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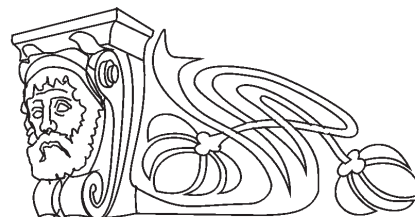
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Article

Cognitive and pragmatic characteristics of Kamila Shamsie's novel "Home Fire"



H. A. Ahmad

Government Graduate College, Pasrur 51410, Sialkot, Pakistan

Samara National Research University, 34 Moskovskoye shosse, Samara 443086, Russia

Hafiz A. Ahmad, denubeamazon@gmail.com, <http://orcid.org/0009-0008-8666-0398>

Abstract. The main aim of this research is to investigate the cognitive models and pragmatic aspects of the novel "Home Fire" by analyzing different lexical units in the novel which represent the themes of grievability and precarity. Kamila Shamsie's novel "Home Fire" recounts the experiences of one British Muslim family to examine, study and relive the themes of *Antigone*, a play by Sophocles. *Antigone* by Sophocles has been widely adapted in postcolonial contexts in recent decades. The novel tells how Britain's post-9/11 Islamophobic politics and media make Muslim lives miserable after September 11, 2001. The main characters of the novel "Home Fire" are struggling with this intolerance and re-establish their own dignity and that of their departed relatives. This paper uses affect theory to analyze how the materiality of grief reclaims grievability for those whose lives are in danger due to conflict with their country. This research paper has further examined the cognitive and pragmatic aspects and characteristics of the novel embedded in its dominant themes and concepts. The major components of the cognitive models of the situations actualized and represented by the concepts of GRIEVABILITY and PRECURITY are analyzed.

Keywords: cognitive model, GRIEVABILITY concept, PRECURITY concept, post-9/11 scenario, *Antigone*, language units

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Научная статья

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Когнитивно-прагматические характеристики романа Камилы Шамси «Пожар в доме»

Х. А. Ахмад^{1,2}

¹Государственный магистерский колледж, Пакистан, округ Сялкот, 51410, г. Пасрур

²Самарский национальный исследовательский университет имени академика С. П. Королева, Россия, 443086, г. Самара, Московское шоссе, д. 34

Ахмад Хафиз Акил, ¹заведующий кафедрой английского языка; ²аспирант кафедры английской филологии, denubeamazon@gmail.com, <http://orcid.org/0009-0008-8666-0398>

Аннотация. Основной целью данного исследования является изучение когнитивных моделей и прагматических характеристик романа «Пожар в доме» путем анализа различных лексических единиц в романе, которые репрезентируют концепты «Скорбь» и «Нестабильность». В романе Камилы Шамси «Пожар в доме» рассказывается об опыте одной британской мусульманской семьи, которая изучает и заново переживает пьесу Софокла «Антигона». В романе рассказывается о том, как британская исламофобская политика и СМИ после 11 сентября 2001 г. сделали жизнь мусульман невыносимой. Главные герои романа «Пожар в доме» борются с этим неприятием и восстанавливают субъектность и человеческое достоинство себя и своих ушедших близких. В данной статье используется теория аффекта для анализа того, как материальность горя компенсирует тягостность для тех, чья жизнь находится в опасности. В данной исследовательской работе были дополнительно рассмотрены когнитивные и прагматические аспекты и характеристики романа, заложенные в его основных темах и концептах. Автор анализирует основные компоненты когнитивных моделей ситуаций, относящихся к концептам «Скорбь» и «Нестабильность».

Ключевые слова: когнитивная модель, концепт «Скорбь», концепт «Нестабильность», пост-9/11, «Антигона», языковые единицы

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Introduction

The Kamila Shamsie's magnum opus, "Home Fire", retells Sophocles' *Antigone* in the setting of Muslim families in Britain. Identity, loyalty, grievability, love, precarity and the effects of political fanaticism are among the topics it examines. Two families are at the heart of the narrative: the Lones, whose father is a well-known politician with a reputation for opposing terrorism, and the Pashas, whose father was a terrorist. The story tracks the siblings' entwined lives as they deal with grief, love, and the consequences of their ancestry. Tragically, Parvaiz is killed while trying to flee the terrorist organization, and his sisters and Eamonn are attacked by terrorists as they go to recover his remains.

