

MODERN MEDIA AND IDENTITY IN KAMILA SHAMSIE'S *HOME FIRE*

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Abstract

Kamila Shamsie's novel *Home Fire* (2017) serves as a retelling of the classic Greek play *Antigone* through a modern lens, reframing the conflict at the heart of *Antigone* as a conflict between the UK Home Secretary and a sister who wants to bring home the body of her ISIS deserter brother. By recasting the characters as British citizens of Pakistani descent, all with different relationships to both their home country and the country of their heritage, the novel examines the implications of recent political controversies related to the right to citizenship in the modern world. This article bridges the gap between the more recent scholarship on *Home Fire* that focuses on the political or legal issues presented by the novel, and past literary criticism on Shamsie's older novels that dwells on topics of identity, history, and memory. In order to do so, the article looks at the novel through a postcolonial lens, exploring society's use of digital media and its role in shaping the identities of the characters. By examining the Western media's portrayal of the British-Pakistani characters and the relationship between the observer and the observed, this article concludes that the way media works to "other" and confine characters in *Home Fire* challenges the assertion that the modern world with its supposedly freer forms of communication allows for a freer discourse for all.

Keywords: Home Fire, Kamila Shamsie, Sophocles' Antigone, modern, postcolonial societies, novel, postcolonialism, neoimperial, literary criticism, citizenship, dual citizenship, modern media, literature analysis

Introduction

Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire* is a harrowing retelling of Sophocles' *Antigone* for the modern age, a new take on the classic tale of a woman's resistance against her government in the name of justice. Set during modern times and bringing up modern debates centered on modern policies, *Home Fire* presents the primary conflict found in the Greek classic in a modern context, transposing it into a world marked by imperial forces established long ago and persisting to this day. It recontextualizes the dichotomy between justice and law and by doing so twists the gaze of its audience back towards the systems and forces that work tirelessly to maintain the status quo. By setting the story in the UK after the 9/11 and 7/7 attacks—a time when anti-Muslim sentiment significantly escalated—Shamsie demonstrates how the West maintains cultural supremacy over those it has historically oppressed by controlling the narrative and forcing those it deems “other” into roles of its design. In particular, the use of media throughout the novel highlights the ways in which identities are formed, challenged, and enforced through surveillance and a constant reframing of what it means to belong. By revealing the power that Western media and the observer have over the observed within the modern world as well as how that power is used—and weaponized—within postcolonial societies, *Home Fire* challenges the assertion that the modern world with its supposedly freer forms of communication allows for a freer discourse for all.

Critical Approach

This essay will analyze *Home Fire* primarily through the lens of postcolonialism, a staggeringly broad field of study that examines “all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day” (Ashcroft et al. 2). Postcolonial theory can be applied to examine the relationships between writers, their cultures, and their literary works, but it is most commonly used

to closely analyze characters in novels and their conformity to or resistance against societies defined by an enduring history marked by colonization.

As a novel that revolves around the right to citizenship and the precarious situations in which dual-national citizens can find themselves, *Home Fire* is a prime candidate for postcolonial analysis. The postcolonial concepts of otherness (being perceived and treated as different) and hybridity (belonging to a multiplicity of cultures or identities) are of particular use when examining the novel, as all five main characters in the story are affected by both these concepts, though all in their own different ways due to their individual, complex ties to both the UK and Pakistan. The pervasiveness of Western media and its historical and continued use to justify Western colonial agendas and “more recent neoimperial discourse that deliberately distorts and erases histories that do not neatly fit within its narrative and geopolitical agenda” (Osman 283) are also compelling reasons to analyze media within the novel through a postcolonial lens.

Overview of Literary Criticism

Most literary criticism and scholarship studying Kamila Shamsie's writing covers her older novels, most of which are historical novels including characters from a wide variety of backgrounds traveling across different national borders. As such, a common theme found in scholarly articles examining these works is the importance of history, memory, and place on the formation of identity. In Shamsie's earlier fiction, questions of place and identity often collide, revealing the different ways people navigate their own identities and discover where—and how—they can belong in societies that still echo their own histories.

