



Homegrown censored voices and the discursive British Muslim representation

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“Homegrown” censored voices and the discursive British Muslim representation

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7 **The Article title:** “*Homegrown*” censored voices and the discursive British Muslim
8 representation
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10 **3-5 keywords:** censorship, British Muslims, Arts Council, Islamophobia, diversity.
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12 **A short abstract (no more than 100 words):**
13

14 In view of the recent Arts Council “Creative Case for Diversity”, and considering the
15 challenging socio-political climate of contemporary Britain, this article explores Muslim
16 cultural participation, and the obstacles towards its visibility. The role of the British Muslim
17 artist is crucial in addressing current radicalising and Islamophobic discourses, yet the
18 visibility of these artists remain contested. Although there is no identifiable criteria that
19 particularly restrict the access of these artists to the creative sector; their political content is
20 often subject to scrutiny. Thus, there is a political and cultural discourse of impermissibility,
21 which results in and performs varying forms of censorship.
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3 In view of the recent “Creative Case for Diversity”, championed by the Arts Council,
4 and considering the challenging political and social climate of contemporary Britain, this
5 article explores Muslim cultural participation, and the obstacles that hinder its visibility. The
6 role of the British Muslim artist is crucial in addressing current radicalising and Islamophobic
7 discourses, yet the positive potential for British Muslim cultural interventions remains at best
8 unharvested, and at worst contested. Although there is no identifiable criteria that particularly
9 restrict the access of artists who address the subject of Islam to the cultural sector in the UK;
10 their political content is often subject to scrutiny. As a result, a discourse on what is
11 politically permissible along with what is culturally sensitive culminates in varying forms of
12 censorship. This article, thus, identifies three practices that are contributing to the limitation
13 of access on Muslim representations in the UK creative sector: a). lack of representation in
14 arts funding policies, b). direct censorship, and c). self-imposed censorship. The article will
15 particularly investigate the cancellation of *Homegrown*, a play by British Muslim Omar El-
16 Khairy, as a case study for censorship arising from discursive discourses about Islam and
17 radicalisation in the UK. While fully exploring the context of this instance, this article aims to
18 draw a picture of the complicated climate in which artists who address topics concerning
19 Islam in the UK operate. In such climate, the three mentioned factors work conjointly to
20 actively limit, or deny the access of British Muslim artists to mainstream audiences, and
21 conversely the access of the public to works representing the Muslim section of British
22 society.

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29 It is prudent to mention here that the term “British Muslim artist” refers to a
30 discursive category that is not homogenous, but rather united by carrying what might be
31 thought as a particular burden of representation. It includes British artists who may be
32 practicing or non-practicing Muslims, or “artists who may not follow Islam” but whose “art is
33 inspired by traditional art forms from the Islamic World” (Muslim Museum 2018). Moreover,
34 while some British Muslim artists choose to engage directly with Islam as a topic in their art
35 and performance works, others do not touch upon the subject at all. The focus of this article is
36 on artists who purposely work on representations of Islam in the UK cultural scene, and the
37 complex socio-political webs of influence they have to navigate.

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41 Central to this article is a play called *Homegrown*, which was co-created by two
42 British Muslim authors/performance practitioners: playwright Omar El-Khairy and director
43 Nadia Latif. The play was cancelled days before its scheduled premiere at London’s National
44 Youth Theatre in August 2015 due to concerns over its content. In the acknowledgments for
45 the un-performed, but published *Homegrown*, the playwright expresses: “These are not your
46 typical acknowledgments. We would usually be thanking all those who helped make this play
47 happen. However, we are living in exceptional times, so our love goes out to all those who
48 took a stand with us” (El-Khairy 2017, 11). This begs the question: what is so exceptional
49 about our times that a work of art needs supporters to actively take a stand? Among the
50 persons and bodies the artists thank is PEN, the international organisation that defends
51 freedom of expression. The acknowledgments raise the alarm and inform the reader that
52 something unusual has happened somewhere in the creation/making of this play, and that
53 somehow freedom of expression has been compromised.

A climate of Islamophobia and radicalisation

Muslims in the UK have been circumscribed by the discourses of radicalisation/de-radicalisation and Islamophobia since 9/11. This has only intensified with the increasing terrorist attacks in the UK and Europe, and the creation of the so-called Islamic State. Although difficult, it is essential to define both of these discourses in order to understand the parameters within which British Muslims, including artists, exist socially and institutionally, and strive for agency. M. S. Elshimi explores the de-radicalisation strategy in the UK and the conflating and sometimes contradictory concepts it relies on, chief among these is radicalisation:

Radicalisation became a loosely defined conceptual framework constructed by government officials and the media, with the help of academics to understand the processes and casual factors which lead individuals to support extremist ideas or even to support or commit violence [...] The framework implied the existence of a spectrum of the archetypal ‘bad’ and ‘good’ Muslim at opposite ends, or integrated on one end, and ‘religious extremist/violent extremist’ on the other. (Elshimi 2017, 25)

