whether Amir likes “hearing about Israel getting wiped into the ocean.” Amir admits that he does, and over Emily’s and Isaac’s protests, insists that it comes from Islam, not from him. Isaac says it DOES come from him, but before he can go on, Jory gets him to stop, and Emily takes Amir into the kitchen.

While they’re gone, Isaac fumes and Jory tries to calm him down, conversation hinting that there’s something going on with Jory at the law firm that she wants to be the one to tell Amir. Amir returns, hurrying to get his coat so he can get some champagne in order to celebrate Emily’s art triumph. Jory goes with him.

Analysis

First, some context. Isaac’s question to Amir about the latter’s reaction to increased airport security is significant because such security increased exponentially in the aftermath of 9/11 which, as has been noted, was an attack undertaken by Islamic terrorists whom, as he has admitted, Amir broadly resembles (i.e. in terms of physicality and apparent cultural identity). It could be argued that with his question, and almost in as many words, Isaac is asking Amir how he feels about frustrations and inconveniences triggered by the actions of his (Amir’s) own people. Amir’s response leads to the building of tension between Isaac and Amir which, in turn, leads to the increase in narrative and dramatic momentum in this section towards an escalating, intensifying series of race-defined confrontations.

Fueled by Amir’s increasing drunkenness and his deepening resentment over the events of the earlier part of the day, the revelations of his responses to 9/11 and his feelings and ideas about Israel (with its history of violent relations with the Palestinians) become increasingly confrontational, insensitive, and emotionally violent. These qualities, in addition to engaging audiences on visceral and intellectual levels, foreshadow the eruption of physical violence (in the following section) that defines the play’s climax. In other words, the confrontations here are just the beginning.

That beginning leads to comparisons between various aspects of various faiths, with Mormonism being brought into the conversation, along with references to hijabs and burkas and fundamentalist Christianity. All these faiths, it could be argued, have more in common with what Amir says is the basic tenet of Islam (“submission”, to the will of God and / or God’s prophet) as opposed to what he says is the basic tenet of Judaism (contemplation and thought).

Ultimately, though, the question that any reader or any audience member would have to answer is this: how much of what Amir says is what he truly believes? How much of it is emerging from his anger at what has happened to him that day? How much of it is drunkenness? The play offers no clear answers, only possibilities, but whatever the true source of his feelings, the bottom line is that Amir is in the midst of a descent to a very dark emotional and spiritual place, the repercussions of that descent making their violent presence felt in the following, climactic section of the scene, and of the play. One

thing is clear: that the argument here and in the rest of the scene is primarily defined by experiences of racism of various sorts, which in turn makes this extended conversation the play's key reference to its most significant theme.

Discussion Question 1

For each scene or portion thereof, define and discuss what each character wants to accomplish – what is his/her intention or objective? What obstacles does the story put in the way of realizing that intention? What tactics do the characters employ to overcome those obstacles?

Discussion Question 2

Do you agree or disagree with Amir's contention that his opinions of Jews come from his faith, and not from him personally? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the comparisons made in this scene between Islam, Mormonism, Judaism, and Christianity. Are the arguments made here valid or not? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

consolidate, render, unmitigated, compliance, admirable, exemplary, devout, monolithic, idiosyncrasy, psyche, sanctimonious, chorizo, paella, apostate, paraphrase, impassioned, contrarian, adamant, conciliatory, monopoly, fundamentalism, patronize, antipathy, jihadist, confidentiality

Scene 3, Parts 6, 7, and 8

Summary

Part 6 - Angry conversation between Emily and Isaac reveals that while they were at the Frieze Art Fair, they had an affair which Emily worries is the reason why her work is in Isaac's show. As Emily and Isaac continue to struggle with their physical attraction and connection, conversation reveals that Jory is about to be made partner at the law firm, that Amir's been there longer, and that the decision to give Jory a partnership instead was made in part because one of the partners saw the newspaper article highlighting Amir's support of the Imam, that Amir broke down when confronted about it, and said that "if the Imam had been a rabbi" it wouldn't have made any difference. Emily tearfully confesses that Amir supported the Imam for her, but Isaac tells her that Amir doesn't really love her – that his feelings are in her painting of him … that "the slave finally has the master's wife." He tells her that because of the situation in her marriage, she will doubtlessly cheat again … and then he tells her he loves her.

Part 7 - As Isaac and Emily are leaning in for a kiss, Jory returns, grabbing her things and in a hurry to leave. She sees the intimacy between her husband and Emily and is about to react when Amir returns, angrily reacting to what Jory just told him about being made partner. A four-way argument ensues, climaxing with Amir ranting about how hard he had to work at the firm when Jory never did. Isaac tries to show Jory out, but she refuses to go with him. There's a struggle between Amir and Isaac, which ends with Amir spitting in Isaac's face. "There's a reason they call you people animals," Isaac says, and goes. Before she follows, Jory tells Amir that Mort is retiring, and that she's taking over his caseload because Mort feels that Amir is too deceitful to be trusted. She then leaves.

Part 8 – Emily goes to get Amir some coffee. He becomes still. When she comes back, he asks if she's sleeping with Isaac. She explains that it happened in London, after the visit to the Frieze and some drinks. She tries to apologize but Amir hits her repeatedly. Stage directions describe his actions this way: "uncontrolled violence as brutal as it needs to be in order to convey the discharge of a lifetime of discreetly building resentment." Amir suddenly calms and becomes still. A knock at the door … silence … and then Abe appears, in time to see Emily appear, her face bloody.

