

Kamila Shamsie's novel is filled with perfect coincidences

Of all the coffee joints frequented by all the British citizens-of-Pakistani-descent in all of Amherst, Massachusetts, she walks into his?

by [Phil Christman](#) in the [November 22, 2017](#) issue

In Review



Home Fire

A Novel

By Kamila Shamsie
Riverhead Books

In Amherst, Massachusetts, a British woman—the daughter of a dead jihadist—meets the son of a British-Pakistani politician who colluded in her father’s death. The son is charming in a halfhearted Oxbridge way; she is clever, brittle, and guarded. Most of all, she is a reminder of home. She falls for him. He falls for her younger sister. Neither sister quite gets around to telling him that their other sibling, a brother, has joined ISIS.

Home Fire, Kamila Shamsie’s seventh novel is, in its way, a retelling of Sophocles’s *Antigone*. But in its (intentional) melodrama and its pileup of perfect coincidences, it more closely resembles a classic Hollywood film. The plot machinery ramps up so quickly that you don’t have time to doubt it. It makes perfect, dreamlike sense that all this would happen at just the moment when the politician-father gets promoted to home secretary. Only when it’s over do you pause to ask a few questions. Of all the coffee joints frequented by all the British citizens of Pakistani descent in all of Amherst, Massachusetts, she walks into his?

It’s fair, I think, to take the plot’s mechanics as self-conscious artifice: we are being told a story, and Shamsie sees no reason to deny the fact. Less forgivable, to me, is the novel’s often slack and unconvincing style. Characters speak to each other in the kinds of well-tuned self-summarizing speeches that people never actually use except, perhaps, in a therapist’s office or during a particularly strenuous blind date. They constantly prompt each other to fill in details that the reader (but not the character speaking) needs to know. They are forever gazing at the photo that reminds them of the backstory that can only lead, with fatal inevitability, to the paragraph-long exposition dump.

Writers have been criticizing this sort of speaking through the characters at the reader at least since James Joyce, who famously mocked George Moore for having one of his characters look up the schedule for a train that’s been running past her front door for years. “The writer should be alert to what his character should know,” as Hugh Kenner puts it in his sublime guide to *Ulysses*.

But the fact is, many readers don't seem to mind this stuff. Perhaps they don't notice, or perhaps it irks them subliminally, like a tiny discoloration on the couch. Not that Shamsie can't be a wonderful wordsmith at best: "For girls, becoming women was inevitability; for boys, becoming men was ambition." Or, when a character goes to view a beloved person's corpse: "The girl sat back on her heels, as if only now, at this moment, had she stopped to consider what she was asking her own eyes to look at." The last phrase is fantastic, though even now, at this moment, Shamsie allows herself the redundancy of *now at this moment*.

I kept reading *Home Fire* through occasional irritation because I could not face not knowing how the book's love story would end. As it turns out, if two protagonists come together with enough heat, I will read through broken glass and barbed wire to see them happy again. Shamsie provides that heat. (Whether she satisfies the need, I won't say, but I will note that the book's very last twist seemed to me its least plausible.)

Besides the romantic suspense it generates, the book is valuable as a reminder of the untenable political situation faced by British Muslims. It portrays an England in which no immigrant—and no nth-generation descendant of an immigrant—can possibly assimilate enough. It's a place that combines implacable hostility toward many of its people with smug belief in its own liberality, and the contradiction squeezes you to death. Reminds me of someplace else.