

RESEARCH ARTICLE**The Conditional Citizen: Kinship, Citizenship, and Tragic Belonging in Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire***

Jyoti RaniResearch Scholar, Department of English, Central University of Jammu, India
jyotirani7014@gmail.com

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Abstract

This paper examines Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire* (2017) as a contemporary reworking of Sophocles' *Antigone* that exposes the conditional nature of Muslim belonging in post-9/11 Britain. It argues that the novel transforms the classical conflict between kinship and sovereign authority into a broader struggle over citizenship, assimilation, surveillance, identity, and the right to mourn. Through the experiences of Isma, Aneeka, Parvaiz, Eamonn, and Karamat Lone, Shamsie reveals how British citizenship may coexist with cultural suspicion and political exclusion. Drawing on Judith Butler's theories of kinship and grievability, Homi K. Bhabha's concept of hybridity, Stuart Hall's account of diasporic identity, and Sara Ahmed's analysis of affect, the paper explores how national belonging is produced through unequal structures of recognition. It also considers recent scholarship on the novel's tragic form, media culture, diaspora, class, and materialized grief. The analysis demonstrates that *Home Fire* neither idealizes familial loyalty nor simplifies the state as wholly oppressive; instead, it presents a tragic world in which individual choices are shaped by competing demands of family, nation, religion, and security. Ultimately, the paper argues that the novel questions the assumption that citizenship guarantees belonging, showing instead how Muslims are repeatedly required to prove their loyalty and legitimacy. Shamsie's modern tragedy thus exposes the political and emotional costs of conditional citizenship and exclusionary definitions of home.

Keywords: Kamila Shamsie; *Home Fire*; Sophocles' *Antigone*; Muslim Belonging; Post-9/11 Britain.**Introduction**

Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire* (2017) is often introduced as a contemporary rewriting of Sophocles' *Antigone*, but its literary power lies in how thoroughly it refuses to remain merely an updated version of an ancient tragedy. Shamsie relocates the conflict between kinship and sovereign law into contemporary Britain, where the bodies, beliefs, passports, and family histories of British Muslims are subjected to intense scrutiny. The result is a novel in which "home" is less a stable place than a contested political and emotional category. To belong to Britain is not simply to possess citizenship; it is, for the Pasha family, to repeatedly perform an acceptable version of Britishness. The state can recognize the family as British citizens while simultaneously treating them as culturally suspect, politically conditional, or morally incomplete. In this tension, *Home Fire* transforms *Antigone*'s ancient conflict between unwritten familial duty and state authority into a modern struggle over citizenship, grievability, gender, and the right to mourn.

This essay argues that *Home Fire* reworks the tragic structure of *Antigone* in order to expose the conditional nature of Muslim belonging in post-9/11 Britain. Through the five-part narrative structure, shifting

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focalization, media forms, and the intertwined stories of Isma, Aneeka, Parvaiz, Eamonn, and Karamat, Shamsie shows that the state does not simply exclude Muslims from the national community; it produces an internal hierarchy of belonging in which some minority citizens are rewarded for assimilation while others are marked as dangerous. At the same time, the novel complicates the familiar opposition between an oppressive state and innocent minorities. Parvaiz's radicalization is neither celebrated nor excused, and Karamat Lone's politics cannot be reduced to simple betrayal. Instead, Shamsie constructs a tragic field in which every available identity is compromised. Read alongside Judith Butler's work on Antigone and grievability, Homi K. Bhabha's theory of cultural hybridity, Stuart Hall's account of diasporic identity, Sara Ahmed's analysis of the circulation of emotion, and recent scholarship on *Home Fire*, the novel emerges as a critique of the fantasy that citizenship can resolve the question of belonging. Its final tragedy is therefore not simply that a family loses its children, but that the political community proves unable to imagine kinship, citizenship, and mourning outside the narrow terms of loyalty and security.

