

Reclaiming the Gaze: Islamophobia and Resistance in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist and Home Fire*

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Introduction

The contemporary global landscape is marked by the rise of right-wing nationalism, an upsurge in xenophobic sentiments, and an increasing criminalisation of minorities, particularly Muslims. These forces are not merely political phenomena; they are cultural, social, and ideological movements that shape how individuals and communities are perceived and treated. As the world grapples with these challenges, there has been an alarming return to nationalistic rhetoric that seeks to draw borders not only in the political and economic spheres but also in cultural and racial terms. Xenophobia (the irrational fear and hatred of those perceived as outsiders) has taken on new forms, manifesting most prominently through Islamophobia, where Muslims are increasingly scapegoated for social, economic, and political anxieties. This resurgence is most evident in the Western societies, where the Muslim community has become a focal point for right-wing forces, often portrayed as a monolithic, alien threat to national security and cultural values. The so-called "war on terror" that began after the 9/11 attacks set the stage for the racialisation and marginalisation of Muslims, a process that has only

intensified with the rise of populist movements and anti-immigrant rhetoric in the 21st century. Muslims, particularly those of South Asian and Middle Eastern descent, have been framed as the Other: a group that is not only outside the bounds of Western civilisation but also inherently suspicious, dangerous, and incompatible with the values of freedom and democracy.

Amidst this hostile climate, postcolonial literature has emerged as a powerful site of resistance, challenging the hegemonic narratives that fuel xenophobia and nationalism. Postcolonial writers, such as Mohsin Hamid and Kamila Shamsie, use their novels to confront these global challenges by reimagining the Muslim subject and reclaiming the narrative of identity, belonging, and resistance. In particular, novels such as *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) by Hamid and *Home Fire* (2017) by Shamsie stand out as crucial texts that address the human cost of rising nationalism, Islamophobia, and xenophobia. These authors not only capture the personal and collective impact of these issues but also actively subvert the dominant Western gaze that seeks to dehumanise their characters. By presenting their protagonists as complex, multi-dimensional individuals rather than one-dimensional victims or villains, Hamid and Shamsie challenge the stereotypes that have long defined the representation of Muslims in Western discourse. Their works provide a much-needed counter-narrative to the popular media portrayals of Muslims as threats or outsiders, offering instead stories of agency, resistance, and personal growth. In doing so, they reclaim the narrative space for Muslim voices, resisting both colonial legacies and contemporary forms of oppression. This article will explore how *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *Home Fire* respond to the rise of right-wing nationalism and xenophobia. By analysing the ways in which these novels subvert the Western gaze, foreground the human cost of Islamophobia, and reimagine the Muslim experience, this article argues that postcolonial literature serves as an essential tool for resistance and healing in a world increasingly defined by division, nationalism, and surveillance.

Literature Review

The rise of right-wing nationalism, xenophobia, and Islamophobia in recent years has triggered a resurgence of interest in how these issues are represented in literature, particularly postcolonial literature. Scholars have increasingly examined how contemporary postcolonial writers are engaging with the complex interplay of race, identity, and nationalism, as well as the reassertion of colonial power structures in the modern era. As global political landscapes shift, so too does the representation of the Other, and postcolonial literature offers vital insights into these dynamics.

One of the key themes in recent postcolonial scholarship is the racialisation of Muslims, particularly in the context of the global War on Terror. Islamophobia, a central concern of this research, refers to the irrational fear, prejudice, and discrimination against Islam and Muslim communities. Scholars like Jasbir Puar (2007) have explored how Islamophobia intersects with other forms of discrimination, arguing that Islamophobia is not merely an expression of hatred but a tool of racialisation. In her work on *homonationalism*, Puar highlights how Muslim men are racialised as threats to Western values, such as freedom and democracy, and are positioned as inherently incompatible with liberal ideals. This theory challenges the oversimplified discourse that presents Islamophobia as a purely ideological issue, pointing to the racial and cultural dimensions that underpin these prejudices.

