

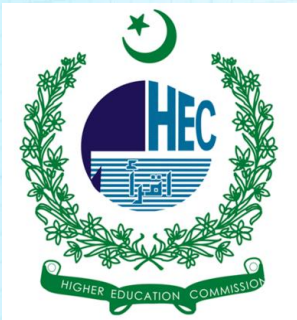
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**The Silenced Voice: A Feminist Postcolonial Analysis of
Women's Identity and Resistance in Kamila Shamsie's Home
Fire in the Context of 21st Century Surveillance Culture**



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Abstract

This paper explores the intersection of gender, power, and identity in Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire* through the combined lenses of feminist and postcolonial literary theory. Set in a world grappling with radicalization, immigration, and state surveillance, the novel presents complex female characters negotiating their identities in an oppressive sociopolitical climate. Drawing on the works of Gayatri Spivak and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, as well as Foucault's concept of panopticism, the study investigates how the state, family, and patriarchy collaborate to silence, control, and surveil women. The analysis argues that *Home Fire* not only critiques Western surveillance regimes but also challenges Eastern patriarchal norms, highlighting women's resistance and redefinition of selfhood in a fractured world. Through thematic analysis of key characters like Aneeka and Isma, the research fills a critical gap in literary studies by examining how postcolonial feminist agency operates within the surveillance state. The paper concludes that *Home Fire* serves as a contemporary literary mirror reflecting how women in postcolonial societies assert voice and agency amid global surveillance and political instability.

Keywords: Kamila Shamsie, *Home Fire*, feminist literary criticism, postcolonial theory, surveillance, identity, women's resistance, diaspora, panopticism, gender politics.

Introduction

In a world increasingly shaped by surveillance, immigration anxieties, and contested identities, contemporary literature has emerged as a mirror reflecting the fractured human condition. Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire* (2017), a retelling of Sophocles' *Antigone*, grapples with the political and emotional costs of belonging in post-9/11 Britain. At the heart of the narrative lies a profound exploration of female agency and resistance in a world where not only the state but also the family and culture become instruments of control. The novel resonates with modern readers due to its treatment of themes such as radicalization, citizenship, diaspora, and the policing of women's bodies and voices. This research paper aims to investigate how *Home Fire* illustrates the complexities of women's identity and resistance within a global surveillance

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regime. It employs a combined theoretical lens of feminist literary criticism and postcolonial theory, particularly engaging with the ideas of Gayatri Spivak, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, and Michel Foucault. While numerous studies have examined the themes of terrorism and diasporic identity in Shamsie's work, there is a critical research gap in analyzing how postcolonial women's voices are both silenced and empowered in the age of digital and ideological surveillance.

Purpose Of This Study

The purpose of this study is to analyze how Shamsie's female characters particularly Isma and Aneeka navigate the intersection of gender, culture, and authority in a society governed by suspicion and political control. By foregrounding their struggles, the novel reveals a larger commentary on the condition of Muslim women in both Western and Eastern sociopolitical frameworks. This study contributes to literary scholarship by addressing underexplored aspects of gendered surveillance and resistance in *Home Fire* through an intersectional postcolonial-feminist approach.

Research Question

How do Kamila Shamsie's female characters in *Home Fire* resist the intersecting forces of state surveillance, patriarchal control, and postcolonial marginalization in 21st-century Britain?

Research Objective

To analyze how Kamila Shamsie's female characters, particularly Isma and Aneeka, assert agency and resistance against gendered surveillance, sociocultural patriarchy, and postcolonial power structures in the context of contemporary Britain.

Literature Review

Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire* has attracted scholarly attention for its nuanced depiction of terrorism, identity, and political belonging in a globalized world. Most academic discussions have approached the novel through political or diasporic lenses, with a focus on radicalization and the ethics of citizenship. However, a critical feminist-postcolonial perspective that prioritizes the gendered implications of surveillance and silencing remains underexplored.

Political and Post-9/11 Context

Scholars such as Bhattacharyya (2018) and Al-Saidi (2021) have examined *Home Fire* within the framework of post-9/11 politics, analyzing how Muslims are constructed as

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both victims and threats. According to Bhattacharyya (2018), the novel reveals the racialization of citizenship, particularly for Muslims in Britain. Similarly, Ahmed (2022) discusses the “surveillance gaze” imposed on Muslim communities, arguing that the state weaponizes fear as a tool of control. While these studies successfully unpack the political atmosphere of the novel, they often overlook how this atmosphere specifically affects women.