Interrogating Identity: Hybridity at the Border

The novel's opening makes belonging a question before it becomes an answer. Isma Pasha, a British citizen travelling to the United States for doctoral study, is detained at Heathrow and subjected to an interrogation that begins with a deceptively simple question: "Do you consider yourself British?" (Shamsie 5). When Isma replies, "I am British," the officer repeats the question rather than accepting the answer. The distinction between "being" British and "considering oneself" British is crucial. The first expresses legal status; the second asks for an affective and ideological declaration of allegiance. The interrogation therefore converts citizenship from a juridical category into a test of identity. Recent criticism has rightly observed that the scene places citizenship at the centre of the novel from its opening pages (Degenkolb). It also establishes one of Shamsie's central paradoxes: Isma is British enough to possess a British passport but not automatically British enough to be assumed innocent.

This moment is significant because the interrogation does not arise from anything Isma has done. Her body, Muslim identity, Pakistani family history, and religious markers make her legible to the security apparatus as a possible risk. The scene consequently demonstrates what Stuart Hall describes as the constructed nature of cultural identity. Hall argues that identity is not an unchanging essence inherited intact from the past; it is produced through representation, history, difference, and positioning. *Home Fire* dramatizes that process by making Isma's identity something others repeatedly interpret for her. Her own declaration of Britishness is insufficient because the state's gaze has already placed her within a competing narrative of Muslim otherness. She is not simply asked who she is. She is asked to reconcile her Muslim identity with a national identity that the interrogator implicitly treats as contradictory.

Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity provides another useful lens for understanding this condition. Bhabha challenges the idea that cultures exist as pure, separate units and instead emphasizes the ambivalent "in-between" spaces where identities are negotiated. The Pasha siblings inhabit precisely such a space. They are British and Pakistani, Muslim and secular in varying degrees, attached to family and critical of some family traditions, shaped by Britain yet haunted by histories that Britain itself helped produce. Their hybridity, however, is not experienced as liberating cultural play. It is politically precarious because British public discourse repeatedly demands clear distinctions: loyal or disloyal, secular or religious, British or foreign, moderate or extremist. The novel's tragedy develops from this demand for categorical identity.

Isma is the character who initially appears most willing to negotiate with that demand. She works hard to separate herself from Parvaiz's choices and tries to protect the family by anticipating the state's

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suspicion. Yet her experience reveals the limits of accommodation. Her decision to inform the authorities about Parvaiz's movement to join ISIS can be read as an act of responsibility, but it is also an attempt to establish her own innocence through distance from her brother. She becomes, in effect, the model minority citizen: educated, professionally ambitious, careful, cooperative, and willing to reassure authority. But Shamsie refuses to let that model produce genuine security. Isma may behave exactly as the state demands, yet the novel's opening reminds readers that she can still be interrogated because of the history attached to her family and religion.

The Paradox of Assimilation: Karamat Lone and Conditional Acceptance

The character of Karamat Lone makes this problem more complex. As a British politician of Pakistani Muslim background who becomes Home Secretary, Karamat appears to represent the possibility of successful integration. His career should be the triumphant answer to the question posed to Isma: yes, a British Muslim can belong. Yet Karamat's political doctrine is built around minimizing visible difference. He argues that citizenship is "a privilege not a right or a birthright" and urges British Muslims to resist markers that emphasize their difference from the national norm (Shamsie 198). He is therefore not simply assimilated; he is invested in assimilation as a political technology.

Karamat's position illuminates what might be called the paradox of conditional acceptance. The state offers minority citizens recognition on the condition that they demonstrate their distance from those minorities whom the state has categorized as threatening. Karamat gains authority partly by presenting himself as evidence that Britishness is available to Muslims who accept the nation's terms. Yet his rise produces another form of exclusion because it depends on distinguishing respectable Muslims from dangerous Muslims. His statement that he hates "Muslims who make people hate Muslims" (231) crystallizes the logic of that division. He does not reject Muslims as such; he rejects those whose conduct, in his view, makes collective prejudice possible. The effect, however, is still damaging: the burden of proving innocence is transferred to Muslims themselves.

