Aaliyah: *Antigone* the voice for British South Asian Muslim Communities

Aaliyah: *Antígona*, a voz das comunidades muçulmanas britânicas do Sul da Ásia

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Citizens of former British colonies—particularly those from Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan—played a pivotal role in revitalizing Britain in the aftermath of the World Wars and have remained integral to the nation's workforce ever since. Yet, despite their substantial contributions and their aspirations to claim Britain as home, they continue to be positioned as outsiders. South Asians, especially those of Muslim faith, have remained largely underrepresented in mainstream British culture—or when represented, have often been portrayed in a negative light.

During the fourteen years of Conservative governance (2010-2024), political rhetoric frequently cast these communities as resistant to 'British values' and unwilling to integrate—paradoxically, even under the premiership of Rishi Sunak (2022-2024), the first person of South Asian heritage to hold the office. As Lau and Mendes (2021) observe, this demographic has often been deployed as a symbol of the supposed threat posed by 'foreigners' to Western society. They argue that "the banalization of a populist, anti-immigrant discourse positions Muslim communities... in a space of radical difference to the West" (p. 56).

Questions surrounding the meaning of citizenship and the viability of multiculturalism remain central to contemporary British discourse. In response, a number of artists and creatives have turned to the theatre of ancient Athens to explore these pressing issues. Among these classical works, Sophocles' *Antigone* has emerged as a particularly resonant vehicle for articulating modern concerns. Scholars such as Mee and Foley (2011), Honig (2013), Van Weyenberg (2014), and

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Fradinger (2023), have demonstrated the play's global adaptability in addressing themes of displacement, political violence, ideological resistance, and regional identity. Additionally—and crucially for this body of work—*Antigone* has long served as a potent lens for postcolonial critique and reflection. As identified in the scholarship of Gibbs (2010), Goff (2010), Rehm (2010), and Wilmer (2010), the play's themes of resistance, marginalisation, and the contest between personal conviction and state authority have made it especially resonant in postcolonial contexts. These scholars highlight how *Antigone* has been reimagined to explore the lasting impacts of colonialism, the complexities of identity in formerly colonised nations, and the struggle for voice and agency within dominant political systems. Building on these previous explorations, this paper will examine the emergence of postcolonial British *Antigones*, particularly since 2017, and investigate why this ancient tragedy has appealed to three writers as a means of expressing the frustrations of the British South Asian Muslim community, articulating lived experiences, and challenging prevailing negative narratives.

Context

An exploration of how *Antigone* has resonated with the British South Asian Muslim community cannot be meaningfully undertaken without first considering the broader context of what it has meant to be South Asian in Britain over the past two decades. According to the 2021 Census of England and Wales, the UK population stood at approximately 59.6 million, with 81.7% identifying as White – a category that encompasses White British, White Irish, and other White European groups (Office for National Statistics, 2021). The second-largest demographic, broadly classified as 'Asian,' accounted for 9.3% of the population, with individuals of South Asian heritage – comprising those of Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, and Sri Lankan descent – making up 6.9%. It is crucial to recognise that this category includes not only immigrants but also multiple generations born and raised in the UK.

Within this cohort, religious affiliations are diverse, yet Islam constitutes the most widely practised faith (Muslim Council of Britain, 2015, p. 16). Nevertheless, due to widespread ignorance and limited education surrounding religious diversity, there is a persistent and reductive tendency to assume that all British South Asians are Muslim—a misconception critiqued by Maxwell (2006, p. 738).

Racism and discrimination against South Asians have long existed in Britain, but these intensified significantly in the early 2000s. The terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 in the United States and the 7 July 2005 bombings in London—both attributed to Islamist extremists—triggered a wave of suspicion toward Muslims in the UK, which, by extension, negatively affected the broader South Asian population. As Lynch (2013) observes, media and political discourse began to dissociate perpetrators from their British identity, emphasizing instead their ancestral origins to reinforce their image as 'outsiders' to the white majority (p. 243). In the years following these events, the British National Party (BNP), known for its anti-immigrant stance, saw its vote share quadruple between the 2001 and 2005 general elections (Minority Rights Group, 2022).

