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Editorial Office:

Muslim English Literature, English Literature Department,
Faculty of Adab and Humanities, Syarif Hidayatullah State
Islamic University of Jakarta. Jl. Tarumanegara, Pisangan,
Ciputat, Tangerang Selatan, Banten 15419.

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Contesting Western Dominant Narratives of Terrorism in Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk About Kevin* and Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire*

¹Nada Syifa Fitriani, ¹Hasnul Insani Djohar*, ²Nada Tayem.

¹Universitas Islam Negeri Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta, ²Indiana University of Pennsylvania,

Email: nadasyifa2611@gmail.com; hdjohar@uinjkt.ac.id; vtnw@iup.edu

*Corresponding Author: Hasnul Insani Djohar

Abstract

This research examines how Shriver's *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (2003) and Shamsie's *Home Fire* expose Western double standards in representations of terrorism and reveal how anti-Muslim bias constructs Muslims as inherently associated with terrorism. The motivation for the study is the continued link of Muslims with terrorism as opposed to sharply contrasting portrayals of non-Muslim perpetrators of comparable atrocities. It explores how these novels deconstruct the supposed neutrality of the War on Terror rhetoric by revealing the ideological assumptions and double standards that inform portrayals of terrorism. The current study applies Edward Said's theory of Orientalism to scrutinize the Western biases in the depiction of terrorism in both novels. It also uses Critical Terrorism Studies to examine how the concept of terrorism is formed through hegemonic Western discourses. This study used a qualitative approach to conduct a close textual analysis of the tales of Parvaiz and Kevin, exploring how their differing representations reveal underlying ideological prejudices. The findings suggest that Western representations of terrorism disproportionately link Muslim identities to terrorism and that white perpetrators are more likely to be explained in terms of individual or psychological factors rather than being labeled as terrorists, even when their actions meet widely accepted definitions of terrorism. These differing portrayals show that the vocabulary of the War on Terror is ideologically informed, rather than consistently applied across cases. Ultimately, the two books question the assumption that this discourse is neutral or objective by showing the racialized and unequal frameworks through which terrorism is represented.

Keywords: *Counter Narratives of Terrorism, Islamophobia and Anti-Muslim Racism, Muslim-British-Pakistani Literature, Representations of Violence and Terrorism, Western Media and White Supremacy, Western Dominant Narratives of Terrorism*

Introduction

In terms of representation and discourse, representations and scholarly critiques on terrorism began to take shape and grow significantly in the world. According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (n.d.), terrorism refers to violent and criminal acts committed by individuals and/or groups who are inspired by, or associated with, designated foreign terrorist organizations or state sponsors of terrorism. This means



that any organized criminal or violent act, whether carried out by an individual or a group, can be categorized as terrorism. However, in global discourse, terrorism is often associated with Islam. Terrorism came to the forefront of worldwide political and cultural discussion with the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York on September 11, 2001. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (n.d.) defines terrorism as the use of violent criminal activity by a person or group of people motivated by religious, political, social, or ideological goals. Although this definition does not limit terrorism to any particular religion or ethnicity, portrayals of terrorism in the public and media discourses of many Western societies have often associated the phenomenon with Islam and Muslim identity.

This association has been maintained, in part, through political discourse and the news media, as well as through artistic production, including literature. This has led scholars to identify a double standard in the representation of terrorism, with Muslim perpetrators more easily being labeled as terrorists, while similar violence by non-Muslim perpetrators, especially white perpetrators, is often explained through individual, psychological, or exceptional explanations, rather than being labeled as terrorism. Research indicates that these biased portrayals mirror broader power dynamics that shape public views on discrimination, identity, and security (West et al., 2022). These modes of depiction have led to the broad-based stigmatization of Muslims and have challenged the assumed neutrality of the language of terrorism. Even the field of Terrorism Studies has struggled to find its own neutrality. Gentry (2020) argues that the definition of terrorism is molded by political agendas and power structures. The War on Terror significantly shapes how we currently view terrorism, impacting its portrayal in policy and language, and this framework dominates most discussions.

Western dominant political, media, and literary discourses have often represented terrorism in selective and racialized ways." That formulation is historically defensible, aligns with scholarship in Orientalism and Critical Terrorism Studies. George W. Bush announced this to track and stop terrorists around the world (*Global War on Terror* / *George W. Bush Library*, n.d.). The Bush administration institutionalized the "Global War on Terror" in the wake of the September 11 attacks, a political and military framework that would dramatically impact public and political discourse on terrorism. Bush initially emphasized that this war was not for Islam or Muslims, but to fight terrorists who use religion (Bhaskara, 2018). However, in reality, this opened up a new view of Islam whose identity was used by a group of terrorists. In fact, it was not just about the 9/11 attacks, but about the conflict of America's invasion of Iraq. This tension is related to the weapons of mass destruction (WMD) that Iraq was suspected of owning by the US after the 1991 Gulf War (Iswara, 2022). Iraq was justified partly through claims about WMDs, which later proved unfounded; scholars argue that the Iraq invasion further reinforced the rhetoric of the War on Terror.



