Necropolitical Trauma in Kamila Shamsie’s Fiction

Amina Yaqin
SOAS University of London

Kamila Shamsie was born in Karachi, lives in London, and has a strong affinity to the United States, having studied at Hamilton College and at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. She is the author of six novels, each shortlisted for a prestigious literary prize; in 2018 she won the London Hellenic Prize and the Women’s Prize for Fiction.\(^1\) Her literary career continues a family tradition of writing in Urdu and English and informs the cosmopolitan Islamicate cultures that populate her novels, imaginatively representing experiences of global and multilingual communities through intimate characterizations, historic plotlines and romantic connections.\(^2\) The trajectory of Shamsie’s novels begins with a strong interest in place and ideas of home and belonging in Pakistan. Her early novels, *In the City by the Sea* (1998), *Salt and Saffron* (2000) and *Kartography* (2002), are centred around Karachi.\(^3\) This is the place where identities are formed and relationships forged against the backdrop of traumatic national moments, such as Partition in 1947 and the independence of Bangladesh in 1971.\(^4\) These novels establish a cosmopolitan aesthetic that reflects her heritage and strong link to Urdu literary culture.\(^5\) Throughout her body of work, including her

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\(^1\) For further information about prizes, see the entry on Kamila Shamsie on The Royal Society of Literature web site, https://rsliterature.org/fellow/kamila-shamsie-3/. For the withdrawal of the Nelly Sachs literary award by the City of Dortmund in response to Shamsie’s support for the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement against Israel, see Alison Flood, “Kamila Shamsie’s Book Award Withdrawn over Her Part in Israel Boycott,” *The Guardian*, 19 September 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/sep/19/kamila-shamsies-book-award-withdrawn-over-her-part-in-israel-boycott. Accessed 29 January 2021. See Shamsie’s published a statement in response: Kamila Shamsie, “The Right to Boycott: An Open Letter,” *London Review of Books*, September 23, 2019. https://www.lrb.co.uk/blog/2019/september/the-right-to-boycott. Accessed January 29, 2021.

\(^2\) See Muneeza Shamsie, “Sunlight and Salt: The Literary Landscapes of a Divided Family”, *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 44 (2009), 135-153. https://doi.org/10.1177/0021989408101656. On Islamic cosmopolitanism, see Bruce B. Lawrence, “Islamicate civilisation: the view from Asia,” in Brannon M. Wheeler (ed.), *Teaching Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 61-74.

\(^3\) Kamila Shamsie, *In the City by the Sea* (London: Bloomsbury, 1998), *Salt and Saffron* (London: Bloomsbury, 2000) and *Kartography* (London: Bloomsbury, 2002).

\(^4\) See David Waterman, *Where World Collide: Pakistani Fiction in the New Millenium* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2011), in particular chapters 2 and 3 on Shamsie’s *In the City by the Sea* and *Kartography*, respectively.

\(^5\) See M. Shamsie, “Sunlight and Salt.”
non-fiction, there is a growing response to cultural divisions in society, offered with insights
that are informed by a female perspective.  

In what follows I develop a critical reading of Kamila Shamsie’s fiction by interrogating
her work with reference to the concepts of necropolitics, necropower and trauma, a concep-
tual framework I borrow from Achille Mbembe’s work on *Necropolitics*. I argue that Shamsie’s
narratives offer searching explorations of the democratic notion of sovereignty, citizenship
and rights. Her characters negotiate complex emotional journeys navigating unknowable his-
tories, borders and militarized securitized worlds to convey relationships of power and pow-
erlessness to the reader. Her writing invites the reader to reconsider the multiple ways in
which necropolitics and necropower are traversed from the perspectives of those who are on
the margins of society, through the intersections of gender, race and class. In particular, I
examine her novels *Broken Verses* (2005), *Burnt Shadows* (2009), and *Home Fire* (2017),
texts that specifically illustrate her engagement with distinct moments that demarcate how
necropolitics and necropower operate in Pakistan, and the effects of a globalized securitiza-
tion of borders on its diasporas in Britain and North America.  

In her dual position as a British Pakistani writer, Shamsie has often been asked to adopt
the position of a cultural representative. In an interview, she confesses that after 9/11 she
was expected to fulfil the role of “cultural intermediary” between the West and Pakistan by
writing op-eds and taking part in panel discussions about Pakistan. Over time she found it
useful to put distance between the envisaged identification as a cultural representative and her
interpretive creative work:

> At first, I was doing quite a lot of that and I wasn’t a two-way intermediary. It was to say
to England or to America, look, here is the more nuanced truth about the place I am
from, and to put a different face, I suppose, to Pakistan than the ones that they kept
printing in the papers. After a while I pulled back from that because I didn’t want to be
pigeonholed in that either and I am certainly not a spokesperson or representative [of
Pakistan].

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6 See Kamila Shamsie, *Offence: The Muslim Case* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2009). Madeline Clements ar-
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7 I have latterly come across an article developed through the lens of decolonial studies by Marcela Santos
Brígida and Davi Pinho, “Necropolitics and National Identity in Kamila Shamsie’s *Home Fire*,” *Interdisciplinar, São Cristóvão*, 31 (2019), 153-167. Their reading is developed through Mbembe’s article
see note 10 below) and the idea of “abyssal thinking” when examining institutionalized violence against
minorities: Boaventura de Sousa Santos, “Beyond Abyssal Thinking: From Global Lines to Ecologies of
Knowledge,” *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)* 30 (2007), 45-89.

