

Engaging with Political Violence in Fiction: readers, readings, and responses

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Abstract: Traditional approaches to literary studies mostly rely on the perspective of a singular academic reading authority. Whilst scholars are highly skilled readers, they are hardly representative of a more generalised reading public. Thus, in order to explore more widely the contributions that literary representations can bring, a broader overview which adds everyday readers' experiences to the discussion is required. Considering my own literary-analytical response to novels alongside responses from everyday readers connects academic and everyday reading experiences. This offers new insights into how literature expands our understanding of the world and ourselves in general, and regarding my research, trauma and violence in particular. The current paper provides examples from interview data, explores the advantages of working with everyday readers, and challenges the dichotomy between intellect and affect, professional and non-academic readers.

Keywords: Literature, trauma, readership, literary analysis, human experience.

1. Introduction

Placing responses from non-academic readers in conversation with my own scholarly analyses allows an exploration of what Hanna Meretoja calls the “transformative potential” (2018, 4) of literature, and what Ann Rigney in her work on cultural memory defines as “aesthetic agency” (2021, 8). Furthermore, it aligns with Rita Felski’s notion of “an aesthetic that is premised on relation rather than separation, on attachment rather than autonomy” (2020, viii). This paper begins with an outline of my research project¹ as a whole, then uses interview data from the reading of one novel as a case study. This allows a detailed look at working with everyday readers and the rich material it provides. For the case study I introduce the novel, look at readers’ initial impressions of the book, and then focus upon two short extracts with reader responses - one from the beginning, and one from the middle narrative. I conclude with readers’ reflections upon the impact of the novel more widely and then summarise how working with everyday readers has benefitted my research. The qualitative dimension of my study confirms and expands on the notion that “Engaging with the dark moments of history can develop our narrative imagination in ethically valuable ways that might teach us something about ourselves that we might not otherwise be able to see” (Meretoja 2018, 302). Similarly, interviews with readers demonstrate how literature offers an “experiential’ mode of access to historical events” (Erll 2008; Rigney 2019, 368), and that “[s]tudying what happens in the intimacy of reading and viewing is as crucial to analysis as larger-scale social and cultural developments” (Rigney 2021, 12). As I will evidence, readers in this project make intellectually and theoretically smart responses which challenge the often cited dichotomies of “skilled” professional reader and “naïve” lay reader.

¹ This is part of my PhD project: *“Sharpening the Moral Imagination”: Political Violence and the Ethics of Reading*.

Whilst professional and non-academic readers may have different motivations for reading, the inclusion of everyday readers broadens the readership base and documents a more nuanced literary response.

2. Study scope and methods

My research examines three contemporary novels that tell difficult stories and challenge readers on a number of levels: *Human Acts* by Han Kang (2014) translated from Korean into English by Deborah Smith in 2016 - is based upon the 1980 Gwangju Uprising in South Korea; *The City Always Wins* by Omar Robert Hamilton (2017) documents the Egyptian Revolution beginning in 2011, captured mainly through the eyes of young activists in a media collective; *Home Fire* by Kamila Shamsie (2017) is set very much in the present, and deals with Islamophobia, counter-terrorism measures, and the radicalisation of a young British Muslim man in London recruited to work for ISIS in Syria. The texts are fictional reworkings of real-life events and demonstrate how political violence in its many forms is, or becomes, interwoven in the everyday lives of characters. The research is conducted on two levels: through close readings informed by existing theories of ethical reading, hermeneutics, and cultural memory, and through analyses involving reading groups and individual readers. The latter generates primary qualitative research data on readers' perspectives to combine with my own close readings. I ask: how do the novels represent political violence? How do readers respond? What can this tell us about the ethical processes involved/activated in reading about political violence? How violence is portrayed and how it is processed by the reader automatically invokes

ethical issues. The fact these novels are based upon historical events provides an added dimension of responsibility.

