

Digital Surveillance and the Politics of Citizenship in Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire*

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Abstract

In the contemporary world of digital era, every human activities and deeds are observed through digital surveillance. Citizenship in the twenty-first century is increasingly shaped by digital surveillance, state security and border control. The rights of individuals are negotiated through technologies of monitoring and suspicion. In the aftermath of the September eleven attacks, surveillance has become a defining feature of national security policies, particularly affecting Muslim communities whose identities are frequently scrutinized through political and digital mechanisms. Kamila Shamsie, one of the most significant contemporary Pakistani novelists, explores these concerns in her novel *Home Fire* (2017). In the novel she portrays the complex relationship between citizenship, state authority and personal identity in contemporary Britain. Through the experiences of the fictional characters from the novel, Shamsie demonstrates how surveillance extends beyond physical observation to encompass border inspections, intelligence gathering, digital communication, and media representation. All these transform a person's citizenship into a conditional rather than an unconditional right. The aim of this paper is to examine how digital surveillance influences the politics of citizenship and shapes the characters' experiences of belonging, exclusion and state control. The novel presents surveillance as a mechanism of power that transforms citizenship from a legal status into a contested political condition.

Key Words: Surveillance, citizenship, security, belonging, power

The twenty-first century has witnessed an unprecedented expansion of surveillance technologies in the name of national security. Surveillance is often justified as a necessary response to terrorism and global insecurity. This has also generated significant debates concerning privacy, civil liberties, citizenship, and democratic rights. In particular Muslim communities have experienced increased scrutiny through airport security procedures and online monitoring. In this context, citizenship has increasingly become a conditional status shaped by security policies rather than an unconditional legal right.

Kamila Shamsie is the contemporary British-Pakistani novelist. Her works explore the intersections of history, politics, identity, migration and belonging. Her fiction is distinguished by its engagement with the historical and political complexities of South Asia and the wider global context. Her narratives particularly explore the consequences of

colonialism, partition, war, terrorism and transnational migration. Her narratives examine how political conflicts shape individual lives and challenge conventional notions of home, identity and citizenship.

Shamsie's novel *Home Fire* explores the lives of the characters, Isma Pasha, her siblings Aneeka and Parvaiz, and Eamonn, the son of the British Home Secretary, Karamat Lone. The narrative of the novel explores political conflict and concerned with the tensions between citizenship, national security and state authority in the post 9/11 Britain. All these characters are Pakistani descendants, they are third generation immigrants. Even though, they are born and brought up in Britain, they are suspected for various things. One such thing is that they are of Pakistani descent and they are negatively stereotyped after 9/11 attacks. This gives the outlook that terrorism emerges from the religious identity of Muslim. Terrorism is connected with the religious identity.

Kampuravan in the article, *Readable Bodies: Islamophobia, and the Muslim Embodiment in Post-9/11 Fiction* denotes the post 9/11 logic of exception as, "portraying Muslim characters as subjects whose rights are provisional and whose bodies are continuously open to inspection" (2132). This argument is relevant to Shamsie characters in *Home Fire* that they are subjected to scrutiny not merely because of their individual actions but because of their perceived religious, ethnic and familial affiliations.

The novel portrays how counter terrorism policies, border controls, and security measures influence the lives of British Muslims by exposing the fragile relationship between individual rights and governmental power. The British Muslim community in Britain is continuously kept under surveillance. This surveillance affects the everyday life of British Muslims. Whatever they do, they think of they are under surveillance.

Michel Foucault in his *Discipline and Punish* states about surveillance that keeps citizens disciplined by forcing individuals to internalize social control and regulate their own behaviour. He introduced the term Panopticon in his work and states that "the major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (201). The major key ideas under this panopticon are visibility, unverifiability and self-discipline. The people under surveillance have the feeling that they are constantly exposed under the supervisor. Secondly, the people under surveillance act unverifiably, Foucault defines unverifiability as, "Unverifiable: the inmate must never know whether he is being looked at anyone moment; but he must be sure that he may always be so" (201). This indicates that they do not know whether they are actively under surveillance for that specific second. This leads to self discipline, where the expected behavior outcome is regulated in the minds of the people under surveillance to act accordingly.

The characters from the novel *Home Fire* illustrate the panopticon idea of Foucault. The character Aneeka continuously have the fear that she is continuously watched under surveillance, even when she googles anything. She refers a term called Googling While Muslim, this reflects the widespread fear among British Muslims that their online searches

may attract the attention of state security agencies and lead to their being identified as potential terrorist suspects. This illustrates that surveillance extends beyond physical spaces into the digital sphere, shaping everyday behaviour through the anticipation of observation.

