

Kamila Shamsie in conversation with Ankhi Mukherjee

Transcript

Aarhi Vadde

Hello and welcome to Season 2 of Novel Dialogue, a literary podcast sponsored by the Society for Novel Studies. I'm Aarhi Vadde, my co-host is John Plotz. We'll be taking turns hosting episodes throughout the season. In Novel Dialogue we bring critics and novelists together to talk about novels from every angle: how we read, write, publish and remember them.

And today we are partnering with the Franklin Humanities Institute at Duke University to bring you a dialogue between acclaimed novelist Kamila Shamsie and distinguished critic Ankhi Mukherjee. Kamila is the author of seven novels, including *In the City by the Sea*, *Burnt Shadows*, and most recently *Home Fire*, which was longlisted for the Booker Prize and won the Women Prize for Fiction in 2018. *Home Fire* is a brilliant adaptation of Sophocles Antigone, centered on a Muslim family in modern day England. I really could not put this novel down, it was thrilling. A heartbreaking love story woven around political theory. I found myself thinking about state power, the weaponization of statelessness, and the racialization of British identity, and how they drove this really modern take on a tragic plot.

So Kamila, we are so excited to have you on the show, welcome.

Kamila Shamsie

Thank you very much. I'm very pleased to be here.

Aarhi Vadde

Great. And Ankhi Mukherjee is a perfect interlocutor for Kamila, and I realize they have been in conversation for a while now before this show, so I'm happy to just be coming in in medias res. She is a professor of English at Oxford and the author of a fantastic monograph called *What is a Classic? Postcolonial Rewriting and the Invention of the Canon*. She's also published a highly illuminating article on the suffering of Antigone, which reads *Home Fire* in light of interpretive debates about the classic play. Ankhi is currently working on a book about psychoanalysis called *The Psychic Life of Power*.

So Ankhi, welcome to the show. Thank you again for coming.

Ankhi Mukherjee

Thank you very much, Aarhi.

AV

So I am thrilled to join you guys and I will now pass the virtual mic to you, Ankhi.

AM

Thank you again, Aarhi, and a very warm welcome again to Kamila. I was wondering, Kamila, if you could please read a short excerpt from one of your recent novels to get us started. Because in a way that is the ground on which critic and author and host converge.

KS

Thank you, Ankhi, happy to do that. I'm going to read from the beginning of *Home Fire*, and since it's a start of a novel, I don't have to set anything up, which is one of the benefits of this section. Though the only things important to know, I think, is that this is a British citizen in a British airport in a London airport.

"Isma was going to miss her flight. The ticket wouldn't be refunded because the airline took no responsibility for passengers who arrived the airport 3 hours ahead of the departure time and were escorted to an interrogation room.

She had expected the interrogation. But not the nerve-wracking hours of waiting that would precede it, or that it would feel so humiliating to have the contents of her suitcase inspected. She'd made sure not to pack anything that would invite comments or questions. No Koran, no family pictures, no books in her area of academic interest. But even so, the officer took hold of every item of Isma's clothing and ran it between her thumb and fingers. Not so much searching for hidden pockets as judging the quality of the material.

Finally, she reached for the designer, labeled down jacket that Isma had folded over a chair back when she entered and held it up, one hand pinching each shoulder.

'This isn't yours,' she said, and it's not sure she didn't mean because it's at least a size too large, but rather 'It's too nice for someone like you.'

'I used to work at a dry cleaning shop. The woman who brought this in said she didn't want it when we couldn't get rid of the stain.' She pointed to the grease mark on the pocket.

'Does the manager know you took it?'

'I was the manager.'

'You were the manager of a dry cleaning shop and now you're on your way to a PhD program for sociology in Amherst, Massachusetts?'

'Yes.'

'And how did that happen?'

'My siblings and I were orphaned just after I finished uni. They were 12 years old. Twins. I took the first job I could find. Now they've grown up. I can go back to my life.'

'You're going back to your life in Amherst, Massachusetts?'

'I meant the academic life.'

The woman dropped the jacket into the messy jumble of clothes and shoes and told Isma to wait. That had been a while ago. The plane would be boarding now. Isma looked over at the suitcase. She'd repacked when the woman left the room and spent the time since worrying if doing that without permission constituted an offense. Should she empty the clothes out into a haphazard pile, or would that make things even worse?