2.1 The Readers

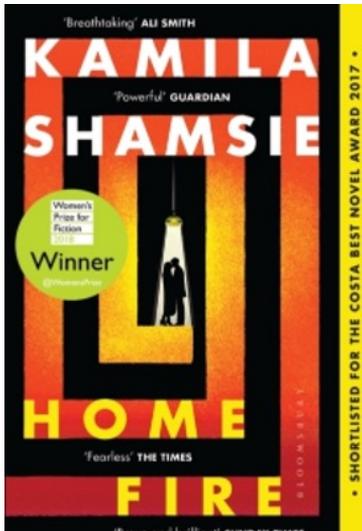
The readers involved in the project were contacted via book club networks. Invitations were sent out to ask for volunteers and the only instructions were to read the novel and be available for interview. I interviewed seventeen participants on each novel (fifty-one in total) in a range of groups, pairs, and individuals. I had a set of questions, but the interviews were conversational in style and readers in groups/pairs often led the discussion with questions to each other. Interviews took place in person and online (zoom) in a home environment. As regards the demographics, I did not go out to find representative groups on age, class, gender, ethnicity, and sexuality. I just wanted volunteers who liked reading, and if they were in groups/pairs, people who felt comfortable with each other. Like most book clubs, the majority of readers in this study are female, white, and in the 50+ age range (see Long 2003, xiii; Hartley 2002, 25). There are six males, and the overall age of readers ranges from 20s-80s in years.

Multicultural/intercultural nuances also complicate the picture. Whilst the majority of participants are British, readers include heritage to India, Russia, Germany, Ireland, Georgia, Poland, Italy, Chechnya, New Zealand. Some participants are in intercultural marriages/relationships - and if they have children, there is an added intercultural dimension. Some readers have dual citizenship. Most but not all readers are educated to degree level and a wide range of professions/backgrounds is represented (education, law, admin, medical, third sector (charity, NGOs), social work, finance, art,

museums, tourism). A third of readers are retired (60+). All describe themselves as avid readers – by this they mean that reading is a part of their lives, and they regularly discuss books with friends, relatives, and wider acquaintances. Literature is part of their social interaction.

3. Case Study: *Home Fire* (2017) by the Pakistani/British writer Kamila Shamsie

Published in 2017, *Home Fire* depicts two families of British Pakistani Muslim backgrounds in the contemporary political landscape that is post-9/11 and post-7/7. Political policy and rhetoric stoke fear and division rather than discussion and the violence this promotes is insidious. It is often unseen by those whom it does not affect and the first half of the novel works to make visible the structural and cultural violence that some of the characters face on a daily basis – the indignities, humiliation, racism, and suspicion fuelled by counter-terrorism measures, right-wing media and politics. Shamsie highlights how this leads to more direct violence such as being spat on, bricks through the window, torture, beheadings videos, a decomposing body and the anticipated violence in the finale of the novel as a suicide vest is strapped to one of the characters. As the epigraph suggests (see figure 1 below), it is a modern reworking of the Greek tragedy *Antigone* by Sophocles.



The ones we love ... Are enemies of the state.

- Antigone, Sophocles

(translated by Seamus Heaney)

- Isma (Pasha)
- Eamonn (Lone)
- Parvaiz (Pasha)
- Aneeka (Pasha)
- Karamat (Lone)

Figure 1 Front cover, epigraph, and narrative structure

The two families are the Pashas and the Lones. Isma, Parvaiz, and Aneeka Pasha are orphaned siblings who live in the Preston Road working class neighbourhood of North London. They are the children of a “jihadi” father who is mostly absent from their lives and who dies on his way to Guantánamo from Bagram. However, his presence is felt in the visits to the family home from MI5 (U.K. Security Service) who refuse to share any details about his situation with the family, and the surveillance of the Muslim community more widely by state authorities. This surveillance, known in academic terms as “suspectification” (see Abbas 2019, 1460), is a form of structural violence that promotes a sense of fear - this invades both community and family relations and sows distrust. The history of the father is a forbidden topic and the children are taught to repeat “I never knew my father” as a defensive measure. The violence operates additionally in the way that the children are deprived of who their mother really is: “the orphaned twins who had never really known their mother before

bitterness and stress ate away the laughing, affectionate woman she'd once been" (Shamsie 2017, 39). The stress causes the early death of the mother when the twins Aneeka and Parvaiz are twelve years old. Isma has just finished university so assumes the parenting role; the novel begins as Isma leaves for the U.S. to resume her own life and pursue a PhD now the twins are nearly nineteen. In the meantime, Parvaiz travels unbeknown to his sisters to Syria, where he soon regrets his decision and wants to come home. Eamonn Lone, who has taken a break from his job "to live life beyond office walls" (Shamsie 2017, 18) and exists upon an allowance provided by his mother, falls in love with Aneeka. Aneeka hopes her relationship with Eamonn can influence his father to help her brother come home. Eamonn is the son of Karamat Lone, a Conservative politician who distances himself from his Muslim heritage to promote his career. Married to an Irish/American wife, Karamat is successful and subsequently becomes Home Secretary in the conservative government. The Lones live in the Holland Park area of Kensington, often referred to as "Millionaires Row".

