"I don't know who I'd be if I wasn't a writer": An Interview with Kamila Shamsie

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Kamila Shamsie is the author of seven novels, including her most recent work, *Home Fire*, which was awarded the 2018 Women's Prize for Fiction. She grew up in Karachi, "one of the world's great, fascinating cities" (Chambers 220), where she enjoyed a privileged cosmopolitan and secular upbringing in a creative and intellectual family. She was educated in the United States, gaining a BA in creative writing from Hamilton College in New York State before attending the MFA Program for Poets and Writers at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. At both of these institutions, she was tutored by the Kashmiri poet Agha Shahid Ali, whom she credits as a significant influence on her early writing practice and style (see Shamsie, "Agha Shahid Ali"). For some years, Shamsie lived and moved between America, Pakistan, and the United Kingdom, before eventually settling in London. In 2014 she gained British citizenship – the difficulties of which process she likens to climbing a mountain ("I don't have [a favorite novel] in terms of content," she wryly observes, "but I will always love *Burnt Shadows* for allowing me to buy my way into a new visa category" ["Kamila Shamsie"]); she is now a Pakistan-UK dual national.

She published her first novel, *In the City by the Sea*, in 1998. It was awarded the Prime Minister's Award for Literature in Pakistan and shortlisted for the John Llewellyn Rhys Prize. With subsequent novels, further accolades followed. *Burnt Shadows* (2009) was shortlisted for the Orange Prize for Fiction, *A God in Every Stone* was shortlisted for the 2015 Baileys Prize for Fiction, while *Home Fire* was longlisted for the 2017 Booker Prize. In 2013, Granta included her in their once-a-

decade list of the "best of young British novelists," alongside Sarah Hall, Naomi Alderman, Helen Oyeyemi, and Zadie Smith: all writers who are currently shaping and defining contemporary British writing.

In addition to the long-length fiction for which she is best known, Shamsie is author of a considerable body of journalism and nonfiction, frequently writing for publications such as *The Guardian* and *The New York Times*. She notes that this element of her work became more prominent in the period following 9/11 and the subsequent "War on Terror"; suddenly, she jokes, she was "in the wrong religion at the right time," as newspapers and magazines found themselves in pressing need of informed political and cultural commentary on Islam and Pakistan. In this manner, she explains, she "fell into journalism" (Chambers 214). In 2009, she published an extended essay on the phenomenon of "the Violently Offended Muslim" (*Offence* 5) and the manner in which this trope – which she identifies as relatively recent and ingrained in the popular consciousness by the Salman Rushdie affair – has fed into the rhetoric of the "Clash of Civilizations" between Islam and the West. Pointing to the propensity of non-Muslim expert commentators to use the Quran to "explain" Muslim reactions to offence, Shamsie notes the historical plurality of Quranic interpretation and – in a rhetorical move characteristic of her writing – diagnoses a crucial failure to ask instead: "why at a precise collision of history and geography certain forms of interpretations should be privileged over others . . ." (11). Drawing out a history of political dissent within and between Muslim nation states, with a specific focus on Pakistan, *Offence* (2009) displays a concern with the forces of history, an eye for the crossing of multiple narrative threads, and an impatience with lazy stereotypes – all of which impulses similarly characterize Shamsie's fiction.

If Shamsie's work is attentive to large global themes of nation and history, it is also shaped, more locally, by family. She comes from a line of writers, politicians, and activists and identifies herself as the fourth generation of women writers in her family. She is the daughter of the writer, critic, and journalist Muneeza Shamsie and grand-niece of the Indian author Attia Hosain (1913-98). Both her great-grandmother Inam Habibullah, a politician and reformist, and her grandmother Jahanara Habibullah wrote and published memoirs. Just as the work and achievements of these women provided a backdrop to Shamsie's developing career, so, writing in an article that combines memoir and criticism to examine Shamsie's *Salt and Saffron* (2000) and Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1963) – two Partition novels from different generations of the same family – Muneeza Shamsie notes that her daughter "grew up to the sound of her mother's typewriter" (139). Discussing Shamsie's work, Madeline Clements identifies this "inherited, predominantly matrilineal" appreciation of the importance of writing as crucial to Shamsie's navigation of postcolonial Pakistan's "uneasy, gendered, national and neo-colonial environments" (124). And Shamsie herself makes a similar link when she observes: "while I grew up in the harsh world of a misogynist military government in 1980s Pakistan – where women's freedom was severely threatened – my familial legacy enabled me to imagine, without pressure or expectation, a life centred around writing" ("A Long, Loving Literary Line").