In this respect, *Home Fire* departs from simplistic representations of Islamophobia. The state's problem is not merely that it hates an ethnic or religious minority. Rather, the novel shows how national identity can incorporate a minority by dividing it internally. Some Muslims are positioned as exemplary citizens, others as objects of suspicion, and the line between the two remains unstable. Karamat himself can become an instrument of the system that once marked people like him as outsiders. His tragedy is therefore bound up with the tragedy of the Pashas: all are negotiating the same national hierarchy, though from different positions within it.

The Politics of Mourning: Grieveability and the Modern Antigone

The Antigone framework intensifies this critique because the original play is fundamentally about the collision between familial obligation and state power. In Sophocles' tragedy, Creon's political order declares Polynices a traitor whose body must remain unburied, while Antigone insists on the primacy of kinship and ritual obligation. Judith Butler's *Antigone's Claim* is particularly relevant because Butler interprets Antigone as a figure whose challenge to authority also exposes the unstable boundaries of kinship itself. Antigone's act is not simply a private family gesture; it forces the state to confront forms of relationship it cannot fully regulate. Butler further emphasizes the vulnerability and risk embedded in Antigone's resistance. The heroine's agency is inseparable from the conditions that make her life precarious.

Home Fire retains this structure but transforms burial into a struggle over citizenship and the public legitimacy of grief. Parvaiz, like Polynices, is associated with an enemy of the state. Yet the modern conflict

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is made more complicated by the fact that Parvaiz is British. His "treason" does not erase his citizenship in the ordinary sense, but it makes the state treat his body as politically contaminated. When Parvaiz dies while trying to escape the Islamic State, Karamat refuses to allow his remains to be returned to Britain. The refusal is symbolically decisive. The dead body becomes a border object, and mourning becomes a political act.

This is where Gabriella Pishotti's argument about materialized grief becomes especially important. Pishotti reads *Home Fire* through Judith Butler's concept of grievability and Sara Ahmed's work on affect, arguing that the novel explores how Muslim lives can be rendered abject by post-9/11 Islamophobic politics. The question is not only who lives, but whose death can be publicly recognized as deserving mourning. Parvaiz's death becomes an opportunity for the state to reaffirm the difference between legitimate and illegitimate belonging. The body of the dead Muslim citizen is denied a place in the national home precisely because he has become associated with the nation's enemy.

Aneeka's response transforms this denial into the novel's central ethical conflict. Like Antigone, she refuses to accept that the political status of the dead determines whether they deserve burial. She goes to Pakistan to reclaim Parvaiz's body when Britain refuses to return it. Her action is not a defense of terrorism; it is a defense of kinship against a state that treats political disapproval as a reason to suspend familial dignity. The distinction matters because Shamsie carefully separates mourning from absolution. Aneeka can love her brother without endorsing what he did. Her insistence that he be buried at home therefore challenges a political logic in which one terrible choice erases all other relationships.

Judith Butler's later writing on grievability helps illuminate this conflict. In *Frames of War*, Butler asks how political frames determine which lives are recognized as fully human, vulnerable, and mournable. *Home Fire* repeatedly demonstrates such framing. Parvaiz is first represented through the vocabulary of radicalization and terrorism; the state's discourse makes him legible as a threat before it allows him to remain legible as a son or brother. Aneeka's mourning is therefore politically disruptive because it attempts to restore complexity to a body the state has reduced to a security category. Her protest is a demand for what might be called relational recognition: Parvaiz was a British citizen, but he was also a brother, a child of a family, and a person whose history cannot be exhausted by the label "terrorist."

Ahmed's theory of emotion deepens the analysis. Ahmed argues that emotions do not simply reside inside individuals; they circulate between bodies, signs, objects, and communities, attaching some bodies to fear and others to safety. *Home Fire* is full of such emotional associations. The Muslim body is repeatedly connected to danger; the passport is connected to scrutiny; the hijab becomes a visual marker that attracts suspicion; the corpse becomes a sign of national security; and public grief becomes potentially threatening because it risks challenging the state's narrative. In this emotional economy, fear does political work. Karamat's policies are justified through the language of protection, while Muslims are expected to demonstrate that they are not the source of the danger against which the state claims to protect everyone.

