

Diasporic Dissonance: Cognitive Dissonance as a Structuring Principle in Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire*

ⁱ *Shafaat Yar Khan*

ABSTRACT: *This research studies Kamila Shamsie's novel Home Fire (2017) from the point of view of cognitive narratology. It highlights that Kamila Shamsie uses cognitive dissonance events to structure the plot of the novel. More than offering an explanatory textual reading, it offers a research methodology derived from the concepts of cognitive narratology, and especially the literary conceptualization of cognitive dissonance. The research contends that the terms derived from these new areas can replace classic terminologies like conflict, rising action, and denouement, or catastrophe. The methodology adopted is based on the study of textual indicators of cognitive dissonance as they are used to construct the plot. This methodology can be used for future research and serve as a paradigm or rubric for evaluative judgments.*

Keywords: Cognitive Dissonance, Cognitive narratology, Plot structure, Conflict

ⁱ shafaat.yar@ucp.edu.pk

Cognitive narratology studies the relations among human mental processes and production and reception of narratives (Herman 2007, p. 308). With its focus on relation between the mind and the narrative, it investigates the narrated experiences of worlds of characters and the reading experience of readers. Its primary focus is on the mental models of world/s created in the narrative (story worlds), cognitive narratology explores how narratives present the thoughts, feelings, and motivations of characters (fictional mind) to readers. It therefore also examines how readers cognitively process the narrated information and construct meanings. This research examines how readers respond to characters and develop narrative structures to interpret the text. Cognitive narratology, thus, not only involves author's rhetorical efforts and their impact on readers' cognitive understanding of the narrative.

Cognitive dissonance is defined as the psychological tension experienced by characters previously termed as the inner conflict. In literary works, cognitive dissonance stands for stages of characters' conflict when contradictory motives or beliefs generate tension which propels the plot when resolution of such tension is sought by the characters. Tension experienced by characters is vicariously experienced by readers whose emotional responses involve them in the ethical situations of their characters. This causes a tension of another kind which involves not just empathetic vicarious experience of the tension but also a judgment situation when readers' own world view or moral ideals conflict with those of their characters. Thus, empathetic and interpretive engagement causes cognitive dissonance in readers. This exposure to conflicting situations causes dissonant or conflicting perspectives so that readers are engaged to reconsider the psycho-moral stances of characters and are themselves drawn into the story world to resist, reconsider, adopt, or reject the choices faced by characters.

As Gerrig (2010) points out, "Authors count on readers to use inference processes to bridge narrative gaps ..." (20) or used schemas to explain readers' responses (ibid, 20). Fiction often involves readers in vicariously experiencing characters' dissonance as studied by rhetorical or affective narratology (Caracciolo 2013). Cognitive dissonance acts as a structural mechanism for plot when it acts as internal conflict involving moral ambiguity as Faustus' oscillation between repentance and return to magic or Raskolnikov's moral dilemma in *Crime and Punishment* which create the tension that structurally drives the plot. Mrs. Dalloway's cognitive dissonance drives the plot through her self-deception. Conflicts and contradictions are the props of literary narratives. Their occurrence in chaotic spatio-temporal patterns is organized in narratological productions by transforming their inconsistency into coherent plots. In this way, the

contradictions of lived experiences are resolved through literary patterns of conflict, tension, and resolution. This intelligibility of life's contradictions, reduced to a causal sequence, also reconciles conflicting interpretations in the light of philosophical insights.

Cognitive narratology studies dissonance as a structural design. It focuses on how authors embed narrative contradictions to stimulate audiences' cognitive processes to generate interpretive activity. Construction of narrative dissonance is, thus, a meaning-making aesthetic strategy which becomes more complex as it tackles socio-cultural scenarios where dissonance management is not just individual, but involves multi-faceted power structures. Thus, owing to the variety and recurrence of multifactorial influences, Diasporic identity evades fixity and needs to be continually re-written to accommodate ever-emergent contradictions and experiences. A critical gap in narrative research persists in explaining how narrative structures produce interpretive instability and ethical conflict, which shift readers' judgments. Existing research on *Home Fire* (2017) focuses on postcolonial adaptation, and diaspora identity. This study is the first to examine how the text constructs, causes, and modifies reader's dissonance through ethical polarity and interpretive tensions. It also fulfills the need for application of cognitive narratology, and affect theory in literary studies. Few theoretical frameworks have been devised for analysis of narrative techniques of production of dissonance in narrative texts, particularly in South Asian postcolonial fiction.

Home Fire is pliant for a study of cognitive dissonance as it constructs a multi-perspectival narrative of the three Pasha siblings in the background of postcolonial state power and post-9/11 terrorism discourses. Fragmented focalization produces many layers of cognitive dissonance at the levels of character, discourse, and reader interpretation. Familial loyalty vs. state allegiance, private emotion vs. familial responsibilities, postcolonial identities vs. familial bonding, plot tensions through competing perspectives, and discursive contradictions, complicated by some temporal fragmentation. These make cognitive dissonance the structural force of the plot.