She stood up, unzipped the suitcase and flipped it open so its contents were visible. A man entered the office carrying Isma's passport, laptop, and phone.

She allowed herself to hope, but he sat down, gestured for her to do the same, and placed her recorder between them.

'Do you consider yourself British?' the man said.

'I am British.'

'But do you consider yourself British?'

'I've lived here all my life.' She meant there was no other country of which she could feel herself apart. But the words came out sounding evasive."

I think I'll stop there.

AM

This is chilling to listen to actually. You know the events of the last week in Afghanistan have jolted us back to 2001, a little ahead of the 20th anniversary, the trauma of 9/11, of course and the subsequent US War on Terror, with its wholesale carnage, 800,000 dead and the displacement of populations, some 27 million.

This opening of your novel *Home Fire* captures a dimension of statist violence that Muslims in particular, and brown skinned people in general, have come to accept as normal and every day at various checkpoints of the West since that September Day, 20 years ago.

Could you say a little more about the figure of the terrorist as woman, something that *Home Fire* prepares us from the start from this scene? And then of course, with its classic extrapolations of Antigone.

KS

Well, rather than the figure of terrorist as woman I think in the terms of the figure under suspicion as woman. You know which I think is to me, I mean, a lot of people talk about that chilling opening scene and the chilling part is the interrogation. But to me, the real chilling part is that she's prepared for it. That Isma as a British citizen who is simply going on her way to go to university degree, knowingly arrives 3 hours early because she thinks of course this is going to happen to me, and as a story we progress as we learned there are particular family reasons for her thinking so. But it's still not an unexpected position for her to be in.

The woman as Muslim terrorist is, I think, a curious figure because actually the women were largely cast in roles of victims and again, you know, I'm glad you mentioned Afghanistan there, Ankhi, because of course we all saw that when the occupation of Afghanistan happened and I was remembered, very remembered very starkly going on a demo in London against that occupation, against that invasion when it was first happening and how small the numbers were of those of us who were marching as compared to the Iraq war, you know.

And there was really this belief that largely this was a just war and a lot of the justice around it was cast in terms of the liberation of women. And of course, we had Joe Biden just the other day saying, look this was never a nation building exercise. This was a counterterrorism exercise, which is possibly the most honest thing a US president has said about the whole war since it started.

But the Muslim woman was sort of this figure of victimhood and needing to be saved. And so we were this curious position, those of us who are Muslim women in those ages that you would go to airports and you would see Muslim men being, you know, forced to undergo certain sort of processes. And as Muslim women you were largely waved through, not always, but largely waved through. And yet there was always this awareness you were seeing a suspect you know you were, and if you didn't fall into the category of the oppressed, then there was you know, maybe you weren't really Muslim or something.

It was a very strange sort of position to be in in those years right after 911 and the number of people who would say to me, but you're not Muslim Muslim, you're not really Muslim, without knowing me, sort of, you know, seconds into a conversation, I suppose on the basis of fact that I you know wasn't wearing a hijab or not looking suitably victimized or something or the other. And so I did want this also to center on women who are not necessarily experiencing the worst of the Islamophobia and yet are so aware of it and have internalized the ways in which the world sees them, and the ways in which the world see the communities they're from and their brothers and their cousins and their neighbors.

AM

You triangulate these sort of configurations of terrorists and configurations of Islamic women with of course, configurations of the citizen subject, you know, of whom you are one, you know, and you are sort of in a way bringing these ideas of common good and civic liberties and letting women embody them and articulate them.

I wonder sometimes, Kamila, when you were talking about going to a demo. You know having to think on your feet and having to even write on the move. Is it sometimes tiring, you think, for people like you and me to constantly have to write to the moment, that you know we can't always write about abstract things and something meta when such dire identity questions besiege, you know, our mental life.

KS

I think we have to always, always insist upon our right to write about the things that are pressing on us, which may be abstract questions. I mean, you know before *Home Fire* I had written a book called *A God in Every Stone* which is set 100 years ago. And yes, there are always overlaps and echoes to do with history and my interest in that novel started with contemporary questions but, you know I wasn't going to take the view that if I'm writing about Peshawar, which is a city on the border of Afghanistan and Pakistan, I have to write about the War on Terror and Al Qaeda and American occupation and drone strikes, that I can write instead about archaeology. I can write about a nonviolent anti-imperial movement of the early 20th century.

