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HOME FIRE: A NOVEL BY KAMILA SHAMSIE
(A Book Review By)

Shenaz Parween

*Junior Research Fellow (JRF),
Department of English,
Sidho-Kanho-Birsha University,
Purulia, W.B., India*

Abstract:

Kamila Shamsie's Home Fire, a modern adaptation of Sophocles Antigone, is a perfect reflection of the Islamophobic racism of today's world, where nothing is more complex than the relationship between Islam and the west. However, instead of the warring families as in Sophocles, Shamsie presents us with anti-immigration politicians during the War on Terror era and a family whose father was a known jihadist who died in custody. For the young Muslim women protagonists (Isma and Aneeka), the radicalization and killing of their brother (Pervaiz)—typecast as a homegrown terrorist by both the state and media—and the subsequent dishonouring of his body alienate them from their intimates, drawing the women into the dangerous spaces configured by terrorism and conflict. The plot even takes a romantic turn with the entry of Eammon, son of a powerful political figure, whose presence raises some important questions, like, Is he there to have a chance at love? or the means of Pervaiz's salvation? Hence, at its core, this is a love story wrapped in politics. Familial love and romantic love are the beating heart's pumping this story along. While reading between the lines, it will force one to go through a lot of complex issues, like how far-reaching the wounds of Partition are, which is where the Pasha Family first lost their footing. How has that impacted the long-term inclination towards jihad? In what ways are immigrant Muslims treated in the Islamophobic West? And last but not least, how is our current political situation worsening these kinds of narratives outside the story, pushing people into outsider status and otherness without firm footing? In a nutshell, it's about assimilation and individuality, borders and crossings, the fluidity that so many take for granted, and the lack thereof that others accept as a matter of course. Hence, it is a powerful novel and a timely one.

Keywords: Islamophobia, Identity, Racism, Other, Love, etc.

**Details of the Book****Title:** 'Home Fire: A Novel'**Author:** Kamila Shamsie**Publisher:** Riverhead Books**Year:** 2017**ISBN:** 9780735217706**Genre:** Novel**Length:** 288

'Cancer or Islam—which is the greater affliction?'—This is a question that often catches a person off guard. Kamila Shamsie's latest novel *Home Fire*, which won the Women's Prize for Fiction 2018 and was also long listed for the Man Booker Prize 2017, attempted to address these uncomfortable circumstances faced by British Muslims as they fight to preserve their distinct cultural identity while defending their 'Britishness' and allegiance to the state against political and social activists who want to alienate them. Kamila Shamsie, a British-Pakistani author said in one of her interviews with *The Guardian*: "I love the part of history that is story...If a thing is interesting enough, than I want to find the story in it." Her words are quite reflective in her latest novel, *Home Fire* (2017).

Home Fire, a modern adaptation of *Antigone* by Sophocles, is a stirring story of familial commitment and sacrifice. A contemporary take on an ancient tale demonstrates the timeless ideas of ancient myths, where the protagonist's familial ties are more emphasized than his/her courage, glory, and dignity. Similarly, Shamsie in her attempt to capture the essence of an age-old story strips away the outer layers of the plot to expose the catastrophic impacts of jihadism and radicalization as well as the government's response to British Muslims. Centered on two Pakistani families (Pashas and Lones) living in London, it starts with an 'aporetic' airport interrogation scene where the older Pasha sister, Isma, becomes a target of racial hegemony. Despite her best efforts to prove allegiance, she becomes aware that any response deemed insufficient could jeopardize her dream of pursuing a PhD in America, which in turn will put an end to her long-sought desire for freedom as well as cause troubles for her already-on-the-radar family. The younger Pasha sister, Aneeka, who battles the patriarchal culture on many fronts, also longs to live a life on her own terms. Their lives are peaceful up until Pervaiz, the younger brother, decides to join ISIS, a climactic moment at which ethnic tensions suddenly flare up and are poised to erupt. He is more motivated by a desire to carry on his father's legacy and be seen as a man, as Shamsie claims: "For girls becoming women was inevitability. For boys, becoming men was ambition" (Shamsie, 35). The aristocratic Lones' present the



opposite side of the spectrum. British Home Secretary Karamat, though a Muslim, believes being both British and Muslim at the same time is impossible while his son, Eammon, a charming personality, falls for Aneeka and their love ultimately ends in the tragic death of the 'star-crossed lovers'. So the characterization of the novel is unique in itself and the narratives of these characters soon become inextricably interconnected, revealing the complex intersections of religion, love and personal identity.

