# "We've become the boogie men": Islamophobia, Schlock Horror and "Radicalization" in Omar El-Khairy and Nadia Latif's *Homegrown*

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This article argues that the 2017 play script of Omar El-Khairy and Nadia Latif's cancelled 2015 immersive theater production, *Homegrown*, offers one of the most thoroughgoing literary critiques of contemporary Islamophobia currently available in English. Moreover, the production's cancellation, as well as its creators' subsequent difficulties in finding established publishers willing to print the script, belies a structural racism inherent in British arts institutions that outwardly make loud claims about diversity. The play's treatment by institutions that should have supported it made plain the urgency and salience of one of its central claims: that official responses to so-called Islamic radicalization, such as the UK Government's controversial anti-radicalization programme, Prevent, rely on language and strategies that have perpetuated Islamophobia in both direct and indirect ways. The content of the play, which has been largely absent from discussion about it until now, anticipates the Islamophobia that its creators ended up facing themselves: its inventive and satirically sharp script repeatedly shows that such policies are not only themselves reactionary, but that they in turn transform spaces of education and artistic expression into spaces of surveillance, suspicion and censorship.

Through an irreverent appropriation of "B-movie schlock" horror tropes (17), *Homegrown* offers an unsettling take on the "issue" of Islamic "radicalization" in contemporary culture: one that decries the equally "schlocky" – that is, cheap, hackneyed and two-dimensional – treatment of this topic in media and political discourse. It takes aim at the way that "radicalized" British teenagers are figured as "boogie men" (186) in news reportage (in the tabloid press in particular), with shorthand terms like "ISIS Brides" or the ISIS "Beatles" proliferating in stories that are peppered with the deliberately sensationalizing language of horror (words like "haunting," [White 2021] "bloodthirsty" [Allen *et al.* 2015] and "depraved" [Mansfield *et al.* 2019]. In doing so, the play warns about the growing scale of Islamophobia in Britain, emboldened by the Government policies that such discourse has helped to shape, and the less prominently reported horrors that this increasingly "acceptable" form of racism continues to inflict on Muslims in the United Kingdom. By immersing its audience in the uneasy environment of an East London school reckoning with the specter of radicalization in its midst, the play confronts and

subverts received wisdom about Muslims and terrorism. Specifically, it encourages them to consider the possibility that, in Arun Kundnani's words, "radicalization […] is the solution, not the problem": "Opening up genuinely radical political alternatives and reviving the political freedoms that have been lost in recent years is the best approach to reducing so-called jihadist terrorism" (15).

The article is divided into two overarching parts. The first, "Context," offers some background to the play, beginning with its censorship. It then moves on to discuss the Prevent programme, its likely impact on the production, and the ways in which the play's cancellation shines a light on how institutional Islamophobia works in a mutually reinforcing relationship with a counterterrorist policy that constructs Muslims as a "suspect community" (Hillyard 1993; Pantazis and Pemberton 2009; Breen-Smyth 2014). The second, longer part, "Analysis," zooms in on one of the play's five immersive strands – or "tours," to use the play's terminology – as a case study, showing how its use of schlock horror works to foreground ways in which Islamophobia similarly warps reality for Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

## Context

### Homegrown's "Extremist agenda"

The background to *Homegrown*'s cancellation is well-documented (Ellis-Petersen 2015; Ali 2018; Farrington 2019). As El-Khairy (the play's writer) and Latif (its director) put it in the opening pages of the playbook, they were approached by the National Youth Theatre (NYT) in early 2015 "with an idea for a show – a large scale, site specific, immersive play looking at the radicalisation of British Muslims" (13). The invitation came at the same time that the news was reporting that three 15-year-old schoolgirls from East London, Shamima Begum, Amira Abase and Kadiza Sultana, had travelled to Syria to join ISIS (BBC News 2015a), and the play – with a cast of 115 actors between the ages of 14 and 18 – was initially set to take place on the grounds of an actual East London school, a short walk away from the girls' own. "Radicalisation" is a key word in El-Khairy and Latif's account, and, as I will go on to show, a strong disagreement not only over its causes, but also over its very meaning, lay at the heart of the controversy surrounding the production. As El-Khairy and Latif go on, "*Homegrown* was intended to be an exploration of radicalisation, the stories behind the headlines, and the perceptions and realities of Islam and Muslim communities in Britain today" (13). However, it soon became clear that the NYT had unwittingly opened itself up to an exploration of radicalization that was itself more radical than the institution had in mind.