8 Kamila Shamsie, *Broken Verses* (London: Bloomsbury, 2005), *Burnt Shadows* (London: Bloomsbury,
2009), *Home Fire* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017).

9 Mushtaq Bilal, *Writing Pakistan: Conversations on Identity, Nationhood and Fiction* (Delhi: HarperCollins
India, 2016), “Kamila Shamsie,” 133-150: 148.
Although Shamsie continues to be a publicly engaged intellectual, in her later novels the task of being a spokesperson for Pakistan is put to one side as she focuses on the art of representation. Her characters are survivors of traumas such as Partition, the nuclear attacks on Japan at the end of the Second World War, and the 9/11 and 7/7 attacks in New York and London. Shamsie’s response to colonial, postcolonial and globalized structures of necropower in her fiction is by experimenting with the novel form and with gendered characterizations. This brings into dialogue the religious and secular political formations of Pakistan, North America and Britain, illustrating divergent views on religion and the nation state. Her writing underlines the growing void regarding citizenship rights within existing democracies and the need for a more ethical democratic future informed by planetary justice.

The structural injustices of democracy have been conceptualized by Achille Mbembe through his idea of a contemporaneous “necropolitics” (the power of death), a critical response to Michel Foucault’s categorization of biopolitics. Mbembe’s juxtaposition of necropolitics with “necropower” turns populations into zombies that create “death-worlds.” In this analysis, the politics of sovereignty in the postcolonial state through anti-terror legislation has provided a means for modern states to exercise the right to kill by creating “the state of exception” and “the state of siege.” As the characters in Shamsie’s novels face their everyday lives, they come into conflict with “states of exception” that make them vulnerable to “death-worlds.” These worlds are determined by undemocratic nationalist forces, racism, and gendered inequalities. In my analysis, I examine how the politics of the state, resistance and terror is shown in Shamsie’s fictions to operate through states of exception, creating precarious situations for characters who are marked as the living dead in modern political warfare.

Mbembe’s representation of necropolitics encompasses the histories of violence that characterize the colonial state, the totalitarian state of late colonial modernity through occupation and the globalized world. He argues that globalized warfare relies on the confluence of military and technological knowledges to enforce submission. And in contemporary warfare, globalized interests are “geographically interwoven,” leading to “militia economies” and deep state interest groups. In this world, when political struggles are determined through force, the state’s “monopoly of violence” is interjected by autonomous groups who also use violence to legitimize counter movements, which contributes to a politics in which there is always an enemy at home. Mbembe puts forward the notion for a democratic future beyond “singularities” and “integration,” arguing for a “planetary democracy” in which the “demand for justice and reparation is inescapable.”

The canvas of Mbembe’s argument is vast: here, I choose to underline particular aspects that resonate with my reading of Kamila Shamsie’s fiction. As a global writer whose work covers colonial and postcolonial histories, she offers unique ways of reading Pakistan both

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10 Achille Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” trans. Libby Meintjes, Public Culture 15/1 (2003): 11-40.
11 A. Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” 16.
12 Achille Mbembe, Necropolitics, trans. Steven Corcoran (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2019), 40.
from within and outside the west. I also wish to extend the notion of necropolitics to include how Shamsie has political debates play out through her novels to convey psychological conflicts over citizenship, identity and religion. An important consideration alongside the representation of necropolitics, therefore, is the question of history. Shamsie’s central characters are permanently scarred by the trauma of Partition, with family and kinship ties psychologically affected by the recurring border upheavals associated with migration, militarization and censorship. This interpretation of history and trauma offers a useful comparative context for the study of South Asian fictions marked by the historical trauma of Partition. In her reading of Partition as “a geography of trauma,” Jennifer Yusin suggests that South Asian identities are smudged by collective and individual experiences of trauma and that literary texts play an important role in imagining and remembering the past. Yusin sees the power of storytelling as something that transcends a historical understanding of borders because of its imaginative quality, one that can represent both unknowable and unspeakable traumas engendered by the creation of new borders and new nations.13

In Broken Verses, Burnt Shadows, and Home Fire, the trauma of forgetting and remembering is an integral part of how characters connect with each other and disconnect from the state to formulate their own histories. Individual experiences of class, gender and difference are thus manifested through trauma, and the subject is disempowered by modes of necropolitical governance and power that seek to erase certain bodies. The body becomes a site of historical trauma as characters try to work their way toward social justice, encountering a web of moral and ethical dilemmas along the way.

In order to situate Shamsie’s fiction, it is necessary to understand Pakistan, a place that is a constant presence in her work. Since its inception in 1947, the Pakistani state has had an embattled relationship with Islam and rights-based political discourse. This has led to disagreements over shared religious values that determine and their role in upholding sovereignty and secular nationalism. Constitutionally, state sovereignty and the judiciary cannot lay a direct claim to natural rights and must remain observant of Islamic principles of social justice. This relationship plays out through parliamentary politics, religious groups, the ulama, and the judiciary—all stakeholders in the construction of a modern Islamic state. The 1980s heralded the promulgation of Hudood Ordinances and judicial reforms under the dictatorship of General Zia ul-Haq. Those revisions in criminal law formalized a parallel legal structure by means of Sharia law and Sharia courts. They fulfilled General Zia’s ambition of validating Pakistan as an authentic Islamic state while affirming his regime’s anti-Communist Cold War politics.14