Much of the critical discourse on Shamsie's *Home Fire* focuses on the theme of identity, as well as the effect the public narrative regarding people with ties to Muslim and South Asian culture has on

the Pasha siblings and the Lone family. In "Sound and Fury: Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire*," Claire Chambers argues that the overwhelming presence of aural descriptions and concepts related to listening in the novel brings up the question of whether or not the oppressor is able to listen to those who commit acts of terror. Chambers closely examines Parvaiz and his radicalization, paying particular attention to the sounds throughout the novel, as well as the ways in which characters listen—or partially listen—to each other. In her exploration of these themes, she also points out how the media interruptions in the novel mimic an aural assault and are "symptomatic of a voluble rather than a listening culture" (Chambers 216), further demonstrating that the West as a culture does not listen to those it has historically oppressed. Peter Krause makes a similar claim in "*Antigone in Pakistan: Home Fire*, by Kamila Shamsie," though with a very different focus. Krause compares the novel to Sophocles' *Antigone* in order to present *Home Fire* as a "counternarrative to the Homeric tradition of war stories" (Krause 13), pointing to the influence the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* have had on war narratives and the focus on Western perspectives within war narratives as a result of that influence.

Other major scholarly articles look more deeply at the political landscape surrounding *Home Fire* as well as the novel's stance on the precarious legal position in which dual-national citizens of the UK—and therefore the main characters of the novel—find themselves due to recent interpretations of citizenship. Great attention has been paid to the concept of statelessness as a punishment—or "a tactically deployable weapon" (Rutkowska 886)—due to the way *Home Fire* so brazenly approaches such topics by changing the major details of the *Antigone* formula to refocus its conflict centered on justice and the right to burial to the modern concept of citizenship and the role of the state in providing rights to its citizens. In "Expatriation, Belonging, and the Politics of Burial: The Urgency of Citizenship in Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire*," Katja Sarkowsky examines the "gap between the characters' claim

to belonging and a politics of belonging that makes this belonging conditional" (Sarkowsky 35). By doing so, Sarkowsky challenges the various definitions of citizenship that have appeared in modern discourse as well as the relationship between citizens and their state. Debjani Banerjee also explores this tenuous relationship and its role in *Home Fire* by examining the effects of multiculturalism as a British national policy on Muslim UK citizens within the novel in an article titled "From Cheap Labor to Overlooked Citizens: Looking for British Muslim Identities in Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire*" (Banerjee 292).

This essay will build upon these points in the scholarly criticism of *Home Fire* and continue to apply postcolonial concepts to the novel while shifting the conversation to focus more closely on the prevalence of media throughout the novel, thereby examining how media in the novel reflects the uniquely modern methods of control that have developed within postcolonial societies. Because *Home Fire's* modernity sets it apart from many of Shamsie's other works, the novel focuses less on the themes of history and memory that pervade her other novels and instead embraces its contemporary setting, including modern technology and modern politics. Few scholarly articles examining *Home Fire* have tackled specifically the influence of media throughout the novel, and when they do bring it up, it is typically in service of another broader claim regarding politics, surveillance, or war. At the same time, while many scholarly articles have analyzed the importance of identity in Shamsie's earlier novels, recent scholarship regarding *Home Fire* mostly focuses on the political or legal issues brought up in the novel. In order to bridge the gap between these approaches, this article provides a perspective that looks at specifically modern media as it is portrayed in *Home Fire* and stays focused on its impact on the identities of the characters within the novel. Through this tight focus on the role of both digital and traditional media in the novel, this essay will examine the influence media has on the relationships between characters' identities and socially-enforced roles within a

postcolonial framework.