This archetypal framing of Muslims in polarising “good” and “bad” categories has generally been extended to their activities and expressions, and influenced the reception of both in the UK. More alarmingly, it also led to a rapid increase in Islamophobic rhetoric as a populist response to radicalisation. In his *Islamophobia*, Chris Allen explores the term and defines it as:

an ideology, similar in theory, function and purpose to racism and other similar phenomena, that sustains and perpetuates negatively evaluated meaning about Muslims and Islam in the contemporary setting [...] Neither restricted to explicit nor direct relationships of power and domination but instead, and possibly even more importantly, in the less explicit and everyday relationships of power that we contemporarily encounter, identified both in that which is real and that which is clearly not, both of which can be extremely difficult to differentiate between. As a consequence of this, exclusionary practices – practices that disadvantage, prejudice or discriminate against Muslims and Islam in social, economic and political spheres ensue, including the subjection to violence – are in evidence (Allen 2010, 190)

Citing many examples of the treatment of Muslims in the media and press, including *The Times* and *The Telegraph*, Allen concludes that “language, terminology and ideas widely circulated in the public domain encouraged Islamophobia and acceptance of anti-Muslim negativity” (2005, 60). Such public tolerance of Islamophobia paired with rising levels of security alerts has led to an environment where Muslims are ordinarily demarcated by a discourse that connotes them with alarm and security tension, and another that disadvantages them. This fraught milieu has been further exacerbated by the emergence of anti-radicalisation policies such as the Prevent Strategy, which has inadvertently normalised a generalised suspicion of Muslims. Prevent is “one of four strands of the government’s counter-terrorism strategy, known as Contest” (BBC 2017). The objectives of Prevent are 1). “to respond to the ideological challenge of terrorism”, 2). “to prevent people from being

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3 drawn into terrorism” and 3). “to work with sectors and institutions where there are risks of
4 radicalisation” (Prevent 2011, 7). While acknowledging the need to combat radicalisation, the
5 policy has faced criticism from a number of activists, politicians, and members of the
6 National Union of Teachers and the Muslim Council of Britain (BBC 2017; Independent
7 Voices 2015; Turner 2017). Prevent’s critics accuse the policy of alienating those it aims to
8 reach, institutionalising suspicion of Muslims and affecting free speech.
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11 British Muslims, however, can be assets in unsettling the rhetoric of radicalisation and
12 countering both discourses of radicalisation and Islamophobia. In the Forward to *Muslim*
13 *Britain: Communities under Pressure*, Tariq Modood proposes a new understanding of the
14 UK and Europe and the necessity of integrating Muslims to create a productive vision of the
15 future:
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18 Ultimately, we must rethink ‘Europe’ and its changing nations so that Muslims are
19 not a ‘Them’ but part of a plural ‘Us’, not mere sojourners but part of its future. [...] The
20 political integration or incorporations of Muslims – remembering that there are
21 more Muslims in the European Union than the combined populations of Finland,
22 Ireland and Denmark – has not only become the most important goal of egalitarian
23 multiculturalism but is now pivotal in shaping the security, indeed the destiny, of
24 many peoples across the globe. (2005, xii)
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27 In line with this, a strong case should be made for a meaningful inclusion of Muslims in the
28 UK public and cultural life without a label of suspicion tagged on their creative productions.
29 British Muslim artists, in particular, have the capacity of introducing positive interventions to
30 the cultural landscape of our turbulent political and social climate. However, their access to
31 cultural production is limited: their needs are often unaddressed in arts funding agendas, and
32 their work is subject to fierce and sometimes debilitating scrutiny. The following analysis
33 will examine both, focusing for the most part on the reception of Omar El-Khairy’s
34 *Homegrown* as an example of the systematic and institutional anxieties that encumber British
35 Muslim works and restrict their potential.
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38 39 **The Arts Council’s “Case for Diversity”: the plight of statistics**