The Islamization campaign and the implementation of the Hudood Ordinances helped to inscribe an Islamic identity onto the bodies of women. Women became symbols of the Islamic

13 Jennifer Yusin, “The Silence of Partition: Borders, Trauma, and Partition History,” Social Semiotics 19/4 (2009), 453-468.
14 See Saadia Toor, The State of Islam: Culture and Cold War Politics in Pakistan (London: Pluto Press, 2011); Ayesha Jalal, The State of Martial Rule: The Origins of Pakistan’s Political Economy of Defence (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).
nation helping to fulfil Zia’s ambitions of establishing a Sharia led state. The Hudood Ordinances include the Zina Ordinances criminalizing adultery and rape punishable through a maximum sentence of stoning by death. The Law of Evidence added another layer of discrimination halving the value of women’s legal testimony compared to that of men, making a woman’s word virtually irrelevant as witnesses to the crime of rape. This meant that rapists got away with the crime and victims were trapped by accusations of adultery.\(^{15}\) To ensure his legacy, General Zia also introduced a constitutional change to the law through the Eighth Amendment that gave the President greater powers and reduced the power of parliament and the Prime Minister. Thus, the 1980s in Pakistan marks a state of exception and siege by the military state that created mechanisms for a new gendered necropower.

**Broken Verses**

*Broken Verses* is set in post 9/11 Karachi. It has as its backdrop the War on Terror, reflecting the blowback of the 1980s Cold War, the cementing of General Zia ul-Haq dictatorship via an appeal to Islamic beliefs through affiliation with the right-wing religious party, Jamaat-e Islami, and the simultaneous development of strategic ties with the United States to fight the Soviets in Afghanistan. The novel juxtaposes a stark generational difference between the cultural formations of the 1980s that witnessed a rise in cultural activism and resistance to the state’s draconian measures on the one hand, and the local and global neoliberalization of the 1990s marked by a media revolution and corporatization on the other. In *Broken Verses* Shamsie presents a potted history of Pakistan through the voice of her protagonist, Aasmani Inquilab (“Celestial Revolution”), whose mother, Samina, a political feminist activist, disappeared fourteen years ago. Samina’s feminist resistance brought her into conflict with the state because of her participation in protest marches against the Hudood Ordinances of the 1980s. She is depicted as a firebrand and is the beloved of a resistance poet, Omi, who was incarcerated several times by the state and later murdered. Omi is modelled on the Marxist poet Faiz Ahmad Faiz whose left politics from the 1950s to the 1960s landed him in prison and resulted in him spending the Zia years in exile from Pakistan. Omi and Samina are separated by death in a Laila-Majnun-style tragic love story.\(^{16}\) As she searches for her mother, Aasmani is drawn to Ed, her co-worker at the television studio and the son of her mother’s best friend Shehnaz Saeed. Without her knowledge, Ed sends her on a coding trail, re-enacting the secret communications between Omi and Samina making her believe they are still alive. Aasmani is angered and saddened when she uncovers Ed’s deception. Through this brutal awakening she comes to

\(^{15}\) Studies have shown that it was poor women who were largely imprisoned under these offenses. See Fauzia Gardezi, “Nationalism and State Formation: Women’s Struggles and Islamization in Pakistan,” in Neelam Hussain, Samiya Mumtaz, and Rubina Saigol (eds.), *Engendering the Nation-State*, volume 1 (Lahore: Simorgh Women’s Resource and Publication Centre, 1997), 79-110. Also see Shahnaz Khan, *Zina, Transnational Feminism, and the Moral Regulation of Pakistani Women* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2006).

\(^{16}\) The Laila Majnun story is part of Islamic folklore associated with the Persian poet Nizami Ganjavi (1141-1209). See Nizami, *The Story of Layla Majnun*. Translated and edited by Rudolf Gelpke (New Lebanon, NY: Omega Publications, 2011).
terms with both the poet’s violent death that has been covered up by the state, and her mother’s suicide. As part of her emotional recovery, to make her peace with the past she decides to volunteer as a researcher on a documentary about the twentieth anniversary of the Hudood Ordinances. The novel underlines the inability of the protagonist to access her own family history because of the conflict between a Marxist-led resistance, symbolized through the figure of the poet, and the subjugation of the militarized state, emphasized in the references to the Hudood Ordinances and her mother’s suicide as resistance to being captured by the state.

Shamsie’s heroine embodies the necropolitics and necropower of the state and of resistance movements as she falters through life unable to emulate the confidence of an earlier generation. Aasmani relives the trauma of historical moments through newspapers, archives, and conversations in order finally to come to terms with the reality of her mother’s suicide. As part of her archival research to uncover the truth, she comes across a sound file in which her mother is in conversation with a cleric, Maulana Moin Haq, in 1986. This gives the reader an insight into the intersectional feminist struggle of which Samina was part. In the clip, she responds to the inevitable veiling question with her own interpretation of Qur’anic verses that challenges the Maulana’s perception. She also uses this opportunity to air her views on the state’s involvement in the war in Afghanistan, and the aftermath that will come for the Mujahideen, who have been recruited internationally through a Pak-American alliance to fight the Soviets with the blessings of the clergy. Samina’s position amplifies how the women’s movement in Pakistan responded to clerical diktats, and she speaks with the hindsight of the aftermath of the Cold War. It is clear that sovereignty and the law colluded with religious ideology to ensure that a state of emergency was created in order to overlook the violence and bloodshed. The sound clip allows Aasmani to review the necropower of the state and recognize its collusion with the deep state at the time and to come to some kind of cognizance of her mother’s resistance. She is unable to come to terms with the trauma of never seeing her mother’s dead body, however. Her global and local job experiences remind her of the continued state of siege when it comes to social justice, and the documentary film is for her an act of resistance that will narrate the truth as she sees it.

