Bigsby, Christopher. "Ayad Akhtar." *Twenty-First-Century Dramatists*. London: Methuen Drama, 2020. 7–30. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781350127579.ch-001>>.

Downloaded from Bloomsbury Collections, www.bloomsburycollections.com, 26 April 2023, 15:32 UTC.

Copyright © Christopher Bigsby 2020. Released under a CC BY-NC-ND licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>). You may share this work for non-commercial purposes only, provided you give attribution to the copyright holder and the publisher, and provide a link to the Creative Commons licence.

CHAPTER 1

AYAD AKHTAR

The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposing ideas in the mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function.

F. Scott Fitzgerald¹

In any immigrant society the question of identity is likely to be central. Do individuals or groups look in or out – in at their own group, enforcing its values and rituals, or out at those in the wider society to which they are invited to conform as evidence of, and justification for, their acceptance? At the port of entry names are changed, by fiat or choice, old modes adapted to the new even as immigrants seek out their kind, speak the old language, visit familiar places of worship until time begins the process of moving them on, physically, emotionally, intellectually, even as there may be a price to pay, a sense of unfocussed guilt. In time, they make way for other more recent groups to be melted in the crucible, or to negotiate a new covenant, not quite a truce but a way of living which requires the least sacrifice, a compromise not seen as such.

They have travelled, after all, not to be what they were but what they could become. To abandon some elements of identity, however, can seem a step too far, a betrayal because they are of a faith which once shaped daily life, offered a path which gave that life a meaning. That is especially true of religion, particularly those whose severity imposes a heavy cost that is part of the route to redemption, nearly two-thirds of Muslims in America insisting on its importance to them. Yet, unforgiving cults aside, isolating their adherents, there remains a need and desire to be part of the society which had drawn them across ocean or borders so that identity becomes contested, a source of tension, exacerbated when elements of faith seem to clash directly with the tenets of other identity groups or appropriated by those intent on challenging the polity itself. However, despite 9/11, polls showed that Muslims were more confident about America than the general populace even as they faced increased hostility from some.

Interfaith marriage had been addressed in the theatre as early as 1922 in the hugely popular, and critically derided, comedy *Abie's Irish Rose* in which a Jew and a Catholic marry in the face of their fathers' wishes. Marrying out could seem a betrayal even as immigrants began to shape the world they were warned against assimilating into. It was, after all, Jews who went on to dominate the American musical (probably America's greatest contribution to world theatre). Even as they changed their Jewish names and for the most part avoided specifically Jewish subjects (*Fiddler on the Roof* being a notable exception – with its lyrics equally applicable to a Muslim house: 'And who has the right, as master of the house/ To have the final word at home? / The Papa, the Papa! Tradition' – along with *Cabaret* with its stress on anti-Semitism), not only did their music often echo Jewish rhythms and display a fondness for the minor key, but they would address the question of identity, of inclusion or exclusion, through an emphasis on other groups as in *Showboat*, *South Pacific*, *Porgy and Bess*, *West Side Story*, the last a version of *Romeo and Juliet* as Ayad Akhtar would turn to *The Taming of the Shrew* in his 2014 play *The*

Who & the What, a comedic treatment of what elsewhere in his work would take a different form.

In fact, for much of the second half of the twentieth century American culture, and, indeed, the interpretation of American culture, was in the hands of Jewish writers, critics, composers, intellectuals, to the extent that Jewish and American culture seemed in many ways coterminous. Akhtar came from a Muslim background, Muslims having less leverage on the cultural life of the nation. A Pew report in 2016 found that over 40 per cent thought them anti-American while Muslims are viewed less favourably than seven other major religions. What Jews once experienced, Muslims are liable to do today and with the same internal debates about potentially competing identities.

Heterogeneity is seen as evidence of liberal tolerance so long as the dominant discourse and narrative are not threatened. In a mass society, the local becomes more important, those things which differentiate from the generality more significant offering as they do a sense of community defined by place, religion, gender, sexuality even as there is a counter-pressure to embrace shared values, acknowledge a national identity. Ostensibly, society celebrates the centrifugal, the group the centripetal. Yet there is, of course, a negotiation, for some more fraught than for others. What is it to be a Muslim in a non-Muslim country? How do apparent prejudices enshrined in a holy book – not seen as prejudice because enshrined in that book – work out in the necessary debates which make up social life? What answers does literature offer? It is a character in Richard Flanagan's novel *First Person* who observes that literature 'asks questions that it can't answer. It astonishes people with themselves.'² The other becomes the self. That is the necessary legerdemain of fiction, of drama, as the particular becomes the general.

In 2017 the British-Pakistani novelist Kamila Shamsie published *Home Ground*. It featured a Muslim family whose father had been a jihadi who died on his way to Guantanamo while his son joined the media section of ISIS in Raqqa. At one stage a character turns to the internet being told that she might be guilty of GWM, Googling while Muslim. It was a thought which occurred to the author who, like one of her characters, has from time to time been stopped by British immigration officials. In Britain and America, being identified as a Muslim, particularly of a certain colour, can test the limits of a liberal tolerance more fragile than might have been supposed. In fact, she had little trouble and the book was long-listed for the Booker Prize, the country's leading literary award. Shamsie was born in Karachi, later taking British citizenship after living in the country for six years because travelling with a Pakistani passport could be difficult at times. It would be her seventh novel, though, before she set her work in her new country.

Pakistan has the sixth largest diaspora with seven million Pakistanis living outside the country. Among that number were the parents of Ayad Akhtar, both doctors, she a radiologist, he a cardiologist. They travelled to the United States in the late 1960s, settling in Milwaukee, though their son was born on Staten Island in 1970. Theirs was a Punjabi family, not overly religious, living in a part of the country in which they were liable to stand out. It was, he has recalled, a volatile family.

He himself grew up American, aware of a Muslim heritage to which he was not initially drawn, though teenage years, as is often the case, prompted an interest which would later fade. He taught himself to pray and at one time persuaded his parents to let him attend a local mosque explaining to Michael Sokolove, of *The New York Times*, that on hearing that on a given

day all creation bowed to Muhammad he had stayed up all night waiting to see the trees bend.³ It was a faith that would fade as he became a militant agnostic at college before re-discovering not a formal religion but a sense of what he called his devotional nature, his ultimate fidelity being to the truth rather than the Quran, even as they were assumed to be coincident.

Ahead, though, lay a precise date which would change him as much as it would others: 9/11. Suddenly, any invisibility he might have sought, any sense of having blended into the commonality, ended in so far as he was made aware by others, and became aware himself, that his was a double inheritance. His work thereafter would be an inner dialogue offered to others as he explored his relationship to a Muslim faith whose tenets, practices and implications suddenly seemed of interest not simply to him, renegotiating the terms of his own relationship to family, beliefs, obligations, but to a wider society in which difference was suddenly less celebrated than feared. What resulted were works which staged private and public tensions, embodied debates about identity in figures whose certainties were exposed and doubts acknowledged. The curiosity is that the more he focussed on his own community the more the issues with which he engaged echoed those of a society apparently so confident in itself but never really assured, never quite clear why there might be others in the world who failed to recognize its self-evident virtues. Anxieties, insecurities, have ever prompted prescriptive responses, religion itself being one evidence for that, as the patrolling of the borders of a supposed freedom is another. In the plays, novel, film he would write he stood back, raising issues without resolving them, an objectivity which would lead him to stage dramatic confrontations but also move in the direction of comedy.

When he was growing up it was assumed that, like his parents, he would in turn become a doctor. In his play *The Who & the What* he would invent a father who was more flexible than his own agreeing to his daughter studying creative writing: 'You were the one who made me see that it's important we don't all become doctors . . . We need *our own kind* thinking about the bigger questions.'⁴

As it happened, at school he encountered a teacher who opened a door to the bigger questions and precisely through writing. In a world literature class, she introduced him to modernist literary texts. He recalls reading Thomas Mann, Robert Musil, Albert Camus, Franz Kafka, Jean-Paul Sartre, Rainer Maria Rilke and Yukio Mishima, hardly standard works in a Midwestern school. It was an education which did, indeed, open doors, not least because she and the books provoked a sense of profound meanings to be explored, an exploration, however, which seems simultaneously to have closed others in that it moved him away from his cultural roots, even if, at fifteen, he decided that he wanted to be a writer. The kind of writer he thought himself as being, however, then and for many years, was a Central European modernist engaging with universal themes rather than his own experience, assuming that such would be too parochial.

It is the nature of the immigrant experience that it involves a tension between what is carried into the new country, the preservation of old traditions and values, and the urge to accommodate. America offers the promise of transformation and re-invention though sometimes at a price, a residue of culpability for abandoned ideas, faiths, assumptions. It is the more acute for the second generation, more deeply embedded in a culture itself intent on asserting its unique identity with an insistent pull towards an assumed centre, its myths regularly celebrated. With no necessary loyalty to a distant world, only refracted through parents themselves ambiguously located, the impetus is towards seeking inclusion

David Mamet has spoken of his own upbringing in Chicago, urged to substitute secular myths for religious ones only later to discover what was lost along the way, an aspect of his identity filtered out and which he subsequently set himself to rediscover, though less in his plays than in assertive polemic. Akhtar would have a similar realization in his thirties and when he did it would release a sudden burst of creativity which saw him write a novel and series of plays virtually simultaneously leading to a remarkable debut for which there are few, if any parallels, though he had been writing for a considerable time.