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41 The 2016 IPSOS Mori’s “Perils of Perception” survey shows that British people
42 largely overestimate the number of Muslims in the UK to one in six, where in fact the actual
43 estimate is one in twenty. Islam, however, is considered the second largest religion in Britain
44 with 4.8% of those surveyed identifying themselves as Muslims, according to the 2011
45 United Kingdom Census. This percentage of Muslim Britons is by no means homogenous as
46 it encompasses varying ethnic demographics: such as Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, Somalis,
47 Gujaratis, Turks, Arabs and Nigerians, to name a few (United Kingdom Census 2011). These
48 groups are typically recognised as ethnic minorities in the UK, but despite their prominence
49 in population Muslims rarely author their representation in mainstream culture, and are often
50 absent or invisible in the creative sector.
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54 Thus and despite this complex picture, the Arts Council’s latest report on diversity in
55 the arts (2016) does not mention Muslims as audiences or artists in its evaluation. To assess
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3 diversity in the arts, the report consults the “protected characteristics”, which “defined by the
4 Equality Act 2010 and the Equality Duty 2011, are: age, disability, gender reassignment,
5 marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, *religion and belief*, sex, and
6 sexual orientation” (2016, emphasis added). However, these protected characteristics are
7 employed as a broad brushstroke to convey a sense of comprehensiveness in the data
8 concerning the UK diverse societal groups without a depth of analysis that distinguishes the
9 needs of each group. A previous report on “Equality and diversity within the arts and cultural
10 sector in England” commissioned by the Arts Council England acknowledges: “[t]his
11 evidence review identified no publications that specifically covered issues relating to religion
12 or belief in the arts and cultural sector” (2014, 62). As a result, the lack of previous research
13 data on the interplay of religion and discrimination, and access to the creative sector is
14 contributing to an insufficient analysis of the state of diversity in the arts, and is possibly
15 impacting the recommendations to improve it.
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20 The survey for the 2016 report introduced productive changes in its criteria for data
21 collection to reflect accurate measurements on the state of hierarchy and
22 permanent/temporary employment. However, a thorough grasp of minorities and their needs
23 in the arts was not reflected in the criteria consulted for this report. Minorities were reduced
24 homogeneously to groups (BME, White, Unknown) and percentages. The report showed that
25 15 per cent of “all Grants for the Arts awards were made to Black and minority ethnic
26 applicants, up from 11 per cent in 2014/15”, but pointed out that “success rates across the
27 board for Grants for the Arts have fallen, due to increased competition for funds” (2016, 26).
28 Although this report demonstrates a positive step towards acknowledging the lack of diversity
29 in the arts; the data remains general and the criteria do not accommodate a detailed
30 examination of ethnic minorities and their specific cultural representations.
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34 It is difficult to assess where and how British Muslim artists are positioned in the arts.
35 This is due to a demonstrable lack of previous studies on the access of British Muslims to the
36 arts, with the exception of some studies investigating ethnic minority artistic engagement,
37 which include Muslims as subjects (as in Gina Netto’s article “Multiculturalism in the
38 Devolved Context”). Considering the current socio-political milieu in the UK and the need
39 for voices that address both Islamophobia and radicalisation, this Arts Council report misses a
40 valuable opportunity to acknowledge and examine Muslim capital and human resources that
41 could contribute substantially to the Arts council’s case for diversity; and better yet, positive
42 social interventions to combat radicalisation and Islamophobia.
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46 In the 2014 Arts Council report, there is a clear understanding of the social
47 advantages of advancing diversity in the arts:
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50 Because of its public voice, the cultural sector is influential in shaping wider social
51 attitudes to equality and diversity. We are aware of the responsibility that Arts
52 Council England has in this regard. [...] This acknowledgement of the opportunities
53 provided by the diversity of contemporary England marks a shift in perspective for
54 the Arts Council, from regarding diversity as a prescriptive aspect of equality
55 legislation to understanding its creative potential and the ways in which it can
56 promote long-term organisational resilience. (1-2)
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3 However, the inadvertent blurring of ethnic and religious minorities under the umbrella of
4 “BME” contributes to disadvantaging an already disadvantaged group. For example, in its
5 attempt to assess religion as a variable for diversity in the arts, the 2014 Arts Council report
6 consults the “Taking Part” survey (2013/14). In that survey, participants are categorised in
7 three groups: No religion, Christian, Other religion. Participation in different cultural sectors
8 (Arts, Museum, Public library and Digital) is then measured and compared across the three
9 groups through a number of years (2014, 62). Supposedly, the category of “Other religion”
10 includes Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, etc.; each made marginal by being amalgamated in the
11 “Other religion” category. For an already contested Muslim minority group and considering
12 the immense social and political tensions surrounding it, such surveys add to the state of
13 invisibility that Muslims habitually inhabit in mainstream culture.
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18 Through this brief examination of the 2014 and 2016 reports on diversity in the arts,
19 one could argue that the problem of access facing British Muslim artists is exacerbated by a
20 general lack of understanding regarding the make-up of ethnic minorities in the UK and their
21 cultural specificities. This, in turn, leads to the creation of criteria for assessment and funds
22 allocation that do not accommodate individual needs of each group. The 2014 report
23 acknowledges: “we know that the realisation of genuine diversity is a long process that
24 requires real effort, and that we have to accept and adapt to many changes along the way.
25 There are no quick fixes” (1). This awareness is positive, but can only be progressive when a
26 deep understanding of minorities and their needs is achieved.
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30 The under-representation of Muslims in the Arts Council’s reports and policy
31 recommendations is not the only factor impeding active Muslim artistic expressions in the
32 UK. There are other factors, which are contributing equally and perhaps more importantly to
33 limiting British Muslims’ access to the arts sector. Whether direct, institutional, or self-
34 exercised; censorship is one of the biggest factors affecting the access of British Muslim
35 artists to the arts.
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38 **C - for censored**