Gender, Power and the Politics of Visibility

The novel's treatment of Aneeka is especially important because gender structures this politics of visibility. Aneeka is not simply "the modern Antigone." She is a young Muslim woman who is brilliant, ambitious, legally trained, sexually self-aware, and deeply committed to her brother. Her agency refuses both Western assumptions about oppressed Muslim women and conservative assumptions about feminine obedience. She does not fit the stereotype of the passive veiled woman, but neither does Shamsie replace that stereotype with a simple model of liberated Western femininity. Aneeka's sexuality, political intelligence, and emotional intensity coexist. Her decisions are sometimes strategic, sometimes manipulative, sometimes

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compassionate, and sometimes destructive.

This complexity matters because it prevents the reader from turning Aneeka into a pure symbol of resistance. Her relationship with Eamonn begins partly because she recognizes his access to Karamat. The relationship is therefore entangled with political calculation. Yet this does not make her resistance false. Rather, the novel shows that marginalized subjects often have to negotiate power through compromised means. Aneeka's attempt to use Eamonn demonstrates that the personal and political cannot be separated neatly. Desire becomes a route into institutional power, just as family loyalty becomes a reason to challenge the state.

The novel's treatment of women also exposes how the political sphere is still structured by gender. Karamat's authority depends upon his ability to appear rational, firm, and protective, while Aneeka is repeatedly described through emotional intensity. Public discourse can therefore code male state violence as responsibility while coding female grief as irrational. Yet the narrative ultimately grants Aneeka moral and rhetorical force. Her actions reveal that the state's claim to neutrality is itself emotional. Its policies are shaped by fear, anger, pride, and the desire to appear strong.

Inherited Wounds: Radicalization and Imperial Ghosts

The Pasha family's history further complicates the relationship between the personal and the political. Parvaiz's radicalization is connected to the story of his father, Adil Pasha, whose past involvement with jihadist networks and death in detention has remained a source of shame and unanswered questions. Parvaiz inherits not a political program but a wound. His recruiters exploit his uncertainty about his father and offer him a narrative in which his family history can be transformed into masculine purpose. Shamsie thus avoids presenting radicalization as a purely ideological conversion. It is also a story about loneliness, inheritance, masculinity, manipulation, and the desire to belong.

This is one of the novel's strongest contributions to contemporary terrorism fiction. Rather than explaining radicalization through religion alone, *Home Fire* constructs a psychological and political ecology in which inherited trauma, economic and social marginality, family history, and transnational propaganda interact. Recent scholarship on diasporic trauma similarly emphasizes how Isma, Aneeka, and Parvaiz negotiate the unresolved relationship between Pakistani inheritance and British identity (Unal). The novel does not claim that marginalization automatically produces extremism; instead, it shows how the language of the extremist recruiter can become attractive when it offers a subject a coherent story about humiliation and belonging.

Parvaiz's story should also be read alongside Britain's own imperial history. Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism* reminds readers that metropolitan identities are not formed independently of colonial relationships. *Home Fire*'s apparently contemporary conflict is haunted by earlier histories: Britain's relationship with South Asia, the military histories of earlier generations, the War on Terror, and the unequal distribution of geopolitical power. Even the family name Pasha carries histories that exceed the immediate plot. Auntie Naseem's memories of a family shaped by service to the British Empire demonstrate how contemporary Britishness rests upon layered histories of colonial connection.

This historical dimension matters because the novel's central question—who belongs to Britain?—cannot be separated from the older question of who has been allowed to participate in the making of Britain's imperial and national history. Karamat's politics attempt to produce a stable national identity by emphasizing present-day loyalty, but the novel keeps reopening the past. Parvaiz's father, the family's migration, the British Army, and the War on Terror all connect personal biography to geopolitical history. The home is therefore

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crowded with ghosts.

Tragic Polyphony: Narrative Form and Digital Surveillance

Shamsie's formal choices reinforce this sense of historical and political complexity. Naomi Weiss argues that *Home Fire* does not merely borrow Antigone's plot but reworks tragic form through dialogue, theatricality, media, and multiple voices. The novel's five-part structure shifts perspective among Isma, Eamonn, Parvaiz, Aneeka, and Karamat. This structure denies any character complete narrative authority. Readers move from one consciousness to another and repeatedly revise their judgments. The effect is polyphonic: no single ideological position can fully explain the events.

