

## STATELESSNESS: THE CONCEPT OF HOMO SACER IN KAMILA SHAMSIE'S *HOME FIRE*

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### **Abstract**

*This article analyzes Kamila Shamsie's novel Home Fire (2017), which is a contemporary remake of the family tragedy of Sophocles' Antigone. The novel focuses on the lives of three orphaned siblings, Isma, Aneeka, and Parvaiz, who are British-Pakistani citizens, living as a minority group in multicultural British society. However, following in his father's footsteps, Parvaiz makes the decision to leave the United Kingdom and join a jihadist movement, which constitutes a threat to his citizenship rights. Later on, he regrets being a part of a radical group and decides to come back home in the United Kingdom, but the government has already revoked his citizenship. The situation becomes complicated when, following the death of Parvaiz, her twin brother, Aneeka makes a demand to the British authorities to bury her brother's body on British soil. Thus, Aneeka finds herself in a situation of confronting the sovereign power represented by the British Home Secretary, Karamat Lone, who has revoked the citizenship of both her and her brother for acting against the vital interests of the state. In this context, I will explore the characters of Parvaiz and Aneeka as stateless people, drawing on Giorgio Agamben's notion of homo sacer, understood as someone condemned to 'bare life' and thus as vulnerable to sovereign violence. The paper will focus on the excess of sovereign power exercised over these two characters, which will be analyzed drawing on Agamben's arguments of state of exception, bare life, and homo sacer.*

**Keywords:** *Homo Sacer, State of Exception, Bare Life, Agamben, Biopolitics*

### **1. Introduction**

It will not be an exaggeration to say that Kamila Shamsie's novel *Home Fire* (2017) offers a modern-day version of Sophocles' tragedy *Antigone*. It deals with the themes of identity crisis, Otherness, and sovereign power, focusing in particular on the experience of three British-Pakistani siblings – Isma, Parvaiz, and Aneeka – living under sovereign surveillance as a consequence of their father's involvement with jihadism. As Claire Chambers puts it, "*Home*

*Fire* operates as a post-9/11 *Antigone*, and its adaptation element is immediately signaled by the novel's epigraph from Seamus Heaney's translation of Sophocles' play: 'The ones we love. . . are enemies of the state (n.p.).'<sup>1</sup> More specifically, Shamsie portrays "the struggle of those stuck between increasingly authoritarian, post-9/11 governments in the West and religious fundamentalist groups in the East."<sup>2</sup> The events in the novel take place primarily in London, but also in other locales, such as Amherst (Massachusetts), Istanbul (Turkey), Raqqa (Syria), and Karachi (Pakistan). The story in *Home Fire* encompasses the fates of two British-Pakistani families, the Pashas and the Lones, which are closely entwined with one another. They both shared a Muslim cultural background but were otherwise exact opposites. Adil Pasha, the father of the three siblings at the center of Shamsie's narrative, was a member of a radical Islamic group and upon detention died in Guantanamo Bay. Karamat Lone, for his part, is a Home Secretary with the British government, seeking a political career and acceptance in the British society, while distancing himself from his Muslim background in the process.

The main action of the story begins with the disappearance of Parvaiz, who decides to join the Islamic terrorist group ISIS. He follows in the footsteps of his jihadist father, whom he never met in person, under the influence of his father's friend and jihadist recruiter Farooq. Later on, Parvaiz realizes that he has made a horrible mistake and wants to come back home to Britain, asking Aneeka for help. His life ends outside the British consulate in Turkey, where he is likely killed by Farooq for betrayal. Named a dead terrorist and a traitor in the news headlines, Parvaiz is no longer regarded as British, as the Home Secretary revokes his British citizenship.<sup>3</sup> Lone's decision is to ban Parvaiz' burial on British soil, repatriating his body to Pakistan. Unable to bring Parvaiz' funeral to Britain, Aneeka initiates a protest against the sovereign decision of the Home Secretary by sitting next to her brother's coffin outside the Karachi British High Commission in one of the city parks.

Aneeka's steps to secure burial rights and justice for her brother via her public presence. The media does not change Lone's mind, who remains opposed to bringing Parvaiz' body to the UK. Instead, the Home Secretary revoked her citizenship as well, for acting against the vital interests of the UK. His position is laid bare in the suggestive statement "Let her continue to be British; but let her be British outside Britain."<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, Eamonn, Lone's son, and Aneeka start a relationship; he tries to convince his father to have Parvaiz' body brought back to Britain but was not able to change his mind. Thus, Lone's unyielding political ambition and British nationalism contributed to the lovers' downfall and death – at the end of the story, the two were reunited in the park but were targeted and ultimately blown up by jihadists. In this relation, Rehana Ahmed very properly points out that "The novel's emphasis on performance and surveillance highlights the role of the visual in shaping or entrenching perceptions of others, and thereby entrenching barriers between cultural groups, or impeding communication across

<sup>1</sup> Claire Gail Chambers, "Sound and Fury: Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire*," *Massachusetts Review*, Vol. 3 (2018), p. 208.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Krause, "Antigone in Pakistan: *Home Fire*, by Kamila Shamsie," *Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics*, Vol. 43, No. 3, (2020), p. 15.

<sup>3</sup> Kamila Shamsie, "Exiled: the disturbing story of a citizen made unBritish", *The Guardian* (November 17, 2018), <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/nov/17/unbecoming-british-kamila-shamsie-citizens-exile>.