It is in the character of Aasmani that we find the novel’s more troubling outlook, that of trauma, mental disassociation, and a broken body. She is a witness to the crisis of democracy in Pakistan and is haunted by her mother’s direct experiences of the necropower of a militarized state. To convey how the necropower of the state is enacted on women’s bodies, the narrator intersperses Aasmani’s memory of the resistance-led lives of Samina and Omi with the pronounced inclusion of the famous case of Safia bibi. The case underscores the injustice of Sharia law: in spite of Safia’s father having filed a complaint of rape, the law punished a blind peasant woman for fornication but allowed her rapists and employers, landlord and son, to walk free. This is an important event in the history of the women’s movement in the 1980s, and is why activists were galvanized into action, wrangling with the law and challenging the so-called zina ordinance. 

17 See Shireen Khan Burki, “The Politics of Misogyny: General Zia-ul-Haq Islamization of Pakistan’s Legal System,” Contemporary Justice Review 19/1 (2016), 103-119. https://doi.org/10.1080/10282580.2015.1101683.
**Broken Verses** thus presents an archive of Aasmani’s memory, and the “celestial revolution” promised by the protagonist’s name is subdued by the death-worlds she inhabits. Aasmani retreats into an abject self, absorbing the silences of state and family history as necropolitical trauma. While she decides to address her neurosis by actively reclaiming her mother’s story, reconstructing the archive of her mother’s past draws her to the sea in which Samina drowned herself: “I bend my back and lower my cupped hands just below the surface of the sea. Her name and the sand stream out between my fingers, dissolve into the waves, and are carried away.” Aasmani struggles to understand why a resistance figure such as her mother gave up on life. The sea colors her imagination; the waves calm her in the crisis that she is living, and Aasmani tries to find truth in the natural world. Shamsie narrates a pessimistic analysis of Pakistani politics, showing that Samina had little recourse other than suicide if she was to ensure that she did not experience a fate similar to the poet’s, given her political associations. **Broken Verses** conveys the politics of a militarized and deep state in Pakistan as well as the narratives that remain unknown to the next generation, who have to contend with cycles of violence from within and outside. It expresses a visceral critique of how General Musharraf’s “enlightened moderation” programme to democratize Pakistan through the opening up of the media industry was determined by an ideological re-appropriation of “youth culture, progressive thought and multiple perspectives.” Aasmani and Ed, who grew up in the 1980s, are precursors to the noughties generation. Their relationship does not echo the tragic nostalgia of Laila Majnun encapsulated in Samina and Omi’s relationship. Instead, it suggests the unbridgeable gap between those whose lives are curtailed by undemocratic futures, creating webs of deceit, untrustworthiness, and emotional dysfuctionality.

**Burnt Shadows**

In **Burnt Shadows**, Shamsie uses the form of the historical novel, juxtaposing the consequences of World War II and Partition through the experiences of Hiroko Tanaka, an East Asian female survivor, who travels from Nagasaki to Delhi, then to Karachi, and Afghanistan, before finally settling in New York City after 9/11. The opening epigraphs of the novel are extracts from poems by the Kashmiri American Agha Shahid Ali and the Urdu poet Sahir Ludhianvi, echoing the desolation of loss and the bittersweet lessons of history. Shamsie was taught by Agha Shahid Ali while studying in the United States and holds him in high regard. The multilingual engagement and inter-generic features of her writing are partly a testimony to his influence. The lines in the epigraph from Agha Shahid Ali’s, “Snow on the Desert,” recall the Bangladesh liberation war of 1971 and its permanent separation from Pakistan, a time of death and of suspension of the law through militarization by the West Pakistan state:

> … a time
to recollect
every shadow, everything the earth was losing,

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18 K. Shamsie, *Broken Verses*, 338.
19 K. Shamsie, *Broken Verses*, 4.
The mood of the poem is captured in the novel’s nostalgic symbolism of love and loss, conveyed by the coming together of the Japanese Hiroko and the Indian Muslim Sajjad. It underlines the borders that are always present, the absent presence of accountability to the state, even under democratic leadership, and how those borders are reformulated through new stories and new identities articulating a permanently changed vision of South Asia.

