Exclusionary Nationalism in Ben Eltham's The Pacific Solution

القومية الأقصائية في مسرحية بن الثام (الحل الباسيفيكي)

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Abstract

Ben Eltham's The Pacific Solution (2013) critiques the Howard government's hard-line policy with Asylum seekers and its amendment of the migration act, known as "the Pacific Solution", which eliminates offshore islands from Australia's migration zone to destabilise refugees' opportunities to find a home in Australia. Moreover, Eltham's play deals with several issues such as racism, stereotyping of Muslims, nationalism and dysfunctional models of representing refugees in mainstream media. This is depicted dramatically on stage through the reactions of three white Australian housemates to the arrival at their front door of an Iraqi refugee to apply for asylum. The play portrays how those three Anglo-Australians, who are employed in the play to comment on three major Liberal politicians, align Australian nationalism with their strong nationalist sentiment. Drawing on the Above, we read Eltham's play as critiquing their notion of Australian nationalism, which is inexorably intertwined with the process of othering, that perceive minority groups and the Opposition parties as posing threat to Australia and its people.

Key words: Pacific Solution, nationalism, asylum seekers.

ملخص البحث:

تنتقد مسرحية بن الثام (الحل الباسيفيكي) السياسة الصارمة لحكومة هوارد في تعاملها مع طالبي اللجوء و تعديلها لقانون الهجرة، المعروف ب الحل الباسيفيكي، والذي اقتطع الجزر الخارجية الاسترالیا من نطاق الهجرة كي تحد من فرص اللاجئين في ايجاد وطن لهم في استراليا. بالأضافة الى ذلك تتناول المسرحية مواضيعا متعددة مثل العنصرية و الصورة النمطية للمسلمين و القومية و الأمثلة الغير ناجحة في التعبير عن المهاجرين في وسائل الأعلام العامة. وقد تم عرض ذلك على المسرح من خلال ردود أفعال ثلاث من الأستراليين البيض المقيمين في بيت واحد لوصول لاجيء عراقي لبيتهم طالبا التقديم على لجوء. وقد عرضت المسرحية كيف يحاول هولاء الأنكلو-الأستراليين الثلاث، والذين استخدموا في المسرحية لأنتقاد سياسيين ثلاث كبار في الحزب الليبرالي الأسترالي، جعل القومية الأسترالية منحازة لعاطفتهم القومية القوية. و بالاعتماد على ما ذكر أعلاه فأننا نقرأ المسرحية على أنها نقد لمفهوم القومية الأسترالية عندهم، و الذي يرتبط بعملية جعل الأخر مختلفا، و الذي يعتبر الأقليات و أحزاب المعارضة مصدر تهديد لأستراليا وشعبها.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الحل الباسفيكي ألقومية طالبي اللجوء.

Ben Eltham's *The Pacific Solution* first premiered at Metro Arts Centre, Brisbane, in 2006. It is a one-act play whose focus is Anglo-Australian politicians' exclusionary views of Australian nationalism represented by three characters who are supporters of the Liberal Party, the governing party in Australia. This is portrayed in the play through the reactions of three white Australian housemates to the arrival of an Iraqi refugee at their front door asking for asylum. It is worth noting that Eltham's play is written in reaction to the Howard government's hard-line policies against refugees and asylum seekers. In Eltham's play, the Iraqi refugee, Asif, is labelled as a terrorist, imprisoned in a cupboard and supposed to be transferred to an island outside the Australian mainland. Eltham's critique of the Howard government is conveyed not only through its theme and title of the play but also in the names he chooses for his play. In addition to Asif, the cast of his play contains three characters whose names are familiar to members of the Australian audience: Johnny, Mandy (Amanda) and Phil. These names are chosen to comment on three important politicians in the Howard government (1996-2007): Prime Minister John Howard and two ministers for immigration, Philip Ruddock (1996-2003) and Amanda Vanstone (2003-2007). The three officials are members of the Liberal Party who, Cox notes, "clung with white-knuckled fervour to a party line that positioned asylum seekers as presumptuous queue jumpers" (2013, p. 69). This is emphasised in the play by the three characters who, such as Phil, regard Asif as an "*uninvited* guest" who wants to take the place of those permitted by Australian peoples and authorities to come to Australia (Eltham 2013, 100). Ample instance of the Howard government's hard-line policy in its treatment of refugees and

