

The Many Voices of *Home Fire*

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Eyes are how we see the world, and voices are how we express ourselves. They vary from person to person, providing different points of view. Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire*, a modern retelling of Sophocles' *Antigone*, follows five perspectives that all deal differently with the effects of external and internal racism in Britain post-9/11. Two characters in particular, Aneeka, a rebellious sister who seeks justice, and Karamat, the British Home Secretary with British ideals, tackle two sides of the same spectrum through their perspectives. Aneeka's point of view, controlled mostly by media excerpts, highlights the oppressive censorship and racism experienced from outside forces, while Karamat's point of view reflects the effects of such from within, being part of a corrupt government himself and tormented by his own internalized racism. Their contrasting points of view represent the harmful consequences of British expectations and stereotypes, and how these consequences create conflict within the self.

Home Fire takes place after the events of 9/11, a time when Muslims were heavily discriminated against. Because of this, each main character struggles with the fear of being seen as an enemy based on the stigmatizations of their religion and race. Besides Aneeka and Karamat, there are three other narrators: Isma, an eldest sister who strives to be a good and peaceful citizen; Parvaiz, an outcast brother who follows the dark past of his father; and Eamonn, the obedient son of Britain's Home Secretary. The stereotypes against Muslims create conflict within each character's

families, which intertwine with one another and become conflicts within themselves. Isma tells her sister to “[a]ccept the law, even when it’s unjust” (203), which highlights how she believes she must be obedient to racist British ideals in order to keep herself and her family safe. Parvaiz and Eamonn, whose mindsets and overall narratives are both greatly influenced by their fathers, experience similar things. Despite being on opposite sides of the political spectrum, they both struggle with re-orientalism, a theory proposed by Lau and Mendes. Lau and Mendes describe the theory of re-orientalization as “demonstrating the pattern of political machinations and maintaining of power imbalances post-9/11 as the result of actions by Asians as much as Westerners” (2), which is a common theme in the novel. Further, re-orientalization occurs within each character’s self, which is most evident in Eamonn’s chapters. This is notable when he narrates, “He was nearing a mosque, crossed the street to avoid it, then crossed back so as to not be seen trying to avoid a mosque” (61). Their narrations, despite offering different perspectives, contain a shared experience with those who face political discrimination that shapes their mindsets.

Aneeka’s chapters are primarily told through social media posts and news reports, stripping her of her voice and identity, and categorizing her as a threat to Britain. Her chapters are unique in the sense that the readers do not fully see through her eyes, as she is swallowed by grief but also silenced by the media. Censorship suppresses one’s speech, and is done when actions seem harmful or controversial. In Aneeka’s case, being related to two terrorists makes her a threat, and therefore undeserving of freedom of speech. The media depicts her as evil and

heartless, taking statements from sources that aren't her or people close to her to make assumptions about her character and intentions. A news article takes a statement from "sources close to the Lone family" (215) to make conclusions about her intentions with Eamonn, rather than from him or Aneeka. Her chapters also depict multiple public opinions instead of her own, furthering the limitations of her voice. Aneeka and Parvaiz do not fit the mold of the "good Muslim" or "good British citizen;" therefore, they become subject to harmful stereotypes and are criticized by the media for not meeting predetermined expectations. For example, she is given the nickname "Ho-jabi"(214), which is a play on the word "hijabi," that simultaneously mocks Aneeka's religion and slut-shames her; "#GOBACKTOWHERE YOU CAME FROM" (194) starts trending after Parvaiz's death and Karamat's broadcasted speech; an article suggests that "children of ji-hadis, many of them British-born, [should be] closely watched by the state" (211), revealing the discriminatory ideals of the public. Aneeka's point of view highlights the consequences of not conforming to stereotypes of Britishness, and how the media plays a large part in isolating those who they label as "other."

Readers see the last few events unfold through Karamat's eyes, which amplifies the pressures of conforming to British expectations. Karamat struggles with internalized racism, and is the most re-orientalized character in *Home Fire*. As a member of the British government, he wants to be seen as trustworthy, and thus abandons his culture in the process. Karamat owns a "lion-and-unicorn paperweight" (232), which is usually associated with the British Royal Coat of Arms, representing his dedication to being stereotypically "British" in the eyes of the

public. Further, he “[presses the weight] to his forehead” (232)—a metaphor for brainwashing—during the broadcast of Aneeka and Parvaiz in Karachi, as if trying to remind himself where his loyalties lie. A paperweight also symbolizes how there is pressure for an immigrant to be completely British in order to belong. He also tells his son, “You know I grew up a believing Muslim. Didn’t harm anyone but myself with it” (109), suggesting that he thinks being openly Muslim is harmful. He continues, saying, “There are still moments of stress when I’ll recite Ayat al-Kursi as a kind of reflex . . . I’d prefer it if you didn’t mention it to anyone” (110), which suggests that despite his rejection of his culture, it is still instinct for him to return to it in hard times, and he seems to be ashamed of it. Lau and Mendes state that “[Karamat] recognizes that the dominant culture is unwilling to change in order to acknowledge and recognize the Other, so they should—must—be the ones coming around” (10). Karamat’s perspective highlights how damaging stereotypes are to one’s sense of self, and how culture is not something that can be so easily erased from one’s identity.

Perspectives in *Home Fire*, whether restricted from the public, or broadcast to the world, represent the struggle of identity in a post-9/11 world. Shamsie utilizes different points of view to highlight the many struggles of those who suffer constant discrimination and re-orientalization. By allowing her characters a voice to narrate, with the exception of Aneeka, readers are able to understand how they think and why they think the way they do, which allows them to sympathize with them. Voices cannot be heard when they overlap, but when they are given a microphone, they become so much louder.

Works Cited

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