



An Antigone at the Time of Islamophobia: Analysing the Muslim Diasporic Identity in *Home Fire*

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ABSTRACT

The tales of Greek mythology have elated many artists for thousands of years. The Antigone legend, together with half a dozen ancient Greek myths, is perhaps one of the most reworked myths of western civilisation. By putting a topical spin on the ancient Greek tragedy, the story of Antigone plays out in this modern world through *Home Fire* by the Pakistani-British novelist, Kamila Shamsie. This paper proposes to compare the myth of Antigone with that of the events in *Home Fire* and also juxtaposes the characters Karamat Lone and Parvaiz Pasha as the two extreme viewpoints representing the rise of obsessive Westoxification and Fundamentalism that pit the Aneeka/Emonn love affair leading to collateral damage. The paper wraps up by summarizing the contextualizing strategies adopted by Shamsie to make it suitable to address the issue of diasporic journey of the Muslim community from Pakistan in the backdrop of Islamophobia/Terrorism.

Keywords: Antigone legend, fundamentalism, Islamophobia, reworked, westoxification,

1. Introduction

In this world of forgeries, where some might be in danger of losing their faith in literature, a contemporary reworking concept is unquestionably a challenging responsibility. Retelling is a widely used skill in everyday life and when we retell, we usually summarise by compressing what we have heard, read or seen into a shorter text. The tales of Greek mythology have elated many artists for thousands of years. The *Antigone* legend, together with half a dozen ancient Greek myths, is perhaps one of the most reworked myths of western civilisation. Countless retellings have taken place and Maria Pospichil Alter in her article *Antigone: A Myth in Change* wonders why *Antigone* does “recur in art and thought of the twentieth century to an almost obsessive degree”.

Antigone, daughter of Oedipus, king of Thebes, & Jocasta (his mother & wife) attempts to bury her brother Polynices against King Creon’s order is caught and ordered to be buried alive by her uncle, the King. Creon’s change of heart comes too late and by that time Antigone, Creon’s son Haemon and his mother Eurydice kills themselves thereby leaving the story as a tale of sufferings.



By considering the various retellings of *Antigone*, we can observe that the translation by Anne Carson, Seamus Heaney and Jean Anouilh stands exceptionally dominant. The poet Anne Carson's translation of *Antigone* is retitled as *Antigonick* which suggests that the play is all about timing. Seamus Heaney's *The Burial at Thebes: Sophocles' Antigone* reminds us of the significance of the play in Irish Culture and politics and Jean Anouilh's translation of *Antigone* is produced as a protest against the fascist regime in France imposed by Hitler after his army occupied the country during the Second World War.

By putting a topical spin on the ancient Greek tragedy, the story of *Antigone* plays out in this modern world through *Home Fire* by the Pakistani-British novelist, Kamila Shamsie. She is one among the new wave of Pakistani writers who are based in Britain and successful in both Pakistan and the West. Her novels are mostly set in Karachi. Karachi is "the canvas of my life", Elizabeth O'Reilly quotes Shamsie in *Literature*. She fascinates her readers into the story not only through her details but also making them feel the emotional, physical and mental needs of the character. Her novels deals with huge themes like war and love zooming on the baroque details of her characters.

In *Home Fire* we can observe that the story of *Antigone* differs from other retellings. For Sophocles' Antigone is the older sister. But Shamsie's *Home Fire* retells *Antigone* as the story of two British-Pakistani families, divided over a rebel brother's fate and skillfully crafts a multifaceted tragedy about cultural tensions and radicalisation in modern London. Narration is in segments thereby prompting the reader to see through each character's eyes. The novel poses heavy questions about British politics and society.

