An Iraqi Refugee in the Australian Suburb in Ben Eltham’s The Pacific Solution

Dr Thamir R. S. Az-Zubaidy/ Department of English/
College of Education/ Wasit University

Ben Eltham’s *The Pacific Solution* (2002) deals with several issues such as nationalism, political intimidation, racism and stereotyping of Muslims. It critiques the Howard government’s hard-line policy with Asylum seekers and its amendment of the migration act, known as the ‘Pacific Solution’, which excludes offshore islands from Australia’s migration zone and undermines thereby refugees’ attempts to seek better chances of life. This is portrayed on stage through the reaction of three white Australian housemates to the arrival at their front door of an Iraqi refugee to apply for asylum. In this paper, I investigate the representation of cultural diversity in the play and argue that it is a critique of dysfunctional models of inclusion where persons from minor cultures are marginalised in the Australian national and social spaces. In so doing, I consider some of the concepts discussed in Ghassan Hage’s *White Nation: Fantasies of White Supremacy in a Multicultural Society* (2000), namely those of managerial capacity, tolerance, and the dialectic of inclusion and exclusion. In addition to critiquing the dysfunctional models of including Muslim refugees, the play examines their representation in the mainstream media and their treatment by the legal process in Australia. To explore the impact of this on Muslim refugees’ alienation and marginalisation, I investigate studies of the representation of Muslims in the Australian mass media and their relevance to the stereotyping of Muslims as terrorists in the play. Drawing on the above, I argue that, through this play, Eltham criticised the Howard government’s inhumane treatment of Asylum seekers and its dissemination of Australian norms as aligning with its premises.

**Key words:** refugee, asylum seekers, Pacific Solution, Muslim, mass media, marginalisation.

Ben Eltham’s *The Pacific Solution* was first performed at Metro Arts Centre, Brisbane, in 2002. It is a one-act play relating the story of an Iraqi refugee who arrives at the front door of a house in the Australian suburb asking for asylum. Eltham’s play is an example of repertoire written in reaction to, John McCallum posts, the Howard government’s ‘policies of detention and forced deportation of asylum-seeking refugees’. In Eltham’s play, the refugee, Asif, is not only labelled as a terrorist but also imprisoned in a cupboard before being transferred to an island outside the Australian mainland.

Eltham chooses names for his play which are familiar to members of the Australian audience: Johnny, Mandy (Amanda) and Phil. Although they seem to be ordinary white Australians who share a house in an Australian suburb, they are used in the play to comment on three important politicians in the Howard government (1996-2007): Prime Minister John Howard and two ministers for immigration, Philip Ruddock (1998-2007) and Amanda Vanstone (2003-2007). All three officials, Emma Cox notes, are members of the Liberal Party who ‘clung with white-knuckled fervour to a party line that positioned asylum seekers as presumptuous queue jumpers.’ This is echoed in the play by Phil who deemed Asif as ‘uninvited guest’ who take the place of others approved by Australian peoples and authorities. Since its arrival to power, the Howard government took a hard-line policy in its treatment of refugees coming by
boats to Australia’s islands. In 2001, the Howard government refused to let the *Tampa*, a container ship which saved 438 in the sea, to land on Christmas Island. Yet, due to great pressure both locally and globally, the government was forced, later, to reverse its decision. Following the *Tampa* Affair, the Howard government passed the ‘Pacific Solution’, a three-steps plan which excised Australia’s Pacific islands from its immigration zone, commanded the Australian navy to interdict boats and prevent them from landing on Australian islands, and established detention centres in a third country, Nauru and Papua New Guinea, where asylum seekers’ applications are processed and determined. According to this change in the migration zone, which is known as the ‘Pacific Solution’ and adopted during Ruddock’s tenure, *The Migration Amendment (Excision from Migration Zone) Act No. 3110* excised Christmas Island, Ashmore Reef and Cocos Island from Australia’s migration zone. It is worth noting that in May 2013, the Abbot’s government extended the excision to include the whole territory of Australia to prevent boat people from benefitting from the country’s legal system by applying for a refugee status.