In literature, the issue of terrorism has been raised in many novels written after the 9/11 attacks. One novel that raises this issue is *Home Fire* by Kamila Shamsie. The novel tells the story of the Pasha family, a Muslim diaspora family in the UK who experience identity conflict, discrimination, and exposure to extremism caused by one of its members, Adil Pasha, who joins an extremist group, ISIS, which is known as a terrorist group due to its Islamic identity (Shamsie, 2018). This novel explores the Muslim diaspora by delving deeper into the lives of the Pasha family, focusing on each member's story while giving readers insight into the characters' deepest sides. The readers also found a novel after the 9/11 attacks that is closely related to acts of violence and killing innocent people, as the way terrorists act, particularly the novel *We Need to Talk About Kevin* by Lionel Shriver. Unlike *Home Fire*, this novel tells the story of a minor named Kevin who shot up a school and killed 10 people due to his psychological condition, which is told through the perspective of his mother, Eva (Shriver, 2006). However, the readers suggest similarities in both novels regarding teenagers' conflicts with radicalism, extremism, and violence, which are closely related to terrorism. As readers, we argue that both novels represent teenagers involved in criminal actions and killing innocent people. However, Parvaiz in *Home Fire* is mainly represented as a terrorist just because his father is a Muslim and dying in Guantanamo, while Kevin, a white teenager, in *We Need to Talk about Kevin* is represented as having familial and psychological conflicts instead of being a terrorist, regardless of the fact that he is involved with killing innocent people, as a terrorist would.

This study uses Orientalism theory by Edward Said to evaluate the different representations of violence committed by white and Muslim characters in *Home Fire* and *We Need to Talk about Kevin*. Edward Said's Orientalism explains how the West constructs and represents the East as inferior, irrational, and threatening in order to maintain cultural and political dominance. This paper argues that terrorism is not an objective or neutral concept but rather a socially and politically constructed label often shaped by power relations, media representations, and state interests. This study examines bias in the representations of Parvaiz and Kevin in novels that show how they are viewed differently. This bias can be revealed as a critique of dominant discourses or representational practice. Thus, these novels invite comparison with acts that often are labeled terrorism. We label Kevin as part of a terrorist action because he conducted mass shootings and killed his innocent friends at school, leading to fear, just as fear is caused by terrorists. However, the Western media represented Kevin as a mass shooter instead of a terrorist, just because Kevin is a white boy. Unlike Kevin, the Western media labeled Parvaiz as a terrorist just because his father is dying in Guantanamo. Thus, to question this Western media, this paper investigates the different representations of violence committed by white and Muslim characters in these two novels to understand the long history of Western misrepresentation toward non-Westerners, including Muslim young generations living in the USA and the UK, as these two novels are set.



Discussions about these two novels have already existed in previous studies. Topics range from psychology and alienation to the role of family. However, there is limited scholarship that reads these novels together, *Home Fire* and *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, and compares them uniquely to uncover the terrorism myth of dominant cultural narratives and the racialized narrative of terrorism. In *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, Kevin is portrayed as grappling with psychological development, including stress during pregnancy, parenting style, and environmental influences (Erica & Hendrawan, 2024). Sissaoui and Oucif (2024) also discussed Kevin's misbehavior, suggesting that the mother-child relationship is instrumental to Kevin's involvement in criminal activity and that crime can stem from a child's failed personality development due to their parenting style. There is not as much research on this novel as *Home Fire*. Research on Kevin's story examines parenting styles, while *Home Fire* focuses on the Muslim diaspora experience. Muslim diasporas as subalterns remain unheard, soundless, and voiceless, which always receive unequal treatment from dominant groups, in this case, the British government, so they speak out in indirect ways, such as in literary works, to share their experiences in the global arena (Rind et al., 2022). Moreover, through these experiences of injustice and structural inequality, the manipulators of extremist ideologies exploit this opportunity to target communities by inserting narratives that lead to acts of terrorism (Raza & Mansoor, 2025). Furthermore, according to Isam Shahida (2015), as stated in Khan (2025), it explains that all the mistreatment felt by Muslims has influenced American non-Muslim society to associate Islam with terrorist groups, as seen in the novel *Home Fire*. There is also a quite interesting study, namely Parvaiz, who achieved identity achievement after going through an identity crisis from his experience as a Jihadi member in Raqqa (Wahyudi, 2022). Previous research indicates that Kevin's actions are the representations of commonly explained by family-related factors, while Parvaiz Pasha's actions are often represented in relation to his Muslim identity, even though both characters are involved in processes of killing, violence, and radicalization. However, people's perceptions of the problem differ. Collins (2021), in his article, also discusses the potential of new-wave terrorism, where, in fact, Western groups like the far-right also fall into the terrorism classification. This shows that the West also has extremist groups, but they are never represented as terrorism.

Based on these research studies, there has been no discussion about the discursive construction of terrorism as a Western discourse that must be countered with counter-narratives, which is explored by examining two novels on the issue of radicalization. This study aims to demonstrate that it has been shown in scholarship that terrorism tends to be associated with Islam and marginalized communities. To contest these dominant narratives, this paper examines *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, focusing on Kevin, and *Home Fire*, focusing on Parvaiz. This research explores how there is a bias in the representations of radical and violent actions committed by white and Muslim teenagers. This is because Kevin is a white boy representing himself as having



psychological problems with his family, instead of a terrorist attached to Parvaiz, who is a Pakistani British Muslim; regardless of the fact that both of them conduct violence and murder. This research examines how *We Need to Talk About Kevin* and *Home Fire* represent the bias in labeling terrorism by using Orientalism and Critical Terrorism Studies as theories of analysis, and can reveal the bias as evidence that terrorism is a mythical construction of the West. This research is important to counter the discourse and narratives that perpetuate against Muslims and marginalized groups that are still widespread today, which need the conceptual precision of CTS. CTS problems, among others, are: definitions are contested, and it is not fixed categories attached to Muslims, but rather to anyone who leads to fear and terror in a community, regardless of their skin color and gender. This paper is significant to contest Western dominant narratives in representing Islam, attached to the ideas of violence and terrorism instead of peace and justice, as Islam means peace and justice in Arabic. However, the Western media has a long history of misrepresenting Islam with negative terms to maintain white supremacy rooted in anti-Muslim racism. By comparing these two violent novels, this paper urges mainstream media to listen to the longing of two young American and British teenagers for peace and justice, regardless of their different skin color, gender, and family backgrounds.