Alongside familial antecedents, Shamsie's work can be located within various literary influences and networks. For her generation of Indian and Pakistani Anglophone writers, the impact of Salman Rushdie's work inevitably looms large. As Muneeza Shamsie writes, "By the time Kamila wrote *Salt and Saffron*, the South Asian English novel had bedazzled the literary world. Salman Rushdie's

experimentation with language in *Midnight's Children* (1981) had released a uniquely hybrid South Asian sound, that had influenced countless writers, Kamila among them" (141). And the writer herself acknowledges that "Rushdie lurked behind the early books" (Chambers 212). Moving past Rushdie, Ruvani Ranasinha identifies Shamsie as belonging to "a new generation of Anglophone Pakistani authors trying to bring the predicament of their country to an international audience that is fixated by its turbulent political situation" (200) writers such as Mohsin Hamid, Mohammed Hanif, Nadeem Aslam, and Ali Sethi. Clements, instead, looks to locate her within a tradition of "world" writers and artists: "These include Joseph Conrad, Italo Calvino, Rainer Maria Rilke, Faiz Ahmad Faiz, Sadequain and Michael Ondaatje, in addition to Agha Shahid Ali" (125). The dual perspectives offered here on how Shamsie's work might best be located arguably speaks to the cosmopolitan range and character of her writing, as well as the multiple literary traditions – Pakistani, South Asian, British, and European – with which her work can readily be aligned.

Shamsie's writing career commenced with a sequence of four novels, each set at least in part in her hometown and largely in the kind of neighborhoods and social circles with which the author was familiar when growing up: "an elite Karachi of gated communities, private members' clubs, and exclusive beaches" (Chambers 211). These early works are commonly filled with rich, luscious detail and take evident pleasure in language and word play, with puns, anagrams, and creative misquotations littering the pages. *Salt and Saffron* commences with storyteller Aliya entertaining a plane full of passengers and ruminating on the word *bugaboo*: "a word that demands to be said out loud, particularly among bilingual Pakistanis who recognize its resemblance to "baghal boo" or "armpit odour," but its meaning "object of baseless terror" is misleading in this conversation . . ." (1). Like that of other Shamsie

characters, Aliya's delivery has the quick pace and arch self-consciousness of contemporary American teen television dramas, coupled with the author's reflective appreciation of the echoes and ironies thrown up by translations and borrowings across languages. In the following interview, Shamsie characterizes this early style as an enthusiastic appreciation of linguistic possibilities – a desire to say, simply: "Look at the language!" With her more recent novels, however, this element of playful display has largely dissipated.

From the first of these early works, Shamsie shows a readiness to tackle large political themes alongside her tales of families and lovers, and her local narratives are always subject to national and international pressures. From *In the City by the Sea*, in which the young protagonist's politician uncle is under house-arrest for allegedly plotting a coup, to *Kartography* (2002), in which the friendship of Raheen and Karim is always preceded by the tangled relations of their parents, whose love affairs play out in the 1970s against the backdrop of the Civil War between East and West Pakistan, in Shamsie's novels, the personal is always intimately entangled in the political. And, furthermore, the "political" to which she alludes is not an abstract notion, but one commonly and firmly rooted in the history of Pakistan, from Partition, through the 1971 War, to Pakistan's nuclearization project, General Zia-ul-Haq's Islamizing military regime in the late 1970s and 1980s, and on to the "War on Terror" and its fallout for the region. The particularities of each of these various events in their nation's history accompany and shape the private lives of many of Shamsie's characters. At the same time, Shamsie – in a recent conversation with three other Pakistani novelists writing in English, featured in *Herald* magazine – responds to questions about the rising international popularity of Pakistani fiction by declaring: "I

seem to have become incapable of imagining a novel that is restricted within the boundaries of a single nation" ("I Know").