There is an obvious class and wealth divide between the two families. Politically and religiously, they also stand apart: Karamat is a representative of the State whose responsibilities cover the law, national security and immigration; the Pashas carry a history of "terrorism" in relation to their father, and later to the brother Parvaiz who is recruited to the media wing of ISIS; Karamat disassociates himself from his Muslim roots and his son Eamonn grows up with little knowledge of his father's cultural background; the Pashas are practising Muslims. The novel is divided into five sections, each representing a different character perspective as the situation unfolds. These are narrated in third person rather than first person so

other voices can be heard across the text and a sense of competing voices is established. Whilst there are clear divisions in lifestyle, social status, and authority, the order in which the sections are structured (see figure 1 above) emphasises an intertwining of lives. The characters of Isma and Karamat who open and close the novel with their narratives, are also the only characters out of the five who are alive by the end of the novel. It evolves very much into a shared story.

3.1 Connecting with readers; initial responses

Scholars emphasise how Shamsie uses a particular “brand of realism” as a technique to engage readers. In her article, “The political novel in our still-evolving reality: Kamila Shamsie’s *Home Fire* and the Shamima Begum² case” (2022), Urzula Rutkowska argues for “a rethinking of the relationship between literature and politics” (2022, 873). She states:

The contemporary novel is a form of imaginative discourse that is already engaging with the world as we see it today, staging debates and helping us to resolve them by projecting us into a future shaped by the repercussions of the present ... *Home Fire* provides a distinct form of ‘living contact’, requiring the reader to build a relationship with each constructed character in a political reality based on their own. (Rutkowska 2022, 873)

This “living contact” with a “political reality” based on the reader’s own is an idea that Birgit Breidenbach also promotes: “Shamsie’s literary

² Shamima Begum is probably the most high profile case documented in the media regarding the radicalisation of British Muslim youth and the stripping of British citizenship thereafter. Readers in the project referenced Shamima Begum frequently in discussion of the novel.

works are thus rooted in historical actuality, and her brand of realism relies on the use of clearly recognisable historical events as a backdrop and crucial context for her fictional characters' lives" (2024, 412). A look at readers' initial responses to the book (figure 2 below), identifies relating to character as the first aspect named by readers.

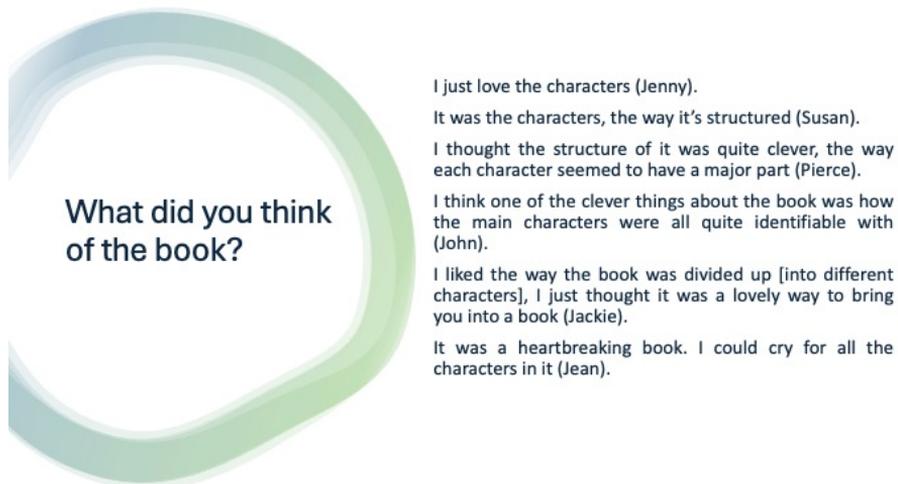


Figure 2 Opening question and reader responses

I think this is really interesting. Literary Studies has traditionally used responses to 'character' as a way to evidence the "specialism" of academic readers as distinct from the "naivety" of everyday readers. Everyday readers are allegedly naive because they form emotional attachments and treat characters as persons whereas academic readers maintain a professional distance. In *Character: Three Inquiries in Literary Studies* (2019), Amanda Anderson, Rita Felski, and Toril Moi express frustration with this way of thinking and call for "a form of literary studies that engages, explicates, and builds on ordinary response" (2019, 12). In this way, both a richer account of "how fiction

connects to ordinary life" (2019, 2) and the ways in which character operates in literature can be achieved.