asylum seekers is the implementation of the "Pacific Solution": an act passed in 2001 under the title, *The Migration Amendment (Excision from Migration Zone) Act No. 127 2001*. This act, from which the play takes its title, is a three-steps plan which not only excised Australia's off-shore islands in the Pacific Ocean from its immigration zone, but also permitted the Australian navy to ban boats from landing on Australian islands and built detention centres in countries like Nauru and Papua New Guinea where asylum seekers are transferred, and their applications are determined (Freeman 2018).

Such attitude against asylum seekers is highlighted in the play when Eltham employs the domestic space, the house where the three characters live, as an analogy for the national space, Australia. In Scene Six of the play, while Johnny and Mandy are watching the Australian cricket team playing against Pakistan, they are interrupted by Asif, an Iraqi asylum seeker, who rushes through their front door to apply for asylum. Asif's sudden appearance in their property and his Islamic name, Asif Muhammed al-Suhail, have a negative impact on the two white Australians; he is regarded as a terrorist and home invader, knocked down by Johnny and dragged while unconscious to the cupboard which becomes his temporary confinement. To absolve the group from any responsibility of bashing Asif's head and to legally reduce his "physical" presence "*prior, during* and *following* his 'request'… null and void", Phil, their housemate, investigates the Residential Tenancies Act of the property and suggests "excis[ing] the cupboard from the lease" (Eltham, 107). However, Eltham's critique of the three officials does not rest at Australia's excision act in 2001 which removes certain Australian territories from the country's migration zone and prohibiting, there-

by, the refugees arriving there from a direct application for protection visas but goes beyond to examine Anglo Australian politicians' responses, the Liberals in particular, towards refugees and explore the perception of their mastery of the Australian national space. By excising the cupboard, where Asif is imprisoned, from the lease agreement, Phil subverts Asif's claim that he has arrived their house and Australia. In addition to critiquing Philip Ruddock's plan of excising the offshore islands through Phil's excision of the cupboard, Eltham draws attention to the role of the second minister of migration in the Howard government, Amanda Vanstone, when Mandy, in the play, suggests to "relocate" Asif to "a particular island" whose inhabitants can be cajoled to take part in the scheme of transferring refugees by providing them with financial aids (109). In so doing, the play casts light on the three white Australian characters' perception of mastering the national space.

Such white mastery of the national space is critiqued by Australian scholars like Hage who notes that white Australians perceive Australia as a nation where they assure their "centrality" as "governors" of the country and "enactors" of its law over "marginalized" people, whether Aboriginal or migrants, who are considered as "objects to be governed" (2000, 16-17). Hage claims that white Australians "share in a conception of themselves as nationalists 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" (18). A cursory look at the location of the play, which is a house inhabited by the three, might give the impression that it depicts, or even assures, "white" mastery over the national space. Yet, this location is chosen

by the playwright, I contend, to provide a lens through which we examine such conception and also observe how the cultural other is conceived, or constructed, in the Australian national imaginary.

Hage proposes that white Australians' perception of mastering the national space stems from their belief that they inhabit a "managerial capacity" to control Australia's national space. Accordingly, for such a manager who believes that s/he has a gigantic image or size, the "other" is minor and manageable. Hage (2000) adds that the affinity between the two, which relies on variance in size, enables the nationalist manager to control or manage the "ethnic" other through moving and removing. In the play, the three white Australians regard Asif as a "queue jumper" or an "uninvited guest" who intends to compel them to tolerate his presence. However, Asif is not the only target for these white Australian characters who, as this paper shows, regard other white Australians who do not share their tough policy with refugees and asylum seekers as un-Australians or internal enemies. In this sense, they are complicit in what might be termed as "exclusionary" nationalism.