The production ran into trouble early on, with its initial venue – Raine's Academy in Bethnal Green – pulling out the day after the show's first press release, following pressure from Tower Hamlets council. A new venue was found in Swiss Cottage, North-West London, and with rehearsals underway and 70% of the play script completed, El-Khairy and Latif were informed that the NYT had met with the police over concerns about the show. Official reasons for the meeting remain unclear, and nor is it known who set up the meeting. However, El-Khairy and Latif report that "the police wanted to read the script, attend the first three shows, plant plain clothes policemen in the audience and sweep daily with the bomb squad" (13). Despite protesting, the NYT reassured them that the police "had no power of ultimatum" (13), and continued outwardly showing support for the production. However, the evening after the NYT's first visit to rehearsals, two weeks before its opening night, El-Khairy and Latif received an email saying that the play was cancelled: "There was no warning, no consultation and no explanation – indeed, they even attempted to prevent us from entering the building the next morning when we came to collect our things" (13–14).

The play's cancellation is a clear example of a double-standard that Stephen H. Jones has identified in British liberal institutions, in that "[they] rarely follow liberal norms consistently. Indeed, liberal norms of governance are frequently suspended when Muslims are involved" (147). The cancellation attracted media attention, with questions asked about censorship raised by both Index on Censorship and English PEN, and an open letter in support of it signed by prominent figures such as David Hare, Simon Callow, Anish Kapoor and Shami Chakrabarty. The BBC reported that in his email to the Arts Council, who had funded the show, NYT creative director Paul Roseby said that "[t]he creatives have failed to meet repeated requests for a complete chronological script to justify their extremist agenda and so it doesn't look good for the future of *Homegrown* on National Youth Theatre turf" (BBC News 2015b). Roseby does not explain what he means by "extremist agenda," but the phrase reveals an adherence to official linguistic framings of Muslims in media and political discourse. Muslims are framed as what scholars of IRA terrorism have long termed a "suspect community," with Muslims taking the place of the Irish as "a sub-group of the population that is singled out for state attention as being 'problematic'" (Pantazis and Pemberton 2009). As Peter Morey and Amina Yaqin have influentially put it in *Framing Muslims*, "the mediascape, into law, into political discourse [are] all areas that currently operate on the assumption that to be a Muslim is automatically to carry some kind of latent threat" (214).

Roaa Ali has covered the controversy in detail in an article in *Research in Drama Education*, and shows that while "the fact that the play was censored is clear […] the context of its censorship is complex

and thorny, and highlights a larger discourse about the permissibility of British Muslim artists on UK stages; or indeed any artist addressing radicalisation in UK theatres" (Ali 279). Indeed, the treatment of the play resembles what Svetlana Mintcheva has recently termed "structural (pre)censorship" in the age of social media culture wars: that is, a state in which a fear of repercussions creates a sense of restraint among artists and producers when dealing with potentially controversial topics (212). As Helen Freshwater has put it in an influential study of theatre censorship in Britain, "[c]onsideration of what Judith Butler describes as the 'foreclosure' produced by self-silencing – where controversial utterance is stifled before it reaches expression or consciousness – serves as a useful reminder that the only censorship we become aware of is fundamentally unsuccessful" (164). On one level, the censorship of *Homegrown* was likewise "fundamentally unsuccessful" in that it drew attention to the play, sparked resistance, and eventually led to the script's publication anyway. However, on another, it is also instructive about the potential scale of "self-censorship" by Muslim writers and artists, as well as Muslims in public debates more broadly, in response to news reportage and policy that effectively holds them to a different set of standards than everybody else.

As Ali points out, the UK Government's highly controversial anti-radicalization programme, Prevent – that is, the public sector-focused part of its broader counterterrorism intelligence-gathering policy, CONTEST – "seems to be a major, albeit very visible factor in the way young Muslims are understood and dealt with in the UK, and why a play which dramatizes these issues was curtailed" (381). Introduced in 2003, the Prevent element of CONTEST has been criticized as both discriminatory and counter-productive from the outset (Kundnani 2015; Sian 2015; Cohen and Tufail 2017). Public sector workers, especially teachers and other educational staff, are encouraged to report young people who show signs of becoming radicalized, but the definition of "radicalization" under the Prevent guidance has always been broad, with a recent report by the Government itself acknowledging that it is a "nebulous and undefined term that had many potential interpretations and nuances" (Chisholm and Coulter 2017, 13). In 2015, the duty for institutions to report individuals to the programme became legally binding, under the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015 (CTSA 2015).

