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THE PRICE OF BELONGING: A STUDY OF NEGOTIATION OF IDENTITY IN *HOME FIRE* BY KAMILA SHAMSIE

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Abstract
This paper investigates the complexities of Muslim British identity and the cost of cultural belonging through a critical analysis of Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire* published in 2017. Drawing on theoretical frameworks including Foucault's "panopticon", Bhabha's "third space", and Butler's "performativity", the study examines how the novel challenges conventional narratives of assimilation and multiculturalism in post-9/11 Britain. Through close textual analysis, the research reveals how belonging is negotiated across personal, familial, and political spheres, with Muslims British compelled to perform prescribed versions of integration while under constant surveillance. The novel's contemporary reimagining of Sophocles' *Antigone* serves as a lens to explore how Muslim citizens bear a disproportionate burden of proving their belonging through negotiations between competing loyalties. This study argues that meaningful integration in British society requires a fundamental reimagining of how belonging and identity are conceived, particularly for marginalized communities.
Keywords: Diaspora, Identity, Belonging, Performativity, and State Surveillance

Introduction

In a cultural battle between the metaphors of a "melting pot" and "salad bowl", a "salad bowl" is quite likely to win owing to its association with more pluralistic societies, where diversity is not only tolerated but celebrated. These two metaphors are central to discussions around immigration and cultural integration. They represent two contrasting views on how immigrant groups should interact with the dominant culture in their host societies. These metaphors are used to frame broader debates about whether assimilation, which means immigrants should adopt the culture of the host society, or multiculturalism, which suggests the idea that immigrants should retain their cultural distinctiveness while integrating, is more desirable. The "melting pot" metaphor became widely popular in the United States in the early 20th century. It was particularly promoted by scholars like Israel Zangwill, who coined the term in his 1908 play titled *The Melting Pot*. The "salad bowl" metaphor emerged as a challenge to the "melting pot" model and gained prominence in the second half of the 20th century, particularly, with the rise of multiculturalism as a policy in countries like Canada and the U.K. However, Kamila Shamsie's novel *Home Fire* presents a contradictory stance. This paper examines the complex negotiations of Muslim British identity in Kamila Shamsie's

Home Fire, focusing on how the novel articulates the price of belonging in contemporary Britain.

The Price of Belonging in *Home Fire* by Kamila Shamsie

Home Fire is a contemporary reimagining of Sophocles' *Antigone* published in 2017 by Kamila Shamsie, a renowned Pakistani-British writer born in Karachi in 1973, who has established herself as a significant voice in contemporary literature. Known for her powerful storytelling that often explores themes of identity, migration, and politics, Shamsie has written several other acclaimed novels including *Salt and Saffron*, *Kartography*, *Burnt Shadows*, *A God in Every Stone*, and many more. Through her writings and public appearances, Shamsie has become an important cultural commentator, addressing issues of citizenship, belonging, and the experiences of Muslims in contemporary Western society. In the novel *Home Fire*, she explores the complexities of Muslim British identity in post-9/11 Britain. The novel follows the Pasha siblings—Isma, Aneeka, and Parvaiz—who are Pakistani diasporas in Britain, haunted by the legacy of their father, Adil, a jihadi who died en route to Guantanamo Bay.

The story begins with Isma Pasha undergoing an extensive interrogation at Heathrow Airport before departing for Massachusetts for her PhD. Marc Augé, a French anthropologist known for his work titled *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity,* describes an airport as "non places"— spaces people pass through without a sense of attachment. For Isma, the airport was a "non- place" and it made her anxious because "She had expected the interrogation, but not the hours of waiting that would precede it, nor that it would feel so humiliating to have the contents of her suitcase inspected. She'd made sure not to pack anything that would invite comment or questions no Quran, no family pictures, no books on her areas of academic interest…" (3). By removing items that might invite scrutiny—the Quran, family pictures, academic texts—Isma performs a calculated erasure of her multifaceted self. This opening passage encapsulates the complex negotiation of Muslim identity within a surveillance state, revealing the performative nature of belonging through strategic self- censorship. Drawing on Michel Foucault's concept of the "panopticon" from his book *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, the passage demonstrates how marginalized subjects internalize and pre-emptively respond to systems of power. The passage brilliantly illustrates the intersectionality of identity—gender, religion, and national belonging—converge in this moment of bureaucratic scrutiny. Isma's response is not passive submission but a complex negotiation of survival. She becomes what cultural theorist Homi K. Bhabha describes in his book *The Location of Culture* as existing in the "third space"—neither fully assimilated nor completely marginalized but constantly navigating between identities.

