

# Navigating Cultural Sensitivity in Kamila Shamsie's Home Fire

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## ABSTRACT

This study explores the depiction of intercultural sensitivity in Kamila Shamsie's novel *Home Fire* (2017), focusing on the complexities of cultural identity, family dynamics, love, belonging, and power relations. It examines the novel's characters and their relationships to demonstrate how Shamsie addresses the tension between cultural heritage and national identity. The study emphasizes the importance of empathy, compassion, and cultural competence in fostering meaningful connections across cultural divides. The research adopts a qualitative methodology, approaching the text through a hermeneutic lens, with Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity 1986 serving as a framework to examine the underlying cultural dynamics. Through this analysis, the analytical part reveals that Shamsie's *Home Fire* predominantly navigates the manifestation cultural diversity.

## 1. Introduction

Inter-cultural sensitivity means the capacity to acknowledge, respect and communicate with people of different cultures. It refers to the ability to understand cultural diversity, identifying likeness as well as differences and altering behavior to enhance good relationships with different people from different cultures. Intercultural sensitivity has been defined by several authors and there are also several models that have been put forward. Here are a few key definitions along with references: Here are a few key definitions along with references:

### 1.1. Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS)

According to J Melton Bennet in 1993 intercultural sensitivity is defined as the ability to change cultural frame of reference and modify behavior to improve communication and relationship across cultures.

### 1.2. Chen and Starosta's intercultural sensitivity model

Intercultural sensitivity is the ability of an individual in terms of cognitive, affective and behavioral aspects to appropriately and effectively communicate with people of other cultures.

### 1.3. Hammer and Bennett's intercultural development inventory (IDI)

" Intercultural Sensitivity is defined as the ability to navigate cultural environments and navigate through the cultural standards and expectations of others and view cultural differences as opportunities for personal and professional development" (Bennett, 2001).

### 1.4 Intercultural issues

Here are some common intercultural issues found in literature: Here are some common intercultural issues:

#### 1.4.1. Cultural identity

Cultural identity is an important idea in literature as it captures the historical, social and personal processes of identity formation of individuals and communities. Cultural identity is portrayed in its many facets with the authors detailing how characters engage with issues of tradition and modernity, the local and the global, and how in literature the theme of cultural identity is often intertwined with the colonial history of Pakistan, struggle for freedom and the post-colonial complexities of state building. Writers explore the concept of the 'Pakistani' self as a subject in the contemporary and complex world where the traditional values are on the one hand cherished while on the other hand the global changes are being faced (Jensen, 2011).

Ethnic and linguistic diversity as well as regional traditions are traced in the literature of the nation. All the stories and their settings be it an urban or a rural area capture the true essence of Pakistani culture, language, dress code, food habits, and traditions. Also, the Pakistani English literature presents characters who are in diaspora and thus gives the reader an insight of the challenges and possibilities of dual identity. Emigrants and their offspring struggle with the issue of identity, and their relationship with the country of origin and the host country. These narratives provide insight into the negotiated and contested and therefore ever shifting nature of cultural identity (Cilano C., 2013).

#### 1.4.2 Stereotypes and misconceptions

Stereotypes and prejudices are among the main factors which cause intercultural conflicts in the context of intercultural sensitivity. Such assumptions stem from cultural beliefs and may hinder appropriate appreciation of other cultural identities. Pakistani English literature engages and subverts the stereotyping which can be associated with the representation of Pakistani culture and society. Authors complicate the narrative, and therefore, challenge stereotypical perceptions that people have about the nation and its inhabitants. Thus, these literary works can be seen as subverting prejudices that pertain to religion, gender and class. Therefore, through exploring the lives of characters and their relations, the literature tries to educate the reader to make them open their eyes and think critically about the Pakistani culture. On the dimension of intercultural sensitivity, one may stereotype other people from different cultures and create bias that may lead to miscommunication. These can be seen in different areas, for instance in the perception of behaviors, communication or even norms (Corapi, 2015).

These are the prejudices that need to be discussed to debunk them, to remove prejudices and biased views. One must be sensitive to his or her own cultural biases and try to unlearn them to embrace the culture of others. This process entails the understanding of the fact that people are different within a cultural group, the understanding of the fact that cultures are not monolithic and the avoidance of stereotyping. To combat stereotyping and prejudice, people need to develop an understanding of the target culture as well as interact with it. One should always enter an intercultural situation with an open mind, curiosity and the desire to learn from other people's point of view. By embracing intercultural sensitivity, stereotypes can be challenged by positive interaction between people from different cultural backgrounds as well as making other people from different cultures feel accepted and appreciated. In so doing, people help in the positive change of society through deconstruction of stereotyping and prejudice (Gulcu, 2019).