With her fifth novel, *Burnt Shadows*, that instinctive internationalism comes to the fore as Shamsie extends the canvas of her fiction well beyond that of her earlier Karachi novels. At one point in the text, an incidental character declares: "I'm at home in the idea of foreignness" (141), and the ultimate fragility of seemingly immutable homelands, and of the sense of belonging they confer, is a common thread running through the book. Commencing in Nagasaki – with an oblique prologue in Guantánamo Bay – the plot, with its multiple free indirect narrative perspectives, travels from Japan at the end of the Second World War to the Delhi of pre-Partition India, through Karachi in the 1980s, New York in the aftermath of 9/11, and Afghanistan during the subsequent US military campaign. Discussing *Burnt Shadows*, and the turn in her work that it represents, Shamsie describes the decision to commence the story in wartime Japan as "simultaneously liberating and terrifying because, having written about the bomb falling in Nagasaki, there's now nothing that I need to consider off-limits" (Chambers 211).

Subsequently, the multiple border-crossings and transnational relationships that characterize *Burnt Shadows* recur in *A God in Every Stone* and *Home Fire*. Such cross-cultural connections can readily be viewed in optimistic terms. The unlikely relationships of British Vivien Rose Spencer and Turkish Tahsin Bey in *A God in Every Stone* and of Japanese Hiroko and Muslim-Indian Sajjad in *Burnt Shadows* provide cheering glimpses of sympathy and equitable exchange. But Shamsie's work is always also cognizant of the long and ongoing history of failed cross-cultural encounters; her novels are filled with instances of betrayal, misunderstandings, and miscommunications. Vivien Rose, momentarily, chooses loyalty to her nation over

loyalty to Tahsin Bey, while in *Kartography* a young Zafar succumbs to the ethnic tensions unleashed in the wake of the secession of East Pakistan and abandons his Bengali fiancé. Betrayal similarly shapes and frames the narrative in *Home Fire*, in which siblings are torn apart by competing loyalties to seemingly irreconcilable systems – national, cultural, religious and familial.

Polarities of connection and disconnection, communication and miscommunication repeatedly and uneasily coexist in Shamsie's novels, in which the author is always cautious of too-simple explanations. For Clements, this skepticism is rooted in Shamsie's experience of growing up in the intense political environment of Pakistan in the 1980s: an experience that reinforced a desire "to draw attention not only to long-standing abuses on several sides, but to insidious inequalities in 'cultural power' that persist between countries like Pakistan and America when it comes to their global communication" (125). Thus, in *Home Fire*, Shamsie resists the kind of stereotypes of Islamic behaviors on which the "Clash of Civilizations" narrative thrives, and proffers instead what Clements terms "the sensitive depiction of ordinary, globe-tethered citizens" (142).

Shamsie's Muslim characters are by no means perfect, but they also refuse to be foils for Western narratives of oriental exoticism, dangerous otherness, or female oppression. Her work commonly tests the fault-lines of Pakistan's deeply patriarchal, religious society, but it also catalogues political dissent, women's rights activism, and irreverent secularism. As Claire Chambers notes, discussing *Broken Verses* (2005) – "perhaps Shamsie's most Muslim novel to date" – Shamsie rejects the hegemonic version of Islam promoted by Zia-ul-Haq's regime, but at the same time, "refers extensively to, and often celebrates, the Qur'an, Sufi philosophy, Ramadan fasting and prayer" (207). These tensions between celebration and dissent recur in Shamsie's

work, and often go unresolved. One might take here, as an example, the question of the hijab, which Shamsie in the following interview dismisses with some understandable impatience, but which nevertheless persists in her novels. Whereas, in *Kartography*, a newly-veiled Sonia directs her concerned friends to discuss matters "more interesting than my wardrobe" (152), Hiroko in *Burnt Shadows* instead views the again newly-veiled women on a Karachi beach with puzzlement: "'Islamisation' was a word everyone recognized as the tool of a dictator and yet they still allowed their lives to be changed by it" (182). Shamsie's work raises issues, around freedom, for example, or duty, that are sometimes paradoxical and rarely straightforward.

Indeed, one might say that Shamsie's work aspires to an educated complexity. At one point in *Offence*, she muses on the immediate problem thrown up by any examination of Pakistan's national politics and religious ideology: "where to begin? In 1947, with the creation of Pakistan? Earlier, with the demands for Pakistan? Earlier still, with the Muslims in colonial India?" (15) A parallel might be drawn here with the opening scene of *Burnt Shadows*, which commences with a brief description of an unidentified man, shackled, stripped, and about to don an orange jumpsuit, asking himself: "*How did it come to this*?" (1). This question drives the narrative forward with some force, but it also drags it backwards some sixty years, in an attempt to untangle history, politics, culture, and family. This same principle – that in order to understand the complexities of the present situation one must be prepared to consider multiple, overlapping, and sometimes contradictory contributory narrative threads – underpins *Home Fire* and characterizes more broadly her distinctive literary voice.