Eltham explores this issue in the play through his employment of the domestic space, the house where the three characters live, as an analogy for the national one, Australia. In the first part of the play (Scenes 1, 3, 4, 5) we are introduced to Jonny and Mandy who are watching the Ashes series on TV where the Australian cricket team play against Pakistan. Phil, their housemate, appears on stage in Scene Five. In Scene Six, Johnny and Mandy are interrupted by Asif, an Iraqi asylum seeker, who rushes through their front door asking for their protection and expressing his intention to apply for asylum. Perceived as a terrorist and home invader, Asif is knocked down by Johnny and dragged while unconscious to the cupboard where he is imprisoned. Phil, who is a student of law, reads the *Residential Tenancies Act* and proposes to ‘excise the cupboard from the lease’ in order to absolve the group from any responsibility following bashing Asif’s head and to legally render his ‘physical’ presence ‘prior, during and following his “request” […]null and void.’ Through this analogy between the domestic and national spaces, Eltham critiques Australia’s excision act in 2001 which removes certain Australian territories from the country’s migration zone to inhibit refugees arriving there from a direct application for protection visas. It is this act, termed as the ‘Pacific Solution’, from which the play takes its name. By excising the cupboard from the lease agreement, Phil problematise Asif’s claim that he has arrived their house and also his expectation to be let in. In addition to critiquing Philip Ruddock’s plan, through the character of Phil, Eltham comments on the role of the second minister of migration in the Howard government, Amanda Vanstone, by making Mandy suggest ‘relocat[ing]’ Asif to ‘a particular island’ whose inhabitants can be financially aided to take part in this scheme of transferring refugees (114). I contend that through the three characters, Eltham examines Anglo Australian politicians’ responses, the Liberals in particular, towards refugees and explore the perception of their mastery of the national space.

Hage argues that Australia is believed by the whites, whether racists or multiculturalists, to be a nation where they assure their ‘centrality’ as ‘governors’ of Australia and ‘enactors’ of its law over the ‘marginalized’, Aboriginal peoples and migrants, who are deemed ‘objects to be governed’. Hage states that:
both White racists and White multiculturalists share in a conception of themselves as nationalist and of the nation as a space structured around a White culture, where Aboriginal people and non-White ‘ethnics’ are merely national objects to be moved and removed according to a White national will.¹

In this play, Eltham presents us with three white Australians where the refugee, Asif, is introduced to investigate their attitudes to the issue of asylum seekers. The location, a house inhabited by the three, shows ‘white’ mastery over the national space and provides a lens through which we observe how refugees are conceived in the Australian national imaginary.

Hage speaks of the nationalist as a person who believes s/he inhabits a ‘managerial capacity’ to control the national space. For this empowered manager who assumes a giant image or size, the ‘other’ is small and manageable. The relation between the two, Hage maintains, is that of power where the nationalist manager has the right to manage the ‘ethnic object’ through moving and removing.¹¹ For such a nationalist manager, the nation is perceived as ‘a homely construct’ where s/he not only lives but ‘feel[es] at home’.¹⁰ In the play, Asif is regarded as an ‘uninvited guest’ or a ‘queue jumper’ who forces his presence on the three white Australians. This is depicted in the play when he tells them that he wants to apply for asylum and the second when he asks Mandy to let him stay for one day with them. It is also emphasised through the references ‘he’ and ‘we’ which clearly specify the variance in size which is inevitably required to provide the housemates with the capacity to manage the refugee and frustrate his wish to be included for the sake of satisfying their need to ‘feel at home’.

The managerial capacity these Anglo Australians believe they are empowered with make them not only decide who stay inside and who have to be sent out but also to express their dissatisfaction with the attitudes of other minority groups, such as the Aboriginal peoples, and also other white Australians who are not members of the Liberal Party, the governing party. Johnny’s list of unwanted persons, as he tells Mandy, includes Aboriginal Australians, ‘those bloody Abos’, who, Johnny observes, are given money by ‘white people […] to solve their bloody petrol-sniffing!’ and ‘those lefties’ or the ‘hippies getting paid by people like you to spend their lives organising protests[…] and saving the refugees’ (pp. 97-98). Further, it incorporates the ‘greenies’ who, Johnny claims, have ‘cooked up’ the ‘myth of global warming’ (40). Indeed, Mandy and Johnny’s remarks against activists and parties, including the Greens and Labor Party, result from the two parties’ critique of the Howard government’s hard-line policy with refugees and asylum seekers.”¹² It is worth noting that with the arrival of the Gillard Labor government (2010-2013), asylum seekers were framed as ‘victims’ of smugglers rather than demonised in the public perception as home invaders as the Howard government did.”¹³