Analysis

Several of the plays themes are developed in this section, which contains the play's climax. The first thematic development is contained in the conversation between Emily and Isaac which, in addition to revealing the affair between them, also reveals that on some level, the affair was connected, perhaps even subconsciously, to Emily's ambitions for her work.

Also developing in this section is the play's primary thematic element, its focus on racism (which plays out in the story Isaac tells about the confrontation between Amir and his supervisors). Here it becomes clear that in many ways, Amir has internalized the perceived hatred of non-Muslims (to the point that he seems to hate himself in the same way that he believes he's hated by others) while, at the same time, internalizing the fierce racial and ethnic pride that, he says, triggers outside hatred and prejudice in the first place. This pull of two powerfully opposing energies makes Amir a deeply conflicted character, which means that in some ways, it's not entirely surprising that at the play's climax, his internal violence towards himself and his identity erupts into external violence towards the nearest white people (his wife Emily and her lover Isaac) who as a community have in his mind triggered both the self-hatred and the need for pride. In terms of the act of violence he perpetrates upon Isaac, it's important to note that the spitting is exactly the same thing that Amir did to the Jewish girl in the Scene 1 story … exactly the gesture that, he says, triggered him to begin the process of moving away from practicing Islam.

Meanwhile, other themes developed here include the relationship between art and truth (developed in Isaac's comments about how Emily integrated her feelings about Amir and his race into her painting); and in Isaac's comment about slavery. This is one of the most potent comments in the play, in that it actually touches on ALL of its themes at the same time.

Finally, however, it's important to note a key point of Jory's explanation of why Amir was not offered Mort's caseload. It's not, she says, because of his race, but because he's "duplicitous" – that is, a liar, which the narrative has indicated earlier is, in fact, the case. The revelation turns the play on its ear, with its suggestion that Amir's troubles spring from him not because he's a Muslim, but because he's a LIAR, with no respect for the truth, which happens to include his faith and cultural and racial identity.

Discussion Question 1

For each scene or portion thereof, define and discuss what each character wants to accomplish – what is his/her intention or objective? What obstacles does the story put in the way of realizing that intention? What tactics do the characters employ to overcome those obstacles?

Discussion Question 2

In what way does Isaac's comment "the slave finally has the master's wife" relate and/or illuminate each of the play's five primary themes?

Discussion Question 3

In Quote 11, Amir refers to himself as the “nigger” at the law firm where he and Jory both work. How does his use of the word illustrate the point that has been made about how Amir and the subject of the Velazquez painting have a great deal in common?

Vocabulary

ballistic, pedestal, console, incredulous, duplicitous, litigator

Scene 4

Summary

Part 1 – Six months later. The apartment is in the process of being packed up. Amir moves through boxes and leftover furniture, along with “a partially wrapped canvas” turned against the wall. His packing is interrupted by the arrival of Emily (who stays well away from Amir) and Abe, who is now dressed more conservatively, in a traditional Muslim cap. He tells Amir how he and his friend (Tariq) got into a political and religious confrontation with a white barista at Starbucks that resulted in them both being arrested and interrogated.

When Emily says she wants to leave, Abe asks her to stay, and goes on to explain how his immigration and visa status is up for renewal, and how he’s worried that because of this incident, that could change – although, he admits, going to a place that isn’t America might not be so bad. Amir calls the lawyer now working on Imam Fareed’s case, and leaves a message asking for an urgent return call. He then urges Abe to think and behave differently in order to avoid trouble, but Abe erupts in anger, telling Amir that behaving the way that white people wanted him to didn’t do HIM any good and that followers of Islam will, one day soon, take back the world that is promised them in the Quran. He then goes, leaving Emily alone with Amir.

Part 2 – Emily and Amir discuss who is going to retain title to their apartment in their divorce, with Emily saying it belongs to her. They apologize to each other for what happened, with Amir saying that he got the painting she sent, that he’s starting to realize how messed up he is and that he’s very proud of her success. For her part, Emily says she was “blind” to Amir’s true nature and situation, and that she wants Amir to stop writing her letters. After she goes, Amir’s attention is drawn to the half-wrapped canvas. He looks at it, and takes off the rest of the wrapping. Stage directions suggest that “from his position on stage, we will only see enough of the painting to realize it is Emily’s portrait of him … he takes a searching long look …” End of play.

Analysis

In a relatively short scene that, in structural terms, would commonly be referred to as “denouement” or “falling action”, the audience learns – through implication – what happened as the result of the events of Scene 3. Here it’s interesting to note how Abe’s racism-experience and/or change of heart relates to Amir’s; how their experiences each manifest the play’s central thematic considerations of racism and perceptions of Islam; and how there is virtually no reference at all here to Isaac or to Jory. There is the sense that, having acted as catalysts for necessary revelations of truth in the lives of Emily and Amir, their influence and presence both leave the narrative almost entirely.