In addition to Puar, scholars such as Sara Ahmed (2012) have investigated the role of emotional governance in Islamophobia, suggesting that fear of Muslims has become institutionalised in both state practices and public discourse. Ahmed's work on the affective dimensions of Islamophobia argues that the fear of Muslims has become deeply embedded in Western consciousness, influencing everything from counter-terrorism policies to media representations. Her notion of 'affective governance' further complicates our understanding of how Islamophobia operates not merely as a political

tool but as an emotional force that shapes the very way Muslim bodies are perceived and treated in the West.

This concern with the racialisation of Muslims can also be traced back to Edward Said's foundational work on *Orientalism* (1978). Said's analysis of the Western gaze, which constructs the East as a threatening and exotic Other, remains highly relevant in understanding the contemporary representation of Muslims. Said's critique of how Western knowledge about the Orient served the interests of colonial domination has been extended by scholars examining how Western portrayals of Muslims continue to reinforce the stereotypes of the 'terrorist' or the 'barbaric Other.' Postcolonial critics like Rachel D. M. Wright (2019) have built on Said's ideas by examining how contemporary British literature reflects and perpetuates these Orientalist stereotypes, particularly in relation to the figure of the Muslim terrorist. Wright's work suggests that literature can play a critical role in subverting these harmful stereotypes, particularly by offering more nuanced portrayals of Muslim characters and their struggles.

Building on these foundations, recent scholarship has expanded the notion of the postcolonial gaze to include the concept of "reclaiming the gaze." Homi K. Bhabha's work on hybridity (1994) and cultural negotiation offers a framework for understanding how postcolonial subjects resist and negotiate with dominant cultural narratives. In particular, scholars have applied Bhabha's notion of the 'third space' to examine how contemporary Muslim characters in literature navigate their hybrid identities in the face of Western hegemony. This hybrid identity, constantly in flux and shaped by multiple influences, challenges the binary oppositions between the West and the East, offering a more complex and humanised portrayal of Muslim individuals.

Additionally, the literature surrounding the human cost of rising nationalism and xenophobia has become increasingly significant in postcolonial studies. The rise of right-wing politics, particularly in Europe and the United States, has led to a resurgence of nationalist

ideologies that often target Muslim populations as scapegoats. Scholars have noted the emotional toll these ideologies take on Muslim communities, who are subjected to surveillance, discrimination, and violence. Critical works by scholars such as Merve Emre (2020) suggest that postcolonial writers, including those from Muslim backgrounds, actively reclaim the narrative by portraying characters who challenge both external and internalised forms of oppression. In her reflections on Orhan Pamuk, particularly in relation to his Nobel lecture, Emre shows how his use of metafiction and introspective narration challenges simplistic Western portrayals of Muslim identity, offering instead a layered and self-reflective voice. She makes a similar point in her profile of Hisham Matar, where she highlights how Matar's exploration of memory and exile becomes a powerful form of political resistance. Through deeply personal stories, these writers critique broader systems of authoritarianism and misrepresentation. Building on this, scholars like Claire Chambers (2011) and Amal Amireh (2003) have shown how Muslim authors use fragmented structures, deep character interiority, and hybrid literary forms to push back against Islamophobic and Orientalist stereotypes. Taken together, this body of criticism reveals how such writers create rich counter-narratives that centre the emotional and political realities of alienation, displacement and resistance, and in doing so, reclaim control over how they are seen and understood.

Furthermore, recent studies have examined how contemporary postcolonial literature interrogates the effects of rising nationalism and the erosion of multicultural values. Scholars such as Elleke Boehmer (2018) have explored how literary texts engage with nationalism not only by critiquing its exclusionary logic but also by envisioning more inclusive futures through narrative reimagination. Similarly, Graham Huggan (2001) argues that postcolonial literature functions as a site of cultural resistance, challenging dominant ideological frameworks and destabilising monolithic narratives of identity. Critics like Priya Gopal (2019) have also highlighted the role of literature in exposing the racialised underpinnings of Western liberalism and calling attention to the marginalisation of Muslim voices within the nationalist discourse. As

the political landscape shifts to the right, these literary interventions become increasingly vital in contesting the reductive portrayals of Muslim identities and advocating for more nuanced, empathetic representations of cultural and religious diversity.