The definition of "extremism" given within the CTSA is equally ambiguous: namely, a "vocal or active opposition to fundamental British values, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs" (UK Home Office 2015). While few would disagree with the emphasis here on mutual respect and tolerance, the definition also relies on a deeply problematic understanding of British national identity and "values,"

and offers a relatively narrow parameter for what might count as legitimate criticism of the state. Under this rubric, in the context of a school or university discussion about politics, history or literature, in which one might think it perfectly legitimate to scrutinise concepts like democracy, the rule of law, or individual liberty, a Muslim pupil or student may well think twice before fully contributing to the debate. As Ali puts it, "[t]he widespread premise that young Muslims are easily-influenced is further complicated by a polarisation of young British Muslims in the two categories of vulnerable/volatile, and made more precarious when the lines are blurred between those who are 'at risk' and 'risky'" (381).

Based on the evidence available, what happened with *Homegrown* is likely to be at least partly a result of this blurring of the borderline between "at risk" and "risky," which – in its uncertainty – reflects a form of racial profiling that will be instantly familiar to scholars of postcolonial writing and history, whereby the racialized other is expected to conform to either one or the other of these reductive binary categories: in this case, either a "good," "moderate" Muslim or an "extremist." As Leonie B. Jackson has argued, "Prevent internalised the good/bad Muslim binary as an integral part of policy" (47). *Homegrown*'s deliberately complex, ambiguous and multifaceted structure actively strives to break this binary down. If, as Pierre Bourdieu has influentially put it, "the literary and artistic world is so ordered that those who enter it have an interest in disinterestedness" (40), then *Homegrown* actively refuses this disinterestedness: the play revels in its radicalism, and, as this article aims to show, should be widely read by anyone who wants to better understand the entwinement of counterterrorist policy with Islamophobia today. It responds to the NYT's brief to explore the "creeping radicalisation of the young" by giving the lie to the use of the term "radicalisation" in this context at all. Instead it presents its audience (or reader) with a more disturbing picture of "creeping radicalisation" (Farrington) in Britain than that which the NYT had in mind: namely, the mainstreaming of far-right ideas about Muslims and Islam in British Government policy and media discourse (Brown, Mondon and Winter 2021). Having been cancelled and subsequently eschewed by other theater institutions and publishers alike (including those who initially showed support) (Farrington), the independently published *Homegrown* play script is a material text that is haunted by – and haunts its reader with – that which might have been. The text's existence constitutes a bold refusal of the Islamophobic narratives that led to its eschewal within theatrical and literary institutions, bearing witness to the play's silencing, as well as to the broader silencing of Muslim voices more widely.

## "Fuck this show": An uneasy immersiveness

The situation that El-Khairy and Latif found themselves in with *Homegrown*'s cancellation reflected a tension that the play script itself describes: namely, one derived from the contrast between the media's reliance on exaggerated shlock horror tropes in its reportage on terrorism, on the one hand, and the less widely reported but more genuine horror of rising Islamophobia, on the other. In her "Director's Note," Latif states that the play is intended to be performed in a way that incorporates well-worn tropes from the horror genre at every opportunity:

> Our biggest influence in making this show was horror – everything from body horror and monster movies to Victorian ghost stories and B-movie schlock. It should permeate the show, maybe starting as something slightly uncanny, unreal or out of place, building to full on terror – with children running, screaming down corridors without explanation, lights flickering and a genuine fear of what lies behind each door. In performances, this might manifest in the first couple of scenes seeming entirely natural, but they become increasingly strange – not fitting with the bodies performing them. If at all possible, there should be a visual sense of doubling back on oneself and things being deliberately altered by invisible forces. (17)

It is significant that at the heart of the play's horror influence is a focus on things feeling "sightly uncanny, unreal or out of place, building to full on terror." The play's setup attempts to take the experience of everyday public space that many among those in the audience for an immersive theatre production might take for granted, and render it strange, replicated in exaggerated form. Young Muslims in the audience might, likewise, find an appealingly ironic sense of recognition at the use of "B-movie schlock" to represent their everyday experiences in the context of increasingly paranoia-inducing counterterrorist policies and rising Islamophobia. In addition, the use of the word "terror" is both pointed and deliberate: as with "radicalisation," the term is familiar from news reportage on terrorist-related incidents and their aftermath (in *Homegrown*'s case, specifically the reportage on Begum, Abase and Sultana, as well, more generally, the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks in Paris). In this play, terror is most forcefully understood as violence legitimated by structural Islamophobia, and by this logic, the audience is more often cast in alignment with, rather than against, its perpetration (albeit indirectly).