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40 The Theatres Act of 1968 officially abolished a system of sanctioned censorship in
41 Britain. Nowadays, the notion of overt and direct censorship in theatre is an alien concept and
42 believed to be a property of the past. Still, there have been notable instances of direct
43 censorship on contemporary performances in the UK with the most prominent cases being:
44 Gurpreet Kaur’ *Behzti* cancelled by Birmingham’s Rep in 2004 (Freshwater 2009), Brett
45 Bailey’ *Exhibit B* cancelled by London’s Barbican (Odunlami and Andrews, 2014) and Omar
46 El-Khairi’s *Homegrown*, cancelled by London’s National Youth Theatre. Direct censorship
47 is understood to be the banning of a particular form of expression by a governing body such
48 as “the Government; the Arts Council; the Regional Arts Board; the Local Authority”
49 (Thomas, Carlton and Etienne 2007, 235); the police; and more recently by theatre
50 institutions and their managers. It is the decision to cancel a planned performance by agents
51 of power outside the work’s creative team.
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3 *Behzti* was censored for fear of offending the Sikh community, *Exhibit B* was
4 cancelled because some people perceived it as racially insensitive, and *Homegrown* was
5 censored largely because of its dramatisation of young Muslims in the UK. These incidents
6 received considerable and varying degrees of media coverage; making them, therefore,
7 documented evidence of the existence of direct censorship. Of the three mentioned examples
8 of censorship, only *Homegrown* is co-created by two British Muslims; and while the practice
9 of censorship in general warrants a full and lengthy exploration, it is beyond the scope of this
10 article. The following analysis will, therefore, focus exclusively on *Homegrown*, exploring
11 how the politics surrounding Islam in the UK is contributing to an environment that curtails
12 expression and limits the access of British Muslims to resources and audiences.
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16 According to playwright Omar El-Khairy, he was approached in 2014 by the National
17 Youth Theatre (NYT); a reputable public theatre in London, committed to the creative
18 development of young people. El-Khairy was asked to write a play that addresses current
19 discourses concerning radicalisation in schools following the “Trojan horse” affair (Hooper
20 2015); a controversy about an alleged infiltration of Islamic groups in a small number of
21 regional schools (Shackle 2017). According to El-Khairy, his Britishness and Arab heritage
22 made him an attractive choice for the NYT to author a piece that dramatises these issues
23 (Hooper 2015). This choice would also meet an increased cultural demand for authentic
24 ethnic representations, and the Arts Council’s case for diversity. Thus, in theory the play was
25 intended to be a positive intervention to discourses on radicalisations in schools.
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29 At the time of the commission, three school-girls from Bethnal Green (a district in
30 London with a large Muslim population) travelled to Syria, apparently to become “Jihadi
31 brides”. The story made headlines around the country and El-Khairy immersed himself in
32 writing a performance work that contextualises this event and probes radicalisation and
33 islamophobia from the perspective of young people. The vision for this work was to be a site-
34 specific immersive performance piece with up to 112 cast members from the NYT. The script
35 was approved by the NYT and Nadia Latif was commissioned as a director. However,
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39 Exactly halfway through the process, the NYT came in to see rehearsals for the first
40 time. They left full of praise and with a number of helpful suggestions. That night, we
41 received an email from the NYT telling us that *Homegrown* was cancelled. There was
42 no warning, no consultation and no explanation – indeed, they even attempted to
43 prevent us from entering the building the next morning when we came to collect our
44 things. All our attempts at meeting with the NYT have been delayed and then
45 cancelled. (El-Khairy 2017, 13-14)
46

47 With that, the making of this play remained incomplete and the show an unfinished
48 history. What followed the NYT’s decision to cancel the performance was a prolonged period
49 of obscurity and a wilful desire to let the incident fall into oblivion. Initially, a statement from
50 the NYT outlined the reasons for the cancellation to be that of “standards”: “After some
51 consideration, we have come to the conclusion that we cannot be sufficiently sure of meeting