The contribution of this research lies in its exploration of how postcolonial literature actively engages with and critiques the rise of right-wing nationalism and xenophobia, particularly in the context of Islamophobia and the racialisation of Muslim identities. By focusing on texts such as *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *Home Fire*, my work aims to demonstrate how these literary works not only subvert Orientalist stereotypes but also serve as powerful counter-narratives to the dominant political and cultural discourses that perpetuate fear and exclusion. In doing so, this research highlights the role of literature in reclaiming the gaze, offering new ways of understanding the human cost of rising nationalism and providing a space for resistance and the reimagination of identity. Through this lens, my study contributes to broader conversations about the potential of postcolonial literature to challenge the growing forces of intolerance and promote more inclusive and empathetic representations of marginalised communities in contemporary society.

Subverting the Western Gaze: The Power of Narrative Voice in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*

In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007), Mohsin Hamid intricately examines the shifting dynamics of identity, belonging, and power through the experiences of Changez, a young Pakistani man who becomes disillusioned with the United States after 9/11. The novel's structure, especially its use of an unreliable first-person narrative, plays a critical role in subverting the Western gaze. By employing a monologue delivered by Changez to an American tourist in Lahore, Hamid allows the protagonist to reclaim his narrative and, in turn, to challenge the very systems of power that have historically constructed the East as the Other.

One of the key ways Hamid subverts the Western gaze is by shifting the control of the narrative from the Western observer to the subject of the gaze, Changez himself. Traditionally, the Western gaze in literature has been characterised by a position of dominance, with Western characters or narrators controlling the stories of the non-Western world. Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) highlights how Western intellectuals and writers constructed the Orient as exotic, mysterious, and inferior, defining it in ways that reflected their own interests and ideologies. The East, in this framework, was never allowed to speak for itself; it was always the object of study and, often, objectification. In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Hamid critiques this one-sided narrative by giving Changez a voice that is both compelling and critical of the world that has constructed him as a threat.

The novel begins with Changez's narration, which is directed at an unnamed American, a tourist sitting in a café in Lahore. This direct address creates a sense of intimacy and immediacy, drawing the reader into the mind of the protagonist while also forcing them into the position of the Other. The unnamed American, representative of the Western world, is initially in control of the gaze, but as Changez speaks, this dynamic begins to shift. By offering his story from his own perspective, Changez reclaims control over how he is seen. This narrative strategy is crucial in a postcolonial context, where the histories of colonisation and racialisation have denied the colonised subject their voice. One of the key moments that highlights this shift in power is Changez's description of his arrival in the United States. He recalls his first encounter with the American dream, which initially captivates him: "I was charmed by the country's energy and optimism, and by its devotion to success [...] I was living the American dream" (Hamid 2007, 22). This optimism, however, quickly gives way to disillusionment as Changez becomes increasingly aware of the fractures within the American ideal. As he excels in his work at Underwood Samson, a prestigious valuation firm, he begins to notice the subtle ways in which his identity as a Pakistani Muslim is marginalised. Changez's growing awareness of the limitations of his inclusion in American society is

expressed in his reflections on his professional success: “I had learned that it was not the success of my work that would be the measure of my worth, but the simple fact of being different” (Hamid 2007, 105). This realisation signals a shift from admiration for the American ideal to a recognition of the inherent racial and cultural exclusions built into the American system.