While Isma's younger twin siblings, Aneeka and Parvaiz, stay in London, Isma Pasha departs for the United States to continue her education. In an attempt to establish himself, Parvaiz joins the terrorist organization in Syria, a choice that has a significant effect on the family. When Isma finds out about his behavior, she scrambles to balance her obligations to her siblings with her own goals. In the meantime, Aneeka starts dating Eamonn Lone, a British Home Secretary's son, who is well-known for taking a tough stand against terrorism. Because of this link, there is direct tension between the two families' opposing views and allegiances. A complicated dynamic results from Eamonn's attraction to Aneeka and her family's hardships despite his father's position. Disillusioned after joining the terrorist organization, Parvaiz makes an attempt to flee before being slain. While traveling to Pakistan to retrieve his remains, Aneeka and Eamonn become caught up in a terrorist strike. The tragic deaths of Aneeka and Eamonn at the book's end underscore the lasting strength of familial ties and the disastrous effects of political radicalism.

Discussion

The mental processes and talents that facilitate learning, reasoning, and problem-solving are referred to as cognitive characteristics. These traits cover a broad spectrum of abilities, such as executive functions including working memory, inhibition, and attention shifting, as well as attention, memory, and reasoning. In essence, they are the brain-based mechanisms that affect how people interact with their surroundings, process information, and make decisions.

It takes empirical evidence to support the theoretical assumption about how closely the meanings intended by the writer accurately reflect the cognitive processes and knowledge structures. Weir pinpoints that understanding outcomes alone cannot provide a complete understanding of cognitive processes. Varied texts and reading objectives place varied cognitive demands on cognitive processes during comprehension circumstances [1, p. 51]. More direct observations of real processes occurring while the reader interacts with the text are necessary for such interactive processes.

Contextual elements impact learners' cognitive processes. Reading texts, including texts of novels, texts of plays and texts of poetry, with various rhetorical organizational patterns, for instance, triggers various processing styles. According to Jang, different reading abilities are elicited by the same item types based on the textual structures [2, p. 210]. This suggests that textual factors and processing skills interact in a complicated way. According to Alderson et al., reading proficiency comprises the capacity to identify the ways in which concepts are conveyed within the text and to comprehend the author's objectives behind the order of the ideas. These results have significant ramifications on understanding. The skills specification must take into account how various textual variables evoke various cognitive abilities [3, p. 423].

Cohen and Upton, and Jang indicate that reading of different type of texts can influence and change higher-order cognitive abilities like summarizing and inferencing [4, 2]. High-proficient readers accumulate enough textual knowledge, while the low-proficient readers claim not to have enough time to consult the text. Similarly, because they were not required to locate or produce main claims in the text, Cohen and Upton found that readers employed different methods in understanding texts. These research results strongly show that different text types invoke diverse cognitive processing, which is further differentiated by readers at different proficiency levels. To completely comprehend these three-way interactions based on a huge number of objects demanding the full range of cognitive processes from learners with different language competence levels, more research is required [4].

Research questions

This study will address the following research questions:



I. How are the cognitive models regarding precarity and grievability, referred to as a theme, surfaced in the novel "Home Fire"?

II. What language units are used for representing the cognitive models referring to "PRECARITY" and "GRIEVABILITY" concepts and what are their peculiarities?

III. Are the cognitive models willful or inadvertent?

Literature review

Judith Butler in her book, "Precarious Life", examines and explores grievability in the wake of the global spiral of violence in the wake of 9/11, posing the questions, "Who counts as human? Whose lives are considered lives? Lastly, what is a grievable life?" [5]. Butler challenges us by posing these robust questions, which make us think about how certain lives are considerably dehumanized and put in a position of rejection because not all lives are thought to be valuable. As a result, the death of a miserable life is not felt by the general people and is viewed as useless to grieve – in other words, it is ungrievable. Through its portrayal of the lives and deaths of the Pashas, a British-Muslim family residing in modern-day London, Kamila Shamsie's book "Home Fire" addresses this problem.

