

The Construction of British Muslim Identity in Kamila Shamsie's Home Fire

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Abstract: *Home Fire* (2017) by Kamila Shamsie is one of the most important novels of the present day to deal with the lives of the British Muslims in the post 9/11 era. Following the lives of a British Muslim family, explores issues of identity, citizenship, Islamophobia, migration, radicalization and belonging. In this research article, the novel is explored using postcolonial theory, diaspora theory and cultural identity theory; in order to examine the construction of British Muslim identity in the novel. The study suggests that Shamsie's work portrays Muslim identity as fractured, hybrid and politicised in the modern day and age of Britain. The article also shows that although British Muslims have a legal nationality, they feel excluded socially, subject to state surveillance, and to conditional citizenship. Shamsie challenges Western views on Muslims and reveals the heartbreak of alienation and marginalisation in the characters of Isma, Aneeka, Parvaiz and Eamonn. The study also analyzes how the gender, media representation and nationalism are contributing to the formation of Muslim identity. In considering the novel in relation to the political realities of today, this article argues that in *Home Fire*, British Muslim identity is seen as an ongoing discussion and negotiation of ideas between the concept of religion, culture and identity to their nation.

Keywords: British Muslim identity, diaspora, Islamophobia, citizenship, postcolonialism, Kamila Shamsie, Home Fire, hybridity

Introduction

The meaning of Muslim identity in the West has been a growing theme in modern literature and political debates, particularly since 9/11 and the growing interests of the world on the topic of terrorism, nationalism and migration. British Muslims are regularly defined by their loyalty, integration, citizenship and multiculturalism. The situation has been securitizing and suspicious of Muslims in many Western societies, resulting in social exclusion and identity crises. The awareness of such tensions and a critique of dominant stereotypes about Muslim communities has been represented and articulated in literature.

Kamila Shamsie is one of the leading South Asian British writers of the modern era, whose work is influenced by the themes of transnational identity, political violence, migration and

postcolonial anxieties. In her novel *Home Fire* (2017), she reworked Sophocles' *Antigone* in the socio-political context of today's Britain. Isma, Aneeka, and Parvaiz Pasha, three sisters from Britain's Muslim community, all grappling with citizenship, discrimination and belonging with a society all but saturated by Islamophobia and political surveillance.

The novel is a reflection of what have become the reality of many Muslim lives in Britain after counter-terrorism laws and immigration laws have been put in place against the Muslim community. British Muslims are often required to demonstrate their allegiance to the state, and are often forced to deal with stereotypes associating Islam with violence and extremism. Banerjee (2020) found that *Home Fire* documents the lived reality of Muslims in Britain who are typically referred to as 'overlooked citizens' whose citizenship is continually subject to conditions.

Shamsie's story explores the significance of British Muslim identity for political events in the outside world and for internal emotional struggles within people. Alienation is felt by the characters not just from British society but from them themselves. The novel illustrates how, Muslim identity is not essential, nor is it monolithic, but flexible and diverse, negotiated in cultural and political contexts.

Themes of hybridity, citizenship, surveillance, Islamophobia, radicalisation, gender and belonging form the basis of this research article looking at the construction of British Muslim identity in *Home Fire*. The study employs theories of postcolonialism and culture to suggest that in his work, Shamsie challenges the Western perception of Islam and also the restrictions of multiculturalism in the UK today.

Literature Review

Since then, there has been a significant development of scholarship on *Home Fire*, especially around the issues of identity politics, Islamophobia and the postcolonial citizenship. Previous research has focused on novel's depiction of Muslims in Britain and its criticism of the political systems of the day.

According to Banerjee (2020) *Home Fire* presents British Muslims as citizens whose citizenship is constantly being called into question by the British society. The novel, Banerjee said, has a "national identity vs. religious identity" theme; that Muslims are still aliens despite contributing to British society. The study also highlights the importance of migration/transnationalism in the context of identity development.

The novel is analyzed by Dutta and Raskar (2025) in terms of hybridity as the concept is put forward by the Indian-American philosopher, Homi Bhabha. According to their study, the Muslim characters exist in a liminal culture, and attempt to negotiate the expectations of British citizenship in the midst of their Islamic identity. The authors believe that this 'mixed identity' is psychologically and emotionally unstable as neither culture is entirely comfortable with British Muslims.

Awaaz is recommended by Safdar (2025) to study the issue of Muslim masculinity and radicalization in *Home Fire*. Safdar claims that radicalisation of Parvaiz is not just religious in nature, but is the product of a sense of invisibility, alienation and emotional neglect. The study illustrates the ways in which young Muslim men are at risk of succumbing to extremist messages when they feel out of place in mainstream society.