Before discussing Eltham's play in light of the issue of exclusionary nationalism, I will explore the concept of nationalism and its inextricable relation with national identity. Smith (1991) defines nation as a "named human population" that shares a territory, mass culture, common memories, myths, economy and "common legal rights and duties" (12). While Some of those components assert the inclusive nature of the nation, others are not; it is generally agreed that not all citizens of the state share the same myths and memories. Moreover, in colonised territories or formerly colonised ones,

common shared territory and common historical memories act as divisive rather than unifying components. Ample instance is Australia where Aboriginal peoples believe that they are still in a process of white colonisation and that post-colonialism has not been attained yet. The same can be noticed in the "common ancestry" in Tamir's idea of a nation as "a community whose members share feelings of fraternity, substantial distinctiveness, and exclusivity, as well as beliefs in a common ancestry and a continuous genealogy" (1995, 425). Such emphasis on common myths and ancestry is dropped from Miller's premise when identifying five prerequisites for constituting a nation: "shared beliefs and mutual commitments", history, active character, 'a particular territory", and "distinct public culture" (1995, 27). Exploring the relation between nation and national identity, Smith argues that nationalism refers to "the process of state-directed nation-building, the consciousness of belonging to a nation, or having a national identity" (71). In addition to being a process of nation-building, nationalism is also conceived as an investment in membership and the future and past of the nation (Moore, 2004). Through such investment in membership people frame a "collective identity" which involves, Moore notes, "a rhetoric about indivisibility, sovereignty, … political legitimacy, common descent or common culture, and special relations to a certain territory" (6). Moore's reference to the nation's collective identity conveys her premise that in constructing such identity or image of their nation people rely on certain conditions like 'shared religion, language, law, geographical isolation, colonial policies, bureaucratic decisions, and the like" (7). In Australia people do not share the same colonial policies, language and religion. Moreover, as the play reveals, political elites,

such as the Liberals, do not invest in membership and indivisibility.

Moore's premise of the inextricable relation between nation and constructing national identity or image resonates with Benedict Anderson's definition of nation as "an imagined political community" because its members "will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives an image of their communion" (1991, 6). In this sense, communities are distinguished, Anderson adds, "not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined" (6). Relying on Anderson's definition, Tamir underpins the role such image of a nation plays "in creating a national reality" (421); as they cannot have face-to-face contact with all members in a community or country, people tend to "perceive the nation", Tamir maintains, according to an image "they have constructed in their own minds" (421). Since nations are constructed or imagined according to people's perception, it is important to investigate whether such image is fixed or fluid and also to state who is privileged to construct it. Renan (1998) claims that "[t]he existence of a nation is … a daily plebiscite, just as that of the individual is a continual affirmation of life" (47). Renan's viewpoint plainly states that national identities are changeable and not fixed. This is echoed by Moore who asserts that national identities are "fluid" because they "are social identities, constructed from the social categories that unite and divide people" (9). In addition to stating that national identities are not fixed but fluid Moore's words explicitly imply the divisive aspect of the social categories from which national identities are constructed and also explain, Moore believes, "why people have divided themselves into different groups" where one perceives itself as "being

a majority group in a state" (10). When nations are perceived as "discursive formations at the level of a symbolic or cultural system", Moore maintains, this "can set one group in opposition to another because what drives the identity construction is the internal logic of the group's discourse" (11). Thus, the group's internal logic "is one of the things that distinguishes a national group from a mere ethnic group" (11). In Eltham's *The Pacific Solution*, the three characters employ their internal logic to set themselves in opposition to non-white Australians, such as the Aboriginals and refugees like Asif, and other white Australians as well.