In the novel, the power of multilingual connections is shown to be greater than the power of nationalism, as it brings together unlikely family pairings in the friendship between Harry, the son of Ilse and James, and Raza, the son of Sajjad and Hiroko. Harry is a CIA operative who runs his own private security firm from the United States after leaving the service. Raza is a gifted translator of languages who moves across continents and families. Harry promises to help him out with his studies and his applications to American colleges and later hires him to work for his security firm in America. They are commissioned by the American military to go to Afghanistan after 9/11. Harry is shot dead and the CIA blame Raza. In the meantime, Raza has been contacted by his friend Abdullah, who is now an illegal immigrant in America. Abdullah is on the run from the FBI and wishes to return to his family in Afghanistan. Events unfold in such a way that Raza manages to escape the CIA in Afghanistan with the help of Abdullah’s contacts, who arrange his illegal passage to Canada. Harry’s daughter, Kim, agrees to drive to Canada to bring Raza back safely to Hiroko in New York. And as a favor, she agrees to smuggle Abdullah over the border from the United States to Canada in the trunk of her car. When Kim arrives in Canada, she gets cold feet and calls the police. Kim’s actions inadvertently doom Raza, mistakenly identifying him as the illegal Afghan taxi driver Abdullah. She believes that the law will favour the innocent, and that her father’s death will be exonerated by her act of goodwill for the nation. What she doesn’t anticipate is the lack of rights and exception to the law in the racialized post 9/11 landscape.

[20] From Agha Shahid Ali, “Snow on the Desert,” in A Nostalgist’s Map of America (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1991), 100-101, quoted as the opening epigraph of Burnt Shadows. The full poem is available at https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43275/snow-on-the-desert. Accessed 24 November 2020.

[21] See Aroosa Kanwal’s perceptive close reading of Abdullah and Kim’s discussion that reiterates a misunderstanding over Islam and a stigmatization of ethnicity coloured by a racialized attitude toward Muslims after 9/11. Aroosa Kanwal, “After 9/11: Islamophobia in Kamila Shamsie’s Broken Verses and Burnt Shadows,” in Claire Chambers and Caroline Herbert, Imagining Muslims in South Asia and the Diaspora: Secularism, Religion, Representations, (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), 185-197.
The novel first introduces Raza in a prologue, as a prisoner bound for Guantanamo Bay, donning an orange jumpsuit and pondering the question, “How did it come to this?”22 At this opening stage we are told nothing about him. The novel does not attempt to explain or unpack this image for the reader until the very end. It does convey North America’s imperial adventures and how the rule of law can be suspended through a strategic use of territory by a leading democracy. Political conflicts, moral values, personal relationships and the bonds of community thus all push against the borders of national belonging and citizenship which were being aggressively reaffirmed after 9/11. As part of his reading of the global English novel, Peter Morey argues that Burnt Shadows offers “a mode of ethical critical engagement with inequalities of power that allows Otherness to flourish while eschewing mastery over it.”23 I would extend his reading to suggest that the ethical question being asked by the novel is about planetary democracy and sovereignty, by underlining the mixing of people and communities across global locations while drawing attention to the unequal experiences of forced migration. A character such as Kim is inattentive to those details and is therefore unable to see how migrants and refugees pay the price for the actions of uncritical patriots. By the end of the book, the narrator has shown the reader that the positive characterizations and freer movements of Sajjad and Hiroko are not possible for Raza after 9/11. The self and other are at a greater distance from each other, and the planetary democracy envisaged through Sajjad and Hiroko’s coming together is set back by the experiences of the next generation.

Home Fire

Families and borders play a central role in Shamsie’s fiction nowhere more strikingly than in Home Fire. Necropolitics informs the storyline as the author narrates how young British Muslims are excluded and racialized in Britain. Globally, since 9/11 and 7/7, Muslims have faced increased securitization and discrimination as a problem community defined by terrorism and illiberal thought. As Peter Morey and I argue in Framing Muslims, “A flipside of this troubling Other presence has been a reinvigoration of the desire among ‘host’ nations to define and contain the parameters of national belonging: a move frequently having to do with the delimiting of Muslim identity around questions of citizenship and practice.”24 The story in Home Fire engages in a critique with changes made to citizenship law in Britain in 2002 and 2014 that allow the state greater powers against the backdrop of Isis, “jihadi brides,” and Muslim families with young people who are a “problem.” In a 2018 op-ed, Shamsie writes that she was alarmed by the authoritarian powers wielded by the Secretary of State post 9/11, authorizing the state to decide who can be made unBritish.25

22 K. Shamsie, Burnt Shadows, 3.
23 Peter Morey, Islamophobia and the Novel (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 201.
24 Peter Morey and Amina Yaqin, Framing Muslims: Stereotyping and Representation after 9/11 (Boston, MA, London: Harvard University Press, 2011).
25 Kamila Shamsie, “Exiled: the disturbing story of a citizen made unBritish’, The Guardian (November 17, 2018).
The “casting out” of Muslims by the state through the use of emergency powers suspends the law to protect the interests of the state. Sherene Razack has argued that this casting out is part of a structural race thinking that allows the western state to categorize the Muslim other as backward, non-secular and irrational.\textsuperscript{26} Razack’s reading complements Mbembe’s observation of how the boundaries between redemption and sacrifice, suicide and resistance, “martyrdom and freedom,” become blurred in modern responses to sovereignty and subjugation.\textsuperscript{27} *Home Fire* makes a timely contribution to the conversation about the racialization and prejudice experienced by young Muslims that places them outside the structures and norms of British values.