<sup>4</sup> Kamila Shamsie, *Home Fire* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), p. 230.

them.”<sup>5</sup> This concern can be pointedly traced in the novel, as Shamsie draws attention to cultural differences which can become a source of problems and threats, thus raising the question of the possibility of a non-homogenous community. In this regard, Stuart Hall says,

What are the terms on which people from different cultural, religious, linguistic, and historical backgrounds, who have applied to occupy the same social space, whether that is a city or a nation, or a region, to live with one another without either one group (the less powerful group) having to become the imitative version of the dominant one-i.e. an assimilationism- or, on the other hand, the two groups hating one another, or projecting images of degradation?<sup>6</sup>

We need to note here that, since Shamsie's novel lays out the discussion about the ways of belonging and not belonging around citizenship rights, multiculturalism, and resistance to assimilation, the novel answers Hall's question with a resounding 'no'. As Debjani Banerjee points out, Shamsie succeeds in analyzing the issues precisely by providing “a deeper look into the community to show the nuanced relationship within British Muslims and their multilayered connections with faith and with state machinery.”<sup>7</sup>

In this context, sovereign power over citizenship and human rights appear as important themes of the novel, which challenge the idea that liberalism, democracy, and totalitarianism are mutually exclusive opposites. Shamsie narrates her story by juxtaposing them in the course of the events. Notably, once Parvaiz and then Aneeka are condemned to being stateless and outside the law, we can think of them as a kind of “living dead,” in Agamben's terms *homines sacri/homo sacer*. We can thus examine the themes of the novel, including being stripped of legal rights, deprived of citizenship, and statelessness, through Giorgio Agamben's work *Homo Sacer* and particularly drawing on his discussions of the suspension of the law, the state of exception, and the production of bare life.

At this point, we will need to note that for Agamben the political subject of modern life is “not man as a free and conscious political subject but, above all, man's bare life.”<sup>8</sup> But to understand what Agamben means by “bare life,” and the transformative effects of the sovereign power on it, we will need to look at the Western politics, in which these effects show in the life of individuals. We will discuss this further in the following section.

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<sup>5</sup> Rehana Ahmed, “Towards an Ethics of Reading Muslims: Encountering Difference in Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire*,” *Textual Practice*, Vol. 35, No. 7 (2021), p. 13.

<sup>6</sup> Stuart Hall, “Rethinking the cultural question” (a video conversation with Nira Yuval-Davis), shown at the interim conference of the International Sociological Association with heading *Racisms, Sexisms, and Contemporary Politics of Belonging* (London, August 2004); see also Nira Yuval-Davis, *The Politics of Belonging: Intersectional Contestations* (Los Angeles, London, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2011), p. 26.

<sup>7</sup> Debjani Banerjee, “From Cheap Labor to Overlooked Citizens: Looking for British Muslim Identities in Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire*,” *South Asian Review*, Vol. 41, No. 3-4 (2020), p. 289.

<sup>8</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 128.

## 2. Sovereignty and Homo Sacer

*Sacredness is a line of flight still present in contemporary politics, a line that is as such moving into zones increasingly vast and dark, to the point of ultimately coinciding with the biological life itself of citizens. If today there is no longer any one clear figure of the sacred man, it is perhaps because we are all virtually homines sacri.* Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, pp. 114-115

For Agamben, “the production of a biopolitical body is the original activity of sovereign power”<sup>9</sup>; thus, the latter controls the individual human rights and decides who is inside and outside the law. Since in this way individuals become the biopolitical tool of the sovereign, the latter regulates the juridical order through them, including by suspending the law “and, maintaining itself in relation to the exception,” that is, by “first constituting itself as a rule.”<sup>10</sup> In other words, within Agamben’s perspective on sovereign power, the sovereign, as the decision-maker over law and political life, has the power to decide who is inside and outside the law. Also, the sovereign can exclude itself from the law because the sovereign is the creator of the juridical order. This is a preferable exception for the sovereign because in this way it resides outside that order and is excluded from any restrictions and penalties of the law while it is under the protection of the law.

Since the law is related to “bare life,” in the state of exception, human life and rights are captured by sovereign power. The sovereign can thus decide that certain individuals can be excluded from full participation in political life. From this perspective, Being can be seen as “nothing other than Being in the ban of being,”<sup>11</sup> which backs up the idea that “the original political relation is the ban.”<sup>12</sup> In this sense, the state of exception becomes a zone of indistinction between outside and inside, exclusion and inclusion, which produces the form of bare life as the fundamental act of sovereignty in the sense of being included in the political realm by virtue of being excluded.<sup>13</sup> Thus, this paradoxical “inclusive exclusion” paradigm becomes significant for the analysis of the act of sovereign exception in the production of bare life.

Agamben proposes that this exclusive operation is intimately bound up with the distinction between *bios* and *zoē*, which is found in the ancient Greek conception of life. Thus, *zoē* refers to the natural life (common to humans, animals, and gods), whereas *bios* indicates the form of qualified life peculiar to a single individual or a group. In this context, *bios* indicates that individuals’ lives are grounded in the political form of life, while *zoē* can be associated with a kind of animalization. That is, *zoē* can be seen as opposed to or excluded from the political life. All in all, the binary confrontation of *bíos* and *zoē* highlights the biopolitical division between political and natural life. At this point, *homo sacer* is not the same thing as

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 60.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 181.