If the above-mentioned components of a nation privilege the major group over the ethnic, it does not claim that members of the major or national group are implicit unanimously in perceiving or constructing its national identity. Indeed, the political elites in a country often feel entitled to frame its national identity which is, as earlier stated, changeable. Moore postulates that national identity might be viewed "as the product actions by political or economic elites" who "foster national identities for their own (self-interested) ends" (12). As such, nationalism loses its moral values and becomes, Moore maintains, "merely a means for elites to preserve or enhance their own power and status in the society" (12). Moore observes that such a process of identity constructing, which can be identified even in western or liberal societies, often "creat[es] a context in which minorities felt insecure" (12-13). Such a problematic perception and dissemination of national identity to preserve the elites' power and achieve their political ends is an important theme in Eltham's *The Pacific Solution*.

Eltham's play critiques the dysfunctional models of nationalism

demonstrated by some Australian officials through an "us" and "them" binary. It shows how those models are divisive or exclusive since they widen the polarised opposition of outsider and insiders or "us" and "them" to the extent that the latter category begins to incorporate members from the dominant group. Brubaker succinctly puts it when he draws the attention to the change in the terminology of outsiders. Brubaker (2017) postulates that "in the horizontal dimension [of nationalism], the opposition is between insiders and outsiders: […] those who share our way of life, and those on the outside who are said to threaten our way of life [which] includes 'internal outsiders': those living in our midst who, even when they are citizens of the state, are not seen as belonging to the nation" (1192). In addition to signifying those who have migrated to a country and gain citizenship, the nomenclature of "internal outsiders" has come to include members of the dominant group whose concern with the welfare and rights of ethnic minorities or "the distant others" is regarded as expressing, Brubaker notes, their indifference "to the struggles of proximate brothers and sisters", their support for "a world without borders, regardless of its destructive effects on the bounded solidarities of nation and community", and also their commitment to "minorities rather than the majority" (1192). Eltham invests such a premise in this play when he introduces three white or Anglo-Australians, proponents of the Liberal party, who regard members of other parties as threatening Australia's security.

Displaying strong nationalist sentiment or exclusionary nationalism in public arenas is common in Australia when the public are often fuelled to do so by well-known figures such as anti-migration politician Pauline Hanson. Examples of such public exclusionary na-

tionalism are the Anglo-Australians' chanting of "we grew here, you flew here" during the Cronulla riots in 2005 and wearing "Wog free" T-shirts. Fozdar, Spittles, and Hartley (2015) use the term "exclusionary nationalism" to "signal pride for one's country that includes a derogation of or negativity towards others, including minorities" (321). In *The Pacific Solution*, Eltham introduces a model of exclusionary nationalism that is more racist than ethno-nationalism as Johnny, Mandy, and Phil come to denigrate not only minority groups but also individuals who share the same language and culture but differ in their political and social views and interests. As introduced in the play, those three white characters perceive Australia as being continuously vulnerable to danger from outsiders as well as others inside the country. Hage (2004) explores such a perception, which he terms as "paranoid nationalism", and states how the Howard government's deployment of a "conservative" national identity undermines the value of Australian society through its focus on border protection and paranoid defence of Australian security claiming that "paranoid nationalism sets in when … the aggressive politics of border takes over the very interior it is supposed to be protecting" (32). In so doing, the Howard government reverses the trajectory of the Australian national policy from supporting multiculturalism to traditional mono-culturalism. In line with this, Erikson (1968) points out such attitude where persons' attempts to keep themselves together often make them "clannish, intolerant and cruel in their exclusion of others who are 'different,' in skin color or cultural background, in tastes and gifts, and often in entirely petty aspects of dress and gesture arbitrarily selected as *the* signs of an in-grouper or out-grouper" (132).

The three characters' strong nationalist sentiment is delineated

in Eltham's play when they express their dissatisfaction with the attitudes of 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 also "those lefties" or the "hippies getting paid by people like you to spend their lives organising protests …, and *saving the refugees*" (79-80). Further, it incorporates the "greenies", the Australian Greens, who, Johnny claims, have "cooked up" the "myth of global warming" (90). Mandy and Johnny's remarks against activists and parties, such as the Australian Greens and Labor Party, result from the two parties' critique of the Howard government's hard-line policy with refugees and asylum seekers (Vanstone 2015). 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 being demonised in the public perception as home invaders as the Howard government did (Jaffa and Hasmath 2013, 421).