In addition to putting the other in the camp of unwanted persons, these Anglo Australians’ remarks criminalise their fellow citizens. This is highlighted in Phil and Mandy’s words while discussing the performance of the Australian cricket team against Pakistan, which can be metaphorically explored to
comment on the performance of the Australian government regarding the issue of refugees and asylum seekers. Phil, for instance, considers Mandy’s sentiments that ‘it’s good for the game that Australia loses sometimes’ as ‘disloyal’ and ‘unpatriotic’ (71). It is ‘offensive’, Phil tells Mandy, to ‘impute negative thoughts against the Australian cricket team’ while it is engaged ‘in a thrilling contest of sporting prowess against the Old Enemy of cricket’, that is, Pakistan (51). In response to her question if he regards her thoughts as seditious, Phil responds saying: ‘if you’d studied law and if your father was a Liberal member you’d know like I do’ (62). Phil’s words imply that Australian law aligns with the Liberal Party’s thoughts and beliefs. Indeed, it is this perception that Hage criticises in his book when he notes that white Australians conceive themselves as governors of Australia and enactors of its law. Critiquing Australian political parties which is initiated in the play by Johnny is resumed by Phil who disapproves of the two parties’ soft line towards the issue of refugees, as is the case with the Labour Party, claiming that Asif has either ‘got himself here. Or was brought. […] or encouraged by left-wing members’ (180). Phil, who labels Asif as a terrorist who has been brought or encouraged by persons from other parties, consider their action as jeopardising the interests of their people and country. Such a negative premise aligns with G.W. Bush’s notion of ‘War on Terror’. In 5 November 2001, Bush addressed the world asserting that from now on there is no longer a place for neutrality in the campaign against terrorism because ‘You’re either with us or against us in the fight against terror’. Phil’s viewpoint presents the Liberal Party and its supporters as the guardians of the state and puts others, such as those in the opposition and their proponents, in the other camp.

Australia has adopted the policy of multiculturalism since 1978 to encourage Australians to share and express their cultural heritage. However, multiculturalism is often linked with tolerance; for conservative persons who oppose multiculturalism, Hage posits, it is accepted only when they interpret it to mean tolerance. As tolerance entails not only acceptance but also setting limits and boundaries for the tolerated persons, this necessitates the acquisition of the ‘spatial power’ within which those persons are tolerated. Moreover, tolerance is adopted according to a continuous ‘need’ for a careful and cautious monitoring of cohesion in the Australian community to frustrate any possibility of having one dominant ethnicity among migrants. The three persons’ response to Asif’s presence operates according to this notion. Asif is aware of their spatial power when he enters the household and, thus, he asks for permission to exist and, consequently, be positioned within the boundaries of the house. The careful and cautious monitoring of cohesion in Australia is delineated on stage when the three Australians characters perceive Asif as a Muslim ‘Other’ or, as indicated in the play, a terrorist whose presence threatens not only these white Australians’ norms but also their safety. Their ‘temporary’ tolerance of Asif’s presence in the cupboard ends with their decision to exclude the cupboard from the lease and then transferring him to an island. Although he is present, he is invisible. Arguably, neither Asif’s presence nor his cultural expression is tolerated. Mandy, for instance, regards his cultural expression, while referring to the Iraqi positive way of receiving guests, as offensive to her people and culture, especially after knocking him down and forcibly placing him in the cupboard.
In Australia, the desire to include the cultural other within the national space, Hage argues, coincides with another desire to exclude them socially. In fact, Hage argues that the two forces activate each other saying that ‘paradoxically, it is precisely the interest in their inclusion that activated the existing social progress of the exclusion, while at the same time setting limits on how far to the margin of society they ought to be excluded.’

Asif is a refugee who asks to be included as an asylum seeker. His inclusion in the house, the cupboard, is based on another force, to exclude him from their social space while they are watching their national team playing in the Ashes. The impact of these two forces is evident on stage because Asif is present and passive and excluded from their social space, as he is confined in the cupboard, but included as the cupboard and the coach where the three characters sit are contiguous sites in the living room where the action takes place. Consequently, Asif’s inclusion and exclusion are dramatised thematically, spatially and socially.

Labelling Asif as a terrorist with no proof of his involvement in a terrorist act displays the impact of the Australian mass media on Australian people. Media representation of minorities within a country influences public opinion in that country and plays a role either in fostering or weakening their integration in host societies. To obtain high viewing figures, mass media tends to present extraordinary and alarming news. Presenting such news in an exaggerated manner and with no in-depth analysis often leads to a misrepresentation of the subject matter. Vanessa Christoph notes that the impact of such practices is that if they initiate inaccurate and negative impressions in the minds of their recipients, such impressions will ‘stay anchored in their memory’ even when those events or news are, later on, corrected. Moreover, when a news agency or a journal takes their information from other agencies or journals this leads to a ‘circular dissemination process’ where thoughts and impressions are reused and, thus, established without verification.