Feminist Approaches to Postcolonial Literature

Feminist critics such as Mohanty (2003) have long emphasized that postcolonial women are often doubly marginalized by the state and by patriarchal traditions within their own cultures. Mohanty warns against universalizing “Third World women” as victims, instead calling for nuanced readings of how they resist and negotiate their identities. This framework is highly applicable to *Home Fire*, where Isma's intellectualism and Aneeka's emotional resistance represent two forms of female agency that challenge traditional binaries of submission and rebellion.

Surveillance and Gendered Subjectivity

Although Foucault's (1977) theory of panopticism is frequently invoked in discussions of state surveillance, feminist scholars like Bartky (1990) and McClintock (1995) have extended his ideas to analyze how women's bodies are sites of political and cultural control. In *Home Fire*, surveillance operates on multiple levels: Isma is questioned at the airport, Aneeka is followed by media, and both are subjected to familial expectations rooted in patriarchal and religious ideologies. This layered surveillance state, cultural, and familial is a feminist concern that has received limited attention in existing literature on the novel.

Existing Gap

While scholars such as Lone (2020) have touched on gendered experiences in *Home Fire*, there is a scarcity of focused, theoretical explorations that combine postcolonial and feminist criticism to examine how women resist surveillance and reclaim voice. This study addresses that gap by analyzing *Home Fire* as a site where multiple forms of power state, religious, cultural, and familial intersect to discipline female bodies and identities.

Theoretical Framework

This study applies a hybrid theoretical framework that combines feminist literary

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criticism and postcolonial theory, informed by key thinkers such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, and Michel Foucault. This intersectional approach enables a nuanced analysis of the multiple axes of power that shape the lives of women in *Home Fire*, specifically how gender, race, religion, and nation-state politics influence their identities and resistance.

Feminist Literary Criticism

Feminist literary theory interrogates how literature reflects, reinforces, or challenges the social constructions of gender. In *Home Fire*, Shamsie presents women who resist not only the limitations imposed by patriarchal structures but also the expectations tied to race and religion. Drawing on Chandra Talpade Mohanty's (2003) argument that women in the Global South are often "discursively colonized," the study recognizes Aneeka and Isma as agents of resistance rather than victims. Their acts of intellectual defiance, bodily autonomy, and emotional labor serve as feminist redefinitions of identity in the face of socio-political control.

Postcolonial Theory

Postcolonial theory, as developed by critics like Edward Said (1978) and Homi Bhabha (1994), interrogates the lingering effects of colonial power structures on identity and representation. This is especially relevant in *Home Fire*, where British-Muslim characters grapple with questions of loyalty, citizenship, and cultural belonging. More importantly, Gayatri Spivak's (1988) question "Can the subaltern speak?" is central to this paper's argument. The novel presents a feminist response: women are constantly trying to speak, but their voices are filtered through the discourses of the state, media, and patriarchy.

Surveillance and the Panopticon

The idea of the panopticon, introduced by Michel Foucault (1977), is particularly useful for understanding the mechanisms of surveillance in *Home Fire*. Foucault argued that modern power functions not through force but through visibility, where individuals regulate themselves because they know they are being watched. In Shamsie's novel, surveillance is omnipresent at airports, governments, the media, and even family members act as agents of disciplinary power. This paper extends Foucault's concept by integrating feminist critiques of surveillance, especially Sandra Bartky's (1990) idea of the "feminine panopticon," which reveals how women's

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bodies are policed even more intensely under both Western secular and Eastern religious lenses.

By combining these theories, this study investigates how *Home Fire* critiques surveillance culture while simultaneously portraying Muslim women's efforts to reclaim autonomy and visibility in a hostile world.

Methodology

This paper uses qualitative textual analysis as its primary research method. Textual analysis in literary research involves a close reading of the selected literary text to interpret how themes, symbols, language, and narrative structure contribute to meaning.

Type of Study

This is a theoretical interpretive study within the field of literary criticism. The analysis is guided by selected literary theories feminist and postcolonial and applies them to the reading of a contemporary novel to explore sociopolitical and gendered issues.

Data Source

The primary data source is the novel *Home Fire* (2017) by Kamila Shamsie. This text is examined for representations of gender, surveillance, identity, and resistance. Key passages involving the characters Isma and Aneeka are closely read to uncover how literary devices and plot structure communicate ideological meanings.