As he has explained,

I started to understand I was running from who I was. I had been inculcated in the literary values of European modernism. I was trying to be a kind of writer that I wasn't. I was trying to ignore the fact that my parents came from Pakistan and that I had a Muslim background. I didn't want to have anything to do with it. I wanted to be the 'great American guy,' a tabula rasa, not defined by anything. I was partaking of that great American paradigm of rupture from the old world and renewal of the self from the new world. Whether it's a rupture from the literal old world, or a rupture from one coast and moving to the other coast, or from one primary family, or one identity to another, we as Americans celebrate that rupture. We celebrate the renewal, but we do not mourn the rupture. I started to recognize that I had been running from all kinds of stuff in many ways. My identity ethnically and religiously was part of that. It was a slow process of coming to understand how much I wanted to be European, how much I wanted to be white, how much I wanted to be the things that I wasn't. When I started to understand that, I had enough presence of mind to not do anything about it, but just observe. And as I observed, I metaphorically looked over my shoulder at what I had been running from, and it led to an explosion of creativity.⁵

In his novel, *American Dervish* (2012), about a young Muslim boy growing up in Milwaukee, he described a moment experienced by his protagonist which mirrored that of Akhtar himself, differing only in its location. For the young college student in 1990 it took place at a college game while for him it was at an airport. Having been raised to avoid pork in his school meals his protagonist now eats a Bratwurst and feels a sudden sense of liberation freed not just from a religious practice but from the religion itself, a rite of passage which removes a barrier between himself and those around him. The sky, it turns out, does not fall. When the instructor, in a course on Islam, casts doubt on the legitimacy of the Quran two fellow Muslims leave the lecture theatre in protest. He remains, taking pride in his newfound, if unexamined, secular confidence. He is also in love with a girl who reciprocates but while he is Muslim she is Jewish, and this sets the stage for the rest of the book which steps back in time to when the then young boy was growing up trying to discover who he was and how he related to the world around him, confusing and contradictory passions sweeping over him.

Growing up in Milwaukee, Akhtar was aware of difference, especially when it came to women, what clothes were appropriate, what was seemly for women to wear, Muslim or not. He recalled an incident in which the family had gone for a vacation on a lake and one summer a young girl, who liked him, turned up at the house in a bikini. His mother was confused. Growing up, and having relationships with girls, he wanted to fit in with American mores even as he was aware that they were not those of his own background. His work is

about remaining committed in some way to the world from which he came while not being defined by it.

Following high school, and after another college from which he dropped out after a year, Akhtar went to Brown University, insisting that he had had a dream in which it had featured. There he had a sense of freedom, not restrained by any particular required curriculum and not in pursuit of grades but discovering theatre as a theatre major and beginning to act and direct (he directed Genet's *The Maids*). He had grown up in a family in which theatre was not part of their experience, his father being somewhat baffled by the concept of people pretending to be what they were not, *Dallas* being the closest to drama that they came. So suspicious of his son's ambitions as a writer was he that he offered to pay his rent when he came out of college if he promised to take the *Wall Street Journal* every day (which he duly did, in the process learning about the financial world in a way which would eventually lead him to write a play on the subject), presumably in the hope that, by osmosis, it would turn him to the light side and to realize that life had more to do with a solid career and making money than making things up for a living. Brown, however, offered more than an introduction to theatre. Having grown up in Wisconsin where everyone was white he was also suddenly exposed to a more various student body and, thereby a different sense of the world and of possibility.

He has said that his involvement in theatre was in part therapeutic. He became interested in the Polish theatre director and theorist Jerzy Grotowski, and later spent a year working with him in Italy in the early 1990s, impressed by his total commitment and his concern to ask rather than answer questions in his work. In 1999 he moved to New York where he worked with actors, on occasion along with the director Andre Gregory (born, in Paris, to Russian Jewish parents). Four years earlier he had married a French woman who he met on his junior year abroad, a marriage, though, which would fail by the time he was in his thirties.

At Columbia he did graduate work in film directing and has said that he regards film as the dominant narrative form, with its basic three-act structure, while moving with ease between the different modes, in a conversation with Gabriel Greene, at a Theatre Communications Group sponsored conference,⁶ naming Scorsese as a major influence and in particular his film *Goodfellas* because of what he called the percussiveness of the story telling, its velocity. He had, he explained, taken more than three months watching six films a day as he explored film history in the process learning something of the story-telling form.

It was while he was at Columbia that he and fellow student Tom Glynn conceived the idea for what became the film *The War Within*. They were there at the moment planes flew into the Twin Towers. They had already been working on another film about identity when Joseph Costello, who would direct *The War Within*, read a story about a Palestinian suicide bomber. In the aftermath of 9/11 they decided to write about the world in the wake of that event, a time of renditions, torture, suspicion of those whose appearance made them likely suspects. They wanted to understand something of the mentality of someone who comes to feel that bombing civilians has its justification, that suicide bombing is a welcome fate. To their surprise they found it relatively easy to find a company that would make a film which would potentially be controversial.

Akhtar has said that 9/11 proved critical to his thinking, explaining that, 'I was myself psychologically not at home with my own identity . . . It became increasingly clear to me that there was a question of, "Why am I trying to do this? What am I ashamed of? What do I want to be?"'⁷ The film switches between French, Punjabi and English, a reflection of its protagonist's

multiple identities. Even those who appear settled are liable to infiltrate Punjabi into their defence of their new American identities.

The film begins with Hassan, an engineering student, suddenly seized on a street in Paris. He is flown to Pakistan where he is tortured for information, his brother having been a terrorist killed, it seems, in Afghanistan. His cell mate is an Algerian called Khalid, himself a genuine terrorist and by the time Hassan is released he has become, what he was not before, a devout Muslim convinced that his duty is to join the fight, that all those of his faith are brothers. He is sent to New York where Khalid now runs a cell and where bombs are being prepared. Pretending to be in search of a job he looks up a former friend and becomes in effect a member of their family, as, unbeknown to them, he prepares to bomb his target, Grand Central Station.

It is his attachment to the family which introduces a momentary hesitation, even being attracted to their daughter, but it also offers him the opportunity to begin the process of indoctrinating their young son. Preparing to set off his bomb, he writes a note to his friends who have found a home and security in America: 'I have done what I will do, what I have to do. You are Americans now and America has been good to you. It has become your home, the country you love. But the life you live is born from the blood of our brothers and sisters throughout the world. Your government takes actions of which its people are unaware but ignorance is not innocence.' 'What I am doing,' he says, 'I am doing for Allah. What I am about to do I am'⁸ even though in the mosque an imam insists that jihad is the struggle of everyday life.

The plot is discovered, the cell broken up, but he and Khalid decide to go ahead, Hussain making a bomb in the basement of his friends' house until they discover him. He turns his back on them, and the woman he was drawn to. Though Khalid fails to go through with his part, Hussain goes to Grand Central and explodes his suicide bomb, in the process killing, among others, the woman who might have held him back from his action.

Akhtar not only co-wrote the script but played the role of Hassan, his understated performance creating a tension between the character's inner conflict and the momentum of a plot which is always on the verge of being a thriller while being effectively restrained. It was released in 2005, just four years after 9/11. It could have been seen as a provocation. At one stage, indeed, attention is drawn to the absence of the Towers as a way of orienting in the city as, in a sense, it is an unstated point of reference in the film.

Did Hassan become radicalized because his life was transformed by his arbitrary seizure, his being the victim of rendition and torture, or was he indoctrinated during his time in prison? Is he wrong in his assessment of America's role around the world, the ease with which his friends have accommodated, abandoned their faith and country? It is a film which established Akhtar's urge to confront rather than evade central questions about identity and the relationship between Muslim Americans and the culture to which they are drawn or against which they may be tempted to rebel. At this stage he saw himself as an actor rather than a writer and there is evidence enough in this film for his talent in that direction.

There came a moment, though, when he read the work of Philip Roth and realized that his own community could legitimately be seen as the basis of stories rooted in that community but whose meanings would extend beyond it even as he experienced something of the response that Roth had elicited from fellow Jews when they sought to impose a duty on him to represent Jews in a favourable light. Akhtar was the first American Muslim to write fiction and drama based in the Muslim community and perhaps as a result encountered those who felt he

therefore had a responsibility to offer a portrait that would correct the distorted view of Islam too often current, as if it was his duty to explicate and justify what to him was the material for art rather than polemic. It was the Australian writer Richard Flanagan who said, 'books don't tell us how to live. They teach us we are not alone' and that 'a novel is not an argument for anything.'⁹ It may seem strange to suggest that this applies to a writer for whom the Muslim experience lies at the heart of his work but it is the essence of what he learned from reading Chaim Potok in his early teenage years who, he said, 'spoke to the religious dimensions of my experience, and also my immigrant experience, because those people in Brooklyn, those Hasidim, were so much like the people I knew,'¹⁰ in a sense echoing his mother's conviction that Jews were models, successfully accommodating to the new country while sustaining a sense of themselves and their traditions.