2. Retelling the Post 9/11 Pakistan

Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire* attracted a large number of reviewers who positively noted and appreciated the novel's adaptation of Sophocles' time tested tragedy *Antigone* as well as Shamsie's draping the story with much pressing contemporary concerns regarding the new dilemmas faced by the Pakistani—British diasporic community after the terrorist events of 9/11 and 7/7 that have changed the shape of the world. As a play has five acts, the novel is set in five locations: London; Amherst, Massachusetts; Istanbul; Raqqa, Syria; and Karachi, Pakistan. Similarly, the novel's structure echoes the five acts of a Western drama. Each substantial chapter is told from the perspective of a major character: a devoted sibling in her late 20's called Isma; the man she has a crush on, Pakistani-Irish Brit Eamonn; Isma's rebellious younger brother Parvaiz; her sister and Parvaiz's twin Aneeka; and Eamonn's politician father Karamat.

The story begins with Isma finally liberated from her responsibility. After spending years raising her twin siblings in the wake of their mother's death, she resumes her dream of studying in America. But she can't stop worrying about Aneeka, her beautiful and impulsive sister back in London, or her brother, Parvaiz, who has disappeared in pursuit of his own dream, to live up to the dark legacy of the jihadist father he never knew. In Sophocles' play *Antigone*, a teenage girl is forced to choose between obeying the law of the land and religious



law. This is essentially the dilemma faced by Aneeka, the beating heart of *Home Fire*, Kamila Shamsie's Man Booker-longlisted loose contemporary reworking of *Antigone*. Her twin brother, Parvaiz, has left London to work for the media arm of ISIS, after discovering that his absent father died on route to Guantanamo. Her sister Isma tells the police where he has gone and Aneeka is appalled:

You betrayed us, both of us. And then you tried to hide it from me. Don't call, don't text, don't send the pictures, don't fly across the ocean and expect me to ever agree to see your face again. We have no sister. (195)

It is a beautifully Sophoclean touch that Aneeka is far angrier with her sister for betraying their brother than she is with her brother for betraying them both.

The close spellings proximity to the names of Sophoclean characters: Isma—Ismene; Aneeka—Antigone; Parvaiz—Polyneices; Karamat—Creon; and Eamonn—Haemon, is suggestively maintained by Shamsie. Shamsie replaces the socio-political contexts of Thebes, stricken by murder, incest, pollution and plague, with the socio-political contexts of present day post-9/11 and post-7/7 Britain, plagued by the contradictory social trends of Islamophobia, Fundamentalism, and Terrorism. In some ways, Shamsie owes a greater debt to Jean Anouilh's adaptation of *Antigone*. For Sophocles, *Antigone* is the older sister, but Anouilh reversed the birth order of the two sisters. In *Home Fire*, Isma is much older. Shamsie drops the incestuous nature of the children's parentage, and ditches the second brother, so that Parvaiz is guilty, except fratricide.

3. Investigating Westoxification and Fundamentalism

Apart from the most popularly established interpretation of the novel as a present day fictive adaptation of Sophocles' drama *Antigone*, *Home Fire* is regarded as a timely overture to the perils of rising Islamophobic 'Westoxification' of Muslims like Karamat Lone and its devastating effects on innocent people like Aneeka and Eamonn. Shamsie's highly political novel *Home Fire* "juxtaposes the characters; Karamat Lone and Parvaiz Pasha as the two ultimate frame of reference representing the rise of obsessive 'Westoxification' and an ever clinging sticky 'Fundamentalism' respectively that pit the Aneeka/Eamonn love affair", says Aamer Shaheen and two others about *Home Fire*. The whole of the West was grazed by the fire of Islamophobia and extremist reactions became flagrant against the diasporic Muslim communities. The word 'Islamophobia', meaning hatred, hostility, and fear of Islam and Muslims, and the discriminatory practices that result, came into vogue after the British Government, in order to revisit its race relations, commissioned the Runnymede Trust in 1996 to compile a report on British Muslims and Islamophobia. With the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Iranian Revolution of 1979, and the Rushdie Affair of 1988-89 in the background, the report, entitled "Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All" (1997), confirmed that the "prejudice against Muslims has reached a scale requiring action to protect the basic rights of Britain's Muslim citizens"(Green, 9-11). Shamsie's *Home Fire*, largely



modeled on Sophocles' *Antigone*, depicts the trials and tribulations of a family with a legacy of terrorism in the present day England.