<sup>13</sup> Nasser Hussain & Melissa Ptacek, “Thresholds: Sovereignty and the Sacred,” *Law & Society Review*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (2000), p. 496.

*zoē*, but rather stands on the “threshold between nature and culture, *zoē* and *bios*.”<sup>14</sup> That is, the division between political and natural life relates living beings to bare life, places them on the threshold of the juridico-political realm.

Bare life, in this sense, is a product of the state of exception, or as Agamben puts it, “the production of bare life is the originary activity of sovereignty.”<sup>15</sup> This means that “bare life” is different from *zoē* and that instead it is produced by the sovereign power which captures the living beings from the very “arising of the political in the West, Greek democracy and Roman law.”<sup>16</sup> As Agamben explains,

The fundamental categorial pair of Western politics is not that of friend/ enemy but that of bare life/political existence, *zoē* /*bios*, exclusion/inclusion. There is politics because man is the living being who, in language, separates and opposes himself to his own bare life and, at the same time, maintains himself in relation to that bare life in an inclusive exclusion.<sup>17</sup>

Agamben suggests that this biopolitical paradigm captured in the distinction between bare life and politics originates in Ancient Athens and runs through to modern Western history, while still determining and obscuring the very nature of politics. As he writes, “in Western politics, bare life has the peculiar privilege of being that whose exclusion founds the city of men.”<sup>18</sup> In this sense, bare life becomes indistinct from a basic form of life, whereas its eventual differentiation becomes possible through a politicization by way of exclusion.

In this framework, Agamben discusses the historical figure of the archaic Roman law, *homo sacer*, the outlaw who has been excluded from the religious and the juridical-political community and thus “may be killed and yet not sacrificed.”<sup>19</sup> According to the Roman law, the *homo sacer* can be killed by anyone without this constituting a homicide as this banned person no longer has a political identity and is seen as a mere bare body. For Agamben, *homo sacer* is deprived of “normal political rights and legal safeguards” by the sovereign, who forces him out of *bios* and thus reduces him to bare life.

At the same time, it is impermissible for *homo sacer* to be sacrificed because of his sacredness. As Agamben claims, “*homo sacer* belongs to God in the form of unsacrificability and is included in the community in the form of being able to be killed.”<sup>20</sup> This, then, is a situation in which, as a result of a double exclusion, *homo sacer* is excluded from both the sphere of the profane law (*ius humanum*) and that of the divine law (*ius divinum*). Agamben explains,

What defines the status of *homo sacer* is therefore not the originary ambivalence of the sacredness that is assumed to belong to him, but rather both the particular character of the double exclusion into which he is taken and the violence to which he finds himself exposed. This violence – the

<sup>14</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, p. 181.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 83.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>18</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The Omnibus Homo Sacer*, translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2017), p. 10.

<sup>19</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, p. 8.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82

unsanctionable killing that, in his case, anyone may commit – is classifiable neither as sacrifice nor as homicide, neither as the execution of a condemnation to death nor as sacrilege.<sup>21</sup>

Thus, by being banned, *homo sacer* is left to live under the sovereign power and – via his unsacrificeability – also outside the realm of God. In this way, his two forms of existence are caught in the zone of indistinction as inclusive exclusion.

In the light of these explanations, Shamsie's novel can be seen as offering a discussion of characters that are *homines sacri* and are thus marked by a border status of indistinction as belonging to neither *zoē*, nor *bios*. That is, as *homines sacri*, the lives of Aneeka and Parvaiz are included in the law by being excluded from it, which is always related to the possible and present state of exception. In this sense, we can say that, for Agamben, sovereign power is embedded in biopolitics and this indeed implies the paradox that life conditioned in the sphere of sovereignty is life that has been abandoned by its juridico-political order.<sup>22</sup>

As it has been noted, since Shamsie depicts her characters as being on the threshold between inside and outside of the juridical order, we can speak of a zone of indifference identifiable in her novel. As *homines sacri*, the siblings now can be seen as being in a liminal position which is neither that of simple natural life, nor social life, but bare life. That is, they exemplify a situation, in which bare life and juridical order appear at the threshold of indistinction, of a paradoxical 'inclusive exclusion'. This peculiar condition is identifiable in terms of Agamben's sense of *Homo Sacer* and allows for the novel *Home Fire* to be read through the lenses of his critique of sovereignty as enacting a state of exception.

### 3. Homines Sacri in *Home Fire*

As the novel tells us, the young orphaned Muslim siblings had a financially constrained life in a London suburb near Wembley. After their father, Adil Pasha, became a terrorist, they lived under the surveillance by MI5 officers. The siblings feared that the British government would withdraw the state welfare benefits from any family it suspected to be siding with terrorists.<sup>23</sup> They had to be mindful about pretty much everything they did in this society, for fear of being harassed by the Special Branch of the security agency, as well as by people in the neighborhood who suspected their sympathies based on the story of Adil Pasha.<sup>24</sup> In an important sense, their father's criminal past had already placed them outside British society, as they were already regarded as members of a more or less disenfranchised social group. We can therefore think of them as a kind of *homines sacri* endeavoring to survive in the multicultural British society while being placed in a disadvantaged position.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 82

<sup>22</sup> It is to be noted that Agamben criticizes Michel Foucault for limiting his studies to hospitals and prisons and not focusing on the concentration camp as a peculiar example of disciplinary biopolitics. According to Agamben, Foucault in this way has ignored the politics of the totalitarian states of the twentieth century (Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 118). Similarly, he criticizes Hannah Arendt for the lack of biopolitical analyses in her investigations, even though she did discuss the link between totalitarian rule and the concentration camp. Agamben thus suggests an analysis of sovereignty as making up for the deficiencies in the views of these two thinkers with the political sense of bare life.