This study focuses on Shamsie's use of cognitive dissonance to structure her narrative and generate plot/s to engage readers and activate their interpretation mechanisms. *Home Fire* intertwines the lives of three British-Pakistani siblings- Isma, Aneeka, and Parvaiz of the Pasha family whose identities are shaped by conflicting loyalties to family, nation, and ideology. Isma who raised her twin siblings since their mother's death travels to America for higher education and experiences surveillance and self-censorship. Their unknown deceased jihadi father re-enters their lives when Parvaiz is lured into following in his father's footsteps by joining ISIS in Syria, soon realizes his mistake, but is shot to death

trying to escape ISIS. His twin sister's efforts to bring him to Britain, through her romantic relationship with Eamonn Lone, son of British Home Secretary Karamat Lone, end in ashes. Karamat Lone's political career depends on his rejection of his Muslim background. The efforts to bring Parvaiz's body to the UK end in the deaths of Eamonn and Aneeka in a terrorist attack.

The novel is suitable for exploration with cognitive narratological research. It is focused on Pakistani women's Diasporic lives affected by their experiences in Pakistan and abroad. Multiple focalizations structure unresolved contradictions into the plot. Shamsie's use of fragmented focalization, spatio-temporal shifts, and ideological tensions make cognitive dissonance the hermeneutic force of the plot, so that the narrative conflict presents a tragic failure to reconcile personal and political selves. The cognitive dissonance forced upon the readers requires an imaginative engagement with the characters' dissonant selves which remain dissonant in the novels' ending.

Theoretical Framework

This study views fictional narratives as 'structured negotiations' of contradictions. It combines Leon Festinger's idea of cognitive dissonance with theories of cognitive narratology. It considers cognitive dissonance to be not just a psychological discomfort arising from conflicting views, but as a potent force in structuring narratives and formation of Pakistani Diasporic identity construction. Festinger's definition (1957) of cognitive dissonance as the tension created by discordant cognitions, and motivating people to seek resolutions has been extended to argue that instead of being resolved, dissonance is narrativized. Contradictions get restructured into meaningful sequences and thus rationalized so that dissonance is transformed into structured storytelling.

For cognitive narratology, dissonance is a formal property of narrative. Authors structure their characters' lives around crises and tension. Thus, cognitive dissonance refers to mental conflict/s characters experience when faced with contradictions in their beliefs, values, or actions. Cognitive dissonance helps authors create complex and growing fictional agents. Narrative techniques such as fragmentation, unreliable narration, and shifting perspectives provide structural strength to narrative architecture. As David Herman (2011/2013) argues, readers' interpretive efforts work through inconsistencies, narrative gaps and ambiguities to reconcile contradictions so that negotiation of competing narrative cues yields meanings.

In applying cognitive dissonance to literary texts, this research views the contradictions, gaps, and lapses in plot as deliberate constructions to challenge coherence and defeat attempts at achieving stable meanings as Shakespeare's

dissonant presentation of the cognitive states of Hamlet or Iago to keep the audience guessing and returning to the play. Unresolved conflicts act as literary paradigms to elevate the text to repeated returns of audience and scholars to interpretative processes, which are themselves complicated by emerging contexts across time.

The theoretical framework of this research also draws on Dan McAdams' theory of narrative identity (2013) as an evolving self. Identity construction is an ongoing integration of conflicting experiences which continually necessitate reinterpretation and reconfiguration

In this way, identity at any moment is a temporal resolution of dissonance in response to new conflicts. In the postcolonial and discourse-oriented perspectives of Michel Foucault and Edward Said, narratives are shaped by power structures. Cognitive dissonance, in this sense, is not only internal, but is also socially produced when conflicting identity positions result in fragmented self-perception. Diasporic dissonance narratives are, therefore, sites of ideological negotiations. Negotiation of dissonance, in such cases, is possible only within ideological narratives available which influence narrated characters' psychological need for coherence expressed through plot structure/s in which their self-construction requires continual revision. The cognitive dissonance, therefore, acts like a central organizing principle that produces the narrative form and constructs narrative identity.

Literature Review

Cognitive literary studies have established itself as a discipline, recently. It was, and is still, accused of lacking "authentic, intelligible and meaningful work" (Müller-Wood 2017). Its great challenge is that any attempt to integrate the scientific and the literary, threatens to reduce literary studies to the scientific; while any endeavors to preserve its literary character risk its marginalization and even exclusion from scientific discourses. (Park 2015). Cognitive literary studies intersect literature and psychology but have to benefit from Cognitive linguistics without losing their literary essence. In pointing out the "dangerous potential of fiction to offer temptingly simplified or erroneous accounts of the world" (2016, 132), Cave highlights that "fictional worlds open themselves up for exploration to a degree that is not possible in the real world" (2016, 128) so that "cognitively enriched fiction offers a mode of intelligence - at once kinesic and reflective - not available to other kinds of discourse" (2016, 132).