From him, and from Philip Roth, he learned that the particular is a bridge and not an end. He might have learned the same from William Faulkner for whom the implications of his novels did not end at the boundary of Yoknapatawpha County. As soon as he realized that his own particular territory was a key, works suddenly tumbled out of him, though he had earlier spent six years writing what turned out to be an unpublishable novel. Now he wrote *American Dervish*, the first draft of *Disgraced*, *The Invisible Hand* and *The Who & the What* and began work on another novel, all this in the course of eight to ten months. It is hard to think of any other writer, other than David Adjmi, who has had such an epiphany. Looking for an explanation, he remarked that,

Kierkegaard says: 'Someday the circumstances of your life will tighten upon you like screws on a rack and force what's truly inside you to come out.' At that time, I was married and my marriage was falling apart; I was languishing, I'd been writing for so long and making no headway; I felt like my work wasn't fertile . . . I felt like I had the strength to maybe start looking at myself in a different way and maybe gave up on some of the fictions I was trying to concoct to make myself feel I was somebody other than who I was. I kind of gave up on wanting to be a great writer . . . What was standing in the wake of all this was greater access to me . . . I think also the end of my marriage, that was a big thing for me. We'd been married for ten years. And I think that forced me to ask a lot of questions about myself.¹¹

As it happens he had been married to a Catholic, albeit not a practicing one, so that cultural identity was an intimate question.

He deliberately set *American Dervish*, which brought him \$850,000, before 9/11, an event which changed Muslims' attitudes towards Americans and Americans' towards Muslims. He stepped back to his own youth in what, he insisted, is an American story, an immigrant story, a dysfunctional familiar story, a conversion narrative, about the American religious experience but from a Muslim point of view.¹² It is also an account of the young protagonist's sexual and moral education as he tries to understand the world around him and his own feelings and convictions. Beyond that, it is a denunciation of bigotry disguised as religion, of a version of Islam which finds little space for enquiry or engagement with those who hold different beliefs.

The book is set in a suburb of Milwaukee and the narrator, Hayat Shah, is the son of a doctor, so to that degree it clearly reflects aspects of his upbringing. As Akhtar remarked, 'I wanted the book to have the feel of autobiography, I wanted it to feel non-fiction, rather than fiction – even

though it was a novel. I was drawing from my own life – I often paraphrase Wallace Stevens: I was building with wood out of my own forest, and stones from my own fields.’¹³ His is essentially a secular family, seldom entering a mosque, his mother (like Akhtar’s own mother a lover of *Dallas*) lamenting her husband’s womanizing and drinking while recalling her father’s respect for the Jews who seemed to him open to debate, dedicated to genuine learning rather than ‘the rote memorization and mindless regurgitation of tradition he saw as common to Muslims.’¹⁴

As survivors of the Nazis, they had every reason to retreat into the certainties of their faith, to avoid self-doubt and self-questioning, but refused to do so, remaining intellectually engaged even as they continued with their rituals in a way which contrasted with his own experience: ‘it was not what he learned in his own religious upbringing at Punjabi mosques, where he, like so many good Sunnis, was taught that pursuing knowledge for its own sake was the sure sign one had fallen from the straight path leading to God’ (119). Hayat’s mother proved equally admiring of aspects of Jewish observances and practices, even as, at the age of nine, he himself had been inducted into the anti-Semitism of other Muslims one advocating the killing of Israelis, taking Hitler as a model. A Jewish boy is attacked at school.

The local imam seems something of a confidence trickster, lining his own pockets. When Nathan Wolfsohn, a Jew, considers converting to marry Mina Ali – best friend to Hayat’s mother, having fled a painful marriage in Pakistan – and attends the mosque he is treated to a tirade against Israel and is called a dirty Jew, ‘no matter who we become,’ he laments, ‘we’re always Jews,’ demanding that ‘Somebody has to say something! . . . If nobody says anything, people will think these things are acceptable’ (205–6). Yet the young protagonist moves in the other direction finding justification in the Quran for the prejudice he has witnessed, passing his newfound views on to Mina’s young son.

Jealous of Mina’s attraction to anyone else, but particularly a Jew, he sends a telegram to her former husband which precipitates a crisis he did not foresee as he threatens to reclaim the son he had abandoned. Beyond that, his father first demands that he should stop reading the Quran and then burns it in front of him. It was a scene which disturbed Akhtar’s agent. He ‘was very concerned because the time that the book was sold was right around the time when that pastor [Terry Jones, 2010] was burning those Korans in Florida, and one of my foreign editors wanted me to take out the Koran-burning scene . . . because she was concerned it might end up being like another “Satanic Verses” thing. So I sat with that for a week. And I realized I had written the book without one iota of fear, and I couldn’t edit it with an iota of fear. And so I kept it as it was.’ As it turned out, the Muslim community seemed to pay little attention. Nonetheless, he felt trapped between two audiences.¹⁵

The resonances of Hayat’s action in informing on Mina reach out to all those around him. She can no longer marry the man she loves but instead, and against her better judgement, marries a Muslim man who can protect her son, except that he insists she should wear first a hijab and then a full-body chador, that she should not speak to other men or even look at them. He beats her for any infraction of his rules, as, we learn, he had his first wife, this justified by the fourth surah of the Quran which permits the beating of women by those ‘in charge’ of them. But it is not religion alone that takes him down this path. He increasingly loses all sense of control buying a gun with which to threaten her and himself, his business falling apart.

Watching this, Hayat abandons his faith for, he tells us, ten years. ‘My soul was outgrowing the child-sized raiment with which my Islamic childhood had outfitted me,’ he explains.

Eventually, after eight years of marriage, Mina dies of cancer but not before he has confessed to his role in destroying her happiness even as she accepts everything as the will of God.

In an epilogue, now working as an intern at the *Atlantic*, he encounters Nathan and learns that he had maintained contact with Mina throughout her marriage, their love for each other surviving. Now, himself living with his Jewish girlfriend, he takes the opportunity to apologize for his anti-Semitic attack years earlier, at peace, finally, relieved of a burden of his own making as of the doctrines of a faith which had constrained rather than liberated him. He has finally understood, what Mina had tried to teach him, that God, or whatever he chose to call him, inhered in the world and its particularity, feeling a sudden sense of gratitude though not quite understanding for what, beyond a sense of 'quiet wonder'.

His is a world of contradictions. Women are subordinate and the objects of desire, self-abnegation is praised but not practised, Islam attracts and repels, at one moment liberating at the next constraining. He watches an adult world of betrayal and confusion, enrolled by his mother against his father, desperate to find his way to some kind of truth, an adolescent adrift and looking for mooring. Islam offers assurance, certainty, the very thing he lacks as he is surprised by the sudden onrush of sexuality and a family which seems at odds with itself. If Akhtar's intention was, as he claimed, to show what it was like to grow up as a Muslim in America at a time when the seeds of contemporary life were being planted, to explore what it was like to be Muslim and Western at the same time, it was also to be a story about forbidden love and a family story.

Akhtar's had been the only Muslim family in his part of Milwaukee. Today he regards himself as a cultural Muslim in the way that Arthur Miller regarded himself as being culturally a Jew, an identification which David Mamet rejected as a wilful denial of the centrality of faith, aesthetics, an attitude towards history, modes of thought not being detachable from their origins. For Akhtar, they obviously are even as he meditates each day, something he learned from the Sufis, a sense of the spiritual remaining fundamental, as it would for Hayat who would, nonetheless, be left, at the end of the novel, where we entered it, in a relationship with a Jew about to confront him anew with issues he had once thought clear if not resolved.

For all that the focus is on Hayat as narrator, the transforming influence is Mina. She is also at the heart of a paradox. She is a believer and introduces Hayat to a sense of the spiritual but is herself the victim of the men to whom she is required by that same faith to subordinate herself. There is no doubting Akhtar's revulsion at the treatment of the women in *American Dervish* but equally no doubt that he acknowledges a sense of transcendence which is embodied in a woman who suffers and dies. The rote learning of the Quran is without meaning for those set to prove their ability to recite it. The imam lacks human understanding, but disregard for women is not restricted to those who seek justification for their actions. Hayat's father, resolutely opposed to Islam, is happy to conduct affairs with other women, offering a lesson to the son whose holy book he burns.