The first version of this conversation took place on stage at the 2017 Literary Leicester festival and was hosted by the Contemporary Women's Writing Association.

FT: I'd like to start by addressing the theme of family. As noted, you very proudly come from a family of women writers, and I wonder how that shaped you as a novelist? Have the women in your family influenced, not just your decision to become a writer but also the content of your writing: the characters, the plots, the themes? Do those women in your life feed into the material of your work?

KS: While it does feed into my work, I'm not necessarily all that interested in looking at the links between my life and the novels. Which may be another way of saying that I don't ask how I come to the novels, because once I get to them, I want to look at them rather than at me. So the question of what connection my life has to my writing is one that I am almost peculiarly uninterested in. And yet, there are certain elements that do come up, and I don't think that it's necessarily around the women who are writers. Certainly, for example, in *Burnt Shadows*, in which the character of Hiroko is a Japanese woman who lives through the bombing of Nagasaki and then has to leave home and find new ways, and new homes: I'm sure I thought of both my grandmothers, one of whom was born in Germany and went to Delhi and then, on Partition, went to Pakistan, and the other, who grew up on the other side of the border, as it became, and then moved to Pakistan. The ways in which they survived the histories of what happened to them and their families. And inevitably, of course – because I grew up in households where people were writing and talking about books – the novel, for me, became the way that I would look at these things, without even necessarily knowing that I was looking at them.

FT: And part of that thinking through histories also, presumably, involves thinking about place? Karachi is at the heart of your fiction. In more recent works, it's still, clearly, very important to you, but we also get scenes in Nagasaki, Delhi, London, New York, and so on. How important is it to you that you capture a sense of place in your fictions? And how different is it to write about Karachi – the place you grew up – than other cities and countries that you perhaps know less well?

KS: There are bits of London in *A God in Every Stone*, but *Home Fire* is my first "London book," as I think of it. It's the first to contain a contemporary London setting. I've been living in London for ten years, and visiting for much longer than that, so in that sense writing the city didn't feel very much different.

The real break in my writing came after having written four novels that were all set in Karachi. Of course, Karachi is a city of 20 million, so there's a lot of it, but those four novels were set in the kind of neighborhood that I grew up in; the characters mostly went to the kind of school that I went to. So I was very much writing the world that I knew. But then I wrote *Burnt Shadows*, which starts in Nagasaki in 1945, and I had to rethink or *un*think the relationship between a writer and their lived experiences. But what didn't change was my sense of the importance of place. I realized that I couldn't write Nagasaki without writing Nagasaki: I couldn't write something set in Nagasaki without having a strong sense of place. The only difference was that part of the process of writing the book would be about establishing that sense of place, whereas when writing about Karachi, I had that knowledge already. And then I actually found that there was a great pleasure in doing that work. Although it also took an interminable amount of time. *Burnt Shadows* is a

novel of 370 or 380 pages, of which about 30 are set in Nagasaki, and those 30 pages took me longer to write than the rest of the book put together. And part of that was because I spent so much time thinking and imagining and searching my way into the place. So after that, going to, say, Delhi – which I didn't know very well, but I have been to Delhi and my father's family is from Delhi, and so you might say that I knew the people of Delhi, and I knew the history of Delhi – so that part of it, by comparison, was quite easy.

But the peculiar thing about *Burnt Shadows* was that, when I sent it to my publisher, who had published and read all my previous books, he said something unexpected: he said, there's a fantastic sense of place with all the settings, except Karachi! And I had to go and rewrite the Karachi section. And I realized that, because I had to do a certain amount of work with all the other places – with imagining myself into those places – with Karachi, instead, I had taken for granted that place was somehow going to magically appear in that section without my doing anything. And also, quite possibly, I didn't feel the same kind of interest to write about it, having done it already in four other books. And so I had to force myself to go back and put place into the Karachi section.

FT: More specifically than a broad notion of "place," we might also consider the significance of "home" as a concept in your work. Throughout *Home Fire*, there are competing and overlapping desires to find or create a place in which to feel at home and to go home. These themes recur in other novels (I'm thinking of Sajjad's mourning for his beloved Delhi in *Burnt Shadows*). Is it fair to say that home is typically a difficult concept for your characters?