Data Analysis Technique

Thematic Analysis: The main technique used is thematic analysis, which identifies patterns and motifs in the narrative. The themes examined include: Surveillance and state control, Female silence and voice, Diasporic identity and cultural conflict, Resistance and self-assertion

Theory Driven Interpretation: The analysis is not purely inductive but guided by the previously described theoretical framework. This allows for layered interpretations that account for both the text's internal dynamics and its broader political context.

Delimitation and Scope

The study focuses specifically on the female characters of *Home Fire* and their interaction with social and political forces. It deliberately excludes male perspectives

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except when relevant to female subjectivity. The paper also concentrates on post-9/11 British society, without extending its scope to other novels or historical contexts.

Limitations

The study is limited to one literary text and two central characters. It is interpretive, not empirical, and thus subject to subjective evaluation. The analysis is confined to the lenses of feminist and postcolonial theories and does not include other frameworks such as psychoanalysis or ecocriticism.

Textual Analysis / Discussion

1. Surveillance and Silence: The Feminized Subject under Watch

In *Home Fire*, surveillance is not merely a backdrop it is a force that shapes identity and controls behavior. Isma's detainment at Heathrow Airport early in the novel is emblematic of the gendered racial surveillance Muslim women experience in the West. Her treatment as a suspect despite her peaceful academic pursuits illustrates Foucault's panoptic model, where subjects are disciplined by the mere possibility of being observed (Foucault, 1977). Yet, Isma's silence during interrogation is not just state-imposed; it is culturally internalized. She refrains from defending her brother, Parvaiz, fearing guilt by association. Her silence aligns with Spivak's (1988) notion of the "subaltern" woman, whose voice is either ignored or mistranslated by dominant discourses. In a state of hyper-visibility, she chooses invisibility a survival tactic under both Islamophobic scrutiny and patriarchal expectations. Aneeka, on the other hand, resists this silence. She openly defies media narratives, stages public protests, and demands the return of her brother's body from Syria. Her visibility is radical, yet it is also punished: she becomes a media target, her private life dissected, her grief politicized. Her body becomes a battleground, showcasing what Bartky (1990) calls the "disciplining gaze" that regulates women's expressions of grief, sexuality, and autonomy.

2. The Body as Resistance: Reclaiming Space and Desire

While Isma represents the intellectual mode of resistance, Aneeka embodies the bodily and emotional forms of protest. Her romantic relationship with Eamonn is not simply personal; it becomes a political statement. As a Pakistani woman in a hijab, her expression of sexual desire subverts stereotypes that portray Muslim women as passive or oppressed. This narrative challenges both Western and Eastern

constructions of modesty and submission. In Mohanty's (2003) framework, resistance is not always overt or verbal it can be expressed through daily acts of autonomy. Aneeka's decision to pursue love on her own terms, despite cultural and religious expectations, becomes a feminist act. Her refusal to conform to state or familial ideologies emphasizes the postcolonial feminist assertion that agency is contextual and situated. Moreover, Aneeka's use of public space whether in her park rendezvous with Eamonn or her protests outside political buildings reclaims the urban landscape that is typically dominated by male presence. In this, she aligns with Judith Butler's (2004) idea of "performativity," in which gender and power are enacted through embodied, public acts.

3. Diaspora, Displacement, and the Double Bind

Shamsie's depiction of the British-Pakistani diaspora reveals the double consciousness experienced by postcolonial subjects caught between the values of the homeland and the expectations of the host country. Isma, for instance, chooses respectability and assimilation. She suppresses her political views and prioritizes academic success. But this survival strategy leads to alienation from her siblings, especially Aneeka, who accuses her of betrayal. This double bind reflects Homi Bhabha's (1994) concept of the "third space," where hybridity emerges, but not without tension. Isma occupies this space uneasily never fully accepted by the British establishment nor fully trusted by her own community. Her character exemplifies the internal colonization of the diasporic woman, forced to mediate between competing expectations.

Aneeka, in contrast, refuses this negotiation. Her radical emotional honesty and her desire to mourn publicly disrupt both British and Pakistani nationalist narratives. In choosing visibility and grief, she claims the right to narrate her own identity, challenging postcolonial silencing and cultural honor codes that seek to regulate women's mourning and sexuality.