Meanwhile, although Amir denies Abe's accusation that he (Amir) got fired, there can be little or no doubt that in addition to losing his wife and entering a period of deep self-reflection, Amir has been shaken up by what happened: it may be, in fact, that Emily is not the only one who was blind to Amir's truths. For both of them and for the play, their new awareness of the implications of their relationship and their recent experiences define the central thematic element of the play and their lives: the presence and impact of racism and prejudice. This idea is arguably further developed in the play's final moments, in which Amir, in looking at the painting and according to the stage directions, appears to be seeing aspects of himself that HE hadn't seen before: the irony of course, is that Emily apparently DID, but either didn't pay attention to what she saw and painted or ignored it. In short, the play's other key themes – the relationship between art and truth, and aspects of slavery – become manifest in the play's final image.

Discussion Question 1

For each scene or portion thereof, define and discuss what each character wants to accomplish – what is his/her intention or objective? What obstacles does the story put in the way of realizing that intention? What tactics do the characters employ to overcome those obstacles?

Discussion Question 2

In what ways do Abe's experience and transformation parallel Amir's? In what ways do they contrast it?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Emily say she was "blind" to Amir and his situation? What blinded her – what did she focus on in order to ignore what she now sees as his identity and truth?

Vocabulary

detritus, chastened, vibrant, reluctant, recoil, barista, interrogation, antagonize

Characters

Amir

Amir is the play's central character, its protagonist. He is described as being in his early-to-mid thirties, initially portrayed as being ambitious and hard-working and, over the course of the narrative, eventually revealed to be a bitter, angry liar and racist. He also is a non-practicing Muslim, although as the play also reveals, he has difficulty completely letting go of the childhood lessons he learned about Islam and its relationship to the rest of the world. In addition, he is portrayed as not only wanting to be as successful as the non-Muslims around him, but as approaching the level of success to which he aspires, albeit not quickly enough. Ironically, he has difficulty accepting the determination of his nephew Abe to even more fully assimilate into the non-Muslim world, telling him that no matter how much he tries to disguise himself (for example: by changing his name), Abe will always LOOK to the rest of the world as though he's the outsider (and presumably the terrorist) that frightened Westerners, according to Amir, will always see.

The irony in Amir, and in his challenging of his nephew, is that he (Amir) is just about as disguised as he can be. He has moved away as far as possible from overt expressions of his Islamic faith; he makes his living in what might be described as a fully western line of work (corporate law); he has bought into the principles and values of western capitalism; and he is married to a white woman. Nevertheless, he is fully aware of, and perhaps over-sensitive to, the way in which he and other Muslims, particularly men, are perceived by the contemporary west. This awareness and the above-mentioned lessons from his childhood, exist turbulently beneath his apparently smooth surface and are arguably the primary cause of the play's conflicts, tensions, and ultimately its violent climax.

Emily

Emily is Amir's wife. Also in her early-to-mid thirties, she is an early career painter, in many ways as eager to make her mark in the art world as Amir is to make his mark in the world of corporate law. The key point to note about Emily is how she's portrayed as being more compassionate and open-minded about Islam than Amir, her sensitivity and respect based on Islam's artistic history and the value of the unique style and techniques practiced by centuries of Islamic artists. It is from that perspective, that point of view, that Emily argues with Amir that he should look past Islam's relationship with violence, both past and present, and see it for the lasting beauty it brings to the world.

At the same time, Emily acts as a peacekeeper and buffer between Amir and Abe, and also does her best to be a supportive ally in her husband's climb up the corporate ladder. Later in the narrative, however, it's revealed that she had an affair, the sudden knowledge of which serves as a secondary trigger for the explosion of violence that

defines the play's climax (the primary trigger being Amir's discovery that he is being passed over for promotion). As the victim of that violence, Emily ends the play both emotionally and physically battered, separated from Amir, aware of her own failings when it comes to considerations of race, and unsure of her future.

Isaac

Isaac is a curator at the influential New York art gallery where Emily is eager to exhibit her work. He is described as being in his forties, white, and smart, and is revealed to be Jewish – relatively liberal and not terribly devout, but still connected with and concerned about issues that affect the Jewish community. This plays an important role in the development of tension between him and Amir, whose Muslim heritage both traditionally and in contemporary circumstances tends to define Jews as enemies. This tension, based in cultural issues and perspectives, becomes personal in the volatile, intense Scene 3.

That tension deepens with the revelation of another Isaac-related circumstance. When he first appears in the play, he and Emily are acquaintances, with Isaac finding much to admire in Emily's work and perspectives. Their relationship is, on his part, one of professional and/or artistic admiration. Eventually, events and conversation reveal that the two had an affair while attending an art fair in England. The tension between Amir and Isaac takes on another aspect when this information is revealed, the multi-leveled anger between the two men eventually erupting into a fist fight.

Ultimately, Isaac comes across as something of a user and a manipulator - charming and intelligent, but nevertheless driven almost entirely by self-serving self-righteousness.

Jory

Jory is Isaac's wife and a colleague of Amir's at the law firm where they both work. She is in her late thirties, African-American, and portrayed as arguably the most sensitive and or compassionate character in the play. While she is ambitious, arguably just as much as Amir, she is also portrayed as having a conscience about how she gets to where she's going (i.e. getting a promotion over Amir). It must be noted that conscience doesn't necessarily include a sense of remorse or regret, but it is nevertheless there. She has a long fuse – in spite of being baited by both Isaac and Amir at the narratively central Scene 3 dinner party, she retains her temper and her relative good humor, until she sees Emily and Isaac in a moment of intimacy that triggers a release of disbelieving anger.