The father of Pasha Family, Adil Pasha, a jihadi, was incarcerated and was slayed during the transfer from Bagram Airfield in Afghanistan to Guantanamo Bay. Near the end of the book, Adil's son, Parvaiz Pasha, is killed while attempting to return home after joining the terrorist organization and becoming appalled by the horrors he sees. The British public views Adil and Parvaiz's deaths as undeserving of grieving because of their involvement in terrorist operations; that is only their loved ones who find their lives and personality valuable. The depiction of the political and familial responses to these deaths highlights the distinction between ungrievable and grievable life, as well as how this distinction contributes to the continuation of precarity for individuals whose lives are considered ungrievable.

"Home Fire" is inspired by Sophocles' *Antigone*, which highlights how post-9/11 geopolitics mirror a timeless violence that still erupts between "kinship and the state", or fragile life [6]. *Antigone* has been widely adapted within postcolonial contexts, having long been "an inspiration for those fighting for freedom in the midst of injustice" [7, p. 22]. *Antigone* herself has come to represent the

oppressed in situations ranging from apartheid in South Africa to "political crises" in Argentina [7, p. 23]. In order to counter the authority of a law that disregards all human dignity, Shamsie's adaptation of *Antigone* thus pulls not only from Sophocles' tragedy but also from the postcolonial legacy it has established.

Chambers asks, "Can the oppressor listen?" as he explores how sound functions as an "embodied experience in the novel" [8]. While Ahmed's paper also addresses whether "Home Fire" permits an "ethical reading" across difference in terms of portraying British Muslim lives to an assumed white public, her work centers on the issue of hearing across difference [9]. Although Burns is also interested in "what we as readers and critics can do with a text", she focuses more on what "Home Fire" reveals about inequality and how it serves as a work of dissent and resistance in her work than on what it reveals about difference [10].

Cognitive and pragmatic analysis of the text of "Home Fire"

In the novel, "Home Fire", the siblings of Pasha express their grief in a practical form that highlights their loss and the significance of admitting it, recovering grievability, after being denied the opportunity to grieve for Adil and Parvaiz in an appropriate manner. In order to grieve for his father, Adil, who passed away in British captivity during the journey from Bagram Airfield to Guantanamo Bay, Parvaiz first experiences bodily suffering in the novel. A British Special Branch officer took away Parvaiz's father's photo album when he was a child, thus "removing ... Adil Pasha from his son's life" [11, p. 127]. The Pasha siblings were "forbidden to talk about" their father or his death by their family [11, p. 52].

The usage of such proper nouns *Guantanamo Bay* and *Special Branch* heralds something sinister and macabre in the mind of the reader; along with bringing grievability for Pasha's family. According to Wiktionary, *grievability* is a noun and "it means the quality of being, or extent to which someone or something is, grievable: able or worthy to be grieved." Guantanamo Bay is an American Detention Camp, based in Cuba, where terrorism suspects were detained. The placing of Adil in Guantanamo Bay refers to theme of grievability and that grievability will be met by the relatives of Adil. Here the proper noun *Guantanamo Bay* denotes the PLACE component of the cognitive model, in addi-



tion to that, it also evokes in the reader's mind such characteristics of the place as infliction, torture, perdition, severity and punishment, which actualizes the theme of grievability. In addition to that mentioning of Special Branch is also a dominant component of the cognitive model which represents the theme of grievability.

Special Branch of any country deals with crimes of gargantuan nature and those crimes which pose serious threat to the security of the relevant country. If an individual is singled out, for reasons unknown, by Special Branch of any country, the concerned individual and the relatives of that individual, will plunge into feeling of grievability. Here CHARACTERISTICS of the PARTICIPANT is incarceration and investigation, hence it represents the theme of grievability.

In the first chapter of the novel, when Isma Pasha, a British citizen, was going to board the plane to start her study in Massachusetts, she was accosted by an officer at the airport for interrogation:

"A man entered the office, carrying Isma's passport, laptop and phone, She allowed herself to hope, but he sat down, gestured for her to do the same, a placed a voice recorder between them.