KS: I don't think it is, actually. Certainly in the earlier novels – the Karachi novels – it isn't, because almost everyone grows up in one place and carries on living there, after occasional interruptions such as university abroad. In *A God in Every Stone* the two brothers from Peshawar are entirely rooted in their city. The Englishwoman has struggles with some of the things her home represents, but she doesn't ever cease to think of it as "home." I think people in my novels often have difficulties with their governments, or with the history they're living in – but I don't see that as having a difficulty with home.

FT: And of course, it's not just place that you're having to reconstruct in those texts, but also time. Your novels often cross time periods as well as geographical borders. Do you enjoy writing the historical elements of a novel such as *Burnt Shadows* or *A God in Every Stone*? What is that writing experience like?

KS: Exhausting! It is also wonderful. It's wonderful because there is something about the way that you learn to inhabit a place in order to write fiction about it: you really have to be able to see all the things that aren't ever going to make their way onto the page. If I have to move my characters through streets, I have to be able to see those streets. And so the research that you do takes up quite a lot of time.

Just after I had finished *A God in Every Stone*, I was at a literary festival and I was on a panel with Eleanor Catton and Damon Galgut, and all three of us had written historical fiction quite recently, but all three of us had also written work that was previously contemporary. And so I asked Eleanor and Damon: "the next book that you write, would you want it to be historical or contemporary?" And Eleanor said, "Oh, I love doing all the work of historical fiction!" And Damon just said, "Listen,

writing is hard enough as it is! If you have to write historical fiction, and have to find out everything about it, then that's just more work, and why are you doing that to yourself?" And I started laughing, and I thought: it's true! I remember a moment in *A God in Every Stone* when I had to have two characters communicate between London and Peshawar. And that meant I had to go and look up not only how long a telegram would take, but also I had to recreate for myself the language of telegrams. But then, also, to look at how much they would cost per word, to figure out how much, reasonably, a young archaeologist – who doesn't have much money – might spend: how brief he would have had to make the telegram. All that kind of work just to write one telegram! And I said: "David, I know what you mean. The next novel that I do is going to be contemporary!"

I love historical fiction, but it's true that it does add those extra levels, and those extra hoops that you're jumping through all the time. So when I came to write *Home Fire*, it was the first time in about eight or nine years that I had gone to write something that didn't require some historical work. And there was this extraordinary feeling. I thought: I can just write this! It's the Internet; it's mobile phones. I know how people get from one place to another in London, and this is going to happen very quickly. It felt very different.

FT: I picked up, earlier, on some characteristic themes in your work. But one thing that struck me, as I was going back over your texts and reading a number of them together in preparation for this, was the importance of clothing in your work.

KS: Really? I had no idea! This is why you learn things when you have academics ask you questions!

FT: Well, I was thinking, for example, of when Karim in *Kartography* returns to Karachi, after living away for many years, and Raheen notes his combination of "jeans, sneakers and a collarless kurta," and says he looks like a foreigner trying to "absorb the influences of the East" – and there's so much meaning packed into that idea. And clothing takes on the most resonant symbolism, certainly, in *Burnt Shadows*, in which the impact of the bomb leaves Hiroko bearing the images of the birds on her kimono, seared into the flesh of her back. And clothing takes on still further significance in the novels that feature the burqa and the hijab (in *Kartography*, in *Home Fire*, and also in *A God in Every Stone*, in which the women of Peshawar wearing burqa are viewed through the eyes of Vivian – who at one point in the text is obliged to wear one herself.) I wonder if you could talk a little about the role that clothing plays in your writing – how important is it to your descriptions of place and culture?

KS: Well, the novel lives and dies in the small details. You want your reader to see and to imagine and to believe that this is a fully inhabited world. But before that, as a writer, I see these characters. And of course clothing is such a marker of class and of nation, of the way you're presenting yourself to the world: of all kinds of things. So I'm very aware of that in general. And of course, women's clothing – and particularly Muslim women's clothing: the hijab, and the burqa, and all of this – always becomes a thing that conversations focus on, in a really annoying way. But it is what conversations focus on. That's what people see.