Meanwhile, it's extremely interesting to note that Jory doesn't respond to Amir's use of the "n" word in his drunken rant at the climax of Scene 3, and of the play. Granted, she is in the midst of dealing with intense feelings after discovering what seems to be an affair between her husband and her hostess, but her lack of response can be perceived as quite telling, particularly when as she's about to leave, she tells Amir exactly why he

didn't get the promotion WITHOUT resorting to a racial comment. In other words, of all the characters Jory, who arguably has just as much reason as Amir to be racially sensitive, is the one character to whom race is of less significance than personal and professional ethics.

Abe

Abe is Amir's nephew, in his early twenties and even more Americanized than Amir, having gone so far as to change his first name from Hussein. This change is a point of tension and conflict between Abe and his uncle, the former being convinced that a name change (among other transformations) will keep him from being treated in the same way as other brown-skinned young men. Amir, for his part, and for reasons the narrative eventually makes very clear, is convinced that nothing will make that much difference to ANY brown skinned male, including himself and Abe.

After Abe fails to get Amir to take the case of an unjustly imprisoned religious leader, Abe disappears from the narrative for much of the rest of the play, returning only in the final scene having re-accepted his Islamic faith, and having had an experience (of getting into a public confrontation with a white girl and subsequently being arrested) that, in the eyes of the play at least, confirms that Amir was right. Ultimately, both Amir and Abe become victims of the kind of prejudice Amir says from the beginning they will inevitably experience, with Abe moving one step further – on the path towards becoming the kind of Muslim RADICAL Amir has said that the West is ultimately afraid of.

Velazquez

The Spanish painter Diego Velazquez lived and worked in the early-mid 17th Century. He became the court painter for the then-Spanish King (Philip VI), and developed a substantial reputation for effective realism that endures to this day. His portrait of his slave/assistant, Juan de Pareja, is a central element in the plot of Disgraced.

Juan de Pareja

De Pareja is the African subject of a painting by the Spanish artist Velazquez, and is sometimes referred to in commentary (and also in Disgraced) as "a Moor", which is the term used, at the time, for persons of African origin. De Pareja, as noted above, was at first Velazquez' slave/assistant, but received training from Velazquez and eventually became a well-known artist in his own right. The portrait of de Pareja serves as inspiration for Emily, in that she creates a portrait of Amir that resembles the portrait of de Pareja, but does so with a contemporary spin and perspective.

Mort

Mort is Amir's boss at the law firm where he and Jory work. Spoken about but never actually seen, and referred to as being Jewish, Mort is described by Amir as aging and ready to retire, while Jory describes him as finding Amir untrustworthy and self-serving.

Steven

Steven is a senior partner at the law firm where Amir, Jory, and Mort work and, like Mort, he is identified as being Jewish. His investigation into statements that Amir made on his job application (statements that prove to be false), his suspicious response to Amir's appearance in the newspaper alongside Imam Fareed, and his strong reaction to Amir's defense of that appearance, all play important roles in Jory eventually being promoted within the firm before Amir. Steven's views are seen by Amir as anti-Muslim, and as typical of the views that he (Amir) feels will never entirely be overcome … or, for that matter, ever be changeable at all.

Imam Fareed

Imams are religious leaders at the mosques where the Islamic faith is practiced – in some ways, the equivalent of priests/ministers in the Christian faith, or rabbis in the Jewish faith. Imam Fareed (a character never seen, only spoken about) has the reputation of being outspoken to the point of being perceived by the authorities as a potential threat. His arrest and imprisonment are the catalyst for a confrontation between Amir and Abe about the responsibilities of being Muslim, while a supportive visit to the Imam from Amir proves to be the catalyst for the eventual deterioration of Amir's work situation.

Amir's Mother

Early in the narrative, Amir describes his mother as being fiercely, traditionally Muslim, specifically referring to an incident in which she berated him for spending time with a Jewish girl. There is the sense that for Amir, the attitudes and actions of his mother represent those of much of conservative Islam, the sort of attitudes and actions against which he deliberately rebels, but as he himself confesses, of which he is unable to rid himself completely.

Symbols and Symbolism

Amir and Emily's Apartment

Central characters Amir and Emily live in an apartment in New York's very desirable Upper East Side. Expansive, expensively decorated, and with a great view, the apartment is representative of the high economic and professional status that Amir has not only aspired to for most of his life, but actually begun to achieve.

"Portrait of Juan de Pereda"

This painting, by Spanish artist Diego Velazquez, is the portrait of the painter's "Moorish" slave/apprentice, Juan de Pereda. It is the inspiration of a portrait that Emily does of Amir, both works having important visual echoes of one another and similar implications about race relations.

"Study after Velazquez' Moor"

This is the name Emily gives to the painting inspired by the "Portrait" mentioned above. Emily's version proves to be the trigger for significant, intense conflict throughout the play, and is also the focus of the play's final moments – specifically, Amir's silent contemplation of it.

The Frieze Art Fair

The real-life Frieze Art Fair is an annual exhibition of contemporary art that takes place in both London and New York City. The London version is the setting for an important off-stage event: the affair between Isaac and Emily.

Amir's Law Firm

Both the ambitious, driven Amir and the more quietly determined Jory work for a law firm called Leibowitz, Bernstein, and Harris. At the beginning of the play, Amir is convinced his name is going to be added to the list of partners, but as the events of the narrative unfold, it becomes clear that Jory has gotten the position instead.