And yet, psychological realism has always dealt with internal conflict as the mainstay of plot. The mental conflicts arising from contradictory values or actions serve to create complex characters whose struggle with such

contradictions become the impetus for character development. Internal monologues, soliloquies, and streams of consciousness reveal conflicting thoughts. Psychological and existential conflicts rely on characters' cognitive undertakings to resolve their conflicts. Audience engagement through empathy, identification or sympathy involves readers in questioning characters' ideas and decisions. Cognitive dissonance creates tension leading to attempts to reduce the discomfort through justification, denial, or behavioral change, reflected in characters' inner conflict and reasoning as in *Othello*, *King Lear* or *Hamlet*. Contradictory goals, ethical dilemmas, trauma or guilt, and socio-political pressures act as triggers for cognitive dissonance.

Dissonance, thus, functions a plot-driving force, conflicting interpretations of characters' motivations involving sympathy with such morally flawed characters as the Joker in Batman movies and comics, or even Macbeth, propagate moral debates of literary works across time and space. Research on cognitive dissonance and cognitive narratology spreads across the disciplines of psychology, literary theory, and interdisciplinary cognitive studies. Coined by Leon Festinger (1957), it has evolved beyond its conception as psychological tension caused by contradictory beliefs into a human motivational drive for consistency.

Festinger's original concept (1957) stated that conflicting beliefs and values lead to psychological discomfort which they try to reduce through justification, denial, or behavioral change. Cognitive narratology's adoption of the concept saw identity construction through narrative integration of otherwise chaotic experiences so that narratives are cognitive structures in which employment of experiences leads to coherence (Hogan 2013). Rhetorical narratology sees authors purposely engaging readers in interpretive dissonance. They create textual gaps to produce cognitive tensions, which in turn, invite readers to resolve inconsistencies through interpretive negotiation with characters experiences.

Literature invites readers' empathetic involvement to vicariously experience fictional characters' dissonance Caracciolo (2013). In fiction, characters mirror cognitive dissonance through inner conflict and rationalization which are manifested in narrative tone, contradictory dialogues, internal monologues, and imagery and symbolism.

Cognitive Dissonance functions as a structural engine (Cave 2022) when dissonance forces characters to act to reduce dissonance. This is done in four ways: refusing accept the emerging cognitions, justifying the dissonant cognition by adding new cognitions, find justification of one's behavior by altering the dissonant cognition, or just changing behavior (Festinger 1957). Literary plots place major turns when characters adopt one strategy against another choice to

reduce dissonance. Elizabeth Bennet undergoes cognitive dissonances regarding Darcy till she visits Pemberley and decides not to reject Darcy's proposal in future. In these situations, cognitive dissonance not only functions to foreground a theme but also serves as causation in that the conflicting choices cause consequences which move the plot forward.

Cognitive dissonance also causes moral and causal shifts when belief changes occur under dissonance. Characters' revision of their beliefs alter the moral or causal events which had hitherto driven the plot, thereby permitting new actions which were formerly unlikely. This reconfiguration of the plot world also alters all future interpretation of events within the storyworld and in the world of the audience. Cave (2022) argues that literary plots use cognitive dissonance as a structural principle, by replacing internal contradiction in place of external factors so that characters' failure to reduce cognitive dissonance makes the plots more engaging. The more dissonance characters are faced with the more escalation is given to the plot (rising action/conflict): "The magnitude of dissonance between one cognitive element and the remainder of the person's cognitions depends on the number and importance of cognitions that are consonant and dissonant with the one in question" (Harmon-Jones and Mills 2019, 4).

Caracciolo has shown that readers experience tensions when compelled by cognitively challenging plots. Such plots enhance reader engagement and coincide with the movements of the plot till resolution or catastrophe is reached. A dissatisfying finale, as in tragedies, makes the audience wondering at the resulting philosophical paradigm so that the dissonant cognition endures as the readerly impact of the work. Further debates among audience or scholars may lead to rationalization of the dissonant cognition manifested in estimation of the artistic/ideological value of the work. This cognitive dissonance is much like what Kutler found in consumers' post-purchase information search regarding the rationalization of their purchase (Kutler, et al 2017).

Statement of the Problem

Charting of the plot from any angle or perspective fails to account for the 'readability' of the novel. The narrative keeps the readers engaged, involving them in ever-occurring complications. Attempts to critique the novel as an Antigone-story fail to account for the narratives occurring before Pravaiz's death. It is the contention of this research that the only structure worth exploring in the novel is one built with the conflict situations in character's minds. With the valid and reliable term of cognitive dissonance, the plot can be seen as cohering all narratives (not events) into deixis and focalization of character's anguished states of mind.