### 1.5 Home Fire

"Home Fire" is a novel by Kamila Shamsie which was released in 2017 and has received a lot of attention. Some of the major themes explored in the book include identity, love, and loyalty during real life political and social struggles. It is a contemporary adaptation of the Greek play *Antigone* which focuses on the issues relating to a British Muslim family. The narrative revolves around three siblings: Isma, Aneeka and Parvaiz – three characters whose lives relate to political and ideological conflict. The first-born child and the eldest sister in the novel Isma, is a responsible and an unselfish character who assumes the responsibility of taking care of her siblings after the demise of their mother. Aneeka is a young and self-driven woman while Parvaiz, their brother, gets involved in a group associated with terrorism. The novel is written in a suspenseful manner while exploring the effects of government decisions, people's attitudes, and the issues of personal and ethnic identity. Jealousy arises, and loyalties are challenged in the process of the story that tackles themes of identity, loyalty and the desire to be accepted by society in a time of fear and prejudice. The novel "Home Fire" was critically acclaimed for its ideas, its portrayal of the modern world and its interesting and well-developed characters and Shamsie's writing. The novel was selected for the Man Booker Prize in 2017 and for Women's Prize for Fiction which it won in the same year. Thus, Kamila Shamsie's novel "Home Fire" is not only an impactful story but also an essential voice in the conversation about the contemporary problems of the individual struggling to find his or her place in the contemporary world. Through her novels such as *Home Fire* where her works are part of the diaspora literature depict the essence of people's lives in the process of migration and adaptation to different cultures (Rind, 2022); (Ansar & Saeed, 2024).

Through a close examination of Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire* this research studies how the novel presents complex intercultural sensitivity by exploring how characters deal with identity conflicts against their backdrop of belonging and loyalty symptoms of cultural awareness during the post-9/11 global era (Lau & Mendes, 2021). This work reviews the novel by using intercultural communication models to establish new insights about literature's connections with identity and cultural conflict which support ongoing research regarding societal understanding of cultural integration.

## 1.6 Research objectives

1. 6. 1 To identify those interpersonal events in the novel, which relate to the phenomenon of cultural sensitivity or its absence.

## 1.7 Research questions

1. 7. 1 Which incidents in the novel show cultural prejudice in the novel?

## 2. Literature Review

Scholars from various disciplines, such as Communication Studies, Education, and Psychology, have emphasized the importance of intercultural sensitivity. Most have concluded that intercultural sensitivity is necessary for effective and productive communication between people from different cultural backgrounds (Chen & Starosta, 1997; Moran, Harris, & Moran, 2007; Olson & Kroeger, 2001; Rosen, Digh, Siinger, & Phillips, 2000; Imran, Maqbool, Sami, & Ahmad, 2020). According to Chen (2005), because of the speedy development of communication and transportation technology, globalization has integrated people with diverse cultures, ethnicities, geographies, and religions into all aspects of contemporary human life. Sensitivity towards cultural differences is a key ability in reducing ethnocentrism and parochialism and for competence in intercultural or multicultural interactions (Chen, Guo-Ming 2010).

Intercultural sensitivity can be described as "an individual's ability to develop emotion toward understanding and appreciating cultural differences that promotes appropriate and effective behavior in intercultural communication" (Chen & Starosta, 1997, p. 5). The concept was treated as one of the dimensions of intercultural communication competence. Intercultural communication competence includes three aspects: cognitive, affective, and behavioral abilities; the cognitive ability is represented by intercultural awareness, the affective ability by intercultural sensitivity, and the behavioral ability by intercultural effectiveness or adroitness (Chen, 2010, 2009; Chen & Starosta, 1996, 2003, 2005).

