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DOI:

[10.1080/17449855.2023.2216998](https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2023.2216998)

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*Document Version*

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

*Citation for published version (Harvard):*

Morey, P 2023, 'Tormented visibility: Extremism, stigma, and staging resistance in Omar El-Khairy and Nadia Latif's Homegrown', *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, vol. 59, no. 3, pp. 331-346.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2023.2216998>

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To cite this article: Peter Morey (2023) Tormented visibility: Extremism, stigma, and staging resistance in Omar El-Khairy and Nadia Latif's *Homegrown*, *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 59:3, 331-346, DOI: [10.1080/17449855.2023.2216998](https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2023.2216998)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2023.2216998>



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Published online: 27 Jun 2023.



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## Tormented visibility: Extremism, stigma, and staging resistance in Omar El-Khairy and Nadia Latif's *Homegrown*

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### ABSTRACT

This article examines the circumstances surrounding the cancellation of Omar El-Khairy and Nadia Latif's play *Homegrown* in 2015. Commissioned by the National Youth Theatre, it was unexpectedly cancelled days before it was due to open. This move can be attributed to heightened sensitivity towards so-called "extreme" opinions of the kind *Homegrown* features, as the British government tightened definitions of unacceptable speech and placed the onus on civil society bodies to police it. Yet, as this article argues, *Homegrown's* treatment can also be understood in terms of the historical commissioning processes for minority – especially Muslim – theatre, which privilege certain topics and modes of address that result in marginal communities' continued stigmatization. From the outset, *Homegrown* was alert to these constraints and sought to counter them through a radical refusal to conduct its debates in the manner approved by the framing conventions of security discourse and the governing etiquette of post-9/11 theatre.

### KEYWORDS



Omar El-Khairy; Nadia Latif; *Homegrown*; radicalization; extremism; British theatre

"We must be careful to only give a platform to the right people." (HM Government Counter-Extremism Strategy 2015, 32)

"I kinda did what you wanted me to, but – didn't, exactly, do what you asked." (El-Khairy with Latif 2017, 85)

### Introduction: *Homegrown* and minority theatre in Britain

The last decade-and-a-half has seen a gradually expanding range of Muslim cultural expression come to the fore in Britain. Muslim artists are producing novels, poetry, television shows, stand-up comedy routines, podcasts, and other forms which are at last beginning to capture the actual diversity of experience in a multi-ethnic community that has too often been homogenized and stereotyped.<sup>1</sup> Yet there are still topics which cause unease among the wider, non-Muslim audience for whom these acts of self-representation constitute a window onto a world they themselves know little about. In particular, when it comes to Muslim attempts to enter the debate about radicalization and

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so-called extremism, expectations from without continue to frame possible expression in particular ways. Art itself is never a neutral, apolitical entity, while the act of producing it automatically positions the artist within a range of pre-existing discourses which affect the work, how it is shaped, and how it will be received. In *Framing Muslims* (Morey and Yaqin 2011), Amina Yaqin and I set out to describe the prevailing frame within which cultural and political discourse about Muslims is contained and delimited. This frame shapes a consensus of meaning for an act of representation by providing it with a specific context created through selection, emphases, inclusion, and exclusion. As such, it determines the relevance of any utterances about or by Muslims and tends to reinforce existing stereotypes (Morey and Yaqin 2011, 21). In the arts, we can consider the processes by which works are produced and consumed. These processes are controlled by certain gatekeepers: funding bodies and artistic directors, reviewers and critics, and media commentators.<sup>2</sup> Constraints exist for all kinds of public art. Yet, when it comes to so-called minority art, they are narrowed in accordance with the requirement to be “representative”: to “speak for” one’s community. In the case of Muslim art, the frame of acceptable utterance is narrower still. In many culture-industry practices, such as those of the theatre, the salience of Muslim self-representation is decided in part by those involved in funding and commissioning. They have the power to deem a text “authentic” or “successful” (or otherwise) according to how well it satisfies predetermined criteria which the minorities themselves have had no hand in shaping.

Some critics, such as David Hesmondhalgh (2002, 12), have labelled theatre a “peripheral” cultural industry since it lacks a reliance on industrial modes of production and circulation which govern other forms such as broadcasting, the Internet, or the music business. Yet in recent decades it has increasingly come to share the same reliance on marketized mechanisms that respond to commercial imperatives, tending in the process to reinforce certain secular ideological norms the contravention of which can provoke a backlash.<sup>3</sup> This article will take as its example the National Youth Theatre’s (NYT’s) abortive production of *Homegrown*, written by Omar El-Khairy and directed by Nadia Latif, which was suddenly cancelled just a few days before its scheduled opening in 2015. While the twists and turns of the story behind the cancellation lead us into a thicket of claim, counterclaim, and disclaimer, certain clues emerge as to why the work was pulled. For one thing, *Homegrown* deliberately refuses to operate within the accepted frame around Muslim representations. Like other Black and Asian cultural products, *Homegrown* was from the outset required to carry the burden of representation that always falls on minority arts (Mercer 1988, 4–14). However, in deliberately choosing to question and subvert the terms on which that burden was imposed, its creators placed the play outside the discursive range of acceptable responses to the challenge of Muslim minority representation. At the same time, concurrent political debates in wider British society raised the stakes still further. In the end, *Homegrown*’s fate was sealed by a convergence of the commercial imperatives governing mainstream theatre in a neo-liberal marketplace; restrictive and dated commissioning priorities resulting in the required stigmatization of the Muslim subject; and the surrounding feverish discussion about extremism and the anticipated effects of impending legislation. This article will outline the circumstances of the cancellation and subsequent controversy, consider the impact of each of these elements, and offer a brief comparison between *Homegrown* and another play about “Muslim radicalization”, Gillian Slovo’s (2016) *Another World: Losing*