Research Objectives

1. To examine the function of cognitive dissonance as a structuring principle in narrative form and meaning making in Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire*.
2. To explore how narrative structures of the novel encode, and organize dissonance through fictional techniques like conflict, spatio-temporal fragmentation, and multiple character perspectives.
3. To explore how Shamsie shapes reader engagement through interpretive processes driven by dissonance.

Research Questions

1. Which fictional techniques does Shamsie use in *Home Fire* to make cognitive dissonance function as a structuring principle of the narrative forms?
2. How does Shamsie's use of specific fictional techniques encode and structure cognitive dissonance within narratives?
3. In what ways does cognitive dissonance contribute to the formation and revision of characters' narrative identities in the text?

Methodology and Research Design

This study employs a qualitative, close reading for interpretive textual analysis. Its research methodology draws its methods from cognitive narratology which studies "the mental states, capacities, and dispositions that provide grounds for ... narrative experiences" (Living Handbook). Grounded in cognitive narratology, the research method explores how Kamila Shamsie uses cognitive dissonance to encode, structure, and resolve narrative conflicts through various fictional techniques in *Home Fire*. The analysis used in this research treats dissonance not as a psychological state alone, but as a formal and structural property of the narrative. The research was based on the hypothesis that the novel is particularly suitable for this inquiry as it has fragmented narrative structures with spatio-temporal gaps; it narrativizes multiple perspectives, and foregrounds themes of identity conflict, belonging, and othering which generate sustained cognitive and narrative dissonances. The methodology triangulates cognitive dissonance theory and cognitive narratology with narrative identity theory.

Close reading has been employed to identify how formal narrative strategies produce and organize dissonance in characters' cognition resulting in narrative structure, and leading to readers' cognitive interpretation. It first identifies inconsistent beliefs/actions in character. This is complicated by their diasporic identities, but for narrower focus, this research avoids postcolonial issues in the

text. After locating textual markers of tension, it focuses on characters' coping mechanisms and relates them to their consequences. The identified situations and character markers are then connected to the identified themes like morality, Diasporic identities, and alien society vs family ties. In this way, this methodology links the interdisciplinary fields of poetics and psychology in ways not yet explored.

Analytical Categories and Textual Indicators

This research studies plot conflict as a structured sequence of cognitive dissonance incidents which are manifested through irreconcilable conflicts in plot events and character decisions. It looks for textual indicators like moments of ethical or ideological contradiction (e.g., loyalty vs. state authority in *Home Fire*), mutually incompatible choices faced by characters, and growing narrative tensions due to spatio-temporal events which promise no immediate resolution. For example, Isma's interrogation scene reflects a conflict between self-identity and imposed national identity which later becomes a key factor in deciding Parvaiz's path toward radicalization, imprisonment, and assassination. Such textual indicators reflect dissonance between familial belonging and ideological seduction.

The research also focuses on how Dissonance is distributed across multiple perspectives, creating conflicting narrative realities for different characters. It, thus, studies shifts in narrative viewpoints through the plot, contradictory interpretations of the same event, and divergent perceptions including characters' own self-perception/s and various characters' conflicting perceptions. It studies how each plot movement (across sections in *Home Fire*) constructs partial truths and produces a growing cumulative dissonance so that readers must reconcile incompatible viewpoints, especially regarding terrorism, loyalty, and justice.

This research then studies the unreliable cognitions and internal contradictions in which dissonance arising from characters' conflicting beliefs, suppressed thoughts, or rationalizations involve the readers in an empathetic process of evaluation. Characters' hesitations, self-corrections, or contradictory statements, their internal monologues revealing conflict between belief and action, the emotional disjunctions cause an overall dissonant effect which then serves as the plot structure leading to catastrophes or resolutions.

Non-linear plot structure with spatio-temporal gaps, and disjointed auto-diegetic narratives or dissonant temporality of experiences have been used to achieve thematic organization or narrative coherence. Temporal disruption and retrospective reconfiguration involve such textual indicators as flashbacks or memory intrusions, reinterpretation of past events in light of either present

knowledge or ideological/moral principles, and delayed revelation of key narrative information. For example, Isma's memories of family life reshape present identity conflicts or information about his father is only gradually revealed to Parvaiz past to affect his transformation/s.

Similarly, it studies how strategic narratives cause readerly dissonance involving interpretive tensions for readers. This involves textual indicators like unexplained motivations, ellipses in narrative causality, and ambiguous or unresolved endings. For example, readers must infer Parvaiz's psychological shift on their own, and their moral judgments about his joining ISIS remain dissonant.

Dissonance reflecting moral/ideological conflicts is also embedded in dialogues and linguistic choices. Such discursive dissonance can be studied through textual Indicators like contradictory statements within dialogues, characters' attempts at political correctness, and postcolonial discourse of ideological conflicts. For example, the interrogation dialogue in the beginning of *Home Fire* exposes tensions between state discourse and personal truth, as do politically charged statements of Karamat Lone. Casual remarks about culture, society, politics, religion, or identity reveal latent ideological dissonances in the novel.