Amir's Shirts

At one point in the narrative, conversation reveals that Amir's dress shirts cost six hundred dollars each. They are, for him, a key symbol (like the apartment) of status and accomplishment. For Emily, however, they are similar to the collar of white lace worn by

the dark-skinned, slave-apprentice subject of a painting that inspired her: representative of an imprisoning kind of status.

The Quran

The Quran is the Holy Book of the Muslim faith, in a similar way to how the Bible is the Holy Book of the Christian faith and the Torah/Talmud are the Holy Books of the Jewish faith. As the action of the play unfolds, comparisons are drawn between all three books, their teachings, and how those teachings are both interpreted and applied by the faithful.

9-11

9-11 is the shorthand term for the events of September 11th, 2001, in which four airplanes were hijacked by Islamic terrorists: two were flown into, and destroyed, the World Trade Centre in New York; a third was flown into the Pentagon in Washington; and the fourth, apparently on its way to attack The White House, was crashed into a field in Pennsylvania following the efforts of a group of passengers to subdue the hijackers. Among other things, the event marked a turning point in relations between the Muslim and non-Muslim communities: in the attack's aftermath, there have been consistent reports of increased anti-Muslim activity around the world.

India and Pakistan

For much of their existence, India and Pakistan were one country – India, which was also, for several decades, under the control of the British Empire. In the late 1940's, however, portions of India were partitioned off into two other countries, Pakistan and Bangladesh. This resulted in several political, social, and cultural repercussions (not to mention the personal repercussions on thousands of families and the genocides of several religious sects), the consequences of which continue in today's world and which manifest in the play.

Alcohol

Islam forbids the consumption of alcohol in any form. Amir, as a lapsed Muslim, clearly has moved beyond that particular stricture, with his heavy drinking prior to and during the play's narratively central Scene 3 playing both a direct and an ironic role in the action.

Settings

America

The United States of America, with both its definitions of success (i.e. generally materialistic) and its perceptions of racial minorities, is the broad-strokes setting for the play. The overall views and perceptions of American culture – “with freedom and justice for all” – are overtly spoken of only rarely, but form a potent and pervasive subtext, primarily when it comes to racial attitudes, throughout the entire piece.

The Upper East Side of Manhattan (New York)

This section of Manhattan is widely regarded as “high end” – expensive dwellings, wealthy homeowners/tenants, upper-level status. For Amir and Emily (most particularly the Muslim Amir), to have a home here indicates not only financial and social position: it also seems to indicate an acceptance, a place in the dominant culture of the time / place / community that many non-whites can only dream of.

2011 – 2012

The time in which the play is set is noteworthy because, as the characters themselves note, they live in a “post-9/11” world – that is, a world that has come into being in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on America in 2001. Attitudes of non-Muslims and Muslims, whites and non-whites, non-Americans and Americans, all changed drastically as the result of the events of that day and its aftermath, with the result that tensions between the various groups play out in the daily lives of contemporary society and in the lives of this play’s characters.

Themes and Motifs

Racism and Prejudice

Both experiences and assumptions of racism and prejudice define the actions and attitudes of almost all the characters in the play. While this is most apparently true of protagonist Amir and of his nephew Abe, each of whom has an experience of anti-Muslim prejudice and attitudes, it's also true of Isaac. His relationship with Amir is, to some degree, defined by thinly-veiled anti-Jewish prejudice on Amir's side, and similarly thinly-veiled anti-Muslim prejudice on Isaac's. All three of these characters are hated and feared, or expect to be hated and feared, because of their skin pigmentation and / or beliefs about their faith / religion.

It's important to note, however, that even the actions of the apparently non-racist Emily are also defined by racism and prejudice. In her case, however, there is the sense that she and her attitudes are defined by a kind of anti-racism, a determination to look beyond assumptions (about character, intention, and faith) that are based on skin color and reputation. What's particularly interesting about how her character is developed is that her determination at times starts to look like denial that those assumptions, and the difficulties arising from them, even exist. This idea is developed most clearly in the final scene of the play, in which Emily herself comments (to Amir) that she might, in fact, have blinded herself to what he believes to be his realities.

Perhaps the most intriguing point to note about this theme is the sense that the character whom audiences might expect to have the most to say about racial prejudice is, in fact, the one who says the least. Jory, Isaac's African-American wife, rarely responds with any kind of heat or intensity to any of the race-defined arguments and/or confrontations that take place in her presence. It's particularly interesting that in her final confrontation with Amir, in which she tells him the truth about why he didn't get promoted, his race doesn't come up at all: only the fact that he's "duplicitous", or a liar. Jory calls him out because of his failings as a person and as a lawyer, not because of any perceptions of him and his work based on race.

Perceptions of Islam

While issues of a wide range of racism-defined experiences and attitudes thread their way through the narrative, the dominant perceptions and actions being examined and/or commented on are those of Islam (as a faith) and of Muslims (as practitioners of that faith). Central character Amir is entirely defined by his experiences as a Muslim: those he acquired as a child (at the hands of his conservative mother); those he's acquired as an adult (during the process of deliberately moving away from his faith and towards a more integrated – read: white – identity); and those he encounters, or believes he's encountering, over the course of the play.

Meanwhile, Amir's nephew Abe takes even more extreme measures to hide his faith and ethnic origins, going as far as changing his name. At the end of the play, however, unlike Amir, Abe chooses to acknowledge and embrace what he has come to believe as the truth of who he is, a truth that Amir spoke of in their first encounter – that no matter what he, Abe, or any Muslim men do, they will (at least in this day and age) be perceived as terrorists.