From the start, it is made clear to the audience that the piece is not a "play" in the traditional sense. Waiting outside what appears to be the main auditorium, about five minutes past the play's expected start time (as, according to the stage directions, the audience begin to "*grow a little impatient*" [23]), the doors fly open and:

> *Three school children* (*AISHA, LAILA and FAROUK) burst into the holding space – all in a blaze of frustration and anger, all laced with a*

> *heavy dose of expletives. They are all racially marked – the first students of colour the audience encounter. They are wearing a mix of costumes, uniforms and home clothes – and carrying a bag of varying sizes. After a few choice words " –This is bullshit", "I'm done, man", "Fuck this show", "Technical difficulty, yeah?" etc. – this group leaves the school through the main entrance – in full view of the audience. A momentary sense of chaos – anything feels possible right now.* (23)

This short piece of action raises questions that, as it soon becomes clear, constitute the driving force of the play: Why have these young actors left the play? What happened to make them so angry? Where are they going? What is in their bags? What do they plan to do? There is a clear evocation here of Begum, Abase and Sultana, but it is significant that no mention is made here of Islam or of radicalization: this is left to the audience's imagination, prompting them to jump to – or at least uncomfortably consider – this conclusion, even while they may chide themselves for doing so.

Once the three teenagers have left the building, an adult voice is heard over the tannoy: "*It tells the audience that the show has been delayed. He/She gives no specific reason and asks everyone to bear with him/her. […] He/She] tells us that there has been a technical fault – and the show is running half an hour late*" (24). In the meantime, five pairs of young tour guides appear, carrying coloured wristbands, which they hand out to the waiting audience members, arranging them into groups according to the colour of their wristbands. The voice on the tannoy informs the audience that while the technical fault is being addressed, they will be taken "on a tour of the school and its facilities" (24). Apparently thrown off schedule by an incident involving the three angry teenagers, the action that transpires as a result is presented as if it is merely intended to fill the time until the technical hitch is fixed and the actual play can commence.

Each group is taken to a different part of the school and experiences a completely different sequence of scenes, or "tour." The tours are led by two tour guides, usually one male and one female, and five out of each tour's ten scenes constitutes an ongoing conversation between them. These conversations are often tense or heated, and the tour guides are usually from contrasting ethnic, religious or class backgrounds (with one of the guides tending to be white, or in one-instance "light-skinned"). The conversational scenes are interspersed with cut-away scenes presenting self-contained vignettes or mini-narratives involving anywhere between one and approximately twenty young performers. These scenes are separate from the action of the tour guide conversations, but the tour guides watch the action alongside the audience, nodding along or making other forms of non-verbal response as it is happening, and then they comment on it in their conversations afterwards. The implication is that the tour guides are showing the audience snapshots of everyday life in the school.

Despite its immersive dimension, agency is largely withheld from the audience in *Homegrown*. Each audience member will always leave with an uneasy sense of lack: that is, of having only seen a part of the show. However, this lack, or partiality of experience, is precisely the point. As theater scholar Jessica Santone has argued:

> Performative audiences perform key components of the work – and they perform "audience". The events that give rise to these audiences entreat them to think critically about institutions, labour and capitalism; but, in the same stroke, the method of engagement they promote conceals political consequences, so that these are only visible belatedly as documentation of the work circulates. (31)

In *Homegrown*, this "concealment" of political consequences is itself aestheticized, and, to borrow from Adam Alston's *Beyond Immersive Theatre* (2016), "attention is turned toward an experience that is produced within the body and constituted by the audience as art in dynamic relation to an immersive environment" (9). The audience's blind spots – the things they cannot see at any particular moment – are brought into sharp relief. In this sense, the play's *most* immersive aspect is that audience members leave knowing that the majority of its action has occurred elsewhere, and this awareness of their own ignorance serves as an experiential metaphor for the limits to their knowledge on the topics being discussed. The show is deliberately opaque, in the sense that El-Khairy evokes in his "Author's Note." Drawing on Édouard Glissant, he advocates for the right to "opacity," in both artistic and human terms: that is, the "right not to have to be understood on others' terms, a right to be misunderstood" (15). Glissant's definition of opacity as "that which cannot be reduced, which is the most perennial guarantee of participation and confluence" (Glissant 191), is equally applicable to the structure of *Homegrown*. In a play where each audience member only experiences a part of the entire play, the experience of perspective itself is what is aestheticized: we are forced to accept it on its own terms, in a literalized sense. This carries powerful political meaning in the context of the debates about Islamophobia and suspect communities with which the play engages: for the right for Muslims to be heard on their own terms, and to assert the right to opacity that is a prerequisite for full participation in society.

## Analysis

### Muslim "folk devils"

In keeping with the spirit of the performed play, the analysis in the remainder of this article will focus on just one of the tours ("Tour 1:

United in Effort") as a case study, followed by an analysis of "The Show" that all audience members witness at the end of the play. In Tour 1, the guides are Amara ("*black*") and Corey ("*white*"), who lead the audience from room to room around the school. Amara and Corey are school friends, but it is implied that Amara has recently rejected Corey's sexual advances. In his frustration, Corey attempts to insult Amara by speculating over why Aisha (Amara's "BFF" [28]) has so angrily absconded with Laila and Farouk: "Aisha, Farouk and Laila. *(Beat.)* Nothing? You can't – you don't even want to entertain – " (28). While Amara clearly does not want to believe that her best friend has joined a terrorist organization, her response reveals a possible flicker of doubt: when Corey says "You're thinking it though," her response is silence: "[…]" (28).