The model proposed for this research also studies cognitive dissonance through construction and fragmentation of identities. Integration of dissonant experiences or failure to do so shape narrative identity. This is indicated in characters redefining themselves across different socio-political contexts, undergoing conflicts between private identity and public roles and identity shifts triggered by crises cause dissonance, and serve to plot the events in a meaning-yielding structure. For example, Isma has to negotiate her various identities - as Muslim, British, sister, academic, and suspected thief or terrorist. Aneeka's identity is structured by love, resistance, and defiance. Parvaiz's fragmented identity causes irreversible narrative breaks affecting his sisters' lives to the points of no return.

The procedure followed here leads from close reading of selected passages in *Home Fire* to highlight what separate focalisations they yield. The identification of instances of cognitive dissonance are then subjected to categorization. Then comes the stage of interpretation of how these instances function as narrative structuring devices. The instances are thus used to show how dissonance shapes the narrative form, and successfully achieves reader engagement.

Delimitation

This study is limited to the examination of cognitive dissonance incidents and their contribution to plot structure. It does not broach topics like religion, nationality, postcolonial issues, terrorism, or Islamophobia. However, it does not refrain from using them as the context in which cognitive dissonance takes place.

Methodological Contribution

This research contributes a systematic way to analyse conflicts as structure of the plot. The methodology followed here combines the paradigms of cognitive narratology in literature and cognitive dissonance in psychology. It, thus, contributes a development in cognitive narratological methods by treating cognitive dissonance as a formal narrative principle and linking fictional techniques with psychological and ideological processes. Its study of cognitive dissonance in literature enhances the understanding of complex characters and narrative structures. In providing a systematic framework for analyzing narrative dissonance in literary texts, it also suggests an evaluative method for judging the success and failure of authors' narrative methods in achieving the goals they commit to, through their narrative methods in a kind of author-reader pact.

Event-focused Plot in *Home Fire*

It is difficult to plot the events in a linear order, as there are too many flashbacks and metaleptic jumps. Internal monologues are mostly paraphrased by an omniscient narrator. Chapters 1–2 focalise Isma, staring at her detention at Heathrow Airport when she is travelling to America for her PhD and her meeting with Eamonn Lone at a café in Amherst. Flashbacks dominate the physical events so that Pasha Siblings' troubled lives are revealed as dominated by their Jihadi father's death; Isma's caring for her siblings after their mother's death. Class, state power, diasporic identity, and political inheritance dominate the narrator's paraphrase of characters' thoughts. This sets a paradigm for the novel's narrative techniques. The dialogues and flashbacks help Shamsie establish the distinguishing features of her characters.

The next two chapters focalise Eamonn presenting him as the privileged, but sensitive and discontented son of Karamat Lone who is on his way to become the British Home Secretary. The meeting of Aneeka and Eamonn results in their secret relationship. Parvaiz being in Syria, working with extremists by recording propaganda videos of torture, brings them together but creates a rift between Eamonn and his father. This shifts the focus to Parvaiz who gets the next two chapters (Chapter 5–6). Farooq, Abu Raees, and ISIS serve as the background, but the narrative is dominated by Farooq- Parvaiz relation and Parvaiz's mental and physical alienation from extremist ideology.

Parvaiz's attempts to return to England dictate the relation between Aneeka and Isma, Eamonn and Karamat Lone. Isma reports Parvaiz to authorities while he flees Raqqa, and is shot dead when trying to enter the British Consulate in Istanbul. Media storm causes Karamat to revoke Parvaiz's citizenship, pushing Aneeka into the Antigone-like situation and Eamonn into a tragic clash with his father. Aneeka and Eamonn dying together seems a tragic-romantic resolution of the tensions raised by the political binders.

Conflict-focused Plot in *Home Fire*

Conflicts in *Home Fire* are mostly caused by strained relations subsequent to characters' decisions. The first part dealing with Isma and Parvaiz shows the family fracture due to spatial movement. Parvaiz is already suffering from low self-worth. Isma's decision to move to America leaves him alienated leading to his radicalization by Farooq who exploits his grief and wins him with stories of his father's honor and promises of belonging. Parvaiz's secretive move to Syria causes betrayal of family trust. Isma's reporting Parvaiz to the authorities to protect Aneeka from state's reaction causes pits sister against sister, collapsing the familial bond completely.

Aneeka's relation with Eamonn Lone is politically motivated to bring Parvaiz back to the family bond. Parvaiz's death and Karamat Lone's revocation of his British citizenship leads to the rupture of Eamonn's bond with his father. Eamonn and Aneeka's death in Pakistan wraps up the family plot with Isma left without any relations. Karamat Lone loses his son, but emerges from the crisis as better bonded with his wife and daughter and much better protected from outside threats.