*Our Children to Islamic State* (hereafter *Another World*), to show how *Homegrown*'s striking mode of resistance contravenes the accepted conventions governing plays on this topic.

### The rise and fall of *Homegrown*

In 2015, the NYT commissioned playwright Omar El-Khairy and director Nadia Latif to devise a play about young people being drawn towards Islamist extremism in the wake of recent developments such as the so-called “Trojan Horse” scandal, where radicalization of children was claimed to be taking place in Birmingham schools, and the defection of three young East London women – later known as the “Jihadi Brides” – to Islamic State forces in Syria. Recognizing the loaded cultural assumptions in the commission, whereby it was presumed that Muslim artists must have some special insight into the phenomena of extremism and radicalization, El-Khairy and Latif set about creating a complex, site-specific, immersive piece with a cast of over 100 diverse young people aged between 14 and 18, that would test commonplace ideas swirling around Muslim youth. The piece was designed to be staged in a school building, taking in the lead-up to, and performance of, a pseudo-school play, with the actors shepherding audiences from classroom to classroom to hear snippets of dialogue reflecting the variety and complexity of discourses on race, religion, and belonging.

A Bethnal Green school was initially earmarked as the performance venue, whereupon the NYT's artistic director, Paul Roseby, gave a *Guardian* interview, linking the play to the recent news story of the three Bethnal Green girls who had run away to join Islamic State (Ellis-Petersen 2015). Yet the girls and their story play no part at all in the play, which is, rather, about the multiple discourses around radicalization: the hints and rumours rather than the whys and wherefores. Even so, the topic's sensitivity was sufficient for Tower Hamlets council to force the school to withdraw as the venue. Another suitable school location was found in Camden. Rehearsals were well underway, apparently with the full blessing of the NYT, when at a production meeting it was mentioned that the police had asked to read the script and suggested measures to be put in place during the performance, including planting plain-clothes officers in the audience and having the bomb squad sweep the venue. No indication was given as to *why* such measures might be deemed necessary. Preparations continued apace.

However, just two weeks before the performance was due to start its run – and immediately after enthusiastically endorsing the work while visiting rehearsals – NYT representatives emailed the creative team to announce they were cancelling the play, citing a sequence of shifting reasons including safeguarding worries, unfinished work, and even quality concerns. Locked out of their rehearsal space and fearful of being misrepresented, El-Khairy and Latif took to the press to tell their side of a story which quickly gained national notoriety. The human rights organization Liberty became involved, checking the script to make sure it did not contravene regulations on hate speech or incitement, and a few weeks later an open letter, signed by theatre figures including David Hare, Simon Callow, and Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti, appeared in *The Times* on August 14, 2015, expressing fear that “government policy in response to extremism may be creating a culture of caution in the arts”. With Liberty's help, the play's creators sent Freedom of Information (FOI) requests to the Arts Council, Tower Hamlets and

Camden councils, the Metropolitan Police, and the NYT itself. The police initially denied involvement in the cancellation. However, when an email was leaked to *Channel 4 News* they backtracked, admitting that meetings had taken place. The FOI request also revealed that, contrary to their claims, the NYT had not only met the police, they had also decided to cancel the show even before seeing the rehearsals.

It is difficult at this distance in time to say which specific intervention sank *Homegrown* and at what point. However, one of the emails uncovered by the FOI requests perhaps provides a clue. On July 30, 2015, Roseby emailed the Arts Council expressing concern about what he saw as the play's "one-dimensional tone and opinion" and claiming that El-Khairy and Latif had failed to justify their "extremist agenda" (quoted in Jupp 2017, n.p.). A further concern expressed in the email is even more telling. Roseby claimed the play lacked the required "editorial balance" and "justification" needed in handling such controversial material, suggesting a deep discomfort with the idea that contentious issues should be aired without a guiding hand to impose a directive shape of some kind (n.p.).