We argue that through these white Australian characters' viewpoints the play portrays how members of the Liberal Party justify their notion of exclusion on ideological criteria of national belonging by projecting themselves as the guardians of the state. Eltham highlights this in Phil and Mandy's discussion of the performance of the Australian cricket team against Pakistan, which might metaphorically be explored to comment on the performance of the Australian government regarding the issue of refugees and asylum seekers. Phil tells Mandy that it is "disloyal", "unpatriotic" and "offensive" 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 (91). Phil maintains that "if you'd studied law and if your father was a Liberal member you'd know like I do" whether such thoughts are "seditious" or not (92). Phil's words imply that Australian law aligns with the Liberal Party's thoughts and beliefs. 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 Labor Party, claiming that Asif is either "brought … or encouraged by left-wing members" (108). As such, in addition to labelling Asif as a terrorist, he accuses other parties of bringing or encouraging such a "terrorist" to come to Australia. In this sense, those opposition parties are accused of valuing the interests of minority groups, and even foreigners, at the expense of the majority and also accused of jeopardising the security of their people and country.

Phil's viewpoint presents the Liberal Party and its proponents as the guardians of the state and puts those in the opposition and their proponents in the other camp. Accordingly, Phil becomes an ample instance of the exclusionary nationalist who employs his/her nationalist narrative, or internal logic, to criminalise others, appeal to people and mass media, and increase their electoral opportunities (Bonikowski et al. 2019). Martin (2015) 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" (307). The negative impact of Australian mass media and political discourse on the issue of refugees and asylum seekers is depicted in Scene Seven in *The Pacific Solution* when Johnny recounts Asif's arrival to Phil saying: "We had a

bit of home invasion" (98). This "home invasion", as Johnny describes and emphasises through his use of the pronoun "we", is thought to be threatening all inhabitants of the house. To urge his housemates to take action, Johnny correlates Asif's presence with the threat of terrorism and continues his use of the pronoun we. As such, his speech has become a call for duty and mateship: "There's a potential terrorist in the house and we need to come up with a plan" (99).

We suggest that the above is an instance of "ethno-nationalist populism" where the targets "are not solely elite actors but also ethnic, racial, religious or cultural outgroups, which are perceived as threats to 'true' people" (Bonikowski et al. 62). Achieving a consensus on labelling those groups as posing threat to society is necessary to arouse public attention and fear. One way of articulating this is by over discussing the topic to attract mass media and public attention. Eltham touches upon this issue through the ongoing labelling of Asif as a "terrorist" although he is unconscious and detained in the cupboard and also Phil's reuse of Johnny's description of Asif as an "*uninvited* guest", "un-asked-for cupboard dweller" and "a *home invader*" whose arrival is perceived as "a *non-permitted* threshold crossing" (100-101). I believe that the play's over use of home invasion is meant to comment on the Howard government's campaign against boat people which aroused people's anxiety and presented the Australian citizen, as Burke nicely puts it, as an "insecure [and] vulnerable" subject who is "under perpetual threat"' (2001, 324). In so doing, the so-called home invaders, such as Asif, and those who sympathise with and help them, the Opposition parties, seem to occupy the same category.

It is worth noting that this premise is still operating in the political

rhetoric of the Coalition where the Liberals constitute the majority. A good example is a statement by Prime Minister Scott Morrison, the leader of the Coalition, who began the 2019 Federal Election in Australia by addressing the Australian people saying: "You vote for Bill Shorten, you know that the boats are going to start. If you vote for Scott Morrison, you know that the boats will remain stopped" (Wilson 2019). Accordingly, boats have been disseminated in the Liberals' political rhetoric as a metonym for a threat lurking at the Australian borders and threatening Australian people, security, culture, values and ways of life. Thus, everyone who sympathises with the boats people is depicted as siding with the devil. Orwell (as quoted in Kennedy 2016) has critiqued such perception of nationalism which classifies people like insects into good and bad. Further, drawing the attention to the perils of conflating nationalism with patriotism, Orwell adds that the former "is inseparable from power" where the nationalist's purpose "is to secure more power and more prestige" (98). Morrison's message sought to mobilise Australians to take part in a practical action against his opponents. Moreover, his words explicitly convey how his attacks of the other, which is masked by the discourse of border protection, is intended to secure electoral appeal. Indeed, those attacks against the Labors and the boat people were influential in enabling Scott Morison to get the "miracle" he desperately needed to win the 2019 election (Cave 2019).