The connection between readers and characters expressed in figure 2 above is not automatic – it was not a feature identified by readers within the other two novels studied in this project. Yet, what the readers express here is what Felski in "Identifying With Characters" refers to as "the felt vitality of fictional beings" (2019, 87). This captures the dual nature of the status of characters; as literary devices on the one hand, and to quote Felski as "worldly actors haloed with affective and existential force" (2019, 87) on the other. Felski elaborates further on the aesthetic form of characters:

It is their fictional qualities that make characters real ... figures in novels and films are vivid, memorable, charismatic, arresting, alive, not despite their aesthetic qualities, but because of them. They possess a kind of reality that we should cherish and respect; that they are made up does not mean that they do not matter. (Felski 2019, 85)

The reader comments attest to this: they capture a recognition of artifice in references to "structure", "characters", "divided up"; authorial intention "way to bring you into a book", "one of the clever things", "quite clever"; alongside a real emotional connection "love"; "identifiable"; "heartbreaking". Readers are not naïve and impressionistic. They are keenly aware that characters are fictional constructs whilst able to respond to them as if they are real.

The following discussion between Jenny and Rebecca illustrates this further:

Rebecca: the characters, you become, they're very real, you become really involved with them, that connection, human connection draws you in and just challenges you.

Jenny: It's very engaging, isn't it? You're very immersed in it.

Rebecca: When you read you know it's fiction, but at the same time you know those things are really happening and because you've engaged on a personal level, it just tips you over somehow.

Jenny: Well, they feel real don't they? They feel like a real brother and sister. You think, ok, it's terrible to go and join ISIS, but you do think, oh God, he's just 19. He's just someone's brother.

Rebecca: Absolutely.

It is clear that the wider context in which the action plays out leans on the "clearly recognisable historical events" (Breidenbach) and the "living contact with political reality"³ (Rutkowska) that readers are invited to make in relation to the characters' lives.

Readers also identify "multiple perspective" as a structural device to "hook" them into the narrative in their opening remarks:

It gave them their own identity and it deepened the empathy you had with each character 'cos you only get a very superficial glimpse or a mention from characters about them, but by giving them their own bit of life-story, it worked. (Pierce)

I kept getting swayed to different points of view ... it was good because I'm not pushed to think about stuff like this very often. (Jenny)

³ Whilst the political reality in *Home Fire* is U.K. based, readers recognised this most definitely as a European and global situation.

It was intriguing because the story was unravelling as you got the detail from each person's perspective. It hooked you in. You wanted to read more. (Rebecca)

It brings a sort of human characteristic to the character, not just showing it from another person's point of view, because from Aneeka, Eamonn, or even Isma, you might see Karamat as a ruthless man in the way he's trying to hide his identity being Muslim, but when you see it from his point of view he's doing it for the good of his family, to protect people. (Monica)

These comments reflect what Anderson, Felski, and Moi refer to as "the experience of thinking with characters" (2019, 1). It complicates responses and widens understanding. This actively engages readers to think about the structures of storytelling, differing perspectives, the process of interpretation, and how their own perspectives are shaped more widely. Rehana Ahmed points out: "By scrutinising modes of viewing others, the novel directs the reader's attention towards their own readerly gaze, encouraging a more self-conscious way of reading" (2021, 4). As reader comments will demonstrate, this extends beyond characters and their situations in the novel. It applies to the structure of the novel overall – and readers' own position in regards to the world events the novel references.

3.2: Extract 1: Isma

Shamsie dedicates four pages to the opening scene which takes place at Heathrow airport. Isma is flying to the U.S. to begin her PhD. The first line states very clearly that she will miss her flight as she is taken aside for interrogation. That this is a definitive outcome of the interrogation process establishes it as common practice. It acts out Schedule 7 of the Terrorism Act (ACT). No suspicion is required to

detain a person, and like the “stop and search” policies carried out on the streets, is considered controversial for its “racial and religious profiling”. Isma has already had her carefully packed belongings searched through, “jumbled” in a heap, and is then left alone to wait. When an official returns with her laptop and phone, her flight is boarding and she dares to hope. However, what follows is a two-hour interrogation (see figure 3 below).