Set in 2015, the novel portrays the disintegration of a home plagued by terrorism. Isma Pasha and her two twin siblings: Aneeka Pasha and Parvaiz Pasha, with the history of silence about their jihadi terrorist father Adil Pasha, are suddenly claimed by it when Parvaiz is trapped by Farooq, a recruiter of ISIS. Isma leaves for America for higher studies and on knowing the price she and her sister Aneeka will have to pay if they keep Parvaiz' joining of a terrorist state a secret, reports it to the police. Aneeka on knowing this breaks up with Isma. She hatches a plan to bring Parvaiz back to England by alluring Eamonn, the son of Britain's newly appointed Home Secretary Karamat Lone. Although started as a scheming plan by Aneeka, both of them find themselves head over heels in love with each other very soon. Convinced by Aneeka, Eamonn talks to his father about his plan of marrying Aneeka and also about bringing Parvaiz back to England. Karamat Lone, a diehard enemy of those who betray their homeland, locks up Eamonn, preventing him from meeting or contacting Aneeka any further. Aneeka's British passport is confiscated when she tries to fly to Istanbul to escort Parvaiz back. Parvaiz on the other hand is intercepted by Farooq and is killed just outside the British Consulate in Istanbul. Karamat Lone, bars Parvaiz' dead body from a burial in England and is sent to Pakistan, his other nationality. Aneeka, heartbroken and ferocious on the unjust British laws, flies to Pakistan and gives a sit up protest in a park. She needs justice for her dead brother and seeks requests, via media, to allow her to give proper burial to her dead brother in England as a British citizen. Eamonn, somehow sneaks out from the house, uploads a video message on internet and leaves for Karachi to be by his beloved's side. When Eamonn enters the park, he is surrounded by a couple of men who make him wear a detonation belt. Aneeka runs to Eamonn to hug him knowing that he is to blast in no time by the bomb in the belt tied around his waist. The two lovers embrace their deadly fate at peace in each other's arms.

The social context of Islamophobia in British society is clearly shown by Shamsie at a number of junctures in the novel. Given the familial legacy of a terrorist father and a terrorist brother, it is no wonder to expect such a cumbersome and humiliating "interrogation on Heathrow Airport, London awaiting Isma while she is leaving for America" (3). Nevertheless the event of "spitting on hijab" (90) wearing Aneeka as she reports to Eamonn, the cause of her immediate bathing as soon as she reaches his apartment, is purely an instance of racism and Islamophobia. Aneeka, talking to Eamonn about the achievements of British Muslims, observes:

Do you say, why din't you mention that among the things this country will you achieve if you're Muslim is torture, rendition, detention without trial, airport interrogation, [and] spies in your mosques, teachers reporting your children to the authorities for wanting a world without British injustice? (90 – 91)

The language used in British newspaper stories, during Parvaiz Pasha's burial controversy, also confirms the Islamophobia trending in British society as Shamsie shows the British newspapers using the Islamophobic epithets for Aneeka and dead Parvaiz like: "Hojabi! Pervy Pasha's twin sister"; "Aneeka 'knickers' Pasha"; and "Muslim fanatic Parvaiz 'pervy' Pasha" (204).