Islamophobia—defined by Bleich (2011) as "indiscriminate negative attitudes or emotions directed at Islam or Muslims" (p. 1581)—grew exponentially during the Conservative Party's tenure in government from 2010 to 2024 (Rodger, 2017). While this rise cannot be solely attributed to a single cause, several key factors played a role: the prevalence of anti-immigrant rhetoric among right-wing politicians, the polarizing and often xenophobic discourse surrounding Brexit, and the increasing normalization of overt racism in political life. A notable example came in August 2018, when then-former Prime Minister Boris Johnson compared Muslim women wearing the burka or niqab to "letterboxes," a statement followed by a 375% spike in anti-Muslim hate incidents in the subsequent week (Tell MAMA, 2019, p. 6).

In such a climate, it is unsurprising that British South Asian Muslims have experienced heightened fear, marginalisation, and a sense of being "othered." As playwright Kamal Kaan shared in an interview conducted for this research:

> 'It definitely went up another gear post-Brexit, this sense of divide. I definitely felt it'.

The concept of multiculturalism in Britain—and the fragility of British citizenship for those who are not White—came under intense scrutiny in the late 2010s, most notably through the highly publicised case of Shamima Begum. A British-born teenager of Bengali descent, Begum left the UK in 2015 at the age of 15 to join the Islamic State (ISIS). In 2019, when she sought to return to the UK, her request was denied by then-Home Secretary Sajid Javid, himself of British Pakistani heritage. On grounds that she continued to pose a threat to national security, Begum was stripped of her British citizenship, a decision justified by her potential eligibility for Bangladeshi citizenship through her ancestry.

Regardless of whether one views Begum as a radicalised individual still aligned with ISIS ideology, or as a vulnerable teenager who had been groomed and trafficked into a war zone, the case illuminated a stark reality: for citizens with immigrant heritage, British nationality can be conditional. Her story raised urgent questions about who is truly seen as belonging in Britain, and how easily citizenship can be revoked when one's racial or ethnic background offers an alternative national lineage. The implications were deeply unsettling for many within the British South Asian community, highlighting the precariousness of their place in the national narrative.

Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire*

Although Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire* (2017) was written three years prior to the decision in the Shamima Begum case, its resonance with contemporary debates on citizenship and the British South Asian experience is striking. A modern reimagining of *Antigone*, the novel centres on two British Pakistani sisters whose brother, Parvaiz, is radicalised and travels to Syria to join ISIS. Soon regretting his decision, Parvaiz attempts to return to the UK but is killed by an ISIS recruiter before he can escape. In response, the British Home Secretary, Karamat Lone—himself of British Pakistani heritage—revokes Parvaiz's citi-

zenship on grounds of terrorism and orders that his body not be repatriated, but buried instead in Pakistan.

The Antigone figure in the novel, Aneeka, is romantically involved with the Home Secretary's son. She pleads for her brother's body to be returned to Britain, but when her appeals are denied by Karamat Lone, she travels to Pakistan to bury her brother herself despite cautions from the Home Secretary. Her partner, having failed to convince his father for leniency follows her there. The couple is ultimately killed in a terrorist attack, their tragic end underscoring the novel's engagement with themes of identity, loyalty, state power, and the personal cost of political decisions.

Home Fire has attracted considerable scholarly attention across the fields of Asian Studies, Classical Reception, and Postcolonial Literature (Banerjee, 2020; Lau and Mendes, 2021; Weiss, 2022). Upon its publication, it also garnered media acclaim for Shamsie's innovative synthesis of the War on Terror, immigration politics, and "a tale so central to the Western canon" (Davies, 2017). Shamsie has firmly denied any clairvoyance regarding real-world events, noting that the novel was completed before Sajid Javid became the UK's first South Asian Home Secretary and revoked Begum's citizenship. Rather, she explains: "All I was doing was paying attention to news stories when they were still minor rather than headline news, and thinking about the directions in which they could and probably would move, given Britain's political climate" (Shamsie, 2022).

