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‘The Ones We Love...are Enemies of the State’ⁱ: The Personal Is Political in Kamila Shamsie’s *Home Fire*

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Abstract:

The brutality of British counter-terrorism in US led War on Terror was resultant of an already rampant Islamophobia in Britain. With the impinging questions of loyalty of transnational population towards the host country, one can pose concerns about South-Asian communities in Britain. In this paper, I would read the multiplicity of Muslim identities portrayed in Kamila Shamsie’s novel, *Home Fire*. The novel is a humanist project, an alternate documentation of personal wounds acquiring political flavour. The paper explores the faceless ‘Other,’ whose narratives are eradicated from public memory defining national grief by nullifying certain other lives as grievable.

Key Words:

Counter-terrorism, Islamophobia, South-Asian Muslim identity, Britain, Other-ing, National grief.

Fiction writers and political theorists propound on the homing desire and ‘hybridity’ (Bhabha 2)ⁱⁱ of diasporic communities. Quite contrary to the empathetic worldview, migrant cultures and diasporic population are habitually seen as threats to national security by right-wing state authorities and indigenous population within the ‘host’ country (Vertovec 54). This impinges questions of loyalty of transnational population towards host countries. Thus, one may be concerned about South-Asian communities in Britain since the 2001 ‘riots’ (Hussain and Bagguley 39-63). After surviving political atrocities and social ‘Other’-ing (Bhabha 19), each member of a diasporic community shares a collective past and desire, that is easily replaced by fear for a common destiny.

In this paper, I would read the multiplicity of Muslim identities portrayed in Kamila Shamsie’s *Home Fire*. The South-Asian British Muslim characters in the novel inhabit an ambivalent place as they are perceived as ‘Others’ to mainstream British culture. This ambivalence leads Others into slipping and suffering as enemies of the State. *Home Fire* depicts an interesting but heart-breaking journey of a Muslim family from being a component of a ghettoized, marginalised group to losing their National identity and burial rights. Each of the characters’ individual journey represents the shared struggle of the South-Asian Muslim community in contemporary Britain, making this novel an important read.

The brutality of British counter-terrorism in US led War on Terror was resultant of an already rampant Islamophobia in the country. ‘The Honeyford Affair’ⁱⁱⁱ and ‘the Rushdie Affair’^{iv} deepened the public portrayal of Muslims having ‘anti-modern values’ along with being ruthlessly passionate about preserving and protecting the same. This posed a threat to established Western ideals of social and rational thought, as well as to liberal and nationalist ideas of freedom and human rights in Britain (Vertovec 103-104). Thus, the South-Asian Muslim community became a distinct antagonistic presence within the country. The community was depicted by British media as monolithic, regressive, violent, thus also inferior to

predominant British culture (Vertovec 105). The sole respite to Islamophobia came with the Runnymede Commission. Among other progressive ideas, it advocated greater political recognition to British Muslims, and called for legislative remedies against Islamophobic discrimination and social violence. The Runnymede Commission made political parties select Muslim candidates in winnable seats to get the latter appointed in House of Lords (Vertovec 106). However, even legal framework failed eradication of racial discrimination in one's regular socio-economic life.