Farooq, the recruiter of warriors as well as man power for ISIS, fans Parvaiz' hatred for the British racist and Islamophobic society by brainwashing him that Britain has lost its multiculturalisms by revising its welfare state plans on selective basis. According to him Britain was a great country once "when it understood that a welfare state was something you built up instead of tearing down, when it saw migrants as people to be welcomed, not turned away" (144). He believes that it is this failure of the multicultural British state, with its receding welfare benefits, that calls upon the creation of a Utopian Muslim welfare state. Farooq convinces Parvaiz that such a state which he calls "The Caliphate" (145) and "al-Dawla" (158) has come to existence where people like Parvaiz and himself can go and live "with the true enactment of the guiding principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity" (144). Parvaiz, "too young and naïve to understand the intricacies and complexities of international politics and also unsatisfied with his life, his neighborhood, and everything else about Britain" (123), is trapped into Farooq's descriptions of ISIS and the false utopian promises it makes.

Karamat Lone, son of a "seamstress mother" (60) and "a newspaper-kiosk vendor" (62), is a second generation Pakistani-British who has risen to the stature of British Home Secretary, not solely basing on his acumen but also due to his qualities to integrate completely into British culture. Karamat is a complex character. Like Creon of *Antigone* Karamat's claim to the position of British Home Secretary is weak too. He is not white despite all his integrationist efforts and his position in politics is not backed by the ethnic and religious community of British Muslim diaspora he belongs to. Therefore it is natural for him to behave as a staunch believer in British nationhood and unwavering following of the state laws to justify his claim to British politics, British public office, and nationality as well. He is a mimic man with no ambivalence. His rich Irish-American wife Teresa O'Flynn called as Terry; his elder son's Muslim name 'Ayman' disguised in Irish spellings: 'Eamonn'; and his daughter's English name: 'Emily', are the indicators of his Westernization. Due to his obsessive following of the Western culture, he is despised by his British Muslim voters, so much so that since they "voted him out in the elections", he contests elections from "a safe seat with largely white constituency" (35). Being an alleged atheist with a strong stomach for costly wines he is labelled by the members of British Muslim community as a "sellout, coconut, opportunist, traitor" (35) and Isma calls him with epithets like 'Mr. British Values', 'Mr. Strong on Security', and 'Mr. Striding Away from Muslimness' (52). He is so much enamored and obsessed with the white British culture and values that his concept of national identity is completely in line with the white British. He is equally Islamophobic as they are. Rather he is so much 'Westoxified' that he is more British than the white British themselves. And when it comes to dealing with the new phenomenon of a rising trend among the young Muslim British to join the terrorist organizations- their way of responding to the white Islamophobia post-9/11 and 7/7 bombings, Karamat Lone has to, as Aneeka observes, "prove he's one of them (white British), not one of us (British Muslims)" (34). As Karamat Lone had dealt with the issue of Adil Pasha, while he was an MP, so he does with the case of Parvaiz Pasha but this time more mercilessly as he is British Home Secretary now. Since his taking the charge of the office of the Home Secretary he recounts:



As you know, the day I assumed office I revoked the citizenship of all dual nationals who have left Britain to join our enemies. My predecessor only used these powers selectively which, as I have said repeatedly, was a mistake (188).

4. Conclusion

Shamsie's rehash in *Home Fire* places herself in the same predicament as her characters. There's an ambitious stylistic shift-Aneeka's section is told in poetic fragments interrupted by a chorus of media reports. The novel's first half is an intimate family tragedy with a few political overtones. But in its second half it upends all our expectations because it isn't just any family tragedy. It's Sophocles' *Antigone* dragged out of ancient Greece and into a contemporary Muslim family, which means the intimacy of the novel's first half has to go, because Greek tragedy requires epic, larger-than-life intensity. Retelling *Antigone* must be one of the more difficult exercises an English novelist can attempt. *Home Fire* not only discourses with Sophocles' work on a moral and structural level, but with modern translations of *Antigone* by Anne Carson and Seamus Heaney. "*Home Fire* pulls off a fine balancing act: it is a powerful exploration of the clash between society, family and faith in the modern world, while tipping its hat to the same dilemma in the ancient one", recites Natalie Haynes in *The Guardian*. *Home Fire* is one of the best Antigones of this period, and one of Shamsie's best novels.

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