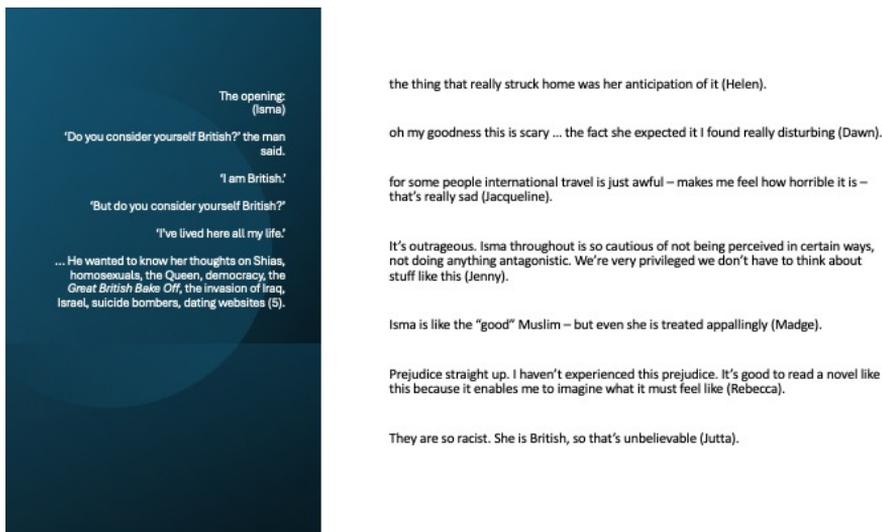


Figure 3 Extract from *Home Fire* and reader responses

Not only is the list relentless, but the combination of topics on which the test of “Britishness” is based is rather absurd. As the extract on the left of figure 3 shows, Isma is well prepared. A look at reader comments here (figure 3 above), reveals feelings such as “scary”, “sad”, “disturbing”, “awful”, “horrible”, “outrageous”, which emphasise an emotional, bodily connection. Yet, these emotional responses are not ‘simply’ emotional. They are a signal of what readers care about, their moral commitments. As Martha Nussbaum states: “emotions

are composites of belief and feelings shaped by developing thought and highly discriminating in their reactions" (1990, 78). Similarly, Felski argues that: "acts of identifying, while they can be emotional, even passionate, are also *reflective*: they are informed by beliefs, ideals, and values. It is a matter not just of feeling but of thinking" (2019, 98). They are evidence of affect and intellect working side by side in readers' interpretations.

In addition to the charges of prejudice and racism identified by Rebecca and Jutta (figure 3), elsewhere readers such as Pierce see a subtle violence in the process: "it wasn't a physical assault as such, it's more of a psychological thing, she felt absolutely helpless, no control, that's what's scary for her". Similarly, Helen comments: "it's not violent or brutal to her in any physical way, it's just that knowledge you are going to be picked out. You are going to be treated differently because of who you are". Reader comments thus evidence that "ethical as well as political judgements are in play" (Felski 2019, 95). Whilst readers in this study demonstrate awareness of their own privilege and distance from such incidents, they also note how situated they feel within the events in the novel: "Reading it as a novel, you're in there, aren't you, with the character, you're actually part of their world and you can really feel the tensions" (Dawn); "as it's all third person, you are not switching narrative perspectives, rather stepping into their worlds" (Susan); "it makes you feel definitely uneasy about her situation, somebody's just gone through all your belongings and something as intimate as your underwear" (Monica); "you are vulnerable in that situation" (Diane). Use of the second person pronouns "you" and "your" here can be read as rhetorical devices utilised in everyday conversation. However, they evidence an "experiential mode of access" (see Erll 2008; Rigney 2019) to the

events taking place. Additionally, the sheer amount of fictional dialogue in the novel offers the reader: “the sensation of being in the midst of an event, a performance, where boundaries of all kinds are eroded and outcomes uncertain” (Thomas 2012, 1). Readers are invited to actively participate in this interplay by interpreting and evaluating characters’ reactions to the events as they unfold. In order to do this, readers automatically reflect upon their own responses and potential reactions to being in such a situation.

3.3: Extract 2: Parvaiz

Readers in the study cite this narrative section as very powerful but uncomfortable. Not only does it contain the most direct violence in the novel, but it raises “ethical issues in perspective-taking” (Meretoja 2018, 219) as readers are encouraged to emotionally engage with a young “terrorist”. Parvaiz’s rhetorical question “Who am I?” melds with readers’ questions of “Who is he?” as preconceived notions of identity are explored and challenged. Despite his father’s history, Parvaiz has a good family, is loved, and is popular in the community – not only as an individual but as someone who contributes to community cohesion – raising funds for the local library. Thus, one of the big questions the novel explores, is how does such a promising young man end up as a “terrorist”? In interviews, Shamsie argues for a need to understand the sophisticated and targeted methods that ISIS use and why they are so appealing to the young people who go to join them. However, she states it is not talked about in public debate because:

there is a sense that if you are talking about it then you are empathising, then you are justifying, that’s a very scary line that if you dare to look too closely and say actually this is complex, then

you're saying it's fine ... so there has been a real shortfall in the conversation round how did they get people to come across.
(Shamsie, Shakespeare and Company Paris 2017, audio 33:00)

Making the central narrative of the novel about a young British Pakistani male who is recruited to ISIS thus works to open up this conversation and challenge assumptions.