<sup>23</sup> Kamila Shamsie, *Home Fire*, p. 49.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 49.

While accepting that the sovereign and *homines sacri* stand in opposition to each other, Agamben also claims that they are at the same time symmetrical and belong to the same order. In his own words, “the sovereign and homo sacer present two symmetrical figures that have the same structure and are correlative: the sovereign is the one with respect to whom all men are potentially *homines sacri*, and homo sacer is the one with respect to whom all men act as sovereigns.”<sup>25</sup> Thus, while the Pasha family had to live with the anxiety of being constantly questioned regarding their loyalty to the British nation, Karamat Lone, as a sovereign figure, was in a position of privilege which potentially enabled him to designate a person as *homo sacer* in Agamben’s sense. That the Home Secretary fittingly exemplifies this Agambenian sense of a sovereign who is ready to differentiate and thus designate *homines sacri* within society as a whole becomes clear in a statement Shamsie has him making:

You are, we are British. Britain accepts this. So do most of you. But for those of you who are in some doubt about it, let me say this: don’t set yourselves apart in the way you dress, the way you think, outdated codes of behaviour you cling to, the ideologies to which you attach your loyalties. Because if you do, you will be treated differently – not because of racism, though that does still exist, but because you insist on your difference from everyone else in this multi-ethnic, multi-religious, multitudinous United Kingdom of ours.<sup>26</sup>

In brief, just as the two opposite figures of the sovereign and *homines sacri* can be seen as symmetrical and belonging to the same order in Agamben’s perspective, so too Lone’s speech appears to ordain the position and correlative relationship of the siblings with British society.

As perceived throughout the novel, the sense of this ordinance becomes particularly somber. For, the predominant public view associated these British siblings of Pakistani descent with terror, which by itself is indicative of the discrimination each of them was exposed to personally. When Isma appeared at the airport on the way to her doctoral studies in the United States, she was interrogated for nearly two hours by the immigration officer: “‘Do you consider yourself British?’ the man said./ ‘I am British.’ / ‘But do you consider yourself British?’ / ‘I’ve lived here all my life’ [...]. /She meant there was no other country of which she could feel herself a part, but the words came out sounding evasive’.”<sup>27</sup> These experiences that resulted from prejudice toward their descent came on top of an extremely difficult childhood which the siblings had to endure upon the loss of their mother (shared between Aneeka and Eamonn): “Everything else you can live around, but not death. Death you have to live through.”<sup>28</sup>

In this sense, the novel presents the characters in-between spaces and on bordering thresholds, positioning them somewhere between dead and living subjects in a way that reflects the contradictory positions they attain with regard to the law. In this intermediary position, the characters in the novel, being neither dead nor alive, can be seen as representing the figure of *der Muselmann* who stands on a “moving threshold” between the human and inhuman.<sup>29</sup> Being

<sup>25</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 84.

<sup>26</sup> Kamila Shamsie, *Home Fire*, pp. 88-9.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 93-4.

<sup>29</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and The Archive*, translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen (Zone Books, 1999), p. 48.

like a living dead, a ghost-like figure, the *Muselmann* here can be seen as symbolizing the border of bare life and political existence, and thus as representing the impossibility of testimony. It is in this sense that, for Agamben, *der Muselmann* is the *faceless center* of the concentration camp<sup>30</sup> and represents the impossibility for ethical resolution in Auschwitz, where the very idea of an ethical limit loses its meaning.<sup>31</sup> That is why Agamben's conclusion is that the camp is "the hidden paradigm of the political space of modernity."<sup>32</sup>

The figure *der Muselmann* is of particular interest here. Etymologically, it comes from the word Muslim, which in Arabic refers to the person who unconditionally submits himself to the will of God. In the chapter "The Muselmann," Agamben focuses on the figure of the *Muselmann* who survives in the concentration camps as a particular type of deportee while also representing the other deportees who endure the worst level of the camp before being killed in a gas chamber.

In this sense, every character of the novel can be seen as representing the status of the *Muselmann*, viz. Muslims, as living in the British society "on a moving threshold." This is attested by Aneeka's statement: "Why didn't you mention that among the things this country will let you achieve if you're Muslim is torture, rendition, detention without trial, airport interrogations, spies in your mosques, teachers reporting your children to the authorities for wanting a world without British injustice."<sup>33</sup> Notably, this statement aligns with Agamben's point that the *Muselmann* occupies "a zone of the human where not only help but also dignity and self-respect have become useless."<sup>34</sup>

Living under surveillance on the margin of society, as a member of the working class, and as a Muslim colonial subject, Parvaiz "hated his life, this neighborhood, the inevitability of everything."<sup>35</sup> He already felt alienated from his environment, which conditioned his sense of unbelonging, identity crisis, and ostracization. Thus, he was aware that he dwelled in-between spaces trying to sustain his political existence. Like Agamben's figure of the *Muselmann*, Parvaiz' character marks the presence of the moving threshold, across which he becomes one of the living dead. Here the figure of the *Muselmann* looms particularly large, as Parvaiz' alienation appeared to be transmitted to him by his own family – his cousin tells him "I'm a Pakistani and you're a Paki."<sup>36</sup> Still, for Parvaiz, his two sisters too allowed themselves to become part of the corruption, as one of them was going to study in America, "the nation that killed their father, whereas the other was propping up the lie that theirs was a country where citizens had rights and courts of appeal."<sup>37</sup>

Learning that Parvaiz had joined ISIS, Isma decides to report him – in a gesture of co-operation with the state – for the sake of the safety of all three siblings, including for the safe return of her brother. Aneeka thought that in this way Isma betrayed her siblings: "Parvaiz is

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 52.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 63.