Method

In analyzing research issues, the researchers use a qualitative method to analyze the two novels. The qualitative research method is one in which the researchers are the research instrument. This method focuses on examining social and human problems. The researchers used the novels *Home Fire* and *We Need to Talk About Kevin* as the main data sources, which contain narratives and dialogues about problems that align with the issues studied in this research.

The data in this research were collected through a documentation technique. The documentation method greatly assists researchers in qualitative research. According to Nilamsari (2014), data collection needs to be supported by documentation, including textual documents: novels, articles, and archives that are useful for verifying and investigating the corpus. This method is suitable for storing important parts of the novel's narrative for analysis. The data was gathered from the novels *Home Fire* by Kamila Shamsie and *We Need to Talk About Kevin* by Lionel Shriver as the primary sources of this research. The researchers also used several books, journal articles, and theses from the internet as secondary sources relevant to this issue. The researchers employed techniques and steps in collecting and analyzing the data. First, the researchers conducted a close reading by carefully reading both novels and noting important sections in them. In the novel *Home Fire*, the researchers noted narratives or dialogues focusing on Parvaiz's psychological condition due to alienation, Parvaiz's decisions leading to extremist groups, and the possibility of bias towards terrorism labels through societal, media, and state responses. In the novel *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, the researchers



noted sections focusing on Kevin's family relationships or parenting patterns, his psychological condition, his violent actions, and people's responses to his case. Second, subsequently, the researchers performed data categorization by selecting and classifying the noted data into a more concise form and eliminating data that did not meet the criteria from both the Parvaiz and Kevin novels.

After the data was collected and classified, the researchers analyzed it using textual analysis techniques. First, the researchers analyzed the terrorism bias found and classified it into two foci, namely representations depicting the character Parvaiz and the character Kevin, and the factors that led them to commit violent acts, which used Orientalism theory as an analytical lens to examine how the representation of violence conducted by white and muslim teenagers is different and problematic. This misrepresentation can be used as a critique of Western dominant narratives in defining terrorism, which are mainly attached to Islam instead of Christianity, which is the dominant religion in the USA and the UK, to maintain white supremacy rooted in Islamophobia or anti-Muslim racism.

Results and Discussions

This research demonstrates double standards or bias toward the stereotypes of “terrorists” and “terrorism” against Muslims by the Western media, as reflected in the novels *Home Fire* by Kamila Shamsie and *We Need to Talk About Kevin* by Lionel Shriver. This bias challenges the discourse of the War on Terror and the very definition of terrorism, which was created to eradicate terrorists and is supposedly neutral. These findings show that the representation of Muslims in literary works and the Western discourse has created a negative view of Muslims that is not neutral towards the actions of Muslims and non-Muslims, and how these stereotypes are still deeply rooted today, influencing the world's view of Muslims.

Home Fire shows that Parvaiz is often portrayed as part of an extremist group, but he is actually searching for meaning in his life and undergoing maturation. His internal struggles are exploited by recruiters to draw him further in. Although he does not directly participate in violence, he is portrayed as a kind-hearted individual, but still rejected by both society and the state due to his Muslim identity and his perceived association with terrorism. There is no acceptance or sympathy for Parvaiz and his family. This novel gives Muslims a voice and shows the reality of life as a Muslim diaspora. In contrast, *We Need to Talk About Kevin* depicts the complexity of the relationship between a mother and her cold-hearted son. Through Kevin's actions and other stories, this novel shows how the lives of teenagers in America in the 1990s showed signs of actual terrorism. However, Kevin is never represented as a terrorist, regardless of the fact that he has killed many innocent citizens. Indeed, white people are less frequently framed as terrorists, but are often interpreted through psychological rather than political frames, as Parvaiz suffers from political frameworks of Islam just because his father is a Muslim and is dying in Guantanamo.

Bias in the Labeling of Terrorism in Novels

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1. Bias Toward Parvaiz as a Presumed Terrorist

In *Home Fire*, Parvaiz is struggling to make a choice between fleeing to Syria in search of his father or staying in London, struggling to fix his identity, and being attached to the idea of terrorism. Shamsi keeps moral ambiguity central to question the Western dominant narratives in defining Parvaiz as a terrorist. Parvaiz's problem is marked by his search for meaning in life and his desire to be more independent and mature, like his two sisters, who have taken steps in their lives. In the novel, Parvaiz shows his rejection of his older sister's decision to sell the house,

'You can't just decide this for us,' Parvaiz said to Isma.