In the novel, Parvaiz is mugged and his phone is stolen. The following day the enigmatic Farooq returns his phone with an apology that the muggers did not realise who he was. This prompts Parvaiz to question "Who am I?" to which Farooq provides the answer: he is the son of "the great warrior Abu Parvaiz" (Shamsie 2017, 125). The physical absence of a father figure and the narrative absence surrounding the man himself (due to the "instrumentalisation of fear" by state authorities via the 'suspectification' of the Muslim community), directly impacts upon his sense of identity. It leaves a space to be filled and Farooq capitalises upon this in his recruitment of Parvaiz. Parvaiz secretly meets Farooq every day, where: "Parvaiz would listen to those stories of his father for which he'd always yearned – not a footloose boy or feckless husband, but a man of courage who fought injustice" (Shamsie 2017, 128). As Parvaiz knows relatively little of his father, there is no opportunity afforded to refute Farooq's lies. The immersion in the dialogue that takes place between Farooq and Parvaiz allows the reader to appreciate how convincing the narrative is to someone in Parvaiz's situation: "the way he was radicalised is captured in an accessible way, the absent father and the hero image that was created – Farooq came along and filled that gap in a very manipulative way. Parvaiz is just a kid" (Pierce); "You definitely felt sorry for him. It was awful. He had all the reasons to believe him and

be swayed" (Rebecca); "You could see that Parvaiz was being groomed. He was vulnerable, open to manipulation, had a fantasy idea of who the father was" (Diane). Readers recognise how the preconditions expose him to being taken advantage of.

Once trust has been established, Parvaiz is ambushed at Farooq's flat. He is first chained in a squatting position so that "the chains cut into his flesh ... He was screaming in pain, had been screaming in pain, for a very long time" (Shamsie 2017, 136/7). Then he is waterboarded. Afterwards it is explained that this is what the authorities did to his father and the subject of Bagram and Guantánamo are brought into focus. Thus, Shamsie deftly parallels narratives of ISIS alongside narratives of Guantánamo and Bagram with which readers are already familiar, but they re-read them again through the eyes of the young Parvaiz: "stories of dogs raping prisoners at Bagram, pictures of tortured bodies" (Shamsie 2017, 148). The role of MI5 in this is emphasised. Indeed, Parvaiz initially assumes Farooq belongs to the authorities: "Who was this man - MI5? Special Branch? They, too had seemed so friendly that time they'd come to the house in his childhood" (Shamsie 2017, 124); "MI5 officers were present at Bagram, Farooq told him, and showed him all the evidence to corroborate that" (Shamsie 2017, 148). Hence, the focus is not just upon how Parvaiz becomes radicalised through the actions of ISIS, but how the response to radicalisation by the British state contributes to this process.

The violence justified by the rhetoric of the "War on Terror" by democratic governments in the west, is effectively used as a recruitment tool to ISIS. As John says: "We tend to tut about Guantánamo and the American reactions and tend to brush the U.K.'s

involvement of all that under the carpet. I remain really angry with Tony Blair for taking us into the Iraq war. We tend to underestimate our part in that whole response". Roberta adds: "The West has created terrorism and continues to create it by what it does and what it's perpetrated here, there and everywhere in the world. The tortures in Bagram are just absolutely awful". The novel thus draws readers' attention to "intersecting histories of violence" (Meretoja 2018, 149) as government actions (both U.S. and U.K.) and ISIS propaganda are placed side by side. The novel does not compare legitimate governments and a proscribed terrorist organisation on a like-for-like basis; what it achieves, however, is to raise questions in readers' minds about "individual and collective responsibility". As Judith Butler argues: "Those who commit acts of violence are surely responsible for them ... On the other hand, these individuals are formed ... What social conditions help to form the very ways that choice and deliberation proceed?" (2004, 15/16). Butler emphasises responsibility does not lie solely in one place: "[it] is not to say that the conditions are at fault rather than the individual. It is rather to rethink the relation between conditions and acts" (2004, 16). The responses from readers below evidence how the novel invites them to do precisely this.