<sup>32</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 123.

<sup>33</sup> Kamila Shamsie, *Home Fire*, p. 91.

<sup>34</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, p. 63.

<sup>35</sup> Kamila Shamsie, *Home Fire*, p. 123.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 150.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 148.



not our father. He's my twin. He's me. But you, you're not our sister anymore."<sup>38</sup> But Isma performatively maintained her loyalty to the state, warning Aneeka "We're in no position to let the state question our loyalties."<sup>39</sup> She was similarly determined to help Parvaiz return safe home, but her position stands in sharp contrast to that of Aneeka. Like Karamat Lone, Isma can be seen as a law-abiding person trying to legitimize herself as a loyal British citizen, though in a way that seems to condone the apparent discriminatory practices of the state authorities. Aneeka, for her part, stood up to what she saw as conflicting notions of citizenship rights for the sake of her family.

Although Eamonn showed a reaction to Aneeka after learning that she used him to access Lone's political power to rescue her brother, he still decided to talk with his father on her behalf, believing that there was nothing his father would not do for him.<sup>40</sup> Eamonn's expectation was not met, though, for "where there had been a father, now there was a Home Secretary."<sup>41</sup> Lone, who worked for the public service and national good his entire life, knew everything about Adil Pasha and his brainwashed son. Consequently, he decided to restrict the contact of his son with Aneeka: "you will have no more contact with this girl. I'm setting up a security detail for you."<sup>42</sup>

Lone was known as a man with a Muslim background, but Muslim groups questioned his "Muslim-ness"<sup>43</sup> and called him a "hate preacher."<sup>44</sup> Indeed, "the press tried to brand him an extremist" but it was actually London's Muslim population "who had turned their back on Karamat Lone and voted him out," because "he expressed an enlightened preference for the conventions of a church over those of a mosque, and spoke of the need for British Muslims to lift themselves out of the Dark Ages if they wanted the rest of the nation to treat them with respect."<sup>45</sup> As a sovereign figure, he has the power to impose bare life upon the Muslim society, exemplifying in this way Agamben's point that in performing this task the sovereign constitutes itself as sovereign.<sup>46</sup> In other words, whereas sovereignty comes into being out of a politicized bare life, it at the same time produces bare life.<sup>47</sup>

Upon witnessing beheadings and tortures by ISIS, Parvaiz decides to return to London. He has no illusions about his situation and declares his readiness to face the consequences of his actions: "I made a mistake. I'm prepared to face trial if I've broken laws. Just let me go to London. But he was the terrorist son of a terrorist father. He rested his head on his knees. He did not know how to break out of these currents of history, how to shake free of the demons he had attached to his own heels."<sup>48</sup> Indeed, he did believe that he could find his way to honor the

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 42.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 42.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 80.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 109.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 109.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 35.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 59.

<sup>46</sup> Mika Ojakangas, "Impossible Dialogue on Bio-power: Agamben and Foucault," *Foucault Studies*, No. 2 (2005), p. 7.

<sup>47</sup> Peter Fitzpatrick, "Bare Sovereignty: Homo Sacer and the Insistence of Law," *Theory & Event*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (2001), retrieved, October 21, 2011, from <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/32622>.

<sup>48</sup> Kamila Shamsie, *Home Fire*, p. 171.

memory of his father with the help of Farooq, but what he found simply did not meet his expectations.

Parvaiz was manipulated by Farooq who told him heroic stories about Adil Pasha in order to recruit him. He “would listen to those stories of his father for which he’d always yearned... a man of courage who fought injustice, saw beyond the lie of national boundaries, kept his comrades’ spirits up through times of darkness.”<sup>49</sup> The ISIS media wing gave Parvaiz a position in Raqqa and he took a place in a villa, which made him happy for three months.<sup>50</sup> The media wing accepted Parvaiz, trained him, and he found pleasure in the learning. For a time, Parvaiz felt like a powerful, manly, and proud member of ISIS happy to explore his father’s history. The role and the benefits he gained as a media sound technician helped him to suppress the identity crisis he had been living through since his childhood.