'Traitor,' he said, pushing away from the counter. (Shamsie, 2018, p. 120)

Here, Parvaiz shows his dislike of decisions made without seeking his opinion. This makes him feel immature and as if he's still under his sister's command. In fact, according to research, having extremist family members and family conflict are associated with more radicalization (Zych & Nasaescu, 2022). Through conflict and pain, he began to search for meaning and direction in his life, which unconsciously led him to a radical extremist group.

The struggle that Parvaiz felt was then exploited by recruiters from extremist groups, who fed him narratives that caught his attention. A recruiter named Farooq exploited Parvaiz's internal conflicts, his father's story, and the reality of Muslim life in England to draw Parvaiz into their ideology. This shows that Parvaiz was drawn in by external forces, not directly by his own will. In the novel, the recruiter gave Parvaiz the great hope that Muslims dream of,

'Not so long ago. When it understood that a welfare state was something you built up instead of tearing down, when it saw migrants as people to be welcomed, not turned away. Imagine what it would be like to live in such a nation. No, don't just smile. I'm asking you to do something: imagine it.' (Shamsie, 2018, p. 144).

It is clear from this narrative that this hope arises because, in reality, Muslims are treated oppositely. The search for meaning is activated through loss, threat, or opportunity to gain meaning, which is often framed as maintaining group values (Kruglanski et al., 2019). As Edward Said explained, Muslims, Easterners, and other marginalized groups are considered the Other by the West, which leads to discrimination, rejection, voicelessness, and negative perceptions (Said, 1977). This is one example of the double standards they have created.

Parvaiz's recruitment process is still ongoing. The novel *Home Fire* shows that Parvaiz could have joined the extremist group solely because of external influences, not his own. Regardless of his decision, all the narratives and invitations came from the recruiter. Therefore, he should have the opportunity to be accepted back and have his story heard. Moreover, Islam does not teach violence as practiced by extremist groups. Islam has long been stereotyped as a religion that wages jihad in the form of acts of terrorism. That is a



mistake. Djohar & Oktaviano (2024) state that the true definition of jihad in Islam is spending wealth and time to worship Allah, because it is the main goal of Muslims living in the world to prepare themselves for life in the hereafter. The novel describes how the recruiter filled the void in Parvaiz's life,

But the man didn't seem to think any less of him for it. Instead he drew Parvaiz close in a cologne-scented embrace, and said, 'I'm glad I've found you brother.' (Shamsie, 2018, p. 125)

This became the recruiter's approach to Parvaiz. Indeed, extremist groups often exploit young people for radicalization by influencing them through family narratives that emphasize honor, sacrifice, and the continuation of the struggle (Abdi, 2021). In addition, the recruiter also touched on the story of Parvaiz's father, who had been imprisoned before he died. Parvaiz was made to feel his father's pain, "*They did this to your father for months,*" Farooq said. (Shamsie, 2018, p. 138). It is clear how the novel shows that Parvaiz was drawn from outside to join the extremist group to find meaning in life and learn about his father, not with the intention of becoming a terrorist and hurting others.

The double standard faced by Muslims becomes evident when Parvaiz realizes that he wants to return home, yet he is denied the opportunity to do so. The novel also explains that Parvaiz was aware of this: "He was conscious of the three men on the balcony watching him, waiting to see his response to the news that the police knew where he was, *and now there was no going back.*" (Shamsie, 2018, p. 163). He knew there was no way to return to England. More clearly, the novel describes how difficult Parvaiz's position was at that time: "*But he was the terrorist son of a terrorist father. He rested his head on his knees. He didn't know how to break out of these currents of history, how to shake free of the demons he had attached to his own heels.*" (Shamsie, 2018, p. 171). Being the child of a terrorist has already made it impossible for him to move, and his current position has made his life even worse. Parvaiz has already been registered in the country as a terrorist who joined ISIS, and the UK has not provided any protection for Parvaiz, even though he grew up and lives in England.

His identity as a terrorist made it difficult for him to even be accepted. The British media and public rejected his return, showing no sympathy or willingness to accept him back into his home country. This is recounted in the novel after Parvaiz is found shot dead in his car,

The Turkish government confirmed this morning that the man killed in a drive-by shooting outside the British Consulate in Istanbul yesterday was Wembley-born Pervys Pasha, the latest name in the string of Muslims from Britain who have joined ISIS. Intelligence officials were aware that Pasha crossed into Syria last December, but as yet have no information about why he was approaching the British Consulate. A terror attack has not been ruled out. The man in the white SUV who shot Pasha has not been identified, but security analysts suggest he could have belonged to a rival jihadi group.

- His body will be repatriated to his home nation, Pakistan.
- No. We will not let those who turn against the soil of Britain in their lifetime sully that very soil in death. (Shamsie, 2018, p. 188)



The community refused to allow his body to be returned to England. There was no justice for Parvaiz, a Muslim teenager who was still searching for meaning in life and was manipulated by ISIS, receiving no sympathy whatsoever from the country and community where he grew up. Indeed, The Framing of Muslims reveals how political influence shapes media narratives that reduce Muslims to stereotypes of violence and terrorism (Djohar & Oktaviano, 2024). It is clear how Muslims are treated as the Other, as terrorists ingrained in their identity.