In their novel, Utami and Wali (2025) have discussed about Orientalism and stereotyping. Muslims are depicted as “the Other” in the western political discourse, their analysis claim. The authors' contention is that the British state is building Muslim identity with fear, surveillance and suspicion, which is furthering Islamophobic narratives.

Sophoclean Antigone is the subject of Weiss' research in *Home Fire*. According to Weiss, Shamsie 's work is an attack on contemporary nationalism, immigration policies, and anti-Muslim politics, an attack that is based on the Greek tragedy. The primary emphasis in the study is on the issue of Parvaiz being denied burial rights as a marker of exclusion from the nation's community.

Likewise, the novel and media representation/identity formation is discussed by Degenkolb (2024). The study uncovers the importance of the media narratives in shaping the image of Muslims as a threat and their self-image which shapes their feeling of belonging and self-assurance within British society.

While the concept of identity, citizenship and radicalization has been explored in previous studies on *Home Fire*, there is a lack of in-depth research on surveillance, gender and hybridity in the construction of British Muslim identity. The purpose of this article is to try to fill this void by analysing various aspects of the novel's identity formation.

Theoretical Framework

The postcolonial theory, the diaspora studies and the cultural identity theory are used to analyze the construction of British Muslim identity in *Home Fire*.

Homi Bhabha's term 'hybridity' comes in handy to grasp the lives of the Muslims in the novel. Bhabha (1994) suggests the idea of a “third space” in which the postcolonial subjects negotiate their identity constantly between the cultures. This is the space of the British Muslims in *Home Fire*, as they are both British and Islamic.

Stuart Hall's theory of cultural identity also contributes towards the understanding of the instability of identity. Hall (1996) has put forward the view that identities are not stable and consistent, but are continually constructed from the past, the present and the social. The novel's representation of the self was influenced by political discourse, media image and experience of discrimination in the formation of the Muslim identity.

Edward Said's theory of Orientalism also applies as it helps to understand the construction of Muslims as a backward, dangerous and inferior culture within Western societies. Said (1978)

suggests that the West defines "civilized" Europeans as opposed to "uncivilized" Eastern others. Muslims are constantly stereotyped with the term "terrorism" and "extremism" in *Home Fire*, an example of the Orientalist assumptions.

An additional framework is that of Michel Foucault's theory of surveillance. Modern states use surveillance and discipline as their means of power exercise (Foucault, 1977). The novel is filled with characters who are Muslims, and they are constantly under surveillance, at the airport, by the police and by the general community.

These are all theoretical approaches that contribute to an understanding of the social, political and psychological processes of British Muslim identity construction in the novel.

By Ali Ahmad, 1994. Ali Ahmad, 1994. *British Muslim Identity and Hybridity*.

Cultural hybridity is one of the main topics of *Home Fire*. The Muslim characters are British nationals and native British but often viewed as 'outsiders', due to their religion and ethnicity. Shamsie shows how British Muslim identity is located in the space of two worlds and is an ongoing process of negotiation.

Isma is an attempt to understand and reconcile British citizenship and Muslim identity. She abides by the law, studies further and makes an effort to stay out of political hot topics. But, despite her efforts she is suspected due to her Muslim background. They have been treated differently to other British citizens, as can be seen in the scene at the airport. Authorities assume that she is a Muslim and thus wonder about her family life, beliefs and travel plans.

This scene captures the reality of living in a world after 9/11 which faces racial profiling and surveillance of Muslims. Shamsie depicts the Muslim identity in a context that becomes politicised by fear and suspicion, as Banerjee (2020) says. Muslims are not evaluated on a person-to-person basis but rather are treated as a threat in general.

It is also narrated in the novel in terms of language, culture and social interaction. All characters are fluent in English, are active in British society and share a number of aspects of western culture. They also have a religious and emotional bond with their Muslim heritage, as well. This contradiction is what produces the internal conflict because society calls for the assimilation of a whole, and rejects the full assimilation.

Karamat Lone is the British Home Secretary, who exemplifies the assimilationist politics of the British. He feels Muslims should try to be as inconspicuous as possible as far as their religious identity is concerned in order to be successful in the British environment. Karamat condemns Muslim women for wearing hijab, and believes Muslims should conform totally to British standards. He has a political ideology that is based on the expectations of the state about "acceptable" Muslims.

This is in contrast to Aneeka, who will not lose her Muslim identity for approval from others. She is bold in her expression of religious and cultural conviction along with her British

citizenship. Eveled will tackle the misconception that Muslims have to endorse their own heritage in order to be accepted as British citizens through Aneeka.