The uncertainty that Amara exhibits here is reflected in Scene 4 of the tour, a vignette about Mohammed Emwazi (otherwise known as "Jihadi John"). The scene is an abstract, Beckettian piece that focuses intensely on the reproduction of structural Islamophobia in the media, and the ways in which this impacts the worldviews of the pupils at the school. In the scene, multiple pupils take turns to recite lines that seem to represent a collective outpouring of thoughts and opinions on Emwazi, but have become disembodied through the collective performance: "*each line must be performed by a different actor to the last – the more random the better*" (34). The lines reveal a nuanced, contradictory and sometimes irreverent set of responses to what this familiar folk devil from the tabloid headlines represents to the young people of the school:

> I don't believe he's a Muslim.
>
> I wish he'd been stopped before he turned.
>
> Whatever the reason he's killing, he has killed. No matter the reason, you can't condone that.
>
> I'm scared he's not dead.
>
> It's the same story over and over again, innit. First it's Jihadi John, next its Kill 'Em All Kareem. It's madness.
>
> I think this prick is just looking for attention to be honest. It's just not, you know, British values, cutting people's heads off.
>
> I'm against everything the Beatles stood for.
>
> I think he's a dickhead. (34)

The fluctuation between ambivalence and condemnation here reflects the confusion and conflict that a case like that of Emwazi would inevitably prompt in a group of culturally mixed young people from a school like this one in London. The folk devil of the headlines, a

villain as two-dimensional as any from even the schlockiest of horror "B-movies," is exposed for the fictional construction that it is.

There is a playful ambiguity in lines such as "I'm against everything the Beatles stood for": a sentiment that, from one angle, could resonate with the anti-Western rhetoric of Emwazi himself, but, from another, is equally in line with the sort of generational alienation that teenagers in 2015 might naturally feel about an old band from over half a century ago, held as iconic by their parents. Which "Beatles" are being referred to here, after all: the 1960s pop group, or the terrorist group of the tabloid headlines? Whichever the case, any inkling of ISIS-sympathizing that could be read into the line is immediately undercut by the contrasting unambiguity of the line that follows: "I think he's a dickhead." Deliberate perspective-play like this occurs all the way through the script, but this style of wordplay – normal in theater on virtually any other topic – constitutes a degree of artistic opacity that the NYT saw as evidence of the production's "extremist agenda."

The "tour guide" scenes and the "vignette" scenes interact with each other in such a way that each draws out the meaning of the other. By placing Amara and Corey's argument about racism side-by-side with this collective monologue about Emwazi, both scenes are placed into a *political* context: low-level interpersonal racism is placed on a spectrum with the structural racism fuelled by reductive media stereotypes, and the figure of "Jihadi John" is exposed as the schlocky, two-dimensional folk devil that it is. By deflating the affective power from this cartoonish media monster, which for a period in 2015 came to function as an avatar for the horrific violence of ISIS, the audience is prompted to ask what political factors might have converged to lead this young man to take the actions that he did. However, as Kundnani has argued, speaking about terrorism as a phenomenon that exists in a political context remains taboo in media reportage on it, which even in its more sober forms (such as broadsheet newspapers and *BBC Newsnight*) often leans towards simplicity and depoliticization. In his words, "[i]t is the race principle that enables the separation of Muslims from the usual liberal norms of rights and citizenship" (284). More, "it is on the basis of race thinking that Muslim dissent is read only as the intrusion of alien, illiberal cultural values into the public sphere and rarely as an attempt to use the political process to hold states accountable to their own liberal standards" (284).

While the construction of a "terrorist" other through racist media bias is not new in itself, nor specific to post-9/11 representations of Islamic terrorism (see Zulaika and Douglass 1996; Pantazis & Pemberton 2009; Breen−Smyth 2014), its utlizisation in support of an ostensibly liberal agenda of openness, democracy and toleration is one that extends beyond a specific geographical context (such as Basque separatism or IRA republicanism) to a context that is more global in

scale. British Islamophobia and what Zulaika and Douglass have termed the terrorism "taboo" (1996) work to mutually reinforce each other in a way that reflects a broader mutual reinforcement taking place across the globe, with illiberal counterterrorist measures being deployed ostensibly in the name of protecting liberalism and democracy (Kumar 2012; Kundnani 2015; Mondon and Winter 2017). Moreover, as Gareth Peirce (the solicitor for the family of Jean-Charles de Menezes, and for Moazzam Begg) has argued, "unlike the Irish … Muslims lack advocates such as the Irish state and the Irish American diaspora" (qtd in Breen-Smyth 2015, 225). Not only has the construction of a Muslim suspect community occurred on a more global scale than that of earlier, more location-specific suspect communities (such as Britain's Irish population), those that it targets are also more isolated: an isolation that is felt at every level of public life. In the case of *Homegrown*, it is not just the British state that is held accountable to its own liberal standards, but also the institutions that rapidly turned their backs on the play in both its performed and printed forms.