This polyphony is especially important because terrorism narratives are often dominated by the state's language. Government, media, and security institutions possess the resources to name events, categorize people, and define threats. Shamsie's novel redistributes narrative authority. Parvaiz's section, for example, allows readers to experience something of his vulnerability without turning him into a hero. Aneeka's sections reveal the emotional reality behind public controversy. Karamat's perspective allows readers to understand his motivations even when they reject his politics. This does not create moral equivalence, but it complicates the reader's relationship to judgment.

Derek Attridge's account of *Home Fire* similarly emphasizes the political force of its formal design. The novel's use of an earlier literary work as a governing framework and its movement among perspectives create a form in which readers must encounter difference rather than receive a single political lesson. The point is not that every character is equally right. The point is that the tragedy emerges because their positions are mutually entangled. A political system that claims to restore security generates the conditions for further alienation; a family's attempt to remain loyal to one another repeatedly becomes entangled with actions that have political consequences.

Digital media intensifies this structure. Aneeka's phrase "Googling while Muslim" captures how contemporary identity is shaped through surveillance and networked communication. The joke is funny because it is frightening: an ordinary research activity can become suspicious when performed by a Muslim body. Recent criticism notes that social media and news websites are not simply background details in the novel; they are part of the mechanism through which characters are positioned and interpreted (Degenkolb). The digital sphere collapses distance, but it also makes surveillance easier. The characters can communicate across Britain, America, Pakistan, and Syria, yet the same transnational networks that connect them make them increasingly visible to systems of control.

This is another point at which *Home Fire* updates Antigone for the twenty-first century. Sophocles' characters inhabit a polis governed through decrees, public speeches, messengers, and the visibility of bodies. Shamsie's characters inhabit a media-saturated state where passports, phones, internet searches, television interviews, and social media posts form a parallel system of observation. The modern state does not merely watch people physically; it watches their traces. Citizenship therefore acquires a digital dimension. To belong is also to be searchable.

The novel's ending is devastating because the state eventually becomes inseparable from the family. Eamonn, Karamat's son, is caught between his father's political identity and his love for Aneeka. The relationship initially seems capable of bridging the gap between the Pashas and the Lones, but it becomes another site where political inheritance is transmitted. Eamonn's privilege gives him access to rooms, institutions, and networks that Aneeka cannot enter. Yet he is also emotionally dependent on her. Their relationship thus dramatizes asymmetrical intimacy: two people may love one another while occupying

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fundamentally unequal social positions.

The Limits of Liberal Individualism: Class and Multiculturalism

The final tragedy also reveals the limits of liberal individualism. Eamonn might choose Aneeka as an individual, but his choices cannot escape his father's position as Home Secretary, his family's public identity, or the state's security apparatus. Aneeka might love Eamonn, but she cannot stop being Parvaiz's sister. Isma might seek a life beyond the family, but she remains entangled in its political history. Karamat might act as a father, but his fatherhood is inseparable from his office. Everyone is caught in networks of relation.

The title *Home Fire* consequently carries several meanings. "Home" refers to Britain, to the family house, to Karachi, to London, and to the imagined place where a body belongs after death. "Fire" evokes terrorism and violence, but it also suggests the intimate heat of family, the danger of political passion, and the destructive force produced when those forms of belonging collide. The title resists the idea that there is one secure home from which the characters have simply become estranged. Instead, home itself becomes unstable. The characters are never completely outside or inside; they are always negotiating the boundaries of belonging.

Recent scholarship on diaspora in *Home Fire* argues that Isma's experiences reveal the contradictions of Western multiculturalism, especially its tendency to mark difference while claiming to celebrate diversity (Naz and Safdar). This contradiction is central to the novel. Multiculturalism can recognize cultural difference at the level of rhetoric while still organizing social life through hierarchies of acceptability. A Muslim can be welcomed as evidence of diversity while remaining suspect as a citizen. Karamat's career embodies this paradox: he is proof that British institutions are open to Muslims, yet his political success requires him to discipline Muslim difference.