Horrific as his torture is, Parvaiz feels "*I am you, for the first time*" (Shamsie 2017, 140) in relation to his father. Farooq narrates a body to be proud of, and Parvaiz literally inhabits/embodies it: "'Tie me again. I want to feel my father's pain.' 'My brave warrior,' Farooq said, as Parvaiz knelt down and waited for the agony to resume" (Shamsie 2017, 141). As readers point out, religion is not the motivating factor behind the recruitment of Parvaiz. Rather than an Islamic fundamentalist as counter-terrorism measures would define him,

Parvaiz is revealed as a boy in search of a connection to his father. The sensitivity to how different narrative perspectives shape readers' own responses becomes particularly acute here. Readers note Shamsie's own narrative structure at this stage of the novel (see figure 4 below). Madge emphasises the design of the novel as a whole, and how it positions her to notice how her view of him changes. Dawn and Jackie's comments reveal that by placing the narrative in the centre of the novel they are already invested in the story and feel impelled to continue. Clare's statement that: "it made me kind of shiver" precisely because "it was so believable" documents a visceral connection to the events described.

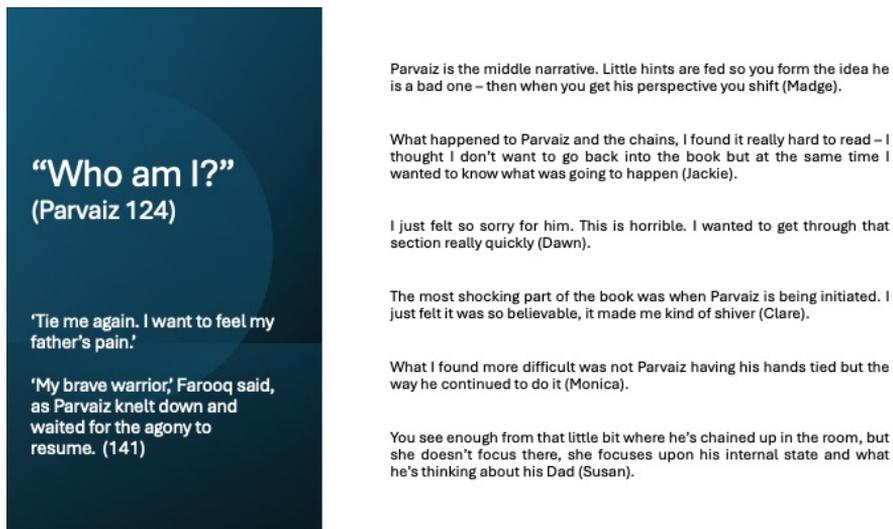


Figure 4 Extract from *Home Fire* and reader responses

In *The Ethics of Storytelling: Narrative Hermeneutics, History and the Possible* (2018), Hanna Meretoja states that “literature cultivates our ability to perceive the world from multiple perspectives”: she calls this “*perspective-awareness* and *perspective-sensitivity*” (2018, 4). In this

way, literary and historical narratives invite readers to “imagine other possible ways of living, feeling and thinking” (2018, 91), which then feed back into the ways we understand ourselves in the world. She further argues: “A sense of the possible – a sense of how things could be otherwise – is integral to moral agency and to the ethical imagination of individuals and communities. It has transformative potential” (2018, 4). This is demonstrated in the way every reader managed to empathise with Parvaiz on some level. They did not excuse his actions but expressed understanding that he was young, vulnerable, and longed for a father figure.

Reader comments covered a wide range of feeling: “I just felt so sorry for him” (Dawn); “it’s an attempt for the reader to understand how that can happen, really helpful, really interesting. It forced me to see how he was brainwashed and groomed” (Jackie); “the grooming, it gave a very human picture of what seemed like political events because you got close to the characters” (Madge); “the narrative of Parvaiz was really powerful, more eye-opening” (Monica). Yet, at the same time as readers relate to what happens to Parvaiz, they also express conflicting feelings. Monica becomes exasperated: “As a reader I struggle to understand how he can continue to do it. It made me sometimes frustrated at his character – he’s had an education, a sister so intelligent and studying law, he’s loved – how can he fall into this trap and be misled like this?”. Jean states: “I couldn’t understand Parvaiz for not seeing through him [Farooq], but that’s being a young lad. He was only 19 – a child really, never knew his father, quite a sheltered boy”. Roberta felt: “I wasn’t completely convinced about why he would be recruited so easily, but the organisation of that group is just phenomenal – the way they process people, recruit, induct and make it impossible to leave – it’s professional”. Shamsie

creates a space for readers to “think through” the ethical complexities of the position Parvaiz finds himself in without condoning his actions. Readers are taken beyond “perspective-awareness and perspective sensitivity” as Parvaiz is recruited, and situated in the actual construction of a narrative to experience the power of narratives to shape a sense of self and an understanding of the world. In “Thinking With Character” (2019), Anderson emphasises that “understanding character within the larger context of a life and over time is of supreme importance ... such understanding simultaneously involves social, psychological, and moral assessment” (2019, 129). Readers are invited to make not only a “social, psychological, and moral assessment” of the decisions and actions the individual characters take, but of the situation itself in which the characters have to operate, and who creates it.