And I think it's taken me time to get that position. I mean, post 9/11, you know I was 28 when 9/11 happened and there was this moment when the world was looking for Muslim voices. And I very quickly found myself, I was writing for The Guardian, I was appearing on Newsnight, which as you and I know, sort of one of the big discussion programs on UK TV. And I was sitting there next to you know, very high-ranking members of the US administration.

And there came a moment where I realized I could become a professional Muslim, you know, and I think I realize that the moment someone asked me to comment on something happening I don't know where it was, Somalia I think, and I thought what do I know about, and they just said there were Muslims involved. So you know, and I started to refuse a lot of things and I think it's very important to know when to refuse things and not to give in to people saying oh but we need your voice in this because very often the people saying we need your voice in this are actually saying, oh God, we need a Muslim woman, where's one, oh that one is visible, I saw her last week. And actually, to resist that. And we're seeing a lot of it now in a different way around the worst form of diversity talk that's happening, which is not about kind of deepening and looking around and interrogating your own ways of thinking. But just to say, where's the nearest black person or brown person? Let's them add them to the panel. Oh, we've already got one we don't need another.

But also I think if you're writing a novel it's a very different kind of space. You know, I mean *Home Fire*, yes, was dealing with contemporary events, but largely a novel knows that it's going to take time to write. It's going to take time to publish and that it hopes to linger in the world for a very long time. So it can't be this sort of I'm responding to what's happening today, but the other part of it is in order for a novel to come out of you it has to be about something that has lodged very deep inside. And I remember reading an interview with John Hersey, of course most famous as the journalist who went to Hiroshima and wrote what became a complete New Yorker issue and then later its own book about what had happened in Hiroshima. But Hersey thought of himself primarily as a fiction writer, and he was also a novelist who won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. And he said something very interesting about how journalism can come from things that are sort of, you know, of surface interest to you, but that the novel comes from a much deeper space, and I think those deeper spaces require you to have been thinking about something and worrying about something for quite a long space of time. And that just means that novel's relationship to time is very different to, you know, that of something occurring in the moment.

AM

In a very early interview V.S. Naipaul said you have to become adept in looking for the truth of your own responses. I mean, he's here describing his own transition from a derivative reviewer of literary works for the New Statesman to an author persona that was his invention, not merely a cultural inheritance. Do you have any epiphanies to share about your wish to become a writer and the hard craft of actualizing that wish?

KS

Well, first of all I think unlike Naipaul I completely discount the idea of the individual creating themselves, you know, rather than being a product of culture and place and class and society and gender and all those kinds of things. You know there is this sort of, the writer who springs fully formed from the forehead of other books or whatever it is, isn't one that that strikes any kind of chord with me.

I think when you start doing something as early as I did, you just, there is a sort of pleasure and a joy you take in it, I mean, literally, I've been doing this since I was 11. It was the thing I did for fun. It was the thing I did, I mean, admittedly, you know I was growing up in those years in Pakistan, it was very boring and there was only one state TV channel so you had to either read, as far as I was concerned, I could be reading or I could be writing and these were my forms of pleasure. And I try to keep hold of that still when I write.

I suppose if I had any form of epiphany it was that you should never tell yourself the kind of writer you are. With my first few novels, I'd always say, you know, I'm someone who writes about Karachi. I write about the world I grew up in, the world I knew intimately. And I will always be that writer. You can't ever say I will always be that writer. You can only say this is the writer I was yesterday. You don't even necessarily know who you are today because you're too busy being it. And that actually, if you just say I don't know, I don't know what's coming down the pipeline I don't know who I'm going to be as a writer tomorrow, what's coming out, it frees you to consider anything. Which can also then be terrifying.

AM

Let's go back to the beginning to your reading of *Home Fire* and talk about the two novels that came before *Home Fire*, namely *Burnt Shadows* and *A God in Every Stone*. For me, for this reader, and I have read a lot of, I've read, I think, five of your seven novels. These three novels blast open the geography of precursor works such as *Kartography* and *Broken Buses*. So in *A God in Every Stone* you read three crumbling empires, you know Persian, Ottoman and British, like a memory palimpsest. While *Burnt Shadows* shows us the through lines between Nagasaki, 1945 and Guantanamo Post-9/11. Do these three novels and I'm including *Home Fire*, mark a turning point in your vision or craft?