Cause-and-Effect Plot

Both in theory and practice, a plot is a chain of selected events arranged in a chain of causes and effects. Selective focalization, spatial and temporal divides, and metalepsis, foreground events as the narrative deems suitable to establish a point of view. The plot of *Home Fire* relates events to personal psychologies as well as external politics. Isma's detention at Heathrow produces in her a fear of state power leading to a cautiousness dictated by survival ethics. This later justifies her betrayal of Parvaiz to authorities, which in turn causes rupture between the sisters. Parvaiz, already suffering from low esteem and resenting Isma's maternal dominance, yearns for a father figure provided by Farooq. His identity vacuum is filled briefly by Aneeka, but he needs certainty and belonging, provided by Farooq who replaces his sisters. Parvaiz's flight to Syria throws Aneeka into a state of panic and grief leading her to strategies her relation with Eamonn. Parvaiz's disillusionment and attempted return leads Eamonn to view

his father's power as morally challengeable. These chains of events lead to a moral resolution of the tensions with useless deaths and serene continuity of political affairs which had been foregrounded in Isma's detention at Heathrow.

Findings and Discussion

Apart from being a passing, isolated incident, the dissonance starts a sequence of repeated interrogations of legal identity like questions about their father which make their identity suspect. Then, surveillance is triggered by travel route through Turkey which is presumably ideologically suspect. Probing into her views on violence and Britain with the categorization of "Overseas Pakistani" serve to destabilise national belongingness. Far from being isolated incidents, such identity dissonance structures reader's introduction to the narrative and ensure that identity is introduced both as internally fractured and externally imposed. This also introduces the idea that in *Home Fire*, characters are woven into the plot through dissonance and not coherence of personal trait.

The novel uses every character as a site of dissonance. Instead of using one or two conflicted characters, Shamsie distributes dissonance across all the characters. Any attempt to form emotional structures of character arcs leads to affective dissonance. Emotional contradictions are found to be not interim stages, but persist as indicators of emotional incompatibility, leading to no resolution. Isma's caregiving memories mixed with resentment over lost youth relate to her feeling relief at leaving home and also feeling guilty. This is mixed with her missing Parvaiz and also recalling his irresponsibility. Her grief after his death is intertwined with self-blame while her emotional responses are repeatedly interrupted by judgment.

Similarly, Aneeka's love for Parvaiz overrides any recognition of his danger and her romantic intimacy with Eamonn is entangled with her political objective. Her tenderness soon transforms into strategic control till her devotion becomes destructive when her grief transforms into Antigonic defiance. Parvaiz harbors a great desire for belonging and a fear of violence, but his admiration for father unknown to him clashes with his uncertainty about his father's ideology. His initial excitement about ISIS grows into horror of violence so that his loyalty to his recruiter is overcome by his longing for home. His hopes for finding meanings end in regrets. Thus, emotional incompatibility and contradictions structure affective dissonance as a characteristic of the plot.

That dissonance will be the structuring principle of the plot in *Home Fire* is obvious from the introduction of the conflict in Isma's airport interrogation. Not merely a postcolonial encounter, the questions asked force a split between her identities and challenge her belongingness which serves later to intensify the plot

and develop the conflict. This structures her cognitive dissonance as central to the narrative, as conflict between self-definition and imposed identity. Isma's compliance in this scene is indicative of her ethical compromises as a survival strategy. The internal conflict and narrative tension join to establish further events in this chain of events.

The construction and fragmentation of identities as Isma negotiating her British/Muslim identity indicates that dissonance and fractures will define the characters in this narrative. We see that this disrupted identity formation determines the future movements of the plot. Aneeka's defiance rooted in her unresolved dissonance indicates *Home Fire's* presentation of multiplicity of identities. Various competing national, familial, and cultural factors forge characters' identities through defiance and resistance, which the novel refuses to reconcile.

Parvaiz's ideological choice to join ISIS pivots the plot on a decision that produces irreversible narrative rupture setting in motion a different chain of events which later shifts from Isma's perspective to Eamon's. *Home Fire's* focalization of dissonant characters places important events in this chain which focuses on conflicting viewpoints as Eamon's privileged position with Isma's. This distribution of Dissonance regarding privileged and the non-privileged bases its dissonance on a political reality which is then complicated by internal contradictions and unreliable cognition.

The coexistence of love and resentment in Isma's suppressing her thoughts about Parvaiz reveals emotional contradiction and thus fragmented affective cognition. The same is caused by Aneeka's persistent loyalty to Parvaiz and attempts to rationalize his decision. This selective reasoning illustrates a dissonance between her familial devotion and moral judgment.

All this is plotted with temporal disruptions metaleptic retrospection like Isma's memories of caregiving in her sibling's childhood. Here we see the past reframing the present identity. Memory restructures her choices, past sacrifices, and present responsibility.