Analysis

Social media and news are ever-present throughout *Home Fire*. Aneeka makes jokes about “Googling while Muslim” (Shamsie 65), Isma and Aneeka contact each other through Skype, and updates on events that happen in the world around the characters are delivered primarily through news websites. Digital media plays a large role in the characters’ lives, as expected in the modern age. However, these elements serve not only to facilitate communication between characters, but also to highlight the characters’ different roles in society. As the story progresses, these different forms of media become ever more essential to understanding the characters and the ways they fit into and interact with the world around them. The use of social and digital media throughout the novel proves that digital media in the West is “far from the empowering panacea that allows for independence and self-presentation” (Osman 293), instead forcing marginalized people into societal roles and actively working towards maintaining a postcolonial society in which, in the eyes of UK Home Secretary Karamat Lone, “citizenship is a privilege not a right or a birthright” (Shamsie 198).

This hard stance Karamat takes in regard to citizenship rights stems from his “personal animus” (Shamsie 245) directed towards British Muslims who turn their backs on the UK, those he sees as a threat not only to the UK, but to other British Muslims. Later in the novel, he states he hates “Muslims who make people hate Muslims” (Shamsie 231), emphasizing the differences he sees between those who conform to the societal norms within the UK and those who do not. Earlier in the novel he calls for UK citizens of Muslim ancestry to hide the physical markers of their difference from the public eye, chastising them for “insisting” (Shamsie 88) on a difference that he sees as “defined against an implied but never explicated norm of Britishness

understood as symbolically 'white' and 'English'" (Sarkowsky 36). He thereby lays the blame on Muslims who do not fit into these unstated norms for their own ostracization. His rhetoric—and the rhetoric of all social media and news throughout the novel—invokes the "good-Muslim-bad-Muslim" binary that pervades Western depictions of people of Muslim descent and works to marginalize them as "others."

Karamat's success on social media and his carefully controlled portrayal of his identity demonstrates a continuation of the colonial situation in which "imperial discourse strives to delineate the Other as radically different from the self" but must "maintain sufficient identity with the Other to valorize control over it" (Aschroft et al. 102). Karamat represents the kind of Muslim citizen that the UK media not only tolerates, but in fact idolizes. He has cast off as many of the connections he had with Pakistan and Islam as he can and has, in a sense, become radicalized. Karamat's radicalization stems from his zealous attitude towards immigration policy in Britain, in that he "becomes increasingly convinced that society can only be improved by dramatic and sweeping change" (Chambers 203), though he attempts to enact such change by working within and for the system. Because of this, his radicalization is not recognized as such by the media, which merely accepts his rhetoric with aplomb, further cementing its role in perpetuating the long-term status quo of racial prejudice in the postcolonial West.

As a politician, Karamat is primarily influenced by the media due to the consequences he knows might happen if he does not capitulate to its demands. He overcorrects and acquiesces to a "world that pits 'good' against 'bad' Muslims, those who are anxious to prove their allegiance to the West and those who are responsible for terrorist acts" (Lau 58). Though he actually speaks more comfortably in Urdu, was raised Muslim, and still struggles with the Pakistani side of his identity, the power of the media is enough to make him bend a knee and accept the role that he feels is necessary in order to maintain his

position in society and make meaningful change. At the same time, because Karamat is actively working towards maintaining the status quo and upholding the Western ideals that he has adopted, the media places him on a pedestal, and Karamat's own influence increases dramatically as he continues to reinforce the value of blending in and adopting a purely British identity. His rhetoric rapidly mutates into slogans to be attached to hashtags on Twitter and posted alongside the invectives hurled at the Pasha siblings, and the Internet buzzes with the possibility of him becoming Prime Minister. As the media's principal "good-Muslim" role model, Karamat's otherness is the primary source of his value to the media, an authenticity that allows him to represent the British Pakistani population for the UK as long as he is solely British in nearly all instances except those in which his Pakistani heritage justifies that perceived authenticity. Through both his policies and his overwhelming public presence on the news, he actively perpetuates and validates the narrative of the "good Muslim" and "bad Muslim" despite being a prisoner to it himself.