There's a wonderful Urdu writer, Ismat Chughtai, who wrote in the early twentieth century: a great feminist writer. (She never covered her head; she was an early modern woman of a certain sort.) And there's one point in one of her works where she saw a woman in hijab, and got annoyed with it. And then you get Ismat Chughtai saying: "then it occurred to me that maybe I should worry more about what's *in* her head than what's *on* her head". Which is an attitude too rarely taken, I think. But because clothing for women is such a signifier of all kinds of things, when you're thinking of your characters, I think it's hard not to see that: that they are aware of it when they're making choices; and the gaze that is falling upon them is going to be aware of it too.

FT: Yes, they're signifiers that carry so much weight. In *Home Fire*, Aneeka is wearing both hijab and makeup, and there's a sense that everything is potentially disruptive of expectations. In fact, in *Home Fire*, Isma and Aneeka are the first primary protagonists that you've written that wear hijab, and they both face questions as to their motivation. To what extent is the novel an attempt to resist or disturb common contemporary narratives about British Muslim identity?

KS: You know, I often get questions like that and they always assume a particular audience, which I *don't* assume. So, I'm going to assume that some of my readers wear hijab, and I'm going to assume that some of my readers are in Pakistan, where there is not the same kind of conversation around the hijab that there is in Britain, that some are British Muslims, some are not British Muslims… So there isn't *a* narrative

that I am looking to respond to. When I'm writing a novel it's always because there are things that are interesting to me and I want to respond to them.

But also, of course, the way that decisions get made when you are writing a novel is often almost random. Someone asked me the other day: how come Isma and her sister wear hijab when, in your earlier novels, that hasn't been the case? And it literally is that when I was writing the novel, the first draft of it started with the first page – which has changed now – in which Isma is waking up in Massachusetts the first day of the first spring thaw, and she goes for a run (she's recently become a runner in America). She's running, and because it's still cold she's got a hooded sweatshirt on, and there are other women running who also have hooded sweatshirts on, and she remarks – and I'm literally making this up as I'm writing it – she remarks something about how in the winter in America you could have a head covering and you just look like everyone else, and no one notices it. And I wrote that and I thought: oh, so she usually covers her head. OK, let's go with that.

FT: So it came out of the text?

KS: So it just came out of the text. I mean, it must have come out of *somewhere*, but it wasn't that I sat down and thought: "I'll have a character in a hijab, for these reasons…" I wrote her, and she was in a hijab. And I thought, is there any reason for her not to be? No? OK, let's keep on with that, and let's see where it goes.

FT: Instead of that original scene, of course, the novel opens with Isma about to miss her flight to the US because she's been pulled aside for interrogation at the airport. And subsequently, passports, nationality, and the threat of statelessness

recur as thematic threads running throughout the text. You've recently applied for and gained British citizenship – and you've written movingly elsewhere about that whole procedure, and the assumptions and emotions bound up within it. How did the experience of that process feed into the novel?

KS: The novel, in a lot of ways, started with that: with that interest in the idea of statelessness and stripping people's passports, and all that. It's relatively recently – really with the last couple of governments – that you've been hearing this line (Amber Rudd said it quite recently, and Theresa May used to say it a lot as Home Secretary) that "citizenship is a privilege, not a right." This is not true! This is not legally true at all. Citizenship is a legal right: you are born into it, you acquire it, you have it. As a citizen, you can be imprisoned, you can be treated in this way and that way, but the fact of your being a citizen: that is a legal right. It is certainly not a privilege that you work towards. And the idea that if you are *this* kind of citizen it's a right, and if you're *that* kind of citizen it's a privilege, is just wrong. And of course, because I went through the process of becoming a citizen, it meant that I was looking very closely all the time at citizenship laws and would see how they were changing and see how citizenship laws apply to dual nationals.

You know, when the whole Brexit vote happened, a lot of people said, "time to get that Irish passport!" or, "I'm due a German passport," or whatever. And of course, what very few people know is that if you have dual nationality then, legally, the Home Secretary can, at their discretion, take away your British passport or your British citizenship if they deem you somehow a threat to the State. It's at the discretion of the Home Secretary, and Amber Rudd and Theresa May have been using that power to a degree that no Home Secretary has before. Theresa May, when she

was Home Secretary, wanted to actually expand those laws so that you could take away citizenship from anyone, regardless of whether they were dual citizens or not, and that got blocked because that would mean making people stateless, which can't be done.

So because I was becoming a citizen, and because I was going to be a dual citizen, of course all of these were things I was really paying attention to. And so they're very much in the novel because it was something that I was watching. And I was seeing that, in the last 10 years, if you go and track how the rules around migration and citizenship have changed, it's very, very scary. It's terrifying. But also largely unreported on, or reported on as a small thing; it's not part of a major conversation.