American Dervish was not the first novel Akhtar had written. There was an earlier one about a researcher at Goldman Sachs. Negative responses from friends persuaded him to abandon it. He was the more surprised, therefore, when, late in 2010, *American Dervish* was immediately accepted by Little Brown and sold to twenty-two countries. It was published in January, 2012, a year which was to prove remarkable as two of his plays received their premieres, one going on to win a Pulitzer Prize. The novel received almost universal praise except, ironically, in *The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, the city's main newspaper and the largest circulating in Wisconsin.

The reaction in the Muslim community, though, he has said, 'hurt my enthusiasm. It's like I'm writing for my people and they don't want to pay any attention . . . that's the real story . . . of my work: the way it's caught between two audiences . . . the tension in the way in which all of the works I'm involved in are servicing two audiences that are often not overlapping.'¹⁶

Disgraced, which opened at the American Theater Company in Chicago on 30 January 2012, engaged with many of the issues raised by his novel, the relationship between Jews and Muslims, the nature of Islam, its attitude to women, divided loyalties, this time set in the moneyed classes living on New York's Upper East Side. At the centre are Amir and Emily. She is an artist drawing inspiration in part from Islamic art ('Islam is a part of who we are, too,' she says, 'God forbid anyone should remind us of this' [92]) and, she hopes, about to be included in a major exhibition at the Whitney. He, who had once worked in the Public Defender's Office, is now a corporate lawyer in mergers and acquisitions angling to become a partner in a Jewish firm, a fact not without its irony since, when young, he had had a Jewish girlfriend until his mother had forbidden mention of her name, spitting in his face so that he would remember her injunction, leading him, in turn, to spit in the girl's face.

They live in a spacious apartment, he wearing shirts costing six hundred dollars, she used to international travel. He is of Pakistani origin, though this is not apparent from the fact that he speaks with a 'perfect American accent'. She is white 'lithe and lovely',¹⁷ not so much a trophy as a means of entering the world to which he aspires. Akhtar has observed that, 'Franz Fanon said in *Black Skin, White Masks* [that] by possessing the white woman he possesses white culture; by holding her breasts he enters into the birth of the white world, right? Emily is a symbol for Amir; she is a key of access to that world, to membership in that civilization.'¹⁸

They seem confident in themselves and their situation, except that their equanimity is easily disturbed, as it had been by a waiter who had looked at them in a way that provoked Amir so that he responded, as Emily says, in such a way that 'You made him see that gap. Between what he was assuming about you, and what you really are' (4). The question of who he really is, though, is far from clear. Indeed, that lies at the heart of a play in which all the characters have secrets, are all capable of denial and betrayal, of prejudices which they conceal from others and even from themselves.

Emily, we learn, had previously had a black Spanish boyfriend before moving to Amir, perhaps evidence of what she feels is a liberal openness which parallels her desire to incorporate Islamic art into her own, though her husband prefers her landscapes because, she acidly suggests, 'they have nothing to do with Islam' (39). She has also had a brief affair with Isaac, the man she hopes to impress with her work and secure a place in the Whitney exhibition. Amir, meanwhile, who has abandoned his religious beliefs, has concealed his true identity from his employers, claiming to have been born in India rather than in a Pakistan whose citizens are 97 per cent Muslim. As a result, his employer sends him a bottle of scotch and a statue of the Hindu Shiva. He has also changed his name. It is not just pragmatism which drives him away from his faith. He describes his sister's fate. His parents had never made her a citizen and when of an age they regarded as ready sent her back to Pakistan to marry, only for her and her husband to come back to America and become adherents of the local mosque.

His nephew, meanwhile, who is described as being as 'American as American gets' (9), has, he thinks, successfully assimilated, changing his own name from Hussein to Abe while claiming the Quran's authority for doing so. Unlike Amir, he was not born in America and is not a citizen, merely aspiring to be such. He comes to his uncle to ask for help in the defence of an

imam charged under the Patriot Act with raising money for terrorists, the imam preferring a Muslim to represent him. While refusing, at his wife's insistence he does make a supportive statement which is picked up by *The New York Times*.

Things come to a head months later when Emily and Amir stage a dinner party for Isaac, curator at the Whitney, and Jory (Amir's colleague at work), at which Emily expects to be told that her work will be included in the exhibition. It is to be a celebratory evening except that Amir has been summoned by two of his firm's partners who question him about his real identity, his statement in *The Times* having associated a Jewish company with Islamic terrorism.

Small talk at the dinner quickly devolves into something more serious when Jory asks Amir where in India he had come from. It seems an innocent remark yet touches a nerve. Emily tries to deflect an incipient argument but the conversation has a momentum of its own. For all his wife's enthusiasm for Islamic art, and Isaac's embrace of its spirituality, Amir points out that in the Quran it says that angels do not enter a house where there are pictures or dogs. For him, Islam is harsh and unforgiving as opposed to Judaism which is enquiring. Islam is about submission. In a line which provoked some shock among audiences, he adds that the Quran is 'like one very-long hate-mail letter to humanity' (47).

When Amir refuses to be identified as a Muslim, having renounced his faith, and, in echo of *American Dervish*, reminds every one of the Quran's support for wife beating, Emily insists that the relevant passage of the Quran has been mistranslated. The temperature, though, is rising, Isaac accusing Amir of self-loathing. Having denounced the cruelties of a faith he insists he has abandoned, he nonetheless confesses that 'even if you're one of those lapsed Muslims sipping your after-dinner scotch alongside your beautiful white American wife – and watching the news and seeing folks in the Middle East dying for values you were taught were purer and stricter – and truer . . . you can't help but feel just a little bit of pride.' Asked how he felt when the Twin Towers fell he adds, 'That *we* were finally winning,' (54–5) the pronoun deliberately chosen even as it is rejected as an inheritance he has tried to expunge, an inheritance which also makes him respond, at some level, to calls for Israel to be wiped out.

Emily's boyfriend had been black. Amir has a white American wife. As Isaac remarks, 'The slave finally has the master's wife' (61). There is a sub-text to relationships in a society charged with racial and religious tensions, the display of liberal credentials. What is suppressed surfaces all too easily, compromises themselves compromised. And all the time there is something else going on at this dinner party as marriages prove no less fragile than political or spiritual convictions. They talk about one subject in order not to talk about others as things begin to fall apart.

Isaac and Jory know what Amir does not, that his company has decided to pass him over and make Jory a partner, regarding Amir as anti-Semitic for his support for the imprisoned imam and discovering his duplicity over his real identity. Emily and Isaac know what Jory does not, that they had had a brief affair, indeed Isaac insists that he still loves her trying to kiss her as Jory walks in. Betrayal operates at all levels. Amir betrays his faith and is betrayed by it. Emily betrays him as Jory does his wife. Beyond this there are other betrayals as religion and politics conspire to turn beliefs into destructive actions.

The party ends when Amir spits in Isaac's face, an echo of his action as a young man. But that is not the end of the evening. Shocked by his wife's infidelity, he attacks her viciously. The man who had complained at Islam's sanctioning of violence against women now beats her brutally. In a stage direction Akhtar indicates that, '*His first blow unleashes a torrent of rage . . .*

He hits her twice more. Maybe a third time. In rapid succession. Uncontrolled violence as brutal as it needs to be in order to convey the discharge of a lifetime of building resentment' (66). Resentment at what? Resentment at the necessity to masquerade as what he is not, to feel obligations others do not. Resentment that he has had to work harder than others, to play a game whose rules are not of his devising, accommodating to values at odds with his instincts. Resentment at having been raised in a faith whose strictures he rejects even as he grudgingly acknowledges its cultural force. Resentment at ever being on the defensive, at a wife whom he loves but whose symbolic significance to his own ambitions he senses. Resentment now that that wife has not only had an affair but with one who embraces a religion he had been taught to despise. Resentment that he might feel such. He stands between two worlds while not at home in either and not fully accepted by either. For a few seconds, Emily is a symbol for all these and his world disintegrates.

Six months later he is discovered packing what he will be taking away following his divorce. He has lost his job. His young nephew Abe has now abandoned his attempt to assimilate, changing his name back to its original, the bright colours of his clothes in the first scene replaced by more muted ones, while wearing a Muslim skullcap. He has been picked up and interrogated by the FBI following an altercation in a Starbucks sparked by a friend's remark that America had deserved what it got and was going to get. His immigration status is up for renewal. Amir telephones the attorney who had defended the imam telling Abe what he himself had learned: 'When you step out of your parents' house, you need to understand that it's not a neutral world out there' (71). It means nothing to Abe who now identifies wholly with Islam and what he sees as its destiny to rule the world. It is not that Akhtar associates with this view but he has insisted that 'I believe there's rarely been a play that's clearer about the meaning of its title to an audience than *Disgraced*,'¹⁹ drawing attention to Abe's speech in which he says, 'For three hundred years they've been taking our land, drawing new borders, replacing our laws, making us want to be like them. Look like them. Marry their women. They disgraced us. They disgraced us. And then they pretend they don't understand the rage we've got' (74). He has changed more than his name and clothes. He has changed his pronoun.