Of the Pasha siblings, Isma is most similar to Karamat, to the ideal of the "good Muslim." Whenever her Britishness is thrown into question, such as when she is interrogated at the airport, she does her best to maintain an inoffensive outward demeanor that creates "an impression for people that she is a Muslim who is completely integrated with the host society" (Rivaldy et al. 29). When Parvaiz's actions bring up even the possibility of her allegiance to the UK being questioned, she severs all ties with him and informs the authorities right away. After his death, she then attempts to be the voice of cool rationality to Aneeka, reminding her of the precariousness of their situation within the UK and pleading that she "accept the law, even when it's unjust" (Shamsie 196). At the same time, Isma is all too aware of the societal forces that act on and against her, as evidenced by her comments towards Dr. Shah in her undergraduate class and "her suppressed anger distilled and abstracted into essays about the

sociological impact of the War on Terror” (Shamsie 38-39). Though Isma puts up a front that matches the ideal of the “good Muslim,” she not only has an understanding of the oppression that surrounds her in the UK, but also has a burning passion to expose it and study it, analyzing the ways it works within society as well as “why the world is so unfair” (Shamsie 237).

Yet despite Isma’s desire to deconstruct societal oppression and enact change, she never seems to make any headway throughout the entire novel. Her research melds into the background as the narration moves away from her to privilege other characters’ voices, but the events that transpire throughout the novel—including simply running into Home Secretary Lone’s son—also completely overshadow her studies. As the novel carries on into the main plot, Isma and her academic work are relegated to the background and ignored in favor of the sensational spectacle that surrounds Parvaiz’s death and Aneeka’s mourning. Just as Isma has a conservative approach to life, she also has a conservative approach to presenting that life—her story, her experiences, and what she makes of them—to others and the public. Holding on to her outward performance of compliance and trying not to draw too much attention to herself as an individual, she resorts to abstracting her postcolonial, hybrid experience as a British Pakistani woman. She writes about her experience in the form of meticulous academic research, but in the process divorces her own identity from them. Similarly, Isma’s use of Skype is characterized by a notable distance between herself and others and reveals an unwillingness to take risks that may expose aspects of her identity that might be considered “un-British.” She surveils her siblings from a distance, constantly checking in to see if they are both online and talking to each other. She watches from afar using digital technology without committing to any real action lest it reveal her divided loyalties to those who may surveil her. By playing it safe and keeping up the persona that is imposed upon UK citizens matching her racial and religious profile,

she consigns her story to academia, and within the context of the narrative, her efforts fall short.

It is only when Isma physically comes into face-to-face contact with Karamat Lone that she is capable of expressing herself fully, with an ardor and candor capable of chastising even the Home Secretary of the UK. Isma is capable of doing so precisely because she is able to corner Karamat away from the cameras, away from the narratives others publish and post about them. The privacy of Karamat's kitchen and the casual nature of their talk places them in a new context outside of the protection that Western media ordinarily provides Karamat, and he becomes anxious and uncomfortable as he feels a "reminder of a world he'd lost" (Shamsie 238). In this context, the shared aspects of their identities serve to threaten him through familiarity and connection. Foreign and yet familiar in his kitchen, to Karamat Isma becomes "Isma Pasha of Preston Road, the upmarket end of Wembly" (Shamsie 235), thereby forging a link through geography to the past, back to the British Pakistani neighborhood in which he grew up and a time when Karamat himself had not yet rejected his Pakistani heritage. When Isma stands up for her brother and sister, reducing Karamat's epic struggle he has built up within his own head to a mere tantrum, she defies Karamat's preconceived image of her as a "reasonable" (Shamsie 235) British Pakistani woman that conforms to British cultural norms and understands her place in society. Instead, Isma breaks down the "good-Muslim-bad-Muslim" binary by approaching and conversing with Karamat as an individual rather than through writing, broadcast, or a proxy discourse spread across social media.