KS

I think *Burnt Shadows* very much was a moment where I became a different writer and again this seems you know for me, as I said earlier, a lot to do--I plan very little in terms of writing. So the first four novels were all set in Karachi and not just Karachi but within a sort of 2 square mile area that I knew intimately and had grown up in, and with the kinds of people I grew up with, and in some ways *Burnt Shadows* was going to be the same thing and *Burnt Shadows*, originally the idea was it was to be about a man in Karachi in 1998, the summer that India and Pakistan tested their nuclear bombs. And his grandmother had been Japanese, so he had a sort of different sense and had been a survivor of Nagasaki. So he had a very different sense of that moment to other people. That was the original idea.

But what had happened was I'd written four novels back-to-back and at the end of the fourth one *Broken Verses*, I was tired in a way I hadn't been before, and I just thought I need to take six months off because usually I'd go from one novel right into the other. And I think when you do that actually the residue of one carries through in the other, or the ways you have of thinking about fiction and what you're writing about carry through. So I had never really given myself a break to allow the previous novel to sort of exit the bloodstream. And that three-month or six-month break became, I think, an 18-month break, and in it I was again judging for a prize. And I found myself getting really annoyed by what I saw as this repeating structure, which is that there's someone in the present-day living their lives and then something happens that sort of activates the past or a past memory, and they have to confront that. And I found myself getting very, very annoyed by this. And I thought, why are all these books doing it? And then I realized the reason I was getting annoyed was because I had been doing that in my novels and I was planning to do it again. You know I had done it in *Broken Verses* where there's this figure, Aasmaani Inqalab and her mother's story sort of, you know butts into her life. I had done it in *Kartography* where they're kids in the 1990s and the 1970 war, sort of asserts itself in their consciousness in a certain way. And I was going to do it again with, you know, the story of 1998, which goes back to the bombing of Nagasaki.

And I just realized I've fallen into these patterns and it's just because I keep doing it this way. I've, you know, haven't stopped to think about it, and then I found myself thinking who is this grandmother in Nagasaki. Why does this boy, this young man in Pakistan have a grandmother from Nagasaki? How did she end up in Pakistan, if she did? Any my first word, obviously I can't write her story. I mean I write

about Karachi. How can I write about a Japanese woman in Nagasaki in 1945? And of course, in addition to everything, there's the concerns that here is this event, this extraordinary event. You know if you're going to write about the bombing of Nagasaki you have to do it properly. You have to honor it in some way and also who am I? What do I know about a Japanese woman in 1945?

But I was teaching at the time and one of the things I always tell my students is if you want to write something and it terrifies you, try to do it. So I really fooled myself to write that book because I thought look I keep saying this to my students. I can't go and look them in the eye in a classroom if I don't at least try to write the story of the woman in Nagasaki in 1945 and of course, my plan was I would completely fail, but at least I'll have tried and then I can go back to Karachi 1998 and do it differently. And of course I did fail, but failing made me want to try another draft and do it better and do it better and figure out how you, in Colum McCann's words, don't write what you know but write towards what you want to know?

AM

I'm a reader. I'm also a literary critic, whose enjoyment of the work does not preclude contextualizing, comparing, analyzing, reading for form and style. What is your relationship to that kind of work that a reader such as me is also doing with your novels? You know, do you think critics have overlooked this or that when it comes to your work?

KS

To say that I think critics have overlooked something would imply that I have a fixed sense of what critics should be looking at. You know, I remember a moment when I was listening to the wonderful Libyan-British-American writer, Hisham Matar talking about his work and the interlocutor said to him some sentence which started with the word so when you are writing, what are you thinking and Hisham said when I write, I try not to think and everyone thought he was making a joke except the writers in the room who knew exactly what he meant, which wasn't, of course, that he wasn't thinking, but that there is that kind of analytical brain or critic's brain that is, you know, looking at the writing and seeing it in a particular way is not the writer brain. The writer brain is literally thinking how do I get from this sentence to the next?

And of course, this is not to say that all the stuff that you critics pick up on isn't there, but so much of it is and has to be back of the brain stuff. Which is to say, you aren't consciously aware of all the connections you are making, which of course you're making, and sometimes I'll be surprised by a critic telling me that there's a certain image that keeps recurring in the novel, and I wouldn't have known but of course I knew. I mean, it's not accidental that a certain kind of image grows and develops. It's just that that was back of the brain stuff so you know, I view critics with great interest.