Apart from the Islamophobic theme, the best part of the novel is its female characters. The Pasha Sisters, Isma and Aneeka substantiated Virginia Woolf's assertion from *Three Guineas* – "as a woman, I have no country.... As a woman, my country is the whole world" (Woolf, 99). Aneeka's deft manipulation of Eammon to gain control over him or Isma's nurturing of the twin orphans Aneeka and Pervaiz- whatever it was, they consistently demonstrated that nothing could stop them from finding a stable identity or a space in a society that is prejudiced against them. The narrative also refutes the long-held misconception that Muslims are resistant to modernity. We get Isma a 'practicing Muslim' who is proud of her Muslim identity, while Aneeka wears a headscarf, dates, engages in sexual activity, believes in Allah, and studies law—activities that many people don't think are all possible at once.

Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak in her essay *Terror: A speech after 9/11* argues that "we must listen to the other as if it were a self, neither to punish nor to acquit" (Spivak, 83). This is applicable even when the 'other' is a terrorist. Similarly, Shamsie doesn't present Pervaiz just as a jihadist but marks the causes that make him one. The distancing of Islam from terrorism is also highlighted here. She is not at all supporting the notion that Muslims are inextricably linked to ISIS but instead sheds light on the various reasons leading the youth in the field of extremism. It is also interesting to observe that each character has a unique relationship to Islam, demonstrating that Islam, like any religion, is not monolithic despite the toxic and perilous manner in which it is frequently seen. We have the jihadists like Adil Pasha and Farooq, liberals like Isma and Aneeka, and non-conformists like Karamat Lone- all are Muslims but different in their way of practicing the religion.

Though at times it seems like the book is heading in one certain direction, there is a significant transition to a romance story for a while. Shamsie's exploration of love and passion can be compared to the greatest romantic classic, '*Romeo and Juliet*'- yet is set in modern times. The budding romance between Eammon and Aneeka and their tragic demise are best described in the words of an article entitled "*From Cheap Labor to overlooked citizens: Looking for British Muslim Identities in Kamila Shamsie's Home Fire*" by Debjani Banerjee, as "Laila and Majnu, the south Asian tale of love that does not find fulfillment" (Banerjee, 298).

However, the love story presented here is wrapped up in politics. The questions naturally come forward, like, Who is Eammon to them? Is he a romantic possibility? Is he the last hope for a wayward brother? Which is more powerful, love or blood? Can we ever get over family duties to move on with our lives, and if so, should we? Thus, love and betrayal go hand in hand in this situation, though Shamsie consistently serves as a reminder that love ultimately triumphed.



To conclude, I can say that Shamsie does an excellent job at traversing complex political terrain and making people think about a subject that is almost neglected-how to live as a Muslim in a nation like Europe with a potential terrorist stigma? However, there are some parts where the text is lagging behind. Despite the fact that Pervaiz's story was essential to the plot, the book got off track when describing it, and a lot of details were left unsaid. Isma, who plays a key role at the beginning of the narrative, likewise seems to receive relatively little attention. Once more, though it is a retelling of *Antigone*, Shamsie's approach has been a little more figurative. She has used much of the basic setup of *Antigone* while not feeling obligated to stick to the original in every detail. Overall, the book is thrilling and lovely and is really about the decisions we make regarding love and the place we call home. The narrative caused me to reflect, cry, resent, and, at times, question my own convictions. When a book can elicit such responses, I would say it is unquestionably worthwhile to read.

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To Cite the Book Review: Parween, Shenaz. "*Home Fire: A Novel by Kamila Shamsie.*" *Literary Cognizance*, V - 2 (September, 2024): 04-07. Web.