On the other hand, Parvaiz's story shows a completely different side of media in *Home Fire*. As a character, he is not directly connected to Western media in the novel until after his death, but earlier in the story he becomes intimately linked with the ISIS media wing and its propaganda. Because of his need to find a father figure, Parvaiz falls for Farooq's tales about his father and becomes enticed by his

radical ideology. The moment when Parvaiz seems to fully buy into the rhetoric of ISIS is when he is shown a picture of a white man about to be beheaded and realizes the man's clothes are similar to those in which his father had died. In this moment, he sees past the impending violence written into the picture and is able to understand the underlying message it bears: "what you do to ours we will do to yours" (Shamsie 149). Such a message works precisely because Parvaiz knows what life as a man of Pakistani descent means in the UK. Though he had been able to ignore discrimination in the past, brushing off racial profiling and police harassment as "no big deal," he now understands the narrative that the West uses to define him as well as his sisters: "Muslim women, particularly the beautiful ones, need to be saved from Muslim men. Muslim men need to be detained, harassed, pressed against the ground with a heel on [their throats]" (Shamsie 132). In doing so, he acknowledges and criticizes the rhetoric commonly used to "justify Western rule in the name of liberating Muslim, Hindu, or Pagan women from their 'repressive' societies" (Osman 282) as well as the consequences of that liberation. As a result of his radicalization at the hands of Farooq, Parvaiz begins to realize the way such beliefs and their popularity in the public consciousness affect his own life and define the way he must operate in UK society. Armed with this new knowledge and offered a solution that simultaneously promises belonging and a connection to his father, Parvaiz takes up a new name and joins ISIS in Raqqa.

After experiencing the "vein-flooding pleasure" of looking upon the picture of the condemned white man, Parvaiz experiences a new sense of belonging, remarking to himself, "so this was how it felt to have a nation that wielded its sword on your behalf and told you acquiescence wasn't the only option" (Shamsie 149). This message he recognizes in the picture very closely mirrors that given by Karamat in praise of the UK earlier in the story when he claims, "there is nothing this country won't allow you to achieve – Olympic medals, captancy of

the cricket team, pop stardom, reality TV crowns" (Shamsie 87). While Karamat's speech does not contain the same overt violence as that of the photo of the man to be beheaded, they each carry a fundamentally similar message: belonging requires allegiance, and identity decides access to rights.

When Parvaiz is later asked to assist in filming an actual beheading, he is unable to overcome his own conscience after seeing the man pray "the prayer Parvaiz's grandmother had taught him to say in times of distress" (Shamsie 168). He finds himself unable to control his hands or help with the execution, and must instead sit in the SUV imagining it, haunted by the man's eyes that he imagines as "not afraid, but accusing" (Shamsie 169). Despite the rush of adrenaline he felt when he saw the picture that changed his worldview, Parvaiz is unable to fully reconcile the violent message of ISIS with the sense of belonging for which he longs. Instead, he becomes unmoored and detached from the world, dissociating from the sounds and clips he engineers and ultimately coming to see himself as an "animal" (Shamsie 170). Nonetheless, Parvaiz's work for the ISIS media wing does still enable the organization to grow, allowing it to wield his talents as a weapon in order to spread its propaganda. By joining the ISIS media wing, he becomes part of the very system that creates the videos and images containing ISIS's counternarrative to the West's, perpetuating the same process that led to his recruitment and later leads to his demise.