The playscript was eventually self-published so, although it was never performed as intended, readers can make a judgement for themselves about the content. What might be termed "extreme" views *are* aired, but only alongside, and in contrast to, views from across the full spectrum of opinion. Yet therein lies the challenge. These voices are not mediated nor arranged in such a way that more "reasonable", moderate perspectives are privileged or win out over more radical ones, either verbally or through the formal containment that would be implied in a traditional well-made play. Moreover, the use of paired actors as "tour guides", splitting the audience into groups and leading them to different classrooms before converging for the performance of the school play-within-a-play at the end, meant that "an audience member could see completely different scenes from the person they arrived with" (Jupp 2017). In the published playscript, a Director's Note advises actors:

It is important to recognise that each strand takes [ ... ] the audience through a range of opinions and stances. Do not normalise these views [ ... ] Some are purposely aggressive or left-field. The audience, of course, do not have to agree with everything they hear, but equally neither do the tour guides. Investigate the space between what is deemed acceptable and what is intelligible. Make bold decisions. Be brave. (El-Khairy with Latif 2017, 17–18)

Within this structure, choreographed heterogeneity takes the place of the "editorial balance" Roseby saw as necessary to the subject matter (quoted in Jupp 2017, n.p.). In short, *Homegrown* deals with a wide array of viewpoints, avoids conventional resolution, and deliberately eschews any edifying message. To understand why this might be quite such a problem at this moment, we need first to consider the Conservative government's response to the challenges posed by recent incidents such as the Trojan Horse and Jihadi Bride affairs.

### The "extremism" debate

The years prior to the *Homegrown* debacle had seen a concerted attempt to manage the societal fallout of the September 11, 2001 and July 7, 2005 terror attacks and the altered imperatives of the War on Terror. Along with those well-documented moves resulting in

the securitization of British Muslims, legislative efforts to protect the community from Islamophobic attack also took place, although they were often bedevilled by mixed motives. Maleiha Malik (2009) describes how plans to introduce a new offence of incitement to religious hatred – finally completed in the Racial and Religious Hatred Act 2006 – were dogged with controversy and

motivated by a desire to protect vulnerable Muslim minorities from hate speech [. . . while also obeying the] simultaneous impetus to regulate the speech of some Muslims that was deemed to be extremist because of its advocacy of illiberal ideas. (97)

The concept of extremism itself being necessarily relative and context-specific, it was important that a clear definition of the term should be arrived at for legal and legislative purposes. Yet the strategy unveiled by the government in 2015, at the end of a long period of deliberation, was condemned in a *Guardian* editorial on May 30, 2016, as “incoherent and likely to be profoundly counter-productive”. It was accused of having a confused idea of extremism and sequestering to the law the task of preventing the expression of so-called extreme views. *The Guardian* commented: “the remedy for bad speech is good speech, not to turn large parts of the machinery of government into a sort of secret police force” (May 30, 2016). By shifting focus from the prevention of “violent” extremism, as in the first iteration of the counter-radicalization policy Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE or “Prevent”), to a more generalized definition of the “extreme” as opinions and behaviours not in themselves violent, the government found itself charged with threatening the very freedom of expression it trumpeted as one of the pillars of those British values it required Muslims to embrace.

In 2015, Arun Kundnani (2015) looked back on what he termed “*A Decade Lost*” to successive governments’ fixations with Islamic radicalization and extremism. He notes how the latter was defined in the 2011 PVE strategy in opposition to “fundamental British values” of liberty, respect, and tolerance. The effect of this and other moves was to further frame Muslims as objects of suspicion and to securitize the multiculturalism debate which reached a peak with Prime Minister David Cameron’s notorious speech at the 2011 Munich Security Conference calling for a move away from multiculturalism and towards “muscular liberalism” (Kundnani 2015, 12, 26). In official discourse a stronger connection was made between those who committed acts of terrorism and those who espoused negative feelings towards Britain and who formed what Charles Farr, the head of the Office for Security and Counter-Terrorism, called “the pool in which terrorists will swim” (quoted in Kundnani 2015, 27). As Kundnani writes, “In effect, extremism represents a new category of speech that can be lawful but is considered by the government to be illegitimate” (27). The elasticity of the definition of extremism served to close down areas of debate, and was criticized as unhelpful by those bodies, such as the police, who were tasked by Prevent with adjudicating on whether radicalism was likely to turn into terrorism.<sup>4</sup>

In the immediate run-up to *Homegrown*, the Muslim community came under renewed media scrutiny with accusations that reflected this heightened sensitivity to dissent, coupled now with a concern for the welfare of young people. Muslim youth was considered particularly susceptible to extremist messaging after the Trojan Horse and Jihadi Bride stories hit the news. Among the provisions of the 2015 Counter-Terrorism and Security Act is the responsibility placed on schools (among other public bodies) to



“have due regard to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism”, by challenging extremist ideas and referring those considered at risk of radicalization (Prevent Duty Guidance 2015). Figures quoted by Kundnani on the number of referrals to the Channel programme between 2007 and 2015, designed to make interventions where individuals are deemed vulnerable, indicate the level of anxiety at the time El-Khairy and Latif’s play was being devised: “153 children under 11, another 690 aged 12–15, and 554 aged 16–17” having been referred in this period (Kundnani 2015, 34). In a statement issued after *Homegrown*’s cancellation, the artists speak of their awareness that the twin demons of political censorship and heightened sensitivity around the themes they were addressing appear to have conspired to thwart their efforts:

We are making art in a particular climate: the climate of Prevent and Channel – programmes which are creating an environment in which certain forms of questioning, let alone subversion, of the given narrative pertaining to radicalization and extremism can be closed down. (Hooper 2015)

This is certainly true and accounts for the suddenness of *Homegrown*’s demise. Yet it is necessary also to recognize that the seeds for the clash of ideas and ideology were sown long before this in the very soil from which Black and Asian theatre grew and was nourished. To understand this, we need to consider the origins, practices, and economic context of minority arts in Britain as they have developed from the 1970s to the present.