Hamid’s narrative structure allows Changez to reflect on his changing relationship to America, particularly after the events of 9/11. While his success in the United States was once a source of pride, the racialised surveillance and suspicion he experiences post-9/11 force him to confront the limitations of the American Dream. In a key scene, Changez recalls being detained at an airport: “I had been made to feel like a criminal [...] simply because of my name and my appearance” (Hamid 2007, 150). This moment exemplifies the experience of racialisation that many Muslims and South Asians face in the West, particularly in the wake of terrorist attacks that are often framed in terms of a clash of civilisations. Changez’s growing sense of alienation is not just personal; it is a comment on how the racialisation of Muslim identities is institutionalised in post-9/11 America, where Muslims are seen as potential threats rather than individuals. This racialisation becomes a central theme in Changez’s eventual disillusionment with the United States. As he becomes more attuned to the ways in which he is perceived as an outsider, his relationship with the country shifts from one of admiration to one of critique. His experiences at Underwood Samson, where he is complicit in valuing companies in the interests of American imperialism, mirror his growing discomfort with the United States’ global actions. Changez’s decision to return to Pakistan is both a personal and political act, signalling his rejection of the Western gaze that once shaped his identity. He reflects, “I had to leave for the sake of my soul” (Hamid 2007, 173), suggesting that his departure is not just an escape from the physical hostility he faces, but a rejection of the ideological and cultural forces that have shaped his life.

Moreover, Hamid’s use of the second-person narration, with Changez speaking directly to the American tourist, further subverts the traditional

power dynamics of the Western gaze. In this narrative style, the reader is placed in the position of the tourist, effectively becoming the object of Changez's scrutiny. The relationship between the two men is deliberately ambiguous, creating a tension between the Western gaze and the Eastern perspective. Changez's direct address to the American tourist also serves to destabilise the authority of the Western observer, forcing the reader to reconsider the assumptions they may bring to the text. This technique is particularly effective in subverting the conventional notion of the West as the ultimate authority on knowledge and truth, shifting the power from the Western gaze to the postcolonial subject who now controls the narrative. In other words, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* subverts the Western gaze by allowing Changez to take control of his own narrative. Through the first-person monologue directed at the unnamed American tourist, Hamid reclaims the narrative from the Western observer and places the protagonist in a position of authority. By presenting Changez as a complex, multi-dimensional character whose identity is shaped by both Western and Eastern influences, Hamid challenges the reductive representations of Muslim subjects in Western discourse and reclaims the postcolonial gaze. In doing so, the novel exemplifies the power of narrative voice in resisting the dominant narratives imposed by the West, offering a space for the subversion of Orientalist stereotypes and the complex reimagining of Muslim identities in a globalised world.

Surveillance and Resistance in *Home Fire*

Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire* (2017) offers another compelling critique of the rise of right-wing nationalism, this time through the lens of gender, familial duty, and state surveillance. Through the story of three British Muslim siblings – Isma, Aneeka, and Parvaiz, Shamsie explores the human cost of nationalist politics and the increasing racialisation of Muslim identity in the post-9/11 West. As in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Shamsie's novel reclaims the gaze from the state and media by foregrounding the interiority of her characters, granting them the complexity and emotional depth so often denied to Muslims in mainstream political discourse.

One of the most poignant aspects of *Home Fire* is how it lays bare the emotional weight of being constantly viewed through the lens of suspicion. Isma, the eldest sibling, has long carried the burden of being both caretaker and the “model Muslim.” At the beginning of the novel, during an airport interrogation scene, Isma reflects on the absurdity and exhaustion of being perpetually scrutinised: “She had said it a thousand times before: no, she wasn’t carrying anything for anyone else; no, she hadn’t left her luggage unattended; no, she had no plans to go to Syria; no, no, no” (Shamsie 2017, 3). In this moment, Shamsie immediately establishes the novel’s central concern: the erosion of dignity that comes from being cast as “guilty until proven innocent.” The mechanical, repetitive nature of Isma’s responses highlights the dehumanisation that state surveillance produces. She is not seen as a person, but as a set of potential threats.