An interculturally sensitive person will adapt effectively to cultural differences. People need to approach others well despite opposing beliefs as long as they prioritize understanding and sensitivity over judgment. Intercultural sensitivity is an attitude expressing openness to interaction with groups from distinct cultures; it is how people respond well to cultural differences. Intercultural sensitivity is essential to fostering social cohesion and conversation between cultures in a global and multicultural context in today's diverse and globalized society. Thus, intercultural sensitivity is expressed through interaction engagement, respect for cultural differences, interaction confidence, interaction enjoyment, and interaction attentiveness due to being open-minded to differences (Yogeeswaran K, Verkuyten M, Adelman L. 2020 Izquierdo R. 2022).

A grounded framework of intercultural experiences based on the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) proposed by Bennett Bennett MJ. 1986 describes how people gain deeper understanding and appreciation of cross-cultural issues when they move from a monocultural attitude to an intercultural consciousness. Instead of viewing differences from a judgmental perspective, the model states that individuals seek to negotiate similarity and differences without judgement, while adapting to their behavior appropriately to the

circumstances at hand (Moore-Jones EP.2018; Magsanay, Mae & Diamante, Jey & Carriedo, Jaina Kim, 2024).

While defining culture, Godwyn and Gittell (2011) take into consideration various aspects. They say that it is characterized by shared basic assumptions that a given group of people invent and develop it, and that new members are expected to be taught how to behave properly within it. In almost all parts of the world, living nowadays is marked by great cultural diversity, so it is almost impossible to live in a monocultural society. All over the world cultures relate to one another partly or fully, and thanks to modern technology, even cultures at distance might be interconnected (Foley & Mirazón Lahr, 2011). In addition, in pursuit of better education, a better quality of life, and career opportunities, people do not rarely travel around the world and change their residence. In all of these contexts, they experience many difficulties (Rizvić & Bećirović, 2017; White & Rice, 2015), such as intercultural sensibility, openness and tolerance toward diversity, which include, among others (Bennett, 2020; Iqbal, Tayyaba. (2021).

### **3. Research Methodology**

A qualitative research design combines a textual analysis approach for studying Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire*. Through close reading, readers achieve deeper text knowledge by working with contextual analysis along with writer and reader perception (Gadamer 1975). The research examines how cultural awareness, together with identity elements and political conflicts, shapes the representation of characters throughout their relationships and encounters.

The study operates under three central theories that combine cultural studies with postcolonial theory and feminist literary criticism. Texts create cultural identities and social values, as cultural studies research by Williams (1977) demonstrates, and postcolonial theory (Said, 1978) examines colonial history's influence on identity. Feminist literary analysis (Butler 1990, hooks 2000) investigates male-female relationships to understand how feminine characters handle postcolonial social frameworks alongside societal norms.

Close reading analysis of *Home Fire* reveals themes that include cultural alienation along with identity crises and external societal pressures. A close analysis of Shamsie's narrative uses the theoretical frameworks to categorise data that shows how it addresses modern cultural sensitivity alongside issues of identity and belonging.

### **4. Discussion and Analysis**

This was brought out right from the beginning of *Home Fire* when Isma was traveling from the UK to the USA. When she goes to check herself in on the outgoing flight she has an unnerving encounter with a female security officer. The extent of her own intercultural sensitivity is depicted in the way she has tried to avoid any untoward incident regarding her own religion and culture: For instance, she had nothing that would raise suspicion such as the Quran, family photos or even books on the topic of interest to her (Shamsie, 2017, p. 11). But still the officer continues to make her uncomfortable and tries to touch each and every part of her clothes and rub them with his thumb and fingers. There is the feeling that the officer wishes to make her feel uncomfortable and questionable. In fact, there is a very clear-cut

feeling of dislike in the officer's comment that Isma seems to be coming back to some sort of life in the United States of America. For this reason, it is evident that she is giving Isma an idea that the girl should preferably leave the UK for good.

The other incident that Isma has, is with a male airport official after the incident with the female officer. This episode has scary features of its own. From this it can be deduced that Isma has a British passport. However, due to her Asian looking face and the headscarf she is wearing, the man asks her whether she is British. This is not only impertinence of the question but also a very offending one because it gives a hint of racism and prejudice towards her religion. Isma gives a straight and short answer to his question saying that she is British. His response is even more insulting as after acknowledging her as British he continues to ask if she thinks like one as well. Isma responds to him saying that she has been living here all her life. However, the writer can depict her discomfort when she writes, "She meant there was no other country of which she could feel herself a part, but the words came out sounding evasive" (Shamsie, 2017, p. 11). The context to the situation sees a British Asian Muslim female being faced by a Caucasian non-Muslim male. In the whole episode of airport, the British officers and their behaviors show the stage 1 Denial of differences of the theory of DMIS. But from Isma's point of view, Stage 2 of the DMIS theory can be disclosed. It is because she was aware of the differences but did not see it as a threat and therefore, she followed all the rules. It is hard to think of a scene that would be more symbolic of lack of cultural sensitivity than this one.