### Representation, British theatre, and the market

The story of Black and Asian theatre in Britain to some extent parallels the slow-dawning awareness that, following the bedding in of the first wave of postcolonial migrants and the rise of a more politically conscious second generation, Britain had become a multicultural society. Reports such as Naseem Khan’s (1976) *The Arts That Britain Ignores; Black Theatre in England*; the post-Macpherson *Eclipse Report: Developing Strategies to Combat Racism in Theatre* ((Brown et al. 2002) – which identified institutional racism holding back minority ethnic subjects in the creative, technical, and managerial sides of theatre; and Lola Young’s (2006) report for Arts Council England, *Whose Theatre?*, aimed to capture the dynamism of pioneering theatre companies such as Tara Arts, Tamasha, Man Mela, and others, and secure for them greater recognition and more funding streams (Ley and Dadswell 2011, 1, 3, 12; Davis and Fuchs 2006, 29, 117). In the 1990s, at what was arguably the peak moment for multiculturalism in Britain – before the backlash generated by the 2001 Oldham, Bradford, and Burnley riots and the 9/11 attacks in New York – critics and politicians alike were keen to laud an upsurge in South Asian cultural activity, catapulting young artists especially into the mainstream and, supposedly, capturing the relaxed hybridity of these third generation Britons.

Yet all this was happening at a time when the established template of multiculturalism which had grown from Black and Asian solidarity in the face of racism in the 1970s and 1980s was giving way to a model based more on faith identifications. Kenan Malik (2009) has described (and deplored) this shift for breaking the anti-racist consensus articulated through the old model of political Blackness, introducing communal tensions, and fostering radicalization where once there was solidarity. He records the involvement of local authorities in London and Birmingham in encouraging this diffusion by dispensing



funds along faith lines (41, 63, 68), while Nira Yuval-Davis (2007), writing at the same moment laments “the growing construction of British diversity in multi-faith rather than multi-cultural terms” (572n1).

It is possible to argue that funding priorities in minority theatre arts failed to keep up with such changes. At the same time, the burden of representation continued to require that productions lay bare the concerns of communities in terms predetermined by existing frames. While they were to speak for minority communities, the gauge by which the authenticity and accuracy of productions were decided continued to be that of the white majority. Graham Ley and Sarah Dadswell (2011) conclude their documented history of British South Asian theatres with the observation that “the history of British Asian theatres for the most part demonstrates the need to advance a distinctive aesthetic [ ... and] to create a profile that will attract and sustain funding”, while noting also “the difficulty of breaking out of a ‘community’ definition regularly imposed by funders” (242, 245). One example of this bind and its relationship to ghettoizing neo-liberal commercial imperatives is interrogated by Anamik Saha (2013). In his essay “Curry Tales” – named after one successful but arguably self-exoticizing production staged by Rasa Theatre in 2004 – Saha makes the point that

The British Asian cultural text is a product not just of its creator’s imagination, but also (and perhaps more so) the conditions of cultural production [ ... ] which can help us explain the persistence of hegemonic and reductive representations of Asianness. (822)

Saha concentrates on the marketing of British Asian plays, and how certain kinds of perspective and exotic content are praised and come to be expected. Conversely, when they depart from a comparatively narrow repertoire of images and concerns, works run the risk of being deemed “not Asian enough” to draw audiences; that is, being a representation of Asianness with little commercial value (832). Saha’s broader point is about “how capitalism attempts to govern the counter-narratives of difference” (819). The drivers behind funding appear to be perceived audience expectations and an embrace of niche marketing. In considering the fate of *Homegrown*, caught on the horns of the extremism debate but refusing to participate in it in acceptable ways, particularly noteworthy is Saha’s observation that

The risk or politics of British Asian cultural production is that, in the requirement to define the product’s USP [unique selling point], the author’s ethnicity becomes the default quality used to distinguish the product from other goods in the market. The further danger is that the focus on reaching the largest audience [ ... ] places a demand to produce an instantly recognizable – and therefore reductive and caricatured – version of difference. (Saha 2013, 833)

So, what I have elsewhere called the market for the Muslim has both aesthetic and economic dimensions (Morey 2018, 6–7). The kind of fascination with Muslim malfeasance which prompts innumerable news headlines finds a counterpart in the priorities of theatre funding and commissioning. Indeed, there appears to be a strongly directive, perhaps even prohibitive, quality to the subjects that mainstream theatre in particular wishes to explore. There is a desire to produce “representative” theatre addressing the key contemporary issues affecting Britain’s Muslim minority. Yet, at the same time, the corpus of topics and how they must be addressed are severely limited. Writing of another play about Muslim experience, commissioned by the Royal Court, Ariane de Waal (2018)

notes how the end result was a reified version of cultural identity, “reshaped and configured as ethnic stereotype in the form of a commodity’s brand or identified market niche” (84). This, in turn, raises “issues about the commercial value that is bound up with (theatrical) representations of British Muslims” (83).<sup>5</sup> The paradox could be summed up as follows: mainstream theatre commissioning and funding policies still obey an older, essentially secular, Black and Asian “ethnic minority experience” paradigm, even though multiculturalism itself has fragmented along religious lines.<sup>6</sup> Commissioners and funders are aware of this and would like to enter the space of religious identity, particularly after 9/11, but only on the terms they, and the governmental institutions with whom they must maintain good relations, are comfortable with. As De Waal writes of commissioning in these years: “it seems that British theatres were primarily interested in participating in a cultural conversation that was already ongoing, rather than inviting playwrights to explore as yet neglected aspects of British Muslim subjectivities” (84).