The negative attitudes experienced and/or expected by Amir and Abe also materialize in Isaac, who, the play argues, has both personal and ethnic reasons to be angry with and mistrusting of Muslims in general, and Amir in particular.

But in contrast to all these negative attitudes are the apparently positive attitudes of Emily who, again as the narrative clearly indicates, chooses to focus on the beauty (in the form of art) of Islamic culture and tradition. As noted above, there is a sense of denial about these attitudes, but there is also the sense that through her, and in spite of that denial, the play is arguing that those who practice Islam cannot, nor should not, be negatively defined solely because of the extreme actions of a few.

The Relationship between Art and Truth

There are two facets to the art and truth relationship explored by the play: truth as inspiration for art, and art as revelation of truth.

The first, truth as inspiration, manifests early in the narrative. Emily's sketching of Amir is inspired by what she sees as the truth of a racism-defined encounter the two of them had in a restaurant the night before – the truth, that is, of Amir's situation as a brown-skinned, apparently Muslim man in contemporary American society. The truth she is inspired by in that situation is seen, by Emily and therefore by the narrative, as related to the truth in a centuries-old painting that, it seems, was inspired by a similar truth: that experienced by the painter Velazquez in relation to his "Moor" (read: African-American) slave/apprentice. All these inspirations and apparent truths come together in Emily's initial sketch, and later in her painting that, as she and Isaac see it, is a revelation of deeper truth – the second facet of the art / truth relationship in the play.

For many artists of many stripes and disciplines (written, danced, composed, dramatic, and/or sung art as well as visual art), actual literal truth is used and seen as a springboard for explorations of deeper, layered, metaphorical, spiritual truth. Reality is shaped by art to mean, or at least suggest, more than what is initially perceived: art as revelation. In the case of this particular piece of art, Emily's painting is intended (by her) and seen (by others) to be a revelation of parallels between Moorish slaves and brown-skinned (Muslim) men in general in contemporary society and, as the play contends, of Amir in particular. He, the play suggests and the painting apparently suggests, has become a slave to both white-defined racism and his responses to that racism … Emily's particular piece of art as revelation of truth in Amir's particular circumstance. This idea is embodied or represented in the final image: of Amir, looking into the painting as he might look into a mirror. Perhaps, the play also seems to suggest, that

that's exactly what he IS doing – seeing himself, perhaps for the first time, as a slave of sorts.

The Corruptive Influence of Ambition

On a certain level of relationship, similarity, and comparability, Amir and Emily make a good couple: they are both very, very ambitious people. Amir is perhaps the more overtly ambitious of the two, in that his conversations and ideas are frequently and vividly defined by discussions of status, specifically his status in the law firm where he works. In her own, quieter way, however, Emily seems to be similarly ambitious, as determined to get her work into the popular, well-regarded art galleries as Amir is to get the position of partner in the firm. What the play and its action also do, however, is portray the ambition of both these characters as being, at least to some degree, destructive.

In Amir's case, his intense desire for financial and career success entwines poisonously with his determination to escape the cultural and professional prisons that he believes being Muslim has imposed upon him. This entwining has taken him further in the direction of what might be described as "false truths", beliefs and values that Amir believes with all his heart and mind to be true, but which have in fact taken him away from his true, compassionate, sensitive soul – the soul that, it seems, Emily fell in love with. This being absorbed in "false truths" seems to leave Amir, when all his ambition and hard work turn out to be for nothing, with little that is genuinely true to rely on and/or believe in. Ambition has pulled him away from himself, an experience he embraced as a result of the above defined desires.

In Emily's case, the corruption is less direct and less overt: while never stating it outright, the narrative offers clear and vivid hints that her ambition to have her art seen by the right people in the right way leads Emily into the affair with Isaac that may or may not have played a final, defining role in her getting the showing of her art that she has long sought. Her love for, and relationship with Amir, seem to take a back seat to her artistic and professional determinations. The result is that when the truth is revealed she, like Amir, is left with nothing.

Aspects of Slavery

Beginning with the references to the Velazquez painting (which has, as its subject, a dark-skinned, so-called "slave assistant") and concluding with Amir's violent verbal eruption at the end of Scene 3 (in which he refers to Jory as a term often representative of how non-blacks viewed blacks during centuries of slavery in America), there are implications and suggestions that any / all experiences of non-whites in America are equivalent to the racism/prejudice defined experiences of slaves. In Amir's specific case, and again in relation to his eruption at the end of Scene 3, he seems to be suggesting that the amount and intensity of his work for his white employers is, in many ways, equivalent to the situation of slavery. Is he justified? The argument could be made

that he has a far, FAR freer and more luxurious life than any slave (or servant for that matter) ever did, and the argument would be valid. But slavery isn't necessarily just about physical living conditions: it's also about moral, ethical, cultural, and racial living conditions, and the play seems to be arguing that in drawing the parallel, Amir has a point.

The point is reinforced clearly and deliberately by Emily and Isaac, who compare Amir's expensive white shirts to the evidently expensive white lace collar worn by the subject of the Velazquez painting (collars being, in many ways, evocative of the imprisoning, inhumane, animalistic conditions in which historically, slaves were bought, sold, and transported). In making the comparison, they are suggesting that in his determination to reject his identity as a Muslim, he is behaving in the same way as slaves who were forced to reject their African or West Indian identities when they became slaves. While it's important to note that Amir's rejection of who he is is by choice and slaves were forced to essentially repudiate themselves, the parallel is the same: dominant white culture and power defined non-whites in ways that enforce(d) long standing power and status structures … or at least, that's what Emily and the play seem to be suggesting.