The trauma of the loss of her parents shapes her narrative identity in such a way that the past becomes a structuring denominator in her present identity. This dissonant identity is revealed to the reader slowly with the revelations about Parvaiz's recruitment forcing upon the reader an interpretive dissonance.

Such narrative gaps with limited disclosure of Parvaiz's motives cause a cognitive tension in readers who are forced to infer and fill the gaps with their own imagination. Similar ambiguity in Eamon's moral stance and his

oscillation between love and political loyalty cause an interpretive gap. The novel ends with deaths without reaching a closure and maintain a dissonance that leaves the reader wondering as to the real takeaway from the novel.

It can be seen in political/moral conflicts that dissonance helps structure the incidence of conflicts. When Aneeka accuses Isma of moral-familial betrayal in impeding Parvaiz's return, Isma's moral-familial conflict takes a new shape forcing readers to resolve Aneeka's cognition of the matter – which as discussed above is already dissonant with Isma's own personal cognition. The political and familial cognizance is most dissonant in the portrayal of Karamat Lone. His political standing, won by discordant identity as "Muslim or ex-Muslim, migrants or antimigrant, present irreconcilable binaries for readers' cognitive resolution. Identity contradictions, therefore, amount to ethical conflicts leading to political vs. paternal identity dissonance embedded in "He would sell out anyone, even his own son" (177).

Karamat Lone has been permitted a perspective. He is more than what media or people make him out to be. In his case, expediency or strategic necessity amounts to tragic because it involves his son. Political opportunism conflicts with what Karamat Lone himself is shown to be in a parallel frame. The father-son conflict is more than just a generational conflict and encompasses an ideological dissonance bordering on moral dissonance requiring the readers to come to terms with the many nuanced layers of characters' cognition vis-à-vis the novel's charting of dissonant cognitions. It is in the safe room, at the end of the novel, when, threatened as Home Secretary, he realizes what his family means to him. The identity fracture the novel foregrounded seems repaired as he changes from a politician to a father. In these passages the narration shifts to foregrounding Karamat Lone's cognitive process, even breaking the narrative into phrases so that it would be pliant to foregrounding his cognition without any dissonance.

Recognition of the dissonance between his roles come to him with the thoughts of his son's death leading to the thoughts of his own: "Who would keep vigil over his dead body, who would hold his hand in his final moments?" (183). Then, the cognition literally 'thunders' when he is protected as Home Secretary and he is concerned about his family. The dissonance is resolved, but a reader wonders why this dissonance did not get resolved for other characters. Lack of similar details for other characters, the gaps in focalization, and unresolved dissonance seem an adaptation of some postmodernist technique.

The political-moral paradigm adapted from Antigone posits one individual's cognition against another's as in Isma's justification of her informing the authorities as her way of protecting the twins and Aneeka's repeated identity merging with Parvaiz which collapses the self/other boundary. These are not

focalized enough to resolve the dissonance caused in readers' cognition of what conclusions these actions lead to.

Parvaiz's motivations have been left ambiguous causing an interpretive gap. His transformation also has not been fully narrated. Though repeated 188 times in the novel, his name is mostly occurs in the third person – as a thought in other people's minds. He is narrated as a cognition and rarely granted a cognition of his own. While this causes cognitive dissonance, it clashes with the principles of storytelling which require not to leave any motives or transitions un-narrated or unexplained. Reader's attempts at a cognitive resolution fail because of narrative gaps/lapses. This clashes with the uncertainties caused by media "truths". The epistemological tensions arising from such gaps or competing perspectives are left unresolved.

Conclusion

In *Home Fire*, cognitive dissonance is not merely represented at the level of character psychology; Shamsie's use of fragmentation, focalization, and discursive multiplicity contribute to the movement of events. The novel thereby exemplifies how fiction transforms dissonance into a structuring principle. Shifting focalization, spatial distances, fragmented temporality, and unresolved narrative tensions at the level of character psychology help her use dissonance as the driver of her plot. Thus, the novel exemplifies how fiction can transform psychological conflict into a structuring principle of narrative form and identity construction.

Identity, fragmented and unstable, acts as an ongoing cognitive effort at negotiating one's moral stance with the emergent needs contingent upon it. Dissonance generates plot movement by driving characters to take actions which result in conflicts, crisis, and tragedy. Irreconcilable conflicts of family, state, love, and ideology distribute and sustain contradiction while focalization distributes dissonance across competing perspectives of the five major characters. Readers are forced into filling the narrative gaps to resolve their own tensions. Shamsie's storytelling keeps a hold on characters' cognitive dissonance and does not allow characters to emerge as independent developing selves. The readers are thus forced to fill the gaps with their own cognitive activities. The plot, as it is, is driven by these dissonant cognitions, coming to a pragmatically realistic closure.