Shamsie deepens this theme by introducing Eamonn, the son of a Muslim-born British Home Secretary, Karamat Lone, whose politics align with right-wing rhetoric. Karamat Lone represents a new, insidious form of internalised Islamophobia: one in which Muslims in positions of power distance themselves from their own communities to curry favour with the establishment. His speeches echo real-world political discourse that positions “British values” in opposition to “Muslim values,” often in ways that implicitly demand assimilation or expulsion. He declares, “Citizenship is not an absolute right. It comes with conditions. And if you refuse those conditions, you are not owed anything by the state” (Shamsie 2017, 194). This authoritarian stance, cloaked in the language of national security, legitimises the stripping of citizenship as a tool of control and exclusion.

At the heart of *Home Fire* is Aneeka’s fierce, emotional resistance to this political climate. When her twin brother Parvaiz is manipulated into joining ISIS and later killed while trying to return to Britain, Aneeka’s grief is not only personal, it is political. Her love for her brother and her desperate attempts to bring his body home expose the state’s failure to recognise the humanity of Muslim citizens. Aneeka refuses to allow her

brother to be remembered only as a “terrorist,” insisting on the fullness of his life, his fears, and his regret. In one of the novel’s most heart-wrenching moments, she pleads, “You don’t have to forgive him. Just let him come home. Let him come home for burial. Please” (Shamsie 2017, 241). Her plea is ignored. Through Aneeka, Shamsie challenges the reader to confront the dehumanising policies that reduce Muslim lives to political symbols, disposable and voiceless. Importantly, Shamsie does not romanticise Parvaiz’s actions or seek to justify them. Instead, she offers a textured portrayal of how vulnerable individuals can be groomed and exploited by extremist groups. Parvaiz’s path is not a result of ideology but of emotional vulnerability, isolation, and a longing for connection with his deceased jihadist father. Shamsie writes, “What Parvaiz wanted was not to fight but to feel. To be a man with a history, a purpose” (Shamsie 2017, 117). His story stands as a painful counter-narrative to the dominant portrayal of radicalisation as a linear, monstrous process. Shamsie shows how radicalisation is rooted not in evil but in pain and disaffection—a product of structural failures, not merely individual choice.

Through this deeply empathetic lens, *Home Fire* challenges the prevailing nationalistic and Islamophobic discourses that dominate British politics. The novel does not provide easy answers; rather, it insists on the complexity of its characters and the tragedy of a state that fails its own citizens. In the climactic final scene, Aneeka sits in a London park with her brother’s body, surrounded by media and surveillance. Her act is both protest and mourning. As drones circle above, her resistance is made visible, even in her vulnerability. She reclaims the gaze, not by returning it with violence, but by forcing it to witness her grief. This final act is emblematic of Shamsie’s broader project: to humanise what politics has dehumanised. By giving voice to Muslim characters in all their contradictions, grief, and longing, *Home Fire* forces the readers to consider the real, lived consequences of political rhetoric and state policy. Aneeka’s heartbreak is not just a personal tragedy, it is a direct result of a government that values control over compassion, security over humanity.

Thus, *Home Fire* stands as a powerful work of postcolonial resistance. It refuses to let state narratives define its characters, insisting instead on their agency, their stories, and their pain. Like *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, it reclaims the gaze from institutions of power and redirects it toward those who have suffered under its scrutiny. In doing so, Shamsie not only indicts the policies that fuel xenophobia and nationalism but also elevates the literature of resistance – fiction that refuses to be silent in the face of state violence and social exclusion.

Literary Resistance and Humanisation

At the heart of both *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *Home Fire* lies a profound critique of how contemporary politics dehumanises those caught in the crosshairs of surveillance, nationalism, and racialised suspicion. As right-wing ideologies gather momentum globally—amplified by populist leaders, anti-immigrant policies, and the rhetoric of “us vs. them”—literature has become a vital space for resisting these narratives. The literary imagination allows authors like Mohsin Hamid and Kamila Shamsie to expose the emotional toll of state violence, challenge dominant perceptions, and most importantly, restore dignity to the marginalised.