However, nowhere in the novel is the influence of modern media made more apparent than during the section focused on Aneeka. Simultaneously split between portraying Aneeka's extremely personal and torturous struggle to come to terms with her grief and the showcasing of the opinions and chatter of the public in the form of news segments, interviews, op-ed articles, and online trends, the narrative fragments when Aneeka becomes the focal point. In the rare instances when Aneeka is given a voice, that voice is vague, distant,

and ethereal, speaking at length of grief repeatedly in detail as a “deal God struck with the Angel of Death, who wanted an unpassable river to separate the living from the dead” (Shamsie 193) or “what you owed the dead for the crime of living on without them” (Shamsie 193). Yet she describes the world outside her grief as though it were merely a façade, a blur of events and actions without a clear purpose or connection to what truly matters in the wake of Parvaiz’s death. As the chapter progresses and Aneeka begins to enact her plan to leave for Pakistan where she will “sit with her brother until the world changed or both of them crumbled into the soil around them” (Shamsie 210), the narration takes on a form built out of sentences that seem to nearly flow into each other without punctuation: “Isma rushing out from Aunty Naseem’s house across the road ‘Where are you going.’ Isma not someone she ever had to answer to again” (Shamsie 206). This stream-of-consciousness narration emphasizes Aneeka’s fractured state of mind and the effect that grief and the public eye have on her. As her narration falls apart, it tries to pack more into each sentence than should normally be possible, as though Aneeka were slowly suffocating and fighting to breathe. These moments are presented almost as the frenzied phantoms that haunt the brief periods of wakefulness amid a throng of nightmares during fitful sleep.

The brief instances of lucidity interspersed throughout Aneeka’s section of the novel create the feeling that she is losing control of her own life. As social media and the news continue to push their own agendas while she struggles with her grief, they drown Aneeka’s voice out in favor of pushing their own narratives. Shamsie uses social media and the news in order to approximate the Greek chorus from *Antigone* (Tolan 131), but goes one step further and has this chorus fully overwhelm the protagonist’s own story. Whereas in every other section of the novel the focal character is given a chance to speak through a narration that privileges their voice and perspective over others, much of Aneeka’s own section is intruded upon by outside voices in

the form of offensive hashtags, posts by fake troll accounts, and even tabloids with headlines disparaging the twins' names by referring to them as "Pervy" and "Knickers Pasha" (Shamsie 204). By doing so, these disembodied texts, anonymous emissaries of postcolonial British ideals without faces or names, work to enforce the status quo of binary distinctions and paradoxical labeling of others, thereby subverting the Pasha siblings' complex, human narrative and replacing it with the simpler, more manageable narrative of the "good Muslim" and the "bad Muslim." In this case, the Western media acts as a policing force that actively controls the image of the Pasha family, presenting only two possible roles in the public eye and constantly pressuring the siblings to fit into them.

However, Aneeka rebels against these roles set before her and challenges the Western media's narrative by staging her own elaborate funeral rites for Parvaiz. By doing so, she creates an alternative narrative to that told by the mainstream Western media, a narrative of loss as opposed to terror—a narrative that she is able to tell through spectacle and active disobedience. She chooses the ideal location—a park in front of the British embassy—to reflect the political nature of her premeditated act of defiance. She clothes herself and the ground where Parvaiz later lies in white, surrounding the tableau with rose petals that evokes a sense of innocence amidst unjustly spilled blood. Through this extremely theatrical form of mourning her twin, Aneeka is able to wrest control and gain the attention of the media despite her marginalized status. In the end, the media does not—cannot—turn away. It captures all this and presents the story as Aneeka tells it not with words, but with gestures, symbols, and raw emotional torment.