The results of this study and these conclusions can be used to study others of Shamsie's novels, particularly where cognitive dissonance results in a plot whose Diasporic parts have been found to be dissatisfying. The takeaway from this research is that application of cognitive dissonance principles employed here can

Diasporic Dissonance: Cognitive Dissonance as a Structuring Principle in Kamila Shamsie's
Home Fire

be used to study how plots are structured using cognitive dissonance and how not putting enough emphasis on it can cause the plots to falter.

Works Cited

- Cancino-Montecinos, Sebastián, Fredrik Björklund, and Torgny Lindholm. "A General Model of Dissonance Reduction: Unifying Past Accounts via an Emotion Regulation Perspective." *Frontiers in Psychology*, vol. 11, 2020, article 540081, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.540081>.
- Caracciolo, Marco. "Patterns of Cognitive Dissonance in Readers' Engagement with Characters." *Enthymema*, no. 10, 2013, <https://doi.org/10.13130/2037-2426/2903>.
- Cave, Terence. *Thinking with Literature: Towards a Cognitive Criticism*. Oxford University Press. 2016.
- _____. "Capturing Cognitive Dissonance." *Live Artefacts: Literature in a Cognitive Environment*, Oxford UP. 2022. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780192858122.003.0008>. Accessed 22 Apr. 2026.
- Festinger, Leon. *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*. Stanford UP, 1957.
- Freeman, Margaret H. "Minding: Feeling, Form, and Meaning in the Creation of Poetic Iconicity." *Cognitive Poetics: Goals, Gains and Gaps*, edited by Geert Brône and Jeroen Vandaele, De Gruyter Mouton, 2009, pp. 169–196.
- Gerrig, Richard J. "Readers' Experiences of Narrative Gaps." *Storyworlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies*, vol. 2, 2010, pp. 19–37.
- JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5250/storyworlds.2.1.19>. Accessed 28 June 2026.
- Harmon-Jones, Eddie, editor. *Cognitive Dissonance: Reexamining a Pivotal Theory in Psychology*. 2nd ed., American Psychological Association, 2019. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv1chs6tk>.
- Harmon-Jones, Eddie, and Judson Mills. *An Introduction to Cognitive Dissonance Theory and an Overview of Current Perspectives on the Theory*. American Psychological Association, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0000135-001>.
- Herman, David. "Cognitive Approaches to Narrative Analysis." *Cognitive Poetics: Goals, Gains and Gaps*, edited by Geert Brône and Jeroen

Vandaele, De Gruyter Mouton, 2009, pp. 79–124,
<https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110213379.1.79>.

_____. “Cognitive Narratology.” *The Living Handbook of Narratology*, edited by Peter Hühn et al., Hamburg University, 2013, <http://www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de/article/cognitive-narratology-revised-version-uploaded-22-september-2013>.

_____. “Narrative Theory and the Cognitive Sciences.” *Narrative Inquiry*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2003, pp. 1–34,
<https://doi.org/10.1075/ni.11.1.01her>.

Jahn, Manfred. “Frames, Preferences, and the Reading of Third-Person Narratives: Towards a Cognitive Narratology.” *Poetics Today*, vol. 18, no. 4, 1997, pp. 441–468.

Kulter, Demirgunes, and Mutlu Avcılar. “The Effect of Cognitive Dissonance on External Information Search and Consumer Complaint Responses.” *International Journal of Business Administration*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2017, pp. 57–?
<https://doi.org/10.5430/ijba.v8n2p57>.

McAdams, Dan P. “The Psychology of Life Stories.” *Review of General Psychology*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2001, pp. 100–122.

McAdams, Dan P., and Kate C. McLean. “Narrative Identity.” *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, vol. 22, no. 3, 2013, pp. 233–238, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721413475622>.

Müller-Wood, Anja. “Cognitive Literary Studies: On Persistent Problems and Plausible Solutions.” *Journal of Literary Theory*, vol. 11, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1515/jlt-2017-0021>.

Park, Sowon. “The Dilemma of Cognitive Literary Studies.” *English Studies: The State of the Discipline, Past, Present, and Future*, edited by Knights et al., Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

Ryan, Marie-Laure. “Narratology and Cognitive Science: A Problematic Relation.” *Style*, vol. 44, no. 4, 2010, pp. 469–495,
<https://doi.org/10.5325/style.44.4.0469>.

Semino, Elena. “Text Worlds.” *Cognitive Poetics: Goals, Gains and Gaps*, edited by Geert Brône and Jeroen Vandaele, De Gruyter Mouton, 2009, pp. 33–78.

Shamsie, Kamila. *Home Fire*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2017.

Teske, Joanna Klara, and Jan Jankowski. "Dissonant and Consonant Narrators: Dorrit Cohn's Concepts, Narratorial Stance Theory and Cognitive Literary Studies." *Brno Studies in English*, vol. 48, no. 2, 2022.