At the start of “Curry Tales”, Saha cites Vijay Prashad’s (2000, 32) synopsis of the long-standing western fascination with South Asian culture which takes the binary form of shorthand orientalist archetypes of the “ghastly” or the “beautiful”. We can think of the beautiful side as represented by exotic foods and spices, elephants, Maharajahs, mystic revelations, hotels where ageing Europeans can go and relive their youth, and plucky slum children overcoming their disadvantages to win big on TV quiz shows. The ghastly, as described by Saha, exists in terms of “Beards, Scarves, Halal Meat, Terrorists, Forced Marriage” (2012). It will be recalled that *Homegrown* was initially commissioned to explore the issues arising from the defection of the Jihadi Brides to join Islamic State in Syria. Roseby confirmed the authenticist motives for the commission saying:

It will be a production asking why are these young people so fascinated about going to either become jihadi brides or fight for Isis, or both. And I genuinely think that’s a question only a person that age can really understand and begin to answer. We’ve got this wealth of resource here because young people know what’s going on and can tell the story first-hand in a way older people may never previously have considered. (quoted in Ellis-Petersen 2015, n.p.)

In other words, in their prejudged ability to address radicalization “from the inside”, so to speak, the creators and young cast of *Homegrown* were being required to carry the stigma of Muslim extremism.

### Bearing and resisting the stigma

The sociologist Erving Goffman ([1968] 1990, 15) famously anatomized the process of stigmatization by which individuals and groups deemed to have discreditable qualities that place them outside acceptable society can be marginalized by those he called the “normals”. The result is not merely the withdrawal of respect but, in many cases, the denial of shared humanity. Goffman talks of races, nations, and religions as particular carriers of stigma for others: what he calls “tribal stigma” (14). We can claim not only that as a scrutinized, securitized minority Muslims are always engaged in self-presentation to others, but also that theirs is a particular type of self-presentation operating within a distorting frame that sees them all as potential terrorists. Moreover, as Goffman says, “the issue of stigma [ ... arises] where there is some expectation on all sides that those in

a given category should not only support a particular norm but also realize it” (17). That is: the tribal stigma of modern-day Muslimness must be acknowledged and validated by those stigmatized. As Anna Branaman observes:

Instead of trying to present themselves favourably, they are required to present themselves in such a way that indicates that they accept their inferior status and don't intend to make claims to full-fledged humanity by treading on ground reserved for normals. (1997, lix)

To make matters worse, in the case of contemporary British drama, Muslim writers and actors are expected literally to perform this stigmatization in front of hundreds of paying customers.

It is evident from the start of *Homegrown* that El-Khairy and Latif had no intention of participating in such self-stigmatization. Clues as to the shape of this refusal appear first in the paratextual material included at the front of the published playscript. Following “A History of *Homegrown*”, outlining the circumstances of the commission and its cancellation, we are presented with an Author’s Note in which El-Khairy complains that the culture industries either dismiss or exploit artists of colour (El-Khairy with Latif 2017, 15). A certain amount of “well-intentioned energy” has been expended on trying to address institutional racism and sexism, yet in the meantime artists have got on with the task of trying to create art on their own terms: “If mainstream industries and institutions neither represent nor reflect us, then we will do it for ourselves” (15). This turns out to be a response to censorship *and* a manifesto statement for the play itself. It describes the play’s strategic obtuseness in both content and form. In the accompanying director’s and devising notes, Latif mentions the influence of the horror genre in creating the atmosphere of the show: “starting as something slightly uncanny, unreal or out of place, building to full on terror” (17). The school setting should be “at times real, and at other times, purposefully weird and uncomfortable” (19). Sure enough, in the play text itself – along with attention to media clichés and well-meaning compensatory attempts to celebrate positive representations of the kind one might expect in a school – the students openly share feelings of alienation and note the hypocrisy of the west in its dealings with Muslims. More shockingly, they discuss violent terrorist murderers including Michael Adebowale, the killer of Fusilier Lee Rigby in 2013, and the ISIS executioner known as Jihadi John. The presence of these grotesques from the pantheon of Islamist extremism cements the horror link, as does a scene in which a group of three “angelic” white girls, described in the stage directions as “*well-dressed and glossy, identical as much as they can be*” (92; italics in original), glide into a classroom as if possessed and begin reciting ISIS propaganda.