Unfortunately, when in the US, Isma struggles to get over the nerve-wracking ordeal that she had gone through during the interrogation at Heathrow Airport. Her small studio also gave her the impression of being watched and being hunted. Through the skylight in the ceiling of the apartment, she gets a glimpse of the sky, but her nervous system is not in good shape hence she feels that she is exposed to the public and to punishment. Once she looks up at the sky and sees parachutists jumping out of the plane and her thoughts shift towards Icarus and Daedalus. Remarkably, these thoughts take a very generic turn: 'What must it have been like to be part of the species which has just shared a discernible event – all looking up at the heavens for a mythic figure to descend' (Shamsie 2017, p. 15). Thus, these lines refer to the "Empathy" stage, however, if we follow the stages of the DMIS model by Milton Bennett, it is the transition from the "Minimization" stage to the "Empathy" one. Empathy stage people are able to comprehend the other person and the effect of culture difference. Her desire to find some universal experience very much comes from the feeling of being an outsider in Britain as a British Muslim. What is interesting is that this episode is set in the United States, and it is important to note that desire for intercultural communication is not limited to any country.

Later, when Isma wakes up for the first time in the studio apartment she tries her best to stick to a routine she has followed since childhood. This involves folding and placing her nightwear and arranging the bed as shown below. Thus, this little return to normality somewhat comforts her emotions for some time. She looks around the apartment and begins looking forward to "the deep pleasure of daily life distilled to the essentials: books, walks, spaces in which to think and work." (Shamsie, 2017, p. 16). It is relevant to mention that these basic mundane tasks are the manifestations of what she has called the ordinariness of human life. Another aspect of the similarity of people's lives is the fear of the unknown which is depicted by the confusion of Isma and Hira when they hear strange music in Hira's house. Thus Isma,

who is a supporter of religion, is not afraid of the unknown as much as others are. But Hira Shah, the only professed agnostic among the characters, becomes superstitious and, thus, the character touches the amulet which Isma had previously thought to be just a decoration. Hira goes to the extent of praying for the Lord's Prayer because of the fear that she has. This very simple prayer which is Christian in nature was taught to her when she was a student at a convent in Kashmir as a child. The part of faith in this incident is very clear and this is not the only time that the general aspect of life has been depicted in the novel. Therefore, based on the DMIS theory, one can say that Hira Shah does not stick to her roots rather she tries to incorporate them into adaptation and integration. This has a close link with the question of intercultural sensitivity.

Other than the conflicts between different communities, the internal conflicts also affect the center of the investigation of this research. This is so because worries within cultures mobilize centrifugal forces which exert different kinds of pressures on intercultural interactions. In *Home Fire* the first instance of this can be observed when Isma is introduced to Eamonn.

They are both second-generation British Muslim citizens but are as politically polarized as can be. Eamonn's father Karamat Lone is a high-ranking politician who has risen through the ranks by exploiting religious, communal and nationalist sentiments without any qualm. He is very much despised by the majority of conservative British Muslims due to his rather Machiavellian approach to politics. Isma and her family are among the people who do not like him. When she sees Eamonn, the resemblance to his father is a shock for her: 'What was shocking was that the man's face was quite recognizable, which made the reader feel queasy' (Shamsie, 2017, p. 19). This is apparently shown by the writer's choice of words which suggests that Isma had physical pain upon discovering that Eamonn was the son of Karamat Lone. This means that cracks within the British Muslim community are affecting the attempts at improving the relations within the culture. This has implication on intercultural sensitivity between the two cultures of the ethnic British and the Pakistani in the UK. One of the most significant elements of Shamsie's storytelling finesse is the choice of the name Eamonn for the son of Karamat Lone: For instance, Ayman was changed to Eamonn to give an Irish vibe to the name so that people would recognize that the father had assimilated (Shamsie 2017: 20). However, there are not many things that could be criticized, as far as the choice of the child's name is concerned; Karamat Lone could not have named his son in a way that might have reflected the desire to demonstrate the integration into the target culture. However, his attempt to show the audience how cultural sensitivity works at one end of the social starter gets him mocking and scolding at the other end.