52 all of our aims to the standards we set and which our members and audiences have come to
53 expect” (BBC News 2015a). However, accusations of the play being “radicalising” with its
54 creators harbouring an “extremist agenda” began circulating in press coverage of the incident
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3 (Ellis-Petersen 2015, BBC News 2015b). The picture became clearer following a Freedom of
4 Information request, which revealed an email by the NYT artistic director Paul Roseby to the
5 Arts Council, in which Roseby admits to having consulted the police: “While the police felt it
6 was a valuable and important subject and supported the initiative, they rightly raised concerns
7 over the content with particular reference to any hate crimes and the ability for NYT to
8 control all social media responses” (Hemley 2015). Roseby raised other issues including the
9 use of offensive language, and safeguarding concerns and the creative team’s failure to “meet
10 repeated requests for a complete chronological script to justify their extremist agenda”
11 (Hemley 2015).
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15 Thus, the play was cancelled. The incident revitalised the discourse on censorship,
16 and whether the decision to cancel the play was really an act of direct censorship. Theatre
17 scholar Helen Freshwater (2009) eloquently summarises the difficulties of defining
18 censorship in modern times, and highlights the changing forces and faces of censorship:
19 “Analyses of censorship now regularly address implicit as well as explicit forms of cultural
20 control and covert proscriptions as well as overt prohibitions” (9). In the case of *Homegrown*,
21 it seems that there were both implicit (the NYT’s undermining the artistic quality of the
22 work) and explicit (police interference) forms of prohibitions. Both the literary association
23 English PEN (Sharp 2015) and the Index on Censorship organisations issued a statement
24 condemning the decision to cancel the play and request further transparency. The fact that the
25 play was indeed censored is clear. However, the context of its censorship is complex and
26 thorny, and highlights a larger discourse about the permissibility of British Muslim artists on
27 UK stages; or indeed any artist addressing radicalisation in UK theatres. It is prudent to
28 mention here that while there has been a number of artistic works, which were curtailed in
29 some form to avoid offending Muslim religious sensitivities (see Haq 2007), *Homegrown*,
30 was censored in large part because of its content, which many found problematic in its offer
31 of undiluted, and sometimes angry, young Muslim voices. Thus, the singling out of
32 *Homegrown* in this article serves to illuminate a complex system surrounding self-
33 representation of Muslims in the UK cultural scene, and by extension their precarious access
34 to the creative sector.
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41 Questions about why the play was censored were abound and the reasons given by the
42 NYT were inconsistent and not quite substantiated with the main reported areas of concern
43 being: artistic standards, safeguarding issues, and an “extremist agenda”. These three areas
44 are polemic and highly problematic as they veer on subjective rather than objective rationale,
45 yet no further explanation was given to justify each of these reasons. On the issue of artistic
46 quality, a critical evaluation of *Homegrown* artistic merit is impossible without witnessing the
47 performance. Because of its site-specific and audience-interactive nature, the play’s script
48 serves only as a precursor for the piece and cannot convey the totality of its artistic standards.
49 Still, a reading of the script shows an innovative and bold vision for theatre making. It is
50 quick-paced and fragmented, embodying the language and trends of young people. It is
51 uncomfortable to read at many junctions, but devoid of a central character or a domineering
52 opinion, it presents a plethora of voices and representations. Theatre critic, Lyn Gardner
53 praised the play script artistically:
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3 I've read the full play, and it is unwieldy and very different from many traditional
4 play scripts. [...]. It is also gloriously authentic, snapping and crackling with the
5 sense of young people thinking out loud about who they are, freely voicing their
6 experiences and perceptions of the world. Nobody, whatever their background, will
7 agree with everything that's said, but that's the point. *Homegrown* opens up a proper
8 grownup debate about attitudes and opinions that often go unspoken and remain
9 hidden. (2017)