3.4 Impact of the novel: Transformative Potential? Aesthetic Agency?

At the end of the interviews, readers were asked if they had gained anything from reading the novel. Here are a sample of responses:

I feel like I'm in a bit of a bubble, these things don't actually affect my daily life. (Jenny)

It made me feel a bit uncomfortable, it's so topical and relevant, this is all about the world which I ought to know a lot about but I only know a little about – it stirs stuff up. It got me quite deep in my tummy. (Rebecca)

It was an eye-opener ... It sort of immediately put you into a place where you wouldn't normally be and a whole world I'd never thought

about existing, I mean obviously I knew that kind of world exists, but I hadn't seen it from that perspective before, really gripping. (Dawn)

It was very shocking. It was just a very eye-opening book. This book is something that will stay with me. It really made me empathise with people who go through something like this. Media and social media will portray something a certain way. I will not take it on face value anymore. (Monica)

It's made me think that there's so much else going on ... that I don't know about. (Jean)

Reading this book has made me think that actually it's all been much cruder, much less focused and intelligence-based than they would have us believe – a lot of it is about prejudice and assumptions. (John)

It's made me think about my life as a white, middleclass, English woman, it made me stop in my tracks, it's really awakened stuff in me. (Jackie)

The comments evidence that the novel confronts readers; it leads readers to focus a more critical gaze upon themselves and how cosseted they are in their own lives. When Dawn states it is "a whole world I'd never thought about existing, I mean obviously I knew that kind of world exists", she acknowledges that she knows these scenarios occur, but admits to never actually thinking about them – until she reads this novel. The closeness of events in the novel to what is happening in the real world also invites readers to (re)see their world. John's reflections point to this. Significantly, other reactions use metaphors of sight which emphasise new ways of seeing: "a very eye-opening book" (Monica); "It was an eye-opener, immediately an eye-opener" (Dawn). Many comments capture the lasting impressions

of the novel which continue beyond the process of reading itself. The novel thus raises questions of responsibility regarding readers' knowledge of what is taking place in the world and promotes a deeper understanding of and connection to contemporary issues that are generally divisive in public debate.

The repetition of the phrase “[it] made me” in reader responses emphasises the “aesthetic agency” of the text. Rigney clarifies the importance of recognising: “the ‘agency’ of cultural carriers, a term that is deliberately chosen here to challenge the notion that the arts are merely passive transmitters of the stories in people’s heads” (2021, 14). The multi-vocality and immersion in fictional dialogue within the shifting narrative perspectives of different characters, positions readers to address their own assumptions, to consider how identities become fixed through the mediation of stories, and in turn to question where these stories come from in the first place. In this way they are invited to be more attentive readers; to pay attention to the agendas behind stories and more widely recognise that they offer only a partial picture. The narrative strategies of multi-vocality that Shamsie utilises create democratic spaces in which opposing views can counter each other. No perspective is given precedence. Readers are thus encouraged to actively participate in the debate the novel engenders and add their own contributions. In this way, fiction creates a space for readers to think through ethical dilemmas and complexities rather than directing judgement to particular standpoints.

4. Concluding remarks: working with everyday readers

My work with everyday readers initially was to provide a sounding board in which to test out my own findings. However, as the research

continued, everyday reader responses became the heart of the project and indeed its driving force. Examining how readers respond feeds into my wider research questions concerning literary style and narrative agency, and allows for a more nuanced understanding of the process, responsibility, and ethics involved in reading literature about political violence. Working with non-academic readers opens up differing trajectories to follow and maps a wider area of analysis than I could achieve on my own. The interview data provides empirical evidence to support and challenge literary claims and additionally offers new ways of thinking. Whilst the limited space of this article allows only a small sample of my work to be shared, readers demonstrate sophisticated understanding, clear identification of stylistic features, and expressions of attachment to works of fiction in a variety of ways. Everyday readers display intellect and affect working effectively side by side and prove themselves to be incredibly astute. The tracing of connections established between writer, reader, and text provides valuable material on “how fiction connects to ordinary life” (Anderson, Felski, and Moi 2019, 2) and explores how writers and readers both bear the weight of engaging with such difficult subject matter. My findings argue that qualitative reader response interviewing has much unused and rich potential for the future of contemporary literary studies.

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