Inspired by Sophocles’ *Antigone*, Shamsie’s novel, structured in five parts, each corresponding to the characters Isma, Eamonn, Parvaiz, Aneeka and Karamat, offers a reworking of the classical text as a response to contemporary events in Britain. The story translates what might happen when a Muslim politician’s son becomes romantically attached to a girl with family connections to radical Islamism. *Home Fire* introduces us to the orphaned Pasha siblings, Isma and the twins Parvaiz and Aneeka. Their father Adil Pasha has left home some years previously to become a jihadi fighter, and they now live a financially constrained life in a London suburb near Wembley. As the novel begins Parvaiz has disappeared without warning, to follow in his father’s footsteps. He has been persuaded by a recruiter, Farooq, to join the Islamic State, and journeys to Raqqa in Syria. However, not long after his induction he realizes he has made a mistake and wishes to return to the UK. When Aneeka learns of Parvaiz’s decision, she targets Eamonn Lone, the son of the Home Secretary, and begins a relationship with him, initially to win his confidence and get him to pressurize his father to arrange safe passage home for her brother. During this process, the pair fall in love. The Home Secretary, Karamat Lone, is a career politician who has disavowed his Muslim background to make it up through the ranks of the governing party. When he realizes his son is in love with Parvaiz’s sister, he forbids further contact. In the meantime, Parvaiz is shot outside

\textsuperscript{26} Building on Giorgio Agamben’s analogy of the *homo sacer*, Sherene Razack traces the use of emergency law by the colonial state to argue how sovereign power was used to justify violence against ‘disobedient’ and dissenting bodies. Sherene H. Razack, *Casting Out: The Eviction of Muslims from Western Law and Politics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008).

\textsuperscript{27} Shamsie’s fiction is a precursor to the case of citizenship rights that unfolded for Shamima Begum, a 15-year-old East London school girl who travelled to Syria to join Isis. Two years later Sajid Javid became the first British Muslim Home Secretary. In 2019 Begum’s British citizenship was revoked by Javed when she wished to return to the UK. She lost her appeal in 2020. Shamsie’s novel is both predictive and suggestive, written in advance of these political events presenting some disturbing insights about Britain’s relationship with its Muslim minorities and the lure of the Caliphate as promised by IS for those faced with economic poverty. See Rachel Sylvester, “Both sides now: inside the rise of Sajid Javid,” *Prospect Magazine* (January 27, 2019). Available at https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/magazine/both-sides-now-inside-the-rise-of-sajid-javid. Accessed 22 November 2020. See Gary Younge, “Shamima Begum has a right to British citizenship, whether you like it or not,” *The Guardian*, (February 21, 2019). Available at https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/feb/21/shemima-begum-right-british-citizenship?fbclid=IwAR3WqWYw9gK_8ujS_G-dwB4zETi0EePBHfGR8rsciHe_ws7K9poNgi3Xbfc. Accessed 22 November 2020.
the British High Commission in Turkey, trying to make his own way home. Lone does not allow Parvaiz’s body to be repatriated to Britain. Instead, the body is flown to Karachi where Aneeka travels to receive it. As a protest against the fact that her brother, and now she too, has been refused the right to return to Britain, she sits next to her brother’s ice-encased make-shift coffin and stages a mourning-ritual in one of the city parks outside the Karachi British High Commission. The park becomes a liminal space of public spectacle where the question of sovereignty and social justice are played out as a sister fights for the burial rights of her brother in front of journalists and cameras livestreaming this shocking staged performance around the world.

Eamonn travels to meet Aneeka. On his way he is intercepted by jihadists who strap a suicide belt on him. As the two lovers are reunited, they are marked for martyrdom. This final scene plays out the body in trauma and re-enacts the epic in dramatic fashion. Shamsie’s rewriting of Antigone thus reimagines a sister looking to claim the right to bury her “treason-ous” brother in his place of birth. The “sovereign,” in this case, the Muslim Home Secretary, declares Parvaiz stateless and leaves him to the mercy of the Pakistani state, as a dual citizen. His son, Eamonn, who was confident that his father would support him in his pursuit of love, discovers that his father holds him in contempt for his lack of ambition and has greater affinity for his role as a statesman than as a father. The communication between father and son breaks down and Eamonn releases a video to present his side of the story to the media. Meanwhile Karamat Lone reminds his assistant, James, “until this thing is over I don’t have a son and I don’t have a wife. I have a great office of state.”28 His wife advises him as follows: “Be human. Fix it.” 29 But there is, of course, no humanity in politics.

On the path to becoming a respected member of Parliament, Karamat Lone has come to be at loggerheads with his own community:

All because he expressed a completely enlightened preference for the conventions of a church over those of a mosque, and spoke of the need for British Muslims to lift themselves out of the Dark Ages if they wanted the rest of the nation to treat them with respect.30

Lone defends himself when confronted with the question that he hates Muslims with the statement: “I hate the Muslims who make people hate Muslims.”31 He feels their inverse racism and inauthenticity as British Muslims. The Lone family structure themselves within the political culture of whiteness that protects and legitimizes them as authentic British citizens. This internal division between communities is touched on several times in the novel as it moves across the Pasha and Lone families.

28 K. Shamsie, Home Fire, 246.
29 K. Shamsie, Home Fire, 254.
30 K. Shamsie, Home Fire, 59.
31 K. Shamsie, Home Fire, 231.
In contrast to Karamat Lone is Isma’s positionality and her interest in law and governmentality from the margins. She keeps within the bounds of the law and is always conscious of what limits she can cross without losing her rights. At the start of the novel, Isma is interrogated at the airport as she makes her way from London to Massachusetts to take up a scholarship to study in America. As part of the ordeal, she is quizzed about her expensive designer label jacket. This is followed by an extended interrogation by the immigration officer:

“Do you consider yourself British?” the man said.
“I am British.”
“But do you consider yourself British?”
“I’ve lived here all my life.” […]
The interrogation continued for nearly two hours.32

After being made to feel like a criminal and an outsider Isma is finally allowed to leave, once she understands that she does not qualify as a Brit because she might be disloyal to democracy, the Queen, or forget to watch national programmes such as the *Great British Bake Off*. During this whole exchange she weighs up the cost of mentioning her human rights to the immigration officials or of saying something sarcastic. But she doesn’t, because unlike her sister Aneeka, she is unconvinced that a rights-based discourse can accommodate the “fragility” of the Muslim subject.