In America, Isma briefly encounters Eamonn Lone though they share a momentary connection, he departs without maintaining contact. Eamonn is the son of Karamat Lone, a hard-line British politician of Pakistani origin known for his stance against Islamic extremism. Karamat Lone,

the Home Secretary of Pakistani origin, emerges as a complex figure who exemplifies the political cost of belonging. His character represents what Mahmood Mamdani in his book *Good Muslim and Bad Muslim* terms the "good Muslim", which means one who has

seemingly successfully integrated into British society; however, this success comes at a significant price. Karamat's political survival depends on his ability to distance himself from his Muslim identity, exemplified in his public speeches against the traditionally minded, and his support for policies that disproportionately affect Muslim communities. The novel suggests that the price of political belonging includes complicity in systems that marginalize one's own community. This is, particularly, evident when Karamat addresses the students of a predominantly Muslim school in Bradford and tries to hegemonies them by stating, "You are, we are, British. Britain accepts this. So do most of you. But for those of you who are in some doubt about it, let me say this: don't set your-selves apart in the way you dress, the way you think, the outdated code attaches your loyalties. Because you do you will be treated differently - not because of racism, though that does still exist, but because you insist on your difference from everyone else in this multi-ethnic, multi-religious, multitudinous United Kingdom of ours. And look at all you miss out on because of it" (87-88).

This paper, also, posits an important question i.e. What's in the name? The answer is, the politics of naming becomes a metaphor for large questions about cultural authenticity, assimilation, and the unattainable standards placed on minority communities seeking acceptance. This is, particularly, seen in the excerpt, "Eamonn, that was his name. How they'd laughed in Wembley when the news-paper article accompanying the family picture revealed this detail, an Irish spelling to disguise a Muslim name - Ayman became Eamonn so that people would know the father had integrated. (His Irish-American wife was seen as another indicator of this integrationist posing rather than an explanation for the son's name.)" (15-16). The transformation of "Ayman" to "Eamonn" represents what sociologist Pierre Bourdieu during his lectures in France presented as "cultural capital", which comprises the intangible social assets of a person which helps in acquiring social mobility and advantages. Eamonn's name manifested as a part of his identity and did have a significant impact on his social success as the novel does not site any instance of him being harassed by the British officials. The situation similar to Judith Butler's theory of performativity, where identity is not merely expressed but performed through repeated acts. The conscious choice of the spelling of the name becomes a performance of "Britishness" that is simultaneously strategic, symbolic, and scrutinized. This brief excerpt encapsulates the central tensions of the novel regarding identity, belonging, and the price of integration.

Months later, Eamonn returns to London and meets Aneeka. During a candid conversation Eamon says, "The IRA tried to bomb it in 1939…You can see news footage about it. Just search for

'North Circular Canal Bomb' or something like that and it'll come up. To which Aneeka says, "Right – because that's a good idea if you're GWM, isn't it?" Eamonn declares, "I don't know that is." Aneeka informs, "Googling While Muslim" (65). Here, it is understood how the same Google search becomes either innocent or suspicious based solely on the religious identity of the searcher. We see how Aneeka internalizes the digital gaze and tries to maintain her digital reputation. Foucault's concept of power-knowledge relations is particularly relevant here. The phrase "Googling While Muslim" encapsulates what he terms "disciplinary power" the way surveillance and self-surveillance become internalised. The Muslim subject must constrain even their information-seeking behaviour due to awareness of constant monitoring. The paper argues that these layers of surveillance create a state of constant visibility and judgment for

Muslim British individuals affecting their personal freedom, relationships, and sense of belonging. The constant state and self-surveillance create a sense of anxiety and paranoia in them. Additionally, causing their privacy to erode.

Aneeka and Eamonn's passionate relationship quickly develop, but Aneeka harbours a hidden agenda. She strategically uses her relationship with Eamonn to potentially help her twin brother Parvaiz, who has recently joined ISIS in Syria, to return home. While chatting with her brother on Skype Aneeka says, "I'm working on a plan to get you home." Home. A place from a past he'd turned his back on, and to which MI5 would make sure he never returned. "I'm fine here", he wrote back. And she replied, "Liar" (170).

"Home is where one starts from. As we grow older
The world becomes stranger, the pattern more complicated
Of dead and living."

The above- mentioned lines from Eliot's poem, "East Coker", which is a part of *Four Quartets*, highlights the role of home as a foundational premise in one's life's journey. The concept of "home" is intricately linked to the human experience of the self, encompassing physical, emotional, cultural, and psychological dimensions. The term "uncanny" describes a sense of unusual familiarity— something that feels both known and strange, evoking anxiety and discomfort. It originates from Sigmund Freud's essay "The Uncanny". It makes a contribution to make us understand the aesthetics of what is fearful and frightening. "The uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar." The concept of "uncanny" is derived from the understanding of two German words: "heimlich" (canny/homely) and "unheimlich" (uncanny/unhomely). The uncanny highlights the tension between repressed memories or desires and their resurfacing. This tension can create anxiety and a sense of being "unhomely" in both physical and emotional spaces as seen in case of Parvaiz.

