

Unstable Catharsis and Cultural Trauma in Ayad Akhtar's *Disgraced*: A Reader-response Study

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ABSTRACT

Ayad Akhtar's Pulitzer Prize-winning play *Disgraced* has largely been interpreted as a political critique of post-9/11 Islamophobia and identity conflict. However, this paper shifts the focus from character analysis to audience psychology through a reader-response framework. Situating the play within the thrust areas of reader-response, empathy and perspective-taking, diaspora and identity, cultural trauma, and psychotherapy and narrative medicine, the study argues that *Disgraced* produces what may be termed "unstable catharsis." For diasporic audiences, the play can function as bibliotherapy by externalizing internalized shame and articulating suppressed experiences of cultural surveillance. Simultaneously, it may reopen unresolved trauma. For Western liberal audiences, the play operates as a psychological confrontation, exposing latent prejudice beneath performative tolerance. Rather than offering classical Aristotelian release, *Disgraced* generates discomfort, fractured empathy, and moral destabilization. The paper proposes that contemporary diaspora drama does not merely represent trauma but stages it as a site of collective psychological processing. In doing so, *Disgraced* complicates the notion of the cathartic power of literature and reveals how cultural trauma is received, negotiated, and emotionally processed differently across audiences.

Keywords: Reader-response theory, Cultural trauma, Diasporic identity, Unstable catharsis.