Another significant dimension of this struggle is class. Citizenship is formally universal, but the novel shows that mobility, education, and social capital affect how citizenship is experienced. Isma can eventually pursue doctoral study in the United States; Eamonn moves through elite social spaces; Aneeka has access to an elite legal education; yet none of these advantages fully protect them from the symbolic suspicion attached to Muslim identity. Sauleha Kamal's recent reading of *Home Fire* argues that rights and literary visibility are unevenly distributed through citizenship and class, particularly through borders, bureaucratic discretion, and unequal mobility. This helps explain why the novel repeatedly stages airports, passports, universities, government offices, embassies, and television appearances. These are institutions in which identity becomes administratively visible.

The class dimension also prevents the novel from being reduced to a simple opposition between "the British state" and "British Muslims." Karamat's family has accumulated forms of social capital that the Pashas do not possess. Eamonn can move through elite spaces without being automatically interpreted as dangerous, partly because his father occupies a powerful political position. Yet his privilege is unstable because his intimacy with Aneeka threatens the political boundaries his father enforces. Parvaiz, by contrast, possesses fewer institutional resources and becomes vulnerable to the recruiter who offers him a different geography of belonging. The novel therefore suggests that radicalization and exclusion occur within networks of class as well as race and religion.

This is also why Shamsie's version of *Antigone* remains recognizably tragic rather than becoming a political morality tale. Tragedy emerges when individual choices encounter structures too large for individuals to control. Parvaiz makes disastrous choices, but his choices are shaped by inherited history and manipulation. Aneeka acts with remarkable determination, but her resistance cannot overcome the state's institutional power.

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Karamat believes that hard political choices will protect Britain and British Muslims, yet those choices destroy his relationship with his son and contribute to the conditions of the final catastrophe. Eamonn attempts to act according to love, but finds himself unable to escape the political identity he inherited. Each character possesses agency, but none possesses sovereignty over the consequences of that agency.

The tragedy therefore lies less in individual error than in the collision of incompatible systems of belonging. Family, nation, religion, law, class, memory, and desire demand different forms of loyalty. *Home Fire* makes these demands visible without resolving them into a single hierarchy. Its ethical achievement is to make the reader feel the pressure produced when a person is forced to choose among identities that are all genuinely theirs. The novel's politics begins precisely where such forced choices become intolerable.

Conclusion

Home Fire ultimately rejects the reassuring promise that liberal multiculturalism can produce a fully reconciled sense of belonging. None of its characters achieves an uncomplicated identity: Isma remains caught between family loyalty and the demands of citizenship; Aneeka resists the state while remaining deeply attached to kinship; Eamonn struggles against the political legacy of his father; Karamat attempts to define Britishness through assimilation; and Parvaiz becomes permanently separated from the family he once sought to understand. Their fragmented identities reveal that belonging is not a fixed condition but an ongoing negotiation shaped by history, politics, and relationships. Through its reworking of *Antigone*, Shamsie demonstrates that the conflict between kinship and state authority remains relevant in contemporary Britain, but that it now operates through citizenship, race, religion, surveillance, media, and counterterrorism. The novel does not present Parvaiz as innocent or Karamat as simply oppressive. Instead, it acknowledges the reality of political violence while questioning whether security can justify reducing individuals to categories of threat and respectability. Its central concern is therefore the inadequacy of conditional citizenship. A British passport may establish legal status, but it cannot guarantee emotional belonging, social acceptance, or the right to mourn. Aneeka's determination to bring Parvaiz home exposes the deepest contradiction of the novel: the state demands political loyalty, while kinship demands recognition of the dead. *Home Fire* offers no simple resolution to this conflict. Instead, its tragic power lies in making readers inhabit competing perspectives and recognize the complexity of human identity. Ultimately, Shamsie asks not whether the Pashas belong to Britain, but why their belonging must continually be proved. The novel thus calls for a more inclusive understanding of citizenship, one capable of embracing difference, contradictory histories, and forms of belonging that exceed the categories imposed by the state.

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