11 It seems that lack of artistic quality, which the NYT cited as one of the reasons for the
12 cancellation, is disputable. The problem with accusing the creative team of a lack in artistic
13 quality without concrete justification is that it tarnishes the artistic reputation of the creative
14 team and places it in doubt. One can only presume that this will consequently damage future
15 prospects for the creative team and further limit what is already a provisional access to the
16 creative sector. If the artistic standards of the work are a matter of inconclusive debate, then it
17 is possible that the real reason for the cancellation was that of anxiety over the content of the
18 play.
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22 **Police prevent-ion and the polarisation of young Muslim adults**

24 Police interference in the arts is presumed to be a foreign concept in contemporary Britain.
25 Yet, *Homegrown* seems to have attracted the attention of the authorities. The creative team
26 claims that:
27

28 The police wanted to read the script, attend the first three shows, plant plain clothes
29 policemen in the audience and sweep daily with the bomb squad. When we protested
30 these measures, asking why the police felt the need to get involved, we were quickly
31 told that the police had no power of ultimatum; and the issue was never raised again.
32 (El-Khairy 2017, 13)
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35 Reasons for this interference were attributed to the fact that the artistic cast comprised of over
36 100 young adults between the ages of 15-25, and that the issues being addressed in the play
37 were those of radicalisation. The police, the NYT and other involved parties felt that the play
38 raised safeguarding concerns: that these Muslim young adults are either vulnerable or
39 volatile. If the show did indeed raise concerns and a need to "protect" young adults, then the
40 question of whether the censorship of this performance is justified needs addressing.
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43 In exploring censorship and its negative implications in the UK, Freshwater makes a
44 distinction between the right to freedom of expression and the right to protect. She cautions:
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46 Supporting the right to freedom of expression in all circumstances entails accepting
47 the dissemination of statements or images which are widely judged to be abusive,
48 bigoted, offensive or simply false. When faced with beliefs and images which we find
49 unacceptable – child pornography, holocaust denial, hate speech – most of us are
50 quick to draw up a set of criteria which will allow us to set aside material which we
51 do not consider to be protected by the right to free expression. In practice almost
52 everyone ends up drawing the line somewhere. (2009, 6)
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3 Freshwater's remarks are essential to establishing responsibility and accountability in regards
4 to the intricate lines governing freedom of expression. Yet, the agency of deciding what a
5 work of theatre means or advocates is a power tool that can be misused and abused.
6 Particularly in the case of *Homegrown*, one of the main recurrent justifications for the
7 cancellation is the need to safeguard Young Muslim adults: it was not clear against what nor
8 how. More troubling still was the assumption made about these Young Muslim adults. In an
9 event organised by Index on Censorship to debate *Homegrown* and launch its publication
10 Tom Slater, deputy editor of online Magazine *Spiked* problematised the generalised
11 assumptions made about young Muslim adults as precarious and easily-influenced:
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15 one of the most shocking aspects of the whole story of *Homegrown* was the way in
16 which it was talked about as if on some level Omar and Nadia were engaged in kind
17 of, I don't know, confusing the young people involved [...] there is a very ugly
18 underside to that. But I think the real problem is the point about Prevent, which
19 obviously has an incredible impact on schooling and children, but really, I think,
20 treats the entire Muslim community as kind of 'easily-led' children, full-stop. (2017,
21 [12:09 - 12:36])
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24 Prevent seems to be a major, albeit not very visible, influencer in the way young
25 Muslims are understood and dealt with in the UK, and why a play which dramatises these
26 issues was curtailed. The anti-radicalisation programme Prevent is operational in schools and
27 universities, and requires teachers and civil servants to report young individuals who show
28 signs of radicalisation. The widespread premise that young Muslims are easily-influenced is
29 further complicated by a polarisation of young British Muslims in the two categories of
30 vulnerable/volatile, and made more precarious when the lines are blurred between those who
31 are "at risk" and "risky". Charlotte Heath-Kelly offers a critique of the later as a tactic
32 prevalent in the Prevent and affiliated governmental programmes: "Young individuals can
33 often be simultaneously presented as vulnerable to extremist ideology and as the potential
34 terrorist of the near future within PREVENT. This often occurs, paradoxically, within
35 attempts to separate designations of risky persons from Muslim communities" (2012, 11).
36 This generalised identification of young Muslim adults as both at risk, and risky, is being
37 adopted in a systemic response to radicalisation. Heath-Kelly cautions that such "framing of
38 Muslim communities as collectively 'at risk' or vulnerable has the paradoxical effect of also
39 securitising them concerning what they might produce; disciplinary governance thus merging
40 with securitisation" (2012, 12).
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46 Such context explains why the police raised concerns about the show, which were
47 later adopted by the NYT. A reading of *Homegrown* as a play does not support the police and
48 NYT's assessment of the play as radicalising. Set in a school with scenes portraying different
49 contexts of interactions, the play has no central character, but disparate exchanges between
50 young individuals. As a result, there is a multitude of opinions and voices: some are racist;
51 some are Islamophobic; some criticises the Hijab or women positioning in Islam; some offers
52 frustrated empathy with disillusioned youngsters travelling to Syria; some makes fun of ISIS,
53 and some calls for understanding as a solution. The youngsters in the play express their
54 frustration at being trapped in ethnic and religious boxes that define them in society and limit
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3 their potentials. For example, in one of the scenes (Scene Four, Second Tour, pp 60-64), a
4 number of unidentified characters, alluded to by their ethnicities alone, exchange rap verses
5 that include swearing, racist slurs and offensive jokes. This might be one of the problematic
6 senses that raised alarm. However, in the context of a school located in an area such as
7 Bethnal Green with ethnic and religious demarcations, the exchanges reveal a deep awareness
8 of racial and religious discrimination and how these young adults deal with it in many ways:
9 internalisation, humour, reverse oppression.
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12 A critical evaluation of the text, as a whole, shows that the play does not clearly
13 support any agenda, but rather offers representations of diverse views and experiences. It is
14 not didactic, but dynamic and evolutionary. Perhaps, here lies the answer to why the play
15 failed to gain police/institutional approval. If the accepted presumption is that of young
16 Muslim adults being impressionable and easily-led, then they need to be “protected” and
17 “governed” with limited exposure to materials that are not clearly instructive, or imbued with
18 anti-radicalisation messages. Undoubtedly, as a national institution that is publicly and
19 charitably funded, the NYT has immense obligations to protect its participants and present
20 responsible works to its audiences. Something that was clear in the NYT’s statement that
21 followed the controversy:
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Clearly our commitment to our members goes beyond an editorial one, and their safety and wellbeing is of paramount importance at all times. The subject matter of this play, its immersive form and its staging in a school required us to go beyond even our usual stringent safeguarding procedures to ensure the security of the venue and safety of cast members. (quoted in Hemley 2015)

Yet, the vague “safeguarding” concerns, the interference of the police, and the preference to be risk-averse were detrimental to rendering a British Muslim representation invisible. This environment has a paralysing effect in the arts as emphasised by PEN: “We fear that government policy in response to extremism may be creating a culture of caution in the arts” (Sharp 2015).

In a statement following the cancellation, the creative team of *Homegrown* similarly highlight the restrictive atmosphere that they are working in, which stifles creativity and deprives both the audience and the artist from experiencing honest representation: “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 radicalisation or extremism can be closed down” (*Homegrown* Creative Team 2015). The statement continues to demonstrate one of the adverse effects of censoring this work: “Not only have we been silenced, but our 112 cast members – who cared passionately about the show, its content and its questions – have had their artistic expression curbed” (*Homegrown* Creative Team 2015).