2. The Absence of the 'Terrorist' Label for Kevin

In the novel *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, Kevin's story focuses heavily on his relationship with his family, especially his mother. Kevin and his mother have a cold and awkward relationship. Previous studies have often emphasized Kevin's relationship with his mother, which the novel also portrays as a major factor contributing to his criminal actions. The novel describes Kevin's attitude towards his mother, *"And in those first few visits he seemed to regard my very presence as an accusation, so before I said a single word he'd get angry. It didn't seem sensible that he should be the one mad at me."* (Shriver, 2006, p. 40). From this quote, there are signs that Kevin has an unfriendly and quite short-tempered character and is uncomfortable socializing. In fact, he has often behaved badly at home since childhood, *"In my home," I said. "That is six acres out of a planet. And even there, I was unprotected from Kevin's coarsening influence on me."* (Shriver, 2006, p. 144). From here, it became apparent that Kevin had the potential to hurt others.

From these signs, the novel also shows that Kevin's psychology is different from that of ordinary people. He has strange traits and attitudes that even his mother and others are afraid of. One of them is mentioned in the novel, *"Kevin hadn't simply played with that cake. He had tripped its heart out."* (Shriver, 2006, p. 117). Kevin's actions are a warning of other strange and violent acts. However, in this novel, there is not the slightest suspicion about Kevin's growth and development. It is considered normal, and of course, always forgiven without any negative assumptions about him. Kevin also has abilities that few children his age possess. He can control all his desires at an early age, *"I don't imagine he was such a precocious boy-such a monster-that he had conquered his every earthly appetite by the age of four and a half."* (Shriver, 2006, p. 151). This is very unusual. Kevin has always been described as a child who knows what he wants and when to do it. He learns quickly on his own. Behind all that, Kevin has the potential to engage in undesirable behavior if he is without supervision.

This potential did indeed materialize and became proof of Kevin's strangeness since childhood. Kevin carried out a shooting with arrows at his own school, killing more than ten people with a well-thought-out strategy and without remorse. *"On April 8th, 1999, I jumped into the screen, I switched to watchee"* (Shriver, 2006, p. 356). This is the day Kevin carried out his actions. The novel even clearly describes how Kevin shot one of his victims, *"Just as there is a tiny pause between lightning and thunderclap, there was a single, dense instant of silence between the arrow's shsh-thunk through Laura*



Woolford's Versace blouse and the point at which the other students began to scream." (Shriver, 2006, p. 375). The novel also describes the chronology of events, in which Kevin locked all the doors in the sports hall, hid, and then shot everyone in the building. Mass shootings like this are indicative of terrorism. But in America, perpetrators are not labeled as terrorists if they are white, especially if they are teenagers. That is why this story focuses more on the characters' relationships and psychology. Basically, the War on Terror discourse has double standards that are not applied to every perpetrator of acts indicative of terrorism.

White perpetrators are free from the label of terrorist in the eyes of society because it suits the West. This is a clear bias between Muslim perpetrators and white perpetrators. In the novel, Kevin is never referred to as a terrorist, a terrorist's child, or implicated in acts of terrorism, even though he had plans and intentions to do so. In the novel, as a white shooter, Kevin is referred to by a different nickname. First, Kevin is referred to as a mass murderer: "Alas, there doesn't appear to be a recorded etiquette for afternoon tea with your former daughter-in-law after your grandson has committed mass murder" (Shriver, 2006, p. 138). Second, he is called a killer, "*(I'm sorry, but what else can I boast about now? I'm getting old, and I look it. I work for a travel agency, and my son is a killer.)*" (Shriver, 2006, p. 154). Third, the media also has its own nickname or term for the shooter, "*Curiously, on the news Monday night, some of his fellow students characterized the shooter, as usual, as "picked on," persecuted as a "freak, a dork, and a loser."*" (Shriver, 2006, p. 284). In fact, when Kevin's story was made into a documentary, the title did not indicate terrorism at all, but rather the title of a typical juvenile crime case, "*Marlin had ditched the dry thriller title "Extracurricular Activities" for the punchier "Bad Boy,"...*" (Shriver, 2006, p. 351). It is clear that the West has covered up its own cases from the labels it has created. They have avoided applying labels that should have been attached to cases such as Kevin's, but they did not. Kevin, who clearly acted violently, did not receive that label. This is a clear bias between the stories of Kevin and Parvaiz, where Kevin was free from assumptions and terrorist labels throughout his life. This double standard is supported by society, the state, and the media, as they all absorb the same Western discourse, which is pro-white only.

In *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, in addition to avoiding labeling and using other terms, the novel also notes that the day of the incident is *Thursday*. This term appears repeatedly in the novel whenever it discusses the chronology of the day Kevin carried out the school shooting. The term *Thursday* is clearly mentioned in the novel,

For years I wrote off my mother as having no grasp of my life, but after *Thursday* I came to terms with the fact that I'd made no effort to understand hers. (Shriver, 2006, p. 110)
And since *Thursday*? He took away my easy answer, my cheating, slipshod shorthand for what life is for. (Shriver, 2006, p. 257)

Rather than referring to the case explicitly, Kevin's story is referenced as "Thursday," which is very subtle and non-confrontational. This would certainly be different if a Muslim were in Kevin's position. This double standard occurs because Muslims, Arabs,



or marginalized groups are always discriminated against, considered outside of their culture and beliefs, and stigmatized as if they were bad and backward (Said, 1977).