Styles

Point of View

Because this is a play, there is arguably no point of view in the same way that there is a point of view in a piece of prose writing – novel, short story, non-fiction, or even a poem. This is because generally in plays, there is no narrating voice with a defining point of view: there are some notable exceptions, but this play isn't one of them. Therefore, points of view to be considered are those of the author, and those of the characters, primarily the central character, Amir.

In terms of the author, the most important thing to note is that he and protagonist Amir share certain similarities: both are of Muslim heritage, both are in their mid-thirties, both make their life and work in New York City, and both are brown-skinned men with experience of encountering racism-based prejudice. On these facts, it might seem reasonable to argue and/or assume that Amir's point(s) of view in the play are similar, if not identical, to those of the author who created him and the characters around him. It must be remembered, however, that similarity in outer circumstance does not necessarily indicate similar in inner values or perspectives: the author may well have asked himself the same questions that Amir asks HIM-self, but did not necessarily come up with the same answers. For example, Amir has clearly decided, years before the story of the play begins, that he is going to reject as much of his Islamic faith as possible and become as much like the successful, non-Muslim people around him as possible. There is no evidence in the play at all to suggest that its creator feels the same way.

Ultimately, though, when considering the point of view of this or any play, it's important to consider its themes, which, in this case, are anchored in the perspective that prejudice is everywhere, in everyone, at least to some degree – and that both prejudice and individual reactions to it can lead, perhaps even inevitably, to destructive conflict – emotional, political, physical, and/or spiritual.

Language and Meaning

The first point to note about the play's use of language is that because it is a play, the story is communicated almost entirely through dialogue. There are places where stage directions describe what the characters are doing and how they're doing it – in other words, the visual action – but for the most part the story, the relationships, the transformations, and the confrontations enacted by the characters are revealed by what the characters say, and how and when they say it. Why they say it is revealed as the result of what, how, and when they say what they say – why is the "subtext", or what's underneath the text … the unspoken.

All that said, there are a number of important points to note about the play's use of language – how the characters speak differently, depending on to whom they're speaking (Amir, for example, speaks very differently to Abe in relation to how he speaks to Isaac, or his partners at the law firm); how the occasional curse word emphases the intensity of what a character is feeling and/or intending at a given moment; and, perhaps more significantly, language indicates and defines the rawness and powerful presence of the issues at work in the characters' lives and relationships.

Easily the most telling language-related moment in the play occurs at the end of the lengthy and intense Scene 3 – specifically, the moment at which Amir, in his angry rant at Jory that reveals his frustration with her having been promoted over him, says that HE's the "nigger" in the office and not her. There is not a much more loaded word in current use in America than "nigger", and its use here, by one non-white individual in an argument with another non-white individual who in other circumstances might herself be called "nigger" is an extraordinarily potent moment, in the play as a drama and in its general use of language.

Structure

There are several points to note about the play's structure. The first is that it takes place over a period of several months, with significant amounts of time taking place between its four scenes. This means that important events BETWEEN the scenes are spoken about, rather than enacted: in some plays this might be regarded as having a negative value, but in this case, the authorial choice leads to an emphasis on / intensification of the confrontational and/or narrative power of the lengthy, and intense, Scene 3.

The second point to note is that the first, second, and fourth scenes are relatively short, while Scene 3 is much longer: there is the sense that the author made this choice in order to emphasize and intensify both the dramatic events of the scene and the single-evening context in which they take place. A related point is that the play has no intermission, meaning that its overall dramatic and narrative momentum is never released by the audience's trip into the lobby for a bathroom and/or bar break. Audience members never get a break from the intensity of either the emotions or the intellectual arguments of the play.

Finally, because the action of the play over four scenes proceeds in a primarily linear fashion (i.e. Event A leading to Event B leading to Event C and so on), the above mentioned passage of time between scenes, there is still the strong sense that the events of the story are strongly and thoroughly connected to one another. Events in Scene 2 exist as the result of events in Scene 1; events in Scene 3 exist as the result of events in Scenes 1 and 2; and so on down the road. In other words, the play's structure is defined and shaped by the principle of "cause and effect" – in life, things happen one after another; in narrative, particularly dramatic narrative, the general rule is that things happen one BECAUSE of another.

Quotes

A man, a waiter, looking at you … not seeing you. Not seeing who you really are. Not until you started to deal with him. And the deftness with which you did that. You made him see that gap. Between what he was assuming about you and what you really are.
-- Emily (Scene 1 paragraph Page 7)

Importance: Emily describes the racism-defined incident that inspired her to do a sketch of Amir based on a famous portrait of a slave. It establishes the everyday racism that Amir arguably encounters, and is the first of several incidents in the play that define its thematic exploration of racism.

You know how much easier things are for me since I changed my name? It's in the Quran. It says you can hide your religion if you have to.
-- Abe (Scene 1 paragraph Page 13)

Importance: This line is rich with significance: the irony of a young Muslim man, justifying the concealing of his identity by quoting the holy book that the religion he's rejecting is based on ... his comment that life is easier when a young Muslim man pretends to be something other than he truly is ... and, again, a reference to the systemic cultural racism he and Amir face, and are striving to combat.