Obviously sometimes someone will have a reading of your work and you feel a little bit depressed by it if a sort of reactionary reading comes in. And I remember when *Home Fire* came out that there was a review which was a very positive review and as much as the person liked the book as well, but their take away from it was you know, how did we ever believe multiculturalism would work? And I thought, really, I mean, this is what you got from the book? Yes, there are times when you can be so disquieted. There are times when you can feel a little bit annoyed if someone has misread something, by which, or misunderstood, by which I'm not on with their interpretation of facts. I'm talking about the fact that, I would say *Burnt Shadows*, you have a young man in the 80s who wants to go and join the Afghan Mujahideen. And there were readers, and this was particularly I have to say in America who thought the mujahideen were the Taliban and made their you know decisions about him, what kind of

person would join the Taliban? Where actually the mujahideen of the 1980s were you know, fighting the Soviets and they were a very varied group of people with different relationships to things like religion, let's say.

So you can get annoyed by that sort of thing, but largely I'm just sort of intrigued. And oh, I didn't know I was doing that, and sometimes I think this person thinks I'm smarter than I am.

AV

I have to ask a question about audience based on the, it sounds like the smattering of reviews you've read and as a Pakistani novelist but also as a novelist with a global audience, do you find that it's particularly around those novels that deal with Muslim identity or with the history of militant organizations that you are read profoundly differently in, say, in Britain, in the US versus, say, Pakistan?

KS

I think with all the books I'm read quite differently. You know, I mean it's not necessarily around those subjects. With *A God in Every Stone*, the first part of the novel centered around an English woman archaeologist and the latter parts of the novel had more to do with a man from Peshawar who becomes an anti-imperial activist. And the English reviewers were much more interested in the English woman, than the Indian and Pakistan reviewers were. But actually the smartest reviews of that book came from India and Pakistan because there was such an understanding of the different levels of history that it was sort of working with. But yes there are there are of course different readings.

And you know what's, with *Home Fire*, at the center, literally the center, I mean the middle part of the novel is a story of Parvaiz who is this young British man who goes to Syria to join ISIS. And for a long time actually his story wasn't going to be in there at all because it was really the story of how the state responded and the impact that has on his sisters and how his actions and the action in the state have an impact on his sisters and what they do and then for various reasons as I was reading, I became interested in his story simply because I realized I had such a crass understanding of the kind of recruitment tactics these groups use to draw young men in and actually it was a far more interesting, complex, nuanced and therefore terrifying story than I had assumed, and so I wanted to put it in there.

But what happened as a result for a lot of people, that sort of becomes the central story. You know, that it starts with a story about a boy who becomes radicalized, which was never the one line I wanted about that book. And you realize that there are certain stories that just weight so heavily on people's consciousness in the news that if you drop it in that will for them become. You know which is why, Aarthi, I was so delighted by the way you introduced it, actually, the way you talk about *Home Fires* being about the state and being about Islamophobia and what it's you know, racist societies and what it is to grow up in there. Which is the book I had wanted to write, but for a lot of readers, and I would say particularly white readers it became, Oh, here's a story of the young man who was radicalized and went to join ISIS.

AV

Right, I mean when I read that strand of the narrative, I have to say I had never encountered such a humanized tale, so deeply grounded in the loss of a father, and the manipulation of a boy who's lost his father and I could see certainly a more conservative reading not even taking in the story, but actually taking in what they think is an apology and just taking it as an apology which is why I, you know, find it commendable and also scary to take on a topic like that as a novelist, because it's such a lightning rod for preconceived interpretations.

But just to ask one more question, you mentioned that the more critical, analytical takes on the novel are really back of the brain stuff. And when you're working on the novel, those can't be in the forefront, but with adaptation and with taking on *Antigone* as you do, I mean to me, once you know it is an adaptation, it's almost, and I'm going to draw maybe an overly canonical reference, but it's almost like T.S. Eliot on *Ulysses* saying there is an invisible structure, and once you know it, it explains a lot. And so, how do you keep that invisible structure in the back of your brain? Or does it come into the front of your brain, say in subsequent drafts? Or is it just part of the molecular body of the novel, in a kind of organic way?