Furthermore, the bias in this case is evident in Kevin's mother's discussion of sympathy. In the novel, it is shown that, “*You bent over backward to be understanding about killers like Luke Woodham in Pearl and little Mitchell and Andrew in Jonesboro. So why had you no sympathy to spare for Vicki Pagorski?*” (Shriver, 2006, p. 329). Even perpetrators of murder may still receive sympathy from others. Kevin, a 15-year-old white American teenager, is a clear example, as his actions are often interpreted through the lens of family dysfunction and psychological problems, leading many to view him as a troubled youth rather than simply a criminal. There is no neutrality in what the West discusses. They are biased in labeling Muslims and non-Muslim white people as terrorists. From a legal standpoint, the West still treats cases of teenage rebellion more leniently,

“New York is pretty lenient with juveniles under sixteen,” I said. “But even in this state, kids have to do a five-year minimum for murder-especially when it’s seven high school students and an English teacher.” I added as her face rearranged, “Oh, and a cafeteria worker. Maybe Kevin has stronger feelings about food than I thought.” (Shriver, 2006, p. 163)

Unlike Parvaiz's case, Kevin did not face significant rejection. In fact, the teenage shooters did not feel ashamed and instead felt like stars. With Kevin's case claiming many lives through baseless shootings, he was free from the label of a terrorist. The contrast between Kevin's and Parvaiz's stories serves as clear evidence of the double standards prevalent in Western countries toward Muslims and marginalized identities, whether in society, the media, or the state.

Exposing the Selective Construction of ‘Terrorism’ through Counter-Narratives

1. Parvaiz as a Counter-Narrative to Western Dominant of Terrorism

Parvaiz's story counters the West's stereotype of terrorism projected onto the world. Through the narrative of the novel *Home Fire* itself, the Western construction clearly reflects that Muslims are the main target in its discourse of oppression. Jackson himself has explained in his theory that Muslims are the main target of the West, and all stereotypes are Western constructions that are far from neutral (Jackson, 2016). *Home Fire*, in its narrative, shows the true side of Muslim teenagers, not from the perspective of their Muslim beliefs or identity, but through their commendable actions and proof that not all Muslims are terrorists, in this context, Parvaiz. His search for meaning in life, his sense of compassion and good conscience, and his regret over the decisions he made are proof that the Western perspective is wrong, and that what the West defines is nothing more than a myth for those who are Muslim and marginalized.

The first narrative that counters Western dominant discourse on terrorism is Parvaiz's search for meaning in life. Parvaiz was recruited into ISIS not solely because he wanted to become a terrorist and kill many people, but because he wanted to find out about his father's story and mature as a man. The novel also mentions that when Parvaiz



wanted to talk about his father, Adil Pasha, his sister would change the subject so that he would not find out anything. It goes on to explain that if their neighbors knew who the Pasha family was, they would be treated badly,

He'd grown up knowing that his father was a shameful secret, one that must be kept from the world outside or else posters would appear around Preston Road with the line DO YOU KNOW WHO YOUR NEIGHBOURS ARE? and rocks would be thrown through windows and he and his sisters wouldn't receive invitations to the homes of their classmates and no girl would ever say yes to him. The secrecy had lived inside the house, too. (Shamsie, 2018, p. 126)

It appears that Parvaiz simply wanted to know the secrets of his life that had always been hidden from him. However, he never got to know them because discussing his father would worsen his family's living conditions. So, Parvaiz himself did not even have the freedom to be himself because of his father's history. The neutrality of the discourse on terrorism needs to be questioned. Even before Parvaiz joined the extremists, he already felt rejected. This construct already existed even when Muslims did nothing wrong. Islam is often associated with violence, terrorism, and a lack of democracy (Djohar et al., 2024). This is what led him to seek meaning in his life through the attractive invitation from ISIS recruiters. Parvaiz himself loved his sister even though he decided to join the extremist group: *"There was no living person for whom he'd leave her just weeks before she had to say goodbye to the elder sister who had raised her—raised them both—as much as their mother ever had. But the dead made their own demands, impossible to refuse."* (Shamsie, 2018, p. 152). This shows that Parvaiz has compassion, not that he lacks conscience for others. This is in stark contrast to true terrorists.

To achieve his goal of finding meaning in life and learning about his father's story, Parvaiz had to make many sacrifices. First, when he arrived in Raqqa, his name was changed to Mohammad bin Bagram: *"The name he meant was Parvaiz's nom de guerre—Mohammad bin Bagram."* (Shamsie, 2018, p. 158). In addition, Parvaiz also had to hand over his passport to the extremists for safekeeping. The novel suggests that they would return it, but that would never happen.

'Relax,' Farooq said. 'If you ever need it back I'll get it for you. But you won't need it back. You're now a citizen of al-Dawla—The State.' (Shamsie, 2018, p. 158)

From this quote, the researchers see Parvaiz's innocent side. Those who are terrorists and commit acts of terrorism are people who have evil plans and cunning minds, and this is very different from Parvaiz. But still, his identity has changed since he decided to enter Raqqa. There is no way out. Critical Terrorism Studies theory also shows that Muslims are indeed the main target, but this identity will stick because it is directly constructed by the powerful West (Jackson, 2016). In fact, Parvaiz still keeps in touch with his family and cares about him, helping him whenever they can.

HAVE PASSPORT AND TICKET. FLIGHT IN THREE HOURS. RUSHING TO AIRPORT



Turn off your CAPS LOCK, Shouty
DON'T THINK YOU CAN START BOSSING ME AROUND, IDIOT
Love you too
Until soon, Senti
Until soon, Mental (Shamsie, 2018, p. 165)

Home Fire shows a side of Muslim family life that has never been seen by Western eyes. From this, it can be seen that Parvaiz seeks meaning in his life by willingly giving up everything for himself and staying with his family. It also shows that his extremist influences come from outside and do not destroy his internal family relationships. He is merely a victim of the dominant power of extremists who use the name of Islam.