Perhaps, this represents one of the most serious consequences of this particular incident of censorship. A cast of 112 young British adults experienced the effective curtailment of their voices, and were shielded from engaging with a British Muslim representation. One cast member lamented the cancellation stating: “To me, *Homegrown*

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3 being pulled was like my vocal chords being cut. It was everything that was needed to be said
4 and everything that I always felt I couldn't say" (*Homegrown* Creative Team 2015). It has
5 been reported by the creative team that no representative from NYT met the team or the cast
6 to explain the situation or offer support to the disappointed youths whose voices were
7 collectively silenced. Although *Homegrown* is only one example, its cancellation shows that
8 censorship and the policing of artistic expressions concerning Islam and radicalisation is one
9 of the major obstacles facing British Muslim artists' access to the creative sector and to
10 visibility.
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13 **Resistance by exercising the right to obfuscation**

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15 The critical response to this incident by members of the arts sector and media has
16 been dynamic, but not overwhelming. English Pen and Index on Censorship have both
17 released statements opposing the censoring forces that silenced this work, and a letter signed
18 by artists; including David Hare, Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti and other artists and campaigners was
19 published in protest against the cancellation. Although there was no direct statements from
20 the Arts Council, emails obtained by a Freedom of Information request (Hooper 2015) show
21 that senior members expressed support for the play to be produced in some form, and
22 lamented the way in which NYT handled the incident. This effort has mounted to little action,
23 however. It has been reported (Ellis-Petersen 2015) that the playwright El-Khairi is in
24 discussions with venues to produce the piece. An extract from the play was performed in a
25 gathering organised by Index on Censorship in March 2017, but a full production is yet to be
26 staged.
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31 El-Khairi, himself has not been overly active via social media channels to respond to
32 or explore many of the questions that remain unanswered. It should also be stated that in
33 attempt to better understand the circumstances surrounding the play, and support the research
34 and findings for this article, I have made several requests to interview El-Khairi without
35 success. These two observations are certainly circumstantial, but one wonders to what degree
36 has the cancellation of *Homegrown* affected El-Khairi and Latif's relationship with visibility
37 and the creative sector. Following the staging of an extract from the play, Latif expresses:
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41 I'm still in the dark about why our play wasn't allowed to be performed [...] If we
42 were all completely clear about exactly what function the police have in these things,
43 then at least we would be able to negotiate it on concrete terms. At the moment it just
44 feels like we're all swimming in this soup of not really knowing what their role is,
45 and I would like clarity on that. (quoted in Al-Mossallami and Zitout 2015)
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47 Such clarity would provide a framework that facilitates the access of British Muslim artists to
48 the creative sector. In a similar vein, the expression of this group should not be expected to be
49 didactic with the sole purpose of delivering anti-radicalisation messages.
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51 Although not overly vocal through press and social media channels, El-Khairi and
52 Latif made an active act of resistance against silencing discourses by self-publishing the play.
53 According to the creative team, the play was contracted for publication by an undisclosed
54 publishing house who abandoned the project after the controversy. El-Khairi and Latif
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3 decided to publish it independently as they “realised that self-publication would be the only
4 way that *Homegrown* would get into the world” (El-Khairi 2017, 14). In a tweet announcing
5 the publication of the play, Latif challenges the reader - audience: “See for yourselves. Make
6 your minds up. Join our gang. #radicals” (March 9 2017). The publication of *Homegrown*
7 contests both the accusations of the play being extremist, and its censorship. By publically
8 sharing the content, El-Khairi and Latif subverted a verdict of silence issued on their artistic
9 expression. By making the work visible, they regained the agency that was taken from them
10 when the performance was cancelled. While the cancellation of the performance and its
11 framing as “extremist” is a narrative *about* the work and its British Muslim artists, the
12 published play is a narrative *from* the artists themselves. The publication of the play is, thus, a
13 re-requisition of the right to self-represent.
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17 In the introduction to *Homegrown*, El-Khairi expresses his disillusionment with the
18 creative sector, and its inability to accommodate non-mainstream voices deemed subversive
19 or controversial. He indicates that his only choice was to operate outside the system and rely
20 on his agency – which explains the independent publication of the play:
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23 Despite a degree of well-intentioned energy being expended on addressing
24 institutional racism and sexism, as well as concurrent efforts to try and correct this
25 with conversations and initiatives around diversity and representation, others are
26 more invested in getting on with living, loving and creating on their own terms. If
27 mainstream industries and institutions neither represent nor reflect us, then we will do
28 it for ourselves. (2017, 15)
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31 Another form of resistance that El-khairi adopts, and which he proclaims in the
32 introduction to the play is the “right to obfuscation- the protection of the shade” (2017, 16).
33 By this, he means the right to be misunderstood in a mainstream charade of equality for all
34 and freedom of expression. El-Khairi cites Edouard Glissant’s concept of opacity as “the
35 right to not have to be understood on other’s terms” (2017, 15). Thus, El-Khairi claims the
36 right to “torment visibility” (2017, 16) in order to destabilise the boundaries between what an
37 artist can and cannot talk about. El-khairi hopes that representation, even that which is
38 ambiguous and rebellious to configurations of mainstream admissibility, should be the right
39 of “the two groups most caught up in this violent bind of legibility and opacity – Muslims
40 and young people” (2017, 16). That is, the right to self-represent should not be conditioned
41 on the perpetuation of a sanctioned pre-written narrative that reduces Muslims to “bad” and
42 “good” stuck between the rhetoric of radicalisation and Islamophobia.
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46 *Homegrown* was chosen as a case study for this article not only because of the
47 complex and uncomfortable issues it negotiates, but also because its censorship was visible.
48 Many plays do not even reach beyond the inception stage because their creators had exercised
49 self-censorship.
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52 **Censoring the Self before it speaks**