Before he was shot outside the British High Commission in Turkey, Aneeka suggested that he go to the British Consulate and ask for a passport. Trying to persuade him to return home, she assures him “What happened to our father won’t happen to you.”<sup>51</sup> After Parvaiz was killed, the media presented him as a London-born terrorist who joined people the state regarded as enemies of Britain.<sup>52</sup> Meanwhile, Lone declared, “I revoked the citizenship of all dual nationals who left Britain to join our enemies [...] His body will be repatriated to his home nation Pakistan [...] We will not let those who turn against the soil of Britain in their lifetime sully that very soil in death.”<sup>53</sup> The fact of the matter, though, was that both Parvaiz and Aneeka were not Pakistani citizens, even though they held NICOP (National Identity Card for Overseas Pakistanis), which exempted them from visas or bureaucratic procedures if they wished to travel and work there.<sup>54</sup> Thus, Lone appears in the position of determining and ensuring the state of exception, which confirms Agamben’s claim that the state of exception is the dominant paradigm of government in contemporary politics and that the sovereign has the authority to suspend the law by placing itself outside it.<sup>55</sup> In other words, the sovereign holds the right to a state of exception that leads to the suspension of the law. We need to note here that on this basis Agamben claims that it is impossible to differentiate between the violation of the law and its execution.<sup>56</sup>

At this point, it appears feasible to suggest that Shamsie depicts the character of the career politician Karamat Lone by reimagining Antigone’s uncle Creon. Lone’s revocation of Parvaiz’ British citizenship and repatriation of his body to Pakistan evokes Creon’s refusal to bury Polyneices. In the process of investigation of the crime, Lone sought to determine the exception of all British passport holders by declaring that it is “possible to strip any British passport holders of their citizenship in cases where they acted against the interest of the UK. Under present rules, only dual nationals or naturalized citizens with a claim to another

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 128.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 167.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 175.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., pp. 197-198.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 188.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 202.

<sup>55</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 15.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 57.

nationality can have their citizenship revoked.”<sup>57</sup> Thus, Lone’s activity as a public official again fits Agamben’s concept of sovereignty. It indicates that the sovereign has the power to declare inhabitants as non-citizens; that is, to create – through the sovereign right of exception – a *homo sacer* that dwells in the condition of bare life.<sup>58</sup> In this sense, the sovereign’s act of declaring people outside the law and thus reducing them to bare life also indicates that one’s natural life is captured in the mechanism and calculation of the sovereign decision.<sup>59</sup>

In this context, bare life is the life that is produced exclusively by the sovereign power and is thus characterized and determined by the paradoxical logic of sovereignty. This exclusion, however, is not totally exclusive but is also inclusive by the manner of its constitution. It is very indicative that the Home Secretary “expanded on his predecessor’s claim that ‘citizenship is a privilege not a right’ to say ‘citizenship is a privilege not a right or birthright’,”<sup>60</sup> because for Lone, “someone’s fitness for citizenship should be based on their actions, not on accidents of birth.”<sup>61</sup> In the context of removing rights, Lone’s statement can be read as pointing to the paradoxical character of the state of exception<sup>62</sup> which is based on the idea that “fact and law [or the exception and the rule] are indistinguishable,” and so “the problem of defining it concerns precisely a threshold, or a zone of indifference, where inside and outside [of the juridical order] do not exclude each other but rather blur with each other.”<sup>63</sup>

In this regard, it is possible to maintain that Parvaiz’ dead body is indicative of the sovereign act of the ban on the human body. As Agamben claims, “the relation of the exception is the relation of the ban. He who has been banned is not, in fact, simply set outside the law and made indifferent to it but rather abandoned by it, that is, exposed and threatened on the threshold in which life and law, outside and inside, become indistinguishable.”<sup>64</sup> Thus, Parvaiz’ dead body is also indicative of biopolitics as a ban or as a tool of sovereign power, as much as of bare life placed outside the law, outside *bios*, or on the threshold of *bios*.

<sup>57</sup> Kamila Shamsie, *Home Fire*, p. 198.

<sup>58</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 171.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113.

<sup>60</sup> Kamila Shamsie, *Home Fire*, p. 198.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 214.

<sup>62</sup> Agamben’s main argument for the state of exception is influenced by Carl Schmitt. Schmitt discusses the sovereign in his book *Political Theology*. For him, “sovereign is he who decides on the exception.” [Carl Schmitt, *Political theology: Four chapters on the concept of sovereignty* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 5]. Schmitt writes, “The exception reveals most dearly the essence of the state’s authority. The decision parts here from the legal norm, and (to formulate it paradoxically) authority proves that to produce law it need not be based on law.” (*Ibid.*, p. 13). Schmitt also points out that “the exception is to be understood to refer to a general concept in the theory of the state, and not merely to a construct applied to any emergency decree or state of siege.” (*Ibid.*, p. 5) Instead, the suspension of the law needs to create a state of emergency for the preservation of the juridical order: “The state suspends the law in the exception on the basis of its right of self-preservation, as one would say” (*Ibid.*, p.12). See also, Giorgio Agamben, *The Omnibus Homo Sacer*, pp. 17ff.

<sup>63</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, translated by Kevin Attell (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press 2005), p. 23.

<sup>64</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, translated by Kevin Attell (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press 2005), p. 23.

<sup>64</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 28.