The novel addresses the question of how an association with radicalization through the 7/7 attackers makes the Muslim citizen precarious. For instance, Isma speaks out in a university lesson about how colonial history and British law collude to curtail human rights:

*It overturned 790 years of precedent in British law,* the Kashmiri lecturer had been saying during an impassioned presentation on Control Orders and their impact on civil liberties when she saw the quiet girl in the third row roll her eyes. *Would you like to say something, Ms Pasha?* “Yes, Dr Shah, if you look at colonial laws you’ll see plenty of precedent for depriving people of their rights; the only difference is this time it’s applied to British citizens, and even that’s not as much of a change as you might think, because they’re rhetorically being made unBritish.” *Say more.* “The 7/7 terrorists were never described by the media as “British terrorists”. Even when the word “British” was used it was always, “British of Pakistani descent” or “British Muslim” or, my favourite, “British passport-holders”, always something interposed between their Britishness and terrorism.”33

This underlines the colonial state’s disregard of the law in its colonies, and Shamsie’s reference to a Kashmiri lecturer hints at another place where the law does not serve its citizens.

32 K. Shamsie, *Home Fire*, 5.
33 K. Shamsie, *Home Fire*, 38.
The focus, however, is on Isma’s interjection to remind the reader of the depriving of human rights of Britain’s migrant Muslim communities, and of how terror comes to be associated with “British Muslims” or “British of Pakistani descent.” This exchange reveals the strong parallels between colonial law and anti-terror legislation in a free democracy that withholds citizenship rights. Isma experiences this discrimination personally. The Pashas are declared unBritish and relegated to Pakistan when their actions are deemed unpatriotic and outside the law. Isma discovers what she has known all along—that there is no room for mistakes or forgiveness for the children of immigrants.

Something that sets the Pasha women apart from their Britishness is the hijab and turban worn by Aneeka and Isma. Eamonn asks Isma, “The turban. Is that a style thing or a Muslim thing?” to which she responds:

“You know, the only two people in Massachusetts who have ever asked me about it both wanted to know if it’s a style thing or a chemo thing.” Laughing, he said, “Cancer or Islam – which is the greater affliction?” […] “Jesus. I mean, sorry. That came out really badly. I meant, it must be difficult to be Muslim in the world these days.” [Isma] “I’d find it more difficult to not be Muslim.”34

The conversation reveals how Eamonn’s first instinct is to think through privilege rather than through difference. Historically, the fetishization of the hijab is an old prejudice that has a longer history in Britain; it remains a signifier of a performative religious identity with associated forms of dress, such as the shalwar qameez, in contrast to secular values.35

The hijab is used as a trope by Shamsie through which she structures the sexual relationship between Eamonn and Aneeka. Eamonn is sexually drawn to Aneeka’s hijab and wishes to “unpin the white hijab that framed her face.”36 The hijab gives Aneeka the quality of a mystical Laila and Eamonn of a love-crazed Majnun, both enacting a Romeo-and-Juliet-style love story as doomed lovers. As his relationship with Aneeka develops, Eamonn begins to distance himself from his father’s biases and larger than life persona to make his own moral judgements.

The concluding part of the novel is set in Karachi and narrates Aneeka’s martyrdom and mourning ritual in what is described as “an iconography of suffering.”37 In this unreal scene,
she breaks open the wooden ice coffin to touch Parvaiz’s face. As the drama unfolds, she is a vision in white, with her mud-covered dark hair flying in the howling dust storm and rose petals strewn around her. She makes her appeal for social justice to the Home Secretary:

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.”

The demand from Aneeka is met with derision by Lone who pounces on her use of the phrases “heads impaled on spikes” and “corpses thrown into unmarked graves” and repeats them in Parliament as an explanation for the bestiality of IS, for whom her brother forsook his own nation, and as a vindication of his decision as a statesman. Behind the scenes, he reaches out to the Pakistani High Commissioner to Britain to ask his government to remove Parvaiz’s decomposing corpse from the park and end Aneeka’s vigil. He is advised that the Pakistani state will not interfere because Aneeka has become the nation’s grief-crazed Laila:

“The people, and several opposition parties, have decided to embrace a woman who has stood up to a powerful government, and not just any powerful government but one that has very bad PR in the matter of Muslims and as recently as yesterday insulted us directly. So, now it’s political suicide for my government to get involved.”

In this discussion, like her brother, Aneeka is cast out: her British passport has been confiscated, and she does not have a Pakistani one. Lone will not allow her passport to be returned to her because of her protest, and the Pakistani state refuse to get involved. Like Parvaiz, she is now outside the law, a homo sacer. The Pakistani public and media connect emotionally with Aneeka’s love for family, appropriating her as a figure of resistance against Western hegemony, and recognizing in her story a tale that is universal and often narrated in folk epics, from Laila Majnun to Sassi Punnu, as hierarchical social injustice that favors the powerful.