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54 In a report surmising the findings of “Taking the Offensive” conference, which was
55 organised by Index on Censorship in 2013, a clear distinction was made between direct
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3 censorship and self-censorship. The later was defined as: “the suppression of ideas by artists
4 or institutions. It refers to work that has not yet been made” (Farrington 2013). This practice
5 of self-silencing is perhaps far more threatening to British Muslim artistic and creative
6 expressions than either direct or institutional censorships. In *Censoring Culture*, Robert
7 Atkins and Svetlana Mintcheva dedicated a much-needed space to the exploration of self-
8 censorship concluding that the subtlety of the practice leaves it yet the most serious form of
9 censorship:
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12 Before something is censored, however, it must be produced and distributed, that is,
13 attain some visibility. A discussion of censorship that only takes into account
14 attempts to repress existing works, misses all those works that never came to life:
15 Perhaps, because this novel didn’t seem sufficiently commercial, there was no chance
16 of it being published or, perhaps, because that play might have offended somebody,
17 the playwright censored himself at the outset and decided not to write it at all. (2006,
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21 While it is difficult to quantify direct censorship on some Muslim British artists
22 (unless it was reported and made visible by media and artistic coverage as in the case of
23 *Homegrown*), it is almost impossible to do so with works that have been self-censored.
24 Whether it is an idea, or a completed work, it remains invisible because its author decided
25 consciously to self-censor. The reasons that cause an artist to exercise self-censorship are
26 many and varied. In a report summarising the discussions of the “Taking the Offensive”
27 conference, reasons for self-censorship included
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30 the fear of causing offence, losing financial support, violent public reaction or media
31 storm, police intervention, prejudice, managing diversity and the impact of risk
32 aversion. Participants acknowledged that these considerations influence many
33 decisions about what work is commissioned or produced. Fear of prosecution for
34 expression that might be considered to be criminal was also cited. (Farrington 2013)
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37 The last cause has nuanced relevance to British Muslim artists, particularly because there is a
38 lack of publically-available information on what is deemed legally and institutionally
39 acceptable when discussing radicalisation and Islamophobia.
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41 An added layer of pressure that restricts British Muslim artists is that of ‘expectation’.
42 Whether preaching to, or speaking on behalf of their communities; these artists are expected
43 to adhere to a preconfigured articulation. They often carry the burden of representation.
44 Speaking in the “Taking the Offensive” conference, Jeanette Bain-Burnett, Artistic Director
45 Association for Dance of the African Diaspora alluded to “a deep-seated prejudice in the UK
46 that limits the range of work that ethnic minority artists are able to produce, based on specific
47 yet unspoken expectations” (Farrington 2013). Certainly, this contributes to a host of already
48 prescribed limitations imposed on British Muslim representations in the UK. When artistic
49 creativity is marred with an extended list of “do nots”, it is no surprise that self-censorship
50 accompanies British Muslim expression when artistic visibility is coveted.
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54 **Conclusion**

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3 There is a complex and all-encompassing web of social, political and cultural
4 boundaries that British Muslim artists must navigate and be wary of crossing when they
5 create their art. The challenges are plenty: from the struggle to secure funding from art
6 organisations that often lump their needs indiscriminately under the banner of BME, to the
7 anxiety of negotiating what is “right” and acceptable to say and exercising self-censorship
8 along the way. This article has investigated the cancellation of El-Khairy’s *Homegrown* as a
9 case study for the direct censorship of a work that negotiates the representations of young
10 Muslims in the UK. Anxiety over radicalisation, and a polarised understanding of young
11 Muslim adults led to a direct curtailment of artistic expression. This example demonstrates
12 the serious obstacles that limit and at times deny British Muslim access to the arts.
13 *Homegrown* is by no means an isolated occurrence, but the visibility of its censorship made it
14 an accessible subject of analysis. Because of the nature of censorship, many stories and
15 voices remain unheard. Perhaps we, as critics, audiences, readers, should be vigilant: we need
16 to think twice whenever a work is cut at the buds with vague excuses like “logistical issues”
17 or “artistic standards” especially when the subject is a treatment of Muslim issues in the UK.
18 We need to demand more visibility for works that offer alternative perspectives; more
19 admissibility to voices that confront us with the uncomfortable. The voice of *Homegrown*’s
20 creative team was silenced on the stage, but was ultimately entrusted to us, the readers,
21 through the published script. The publication of the play made *Homegrown* visible, thus
22 giving the reader (and those who would-have-been audiences) the right to be informed and
23 the right to assess and make one’s judgement. Enabling the access of the British Muslim artist
24 to the creative sector brings forth a number of gains: it empowers British Muslims to author
25 their own representation; it introduces these works to a public unaccustomed to Muslim
26 representation, thus encouraging tolerance and integration; and it restores agency to the
27 readers and audiences to decide for themselves the meaning of a performance/work of
28 art/British Muslim representation. *Homegrown* is an intriguing piece of theatre-making; but it
29 is also powerful, extraordinary and urgent if for no other reason than the fact that it made the
30 invisibility of British Muslim artistic expressions visible.
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