Search for belonging, is particularly evident in Parvaiz's story. Complicated by his father's absence, it leads him to seek connection through ISIS. The novel suggests that his vulnerability to radicalization stems partly from the unresolved tensions of belonging. Feeling lost and disconnected, he is manipulated by an ISIS media operative who exploits his desire for a father figure. Quickly disillusioned by the brutal reality of ISIS, Parvaiz realizes his mistake but finds himself trapped in Syria. The narrative reaches its tragic climax when Parvaiz is killed by ISIS and his corpse is sent to Pakistan instead of Britain. Aneeka becomes obsessed with bringing his body back to Britain for burial. She attempts to use her relationship with Eamonn to appeal to his father, Karamat Lone, who has recently implemented a law allowing the government to strip citizenship from individuals involved with terrorist organizations. After the death of Parvaiz, in attempt to establish herself as a "good Muslim" as described by Mahmood Mamdani in his book *Good Muslim and Bad Muslim*, Isma says, "My sister and I were shattered and horrified last year when we heard that our brother, Parvaiz, had gone to join people we regard as the enemies of both Britain and Islam. We informed Counter Terrorism Command immediately, as Commissioner Janet Stephens has already said. We wish to thank the Pakistan High Commission in Turkey for the efforts they're making to have our brother's body sent to Pakistan, where relatives will make plans for his burial, as an act of remembrance to our late mother. My sister and I have no plans to travel to Pakistan for the funeral" (197), which costs Isma her relationship with the only living immediate family

member, Aneeka.

In a final act of defiance and grief, Aneeka travels to Pakistan where Parvaiz's body lays lifeless. Hoping to create a media spectacle that will force the British government to allow his burial on British soil, Aneeka looks at the camera during a live telecast and demands, "In the stories of wicked tyrants, men and women are punished with exile, bodies are kept from their families - their heads impaled on spikes, their corpses thrown into unmarked graves. All these things happen according to the law, but not according to justice. I am here to ask for justice. I appeal to the Prime Minister: let me take my brother home" (225). The plea "let me take my brother home" represents multiple layers of belonging like the right to burial in one's homeland, proper funeral rites, and right to mourn one's kin. This passage crystallizes the novel's central themes about the price of belonging in contemporary society. Through Aneeka's appeal, Shamsie exposes how state power extends beyond life into death. Judith Butler's work on "grievable lives" becomes particularly relevant here. Aneeka's plea highlights how certain deaths are deemed less worthy of mourning by the state. The denial of proper burial rights demonstrates hierarchies of human worth and serves as a powerful indictment of how modern states continue practices of exclusion and punishment even after death.

Conclusion

Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire* presents a complex critique of contemporary British multiculturalism, revealing how the metaphor of the "salad bowl" society remains more aspirational than actual in post-9/11 Britain. Through its intricate narrative and character development, the novel demonstrates that the price of belonging for British Muslims encompasses not just cultural adaptation but often requires fundamental compromises of identity, faith, and familial bonds.

The analysis reveals several key findings about the nature of belonging in contemporary British society. First, the novel problematizes the traditional binary between assimilation and multiculturalism, suggesting that even in supposedly pluralistic societies, minorities— particularly Muslims— face pressure to perform specific versions of integration. This is evidenced through characters like Karamat Lone, whose political success depends on distancing himself from his Muslim identity, and Isma, whose airport experience demonstrates the internalization of surveillance and self-censorship.

Furthermore, the study illuminates how the price of belonging operates at multiple levels— personal, familial, and political. Through theoretical frameworks including Foucault's concept of the panopticon, and Butler's theory of performativity, we see how characters negotiate their identities within systems of power that demand constant proof of loyalty and integration. The transformation of names (Ayman to Eamonn), the careful curation of personal belongings, and the strategic performance of "Britishness" all represent different forms of cultural capital required for acceptance.

The tragic conclusion of Parvaiz and Aneeka's story serves as a powerful metaphor for the limits of belonging in contemporary Britain. The state's power to deny burial rights and citizenship demonstrates how belonging remains conditional and can be revoked, extending beyond life into death itself. This reflects what Butler terms the hierarchy of "grievable lives" and highlights how certain deaths are deemed less worthy of mourning by the state apparatus. Ultimately, this analysis suggests that the price of belonging in contemporary British society

is not merely about cultural integration but involves a complex negotiation of visibility, surveillance, and state power. The novel challenges simplistic narratives about multiculturalism by revealing how the burden of proof for belonging falls disproportionately on Muslim citizens, who must constantly navigate between competing demands of family, faith, and state. Through its reimagining of *Antigone*, *Home Fire* demonstrates that the price of belonging often involves difficult choices between competing loyalties, suggesting that true integration cannot occur without a fundamental rethinking of how society conceptualizes belonging, and identity in an increasingly complex world.

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