Aneeka's tactics work, and she is able to retake her own narrative from the Western media, but her victory comes at a price. In order to break free of the Western media's predetermined roles for people like herself, Aneeka must abandon her own identity and take on something new and alien—an outwardly performative identity different from

both her own and that which the media prescribes to her. She does so through a series of actions that violate the image the media has built around her, starting with her visceral, wild response when she receives Parvaiz's body. Though she looks docile and "doe-eyed" (Shamsie 220) as she waits patiently in the park, when Parvaiz's coffin arrives, she rips it apart with her bare hands (Shamsie 223). She is described as though she were an animal or a monster, driven by a mad desire to see her twin and nothing more. Then as she kneels and examines her brother's corpse, a dust storm picks up and tears through the park—not unlike the dust storm that precedes *Antigone's* arrest in Sophocles' original. However, while in *Antigone* the heroine is left to cry out like "an embittered bird that sees its nest robbed of its nestlings and its bed empty" (Sophocles lines 466-469), Aneeka emanates something altogether more dangerous, a sound that elicits awe rather than pity. Caked in mud and dust, she emits "a howl deeper than a girl, a howl that [comes] out of the earth and through her" as she sits in what is described as an "apocalyptic mess" (Shamsie 224).

At this point, she resembles something "other," something that transcends the principled, grieving girl from before. While she has always been othered as a Muslim woman in the UK, her public image shifts dramatically in this moment, with a tabloid article going so far as to present a picture of Aneeka howling during the storm with the headline "Is this the face of evil?" (Shamsie 229). While echoing the Western media's general perspective regarding British Muslims, the tabloid resorts to a new rhetoric that runs counter to Western media's "overwhelming portrayal of women as victims, without accounting for their actual or potential agency" (Osman 280). Rather than using Aneeka's promiscuity to defame her or her status as a victim to deny her agency, the tabloid depicts her in a way that better fits the accusations commonly leveled at Muslim men. By doing so, those in control of such news outlets ironically acknowledge her agency as well as validate her presence as a threat even though her clearly nonviolent

protest immediately nullifies the accusation. For this reason, Aneeka is able to reach out through the news cameras and influence the British public, taking back her narrative and challenging the Western media's authority. Aneeka purposefully manipulates her own image through the Western media and breaks out of the good-Muslim-bad-Muslim paradigm that defines British preconceptions concerning Muslims. However, this comes at the cost of not only her life in the literal sense, but also her dignity as an individual as she becomes pure spectacle at the end of the novel. In the eyes of the Western public, she becomes a monster—an "other" in the most extreme sense, abandoning her own human dignity in her grief. Aneeka's intense public mourning shows what it takes to break free of the different roles society molds for her and the difficulty of challenging the systemic oppression spread by Western media that dominates the rest of the novel. The cost incurred by her gambit to force the public to face the consequences of its discriminatory narrative surrounding Muslims is not only her life, but also her privacy, her dignity, and her very self.

Nevertheless, Aneeka does eventually lose her hold over her narrative once more, and as the novel draws to a close the media fully takes over. When Eamonn and Aneeka finally reunite in what is to be their final moments alive, they are in fact framed by a screen, their actions relayed to the reader through a detailed description of the events as they are depicted on the news. The narration detachedly informs the reader that "a man in a navy-blue shirt walks into the park" and "calls out the name of the woman he's come for" (Shamsie 259), reducing both Eamonn and Aneeka to mere descriptors and stripping them of their names. By doing so, the narration separates itself entirely from them as characters and reduces them to mere figures, silhouettes of the vibrant individuals laboriously developed over the course of the novel. In these last moments of the novel, the narration instead keeps itself at a distance—literally—by placing itself behind the screen, relaying the events as they are captured by the lens of a camera on the

shoulder of a cameraman on the periphery of the park. In this way, the narration presents the events the same as they are presented to the viewers of the news program in Britain: sensational, yet impersonal and allegedly objective.

When the two lovers collide in an embrace, the narration draws special attention to the cameraman and the artifice of the moment, highlighting the “judder of the camera as the man holding it on his shoulder flinches in expectation of a blast” (Shamsie 260). Not only does this emphasize the fact that all that is conveyed to the reader is done so through the eyes—or camera—of another, but specifically reflects the effect that outside observers’ own worldviews and understandings have on a narrative. The cameraman’s expectation of violence, of an explosion, is transferred directly into the image given to the public and physically influences the portrayal of their embrace. In this moment, the version of events given to the reader is mediated through a camera, a seemingly objective and unfeeling device capable of recording and reconstructing truth for viewers, but the human in control of that camera is still ultimately the source of the narrative, and his expectations seep into his representation of Aneeka and Eamonn’s final moments together.

