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EastEnders to show gay Muslim kissing homosexual character British soap opera tackles Muslim homosexuality



Marc Elliot or Syed Masood (seen here) will kiss a homosexual character in controversial plot

DUBAI (Mona Moussly)

A popular British soap opera is set to introduce a controversial storyline that will see one of its Muslim characters become gay, which is likely to ruffle some feathers among British Muslims and add fuel to an already heated debate about Islamophobia in the United Kingdom.

EastEnders, a long-running soap opera named "Best Soap" in the 2008 National Television Awards, will introduce the new plotline this summer and will see its Asian character Syed Masood find himself struggling with his Muslim faith and his sexuality.

The character will then follow up on his feelings for an openly homosexual character and the two will share a passionate on-screen kiss defying his devout Muslim family and his mother's attempts to set him up with women from "good families."

News of the controversial plot comes just weeks after a Gallup poll revealed that British Muslims have zero tolerance for homosexuality as opposed to their non-Muslim counterparts.

"Normal friendly Muslim"

A Muslim Council of Britain spokesman refused to comment to Al Arabiya but Asghar Bokhari from the Muslim Public Affairs Committee told British press: "The Muslim community deserves a character that represents them to the wider public because Islamophobia is so great right now."

"There's a lack of understanding of Muslims already and I think EastEnders really lost an opportunity to present a normal friendly Muslim character to the British public," he said.

EastEnders' executive producer, Diedrick Santer, however, argued there was too much political correctness when it came to black or Asian characters and said he believed it was best to tackle controversial plots head-on.

"Sometimes there's a danger of being too careful with black or Asian characters that we might go into territories that might offend," Santer was quoted by the British press as saying.

"But it seems to me if we steer away from any controversy, they don't stand a chance of being a great EastEnders family - they'll just be in their kitchen unit making curries for years and years and that's not going to be very interesting," Santer said referring to the Asian ethnicity of most Muslim characters on EastEnders.

EastEnders is considered one of the most popular soap operas in the United Kingdom and regularly tackles controversial subjects in a bid to attract viewership.

Muslim reaction

For practicing Muslims there is no such thing as a gay Muslim because the two things contradict each other as homosexuality is strictly forbidden in Islam.

"A gay Muslim is an oxymoron. If you submit to your lord by being a Muslim, then you must obey him. How can you submit to your lord when you openly defy his will. How can you be a loyal servant to Allah when you know he despises it with utmost hatred, hence the story of Lut (ailayhu al salaam)," blogged Suree, who is described as a traveler, on the Wake Up Project forum.

For EastEnders fan Maya Haslam, who is a British Muslim currently living in Dubai, the new storyline is "appalling."

"I don't understand what they are trying to do," Haslam told Al Arabiya. "This is not a true reflection of the majority of Muslims in the United Kingdom," the 31-year-old who works in marketing said.

British Muslim of Pakistani descent, Naveed Ahmed, 35, echoed the sentiments and told Al Arabiya "I think its bad, it is going to give a bad impression about Islam."

"The type of people that watch EastEnders are going to be very naïve about such a portrayal of Muslims," he added.

When asked if Muslims would boycott the show over the provocative plotline, Ahmed said he did not think so because "generally practicing Muslims don't really watch EastEnders."

For some, however, the new storyline is great as it gives a voice to a silent minority that feels neglected.

"It is high time that the invisible minority became a visible minority," Yusuf Wehebi from Imaan, an organization that supports Britain's gay and transgender Muslims, told the BBC.

"It is entirely possible to be Muslim and gay and there's many of us in Britain today," Wehebi said. "It is great that the BBC have had the courage to raise such an important social issue in our society today."