'How did the law help our father?' (Shamsie 142) is a seminal question driving the plot and actions of the characters in Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire*. A disillusioned nineteen-year-old Pervaiz enquires his twin Aneeka, both unaware of the irony. Pervaiz is not inquisitive, he has deliberated upon his inquiry. It is to critique Britain's take on War on Terror and how the country has shrugged off responsibilities towards certain individuals. The novel is set in contemporary Amherst, London, Syria and Pakistan. The novel, inspired by Sophocles' *Antigone*, is divided into five sections, each of which focuses on a character's journey – Isma Pasha, Eamonn Lone, Pervaiz Pasha, Aneeka Pasha and Karamat Lone respectively. One can ingenuously say that the story is more than a '(South-)Asian family drama dragged into Parliament' (Shamsie 246). Pervaiz, allured by Farooq, an ISIS recruiter, joins the *jihadist* movement. Farooq feeds him information about Adil Pasha a.k.a. Abu Pervaiz, the Pasha siblings' absent *jihadi* father. Farooq makes Pervaiz imagine Adil as a passionate fighter, compassionate comrade, severely tortured in illegal captivity – or the father one would be proud to have. News of Adil Pasha's death on his way to Guantanamo was common knowledge in the neighbourhood of Pervaiz's childhood. However, Pervaiz fails to comprehend that his father's journey is not unique. Anyone 'who turn(s) against the soil of Britain' (Shamsie 188) is to suffer the same fate, Pervaiz too will. The personal and political merge, and as critics of Pervaiz's impulsive actions, readers wonder whether his journey purposes an understanding of the circumstances of his father's death, or alternately, his own death and the ensuing wide-scale political debate would make significant changes in the politico-fictional world of Shamsie's Pakistani passport holder South-Asian British Muslim characters. In regards to government's apathy towards lives of Others and to develop this argument further, the last scene of the novel becomes effective. It will be discussed later in the paper.

With Pervaiz's disappearance and joining the ISIS in Raqqa, Syria, the sisters Isma and Aneeka find each other at loggerheads. The elder, Isma, has brought up the twins single-handedly after the demise of their grandmother and mother. Having found back her fervour for life, Isma decides to pursue PhD in Sociology from America. She reports Pervaiz's disappearance intending to protect Aneeka, the only family she's left with. The two sisters are a foil to each other. Isma, who abides by the Quran (Shamsie 43, 47) and accepts social, moral and legal norms, is an epitome of rational decision-making. Aneeka represents action against Isma's checks-and-balances. She's studying law at LSE and acquires a university scholarship, an endowment Pervaiz couldn't. Shamsie presents Aneeka as flamboyant and carefree (Shamsie 23), whose passion for life replaces her mission of helping her brother return home, England – first unharmed, then demanding burial rights, unfortunately failing both.

Isma has grown up believing 'stories of abuse suffered by the families of British men who'd been arrested in Afghanistan' (Shamsie 49). It is known: 'British government would withdraw all the benefits of the welfare state – including the state school and the NHS – from any family it suspected of siding with the terrorists' (Shamsie 49). South-Asians migrated in England were seen as economic liabilities for the country. A family's immigrant status coupled with terrorist ties made the Government shrug its responsibilities, denigrating them as 'human waste,' excess population, denying them even bare necessities. In a new

global order where rules are abandoned in the course of action, the Muslim population was seen as threats to natives, an 'effigy to be burnt as the spectre of global forces' (Bauman 66). This becomes Pervaiz's predicament too. Isma understands what it is to be an Other to mainstream, populist culture – she knows she cannot belong, that the government and natives do not consider her as their own. She is not privileged enough to permeate boundaries and enjoy multiple lives like Eamonn Lone, son of Britain's Home Secretary of Pakistani origin (Shamsie 49). Eamonn is a third-generation immigrant, a hybrid whose Muslim identity is reminiscent of distant summer vacations or Eid celebrations (Shamsie 58-59). His wilfully-forgotten Muslim identity recurs as a 'shameful memory of...embarrassment' (Shamsie 61) on the day he visits Aneeka in Bradford. As Eamonn soaks in the sights of the Bradford cottage, readers realize that Pasha sisters' present life is Eamonn's shameful past. The Pasha siblings cannot live his privileged hybrid liminal (Bhabha 3-4)^v life. Eamonn has not received a Muslim upbringing, thus perceives fellow Muslims as Others. He casually asks Isma about her headgear on their first meeting in America, 'The turban. Is that a style thing or a Muslim thing?' (Shamsie 21). And after making an offhand remark on Islam being an affliction and cancerous, nonchalantly clarifies, 'it must be difficult to be Muslim in the world these days' (Shamsie 21). Eamonn is 'half-half' (Shamsie 61), and evidently doesn't acknowledge the Muslim half to be his identity. On the other hand, the fates of other Muslim characters like Isma, Pervaiz and Aneeka are intertwined with the community they represent. In case, any of them manifests deviant behaviour, the punishment meted out to one remains binding upon the future of the entire community. Judith Butler, in her collection of essays, *Precarious Lives*, critiques the State's practices of annulling precarious human lives as 'faceless...symbols of evil' (Butler xviii) merely on the basis of suspicion.