Amir is left alone, with nothing but the painting his wife made and which incorporated him as a figure, itself an ambiguous gesture since it was inspired by Velazquez's *Portrait of Juan de Pareja*, he being Velazquez's assistant but also a black slave. To what is Amir a slave? To his past or the future to which he believed he could lay claim?

Akhtar has offered his own explication of his play seeing in it an expression of the identity politics which colour and define individuals trying to locate themselves in a society itself uncertain of its supposed certainties. Authenticity may be proclaimed as an objective, confident views advanced, but public performance may conceal private doubts, social statements belie personal insecurities. A face presented to the world may be a mask adopted for reasons rooted both in individual psychology and social aspirations. Human lives seldom have neat contours, without contradictions, denials, loyalties shifting with circumstance. Betrayals exist both in intimate relations and in the very systems of thought and belief which seem to offer a coherent account of experience. So they prove in *Disgraced*. Religion, in particular, can simultaneously be seen as generative of consolation, rich in cultural expressions, or crudely destructive of the very human relationships which can be the source of meaning.

'*Disgraced*,' Akhtar confesses, 'would probably set most theaters on fire in the Muslim world, because the things that are said in the play are just unspeakable.' That, however, is 'by design.

Amir is a flawed truth teller. We can discredit the witness, but we can't necessarily discredit what he says. Dissonance around the truth value is exactly the trouble of the play, and sits untidily with Muslim audiences.²⁰ There are, he concedes, Muslim viewers who would see the play as a warning of the consequences of eating pork, drinking alcohol, marrying a white woman, but that he regards as expressive of the contradictions implicit in a cultural situation in which contending interpretations coexist, though it seemed to have become more polarized since he had begun writing. 'Even five years ago,' he observed in 2016,

I don't think identity politics were quite as central to the national conversation as they are now. Something about the culture of identity politics seems to foster or encourage the expression of one's outrage as the expression of one's authenticity . . . Ultimately what the play is suggesting is . . . whatever you take yourself to be is a lie. You take yourself to be a Muslim, that's a lie . . . You take yourself to be an Indian, that's a lie. What's so troubling to so many people about the final scene is that it's inconclusive. The play's not going to tell you what Amir's identity is. He has no idea. Do any of us? Or is that a fiction that we operate until we no longer can? Is it always a false self that advances our interests until it doesn't?²¹

The play is designed to disturb. It is not offered simply as an account of the struggle of a Muslim to locate himself in a society whose values are at odds with those he has learned. It is a reminder of the tribalism which is a factor in America and beyond, of the struggle to become something more than a product of external pressures and internal desires. Here, Muslims and Jews look after their own, circle the wagons against external threats even as the centre cannot hold. The accoutrements of wealth, expressions of an unexamined dream, devolve into little more than fashion, itself arbitrary. The dinner menu, as carefully contrived as Emily's art, is beside the point when it comes to issues which live on the pulse. Expensive clothes, exquisite décor, become baroque accompaniments to relationships which fracture, commitments which dissolve, social relationships which defer to other urgencies. Glasses raised in celebration give way to one shattered on the apartment floor. Akhtar began *Disgraced* inspired by the central figure, writing a monologue which led into the dinner party, explaining that it took him two years to understand what it was about, even changing it from its initial production as he learned.

Charles Isherwood, in *The New York Times*, greeted *Disgraced* as, 'a continuously engaging, vitally engaged play' with dialogue which 'bristles with wit and intelligence'.²² In 2013, it was awarded a Pulitzer Prize, along with an Obie. Transferred to the Lyceum Theatre on Broadway, it was greeted by Alexis Soloski, in *The Guardian*, who described it as being as carefully crafted as a Swiss watch, adding that, 'it's tough to imagine anyone emerging from the Lyceum unstirred, unprovoked'.²³

Disgraced had its first performance on 30 January 2012. Five weeks later, *The Invisible Hand*, then a one-act play, opened at the Repertory Theatre of St. Louis. Two years later, in September, 2014, it opened at ACT Theatre in Seattle before a New York production at Off Broadway's New York Theatre Workshop. When it opened in London it was, predictably, at the Tricycle Theatre with its commitment to the political.

Following a film in which a Muslim is kidnapped, this was a play in which the Muslims are the kidnappers. It was a play, he confessed, which justified his father's insistence that he should

read the *Wall Street Journal* in that money, the trading of shares, would be seen as at the heart of a work in which both would play a central role. As he commented, 'As somebody who wishes to understand the world better, I think that, in our day and age, not to understand how deeply finance has informed and defined our relationships – not only to each other but to ourselves – is to miss an important part of what it means to be alive right now, in this civilisation ... Power, money, cheating. American obsessions.'²⁴

Money is a form of communication, relating people to one another and to the world they inhabit. Its value is that ascribed to it in the multiple exchanges in which we are all involved. Insurance companies place a precise value on human lives. So do kidnappers. Wallace Stevens was Vice-President of the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company and it was he who referred to money as a kind of poetry, a comment quoted by Akhtar in his introduction to *The Invisible Hand*. It has a language of its own, especially to those who trade it. It is a medium and a message. It has a way of shaping the world even as there are those who have the power to shape it. Is money not, Akhtar asked, 'the site par excellence of our recurring quotidian terrors and soaring fantasies, and, above all, the everyday test of our character? And in America, money is something else as well: the metonymic complement of personal will itself, its acquisition standing in for the supreme American expression of individual vitality. In many ways, money is our central story.'²⁵

He invokes Alexis de Tocqueville who, in an 1843 letter, had confessed that he knew of no country where the love of money had such a strong hold on the affections of men while in *Democracy in America* suggesting that the American Republic would endure until Congress discovered that it could bribe the people with their own money. It was the same de Tocqueville, though, who having read the Quran, came to the conclusion that there were few religions as deadly as Islam but that what he saw as its decadence would lead to it fading away.

No wonder the published version has an epigraph from Adam Smith, patron saint of financiers, albeit with a stress on altruism which Ayn Rand, who they probably preferred, would happily strip away. In *The Invisible Hand*, self-interest and altruism dance uneasily around each other. Money fuels the establishment and revolutionary alike, a fascination with its processes and alchemical power common to both. What Akhtar set out to do, he explained, was to give form 'to an American tale, but one unfolding on a global stage, an encounter of our national ethos with the world beyond its borders' (xv).

The play opens in a holding room in Pakistan. An American, Nick Bright, an employee of Citibank, has been kidnapped in error (his immediate boss being the intended target), and is being held against a ransom demand of ten million dollars. His immediate captor, Bashir, is British, from Hounslow, under the flight path to Heathrow, one of the poorer districts of London, who boasts that he has passed GCSE (General Certificate of Education), a base level qualification whose grades he does not offer. This is his naive offer of evidence for his intellectual capacity. In fact, it quickly emerges that he has something to learn from the captive Nick who, given his bank's unwillingness (bolstered by a new American law) to pay the ransom, proposes that he should use his skills to raise money on the market, even as, in secret, he is trying to find a way out of his captivity by burrowing through the wall. Sometimes the apparent threat of violence is illusory. Thus the play begins with Dar, charged with guarding him, applying an implement to Nick's hands, not, it quickly turns out, an instrument of torture but nail clippers. Later, though, the same man is required to put a gun to their captive's head and pull the trigger,

a test both of his loyalty and a reminder to Nick that his life is in their hands. The gun has no bullets. More ominous is the sound of circling drones.

The threat is that if he fails to secure the money he will be handed over to the organization which decapitated the American Daniel Pearl in February, 2002, though in fact the imam in charge is only seeking funds to alleviate the suffering of the poor. Money is the key to Nick's release, to the funding of the organization which captured him, to those in need of help. Beyond that, the imam suggests, it is the key to Pakistan and its government, suggesting that it had deliberately sheltered Bin Laden ensuring that American money poured into the country, a source which dried up with his capture. Finally, though, it is the key to the death of the Imam Saleem as Bashir is convinced that he has used money for his personal purposes. He is killed even as Bashir, now dressed in robes reminiscent of Saleem, himself arranges for the assassination of Pakistan's central bankers in order to profit from a fall in the value of the currency having learned a lesson from Nick. He makes thirty-five million dollars which he says he intends to spend on those in need. Nick is now free to go but stands paralysed, the logic of his own lessons having been carried out.

Manipulations of the stock market and currency in Pakistan echo those on Wall Street. Money is not only an agent of power; it is power. Its uses and abuses are the substance of history. In Pakistan, corruption is clear. It filters down through the system. It is no less true in America where democracy itself is in thrall to it, money sustaining those in power and funding a military whose reach extends throughout the world, hence the circling drones. Was the imam corrupt? Was Bashir? Is Nick, who has accounts in the Cayman Islands? Is America? Certainly Pakistan is. In the enclosed world of the various rooms in which the action takes place the only real relationship between the characters is defined by money. It is the reason for Nick's capture, the agency of his release. He inducts them into the processes of the free market to secure his own freedom, but those lessons are to do with how it is possible to take advantage of others.