This climate includes a historical backdrop of legal ambiguity and racialised inequality. While the 1948 British Nationality Act granted subjects of the British Empire the right to citizenship, this did not translate into equitable treatment for migrants from the Global South—especially those from South Asian nations such as India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh (Banerjee, 2000, p. 292). During the writing of *Home Fire*, Shamsie became aware of amendments to British immigration law that enabled the government to strip individuals of their citizenship if they held dual nationality—a status common among South Asians for a wide range of reasons such as familial or economic needs (Shamsie, 2018). Her novel reflects a growing frustration with how British citizenship was not only precarious but also inconsistently interpreted, particularly for Muslims and people of South Asian descent, who often find themselves needing to prove their belonging within a nation that still treats them as conditional citizens.

This tension is apparent from the novel's opening scene, in which Isma—the Ismene counterpart—is detained and interrogated at a British airport, setting the tone for the fraught and bureaucratically hostile environment faced by British Muslims. In *Home Fire*, Shamsie masterfully channels the enduring relevance of *Antigone* to illuminate contemporary dilemmas surrounding race, identity, and the power of the state in shaping—and sometimes revoking—a citizen's place in the nation.

> 'Do you consider yourself British?' the man said.
> 'I am British.'
> 'But do you consider yourself British?'

> 'I've lived here all my life.' She meant there was no other country of which she could feel herself a part, but the words came out sounding evasive. The interrogation continued for nearly two hours. (Shamsie, 2017 p. 5)

Shamsie's identity as a Pakistani woman living in London gave her an intimate understanding of the everyday realities faced by many in the British South Asian Muslim community—particularly during the heightened scrutiny of the post-9/11 era. Although she did not experience airport interrogation herself, she has noted that, for years following the 11 September 2001 attacks, conversations about such encounters were common among her friendship circles of Pakistani and British Muslims (Foyles, 2017).

Interestingly, playwrights Kamal Kaan and Inua Ellams, who each created *Antigone*-inspired works in the years following the publication of *Home Fire*, have both stated that they were aware of Shamsie's novel but deliberately avoided reading it prior to working on their own projects so as not to be influenced by its narrative or themes. Nevertheless, their theatrical interpretations echo many of the same preoccupations—particularly in the centring of the South Asian Muslim community and its fraught relationship with the British state.

When asked why such thematic overlap might have occurred, Kaan reflected, "It's in the air, you can't get away from it." His comment speaks to a broader cultural and political atmosphere in which questions of identity, belonging, and state power weigh heavily on artists from marginalised backgrounds.

Kaan's *Aaliyah*

Aaliyah (After Antigone), produced by Freedom Studios, premiered in October 2021 with an eight-day run. However, its impact continues to resonate beyond the confines of the theatre through a freely accessible digital recording, allowing audiences far beyond the British city of Bradford to engage with this powerful reimagining. Notably, the decision to create a hybrid production—combining live and digital elements—was made well before the COVID-19 pandemic compelled theatre-makers globally to reimagine how they connect with audiences (Yorkshire Times, 2021).

Freedom Studios is committed to amplifying the voices of South Asian, ethnically diverse, working-class, and young people in Bradford. Their mission is not only to reduce barriers to creative expression for these communities, but also to ensure that access to theatre—as both participants and audiences—is as inclusive as possible (Freedom Studios, n.d.). As early adopters of digital technologies in theatre-making, they have actively explored the relationship between innovation and traditional live performance, challenging notions of what theatre can be and who it is for.

When Kamal Kaan pitched his adaptation of *Antigone*, he was intent on ensuring that the production would have a lasting legacy and remain accessible to the very community it represented. According to co-director Dermot Daly, this emphasis on accessibility was embedded in the very title of the play itself—*Aaliyah*—a name both recognisable and grounded in the cultural context of its intended audience.

> If we were to say *Antigone*, this ancient thing, lots of people would have gone 'nah' so let's give it a name that your mate is called… and let's set it in Bradford. …have that young person watch it on their phone…removing as many barriers as we possibly can.

These creative decisions were deeply significant in ensuring that *Aaliyah (After Antigone)* not only represented but resonated with the local community of Bradford. Situated in the north of England, Bradford has a substantial South Asian population, with 30.6% of residents identifying as Pakistani, Indian, or Bangladeshi (Bradford Metropolitan District Council, 2022). Like many other ethnic minority communities across the UK, these groups remain underrepresented in British theatre—both on stage and within audiences. Research conducted by Arts Council England highlights that a common barrier to participation and attendance among people from minority ethnic backgrounds is a sense of discomfort or feeling out of place in traditional theatre spaces (Arts Council England, p. 31). This suggests that a lack of meaningful representation—whether in casting, storytelling, or cultural framing—can significantly hinder engagement.