Secondly, the character Isma, when getting ready to travel to America for her Ph.D studies, she is aware of the airport interrogations and security checking of her belongings. Shamsie illustrates, “She’d made sure not to pack anything that would invite comment or questions – no Quran, no family pictures, no books on her areas of academic interest” (HF 3). This incident demonstrates how surveillance has become an integral feature of contemporary citizenship in Britain. Isma’s deliberate avoidance of objects that might attract suspicion reveals her awareness of being scrutinised because of her Muslim identity and family background. Her decision to regulate what she carries with her indicates that surveillance operates not only through the anticipation of being watched. She modifies her behaviour even before encountering the authorities, demonstrating the internalisation of surveillance in everyday life. Through Isma’s experience, Shamsie illustrates how airport security and institutional scrutiny can transform ordinary acts of travel into experiences of anxiety and self-monitoring. This reveals how surveillance extends beyond the identification of actual criminal behaviour and instead subjects individuals to suspicion based on their religion, identity and associations.

David Lyson, a Sociologist and a leading scholar in surveillance studies, argues in *Surveillance and Society: Monitoring Everyday Life*, that surveillance has become an ordinary and pervasive feature of modern life. Surveillance is no longer confined to prisons or police investigations but it is embedded in everyday life through institutions such as airports, work places, social media and government databases. Lyson argues that surveillance is used to classify and categorize people based on the data collected about them. This process is referred by Lyson as social sorting.

Surveillance extends beyond physical monitoring to shape the consciousness and behaviour of the individuals. In *Home Fire*, even though the character Isma reaches America, the airport interrogation persists psychologically. Shamsie denotes, “With the memory of the Heathrow interrogation still jangling her nerves, she had been able to think only of surveillance satellites wheeling through the sky . . .” (HF 9). The state’s scrutiny becomes internalized, illustrating that surveillance operates through its lasting impact on individual perception. This illustrates that surveillance changes the people’s ordinary life experience. Isma continues to imagine herself as a potential object of observation. This reflects Lyson’s argument that surveillance has become an ordinary condition of everyday existence.

Common in *Creating Social Models Based on Social Psychology* defines internalised surveillance as, “people act with awareness of the possibility of being watched, regardless of whether they are actually watched” (445). This internalised surveillance is observed in the character Isma that before she arrives the airport to reach America. She deliberately removes her personal belongings that might attract suspicion, indicating that she anticipates being monitored because of her Muslim identity. David Lyson argues that surveillance is not merely the observation of individuals but a process that influences behaviour through the

expectation of being watched. Isma's decision not to carry Quran, family photographs, or academic books illustrates how surveillance disciplines individuals even before any official inspection begins.

Surveillance made on particular group is termed by Lyson as social sorting. He explains that surveillance systems classify people. Although Isma has done nothing wrong, the security officer in the airport subjects her belongings to scrutiny. Surveillance therefore becomes a means of categorizing individuals based on cultural and religious assumptions. The airport becomes a political space where citizenship is continually verified. Shamsie therefore critiques a system in which national security policies undermine the equal rights of citizens by subjecting certain communities to intensify monitoring.

Isma states to her professor, "if you look at colonial law you'll see plenty of precedent for depriving of their rights, the only difference is this time it's applied to British citizens" (HF 38). This indicates that laws and surveillance practices once used in colonial territories are now being applied to British citizens, especially Muslims. Surveillance is therefore not simply about preventing terrorism but about justifying the restriction of civil liberties.

Isma's experiences become productively exposed through her research papers as she researches on "the sociological impact of the War on Terror" (HF 39). Her professor Dr. Shah and Isma works on the paper titled as, "The Insecurity State: Britain and the Instrumentalisation of Fear" (HF 39). Her academic engagement provides a critical perspective on the relationship between state surveillance, fear and the erosion of civil liberties in contemporary Britain. Isma's research reflects her personal experiences of interrogation and surveillance. This demonstrates that surveillance operates through both institutional practices and psychological effects, encouraging individuals to monitor and regulate their own behaviour.

Surveillance can promote two distinct things in the society, they include disciplining and serving as an oppressive force. It disciplines individuals by creating the possibility that they are constantly being observed. Because people know they may be watched, they begin to monitor and regulate themselves. Isma's unpacking Quran, family photographs and academic books from her luggage because she anticipates questioning at the airport. The important point is that nobody has yet forced her to remove these things. Her awareness of possible surveillance makes her discipline herself.

However, surveillance goes beyond neutral social discipline, when it is unequally directed toward particular citizens, especially Muslim citizens. The problem observed in this context is not simply everyone is watched. Isma's experience demonstrates that her religion, family background, travel and intellectual interests can make her more vulnerable to scrutiny. Surveillance consequently becomes connected with suspicion, discrimination and exclusion. In *Home Fire*, surveillance operates simultaneously as a disciplinary mechanism and an oppressive force, while its disciplinary function produces self-monitoring and behavioural regulation, its institutional application to Muslim citizens transforms surveillance into a form of political oppression that conditions their mobility, identity and sense of belonging.

In conclusion, Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire* presents digital surveillance as more than a technological practice of monitoring individuals, it emerges as a significant mechanism through which power, citizenship and belonging are negotiated in the post 9/11 security state. Through Isma's interrogation, her awareness of being watched, her self-regulation and her research on the insecurity nation state demonstrates how surveillance becomes internalized and transforms ordinary citizens into subjects who continually monitor their own behaviour.

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