Kamila Shamsie builds upon this *fear of judgement* (emphasis, mine) leading to inaction of Muslims worldwide who are willing to prove their loyalty to Western norms of humanity. Another character who echoes a similar notion of submissive Muslim identity as Isma is their Karachi-based Pakistani cousin. After booking a hotel room for Aneeka when the latter travels to Pakistan to claim Pervaiz's body, he tells her,

My sister lives in America, she's about to have a child there – did you or your *bhenchod* brother stop to think about those of us with passports that look like toilet paper to the rest of the world, who spend our whole lives being so careful we don't give anyone a reason to reject our visa applications. Don't stand next to this guy, don't follow that guy on twitter, don't download that Noam Chomsky book. (Shamsie 209)

This submissiveness is resultant of the conviction that restraint and non-resistance to media misrepresentation or State-sponsored violence on Muslims are key to fitting into Western norms of living well. Kamila Shamsie explains in an interview the precariousness of Muslim lives in a xenophobic country. Like Aneeka's and her Pakistani cousin, Shamsie speaks about risks of GWM (Googling While Muslim):

I don't think this is a book I would have written before (receiving dual citizenship of Pakistan and Britain). But I was very aware of Googling while Muslim while writing this book. When I started to research (on ISIS), I would do stupid things, like look at three relevant websites, then go look at some really trashy celebrity stuff for a while. There was a part of my brain that was saying, what will I say if intelligence agencies come to my door and

want to know why I'm looking up this stuff? In my head I worked out my defense. (Interview with Julia Felsenthal)

Further, Shamsie explains the gap between a critically-acclaimed international writer's privilege and a regular teenager wearing a Muslim name who is 'aware of being viewed with suspicion' (interview with Julia Felsenthal). The quotes strip the author to her bare Muslim identity. She moves beyond the fictive to speak of real anticipations scripting everyday Muslim lives, and how one suffers political scrutiny. This aids inferring Shamsie's intention behind writing *Home Fire*. It is a humanist project, an alternate documentation of Muslim lives' struggles that State and mainstream media categorically repress and eradicate from the Nation's cultural memory. Shamsie writes with hope that one day people would rise above selective amnesia, and when they do, literature would fill in for gaps political facts leave behind (interview in *The Guardian*).

Likewise, Isma and Aneeka hope (Shamsie 5, 97, 205). Aneeka even fearlessly acts upon it. She goes to the extent of luring Home Secretary's son into a romantic liaison, before plunging headlong into political resistance and defiance (like Antigone) challenging the Government's mandate to bring her brother back. In one of her secret stays at Eamonn's place, Aneeka argues (Shamsie 90-91) about Home Secretary Karamat Lone's opinions about Muslim-identity markers. She is furious to locate racial undertones and stigma in his speech. The speech urges Muslim teenagers to conform to contemporary generic British lifestyle (Shamsie 87-88). The Home Secretary addresses a Bradford school with predominantly Muslim students: '...don't set yourselves apart in the way you dress, the way you think, the outdated codes of behaviour you cling to, the ideologies to which you attach your loyalties. Because if you do, you would be treated differently...' (Shamsie 87-88) The speech reads as a threat, not advice. It states facts, not with an attitude to solve racial discrimination, but to reinforce (Aneeka lists): 'things this country will let you achieve if you're Muslim is torture, rendition, detention without trial, airport interrogations, spies in your mosques, teachers reporting your children to the authorities for wanting a world without British injustice' (Shamsie 91). Lone speaks from a vantage point. The school showcases him as a model British Muslim of South-Asian origin, one who critiques and sees (also demeans) Islamic religious identity-markers as performance, unworthy of reverence for a belief system or life-choices. Lone's speech imposes the idea that Britain will accept Muslims if they discard visible Muslim-identity markers (Shamsie 87). In other words, Lone indicates that public display of religious beliefs may be fatal for the corporeal existence of an Other. He renders identity-markers akin to wearing one's political opinions publicly that undoubtedly invokes State-sponsored violence. Interestingly, Karamat practices this – he endorses keeping religious beliefs and practices private, that religious performance in public only adds political flavouring. He shares a personal anecdote with his son and mentions that during 'moments of stress,' he recites a prayer, 'Ayat al-Kursi as a kind of reflex' (Shamsie 107). Immediately, he announces the confession to be a moment of weakness and persuades Eamonn to keep it a secret as it makes him nervous to imagine how common Britishers might perceive 'a Home Secretary who's spoken openly about his atheism...secretly recites Muslim prayers' (Shamsie 107).