In contrast to the characterization of Aneeka is that of Parvaiz. Before his death, trying to make sense of the past, Parvaiz reasons: “I’m prepared to face trial if I’ve broken laws. Just let me go to London. But he was the terrorist son of a terrorist father.” His state of exception is determined by necropower of both of the British state and the Islamic State. “The one thing that the violent respect is more violence,” Farooq tells him, justifying his position.

38 K. Shamsie, *Home Fire*, 225.
39 K. Shamsie, *Home Fire*, 228.
40 See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).
41 K. Shamsie, *Home Fire*, 171.
42 K. Shamsie, *Home Fire*, 165.
Parvaiz does not find the utopia he was promised in his role as a sound technician in the media wing of IS. Instead of the mundane everyday soundscape he used to capture from above his garden shed, he finds himself cast adrift recording sound effects of “beheadings, crucifixions, whipping.”

His desire to leave the Islamic State is ever present from the moment of his arrival and becomes urgent after he has witnessed a beheading. He feels dehumanized and wishes to return to London to his family but “He didn’t know how to break out of these currents of history, how to shake free of the demons he had attached to his own heels.”

The necropolitical trauma of his father’s world continues to haunt Parvaiz.

The pathologization of the Muslim man as inherently violent and the woman as a veiled victim are two stereotypes from which Shamsie tries to break away in her depiction of the twins Parvaiz and Aneeka, by humanizing their stories. Burdened by multiple exclusions, the contemporaneous necropower and necropolitics faced by the twins is enacted through the necropolitical trauma of borders. Isma’s plea for Aneeka to accept the law sets the siblings apart over the question of justice. Isma can find her peace through prayer but Aneeka cannot: like Antigone, she needs to enact justice for her brother’s body. She remains the most enigmatic character in the novel and her narrative voice breaks down as a fragmentary mix of tabloid news reports, trending twitter hashtags, tweets, and the account of her journey to Karachi reflecting her broken mental state.

The conventional prose narrative voice returns with Karamat Lone, who is the final storyteller of the book. The novel closes with two visions, one of love triumphing over hate, as Eamonn and Aneeka are united in a park under a tree, the other of hate, as they are about to be blown up. Karamat Lone is left watching the constant replay of the final scene of death on all television news channels. The trauma of necropower is now a permanent part of his life. Necropolitics is central to the novel depicted in the racism of the British state, the subjugation of the Muslim citizen, and the violent power of the ideological Islamic state. This is all depicted through five different voices, four of which belong to second-generation immigrants. Through their narrations, internal and external, the story reiterates that there is a large rift between the British state and its British Muslim youth population, particularly young Muslim men and women, who are under increasing pressures of surveillance, racialization and grooming. It represents an intergenerational divide between Muslim families exacerbated by state interventions. Beyond the novel, as part of their daily interaction with British life, young Muslims such as Isma, Parvaiz and Aneeka have also been part of intensive scrutiny through counter-radicalization programmes in the UK. For example, the Prevent duty (the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015), that was introduced as part of a state-led response to 9/11, to counter homegrown terrorism requires citizens to become informants. The crude way in

43 See Claire Chambers’ insightful reading of radicalization, jihadism and how sound and text work in the novel: Claire Chambers, “Sound and Fury: Kamila Shamsie’s Home Fire,” The Massachusetts Review 59/2 (2018), 202-219. https://doi.org/10.1353/mar.2018.0029.

44 K. Shamsie, Home Fire, 169.

45 K. Shamsie, Home Fire, 171.
which the programme has been implemented, particularly its intrusive presence in education institutions, has, however, contributed to alienation amongst Muslim youth communities through surveillance and racial profiling.\textsuperscript{46}

Necropower, necropolitics and trauma come together as \textit{necropolitical trauma} in \textit{Home Fire, Burnt Shadows} and \textit{Broken Verses}. Shamsie’s novels demonstrate a growing dissatisfaction with the limitations of democracy imposed on migrant movements by the law. In her representations of Pakistan and Britain she is increasingly concerned with the question of social justice. As a writer, she is sensitive to the necropolitical traumas of history that characterize individual lives and attempts to humanize the stories of those who are on the margins of society. The three novels gravitate toward a type of redemption through death for those who experience the limits of the state. The stories stop short, however, of making death an explicit form of activism, and portray the kind of \textit{death-worlds} Mbembe describes. The novels fictionalize a politics in which states are at war with their migrant communities and necropolitical trauma has become a permanent condition used by militant groups to target youth populations who are on the margins of society. Shamsie’s writing gravitates toward the idea of a planetary democracy where law, sovereignty and justice are not subservient to necropolitical traumas. Through experimentations with form, character, and voice in her storytelling she offers us glimpses of pessimistic realist worlds tempered by romance, spirituality and violence. Her work demonstrates that she is a writer committed to bridging worlds and will speak truth to power in the service of social justice.

\textsuperscript{46} For an in-depth study of how Muslim students feel alienated and racialized on university campuses see Alison Scott-Baumann, Matthew Guest, Shuruq Naguib, Sariya Cheruvallil-Contractor, Aisha Phoenix, with the assistance of Tareq Al Baghll and Yenn Lee, \textit{Islam on Campus: Contested Identities and the Culture of Higher Education in Britain} (New York: Oxford University Press), 2020.