Personal worth, as Marx and Engels insisted, has become exchange value (though Marx bought and sold shares, borrowing money from Friedrich Engels), here subordinating religion, the only freedom being free trade, free, apart from anything else, of a sense of morality and transcendence, simply a system available for co-option. Religion and politics, they suggested, are no more than veils for exploitation, in the end exploitation of the self as of others. It is not that Akhtar is staging a polemic against capitalism merely that he is presenting an allegory, offering a metaphor, for relationships which have a monetary base. The characters exchange pleasantries about one another's families, acknowledge familial ties, but these, perhaps necessarily in the circumstances, are subordinated to the need to realize liquid assets.

Meanwhile, outside and throughout, drones have been circling. The play ends with gunfire and explosions. It was Tennyson who underscored the connection between money and war: 'Ring out the narrowing lust of gold;/Ring out the thousand wars of old,'²⁶ this recalled by the historian Niall Ferguson in his book *The Cash Nexus*, the word nexus suggesting that which binds together.

Power has been shifting throughout *The Invisible Hand*, the only constant being money with its ability to break or mend bodies, to determine where advantage resides and how it is used. It is the invisible hand, neutral in itself, stem cells which can morph into different forms. Nick is left free only in that he is no longer a captive. In other respects, as he has demonstrated, like everyone he is in thrall to finance in its various forms. Is he paralysed because stunned at his sudden release or because he can no longer live as he has? Are Nick's futile efforts to escape his

prison to be reflected in a future in which he has been offered a lesson in the need to escape a way of living, a way of thinking? Was the imam corrupt having, when young, himself revealed corruption, a revelation which had led to his own father's death in a country in which corruption is endemic? Will Bashir, who shows enthusiasm for playing the market himself, becoming an accomplished trader, use the money he has raised to follow in the footsteps of his imam, shot by the man who earlier had been willing to shoot Nick at his instructions? And what of the American drones, as America reaches out beyond its borders, its pursuit of Bin Laden having poured money into the country to seek him out?

Bin Laden himself, incidentally, in documents discovered in his hideout in Pakistan, while criticizing the role of money in America, and the financial power of lobbyists, offered an astute analysis of the impact of currency markets, even as he left twenty-nine million dollars in his will with the request that it should be spent on jihad. He was also very conscious of the existence of drones.

The Invisible Hand, Akhtar acknowledged, was 'rich with contradiction, short on resolution,'²⁷ an American story reaching out into the world, the ethos of money embraced even by those who hold it in contempt, a mechanism to ensure stability, yet also a means of corroding it.

The play is not without its humour, even given the circumstances. There is a human connection between captors and captive. Of course they have a mutual interest. In the end, though, the murder of the imam underscores the fact that the personal exists within a context, that the price at the heart of the play is not simply that of the ransom demand. It is that paid by all those concerned and by the societies which they represent. When the Tasmanian writer Richard Flanagan reported on the plight of the Syrian refugees, who he had followed from the Lebanon to Serbia, he remarked that they are not like us, they are us. Much the same could be said of those in *The Invisible Hand*. It is not that there is an equivalence between an American banker and those who threaten him with death but that they are equally faced with questions about the purposes they serve and the means by which they serve them. The accomplishment of the play lies in the fact that he presents their lives as intersecting not only in the chance circumstances of their meeting but in the moral equivocations which are slowly exposed.

The play was positively received by critics. Besides an award from the St. Louis Critics Circle for its first production, it won an Outer Critics Circle Award for Akhtar along with an Obie, an Obie also going to Usman Ally who played Bashir.

In 2014, Akhtar changed direction with *The Who & the What*. The treatment of women remained an issue, the relationship between fathers and daughters, the nature and force of faith, but now it was presented in a comic form. Inspired, he explained, by an advertisement for *Kiss Me Kate*, itself based on *The Taming of the Shrew*, it occurred to him that while it might seem at odds with contemporary notions of the relations between the sexes, and the role of a father in determining who might be suitable partners for their daughters, it was not at all irrelevant to Muslim families. Beyond that, he had long been interested in the idea of the Prophet as a literary figure, dangerous territory, he and others had learned, from the reaction to Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*.

The two came together in *The Who & the What* in the form of Zarina, described as 'of South Asian origin', the eldest daughter to Afzal who is determined to marry her off to a suitable man before her younger sister can contemplate marriage (the play carries as an epigraph a quotation from *The Taming of the Shrew* as Baptista Minola, a nobleman in Padua, explains that he will

not permit his younger daughter to marry until her older sister finds a husband). Unbeknown to her father, a practicing Muslim, Zarina is struggling to write a novel about an incident in the Prophet's life involving the wearing of the veil, a gesture which is doubly rebellious in that she conceals what she is doing from him and challenges religious orthodoxy, seeking independence on two levels. The requirement to wear a veil, she insists, is a result of a misinterpretation, even as the suppression of women is a metaphorical equivalent.

Akhtar himself described the play as 'Neil Simon with a PhD in comp lit.'²⁸ The title, he explained, came from his reading of Jacques Derrida who speaks of the who and the what of love, the qualities the object of that love possesses being the what, while the who is the person independent of those qualities. In her novel, Zarina is trying to get at the who of the Prophet beyond the what.

The reference to Derrida is a key to the play which is not only concerned with the situation of Muslims in a country in which they only represent 1 per cent of the population and are faced with the tension between two identities, though that is one dimension (a confusion of identities in a wholly different sense lying at the heart of *The Taming of the Shrew*). Beyond that, and essentially, it is a play about love in its different manifestations (father for daughter, daughter for father, husband for wife, wife for husband, men and women for God). It is a play about who we think we are, what constitutes our sense of self. In that context it is worth quoting Derrida at length. Pressed in an interview to speak of love, its nature, its philosophical implications, at first he refused. He had, he said, nothing to say except that the nothing then turned out to be something:

Do I love someone for the absolute singularity of who they are? I love you because you are you? Or do I love your qualities, your beauty, your intelligence? Does one love someone, or does one love something about someone? The difference between the who and the what at the heart of love, separate the heart. It is often said that love is the movement of the heart. Does my heart move because I love someone who is an absolute singularity, or because I love the way someone is? Often love starts with some type of seduction. One is attracted because the other is like this or like that. Inversely, love is disappointed and dies when one comes to realize that the person doesn't merit our love. The person isn't like this or that. So at the death of love, it appears that one stops loving another not because of who they are, but because they are such and such. That is to say, the history of love, the heart of love, is divided between the who and the what ... The question of Being is itself already divided between who and what. Is 'Being' someone or some thing? I speak of it abstractly, but I think that whoever starts to love, is in love, or stops loving, is caught between the division of the who and the what. One wants to be true to someone, singularly, irreplaceably, and one perceives that this someone isn't x or y. They didn't have the qualities, properties, the images, that I thought I'd loved. So fidelity is threatened by the difference between the who and the what.²⁹

In terms of *The Who & the What* these observations are played out not only as marriages are contracted and come under strain, as parental love comes into conflict with abstract principles, and religious love and practices are examined, but as the nature of being, identity, a sense of the boundaries of the self, are explored. The who and the what are, as Derrida proposes, not only relevant to personal relationships supposedly at their most intense, but also to an understanding

of what constitutes our sense of identity, of being in the world. Neil Simon may be a point of reference in the flashes of comedy, but the PhD in comp lit seems more telling.

The two daughters, Zarina and Mahwish, are both American-born and speak with an America accent, while their father, Afzal, who has lost his wife to cancer, has what is described as a very noticeable Indo-Pakistani accent and that difference dramatizes their different perspectives. They are shaped by America while he is still trying to mediate between two different worlds, unwilling to see his family as having moved away from old ways of doing things. He is not strict in his faith, and is motivated by love, but still wishes to see them continue the tradition that shaped him. He himself had had an arranged marriage, taking three years thereafter to discover love. As a result, he has broken up a relationship which Zarina had with a Christian man, although he had promised not to raise any children in that faith while himself refusing to convert. Plainly, loyalty to her father had triumphed over her own wishes.

His strategy to secure a Muslim husband for Zarina, perhaps in compensation, is to sign her up for a Muslim dating site – Muslimlove.com (a real site of that name announced for 2018) – without her knowledge and then meeting those who respond. His mastery of the technology suggests that he is not entirely detached from the America to which he has an ambiguous relationship. In one sense he has achieved the American dream. He is the owner of a successful taxi company, named for his daughters, in thirty-five years having gone from being a driver to owning nearly a third of all the city's taxis. In another sense he remains committed to old values.

The latest to respond to his entry on the website is Eli. He is white, son of a blueblood from New England and a Southern evangelical. He is a convert to Islam, socially conscious perhaps as a result of his family's unlikely adherence to Karl Marx. His father is an even more unlikely enthusiast for black culture living in an all-black neighbourhood, hence Eli's exposure to Islam and to the Malcolm X who had returned from Mecca with the realization that Islam was a religion for all races and colours. It turns out that he had already met Zarina, albeit briefly and disturbingly, at a lecture in which a black woman called for all Muslims to become Christian.

