



Pearson  
Edexcel

# GCE English Literature

Component 2:  
Prose

*Home Fire*, Kamila  
Shamsie

An Introductory  
Guide





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## An Overview

Kamila Shamsie's novel, *Home Fire* was published in 2017. The novel, which won the Women's Prize for Fiction in 2018, highlights the concerns and issues faced by Muslims both in the UK and around the world.

The novel is split into five separate sections, each following the life and thoughts of a particular character. The narrative is focussed on two British Muslim families: the Pasha family, Isma and her younger twin siblings, and Parvaiz, and the Lone family, the MP (who later becomes Home Secretary) Karamat Lone, his wife, Terry, and his son, Eamonn.

The novel joins together a number of characters, locations, and events to challenge and correct stereotypes as well as create an emotive and compelling story of love, identity, family, and duty.



## Key themes of the novel

- **Prejudice and stereotypes** – this important theme is prevalent throughout the novel. From the outset, Isma is subjected to a search at the airport (which she has rehearsed for and tried to avoid) as she is wearing a hijab. Isma and Aunt Naseem also express their concerns about Aneeka as although she is a practising Muslim and wears her hijab, she wears make-up and acknowledges both her sexual desires and her own attractiveness to men. The fear of prejudice and falling into stereotypical roles is perhaps best highlighted when Aneeka and Eamonn are discussing the bombing of the local canal in 1939. When Eamonn suggests she should look up more about it, Aneeka states how ‘Googling while Muslim’ is not a good idea. The prejudiced view of British Muslims is further seen through the treatment of Parvaiz. Even though he hasn’t actually committed any terrorist acts, he is guilty in the eyes of the British press and the coverage of his death is always accompanied by the word ‘terrorist’ and the rest of his story is not told.
- **Family, love and duty** – the strength and power of family and duty is apparent in all of the relationships within the book. Shamsie depicts two very different families to illustrate the importance, and inherent difficulties, of family life. The Pasha family are portrayed as a close family from the outset. Isma, as the eldest, has had to support and bring up her younger siblings when their father died, and she is very protective of them. Whilst she is away, she tries to keep up with Aneeka whilst worrying about her brother, Parvaiz. Everything Isma does is to protect her family but she is unable to prevent the deaths of both of her siblings, which are arguably caused, in part, by familial love and duty. Parvaiz is encouraged to join Farooq in Syria as Farooq knew and fought with his father in Bosnia. Parvaiz feels he is following in his father’s footsteps and continuing his legacy. Aneeka, from the outset, is devoted to getting her brother home from Syria. She tries to convince Eamonn to talk to his father and allow Parvaiz home and, when he is killed, she travels to Pakistan to retrieve his body and is also killed. The Lone family also depict a family struggling with family love and loyalty. Eamonn clearly admires his father, but, like Parvaiz, fears he is failing him in some way. Eamonn is grateful to his mother for allowing him to pursue his own ideas and life but wants to make his father proud. He struggles with his father’s controversial views and seems to be caught in a cycle of trying to please his father and wanting to develop his own life.
- **Identity, nationality and religion** – in her novel, Shamsie explores how identity is perceived by others through a person’s religion and nationality, and how narrow this view is. The Pasha family are British but their ‘British-ness’ and identity is constantly questioned due to their faith. When Isma is at the airport, she is accused of not being British despite her British passport and papers for travel. Likewise, both Aneeka and Parvaiz have their British citizenship revoked and are unable to return to the country of their birth due to a law introduced by Eamonn’s father, Karamat Lone, the Home Secretary. Lone is also a character who has his identity and views linked to religion. He feels that in order to be accepted into the British establishment that he must renounce his faith and distance himself from the customs and practises of his religion. Shamsie, through her depiction of Isma and Lone and their differing stances on their faith is trying to underline that religion and nationality are not mutually exclusive and should also only make up a small part of somebody’s individual identity. Shamsie also investigates the idea of grooming and radicalisation through the identity of Parvaiz. As



a young man who feels he does not have a lot of opportunities, he is desperate to shape his own identity. Farooq uses Parvaiz's insecurities and lack of identity to recruit him to his cause. He is able to use Parvaiz's father as a tool and convince him that Jihad is the answer, and that joining ISIS will allow him to be just like his father and to carve an identity for himself.



## Literary features that shape meaning

- **Settings** – Shamsie uses a lot of different setting in her novel to help shape meaning and create effects and to explore different cultures and identities. The opening sections with Isma paint an almost idyllic, academic and quiet setting of Amherst in the USA. The two different settings in London – the Pasha family home in Wembley and the Lone family home in Notting Hill instantly show the different economic and social circumstances of the two families. Shamsie uses Raqqa in Syria and Karachi in Pakistan to show how war and hatred can change people and their beliefs.
- **Characterisation** – Shamsie uses her characters to introduce key themes and issues within her novel. Through Isma and Aneeka she challenges stereotypical views of Muslim women. Although they are both practising and devout Muslims, Isma and Aneeka are both intelligent and are in full time education. Both women wear a hijab but see it as a way to express themselves and their own views about their faith. Both also express their sexual desires – Isma is attracted to Eamonn and is disappointed when he rejects her and Aneeka is aware that men find her attractive and she uses makeup and goes out regularly. Parvaiz represents a young man who is disillusioned with life in Britain and makes a bad decision. Due to the prejudices and pre-conceived ideas about Islam and the Qur'an, he is dismissed as a terrorist and never allowed the chance to explain his decision and atone for his mistake.
- **Timelines and narrative structure** – Shamsie mirrors the form of a play – the story of Home Fire is based on the Greek Tragedy, *Antigone* – and splits her novel into five separate, but connected sections. She assigns each of the main characters a section and allows the reader to learn more about their motivations and their history as the novel progresses. As the events overlap and move back and forth, the reader is able to get a sense of how different lives can interact with each other and interconnect. It also allows the reader to challenge their own views about the themes and the characters as more information unfolds throughout the narrative.
- **Dialogue and voice** – Shamsie writes in the third person narrative throughout her novel. She uses free indirect discourse which allows Shamsie to show the characters' different thoughts or viewpoints on the same issue and to create a rich narrative for the reader. Shamsie uses colloquialism and naturalistic language to underline the relationships within the novel. She also uses Urdu at key moments – Eamonn learns a few phrases to show his love for Aneeka and Karamat talks in both Urdu and English when he is talking to the Pakistan High Commission to show respect but also to underline that he is representing Britain in this matter. Parvaiz also learns some phrases in Arabic which indicates how he is becoming more and more radicalised. Shamsie varies the voices and types of writing she uses. Towards the end of the novel, she begins to use newspaper articles, Twitter feeds and hashtags to illustrate the tone of the reports and the bombardment of information the situation with Parvaiz is receiving. It is also used to underline the assumptions about gender and religion that people can jump to without knowing all of the facts.
- **Language and symbols** – Shamsie uses rich and descriptive language throughout her novel to create meanings. Farooq's language about the Caliphate and how it has made the country great again is engaging and the reader can see how Parvaiz believes every word he says. Shamsie also evokes strong emotions at the end of the novel when she