The novel, then, is hybrid and fragile constructions of British Muslim identity. Muslims are culturally and legally British, but they are socially excluded due to the perception that Muslims' cultural identity is incompatible with the Western nationalism.

Islamophobic violence, monitoring and targeting

In the novel *Home Fire*, one of the strongest influences on the identity of Muslims is Islamophobia. Islamophobia is one of the strongest elements in Muslim identity in the novel *Home Fire*. In the novel Britain is depicted as a society in which Muslims are always being monitored, asked questions and stereotyped. The State turns into a tool for shaping and controlling the identity and the actions of Muslims.

Why is the first airport scene important? Because it sets the tone for the film, which immediately instills a suspicion of Muslims. Muslims are treated as a people who exist first on a security basis and not as normal citizens is reflected in what happens to them during their interrogation by Isma. The authorities specifically look at her background rather than her individual history, and her religious background.

Foucault's notion of the "panopticon" can be helpful in the understanding of this process. It brings to their attention that they are being watched at all times by society and the state, especially Muslims. This awareness impacts on their behaviour and self-awareness. They self-censor themselves and steer clear of political discussions and try to "appear safe" to authorities.

Dutta and Raskar (2025) make the point that in *Home Fire* surveillance is used as a form of social control. Muslims internalise fear as they know that they may be punished or excluded for any wrongdoing or suspicion. Surveillance thus "moulds" identity by imposing a requirement for Muslims to "police" themselves (Dutta and Raskar, 2025).

In addition to this, media portrayal is also a factor of Islamophobia in the novel. There is a continuous cycle of public rhetoric associating Islam with terrorism and perpetuating stereotypes of Muslim violence and/or disloyalty. Muslims are put under pressure to denounce terrorism at all times, including if they are not involved in acts of terror themselves.

The novel is critical of the "conditionality of citizenship" of Muslims. The Muslims are different from other citizens; they have to prove at every moment of their lives their loyalty to the nation. This 'conditional belonging' is apparent when the British government are not willing to return Parvaiz's body after he dies. He was born in Britain, but is not given permission to return to his home country because he is labeled a terrorist.

Utami and Wali (2025) suggest that Parvaiz's absence is an indication of the general rejection of Muslims from the nation community. The state's refusal to accord Muslims the right to a full British burial, is a testament that they do not consider Muslims to be fully British citizens.

In this way, Shamsie uncovers the nature of Islamophobia in the lives of British Muslims, which is manifest in fear, exclusion and institutional discrimination.

The story of radicalisation and the crisis of belonging

The themes of Parvaiz's story are the role of alienation and identity crisis in the process of radicalisation of Muslim youth. Parvaiz is a confused character, suffers from loneliness and emotional neglect, unlike Isma who wants stability by going to school.

In a society that seems like it's empty of him, Parvaiz wants to be recognized and to have a role. He is curious about his father, and is easily swayed by Farooq, who plays him psychologically and politically. Farooq sees ISIS as a place to find dignity, brotherhood, belongingness - as a space for Muslims.

Safdar (2025) believes it is not a religious fanaticism but emotional vulnerability that led to Parvaiz's radicalization. The novel utilises the concepts of social exclusion and identity fragmentation to argue that these are the reasons why young Muslims can be vulnerable to the recruitment process of extremists. The novel implies that social exclusion and identity fragmentation are the reasons young Muslims can be vulnerable to the recruitment process of the extremists.

It is important to note that Shamsie does not resort to the "simplistic explanations" of terrorism. She does not depict Parvaiz simply as a violent, bad guy. Rather, the novel focuses on the psychological ramifications of marginalization and discrimination. Parvaiz vehemently rejects the British society and the concept of his identity due to these reasons, turning towards extremism.

But, when Parvaiz gets to Syria, he understands the terror and manipulation of the extremist groups. He finds himself caught in a dilemma, between ISIS attacks and British state rejection. He tries to go back home, but is unable to do so, as Britain will not accept him.

The tragedy of Parvaiz is reflective of the lack of conduct of extremist ideology and state policy. The novel questions the governments which only aim for punishment but not rehabilitation and inclusion. Therefore, Shamsie introduces radicalisation as a multi-faceted social and psychological phenomenon which is driven by exclusion, identity crisis and emotional vulnerability. In *Home Fire* gender is a major factor in the creation of Muslim identity. In the novel, Muslim women defy western stereotype of oppressed, passive and voiceless women.