4. Sisterhood, Grief, and Ethical Resistance

The bond between Isma and Aneeka represents a complicated feminist relationship, rooted in shared trauma but fractured by ideological divergence. Their interactions expose the emotional labor women perform within families affected by war, exile, and surveillance. While Isma embodies caution and assimilation, Aneeka champions

confrontation and radical love. This dynamic illustrates the plurality of feminist resistance there is no single mode of agency that fits all women. Their differing approaches are not mutually exclusive but complementary. Both resist, albeit through different means: Isma through intellectual engagement and strategic silence, Aneeka through emotional defiance and bodily risk. The final scenes of the novel where Aneeka cradles Parvaiz's coffin in the Karachi airport, defying political boundaries and media narratives represent a sacred, feminist reclaiming of grief. Here, the personal becomes the political in its purest form. Aneeka dies asserting her humanity in a world that denied it, making a powerful statement against state cruelty and postcolonial patriarchy.

5. Rewriting Antigone: Tragedy, Justice, and the Modern Subaltern

Shamsie's choice to adapt Sophocles' Antigone is not incidental. In the classical text, Antigone defies the king's edict to honor her dead brother. Similarly, Aneeka's protest mirrors the ancient heroine's moral resistance to unjust law. However, unlike Sophocles' Antigone, Shamsie's version is complicated by race, religion, and migration. This rewriting brings postcolonial and feminist dimensions to the classical narrative. Whereas Antigone's struggle was with authority, Aneeka must navigate a network of oppressions state surveillance, Islamophobia, patriarchal norms, and media sensationalism. Her tragedy is not only personal but systemic, exposing how modern women are entangled in the legacies of empire and nationalism.

By placing a Muslim woman at the center of this tragic retelling, Shamsie challenges Eurocentric literary traditions and asserts the global relevance of postcolonial female suffering. Aneeka's death is not just a personal loss; it is a literary and political indictment of a world that continues to dehumanize and silence women who dare to speak.

Findings

The thematic analysis of Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire* reveals the novel as a rich literary site for exploring the intersection of gender, surveillance, identity, and resistance in the 21st century. The findings of this study support the argument that Shamsie subverts traditional narratives of victimhood by presenting Muslim women not as passive recipients of oppression, but as agents of emotional, intellectual, and bodily resistance.

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1. Surveillance is gendered: While both men and women in the novel are surveilled, women experience a multilayered form of surveillance by the state, the media, their families, and religious traditions. Isma's self-censorship and Aneeka's vilification demonstrate how women's actions are constantly scrutinized and politicized.

2. Female resistance is plural: The novel does not endorse a singular model of feminist resistance. Instead, it portrays resistance in diverse forms from Isma's cautious negotiation of identity to Aneeka's emotional defiance. These variations challenge binary constructions of East vs. West, submissive vs. rebellious.

3. The diaspora as a site of contradiction: The British-Muslim identity is shown to be fragmented, especially for women who must constantly navigate contradictory expectations. This liminal space fosters both vulnerability and strength.

4. Rewriting the classical canon: Shamsie's adaptation of Antigone serves not just as homage but as critique. By placing a Muslim woman in the tragic heroine's role, the novel reclaims classical literature for postcolonial and feminist reimagination.

5. Voice and silence are political tools: Both silence (Isma's strategic quietness) and voice (Aneeka's public protests) are shown as forms of resistance. This duality reflects the complexity of women's experiences in cultures where speaking up can lead to erasure or violence.

These findings contribute to literary studies by emphasizing how contemporary fiction like *Home Fire* speaks directly to today's sociopolitical concerns, particularly around immigration, gender politics, and Islamophobia.

Conclusion

This study has explored Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire* through an intersectional feminist and postcolonial lens to uncover how women's identities are constructed, policed, and contested in contemporary society. By examining characters such as Isma and Aneeka, the paper has shown how the novel critiques both Western surveillance regimes and Eastern patriarchal norms, revealing the complex realities of Muslim women in diaspora. Through the integration of Spivak's subaltern theory, Foucault's surveillance discourse, and Mohanty's transnational feminism, this paper has demonstrated that *Home Fire* offers a nuanced depiction of female subjectivity under multiple regimes of control. Shamsie reclaims the narrative space for postcolonial women, offering them complexity, humanity, and agency.

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In the age of global surveillance, refugee crises, and media exploitation, *Home Fire* challenges the reader to reconsider simplistic notions of victimhood and rebellion. It asserts that feminist resistance can take many forms quiet, loud, intellectual, emotional and that literature remains a powerful tool for imagining justice, voice, and dignity in an unjust world. Future research may extend this analysis to comparative readings of other diasporic female authors or explore how digital surveillance technologies specifically impact literary representations of postcolonial women.

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