'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.

The interrogation continued for nearly two hours" [11, p. 5].

In the above dialogue between the interrogation officer and Isma reveals the theme of precarity. When Isma says to the interrogation officer that "I am British", the officer again asks "*But do you consider yourself British?*", having a touch of irony and underlying meaning. Here the sentence "*Do you consider yourself British*" represents the CHARACTERISTIC of the PARTICIPANT (not British), which is rendered implicitly: *do you consider yourself British à Isma is not a British*. When Isma being a British citizen is asked such a question at Heathrow Airport, fusillade of such questions will make her liable to precarity and will undermine her British character. It seems that for representation of concept of PRECARITY the dominant component of the represented cognitive models is important. Why? The author's intention is to represent PRECARITY concept and by foregrounding the represented cognitive models.

In the novel, "Home Fire", when Isma's brother joins the proscribed organization, Aneeka Pasha (Antigone), the twin sister of Parvaiz (Polynices) and a British Muslim woman residing in Wembley, frantically attempts to persuade him to go back to London. Aneeka starts a covert relationship with Eamonn (Haimon), the son of the British Home Secretary, after he shows up at her door with a keen interest in her after seeing her picture in her sister Isma's (Ismene) room. Aneeka hopes to use Eamonn to help her brother get back to Britain. The two, however, fall in love, and even after Eamonn finds out about Aneeka's scheme to aid her brother, he decides to stay with her and consents to approach his father on her behalf, imploring him to think about letting Parvaiz go back home. This request is turned down by Eamonn's father, Karamat Lone (Creon), who also prohibits Eamonn from communicating with Aneeka in the future. The author has drawn several parallels between Sophocles' play, *Antigone*. The PARALLEL between the characters of both works – "Home Fire" and *Antigone* – foreground the theme of precarity. Here the participants implicitly represent the themes of precarity and grievability.

Karamat erodes Muslim lives by endorsing policies and discourse that further distance British Muslims from their fellow citizens, turning them into symbols of the possible enemy and escalating Islamophobia in his nation. His claims, such as "I hate Muslims who make people hate Muslims" [11, p. 243]. Such expressions project his abhorrence towards dogmatic and extremist Muslims. The noun, Islamophobia, is gaining grounds in Europe particularly in the UK and Germany.

According to Cambridge Online dictionary: "Islamophobia is the unreasonable dislike or fear of, and prejudice against, Muslims or Islam"¹. According to Paul, "Islamophobia is primarily a form of religious or cultural bigotry; and people who harbour such sentiments often stereotype Muslims as a geopolitical threat or a source of terrorism" [12]. According to Becker: "Muslims, with diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds, are often inaccurately portrayed by Islamophobes as a single homogeneous racial group" [13]. Through the noun *Islamophobia*, the author guides the reader in making his mind from a pragmatic point of view, the author's goal is to make the reader know about the repercussions of the rampant *Islamophobic* elements in the United Kingdom by foregrounding the theme of precarity

¹ Cambridge Online Dictionary. Available at: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/islamophobia> (accessed July 25, 2025).



and CONSEQUENCES components of the cognitive model. The language means in the text of the novel actualize "PRECARITY" and "GRIEVABILITY" concepts. There is also a parallel realization of two diametrically opposite cognitive models which make the reader to know: the UK with *Islamophobia* and the UK without *Islamophobia*.

In "Home Fire", Shamsie used the media's portrayal of Aneeka to highlight the hypocrisy of Britain's criticisms of Muslim women's physical rights. When Karamat debunks Aneeka and Eamonn's relationship, and explains that Aneeka intended to use his son to make a plea on behalf of her brother, this incident is published by a magazine having a title: "*Ho-Jabi! Pervy Pasha's Twin Sister Engineered Sex Trysts with Home Secretary's Son*". According to Shamsie, Aneeka is referred to as "*Knickers*" and "[s]he hunted down the Home Secretary's son, twenty-four-years old Eamonn, and used sex to try and brainwash him into convincing his father to allow her terrorist brother back into England" [11, p. 67]. Aneeka is dehumanized and shown as only a sexual object when she is called *Knickers*.