When they meet again, in the present, Zarina, intelligent, questioning, a Harvard graduate with an MFA, explains the subject of her stalled novel. The Prophet, she explains, had seen Zaynab, his son's wife, naked and, following her divorce, married her. When, on his marriage night, one of the guests follows him to the bedroom he says, '*If you ask the Prophet's wives for anything, speak to them from behind a curtain.*'³⁰ In other words a request for privacy had subsequently been turned into a requirement for women to cover their faces. What she wishes to do is to humanize the Prophet. As she says, 'all the stories we hear, that have gotten told for hundreds of years, don't point to a real person. It's like this monument to *what* we have made of him. But *who* really was he? We don't know. That's what I'm calling it. *The Who & the What*' (39). For others, she realizes, this is potentially blasphemy. It is also, though, a description of the process of a play in which Akhtar explores characters who by degrees expose who as well as what they are. Zarina's father assumes that because she has fifteen biographies of the Prophet on her shelves this shows the measure of her commitment to Islam when in reality it is an expression of her doubt about the version of Islam to which so many are committed. The who and the what of her are different.

The first act ends as Afzal lays out his prayer mat beginning to pray as in her bedroom Zarina has a breakthrough with her novel, as she writes reading out loud an incendiary passage which casts doubt on the Prophet's status as a conduit to a God who could be a woman. Her

emerging portrait is of a man capable of doubt and filled with sexual desire, an unnecessary obstruction to immediate access to a deity.

The second act is set a year later. Zarina and Eli are married, her book complete and dedicated to him. As a convert, voted Young Muslim Leader of the Year (while suspecting it is because he is a white convert), indeed now the new imam, he is alarmed at the portrait she has drawn detecting what seems to him to be a hatred for the person central to his faith. For her part, what she hates is 'what the faith does to women,' stories of his goodness 'an excuse to hide us. Erase us' (50). Ominously, he replies, 'I don't want anything to happen to you' (51). When her father gets hold of her manuscript, indeed, he says that, 'In Pakistan? She would be killed for this. Killed.' (75)

A tension has entered her marriage to be resolved, Afzal believes, by Eli becoming more dominant. He must 'break' her, as Shakespeare's Petruchio had set out to 'tame' Katherine in *The Taming of the Shrew*, except that this is not part of a comic plot. Meanwhile, her sister, now married to Haroun (with whom she had had anal sex before marriage in order to appear a virgin at the time of her marriage), more for the what of him than the who, confesses to being unhappy, attracted to another man, Manuel whose name is clearly not Muslim. Things, it seems, are falling apart, except that Eli now defends his wife when her father demands she destroy her book insisting that humanizing the Prophet should not be an offence, a gesture which makes Zarina realize that his love for her is real. They leave as Afzal insists that his daughter is now dead to him, her name not to be mentioned. He throws her photograph into the sink and tells Mahwish she should leave her husband and return home.

In an epilogue, set two years later, Afzal and Mahwish are together in the park, she having indeed left her husband but for a relationship with Manuel which her father evidently accepts. The meeting, though, is not accidental, Mahwish having arranged it so that her sister can say goodbye to her father, she and her husband having to move because her book has, as anticipated, caused offence to his congregation and incidentally ruined Afzal's business, his drivers having deserted him, smashing the windows of his house. He remains baffled by the book and her need to write it, even as she insists that Muslims around the world had thanked her for allowing them to ask questions of their faith.

Mahwish explains that she is pregnant by, of course, a non-Muslim. Her father embraces her but is unable to do the same with Zarina. He is left alone to pray: 'Please, please, please. I love her. I love her too much. Please understand. Please forgive me.' Zarina, unnoticed, returns overhearing the rest of his prayer directed at the new child, 'Whatever anger you have with Zarina, *ya Allah*, please don't make that child suffer for what she did. If you can't forgive her, just don't take it out on him. *Inshallah*, please let it be a boy.' Zarina, (*With sass, defiance*) steps forward and says, 'It's a girl' (92-3).

Misunderstandings persist to the end, a father guilty for loving his daughter, a daughter needing to assert her independence. If Zarina's novel is inflammatory so, too, potentially is Akhtar's play for all its flashes of humour, but, as he has said, 'I'm not an apologist. I'm not involved in PR about correcting some impression that people have of Islam. My position is that, as an artist, I have to have the freedom to wrestle with my demons and my raptures and those of my community, and to celebrate and criticise in equal measure. And the best way to tell a good story about the world I come from is not to worry about the politics of representation, except in so far as it's relevant to the characters I'm representing.'³¹ What interested him, as here and in his other works, was how 'we imagine our worlds mythically.'³² It was not only the

Muslim world, however, which offered a prescriptive model. Capitalism did much the same and with the same capacity for good or ill.

This led him to his next play, *Junk: The Golden Age of Debt*, which opened at the La Jolla Playhouse, California in August, 2016. It is set on Wall Street in 1985 with not a Muslim to be seen, though several Jews. Faith remains a subject except that now the object of that faith is money worshipped with as much fervour as religion. As he told Michael Sokolove, 'If the human stakes are understandable, if we understand the action of any given scene – somebody is lying; somebody is trying to steal; there is a vendetta – those basic human interactions will be understood. That was my gambit.'³³ This is a world, in the words of one of his characters, in which a man is what he has, not the who but the what. *Junk* is a highly adept made-for-the-movies play, fast-paced, intercutting between scenes, combining, as it does, elements of crime, an embattled States Attorney, corporate moles, the drama of high-stakes players.

A play with seventeen characters, it runs for two-and-a-half hours, not something he would have contemplated earlier in his career. Explaining his intention, he said, 'I really want to make sure that I fully bring home the important reversals that unfold over the course of the play ... the structural conceit is that we want to see a man escape. At the end of the first act he escapes but his escape is ineffective. At the end of the second act he escapes, but by the most unusual means, which is that he is released in accordance with the very agreement that we were led to believe would not be honored in the very beginning ... Money is the thing that moves all these changes.'³⁴ The engine of the new world order is debt.

It is Judy Chen, a business journalist, who opens the play and provides one of the threads in a work with several unfolding stories. She is writing a book and is fascinated by what has happened as money has invaded all aspects of experience, becoming a value in itself as much as for what it can buy. It is she who sets the stage, briefly addressing the audience. This, she declares, 'is a story of kings – or what passes for kings these days. Kings, then, bedecked in Brooks Brothers and Brioni ... embroiled in a battle over, well, what else, money. When did money become the thing? I mean the *only* thing? Upgrade your position in line, or your prison cell, for a fee. Rent out your womb to carry someone else's child. Buy a stranger's life insurance policy – pay the premiums until they die – then collect the benefits.'³⁵

For Akhtar, 'What she's suggesting is that the entire compass of human existence is now defined by the imperative to monetize every possible interaction. This is what the system has created; it's created this aberration where everyone is looking to benefit in a financial way off of every transaction they are having with everyone else. This is the ideal. And then people wonder why don't we have a society anymore. Why is there no sense of mutual well-being? Because we are pitted against each other like merchants.' Yet Chen is sleeping with one of those she will be writing about, proving as corruptible as those she observes. As Akhtar has remarked, 'In a country where that's all that's left, you're an idiot if you don't do that.'³⁶

At the heart of the play is Robert Merkin (an echo of the actual Michael Milkin, known as the junk bond king, indicted for racketeering and securities fraud in 1989), an investment banker, king of the new financial world, with a reputation for turning debt into cash and who plans a hostile takeover of a family-owned steel manufacturer. He aims to use the company's own assets as collateral on a loan while manipulating the market through insider trading. He is resisted by the owner of the company, Thomas Everson, and by a private equity investor, Leo Tresler, who despises the new breed, though since both he and Everson are anti-Semitic the ethical lines are not always clear since Merkin is himself Jewish. They are like two armies

preparing for the battle and perhaps it is no surprise that Akhtar should invoke *Henry V* in an introduction to the published edition, even if he does so to suggest that his play is no more constrained by a literal truth than was Shakespeare's.

For Merkin, the world has changed and those who fail to realize this an irrelevance. In one sense, though, he is presented as being less a man with a substantial character than someone on whom others project their feelings. Not for nothing is he known by the name Moby Dick when he practices his insider trading. Meanwhile, public deceptions are mirrored in private life, Merkin deceiving his wife as though there were no barrier between the private and the public, even as she has been an active partner in his deals, even drawing his attention to the money to be made from the new for-profit prisons, schools, hospitals. There are, it seems, no no-go areas for those for whom all human interactions provide occasions for financial gain. These are characters who acquire one another as well as portfolios.

Nor does Merkin lack a certain plausibility. His analysis, delivered to a conference of private investors, which identifies the simultaneous insistence that Americans should buy American even as demand declines in the face of superior products from abroad, is accurate enough. The steel company he sets out to acquire, intending to strip it of its assets before closing it down, is genuinely in a hopeless situation and is, in fact, we learn, being defended by manipulating its balance sheet so that corruption is not restricted to one side, old money itself being familiar enough with fraud.

