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SPEAKING FOR OUR TIMES

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When I started reading Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire*, it was not for the fact that it was the new work of a much-admired writer of the sub-continent or that it was a contemporary adaptation of the famous Greek tragedy *Antigone*. It was rather that I wanted to see what an all-too-real setting of an Islamophobic West was like. Where airports can mean long interrogations rather than a vacation and browsing histories are a potential liability, which Shamsie calls GWM (Googling while Muslim). All of which are not unusual in the daily lives of Muslim communities in the West since the events of 9/11, the U.S. invasion of Iraq, the collapse of Syria and the rise of the Islamic State.

Home Fire won Shamsie the Women's Prize for Fiction last year, with the judges declaring that it "spoke for our times". For one, it explores what it means to be a young Muslim in the West. Isma Pasha, a Muslim hijab-wearing Londoner, in the opening pages of the novel has "made sure not to pack anything that would invite comment or questions—no Quran, no family pictures, no books on her area of academic interest" when flying to the U.S. to pursue a PhD. In an hours-long interrogation, Isma has to defend her "British-ness" by giving her views on everything from democracy to the Queen and whether she considers herself British. The saddest part is that given the inevitability of the events, she had rehearsed many of these same questions earlier with her sister. Shamsie's novel, which came out

in 2017, was eerily prescient. Back when she was writing it, in early 2015, Shamsie said she thought the idea of a British Muslim Tory Home Secretary hardly likely. Then, last year, Sajid Javid was appointed to the post (earlier, in 2016, Sadiq Khan became mayor of London). The Britain in her novel is the Britain today—where British Muslim communities are other-ised, citizenship is stripped in the name of security, and young Muslims who joined the IS are cut off from their families and homes forever.

While usually literary exploration of social, political, and economic crises can take years or even decades to filter through, in recent years, the urgency of the moment has meant more and more works are coming out during, or even, before the major events of our time. Fiction has proved that it has the power to influence attitudes and lay the groundwork for social change.

Uncle Tom's Cabin by Harriet Beecher Stowe, depicting the reality of enslaved African Americans in the U.S., came out in 1852 and enormously influenced how (white) Americans viewed slavery and is said to have encouraged abolitionist views leading up to the civil war. A staple at American high schools, if it is so powerful still today in being able to evoke 19th century slavery, imagine the effect it had at the time.

Fiction seems to get through in a way that harrowing news reports, lengthy and detailed non-fiction by journalists and activists, just don't. At the height of the IS caliphate, do you recall the harrowing stories of Yazidi slaves, Mosul residents

fleeing their homes, or the individual stories of those killed, injured, or displaced?

But a story stays.

Home Fire is the story of three siblings in west London whose lives are changed forever when their brother leaves for Syria. Their father is long gone—a jihadist in conflicts in Muslim countries (Bosnia, Chechnya, Afghanistan) around the world, who eventually died while being transferred to Guantánamo Bay, captured by the Americans.

Since childhood, police and MI5 interrogations and visits have been a constant in the siblings' lives. So much so that Isma, the elder sister and de facto mother to twins Aneeka and Parvaiz since the death of their mother and grandmother, is the first to tell the police where Parvaiz has gone.

Shamsie depicts how Parvaiz was groomed by an IS recruiter who draws on his yearning to understand his father and on his feeling of isolation in a country where his religion and background means he is treated differently. He is told of, shown, and even subjected to, his father's torture at Bagram air base in Afghanistan.

The story is told from the different perspectives of the five main characters—the three siblings, home secretary Lone, and Eamonn (Lone's son who is seduced by Aneeka in an effort to get him and his father to help her twin brother get back from the caliphate).

Home secretary Lone has long distanced himself from his Muslim background and his speeches, preaching

that communities such as the one he came from should renounce their 'backward' culture and religion and conform to British ways, making him a hated figure to Muslims such as the Pasha family. They call him "Mr. British Values. Mr. Strong on Security. Mr. Striding Away from Muslim-ness." Hijab-wearing Aneeka is spat on in the Tube on the same day Lone makes such a speech.

Shamsie has said in interviews that while Lone is not based on Javid, she did consider him along with Khan and Baroness Sayeeda Warsi [all influential political figures in the UK of Pakistani migrant parents] in thinking up the character.

Another instance that strikes home is when near the end of the novel, Aneeka fights to bring her dead brother's body back home to the UK for burial. One can draw parallels with Shamima Begum's case earlier this year—the 19-year-old British IS 'bride' who wanted to return to the UK with her newborn as she didn't want to raise him in the refugee camps in Syria. In response, Javid declared that her UK citizenship be stripped. Her son did not live.

In Shamsie's novel, Lone does the same for Parvaiz as a dual national who 'betrayed' the UK to go be a jihadist. Parvaiz's body is then sent to Pakistan and Aneeka herself, in trying to bring him home from Istanbul where he had fled, has her passport confiscated. Parvaiz subsequently dies, shot for his desertion, before she can try to do so.

In an interview with *Middle East Eye*, Shamsie says, "I think Britain does need to think hard about why some of its citizens so lack a sense of belonging. It's always discussed in terms of the failure of migrants to assimilate, but the treatment of British Muslims as a suspect minority must be part of the conversation... For us to write them all off forever, and decide they were evil rather than groomed or exploited, didn't sit easily with me."

Shamsie's novel is not the only such fictional telling of major events of our time. Another story that touched on, arguably, the issue of our times is Mohsin Hamid's 2017 novel *Exit West* which explored migration, borders, and the refugee 'crisis' in Europe. Yet another is Angie Thomas' young adult novel *The Hate U Give*, which came out in 2017; the Black Lives Matter movement had started in the US, with Americans taking to the streets protesting police killings of African Americans, on and off between 2014 and 2016. In *The Hate U Give*, 16-year-old Starr Carter sees her close friend Khalil shot by the police in front of her in their predominantly black inner-city neighbourhood in Georgia. It goes on to portray the struggle she faces on whether to keep quiet about what she saw or fight for justice in unforgiving surroundings.

Growing up, I only read fiction. Only as I grew older did I begin to venture into nonfiction. Though I enjoy memoirs and biographies, I'm drawn to novels over nonfiction tomes on real-life events. You relate to characters and they get inside your head. Stories have the power to change our opinion and morals. When writers speak for our times, it has all the more power to bring about change.