In so doing, mass media influences the impressions people have about society and politics in that country. Christoph argues that the ‘reality’ presented in the mass media is not only selected but also ‘coloured’ by the prejudices of journalists and reporters. (Re)presenting the other through stereotypes strengthens former images people have in their minds about migrants and turns these images, consequently, into facts that cannot be shaken or changed easily. In addition to security issues, migration and minority groups are linked to social and economic problems in the host countries which distort public perception and affect minorities’ integration into the host society.

Greg Martin proposes that refugees and asylum seekers arouse anxiety and moral panic in Australia because they are demonised by both Australian politicians and mass media as ‘a group posing threat to societal values and interests’. In this play, The Pacific Solution, Eltham critiques such a negative representation of refugees who are stereotyped as ‘illegal’ and ‘un-wanted’.

The play also critiques the representation of Muslims who are unanimously labelled as terrorists. As portrayed in the play, a consensus is rapidly initiated about labelling Asif as a terrorist through a word of mouth among the three housemates which resembles the ‘circular dissemination process’ that Christoph indicated above. The legitimacy of labelling others as terrorists relies on, Bethami A. Dobkin believes, ‘the degree to which consensus is produced’. The influence of the ‘terrorist’ act depends, Dobkin maintains,
on the way in which it is made ‘more dramatic’ than other problems. Such an influence is delineated in Scene Seven in the play when Johnny recounts Asif’s arrival to Phil saying: ‘We had a bit of home invasion’ (58). The ‘home invasion’, as described by Johnny, applies to all inhabitants of the house through the reference ‘we’ and discloses how mass media arouse recipients’ anxiety although Mandy’s part of the story explains clearly that the so-called ‘invader’ is under control: ‘[s]ome little Arab bloke’ intended to force his presence on them and for which he was punished when Johnny ‘bashed him against the wall’ and imprisoned him in the cupboard (58). The group’s reference to the stranger as ‘some little’ resonates with Hage’s idea that white Australians perceive the cultural other as small and manageable. A call for mateship is suggested when Johnny seeks Phil’s help through his second use of the pronoun ‘we’: ‘There’s a potential terrorist in the house and we need to come up with a plan’ (54). Although Johnny’s words, that is ‘potential terrorist’, state explicitly that the ‘terrorist’ act has not been done yet, he urges his white Australian ‘mates’ to demonstrate a firm stand against terrorism in the country. As stated here, a consensus is initiated through this ongoing labelling of Asif as a ‘terrorist’ although he is unconscious and detained in the cupboard. Eltham’s play is not the first work to relate how a Middle Eastern refugee is labelled as a terrorist. Indeed, similar attitudes are the focus of several Australian plays, such as Michael Futcher and Helen Howard’s A beautiful Life (⋯⋯) and Hannie Rayson’s Two Brothers (⋯⋯).

Asif is a Middle Eastern Muslim and the group’s reaction to his presence casts light on the representation of Islam and Muslims in the Australian mass media. Australian perceptions of Islam, Howard Brasted asserts, do not obviously deviate from those of the western mainstream. Islam, in western agencies and newspapers, is portrayed as a ‘fallen’ and ‘rival world system’. No matter where they reside – in Arabic or Muslim countries or even India or Australia – Muslims are unanimously regarded as relevant, Brasted maintains, to events such as ‘hijackings, hostage-taking, oil embargos, the Iranian Revolution, the Arab-Israeli conflict, the Gulf War, and so on and so forth’. Eltham draws attention to this perception in Scene Six in the play when Asif introduces himself. Indeed, as soon as Mandy hears him mentioning his name, Asif Muhammed al-Suhail, she rushes to take a shelter behind the coach thinking that he is a terrorist who will attack them.