This is unsettling at two levels. One, it makes readers question what is personal, how much of one's personal life is political, who defines it and under what circumstances? And, more specifically, how does society grasp the identity of an 'Other?' A discussion on the latter leads to an understanding of the former. In the larger context of Muslim identity politics, the Other operates beyond Bhabha's colonizer-and-colonized dichotomy. The Other is scrutinized in the public eye basis their alternate choice of clothing (*burkha*, *hijab*, skull-cap for Muslims), which is also an indication of them being from elsewhere, thus carrying their

place, time and culture to the here and now of the natives. So the Other is perceived as a latecomer to the present geo-political locale, one who doesn't belong to the present time-frame and geographical space, is possibly not decided upon staying for long, and is thus denigrated as a contamination to the country's (here, Britain's) cultural space. This brings us to Jacques Derrida's concept of 'Hospitality'^{vi} (Derrida 16). Derrida critiques the native's idea of ownership of spaces leading to hostility towards Outsiders^{vii} and pronounced Other-ing (Derrida 32). Moreover, in the context of South-Asian Muslims in Britain, the Other is perceived as one who is violent, perpetually angry and easily offended while safeguarding that which belongs to him from elsewhere. Kamila Shamsie in her non-fiction, *Offence: A Muslim Case*, writes on offence in context to the stereotype of the British Muslim protecting, if not promoting, Islamic culture and traditional Muslim practices.

Connecting the 'Other' directly to terror and threat, a British sense of the Self is formed in opposition to stereotypes that the Other is associated with. Karamat Lone's that-is-not-me syndrome comes from judgment, post his attainment of power. However, his formation of the Self as against the Other is not dependent on Other's identity formation, because the Self is misinformed of the Other being a homogeneous composite mass incapable of human psycho-social evolution. This is where a British Self differs from the colonial Self of a master (Bhabha 25). Karamat Lone considers himself ahead of 'Others' in their journey of self-actualization, which he (not too convincingly) believes is possible only when one has shed off the part of their original identity that is not accepted in public spaces. This is significant to the debate on private-versus-public. According to Lone, public life requires absolution of religious practices along with restraint and self-moderation – all of this is exploited in Lone's decision to reject Pervaiz's burial in British soil. The British Self desires domination in the public and political spheres, negating the variety of cultures, thus seeking homogeneity and pre-supposing heterogeneity a threat to native lifestyle.

In this regard, the novel's opening and closing scenes become important. Isma says, 'I'd find it more difficult to not be Muslim' (Shamsie 21). She is not as easily offended as Pervaiz or Aneeka, and yet is just as much an Other/Outsider as resisting Muslims. She goes through extensive frisking and interrogation at the airport and misses her flight to USA. Isma finds peace and 'hope' (Shamsie 5) in Islam, and yet doesn't carry The Holy Quran in her suitcase (Shamsie 5), lest she be ostracized for being a believer. The frisking is representative of government officials' invasion into privacy or secrecy of a covered woman's body and personal belongings. Questions during the interrogation shift from international politics and *jihadist* attacks to the Queen of England (Shamsie 5) only to rummage her mind-scape for fissures that might establish her political leanings. Here, the personal and political merge as Isma dons a Muslim name and a turban. Visual Othering paired with fear of and hatred towards Muslims in public places incite suspicion and extensive frisking.