Rivkah comes up to me in the hall with a note. Hi Amir, she says. Eyes sparkling. I look at her and say 'You've got the name of a Jew.' She smiles. 'Yes, I'm Jewish, she says.' Then I spit in her face … so when my older sister goes on to you about THIS way and the OTHER WAY, now you'll have a better idea of the PHASE I'm really going through. It's called INTELLIGENCE.
-- Amir (Scene 1 paragraph Page 17)

Importance: This quote functions on a number of levels: to portray the anti-Jewish sentiments within which the Muslim Amir was raised; to foreshadow the playing out of those sentiments in his confrontational relationship with Emily's Jewish art dealer; and to foreshadow a particular moment later in the play when Amir repeats exactly the same action and intention.

So a man who has nothing left but his dignity and his faith is still trying to be useful in the only way he knows how?
-- Emily (Scene 1 paragraph Page 21)

Importance: With this quote, the Caucasian Emily defends the Imam that Amir refuses to have anything to do with. She seems, at this point, to be able to see past the implications of the Imam's racial identity to what defines him as a man. As such, she is foreshadowing events later in the narrative, when Jory seemingly does the same thing in her explanation of why Amir was passed over for promotion - not because of issues with his being a Muslim, but because of issues with his being the kind of man he is.

Well, we've all gotten way too wrapped up in the optics. The way we talk about things. We've forgotten to look at things for what they really are.
-- Emily (Scene 2 paragraph Page 31)

Importance: Once again, Emily reinforces the value of looking past the superficial and apparent, and into the truth of deeper identity.

Amir: Steven and Mort got ahead underpricing the competition. Back in the day, when they got started. Jory: Well, downtown WASPS didn't want to be doing mergers and acquisitions. Amir: Yeah, fine. That's why Jews were doing it. And then mergers and acquisitions became all the rage. And guys like Steven and Mort became the establishment. We are the new Jews … That firm will never be ours. It's theirs. And they're always going to remind us that we were just invited to the party.
-- Amir / Jory (Scene 3 paragraph Page 41)

Importance: In this exchange between two non-Jewish lawyers working in the same firm (Muslim Amir and African-American Jory), the play's consideration of the layers of racism at work in their business, and arguably in society, are discussed and revealed.

So there you are, in your six hundred dollar Charvet shirt, like Velazquez'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 – the question remains – of your place. For the viewer, of course. Not you. It's a painting, after all …
-- Isaac (Scene 3 paragraph Page 46)

Importance: With this quote, Isaac draws another layer of parallel between Amir and the slave/apprentice subject of the Velazquez painting that inspired Emily to sketch him. The connection between Amir's shirts and the collar of the painting's subject is vivid and clear.

The Renaissance is when we turned away from something bigger than ourselves. It put the individual at the center of the universe and made a cult out of the personal ego … that never happened in the Islamic tradition. It's still more connected to a wider, less personal perspective.
-- Emily (Scene 3 paragraph Page 49)

Importance: On one level, this quote represents Emily's deeper perspectives and reflections on Islam. On another level, it becomes a commentary on Western culture and attitudes that extends beyond the play and its story and into society as a whole.

Amir: 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. Isaac: Not the only people to have suffered in a desert for centuries, Amir. Don't know what it says about the JEWISH psyche, if that's the word we're going to use" … Amir: Whatever they do, it's not what Muslims do. Muslims don't think about it. They submit. That's what Islam means, by the way. Submission.
-- Amir / Isaac (Scene 3 paragraph Page 53)

Importance: In this exchange, Amir and Isaac discuss the ironic similarities and parallels between their two faith traditions - Islam and Judaism, respectively.

Amir: I guess I forgot – which WE I was … it's tribal, Jory. It is in the bones. You have no idea how I was brought up. You have to work REAL hard to root that shit out. Jory: Well, you need to keep working. Amir: I am.
-- Amir / Jory (Scene 3 paragraph Page 63)

Importance: Here, Amir explains to Jory why he felt the way he felt (i.e. a momentary surge of justice being served) on 9/11.

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 first office! Yours had a view of the fucking 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! You think you're the nigger here? I'm the nigger! Me!
-- Amir (Scene 3 paragraph 72)

Importance: This quote is the climax of Scene 3, and arguably the climax of the play's overall thematic interest in racism. In its use of one of the most charged and powerful words in American conversational English, the speech sums up and defines Amir's experience of himself in the culture that he simultaneously loathes and wants to be a part of. The fact that the speech is spoken to Jory, the only African-American character in the play, is worthy of particular note.

The one thing I can be sure about with you? You'll always turn on your own people. You think it makes these people like you more when you do that? They don't. They just think you hate yourself. And they're right! You do! … The Prophet wouldn't be trying to be like one of them. He didn't conquer the world by copying other people. He made the world copy him … THEY'VE conquered the world. We're gonna get it back. That's our destiny. It's in the Quran.
-- Abe (Scene 4 paragraph Page 84)

Importance: Abe once again quotes the Quran in defense of his position and values, only this time it's not in rejection of its teachings and the faith that arises therefrom: this time he's using it to explain the reasons why he has rejoined his faith. The quote also defines his new relationship with Amir, and perhaps opens the door even more (following other, less rational incidents of the play) to Amir's new relationship with himself.