In this moment, the visual details—supposedly verifiable facts as recorded by the camera and reproduced on the screens of so many watching the news in Britain—become the focal point. Clothing, scenery, and the events themselves all become the main characters as the surface-level supersedes all else. The narration never reveals what Aneeka and Eamonn say to each other in their final moments, instead focusing on their movements and the way their bodies are framed by their surroundings. The description is abstracted, tinged with generalized, archetypal language applied to the characters and the park, yet it also provides incredibly specific and detail-oriented descriptions of the characters’ actions. As individuals, they exist only insofar as their actions allow them to exist in the eyes of others.

Their personal feelings, beliefs, and identities are ignored and erased from public consciousness. At this point in the story, the way they are portrayed by the media reduces them to mere symbols, and they too become a part of the “iconography of suffering” (Shamsie 221) scattered in the park.

However, unlike Sophocles’ *Antigone*, *Home Fire* does not end with further death. Despite the reader’s knowledge of what should happen next, given the belt strapped to Eamonn, the story ends not with an explosion, but with two lovers embracing each other “under an ancient tree, sun-dappled, beautiful and at peace” (Shamsie 260). At this moment the narrative takes a step back, away from the main characters’ perspectives, the news stories, the narratives espoused all over social media, and all sense of any viewpoint centered on an individual within the story. Though contained in Karamat’s section of the novel, these final sentences introduce a new voice, one that views Aneeka and Eamonn as “lovers,” a word too intimate for either Karamat or the viewers of the news program to apply to them. Instead, Aneeka and Eamonn are described not through the eyes of other characters, but through the eyes of the narrative itself, which paints a scene of radiance and peace as a counternarrative to the reality of Aneeka and Eamonn’s dire situation. If the story were to end in an explosion, in shock and carnage, all Aneeka has worked for will have been lost. The newsreel would become yet another story of terror, enabling the Western media to continue disseminating the same narrative of Muslim extremists in the name of security and spectacle. Instead, the novel stops before any of that can happen and pauses on one final image. Of all possible moments to end on, Shamsie chooses this one, an image of a brief but brilliant moment of human kindness and love, captured and frozen in time before and after so much death and divisiveness. She wields her complete control over her own story and offers up an image captured in prose and shaped by her own hand to demonstrate that the way people and events are portrayed carries an

extraordinary weight, and how we see and talk about others influences the way others interpret them.

Conclusion

Portrayal matters. As reflections of lives lived and dreamed of, narratives serve as blueprints upon which we build our selves, whether by our own agency or through a pressure to conform. *Home Fire* is a novel that takes multiple distinct, separate narratives told by different characters and weaves them together to demonstrate how power stems from being in control of the way others perceive oneself. The role of media is to create a narrative, and that narrative determines others' beliefs. The widespread acceptance of the story told by Western media allows it to eclipse the voices of those who are considered "other" within Western society, and this is how postcolonial structures of power maintain themselves within the modern world. Those who control media outlets control at a distance by omission, manipulation of fact, and fabricated, simplified sets of identities to measure others up against. Since the age of widespread colonization, Western powers have controlled those they colonized not only through force, but also through the control of social norms both in their lands and in the lands they conquered.

Shamsie's *Home Fire* paints a stark picture of Western media and its continued potency in the modern world, illustrating media's capability to control and oppress through labels and portrayal. By showing the different ways her characters resist or give in to the dominant Western beliefs about themselves as individuals based on generalized, abstract aspects of their identities, Shamsie emphasizes the inherent difficulty the marginalized face when navigating hybrid, multifaceted identities as "others" within modern-day postcolonial societies. ■

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