## The horror behind the door: Liberal Islamophobia

The play's critique of the role of institutions, and especially liberal institutions, in the perpetuation of suspicion against Muslims is particularly apparent in Scene 8, a vignette that echoes the distinctly *gendered* racial tension between Corey and Amara earlier on. In this scene, Haneen Munir, an Egyptian writer and YouTube star who "describes herself as a forward-thinking, revolutionary Muslim feminist activist reformer" (45), has come to speak to the class about "[the] idea of the Muslim female's sexual identity," and to promote her new book, '"From Libya to Labia: One Woman's Journey to Sexual Liberation'" (44). The stage directions state that "*[t]he audience should be well-behaved and sat quietly at their desks, in chairs or on the floor*," and, in keeping with the atmosphere of horror: "*This scene is not entirely naturalistic – the actors speak in voices that do not belong to them*" (44).

The ridiculous title of Haneen's book signifies from the outset that she is going to be a target of some form of satire, and it quickly becomes clear that she will be taking an anti-Islamic stance on her topic in a manner strongly evocative of the "classical Liberal" Muslim-reformist arguments frequently made by the high-profile apostate author and former politician, Ayaan Hirsi-Ali ("About," ayaanhirsiali.com). Like Hirsi-Ali, Haneen argues that "the toxic mix of religion and culture has become a catalyst for a deep-rooted sense of shame, leading to unbridled oppression in Islam. We need a social and sexual revolution" (44). She goes on to ask the female pupils in the

audience, "Who of you here have ever masturbated?" When nobody except herself raises their hand, she says: "ladies, the lack of raised hands, as trivial as it may seem, is an indicator for a much wider issue. You're trapped under Islam – and without reform – or a total revolution – you'll remain that way" (45). She follows this with a critique of "the horrendous practice of FGM enacted by Muslims across the world – the forced removal of young girls' clitorises," which is the issue that lies at the heart of Hirsi-Ali's critique of Islam, especially in her bestselling memoir, *Infidel* (see O'Gorman 2018).

The scene is, again, written with nuance: Haneen is not a simplistic caricature, and at no point is the audience encouraged to disagree with her assertion that FGM (Female Genital Mutilation) is a "horrendous practice." What *is* held up for critique is the sweeping generalization being made in Haneen's connection of FGM with Islam, as if the two are inextricably entwined, the "unbridled oppression" of the latter inevitably leading to the brutality of the former. Her position reflects what Aurelion Mondon and Aaron Winter have identified as a "liberal Islamophobia" that has gained ground and acceptability in public discourse in recent years: one that "is anchored in a pseudo-progressive narrative in the defence of the rule of law based on liberal equality, freedom and rights (e.g. liberal versions of freedom of speech, gender and sexual equality)" (Mondon and Winter 2017, 2162). It is Islamophobic because, like many critiques of Islam couched as "liberal" in the Western media (from the likes of "New Atheists" like Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris), it relies upon "the creation of a loosely defined Muslim culture and community inherently and homogenously opposed to some of the core values espoused in a mythical essentialized culturally homogenous, superior and enlightened West" (Mondon and Winter 2017, 2163). Elsewhere, Deepa Kumar has influentially written that "[s]ingling out Islam for its sexist practices in the mainstream media and public discourse is not a historical oversight but a systematic attempt to construct 'our' values and religion as being enlightened in contrast with 'theirs'" (Kumar 2012, 46).

In line with these critiques, El-Khairy's representation of Haneen aims to expose the ways in which liberalism – and liberal institutions – can provide a cover for racism, precisely when such racism is "based on the premise that it is not racism" (Mondon and Winter 2020, 103), or in other words, when it is hiding in plain sight. The presence of a "Heckler" in the audience, who is also from a Muslim background, and who repeatedly speaks up to challenge Haneen's position, helps to throw the Islamophobia of her argument into relief, while also reminding the audience that Muslim women are not a homogenous block: "There's at least a billion Muslim women. To talk about FGM isn't to talk about Muslim culture" (45). A tense back-and-forth exchange proceeds between the two, with the moderator of the event

eventually stepping in to end the talk as "We're running out of time – and I really do think we've gone off topic" (47). The comment may not initially seem significant, but it belies the ideological assumptions within British institutions such as schools about what does and does not constitute legitimate speech on Islam. Meanwhile, the fact that the stage directions encourage the actors to "*speak in voices that do not belong to them*" works to underscore the way in which each figure is speaking not entirely on behalf of herself, but instead performing their role in a scripted piece of "schlock" theater, perpetuating the ideological theatricality that public debates about Islam have often come to assume in the public domain since 9/11.