KS

It's so interesting to hear you talk about in that language of the molecular part of the novel you know, the body of the novel because when I talk, what I say it's not so much, *Antigone* isn't so much the skeleton of *Home Fire*, but it's the marrow in the bones, which is how I think of it. So when it was a concern for me when I started to think okay, I'm going to write this novel, which is an adaptation of *Antigone*, I knew that the novel had to absolutely stand on its own. It had to work for people who didn't know *Antigone* at all, but it also had to work for people who knew *Antigone* and didn't see any need to reread my take on *Antigone*, when there's Sophocles take on *Antigone*, and so the way I went about it was I read several different versions of *Antigone*, and then I put them aside and I thought I'm not going to look at these again because now I'm going to work on the novel. And that I was sort of relying on, okay, now the play itself is back of the brain stuff and I know my characters and I know certain strands, but I had really assumed that the novel would depart much further than it did from the story of *Antigone*, or that I would discard a lot more than I did. And yet, as I went on, and it's possibly because of, you know, in that way that Eliot talks about it because it's so, once you have it, it's just there. It's so deep that everything else is sort of forming and shaping around it and so much more of the play ended up in the novel than I thought.

It was interesting 'cause there's been some classicists who've reviewed and written about it. And they found connections that I didn't even think about, and it's sort of small things like sort of in *Antigone* we know that the siblings are the children of Oedipus and Jocasta, so they are the children of incest. Which is a thing I completely put out of my head. I thought that I'm definitely not using and yet there's a moment where Isma who's much older than the twins says of her sister Aneeka, "She's my sister, almost my child" and someone said oh look there's the incest thing and I thought, I hadn't even thought of it, but of course.

AM

I think one of the things that's come up in both your response, Aarthi, and Kamila's discussion of, you know what constitutes the work of writing the novel and the kind of more analytical work of writing criticism of the novel is that you know, of course, you know, as you said this kind of a work which is based on your multiple readings of *Antigone* is in many ways interpretive. You know it is in many ways sort of, you know, deeply historical, and of course the best kinds of you know flights of criticism are flights, they're imaginative, and they are very visceral. They're very embodied, you know. We can, I can say I'm going to write on a bunch of Pakistani novelists alongside, you know postcolonial theory, but what I like about that novel is, you know what Jacques Lacan says about the object a of desire, but I don't know what it is I like about that voice. I like that voice. I don't know what it is, you know that missing object. And I do think that best kinds of collaborations happen when these two visceral worlds collide. You know between the author and the critic, because you know when I read *Home Fire*, what I picked up on was that quest for understanding *Antigone*'s meaning, that we understand why she did it

from a very statist citizen-subject point of view. We don't understand the structure of her suffering. We don't understand the structure of her love, you know. Did she do it for love? Whose love? Love of her brother, you know, love of family, love of ideas? So you know, I was reading you not with your kind of, you know, contemporaries from the anglophone world. But I was reading you with Heaney and with Nussbaum and with Steiner, you know, I was reading you alongside those quests for *Antigone's* meaning, and that I think you know is kind of a very interesting way in which the critic as artist and the artist as critic you know, can kind of come together, but I wondered, Kamila, if you find you know certain categorizations that critics also do, let's say feminist or postcolonial or historical, if you find those limiting. Or is there any one kind of category or classification that you are more comfortable with than others?

KS

I think I would mind if I was only ever talked about as being in one category, so if I was going to always be the Muslim writer, that would be very tedious. What I found interesting is the only category that people have said, do you mind being called this? And they ask this often, is political writer, which I find so bizarre that that's the category that people think, how do you feel? And it's again it's never someone who isn't white I should say, you know. But there's almost this understanding that to call someone a political writer is an insult. I think there is a sort of way of confusing political with polemical and the idea that political must be hammering home a point and therefore can't be nuanced and can't be character driven and can't be full of feeling so I do find it very bizarre this sort of strange antipathy that certain critics have, or think writers have towards a category of political writer.

But now I'm very happy to be, you know. I mean there's someone who did, I haven't read it but I know my mother pointed out someone did what they called a vegetarian reading of *Burnt Shadows*. I don't know what this is, but it sounds fascinating. I mean bring it on, you know, give me the carnivorous reading and the vegetarian reading and the vegan readings of my work. You know it is--

AV

In the paleo reading.

KS

The paleo reading, yeah, plant based reading but I don't think, I mean I think it's important to say that if someone takes a lot of time and care over your work and reading you closely, that does mean a lot. You know you sit and you write a book and it's you and these words on the screen, and you have no idea how it's going to land in the world and whether it will make any noise on landing, or whether you know ten years later, there will be any trace of it still. So largely, I just I feel very moved actually when I know that someone has really sat down and spent time with the work. When there are so many other works out there they could be spending time with.