Consolidating a binary discourse is evident in Morrison's words where the nation has to side with him against Shorten, the leader of Labor Party, the opposition, who as Morrison implies, is the supporter of the boats people, the enemy. As such boats come to signify, Wilson purports, "the ultimate outgroup, against whom legitimate

Australians can measure themselves". In so doing, electing the Liberals does not simply mean defeating the Labor Part and the opposition but defeating the threat lurking at the borders. This is a prime example to show how demonising the Other operates in the highest political level and is employed by the political elites in Australia who boast that their country is as a liberal one adherent to western values. Morrison's statement is an instance of conveying how nationalism is inexorably intertwined with the process of othering. This process entails not only boats people, refugees and asylum seekers but also other white Australians. Arguably, labelling asylum seekers, refugees and those with divergent views from those of the governing party as others who are either posing threats to society or helping outsiders to do so is a divisive and exclusionary attitude. Bhabha (1990) perceives "exclusivism" as "a form of segregation" and "separation" that proclaims "the practice of total disregard for the culture, language, opinions and ideas … that are divergent from one's own" and which "consider[s] all who are different off limits" (14). What is showcased in Eltham's play by the three Anglo-Australians, as stated earlier in this paper, excludes others who are presented as inferior to "true" Australians in the Liberal Party and endangers them as well. As Johnny, Mandy and Phil imply, the category of the Other incorporates persons who signify internal and external threats. It includes not only boat persons and asylum seekers, but also the Labor Party, the Australian Greens, Aboriginals, and activists who call for equality, rights of minority groups, ecological sustainability and the rights of Aboriginal peoples, the traditional owners of land.

We argue that the emergence of "us vs. them" ideology or mentality in Australian political discourse coincides with others in the

world that paves the way for the appearance of neo-nationalism in Western Europe especially in the second decade of the twenty-First century. Gingrich (2006) argues that the neo-nationalist groups in Western Europe have succeeded in appealing to voters through their "tripartite hierarchical ideological pattern" in which the "us" group is placed in the centre "against two groups of them", one above and the other below (199). The first represents the EU authorities and the second constitutes migrants and other minority groups in the EU countries. The same "neo-nationalist" mentality is identified in Eltham's play regardless of the positions the three groups occupy in this tripartite pattern. If the three white characters, who are employed to signify three Liberal politicians, represent the "us" – or "neo-nationalist" – group that occupies the centre, the other two "them" groups comprise the "neo-liberals" in the Opposition parties and minority groups such as the Aboriginals, refugees and asylum seekers. If the two groups in Gingrich's pattern are perceived as having "mysterious" and "dangerous" associates, the two groups in Eltham's play are believed, by the three white characters, to be budget consumers, enemies and their internal allies.

To conclude with, by introducing a cast in which the major characters symbolise three key personnel in the Howard government, Eltham critiques the Liberal Party's tough policy against asylum seekers. The play also touches upon the three characters' distorted notion of nationalism where minority groups and white Australians who oppose the Liberal Party's ideology and policies are not only excluded but also delineated in the political discourse as posing threat to Australia and its people. To do so, Eltham employs the arrival of an Iraqi asylum seeker to show how nationalism, in Aus-

tralia, is framed in dual identities – us and them or those siding with the outsiders and threat and those resisting it – to produce a world of binaries in the national space. Thus, in addition to unmasking dysfunctional models of inclusion, *The Pacific Solution* portrays how the process of othering in Australia has been utilised in the political rhetoric to incorporate Australians whose views and actions are contrary to those of the Liberal Party, the governing party.

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