Press articles in Australia were responsible, Adam Jamorzik claims, for ‘demonising the refugees from the Middle East countries’ who were either detained ‘behind razor wires or electrified wires’ or sent to ‘penal settlements in far-distant islands’. Muslims, Anne Aly asserts, have been constructed in Australia’s mass media, since 1977, as ‘an antagonistic “other”’ whose religion and culture constitute a ‘looming threat to Australia’s cultural values’.” Scott Poynting argues that since the mid-1980s ‘the Middle Eastern/Muslim “other”’ has been depicted in the mass media ‘as backward, uncivilised, irrational, violent, criminally inclined, misogynistic and a terrorist threat – a whole litany of evil attributes’. As such, the Australian mass media, Aly maintains, ‘effectively inculcates fear of Muslims among the broader community by equating Muslims with the threat of terrorism’.” As recipients of what the Australian media presents, Australians would vastly be influenced by its contents and orientation.
The stereotyping of Muslims in the Australian mass media is explored in Scene Six when Asif enters the white Australians’ house and introduces himself as ‘Asif Muhammed al-Suhail’ who ‘would like to apply for Asylum seekers’ (54). As stated above, Mandy takes a shelter behind the coach and tells Johnny: ‘He’s a fucking Al Qaeda terrorist Johnny, he’s going to kill us all!’ (54,55). Although Asif tries to pacify the situation by stating that he has not ‘hurt anyone’ and that he requests their help as a ‘human being to human being’ (55-56), Johnny knocks him down and confines him in the cupboard which has become his ‘detention’ saying: ‘Stupid fucking refo’ who ‘deserves what he gets’ (59). Such a negative reception of this Middle Eastern Muslim is maintained by Phil who regards Asif as an ‘uninvited guest’, ‘un-asked-for cupboard dweller’ and a ‘home invader’ whose arrival is perceived as ‘a non-permitted threshold crossing’ (169-171). Indeed, Phil’s idea echoes that of Philip Ruddock who regard boat people as ‘a threat to Australia’s sovereignty’ and the ‘“queue jumpers” who stole places from the world’s most vulnerable’ ones.” Further, it refers to the Howard government’s campaign against boat people which aroused people’s anxiety and presents the Australian citizen, Anthony Burke claims, as an ‘insecure [and] vulnerable’ subject who is ‘under perpetual threat’. The consensus on labelling Asif as a ‘terrorist Muslim’ is established when Phil, who has neither seen nor spoken to Asif, considers him as ‘a potential suspect in the war on terror’ and a ‘terrorist’ who will pay for any damage he has caused to the property (188). Consequently, Phil’s attitude of basing his opinion of Asif on Johnny and Mandy’s account is a prime example of Orientalism.

The three Australians’ perception of Asif as a terrorist shows a conformist and unanimous view of perceiving Muslims. This disregard for cultural and linguistic specificity is an example of Orientalism. Orientalism, Said argues, works as an ‘archive’ where information is ‘commonly’ and ‘unanimously held’. The ideas and values held in this archive not only ‘explained the behavior of the Orientals’ but also ‘allowed the Europeans to deal with and even to see Orientals as a phenomenon possessing regular characteristics’. The Australian mass media, in this sense, works as an archive which not only explains Muslims’ behaviours but also shapes the way Australians like Phil, Johnny and Mandy deal with them. Indeed, all three characters act as representatives of Australians who engage in cultural stereotyping. Through the play’s portrayal of these three white Australian characters’ inhumane treatment of Asif, Eltham condemns the country’s asylum seekers policy and encourage the Australian audience, Cox observes, to align themselves against’ the Howard conservative government.

To conclude with, The Pacific Solution unmasks the dysfunctional models of Muslims’ representation in the Australian media and politics, showing how they are stereotyped as terrorists which undermine, in this respect, their opportunities of positive inclusion in society. It examines the Howard government’s tough stance towards Asylum seekers to subvert refugees’ attempts to establish a sense of belonging in Australia by keeping them in detention centres and excluding them from the national space. This is emphasised in the play when they imprison Asif in the cupboard which becomes a non-social and no-belonging space before being deported to a detention centre in a remote place outside Australia’s public and legal sphere. As delineated in the play, these three white Australian characters not only marginalises
and alienates refugees and Aboriginal peoples but also associate other white Australians, who oppose their plans and viewpoints, in ‘unpatriotic’ or ‘seditious’ actions.

1 John McCallum, Belonging: Australian Playwriting in the 20th Century (Sydney: Currency Press, 2005), p. 188.
7 Ben Eltham, ‘The Pacific Solution’, in Staging Asylum, ed. by Emma Cox (Sydney: Currency Press, 2013), pp. 180-111 (p. 189). All further references to the play are from this edition and will be marked in parentheses in the text.
9 Ibid., p. 18.
10 Ibid., pp. 42-46.
11 Ibid.
13 Jaffa McKenzie and Hasmath, p. 181.
16 Hage, p. 48.
17 Ibid., p. 48.
18 Ibid., p. 144.
19 Hage, p. 144.
21 Ibid.
22 Ibid., p. 144.
How politics of Fear Have Changed Australia, <http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/policy_advisers/publications/docs/bepa_migration_final_


Ibid., p. 7.

Ibid., p. 11.

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