FT: Such ideas around belonging and identity are clearly bound up with the long shadow cast by 9/11 and the subsequent "War on Terror," but it strikes me that the novel also engages more specifically in a meditation on masculine identities. Parvaiz, Aneeka's twin, is a sensitive young man – he's artistic, a staunch ally of his twin sister, a lover of local libraries – and, in a family of women, he deeply misses his father (more than he has ever acknowledged). And a combination of circumstances makes him susceptible to grooming by Farooq, a charismatic older man who seduces him with tales of honor and camaraderie and then abandons him. In many ways, *Home Fire* is a very feminine story, largely focusing on the two sisters, but to what extent is it also concerned with the vulnerability of men?

KS: It was certainly something I was very interested in around Parvaiz – and more generally. You know how, if you have e-books or Kindle, you can see which lines have been highlighted by readers? Well far and away the most highlighted line in this novel – and I mean highlighted some four times more than anything else – is a line in which Isma is talking to Eamonn and she says something like: "for girls, growing up to be a woman is inevitability; for boys, growing up to be a man is an ambition." There's that idea in the book of this thing of "being a man," and what it means to "be a man"; and the ways in which, if you're failing to be a man, you're made to *feel* that failure – especially if you're a certain kind of sensitive boy. That sensitivity won't necessarily be seen – by both men and women, it should be said – as a kind of strength, but rather as some kind of weakness and vulnerability.

And so I was interested in that idea, but I was also interested in the two sisters. A friend of mine said (which I loved): well, there are also two ways of being a woman, aren't there? On the one hand, you've got Isma, who possibly spends a little more time than she should looking out for her family and being "the good sister" and the good almost-adoptive-mother, and putting her life on hold. And then you have Aneeka, who says instead: "I want what I want." So these are two different ways of being a woman. And the siblings are also trying to negotiate their way around this world in which gender roles – whether you're a man or a woman – are so damaging and limiting and peculiar. You have these three siblings: he's trying to figure out what kind of man he is, and they're trying to be these two different kinds of women. And they're in this house where they've really grown up without parents and they're, in some ways, making this stuff up as they go along.

FT: *Home Fire* is quite different in form and style from your earlier works. Could you reflect a little on the manner in which your style has evolved?

KS: I rarely sit and think about what the style of a novel will be. I start writing and see how the writing comes. In the first draft of *Home Fire*, that first Isma section sounded more like my earlier novels. But as I was moving through it, it started to get more pared down, more compressed. And I realized that made sense to me: that made sense for the book. I wanted the language to be as near transparent as possible. I think changes have been happening throughout the books, from the first one onwards. If you look at my first novel, which was written in my early twenties, you can just tell that there are words and phrases that I loved the sound of. There's a lot more "look at the language!" But with this one, I didn't want it to be "look at the language!" but rather: "look at what the language is *doing*."

Partly, also, it came about because the novel is a retelling of *Antigone*. If you look at *Antigone*, there is so much that happens in that play, but it's so compressed, and the language is so stripped back and pared down. The translation I was looking at was the Anne Carson one, which is even more stripped down and pared back than any other – and just the effectiveness of that was something that I was struck very powerfully by. There's an early scene in her *Antigone* between the two sisters, and they're having an argument, and the Antigone figure says to her sister: "Why do you care what happens to me? You've made your decision; you're not on my side – go away". And her sister just says: "I'll be so lonely." And it just struck my heart, the sister saying, "if you go and get yourself in trouble and get yourself killed, I'll be so lonely." And I think I wanted that: to try and have the words echo as far as possible,

but doing as little as possible. Also, I wanted a certain pace to it. So I didn't want there to be too much extraneous stuff. I want you to get caught up and moved along.

FT: In addition to that element of pace and concision, *Home Fire* is also notable for the use of different media. Particularly in the Aneeka section, you include a whole series of different forms of writing: text messages, hashtags, tweets, newspaper articles, a television interview, even a poem… What were you thinking of when you decided to use that variety of material?