Speaking about the influence of horror films on the play, Latif has emphasized the importance of the fact that the tour guides "are less and less in control" as the tour progresses," and "by the end they and the audience should feel like they have no idea what's going to be behind the next door (the images they encounter will get more and more violent)" (Farrington). In the case of Tour 1, what lies behind the final door is, perhaps, surprising, given Latif's emphasis on increasingly "violent" images. The tour's final vignette, in Scene 10, comes in the form of a monologue "*performed by a white girl*" who is "*non-violent and unassuming – with unwavering conviction*" (49). Her voice "*should be absolutely clear – and ring out*" and "*She has an enraptured all-white audience of her peers*" (49). Crucially, "*AMARA may agree with some of her points about Islam's relationship to women. She might even chime in*" (49). The monologue reasserts the essential thrust of Haneen's earlier argument (which, perhaps surprisingly, Amara was also impressed by), using women's rights as a justification for a critique of Islam that is essentially racist in the way it generalizes Muslims, only this time without the former speaker's sheen of authority: "I mean, FG-flippin'-M, for Christ's sake. That's actually a thing – and it happens in Muslim countries, and yet people still have the audacity to sit back and deny the misogynistic thinking of this religion" (49–50). The monologue becomes increasingly offensive, until she brings the tour to a startlingly racist close: "And these dirty, violent men aren't some far away boogeyman. The news isn't just a fictional horror movie set to scream at and then justify the fear with the fact that demons don't exist in Britain – 'cause they're here, in fucking Yorkshire" (50). In a clear instance of things "becom[ing] increasingly strange – not fitting with the bodies performing them," the most shocking thing about the racism on display here is that it is rising forth not from the speech of a far-right activist, but from a "*non-violent and unassuming*" female classmate. The "genuine fear of what lies behind each door," the audience is prompted to consider here, is the mainstreaming of Islamophobia in "liberal" discourse, and the fact that the perception of this girl as "non-violent" is itself a form of violence: that is, a racism that evades recognition *as* racism.

## Becoming the "boogie men"

*Homegrown*'s critique of institutional Islamophobia comes to a close with a scene that literalizes, in absurd fashion, the process by which Muslims are transformed into a suspect community. The tour comes to an abrupt close, and "*The same adult voice heard at the top of the show comes over the tannoy to tell everyone that the technical issue has been resolved, and that they can now enter the theatre. AMARA and COREY quickly, and silently, shepherd the audience to their seats*" (50). The separate strands of the play have come to an end and the final section, titled "The Show," commences in the main auditorium, with all audience members present:

> *This section should be performed by the maximum number of actors available. An actor can play more than one part in different sections (except for the interviewers, who must remain consistent throughout). Actors, however, must completely change their appearance when they switch between characters in different sections. The costumes should be in plain sight of the audience, so that they are aware of the mechanics of transitions and character transformations.* […] *All the characters are not Muslims – until the final section.* (166)

"The Show" consists of five short parts. The first four constitute non-Muslim characters being interviewed about their (often ignorant) thoughts about Muslims and multiculturalism in Bethnal Green: there is a Social Worker, a Pub Owner, a Hipster, a Busker, a Housing Association Manager, and a Campaigner, among others. However, towards the end of the Show's fourth part, and leading into the fifth part, "*those on stage begin the process of "brownface" – transforming themselves into Muslims. The 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*" (178). This is one of the play's most surreal moments, with the social construction of Muslim identity in contemporary discourse being literalized as the actors change their clothes.

Once all actors on stage have completed their transformation, Part Five begins, with "*[t]he entire cast [...] now speaking as a chorus of 'Muslims*183) "*'*). This time, however, the content of what is said is different: while, crucially, the voices remain plural, with characters not always agreeing with each other and sometimes contradicting each other, in each case they come across as complex human beings rather than flat, prejudiced stereotypes or caricatures. Discussing schoolchildren who abscond to ISIS, for instance, "Muslim 6" says "It's really tough. I think they should be sent to prison [… and] made to go through some sort of deradicalisation programme" (184),