describes Aneeka's grief through personification. The use of the symbol of the parachutist is important in the novel. At the start of the novel, Isma sees a parachutist through her skylight. She likens it to the myth of Icarus who flew too close to the sun despite his father's warnings. This image at the start of the novel foreshadows the fate of Eamonn who also dies despite his father's warnings. It could also be argued that the title 'Home Fire' is a symbol for a lot of the events in the novel. 'Home' for most of the characters means Britain and they are desperate to be accepted and/or to return to their home. Home, in the case of Karamat can also be a reference to the Home Office and how his job relates to immigration and security. 'Fire' has connotations of disaster, but also of comfort. '*Keep the Home Fires Burning*' was a patriotic song from the First World War, so the title also alludes to patriotism. In the song, this phrase means to protect and maintain your home/country while the soldiers were away fighting, as Isma keeps her family together in the after their mother's death.



## Contextual factors

- **The author's life** – Kamila Shamsie is a British-Pakistani writer who was born in Pakistan and attended university in America. She now lives in London. Her books focus on race and politics around the world as well as gender issues and conflict. She has been interviewed many times about *Home Fire* and states that as well as being heavily influenced by the Greek tragedy, *Antigone*, she also used Gillian Slovo's work and research for her play *Another World: Losing our Children to the Islamic State* as inspiration.
- **Historical contexts** – Shamsie references ISIS and the Caliphate in Syria and Pakistan in her novel and it is this fundamentalist group that Farooq radicalises and grooms Parvaiz into joining. By 2017, ISIS were responsible for a number of bombings and attacks and were seen by many Western countries, including the UK and the USA as a dangerous terrorist organisation. Shamsie references the treatment Jihadists received if they were captured by talking about Guantanamo Bay (an American military prison in Cuba) where Parvaiz's father died and Parvaiz himself is tortured by Farooq's cousins to help him endure any punishment he may receive if he is also captured.
- **Literary context** – Shamsie's novel is based on Sophocles' tragedy *Antigone* which was written in 441BC. In his play, Sophocles tells the story of Antigone (daughter of Oedipus) who tries to rescue the body of her brother, Polynices, which has been left to rot outside the city walls after he is killed by his brother, Eteocles. Shamsie, like Sophocles, uses a five-part structure to her novel and uses a line from Seamus Heaney's translation of the play 'The ones we love... are enemies of the state' to introduce her novel.
- **Social context** – Shamsie's depiction of Islam and the Muslim faith is varied and gives many sides to the faith to break ill-informed stereotypes about the religion. Isma and Aneeka are strong, educated, and independent British Muslim women. Parvaiz is depicted as a sympathetic character who has been marginalised and ignored in Britain and becomes intrigued and won over by the false promises of Farooq who uses these insecurities to recruit him. Shamsie also explores the role of the government and how it can withdraw citizenship from dual nationals.



## Further information and reading

The following links may be a useful introduction to Kamila Shamsie and her thoughts about *Home Fire*.

- [Kamila Shamsie on Sophocles](#) – in this video interview, Shamsie discusses her use of Sophocles' play and the dangers of 'Googling while Muslim'.
- [Talk at the Politics and Prose bookstore](#) – in this longer video, Shamsie talks to an audience at the Politics and Prose bookstore about *Home Fire*.
- [Talk at Shakespeare and Company](#) – in this video interview, Shamsie talks about her work and the themes of *Home Fire*
- [The Guardian Interview](#) – in this interview with The Guardian newspaper in 2014, Shamsie talks about her life and her political views.
- [Twitter account](#) – Shamsie is a regular user of Twitter and her posts can be found here.
- [NPR review](#) – this is a review of the book on the NPR website.
- [Review](#) – this review from The Guardian website focusses on the novel's parallels to *Antigone*.

The following links may be a useful introduction to some of the historical/social/literary context mentioned above.

- [Tragic form in Home Fire](#) – this zoom presentation from Naomi Weiss discusses *Antigone* and *Home Fire*.
- [ISIS \(IS\)](#) – this webpage from the BBC discusses IS (or ISIS) and their aims.
- [Caliphate](#) – this article from the University of Birmingham website explains the Caliphate and its role in history.
- [International Centre for the study of Radicalisation](#) – the ICSR website has many interesting articles and opinion pieces about radicalisation and how to prevent it.
- [Guantanamo Bay](#) – this article on the Amnesty International website discusses the history of the detention centre and its methods.