Parvaiz is the counterpoint in this novel. His actions demonstrate a sense of humanity and a very good teenage boy. This is not possessed by terrorists who can brutally kill people. He carried out various campaigns to save the library, rallied public support, participated in strategy meetings, and then switched to establishing and managing a volunteer library by raising funds, transporting books, and regularly volunteering (Shamsie, 2018, p. 142). Through this narrative evidence, it was found that society and the state treated Parvaiz extremely unfairly. People should not even be given a place after the good deeds they have done. Therefore, there is no neutrality in the stereotype of 'terrorist' because Parvaiz himself did not get a second chance at life. In fact, Parvaiz had realized his mistake and wanted to return to his home country, '*No, I just... I can't stay here. I can't do it. They've taken my passport so I have to but I can't. I thought if I learnt the rules... but I can't. I can't. I just want to come home.*' (Shamsie, 2018, p. 174). However, there was nowhere for him to return to, as he would only be rejected. This realization should be proof that Parvaiz had found his way back, which should be supported. But in reality, people preferred to continue rejecting him and his Muslim diaspora identity. In fact, even today, Muslims and Islam are still often demonized through constant association with terrorism in the media (Djohar, 2019).

The crucial point to challenge Western dominant discourse on this novel is that Parvaiz did not hurt anyone. He did not shoot or kill anyone. He worked for a studio. He was even afraid of hurting people. The novel shows that, "*For days and days after that, he worked in the studio on sound effects of beheadings, crucifixions, and whippings. This was both a test and a punishment. In the studio, he had control of himself.*" (Shamsie, 2018, p. 169). If the West's commitment to combating terrorism were truly impartial, Parvaiz's attempt to return home would have been treated as an opportunity for intervention and rehabilitation rather than exclusion, while his family would have received protection rather than suspicion. Many other criminal cases are always forgiven by the law. However, there is no such opportunity for Muslims. The legal system and 'anti-terrorism' norms are racially biased, where Muslims are automatically associated with terrorism while white perpetrators are assumed to be the opposite; as a result, white people are free from the label of terrorist even though they commit similar acts of violence (Buzas & Meier, 2023). It is clear that Kamila Shamsie, in this novel, provides space for a deeper understanding of Muslim stories, while the narrative itself reveals a life that is



not neutral towards Muslims, especially regarding cases of violence that are always indicated as acts of terrorism.

2. Kevin's Violence as a Counter-Narrative to Western Dominant of Terrorism

Kevin serves as a counterpoint to dominant Western narratives constructed to protect them from labels and perceptions of terrorism. Kevin's shooting was a life-threatening act that even resulted in fatalities. Despite committing a mass killing, Kevin is often represented as a family and psychological disorder rather than being associated with a broader political collective identity. In the novel, Kevin's mother mentions the victims he killed.

“Well, first I’ll feel sorry for Thelma Corbitt, and Mary Woolford. For the Fergusons and the Randolphs, for the Ulanovs and the Espinozas. I’ll let my heart break over a teacher who bent over backward to get inside your precious head, over a basketball player who can barely walk, and even a cafeteria worker I’ve never met, and *then* we’ll see if there’s any pity left over for you. There just might be, but it’s the scraps of my table you’re due, and for scraps you should count yourself lucky.” (Shriver, 2006, p. 245)

Furthermore, Kevin's mother is also represented as analyzing her son's victims. However, she did not find any fault with them. Kevin's mother has examined the victims herself: a basketball player, a studious Hispanic, a film buff, a classical guitarist, an emotional actor, a computer hacker, a gay ballet student, a political activist, a vain teenage beauty, a part-time cafeteria worker, and a devoted English teacher, an apparently random group with nothing in common (Shriver, 2006, p. 246). This shows that Kevin is depicted as having no clear goal; he just wants to take action and be the star of his actions. Kevin is an example that even white people can commit acts that are indicative of terrorism and harm many people. With the victims described explicitly in this novel, Kevin is free from the label of terrorist because, in dominant narratives, the label of terrorist is not applied to white killers, regardless of the fact that they have killed hundreds of innocent people.

Kevin is represented as very different from other perpetrators. He even appears calm, as if he has no conscience. Those who are labeled as terrorists are people who have no conscience, which is why they can bring themselves to kill people, and this is one of Kevin's characteristics. In the novel, Kevin is also depicted as focused and expressionless, unlike other teenage shooters who are described as crazy, with empty stares and maniacal smiles (Shriver, 2006, p. 379). It reveals that Kevin's character changed after committing the crime. Not only that, but Kevin also killed his father and sister in his own home, cruelly and unimaginably. This novel illustrates to readers that even white teenagers have terrible stories and are even capable of acts equivalent to terrorism. Kevin killed his younger sister by tying her to an archery target outside the terrace, with an arrow piercing her chest. Meanwhile, his father, who was always kind, spent time with him, went on picnics, told stories, and raised Kevin well, but was chased and shot by Kevin until he died (Shriver, 2006, p. 389). With such extreme measures, Kevin and his family were not even cornered, and instead, their story was turned into a documentary. The term



"Thursday" shows that Western-dominant narratives have their own way of protecting white people from the negative labels, despite their killing actions, which is similar to terrorist action: the cold killers.