AM

You seem to love writing about the face. Implacable and unreadable faces in particular. They form a limit case of sorts to the personal, historical or collective quests the fiction otherwise plots. So I'm thinking about the goatherd's starving face in *A God in Every Stone* or Aneeka in the park vigil in *Home Fire*, a dust mask on her face. In the first instance you talk about a stony gaze that continues beyond the viewer and in the second in *Home Fire* you describe a howl deeper than the girl that emanates soundlessly from the earth. Can you talk a little bit about why this kind of description or non-description appeals to you?

KS

So of course, Ankhi, this is one of those cases where the critic brings up elements of your own work which you hadn't seen yourself. But I mean which is not to say you're wrong. It's just to say, you know it was back of the brain stuff. If I had to make a guess, because of course when writers talk about their own writing and why they did a certain thing they are guessing because that's what happens with back of the brain stuff. When you write a novel, there's a curious, it's not curious, there are two things that have to happen at the same time for the novel to work. And one is that the characters have to be absolutely real and believable as individuals. They can't be a cipher. They can't be a metaphor, but at the same time, their stories should echo beyond themselves and their stories should carry within them other stories. And larger, I'm going to use the word truths, about the world and how it's constructed, and the human heart and the human brain and politics and all of that. And I think with both those lines you mentioned I think what I was doing was those are places when I want to suggest that yes we are, these are individual lives and in this case individual made up lives. But there is something deeper. There is something that extends beyond their lifetime. There is something mythic that goes on. It goes back this thing I saw much earlier of how we are creatures of stories, and we live in narratives, and we keep reliving the same narratives. And that's why *Antigone*, a story of 2000 years ago fits so perfectly with the story of 2017. And this very particular moment of young British men going to join ISIS and the states responding by stripping citizenship and the families being caught in between. That I want to, I think, acknowledge and allude to at all times these deeper stories, these mythic stories. The fact that the individual yes, is an individual but is also something more and that there are always these mythic stories, these myths that we are drawing on for all the stories we tell.

AM

Before I let you go, one last question it's a very, probably the most important one. What's your favorite treat while in the throes of doing all this, you know cosmic and local stuff. What do you do or play or eat when the going gets really tough?

KS

So what I actually like to do is I love to cook, you know, and there's something very therapeutic with just being in the kitchen with some music on and you know trying something new or cutting something. And I love to go to the homes of a very few select friends, the kind of friends who's living rooms are an extension of your own apartment, where you don't have to work to be in their company, where you can say you talk at me. I'm just going to sit here and take it in. And I love to walk through London. So give me a day where I can go and walk over to a friend's house and sit and have a cup of tea with them and then go home and cook myself a meal. And if it's bad, no one but me needs to know it and that for me is a very happy day at the end of a writing day. Where you're not using too much energy, but you're just, there's something kind of restorative about all of that.

AV

What is the last thing you cooked? That you're proud of, or not proud of, either one?

KS

Oh god what was the last thing I cooked? Today, I'm not a big salad person but I'm going to attempt a salad which I haven't attempted before which is with peach. Peach and spinach leaves and walnuts and goat cheese. What do we think of this?

My signature, if I have a signature dish it's my biryani which I'm very proud of.

AV

Perfect, I think highly of that.

KS

Ankhi just had this look like, when am I getting your biryani? I saw that look, Ankhi!

AM

Exactly. Thank you so much, Kamila, thank you so much Aarthi and thank you to Novel Dialogue for this wonderful hour we've spent.

AV

Yeah, and I have to continue the parade of thanks by thanking Ranji Khanna and Chris Chia at the Franklin Humanities Institute for making this episode happen.

And as always, I am grateful to the Society for Novel Studies for its sponsorship and acknowledge the support of Duke and Brandeis. Nai Kim is our production designer, Claire Ogden our sound engineer. Hannah Jorgensen is our transcript editor and James Draney our blog editor.

Past and upcoming episodes include Tara Menon speaking to Sigrid Nunez and Colleen Lye in conversation with Viet Thanh Nguyen. So from all of us at Novel Dialogue. Thank you for listening and if you liked what you heard, please rate and review us at Apple Podcasts, Stitcher or wherever you get your podcasts.