whereas "Muslim 4" disagrees: "I don't think they should be thrown in jail. But I don't think they should be released back into society either. I definitely think they should receive some sort of counselling – help of some sort, you know – in a secure unit, or something" (184). This exchange takes place just as an adhan (or call to prayer) is heard in the distance, and a young Muslim man in the audience gets up and walks over to the corner of the room to pray: "*not a violent interruption,*" the stage directions state, "*it is simply time to pray*" (185). The contrasting views and images of Muslims here offers the kind of polyphony that is fundamental to what it means to live in a democratic society, where difference of opinion and freedom of expression are supposed to be afforded to everybody equally. Speaking of the real-life cases of Begum, Abase and Sultana, rather than Aisha, Laila and Farouk, "Muslim 1" makes the crucial point that "[w]e seem to have forgotten something. These are just three young girls. What we need to ask ourselves is what has gone so wrong in these girls' lives that they felt they had nothing else left other than to go to Syria" (185). This question over "what has gone so wrong" is where the interests of the NYT, on the one hand, and El-Khairy and Latif, on the other, clearly converge, but with each coming to very different conclusions.

In an era in which Islam and Muslims are consistently and purposefully constructed by the media as at odds with "British values," and the government itself, through legislation such as the CTSA 2015, works to "build on public insecurities to give false legitimacy to Islamophobia (Cohen and Tufail 45), Muslims are put in an impossible position: one that *Homegrown* dramatizes in its actual content, as well as in the story of its censorship. "We've become the boogie men," (186) says "Muslim 4" in the play's closing moments, bringing the shlock horror motif to a rounded conclusion: "Seeing my faith being twisted into something it's not by extremists. I'm angry" (186). The line, "we've become the boogie men," has a disconcertingly literal as well as a figurative meaning here, as it is being spoken by an actor who just moments ago, prior to "dressing up" as a Muslim, was likely to have been reproducing Islamophobic stereotypes.

Finally, the closing lines, delivered by "Muslim 2," are deliberately provocative, and again El-Khairy and Latif have clearly taken the task given to them by the NYT – to write a play about "radicalisation" – and turned the brief on its head in a way that reveals the limitations of the way such discourse is framed:

> MUSLIM 2 I think the Muslim community should be taking responsibility – acting to eradicate the ignorance shown by people towards Islam. I mean, how can we just sit back and let all these disgusting terrorist acts define our religion to the rest of the world. We have a duty to change something here. (186)

The first sentence, about "the Muslim community" needing to take "responsibility," is a deliberate red-herring: the call for collective

responsibility is a trope familiar from media coverage of Islamist terrorism, as well as in commentary on it by public intellectuals throughout the years of the war on terror. Martin Amis, for instance, prominently made a version of this claim (Donadio 2008), as have Trevor Phillips (Versi 2016), Ed Husain (2021), and Rupert Murdoch (*Guardian* Staff 2015), among others (including high profile liberals of Muslim descent such as Salman Rushdie [2001] and Zia Haider Rahman [2007]). It has become a cliché frequently mobilized in response to high-profile negative news stories about Muslims in the West, whether on the topic of terror attacks, teenage radicalization or predatory "grooming gangs." In this instance, however, the "responsibility" that "Muslim 2" advocates for is a responsibility that refuses the media's incessant demands for Muslims to apologize for or condemn terrorism, and instead to challenge the racializing implications inherent in the framing of this call for "responsibility" itself.

The repetition of this call for collective responsibility has contributed to an increasingly normalized structural Islamophobia in Britain (Sian 2015; Sharma and Nijjar 2018): one that we can see elsewhere too, for instance in France, where President Emmanuel Macron has attempted to outmanoeuvre the Front National by appealing to the Islamophobic impulses of its support base (Marwan 2021). The moral and political need to resist systemic Islamophobia is clear, but this resistance is cast by the state as "radical" when those who express it are Muslim. If resisting racism is radical, the play suggests, then radicalism is exactly what is needed: a call that is made unambiguously when the lights "*cut to black*" and "*Tyler the Creator's 'Radicals' starts playing at earsplitting volume*" (185) (the track's raucously hyperbolic chorus features the refrain, "Kill people / Burn Shit / Fuck school" [Okonma 2011]). At the end of the play, Muslim members of the audience are proffered a complex and nuanced articulation of the experience of Islamophobia in twenty-first-century Britain, which fuels the perception of Muslims as a suspect community, while non-Muslim audience members are left with a fundamental challenge to their preconceptions (including those based ostensibly in liberalism), and a call for solidarity in the struggle against this increasingly prevalent form of contemporary racism. Through its subversive use of "schlock" horror, *Homegrown* foregrounds the absurdity of everyday life in a society that struggles to disentangle Muslims from "bloodthirsty" and "depraved" extremists, while ostensibly holding "democracy" and "respect for others" to be core "British values."

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