Another narrative in the novel that can counter Western dominant discourse on terrorists and terrorism is the set of other cases it describes. There were many similar cases to Kevin's in America during those years. In fact, there were always victims. However, as stated in Critical Terrorism Studies, this discourse is indeed a selective construction, which exempts white perpetrators but strongly targets Muslims as the main target. Cases like this have happened many times and are not associated with acts of terrorism because they are considered outside of what they have constructed, such as Muslims, people with Arab features, or non-white people. Some of the cases that occurred include the case of Barry Loukaitis, who killed a teacher and two students while taking the entire class hostage in Moses Lake, Washington at the age of 14; the case of Tronneal Mangum, who shot and killed a boy at his school at the age of 13 because he owed him \$40; the case of Evan Ramsey, 16, who killed a student and the principal and injured two others in Bethel, Alaska, the case of Luke Woodham, who killed his mother and two students and injured seven others at the age of 17 in Pearl, Mississippi, then the case of Michael Carneal (14 years old) who shot and killed three students and injured five people in Paducah, Kentucky, the case of Mitchell Johnson (13 years old) and Andrew Golden (11 years old) who shot and killed a teacher and four students and injured ten others in Jonesboro, Arkansas, the case of Andrew Wurst (14 years old) who killed a teacher and injured three students in Edinboro, Pennsylvania, and many other cases that have occurred (Shriver, 2006, p. 61). Beyond the crime itself, the novel represents some acts of violence committed by white American teenagers that lack a clear or readily identifiable motive, making them difficult to explain through conventional reasoning. One case shown in the novel illustrates this point. *"Brenda killed two adults and wounded nine students in her San Carlos, California, high school only because, as the Boomtown Rats' hit single subsequently attested, 'I Don't Like Mondays.'"* (Shriver, 2006, p. 240), which shows that this is not a valid reason for committing a crime. There was also a case of a child who shot two students and injured three others at school simply because he had broken up with his girlfriend, who was only twelve years old (Shriver, 2006, p. 284). These narratives serve as an important counterpoint to the Orientalists, who have long constructed criminal acts as acts of terrorism committed by Muslims.

In fact, mainstream society is quite paranoid about cases involving its citizens. White supremacy is paranoid that America is very sensitive to anything that could potentially be a signal for crime.

An oppressive literalism reigned, so that when some excitable sophomore screamed, "I'm gonna kill you!" to a volleyball teammate who dropped the ball, she was slammed into the guidance counselor's office and expelled for the rest of the week. Yet there was no safe haven in the metaphoric, either. When a devout Baptist in Kevin's English class wrote in a poem, "My heart is a bullet, and God is my marksman," his teacher went straight to the principal, refusing to teach her class again until the boy was transferred. Even Celia's primary school grew fatally po-faced: A boy in her first-grade class was



kicked out for three days because he had pointed a chicken drumstick at the teacher and said, "Pow, pow, pow!" (Shriver, 2006, p. 317)

It appears that mainstream society is also afraid of the potential for children or teenagers to commit crimes. However, in contrast to the treatment of Muslims, these individuals are often approached through protective and rehabilitative measures rather than political exclusion. This also shows how they allow this construct to continue to grow in Muslim identity. It also shows a lack of neutrality in the fight against terrorism. In addition to being biased, even criminals still receive sympathy from those around them, media labels or language, to protection from the state. In Kevin's case, his mother also eventually accepted his apology, *"I'm not quite sure, since he muttered it into the upturned collar of my coat, but I like to think that he choked, 'I'm sorry.' Taking the risk that I'd heard correctly, I said distinctly myself, 'I'm sorry, too, Kevin. I'm sorry, too.'"* (Shriver, 2006, p. 398). This shows that perpetrators still get a second chance for what they have done. The Western dominant discourse on terrorism is biased and non-neutral, selectively stereotyping certain marginal groups. Through the stories of Kevin and Parvaiz, readers observe how life for Muslims in the diaspora is represented in their countries of residence as unfair and prejudiced, compared with how mainstream society is represented when faced with crimes and violence involving them, which is often associated with family and psychological issues rather than political terrorism. Thus, it is vital to compare and question the Western dominant narrative of terrorism excluding Muslims from American or British belonging to maintain white supremacy rooted in anti-muslim racism for centuries.

Conclusion

This study shows that the Western dominant discourse of terrorism and counter-terrorism is not applied neutrally, but rather targets certain groups, with Muslims as the main target. Through literary representations. It is evident that Western dominant narratives consistently portray Muslim perpetrators through their religious and ethnic identities, while acts of violence committed by white people are more often explained through psychological disorders, personal trauma, or family problems. Such portrayals not only reinforce Islamophobia but also have real consequences by legitimizing surveillance, exclusion, and suspicion of Muslims as a group. Literature, therefore, plays a crucial role in questioning these dominant narratives in exposing this ideological bias and offering readers a more nuanced understanding of global violence beyond the dominant media narrative. It invites readers to critically engage with representations that are often obscured by political discourse. Future research could expand this analysis by comparing novels published during periods marked by increased discourse on terrorism, as well as by further examining representations of domestic terrorism in the United States. Such studies would deepen critical engagement with the ways terrorism is framed, challenged, and contested both in literature and in mainstream society.



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