Isma is a smart, educated and independent person. She sacrifices her personal freedom in order to make it better for her siblings and she strives for her academic success in spite of social challenges. The character is complex and represents the nature of the lives of Muslim women in Britain. Meanwhile, the film's leading lady, Aneeka, is a symbol of emotional blockage and defiant politics. She is an open Muslim, and does not abide to assimilationist pressure. Aneeka

is far from the stereotypical images of 'Muslim Women' and is passionate, confident and assertive.

The novel also emphasizes on the politicisation of Muslim women's bodies in the west societies. Items of clothing like the hijab are viewed as a sign of difference and frequently are the matter of political debates on integration and national identity. Karamat Lone criticises visibly religious Muslims because he feels that they are blocking the integration of these Muslims into British society. His views are consistent with the wider society's norms that Muslims need to keep their religious expression to a minimum to gain acceptance.

In portraying Muslim women as multi-dimensional individuals, Shamsie questions Islamophobia and the patriarchal system. The female characters are not victims but are the ones who have to be the ones to create their own identity and fight against the exclusion. As a result, the novel illustrates the interactions between gender, religion and nationality in the creation of British Muslims.

People and citizenship play an important role in Home Fire. With the western nation states being skeptical and hostile towards Muslims, the novel asks the question "Can Muslims belong in western nation states?"

The Pasha brothers and sisters are British born, but their citizenship is provisional. Their rights may be abridged or terminated at any time when their rights are thought to be a threat to the country's security. This novel thus differentiates between the notion of legal citizenship and emotional belonging. Karamat Lone is a spokeswoman for the nationalist agenda which has an assimilationist agenda over multiculturalism. He feels that Muslims have to follow all British ways in order to be successful. This is the novel though, which shows that even assimilated Muslims are targeted with racism and exclusion.

Parvaiz' case is emblematic of the fragilities of Muslim citizenship. He is then stripped of his nationality on joining ISIS and not allowed to be buried in Britain. The penalty is symbolic of today's political controversies over citizenship cancellation and counter-terrorism measures. The refusal of a burial place represents the "death of citizenship" as pointed out by Weiss (2022). When Parvaiz dies, he is treated like an outsider and not a British citizen.

The novel is a criticism of the liberal democracies that are "multicultural" and yet "exclude" minorities. Though it is expected of the Muslims that they should fit into the society, they are never accepted as equal citizens. British Muslim's identity is thus drawn into questions of national belonging, nationalism and political power, as Shamsie portrays it.

The issue of the media as representations and the impact they have on the formation of identity

Representation of Muslims in the media plays a crucial role in building Muslim identity in Home Fire. As news coverage and political rhetoric repeatedly link Muslims with violence and extremism, it is an object of public perceptions and social attitudes.

In Degenkolb's view (2024), the mass media has a role in shaping the fear of the Muslim community. The Muslim population is portrayed as a threat to the public imagination, they are excluded and discriminated against.

The novel illustrates the internalisation of these stereotype by Muslims. Characters discover they are graded as a whole as a result of the actions of extremists. The awareness gives rise to emotional stress and exhaustion.

The media narratives are able to muddle up Aneeka's grief after Parvaiz's death. Media doesn't usually depict her as a sister who is grieving, but rather through political and security lenses.

Shamsie attacks the dehumanization of Muslims in political rhetoric and stresses a need to understand experiences of individuals not in terms of stereotypes.

Conclusion

Overall, Home Fire is an excellent book that delves into the complexities of British Muslim identity in the modern context of Britain. The novel explores the impacts of Islamophobia, surveillance, nationalism, and social exclusion on Muslim communities, through the experiences of the novel's four characters: Isma, Aneeka, Parvaiz, and Eamonn.

This novel theorises the British Muslim as a hybrid, fractured and ongoing process of negotiation. The Muslims are British at law but not at heart, as portrayed in political rhetoric and the media. State surveillance and Islamophobia generate fear and insecurity and makes the Muslims to prove their loyalty continuously.

Also discussed is the psychological impact of marginalisation, especially for young Muslims experiencing a sense of belonging and identity crisis. The novel's criticism of simplistic perceptions of radicalization and the importance of a sense of exclusion and alienation is brought up through Parvaiz's tragedy.

Moreover, Home Fire defies the stereotype of Muslim women, and shows how gender, religion and nationalism intermingle. The novel ultimately challenges whether liberal democracies offer an equal belonging in a community to the minority communities.

Through the discussion of these paradoxes Shamsie shows British Muslim identity to be strong and weak in multicultural Britain. The novel continues to be a significant piece of literature for the debates about citizenship, immigration and politics of belonging in the contemporary world.

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