The hysteria accompanying the fear of Muslims, lying just beneath the surface but ready to erupt in vituperative accusation when an incident does occur, is foregrounded. El-Khairy and Latif parody the excesses of “Muslim scare” discourse and in the process ironically push the “bad Muslim” paradigm to its limits. The feeling of uncertainty is initiated at the beginning, when three students are seen leaving the school. Their absence is the cause of discussion among their friends: are they bored with rehearsals for the school play, just bunking off, or on their way to Syria? We are never told. In truth, this initial event is merely a prompt for the play’s wide-ranging discussions of race, racism, and Islamophobia in modern Britain, including the unfair burden of representation

forced onto Muslims. In one dialogue, two students consider whether the play's creators have passed up a chance to present a more positive image of Muslims:

LISA. [ . . . ] they've been given this – amazing – this rare opportunity to counter all the ugly representations in the media of crazed Muslims, and what – they do that –  
 EDDIE-JOE. That shouldn't be their burden.  
 LISA. It's still a responsibility  
 [ . . . ]  
 EDDIE-JOE. If that's what you want, they should have got some white dudes to work with us instead. (2017, 95)

An off-the-cuff remark by a canny student in another scene, when presenting their homework on “Muslim heroes” to the teacher, could stand for *Homegrown*'s attitude to the prejudicial terms of its commission: “I kinda did what you wanted me to, but – didn't exactly, do what you asked” (85).

The individual tours led by the students converge at the end when the audience are led to their seats to watch the school play. Although this seems a more recognizable platform, *Homegrown* is still concerned to thwart any potential emotional identification with characters, nor does it allow the audience to lose themselves in a narrative. Instead, while the cast take its place, the stage directions emphasize a Brechtian defamiliarization by insisting that costume changes and character transformations take place in plain sight. At one point we are told: “those on stage begin the process of ‘brownface’ – transforming themselves into Muslims. This process is both obvious and unsure – obvious because it is cartoonish, unsure because no one is really sure of what they are supposed to look like” (El-Khairy with Latif 2017, 178). This is the culmination of the production's experiment around the question of cultural hierarchies and representation – who gets to speak for whom. In this, the creators were inspired by Spike Lee's (2000) film *Bamboozled*, about the minstrel tradition and blackface in American popular culture. In the same way that Lee's movie dissected the politics of cross-racial performance, El-Khairy and Latif wanted to explore the idea of non-Muslims speaking on behalf of Muslims. The cartoonishness of *Homegrown*'s enacted transformations highlights the falsity of an appropriation that wishes to ventriloquize minority subject positions in a parody of Muslim “authenticity”. In the final scene's collage of reflections on the fallout from the Jihadi Brides' defection, the directions tell us: “The entire cast are now speaking as a chorus of ‘Muslims’” (El-Khairy with Latif 2017, 183).

In its willed resistance to the consolations of naturalistic reportage, *Homegrown* stands resolutely against what is expected of works dealing with “the Muslim problem”. This is a play about Muslims that, in Latif's words, “does not seek to educate or improve its audience [ . . . ] It's not a remedial piece of art in any way” (2019, 258). The exchanges that the audience were to encounter on their tour were devised from YouTube footage, interviews with people on the street, and some dialogue written by the young actors themselves. There is no editorial presence pulling things together or directing our sympathies, teleological impulse, or “authentic opinion” to be had from the two Muslim creators. A willingness to contest the epistemological assumptions underpinning the commissioning of a play by Muslims about an area of extreme political sensitivity in which they are marked out for suspicion – what de Waal calls the “pernicious schemes of intelligibility” governing their representation (2018, 87) – is what marks *Homegrown* out

from the verbatim plays with a similar remit which were in theatres at this same moment. By way of a brief comparison, I consider Slovo's (2016) *Another World*, developed with Nicolas Kent, which was performed at the National Theatre in the spring of 2016.

### "Truth" and transparency

Verbatim theatre, a longstanding means of bringing current events under a dramatic lens, seemed a particularly apposite form after 9/11, when the need to understand the motivations of terrorists appeared most pressing (Claycomb 2012). Following Robin Soans's ([2005] 2012) *Talking to Terrorists*, directed by Max Stafford-Clark at the Royal Court in 2005, Slovo's *Another World* continues the semi-documentary approach to understanding causes and consequences. Yet, as De Waal has pointed out, the realist claims of the verbatim form often assert "an epistemological certainty about the 'terrorist self'" (2018, 71), markedly at odds with *Homegrown*'s radically interrogative approach. *Another World* stages a series of exchanges by actors voicing the words of those involved in radicalization or experiencing its fallout. It deals in thematic blocks – ISIS ideology; Prevent; the Paris Bataclan theatre attack; strategic responses by governments – cued up by sound recordings and videos projected onto a screen in the background. Among the voices we hear are those of educators, security experts, senior police officers, former terrorism detainees, and the mothers of those who have left home to join ISIS. The didacticism of the project – and therefore a clue as to the intended audience – is evident early on when an academic offers a basic history of the Shia/Sunni schism within Islam. Indeed, expertise and direct experience appear the criteria for inclusion. This is because *Another World*'s project is to answer those questions posed on the back cover of the published playscript: "What is the entity that calls itself Islamic State? Why are some young Muslim men and women from across western Europe leaving their homes to answer the call of Jihad? And what should *we* do about it?" (Slovo 2016; emphasis added).