Meanwhile, the human rights campaign group Liberty issued a statement to show their reaction against the sovereign: “Removing the right to have rights<sup>65</sup> is a new low. Washing our hands of potential terrorists is dangerously short-sighted and statelessness is a tool of despots, not democrats.”<sup>66</sup> The British media supports Parvaiz and criticizes the sovereign for excluding him from the legal rights of human beings. Reporters blame the state for not paying enough attention to children like Parvaiz: “It’s a cause of profound concern that the children of jihadis, many of them British born, are not closely watched by the state. How many more Parvaiz Pashas will it take for things to change?”<sup>67</sup>

Before going to Pakistan to receive his body, Aneeka asked Isma for help only to be warned by her again not to attempt anything against the state: “Why can you never understand the position we are in? We do not have that liberty. Remember him in your heart and your prayers, as our grandmother remembered her only son. Go back to uni, study the law. Accept the law, even when it’s unjust.”<sup>68</sup> Still, Aneeka endeavored to bring Parvaiz’ body to London where she believed he properly belonged. And when a journalist asks her why she is going to Karachi, her answer is straight: “For justice.”<sup>69</sup>

Aneeka starts her protest against the Home Secretary in front of the British Deputy High Commission with the thought that “here she would sit with her brother until the world changed or both of them crumbled into the soil around them.”<sup>70</sup> In this sense, Parvaiz’ body is politicized by the sovereign power, which links to Agamben’s claim that politics is always already related to biopolitics and is at the core of sovereign power to such an extent that – by declaring a state of exception – it transforms the political realm into the realm of bare life.<sup>71</sup>

Here, Shamsie provides “a fresh layer to the classic by reconsidering the issues Sophocles raised against the backdrop of racist immigration laws and radicalization.”<sup>72</sup> Like Antigone, Aneeka tried to claim the right to bury her brother in his place of birth; she made her point in front of cameras that were recording her: “In the stories of wicked tyrants men and women are punished with exile, bodies are kept from their families – their heads impaled on spikes, their corpses thrown into unmarked graves. All these things happen according to the law, but not according to justice. I am here to ask for justice. I appeal to the Prime Minister: let me take my brother home.”<sup>73</sup> Her quest for justice can now be readily revisited in Agambenian

<sup>65</sup> According to Arendt, “right to have rights” (right to membership) should be a basic human right in order to preclude the possibility of being stateless. The cases of stateless people show that having human rights is necessary for every human being in the World. Thus, “right to have rights” needs to be an integral part of any politics. But if belonging to a political community is prevented, the “right to have rights” is no longer present. Hence, Arendt’s emphasis on belonging to a political community as a basic human right. See, Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, 1951), p. 296; Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 309.

<sup>66</sup> Kamila Shamsie, *Home Fire*, p. 198.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 201.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 196.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 207.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 210.

<sup>71</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare life*, pp. 6-55.

<sup>72</sup> Claire Gail Chambers, “Sound and Fury: Kamila Shamsie's Home Fire,” *Massachusetts Review*, Vol. 59, No. 2 (2018), p. 208.

<sup>73</sup> Kamila Shamsie, *Home Fire*, pp. 224-225.

perspective, as by that time Parvaiz' politicized body had turned into a tool of biopolitics quite articulately: "the 'body' is always already a biopolitical body and bare life, and nothing in it or the economy of its pleasure seems to allow us to find solid ground on which to oppose the demands of sovereign power."<sup>74</sup>

Lone asked for the removal of the corpse from the park and for an end to Aneeka's protest, but the Pakistani Home Commissioner did not intervene, making clear in a statement the possibility for another perspective on the matter: "The people, and several opposition parties, have decided to embrace a woman who has stood up to a powerful government, and not just any powerful government but one that has very bad PR in the matter of Muslims and as recently as yesterday insulted us directly. So, now it's political suicide for my government to get involved."<sup>75</sup> The controversy was further fueled by a representative of the Muslim Association of Britain and British Muslims, who claimed that Lone hated Muslims, as well as by Lone's staunch defense – "I hate the Muslims who make people hate Muslims."<sup>76</sup> In fact, these adverse reactions to his politics apparently played a part in Lone's decision to go on with revoking Aneeka's citizenship. Thus, acting from the position of the sovereign, the Home Secretary institutes an exception that takes place in conditions very different from those of Auschwitz – indeed in the present conditions of the contemporary political order.<sup>77</sup> His political actions practically confirm that the contemporary political conditions equally provide for a transformation of the citizens into bare life and *homines sacri*.<sup>78</sup>

Aneeka's wish was to receive her brother's corpse, but for Lone she was a "slag, terrorist-spawn, and enemy of Britain."<sup>79</sup> He decided to "strip her of her citizenship, a move that could be traced back to personal motivations,"<sup>80</sup> making it impossible for her to return to the UK without applying for a visa. Consequently, her British passport was confiscated by the security services as she attempted to board a flight to Istanbul, and so the position of the Home Secretary to keep her outside Britain was upheld – "let her be British outside Britain."<sup>81</sup> Lone's aim was to send "a message to those who treated the privilege of British citizenship as something that could be betrayed without consequences."<sup>82</sup> Thus, based on the definition of *homo sacer* as being included in law through exclusion, Aneeka's character comes to symbolize a living dead figure that has turned into an unrecognized part of politics. This symbolism, therefore, asserts once again Agamben's point that in the modern world there is no clear-cut zone between *bios* and *zoē*, and that "bare life is no longer confined to a particular place or a definite category," but instead "it now dwells in the biological body of every living being."<sup>83</sup>

<sup>74</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, p. 187.

<sup>75</sup> Kamila Shamsie, *Home Fire*, p. 228.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 231.

<sup>77</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without Ends: Notes on Politics*, translated by Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), p. 6.

<sup>78</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 111.

<sup>79</sup> Kamila Shamsie, *Home Fire*, p. 229.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 230.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 230.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 231.

<sup>83</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 140.