The narrative of separatist politics has multiple layers – the privileged few perceive Others in terms of them being objects that are not worthy of touch and use. The concept of tangibility or whether a particular human body is touchable stems from the notion of whether it is first, *pure*, thus worthy of being cohabited with, secondly, whether it is of *use* (both emphasis, mine), that is if it is useful, harmful or dangerous for the native. One's views of Other then evokes emotions of hate, disgust or fear. In her *Cultural Politics of Emotions*, Sara Ahmed writes at length on how emotions of fear and hate are dependent on external objects and fearful memories (Ahmed 7-8). Taking a cue from Ahmed, one may argue that native's claim of supremacy in public places births from their 'fear' of the outsiders, foreigners and strangers. Their fear is based on pre-conceived notion that ethnically different communities

of migrants and asylum-seekers are harmful or dangerous. Ahmed elaborates that Fear of an object leads to hatred for the same. One may fear for one's life and property in the presence of asylum-seekers either when the one feared is viewed in terms of an object: sharp, dangerous, thus life threatening, hence best placed afar; or in terms of a wild animal whose instincts cannot be trusted. In either case, the asylum-seeker is dehumanized, their intentions misunderstood. Moreover, fear or responses to terrorism work as 'an economy of fear' in collective consciousness (Ahmed 15). The British government knows, and as Karamat Lone requests, public invisibility of the 'Other' is the best way to nullify their socio-political existence, else extensive airport interrogations would become a global norm for Muslims. However, invisibility also means no-welfare-benefits for ethnic minorities, probably the aim of such disruptive State policies.

The tragedy that *Home Fire* explores is neither the death of the father, nor the fatal journey of Pervaiz into ISIS. It is the failure of Aneeka to get Pervaiz's body home. Pervaiz was shot dead trying to flee ISIS, having regretted his decision to join them. Home Minister declares that British government has 'revoked the citizenship of all dual nationals who have left Britain to join...(their) enemies' (Shamsie 188), adding further that Britain 'will not let those who turn against the soil of Britain in their lifetime sully that very soil in death' (Shamsie 188). Keeping 'trash' (Shamsie 219) out and avoiding contamination, UK decides to dump Pervaiz's body in Pakistan. Though his extended family arranges for a funeral, Aneeka travels to Pakistan, sits beside the rotting body for over twenty-four hours demanding 'justice' (Shamsie 207), expecting British government to allow burial in Bradford (Shamsie 219-230). The Pasha siblings suffer this disastrous condition as their personal lives intermingle the political at three levels. To begin with, their family was afflicted by the act of terrorism for two generations, thus resulting in public hate and historical Othering. Moreover, Karamat Lone is Muslim and holds a supreme political position: this makes him feel indebted to the Runnymede Commission (Ibid. 3). Aneeka, quite rightly points out when Karamat Lone takes charge as Home Secretary, 'it's all going to get worse. He has to prove he is one of them, not one of us...' (Shamsie 34). Finally and most importantly, as Judith Butler argues in *Precarious Lives*, 'certain forms of grief become nationally recognized and amplified, whereas other losses become unthinkable and un-grievable' (Butler xiv). While explaining various tools of nation-building, she establishes how certain lives are grievable, and others not, 'the differential allocation of grievability...decides what kind of subject is and must be grieved, and which kind of subject must not,' thus, maintaining 'exclusionary conceptions of who is normatively human: what counts as a livable life and a grievable death' (Butler xiv - xv). In the nation's failure to mourn his death, Pervaiz earns his identity as an 'Other.' Aneeka's unsuccessful struggle of acquiring burial rights in England is suggestive of her short-sightedness and impracticality. She intends to 'negotiate' (Chatterjee 40-41)^{viii} with the Government, not knowing that politics of negotiation is possible only when the government recognizing a subject's position to be on the right side of the (social-)margin. In other words, unlike the Pasha twins, who have been stripped of British citizenship, one has to be a part of the State to command politics of negotiation. A *jihadi* body is stateless like the body of a refugee/Outsider. The position of the Outsider/Other doesn't support 'reactive aggression' (Butler xiv) for a political choice.