Importantly, Slovo includes the voices of four anonymous sixth-form students from Tower Hamlets. These voices are closest in demographic terms to the young actors in *Homegrown* and speak in response to a set of questions that remain mostly un verbalized in the script, but which lead in the expected directions; one female student notes that she conducted some research on ISIS ahead of this interview leading to a conversation with her peers about the need to be careful what you google as a Muslim (Slovo 2016, 43). Yet, for the most part, the play operates through the twin registers of pontificating and poignancy: pontificating from those implementing government policies and recommending strategies; poignancy from the testimonies of the grieving mothers of ISIS defectors who know they are unlikely ever to see their children again. At the end, the mother of one man killed in Syria recounts undertaking a perilous journey to the region where her son died and distributing what little money he had to those made destitute by the conflict, winning a consoling promise from one grateful refugee that she will name her own unborn son after the dead fighter (55).

To the extent that it is driven by literalism and an urge to conventional cathartic resolution in the face of the evidence it presents, *Another World* is a remarkably conventional piece, offering food for the mind and emotions of its audience. Yet, the play is more than merely a dutiful rehearsal of the issues. Slovo is aware of the ironies and contradictions in the views advanced by the experts

and brings these to light in the way the play juxtaposes speakers who are never exactly in dialogue, placing the responsibility for sifting the views expressed onto the audience. Yet all this is done within the containing frame of acceptable prevailing discourses about Muslims and with an eye to theatrical politesse. As such, unlike *Homegrown*, it fails to disturb the complacencies of a liberal world view. El-Khairy and Latif's play, by contrast, takes such complacency as one of its main targets.<sup>7</sup>

An example of the contrast can be seen in the way the students address the audience in the two plays. In *Another World* the young people are (perhaps unsurprisingly) far more critically self-conscious than most of the adult contributors: the price of living with daily suspicion. When one of them bemoans the fact that the media appear more fixated on Muslims than on the deeds of the English Defence League (EDL) and other racist organizations, the interviewer makes a rare appearance to ask:

[Why is that?]

MALE D. I think – I think that's a question that the people who are watching this play should ask themselves.

[What I'd like to say is] we are exactly the same as you, that's what I think. Every fear that you feel whenever you see these attacks or stuff, we feel it, as well. It's not as if we don't.  
(Slovo 2016, 50)

The equivalent passage in *Homegrown*, commenting on the preceding scene which is composed entirely of jokes about white liberals, describes the attraction of adversarial political comedy as follows:

SHIV. [...] everything you're looking for is in there [. . .] It's just a matter of approach – tact really. That's where the politics lies. Not in the rhetoric. Fuck the rhetoric.

Any dick can say shit. But where's the craft in saying it? (*Beat*) Right? [...] It's exciting. (*Beat*) I wish I was allowed to do something like that in our show.

NANCY. I don't see that – any of that. And other people – most people aren't going to see it either.

SHIV Fuck other people

NANCY. Your audience, you mean?

SHIV. Yeah – a healthy disdain. It's good. It's important to keep that relationship honest – true like.

(El-Khairy with Latif 2017, 125–126)

In both plays, performers turn the spotlight back on the audience, but they do so in drastically different ways and in starkly contrasting tones. In place of *Another World's* well-mannered liberalism, *Homegrown* contravenes many of the established rules about what can be articulated in terms of “extreme” opinions. (Another rule it breaks is the theatrical imperative that while you can challenge your audience it is probably best not to insult them too.)

*Homegrown's* deliberate perversity is part of its rejection of the established terms of debate: terms which require Muslims to perform what Yassir Morsi (2018, 479) calls “their own self erasure” by subordinating themselves to another's constructed image of them. Definitive evidence of the writer's refusal to abide by the stigmatizing terms of this framing comes when El-Khairy, in his Author's Note, invokes the French Martinican theorist Édouard Glissant's (1997) idea of opacity:



He defined it as the right not to have to be understood on others' terms, a right to be misunderstood [ . . . ]. For external pressures always insisted on everything being illuminated, simplified and explained. However, Glissant's refusal suggests that there is another way. (El-Khairy with Latif 2017, 15)

El-Khairy expresses the hope that *Homegrown* will be a work that “torments visibility, and uses our assumed clarity on the topics du jour in a productively ambiguous manner” (El-Khairy with Latif 2017, 16). Glissant criticizes the requirement of transparency imposed by western regimes of knowledge, noting that it always results in reduction. By contrast, he says, “The opaque is not the obscure, although it is possible for it to be so and be accepted as such. It is that which cannot be reduced” (Glissant 1997, 191). To be deliberately opaque in an age when transparency is required of the Muslim subject is to court more than misunderstanding. Fidelity to an explanatory mission, imposed in the ultimately ethnocentric terms of theatre commissioning and funding models in their desperate attempt to remain “relevant”, is the prime requirement for a play on “Muslim radicalization” to be deemed successful. It is the reason why Slovo's *Another World* can earn plaudits such as “enlightening” or “richly informative”, while El-Khairy and Latif's *Homegrown* can be cancelled (Billington 2016, n.p.).