His speech is the more effective not only because it offers an apparently clear-eyed account but because it assumes a certain ethical stance, albeit by a man for whom morality in business is an impediment. It could as easily be a liberal speaking as a neo-liberal. Thus he attacks the 'self-serving belief that we, Americans, are somehow *better* than others' which marries,

all this Norman Rockwell sentimentality to the racist tirades about slink-eyed Asians copying our stuff, and the dirty spics taking our jobs ... what do we hear in this country? 'We're Americans. We invented the automobile. We built the greatest steel mills the world has ever known. God bless America.' Let's set aside the revolting assumption that God doesn't bless other nations, or that somehow an American's job is more important to his family than a Chinese father's one is to his ... Let's stick to the facts. Fact: They are winning. Fact: We need to understand why. Fact: We need to change ... When you can't change, you die. And that is what is happening in this country right now. (80–1)

The marketplace speaks truth if not to power then, he implies, to those making rational rather than emotional choices. The new robber barons have learned the language of concern just as they have adopted the pragmatism of William James. And Merkin is aware of the line of descent recalling the practices of J.P. Morgan, Rockefeller and Carnegie. His is the American way, the American dream, or at least a version of it.

Meanwhile, those they target are forced into compromises of their own. 'Is this the future?' asks Everson. The play may be set in 1985 but it turned out that it was, indeed, the future. Michael Milken, the junk bond king, who worked at the firm of Drexel Burnham Lambert, was convicted, in 1990, of fraud involving securities trading, partly on the basis of the evidence of Ivan Boesky, an arbitrager on which, it would seem, Akhtar based the figure of Boris Pronsky, the arbitrager in *Junk*, just as Giuseppe Addesso, the US Attorney of New York, Southern

District, in the play, was surely based on Rudy Giuliani, US Attorney of New York, Southern District, who was in charge of a probe into Milken and, like Addesso, had his eyes on becoming Mayor. Addesso goes after Merkin, invoking RICO (Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act), as Giuliani did after Drexel. Beyond that, as Akhtar observed, 'Donald Trump rose to power on untold amounts of debt. And the great awakening is exactly what it was. It was the great awakening and the construction of a new church, and we are now living in the world that church created,'³⁷ the church of finance.

The point is that corruption beginning in one place spreads out. As Maximilien Cizik, an investment manager trying to help rescue Everson Steel, points out, 'city councils and state governments will follow. Then consumers. And then what?' 'Then,' replies Tresler, 'we won't have a country anymore' (104). Junk is not only the designation of a bond, it seems, but a description of a country dazzled by wealth, in thrall to debt, and blind to a logic which would lead to 2008 when the financial world collapsed.

The battle between Merkin and Everson comes to a head at a board meeting at which the former raises his bid persuading the shareholders to accept his takeover, except by then the US Attorney has closed in, recording a conversation in which Merkin exposes himself as an insider trader. As the second act ends, he is arrested as, elsewhere, Everson shoots himself leaving his shares to the workers.

Six months later, Merkin discusses his options with his Counsel. He settles for a plea which will see him only serve two years (Milken received ten but it was subsequently reduced to two and he was released after twenty-two months), reminding Addesso that if he has political ambitions it will require money, that he will effectively have to worship at the same altar. He agrees to a fine of seven hundred and fifty million dollars, as Milkin did for six hundred million. In both cases, fictional and actual, there was no sequestration of funds.

Both sides of the battle now join. The 'New Everson', a stage direction informs us, is '*a multiracial, multicultural synthesis with single-minded devotion to the bottom line.*' The pharmaceutical division is about to be sold off, nine hundred people losing their jobs, while there are bidders for the steel division. The object is to make money rather than products. Assets are being stripped even as they debate which company they will target next.

As to Tresler, he remains secure in his racist assumption resentful of those who lack his pedigree, his racial purity. He now employs a ghost writer as Chen finishes her own book, carefully scrutinized by Merkin's lawyer until he offers her three million dollars not to publish. Addressing the audience, she confesses that she took the money investing it in high yield junk bonds: 'At the close of the third quarter of 2017, I was worth nineteen million. I never wrote another word' (145).

The final scene is set in the low security prison where Merkin is seen offering financial advice to a pliable guard advising him that the financial system is designed to be opaque. If he wants a mortgage, he suggests, put 'No money down. Sell the mortgage debt. Use the proceeds to secure insurance against default. Right. Right. Like junk. Now just sell it to the American people,' admitting that he had made fools out of people but only, he insists, those 'in charge' (149). In this play, though, nobody is really in charge except those busy selling America back to itself. Junk bonds, and sub-prime mortgages, would later bring America, and much of the world, to its knees yet they survive, an innovation in finance still eagerly embraced though not, one presumes, their illegality. Milkin is still admired on Wall Street and many of those who worked with him have reaped their rewards.

He plainly learned from the robber barons who polished their reputations by establishing philanthropic foundations. On his release from prison he founded the Prostate Cancer Foundation (he, himself, being diagnosed with the condition). With his brother he established The Milkin Family Foundation and then a think tank called Faster Cures. He became a leading benefactor. F. Scott Fitzgerald was wrong. Americans lives do have second acts.

At the end of the play it is clear who has won. As Akhtar observed, 'Wall Street's won. Money's won. The system ... And there's a reason they won. They won because they defined the world. They won philosophically and they prevailed. And what they have to offer is technology and cash. They've created a society in which those two things are really all that matters ... I couldn't put a positive spin on this. I spent so long thinking about it and I didn't see the silver lining. Finance is not only conditioning and defining what we think of as human, but it's tearing the fabric of collective well-being into shreds.'³⁸

In reviewing the play, Ben Brantley, in *The New York Times*, described it as 'numbingly safe', with unconvincing characters, while acknowledging that it proceeded 'with remarkable briskness, efficiency and accessibility', as though describing arrangements for disabled access.³⁹ In doing so he recalled the failure, on Broadway, of two British imports, Caryl Churchill's *Serious Money* and Lucy Prebble's *Enron*, the latter the focus of a trans-Atlantic spat between himself and *The Guardian*'s Michael Billington. Brantley had dismissed it as a 'flashy but labored economics lesson', amounting to not 'much more than smoke and mirrors'.⁴⁰

For his part, Michael Billington called *The Times* review 'obtuse and hostile', evidence of 'the aesthetic conservatism of a theatre culture that likes plays to be rooted in the realist tradition.' Because of the power of that newspaper, 'which carries the force of a papal indictment', the play could not succeed (it closed after twelve days and fifteen performances). He noted that the same newspaper had dismissed David Hare's *The Secret Rapture* and concluded by saying that, 'If Enron's melancholy saga proves anything, it is Broadway's irrelevance to serious theatre.' There might, he concluded, 'be room for one, decent, straight new play ... But at heart Broadway is a big, gaudy, commercial shop-window, where fortunes are won and lost'.⁴¹ The one play he referred to, in this 2010 article, was John Logan's *Red*, but that, as it happens, had opened at the Donmar Theatre in London. The beating heart of American theatre, he declared, was no longer to be found in New York but Chicago.

Akhtar's *Junk* did, of course, begin life far from New York subsequently making its way to Lincoln Center (a Broadway theatre, though distant from the theatre district). Interestingly, Chris Jones, in the *Chicago Tribune*, also invoked British imports. He described *Junk* as 'an epic, strutting, restless, sexually charged, slam-bam-wham piece of work, something akin to the huge socio-political dramas by the likes of David Hare, produced at the National Theatre in London but far less common on this, less reflective side of the Atlantic',⁴² while finding it fascinating how his approach differed from what Jones called that of the socialist Anglo progressives like Caryl Churchill (who wrote *Serious Money*). What struck him was that Akhtar did not ascribe blame to white male privilege or capitalism, instead seeing the crisis as cutting across gender and race. It was, he declared, an exciting play.

When it was reviewed by *The Guardian* it was not by Billington but Alexis Soloski for whom, despite its two-and-a-half-hour length, it zipped by quickly, being smart, speedy and adroit even as it failed fully to explore the psychology of its central character. Soloski is an American. Cultural differences can be more complex than they sometimes seem.

Staging America

In a sense the writer who began fascinated by the contradictions of faith, the confusions embedded in a sense of identity, returns to these concerns with this play. The new God is money, and to a degree always has been. In *Junk* it has the same power to disrupt relationships, provide the language within which his characters and, beyond them, society exist. Identity is defined by one's position in the marketplace, a hierarchy of need becoming a hierarchy of desire. Loss becomes a word for financial failure rather than a sense of human desolation. Ends and means lose any ethical connection. Pragmatism rules, America's gift to philosophy. Akhtar is a writer who began wondering whether he was an outsider staring in, set apart by faith and origin, or whether he was fully engaged with an America in which allegiances were ever questioned. It is an equivocal stance which in the end gifted him his drama whose energies derive precisely from that contended sense of what might constitute reality, his own and that of the society he inhabits.