The lexical unit *knickers* has definite cognitive model; and this cognitive model is intertwined invariably with debauchery when employed metaphorically, and usage of such word leads to Aneeka's precarity in the society; in addition to that, the hurling of such slang word *knickers* on a female individual who hails from Muslim background tends to bring her to grievability and notoriety. Her family will grieve such comments hurled upon Aneeka. The noun *knickers* indicate the action of the PARTICIPANT through its frequent usage to stigmatize Aneeka, and it becomes the dominant component of cognitive model which represents the theme of precarity and grievability. These are the linguistic units which interact with the contextual factors to give or interpret the sentence or the statement.

Additionally, the title's "*Ho-jabi*" juxtaposes the image of the hijab, a type of Islamic veil that is stigmatized in many western countries, including the United Kingdom. Even in 2018, British Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, was accused of stoking Islamophobia in the United Kingdom, when he said that *burqa* clad Muslim women "resemble letterboxes and bank robbers"². So, in the same vein, title "*Ho-jabi*" became a source of bodily oppression,

² *The Guardian*. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2018/aug/07/boris-johnsons-burqa-remarks-offensive-foreign-office-minister-alistair-burt> (accessed August 3, 2025).

with the disparaging term "*ho*", a western slang term for whore, which is used to compare Aneeka to a prostitute. In doing so, the headline of the piece vilifies Aneeka as an accomplice to Parvaiz and simultaneously makes fun of her for being both sexually oppressed and promiscuous.

The coined term "*Ho-jabi*" is used as a jibe against Muslim women, it also carries *double entendre* effect. The cognitive characteristics of this term represents the theme of grievability and precarity simultaneously. If a Muslim woman is passing through a street in the UK and anyone hurls the slang "*Ho-jabi*" on her, she will feel herself precarious when she is under such situation. Precarity for Muslim women was gaining grounds in the British Society. In the novel, the term "*Ho-jabi*" is shown as one of the minor feature of British Society (PARTICIPANT) which represents the concept of grievability and precarity. Precarity and grievability are the part and parcel of each other, one phenomenon is the concomitant of other.

When Isma arrived in Boston, USA, she was expecting same treatment as she met at London Heathrow Airport, that she might be grilled, she might be deported to London but here the situation was antithesis to London. Isma was just questioned that where she was going to study and about "*university basketball team*". When Isma exited Logan Airport, she texted the message: "*Arrived safely. Through security – no problems. Dr. Shah here*". The dispersed thought and precarity of Isma's mind is reflected through phrases in the text of the message, like: "*Arrived safely*", "*through security*" and "*no problems*". Here the preceding phrases represent the CHARACTERISTICS of the PARTICIPANT (Isma), which is rendered implicitly: *through security – no problems* à *I have cleared the security and precarity has come to end*. It seems that for representation of "PRECARITY" concept the CHARACTERISTICS component of the represented cognitive models is important. Why? The author's intention is to represent "PRECARITY" concept; and by underscoring the dominant component of the represented cognitive models the author shows people's precarious situation in which they find themselves.

Conclusion

In the paper we have deeply analyzed the text of the novel, "Home Fire", and have ferreted out the cognitive models which represent and actualize the concepts of PRECARITY and GRIEVABILITY; in



addition to that we also explored which lexical units are used to foreground these concepts. The phrases, adjectives, sentences, adverbs present in the novel were analyzed and investigated by the author. We also explored the pragmatic and cognitive aspects of representation of precarity and grievability in the novel, “Home Fire”, while having a specific focus on cognitive model actualized in the text of the novel that reflected the structure of several situations connected with the prominent themes

The dominant components of the cognitive models, which include PARTICIPANTS, ACTIONS, and CHARACTERISTICS, invariably refer to precarity and grievability. The language units which are employed to represent the dominant components are verbs which denote concept of precarity; the usage of *double entendre* suggests and refers to acute precarity of characters; metaphors which indirectly refer to grievability; adverbs which refer to the propensity of corrupt practices; semiotic presence also highlights the ambiance of precarity.

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