Home Fire is not merely a literary representation of Theresa May's ruthless immigration policy and UK's violent counter-terrorism methods in the US led War on Terror, it asks deeper humanist questions about the role of government in regards to families of terrorists so that they do not become antagonist to their Nation. Terry, Karamat Lone's wife, in a personal conversation with the Home Secretary, rebukes and advises him to 'Be human. (and) Fix it' (Shamsie 254). The novel is written with the same intention and hope that governments

world-wide would consider humanist methods of approaching international terrorism before it is too late. Dominant forms of representation systematically construct public life – the voiceless and faceless multitudes that are eradicated from public memory define what is national grief and which lives aren't grievable. Kamila Shamsie exemplifies and as Butler argues, 'it is not that mourning is the goal of politics, but...without the capacity to mourn, we lose that keener sense of life we need in order to oppose violence' (Butler xix). Adil Pasha's life, torture by 'enhanced interrogation techniques' (Shamsie 148) and the manner of his death affect all the fictional characters. *Home Fire* establishes every citizen of a country, regardless of their ethnicity and class, is responsible for security decision-making of the Nation.

Endnotes

ⁱ Kamila Shamsie refers to this quote as an epigraph to *Home Fire*. The quote is from Seamus Heaney's translation of Sophocles' *Antigone*.

ⁱⁱ Homi K. Bhabha, in his 1994 publication, *Location of Culture*, defines 'hybridity' as an inclusive term that avoids perpetuation of antagonistic binarisms, and indicates formation of new identities as a result of assimilation and adaptation through cultural exchange and maturation.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ray Honeyford, a head teacher of a Bradford school with 90% non-white learners, was suspended on the grounds of racism for writing a piece against multiculturalism in British schools in 1980s. He was admired on one hand and vilified on the other.

^{iv} The Rushdie Affair refers to a violent Muslim outburst post publication of *The Satanic Verses* (1988). A Fatwa was issued against Salman Rushdie on the grounds of him being a non-believer and his writings being blasphemous. The book was inspired in parts by the life of Muhammed.

^v According to Homi K. Bhabha's *Location of Culture* (1994), a liminal body is one who is in-between or at the threshold of two (here, cultural) spaces, one who permeates into an inner space, exists in both the spaces, and yet belongs to neither. In this freedom resides a privilege. Hybridization being a continuous process, the liminal body is necessarily at a particular stage of progression in socio-cultural identity formation.

^{vi} In Jacques Derrida's *Of Hospitality*, he suggests a marked difference between the host and the guest. The guest enjoys his position as long as he accepts the host's authority ruling sovereign within the household. Also, it rests on the host's disposition whether he is hospitable or hostile to the new entrant, that is, the host decides whether others are welcome within the premises of his household, whether the host relates himself to the other, the guest, as one of his own, or as a stranger (Derrida 23-26).

^{vii} According to Jacques Derrida's "Avowing—the Impossible," an Outsider is one who belongs elsewhere, he can be either a stranger or a foreigner; the Stranger is a newcomer, an unknown and unfamiliar person, but not necessarily one who belongs to another space; and a Foreigner is someone who comes from abroad.

^{viii} Partha Chatterjee, in his "The Politics of the Governed," elaborates on how marginal groups negotiate with government agencies to set a strong foothold in governing themselves. In doing so, they push themselves from the margins to centrality of political action.

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BIO-NOTE

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