In this sense, Aneeka and Parvaiz are subjected to the sovereign power by being politicized as liminal figures. They appear caught in the zone of indistinction between human and non-human, whereas this paradoxical situation can be fittingly apprehended within the terms of a possible and present state of exception. As Agamben puts it, “this threshold alone, which is neither simple natural life nor social life but rather bare life or sacred life, is the always present and always operative presupposition of sovereignty.”<sup>84</sup> We can therefore affirm with the help of these characters our point that liminal figures come into being on the threshold between *zoē* and *bios* through the sovereign act of ban.

In another related development, to clear speculations about the Pasha family, Eamonn released a video, in which he admitted that he talked to his father about Parvaiz Pasha because he felt honor-bound to tell his father that his personal life and his father’s professional life were on the way to collision. Eamonn pointed out that Parvaiz Pasha was, in fact, trying to get to the British Consulate in Istanbul not to carry out a terrorist act but to apply for a new passport to return home. Eamonn thus stood with Aneeka in this process: “While her brother was alive that love was turned toward convincing him to return home; now he’s dead it’s turned to convincing the government to return his body home.”<sup>85</sup> Similarly, Terry, Lone’s wealthy Irish-American wife, also made her point for justice in an argument with her husband: “I am talking about a nineteen-year-old, rotting in the sun while his sister watches, out of her mind with grief. He’s dead already; can’t you leave him alone?”<sup>86</sup> To make herself clear, she pulled no punches in arguing with Lone:

your political mind is not as sharp as it was [...] You arrogant idiot [...] this orphaned student who wants for her brother what she never had for her father: a grave beside which she can sit and weep for the awful, pitiable mess of her family life. Look at this sad child you’ve raised to your enemy, and see how far you’ve lowered yourself in doing that [...] And you have lost your son too. [...] Be human. Fix it.<sup>87</sup>

Lone was unrelenting, though: “until this thing is over, I don’t have a son and I don’t have a wife. I have a Great Office of State.”<sup>88</sup>

Still, Lone was unable to straighten out the consequences and dangers that his policies brought to the siblings and his son. There were threats against him, his wife, and his daughter; people tried to attack him. While they stayed in a safe house, Eamonn had already arranged to meet Aneeka in the park in Karachi. Two men caught him and strapped him into an explosive belt. He warned Aneeka not to come close toward him, but she ran, crashing right into him. They were able to embrace for a second before they were blown up.

#### 4. Conclusion

In essence, in her novel *Home Fire* Shamsie remakes Sophocles’ tragedy in a modern-day context to engage with “the vital project – at once feminist, anti-imperialist, and anti-

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., p. 106.

<sup>85</sup> Kamila Shamsie, *Home Fire*, p. 245.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., p. 252.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., pp. 252-253.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., p. 246.

Islamophobic – of wresting victimhood from the invader and reframing the war as a needlessly violent fiasco.”<sup>89</sup> The novel directly addresses the questions of citizenship, belonging, nationality, and justice. It vividly depicts the complexities of national citizenship in terms of the conditions of inclusion/exclusion of the characters from the political realm and law of the state. As it has been suggested, “the novel’s staging of conflicting concepts of citizenship – exclusive vs. inclusive, contract vs. right, conditional vs. unconditional, etc. – illustrates the complexity, even messiness of the contemporary debate.”<sup>90</sup>

Aneeka’s struggle to secure a burial for her brother as a British citizen points to a necessary discussion of the relationship between politicized biological life and sovereign power. In this regard, we found it particularly fitting to read the story through the lenses of Agamben’s notion of the state of exception and the political and social criticism that is germane to it. Agamben’s perspective thus made it possible for us to see Lone’s act of revocation of Parvaiz’ and Aneeka’s citizenship as a most fitting example of the socio-political creation of *homo sacer* and bare life through a sovereign state of exception. And generally, the story told by Shamsie can be understood as presenting us with characters who find themselves in that zone of indistinction, the threshold between *zoē* and *bios*, which, for Agamben, is constituted by the sovereign in the political sphere by way of exclusion.

In this perspective, the characters of the siblings reappear to us as *homines sacri*, outlaws, desperately trying to survive on the threshold between *zoē* and *bios*. Aneeka and Parvaiz, in particular, most fittingly exemplify Agamben’s sense of bare life and *homo sacer*. They remain trapped on the threshold in the zone of indistinction in which inside and outside (of the juridical order) are inevitably blurred.

Finally, it would not be an exaggeration to say that, from the very beginning, the siblings are more or less positioned outside the law due to the past of their father, and that they thus acquire the status of scapegoats.<sup>91</sup> The surveillance of the Pasha siblings, instituted because of the preceding involvement of their father with radical Islam, can be seen as an infringement of their citizenship rights since in this way they are presumptively differentiated as figures that threaten the British state. Therefore, they are also representative of *Muselmann* figures that are excluded from the political humanity and left with a blurred status on the threshold in the zone of indistinction.

<sup>89</sup> Peter Krause, “Antigone in Pakistan: *Home Fire*, by Kamila Shamsie,” p. 15.

<sup>90</sup> Katja Sarkowsky, “Expatriation, Belonging and the Politics of Burial: The Urgency of Citizenship in Kamila Shamsie’s *Home Fire*,” in Caroline Koegler, Jesper Reddig, and Klaus Stierstorfer (Eds.), 29-44. *Citizenship, Law, and Literature* (Berlin & Boston: De Gruyter, 2022), p. 42.

<sup>91</sup> The figure of scapegoat has been insightfully discussed in comparative fashion in both literature and myth. See, René Girard’s *The Scapegoat*, translated by Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), pp. 20-22.