KS: Well, the first thing I was thinking of was the Greek chorus. When I was reading *Antigone,* I knew that I would use what was helpful to the novel and I would discard what wasn't. And with the chorus, my first instinct was: well, I'm not going to have a chorus. And then I was thinking, how *would* you have a chorus? And then I thought, "oh, of course! – the media is the chorus." The way the chorus functions in *Antigone* is that they are quite fickle; they change character, and sometimes they're commentating on something, sometimes they put forward a certain point of view; their sympathies are changing. And the more I thought about that, the more I thought: it's social media; it's the news.

And then I realized that one of the things I was interested in in the novel was the idea of juxtaposing what is a very personal, familial story against the way it then gets reported and presented. So you see it as it's happening – within these characters, and in their world. It's just these five people. And then, at a certain moment in the novel, we see how, once it goes into the public sphere, it becomes something else: a really crude version of events. And that gap between the two – between how it really

was from the inside, and how it's seen from the outside – was something that I wanted to explore.

One of the things that Eleanor Catton said when she was talking about why she loves the historical novel was that if you're writing a contemporary novel (and this is to do with the hypercapitalism of the world that we live in), you can't avoid brand names. For instance, if you're referring to a phone, it will be an iPhone, or an online search will be Google. And she said: "I hate using the brand names." And I realized, so do I! But actually, if you look at contemporary literary fiction, it's almost as though we've all decided to shy away from that and so, as a result, you have literature being written in the twenty-first century that pretends we are not living in a world that is being mediated by iPhones, and texts, and Twitter, and Facebook, and Skype, and all of that, and yet so much of our world and our information is mediated in that manner. So for this book, I decided: I'm just going to embrace that.

FT: The other distinctive formal element in *Home Fire* is the use of multiple narrators, and the manner in which we only ever hear from each character once. As a reader, immersed in a narrative voice, that can be frustrating. I really missed Isma!

KS: So did I!

FT: Where other novelists have used multiple narrators to provide different perspectives on a particular event, in your novel instead, the narrative is perpetually moving forward. So we never, for example, get to see Isma and

Eamonn's interactions from his point of view – the narrative has moved on by that point. What were your intentions in adopting this method?

KS: The image that I had in my mind was of a relay race – of passing the baton. I was intrigued with the idea of telling a story in that way. And I knew the risk of it was that you moved too far from characters. There are lots of people who miss Isma! That was partly why, in the last section, you do have her again, in the scene with Karamat. It was also partly because I missed Isma as well, and I needed to get her back in there somewhere. But I also didn't want to do that thing of showing the same moment from five different points of view. I did want that forward momentum. But I also wanted you to have different characters looking at each other. So in the beginning, you have Isma telling you something about Karamat, and you have the way Isma looks at Eamonn, and you have Isma talking about Aneeka. So in that first section, you get: here's Isma – she seems pretty sensible – and here's how she sees all these other people. And now, here's the book: and here are all the other people.

Also, as a novelist, you want to do different things. With *Burnt Shadows* I had done some of the multiple perspectives, moving back and forth in different ways. I liked the idea of the challenge of doing it this way, and seeing if it could be done in such a way that your reader hopefully doesn't throw it down in disgust, saying, "I'm sick of always leaving the people just as they're getting interesting!" I hoped to be able to find a way to hook you into each one.

FT: Do you see changes in your writing over the past twenty years? Have your concerns and your ambitions for your novels changed over the course of your career?

KS: I would have to slit my wrists if I thought I was writing now in a manner that isn't considerably different to my twenty-something-year-old self! But in some respect the central concern and ambition has stayed the same: get better, try something different each time. And that theme of history and politics disrupting the lives of individuals has stayed fairly consistent too.

FT: You've done many appearances such as this, and some in conversation with fellow authors such as Jeanette Winterson and Ali Smith. How important is it for you to feel part of a community of contemporary women writers? Do you feel there is such a thing?

KS: Well, who wouldn't want to be in conversation with writers such as Jeanette and Ali – and also Gillian Slovo, Tahmima Anam, Tishani Doshi, Madeline Miller, etc. I'm lucky that many of these writers are also my good friends; and that friendship is very important. Some writers may be solitary; I'm not. The connection with other writers – intellectual and emotional – feels vital to me. But I don't know if I feel part of a community of contemporary women writers. There are individual friendships and some group friendships, but those friendships also involve male writers such as Nadeem Aslam, Hisham Matar, Pankaj Mishra, Mirza Waheed.

FT: What is it that keeps you writing?

KS: I've been doing it since I was 11. I don't know who I'd be if I wasn't a writer. Also, it pays the bills. So probably quite useful to keep on doing it.

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