It is not only Karamat Lone who has such an inner conflict. In the same way, Isma herself gets herself into a similar conundrum. She is also aware of the fact that her sister Aneeka would not appreciate her being nice to Eamonn Lone. It is in this frame of mind that, on one occasion, she finds herself in two minds when Eamonn leaves her to get a cup of coffee and does not return: 'This made her feel both vindicated and disappointed at the same time as Shamsie (2017) puts it, it left her both vindicated and disappointed'. But soon she finds herself being drawn towards the man and her dislike towards him for being Karamat Lone's son fades away. Interestingly, a great deal of this appeal stems from the fact that Rowan's comedy, as well as the allusions that he uses, are distinctly English and, therefore, European. She is moved to think: 'Someone brought him up like I wanted to bring up Parvaiz', (Shamsie, 2017, p. 23 emphasis in original). It continues to be a rather paradoxical relation between the two

as she herself is part of the middle class and he is a working class who has been brought up and thinks differently from her. This might be considered as her individual effort to overcome the intracultural conflict for the sake of the intercultural compromise.

As has been highlighted earlier, Isma's dislike of Eamonn at the start is because of his father. For herself, she had never even seen her father as the man was a committed militant who was killed by the US while in transit from Bagram to Guantanamo. This was very different from the character of Eamonn's father. It is in this frame of mind that while responding to Eamonn's questions about her own life she does not ask him about his because "he might mention his father...and that might lead down a road she didn't want to travel" (Shamsie, 2017, p. 24). Eamonn is not aware of this as he feels that she must be finding it rather challenging to be a Muslim in today's world. Isma's reply is very direct when she stated that she finds it more challenging to have to not be a Muslim. Once again, this conversation between the two brings out the fact that there is a lot of animosity hiding behind the apparent politeness of the two. This is the severity of the situation as captured when Isma understands that "She had presumed that in some way, whether non-religious, or even in his political affiliations, he was Muslim" (Shamsie, 2017, p. 24). 3. Discussion and Findings:

This was brought out right from the beginning of *Home Fire* when Isma was traveling from the UK to the USA. When she goes to check herself in on the outgoing flight she has an unnerving encounter with a female security officer. The extent of her own intercultural sensitivity is depicted in the way she has tried to avoid any untoward incident regarding her own religion and culture: For instance, she had nothing that would raise suspicion such as the Quran, family photos or even books on the topic of interest to her (Shamsie, 2017, p. 11). But still the officer continues to make her uncomfortable and tries to touch each and every part of her clothes and rub them with his thumb and fingers. There is the feeling that the officer wishes to make her feel uncomfortable and questionable. In fact, there is a very clear-cut feeling of dislike in the officer's comment that Isma seems to be coming back to some sort of life in the United States of America. For this reason, it is evident that she is giving Isma an idea that the girl should preferably leave the UK for good.

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## 5. Conclusion

Kamila Shamsie presents a multilayered narrative which describes the issues that are important within the context of the diaspora. Analyzing cultural identity, historical background, transnational experience, global concerns, and language and style, Shamsie creates an engaging narrative that will be relevant to the reader. The characters navigate the complexities of identity and being an outsider while also navigating numerous cultures and their respective impacts on the characters, all while being in the backdrop of history. Such fluidity of the characters' experience of crossing borders between different countries and cultures highlights the unity of the diaspora communities and the novel's more general appeal to the themes of love and the search for identity. The use of language, symbolism and metaphor by Shamsie enriches the narrative and gives depth to the storyline and makes it more realistic in portrayal of the characters' emotions. Besides, the novel is a social and political commentary that raises subjects such as wars, acts of terror, and social justice. Through "Home Fire", Shamsie does not only talk about cultural relocation of Pakistani British individuals but also advances the concept of diaspora literature as a way of responding to the world's current affairs. In the view of Haugh (2004), the politeness of speakers indicates the speakers' perceptions of self and others. Every culture has its sets of etiquette which are observed when it comes to politeness. There are some cultures that discourage polite language and there are those which consider it impolite and indecent. A study shows that while western culture is inclined to negative faces, the Asian culture is inclined to positive faces as a result of group thinking.

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Wyne, et. al.

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