Both novels make visible the psychological fragmentation experienced by Muslim characters who find themselves constructed as national threats. In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Changez’s slow unravelling is not the result of radical ideology, but of a prolonged identity crisis born of social exclusion. His growing alienation reflects what Homi Bhabha famously called the “unhomely”—a condition where the border between the public and private self collapses, leaving the postcolonial subject estranged from both homeland and host nation (Bhabha 1994, 9). Literature captures this haunting condition in ways that policy and news media cannot. Hamid’s introspective narrative voice renders Changez not as an object of fear, but as a young man caught in the machinery of geopolitics, longing for belonging and wholeness.

Similarly, *Home Fire* offers a deeply empathetic portrayal of lives shattered by the collision between state power and familial love. Aneeka's refusal to allow the state to dictate how her brother is remembered is, in itself, a radical act. Her grief, which is public, unapologetic, and defiant, becomes a form of protest. The novel insists that mourning too is political, particularly when states weaponise death to advance nationalist agendas. As Judith Butler argues in *Precarious Lives* (2004), the state's refusal to recognise certain deaths as grievable reflects whose lives are deemed valuable. By centring Aneeka's pain and her desperate plea for recognition, Shamsie exposes the brutal hierarchies that underlie contemporary security discourses.

Postcolonial literature, then, becomes a site for reclaiming what nationalism seeks to erase: the humanity of those it otherises. Both Hamid and Shamsie push against the grain of dominant political narratives, offering alternative ways of seeing and knowing. Their protagonists are not saints or villains but fully realised individuals negotiating impossible choices. These texts resist simplification and demand that readers hold complexity and contradiction without resorting to judgment. In doing so, they invite us to feel with those who are so often rendered faceless by policy and prejudice.

Moreover, both the novels serve as literary interventions in the post-9/11 cultural archive, challenging the linear narratives of radicalisation and offering instead a textured account of how precarity is lived and resisted. They dismantle the binary of West versus East and force us to reckon with the entangled histories of empire, migration, and global inequality. In this way, they continue the postcolonial project of not just critiquing empire, but also imagining new ethical frameworks for coexistence. Through their use of voice, narrative structure, and affect, Hamid and Shamsie illuminate the inner lives of those vilified by political discourse. They offer us characters who are grieving, loving, angry, confused, and courageous; characters who, in reclaiming their narratives, also reclaim their dignity. This is perhaps literature's most urgent role today: to resist the reduction of human beings into

categories of danger or innocence and to insist instead on the complicated truth of their humanity.

Conclusion

In a world increasingly defined by borders, both physical and ideological, the resurgence of right-wing nationalism and xenophobia poses urgent ethical and emotional questions. These are questions that literature is uniquely equipped to explore. Through *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *Home Fire*, Mohsin Hamid and Kamila Shamsie offer far more than political commentary; they offer windows into lives fractured by fear, alienation, and the persistent need to be seen. These novels resist the silencing gaze of the state and the media by restoring narrative agency to characters who are too often reduced to symbols of threat or tragedy. By centring human experience, including grief, love, uncertainty, and defiance, Hamid and Shamsie reclaim the right to complex identity. They challenge dominant narratives not only by exposing their flaws but by offering alternatives rooted in empathy, nuance, and emotional truth. Their works invite readers to consider not just what nationalism excludes, but what it costs: the quiet devastation of families, the slow erosion of trust, the trauma of being endlessly watched and never truly seen.

This article contributes to current scholarship on postcolonial literature by situating these texts within the broader discourse of state surveillance, cultural alienation, and the politics of mourning. It builds upon recent critical conversations around the dehumanising effects of security culture and reaffirms the role of fiction as a space for ethical witnessing. In tracing how both these novels resist dominant gazes and recuperate Muslim subjectivity, this study underlines the necessity of literary engagement in times of political fracture. The stories we tell, and those we choose to hear, shape not only our understanding of the world, but also our capacity to change it. In reclaiming the gaze, postcolonial literature does not merely challenge power. It reclaims hope. And in doing so, it reminds us that narrative is not just an act of resistance; it is an act of care.

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