### Conclusion: Getting past the gatekeepers?

We can say that the British government's hardening attitudes towards, and narrowing definition of, extremism in the period when *Homegrown* was being prepared, coupled with a cultural nervousness resulting in the further consolidation of a limited representational repertoire, led to censorship by over-zealous gatekeepers in the National Youth Theatre and the Metropolitan Police. As Rehana Ahmed (2020, 367) puts it in another context: “the functional authoritarianism of the British arts establishment, predicated on and screened behind a secular liberal understanding of free speech [ ... ] help[s] to shut down dialogue and debate”. Perhaps, therefore, it is not really the case that *Homegrown* had an “extremist agenda”, but that it included “extreme” positions which it then refused to filter through the corrective lens of liberal didacticism, nor neutralize via dramatic catharsis. In the era of the Trojan Horse and Jihadi Bride controversies this was enough to bring it to the attention of cultural authorities themselves feeling pressured towards censorship by a narrowing definition of acceptable speech. In a classic instance of the convergence of those institutional and ideological practices which, in Anshuman Mondal's (2018, 509) terms, “‘shape’ freedom, especially freedom of expression, in particular, context-specific and historically determined ways”, the play was caught in a pincer movement of censorious forces. Those tasked with implementing an aggressive model of monocultural liberal democracy found themselves acting in evermore extreme ways in an attempt to combat “extremism”. *Homegrown* then becomes a victim of the very phenomenon it was exploring.

In his work on television discussion programmes, Simon Cottle (2006, 150) describes what he calls the “agoraphobia” – fear of the wide-open spaces of debate – that descends on producers when a discussion threatens to go off-topic, and how they “feel compelled to steer and control programme flows and agendas”. Something similar might be seen at work in the authorities' response to *Homegrown*. I would argue that the play and its creators were punished for not following the script, not



staying within the frame. All of this indicates the degree to which mainstream artistic spaces and contemporary identity politics exist in a wary stand-off: needing but never trusting each other. Authentic spokespersons are always sought, and rewards are to be had for interrogating stereotypes as long as those interrogations remain within the liberal, improving narrative which sees theatre as an extension of global humanism defined in secular (and western-universalist) terms. Theatres are keen to commission work which can be said to have served or spoken for a marginalized group. However, the fate of *Homegrown* suggests that the terms in which such an exchange takes place in fact may obstruct the emergence of a Black avant-garde who will challenge *ways of seeing*, as well as what is seen. El-Khairy and Latif were commissioned by the NYT who were looking for a topical play, written and directed by Muslim artists, to explore the phenomenon of Islamist radicalization. They decided to subvert and question the underpinning assumptions by producing something far more experimental and challenging. The uncompromising power of *Homegrown*'s relentless exposure of the glib framing clichés about race and Islam in modern Britain would leave the liberal viewer with nowhere to hide, if only they were allowed to see it.

## Notes

1. To the expanding ranks of Muslim prose writing mentioned by other contributors to this volume, we might add plays such as Ishy Din's (2012) *Snookered* (with Tamasha); Avaes Mohammad's (2015) *Hurling Rubble at the Sun/Moon* (with Park Theatre); Hassan Abdulrazzak's (2016) *Love, Bombs and Apples* (with Turtle Key Arts); and Asif Khan's (2017) *Combustion* (with Tara Arts).
2. The main funders for drama in the UK include Arts Council England, the National Lottery, and the Heritage Lottery Fund. Some funding exists for theatres along with grants for theatre companies, while smaller private foundations and trusts exist to support individual productions and performers. The larger players in this landscape are most directly involved in gatekeeping as their public accountability requires that they are cognizant of prevailing tastes and norms, even where they are committed to facilitating artistic expression.
3. Hesmondhalgh's (2002) critique might be updated and further nuanced by acknowledging the growth of recent collaboration between high-profile theatre productions and cinemas which often screen performances, to say nothing of experimental theatre's increased use of technological mediation, hastened by the COVID-19 pandemic. Both these developments complicate the picture of theatre as "low tech" and therefore at a remove from other media industries.
4. Vikram Dodd (2016, n.p.) reported widespread concern within the police force at the implications of the government's spreading of responsibility for the identification of unacceptable radical speech. Police spokesmen warned of the potential to inadvertently create a "thought police", stifling the freedoms they were supposed to be protecting.
5. De Waal (2018, 84) relates how Atiha Sen Gupta ([2009] 2012), author of *What Fatima Did ...* attended a meeting with the literary manager and artistic director of the Hampstead Theatre armed with three different pitches, to find that they were only interested in the one about a young girl choosing to adopt the hijab for the first time.
6. Roaa Ali (2018) describes how the 2016 Arts Council England report on diversity continues to use categories allied to those "protected characteristics", identified in the Equality Act of 2010, which are insufficiently nuanced to capture contemporary identity formations: "Minorities were reduced homogeneously to groups (BME, White, Unknown) and thus percentages [ . . . ] The data remains general and the criteria do not accommodate a detailed examination of ethnic minorities and their specific cultural representations" (276).

7. While overt racism is easy to identify, one of the play's aims, according to Latif, was to critique the audience and to say: "You . . . you are the problem" (2019, 260).

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor

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