Kamal Kaan's creative practice has consistently been grounded in the exploration and celebration of his own heritage. Born and raised in Bradford, and of British Bengali Muslim descent, Kaan brings a deeply personal and culturally rooted perspective to his work. He shared in interview that Sophocles' *Antigone* had long remained in his consciousness, ever since first encountering the tragedy in a school drama class. The themes of familial duty, resistance to state power, and moral conviction stayed with him, later providing fertile ground for a contemporary retelling embedded in the lived realities of his own community.

> I can still remember just feeling as if I was Antigone. I fell in love with this idea of conflict between the law of man and the law of god, and growing up as a Muslim, the law of god holds a lot of weight, but at the same time that has to play alongside the law of man i.e., the law of the country. …written hundreds of years ago. It was just amazing that it felt so modern…

Collaborating with Freedom Studios offered Kamal Kaan the opportunity to revisit his early connection with Sophocles' *Antigone* and reimagine it through a deeply personal and contemporary lens. He pitched a version of the tragedy that was loosely inspired by his own sisters, who worked as cleaners in Bradford, grounding the narrative in the everyday realities of working-class South Asian women. Central to his adaptation was a provocative and timely question: what would happen if two sisters, quietly living their lives in a northern English city, were suddenly confronted with the threat of losing their British citizenship?

Kaan has openly acknowledged that the case of Shamima Begum—as well as other instances in which British South Asians found themselves pleading with the government to recognise their rights —was a significant source of inspiration. These real-world events, coupled with the emotional and moral dilemmas presented in *Antigone*, shaped his vision of a story that would resonate not only with his community in Bradford but with wider audiences grappling with questions of identity, belonging, and justice in an increasingly divided Britain.

> The sense of feeling and fear…. especially if we weren't born here or even though we were born in this country but have a link, however tenuous that might be… the government could find something, find some WhatsApp message to suddenly use that as an excuse to send me back to Bangladesh…

In *Aaliyah (After Antigone)*, Kamal Kaan reimagines the classic tragedy through the lens of contemporary British South Asian experience. Antigone and Ismene become Aaliyah and Imani—two British-born Bangladeshi sisters who work as cleaners in Bradford's local government offices. Their brother, Syeed, a modern counterpart to Polynices, has been detained by the British government for vague and unspecified security reasons. Although born in Bangladesh, he has grown up in the UK, and yet he now faces imminent deportation. In response, Aaliyah turns to modern tools—Whatsapp messages and live video streaming—to mobilise support in a desperate attempt to stop the plane deporting her brother from taking off. Her actions deeply unsettle Imani, who, despite holding British citizenship, continues to view their place in the country as conditional — they are 'guests'—fearing that any resistance might jeopardise their safety and stability.

The character of Haemon is reimagined as Hussain, Aaliyah's new secret husband and a local government councillor. Estranged from his parents, Hussain's personal and political conflict intensifies when it is revealed that his mother is none other than the Home Secretary, Parveen Parvaiz—the very official orchestrating Syeed's deportation. Parveen appears via Zoom video call, warning Aaliyah that her activism could result in the revocation of her own citizenship. In a subsequent call, she pressures Hussain to leave his wife, however it is revealed that Aaliyah is pregnant. Aaliyah's unwavering resolve in defending her brother, even in the face of severe personal risk, ultimately inspires Imani to join a protest outside. Tragedy soon follows, as Hussain returns with news of Imani's death in the crowd. In a final confrontation, Parveen offers Aaliyah a way out—by publicly denouncing her brother and now her sister. Aaliyah refuses. As a result, she is branded a traitor, and the offices are stormed by armed police, culminating in Hussain's death.

The play closes with a unique epilogue: Parveen, devastated by the death of her son, resigns as Home Secretary but later becomes Prime Minister. Now committed to re-examining Syeed's case, she acknowledges the failures of her previous actions. Meanwhile, Aaliyah is shown living peacefully with her newborn daughter, whom she names Antigone—after the Greek figure her brother once told her about. As Ward (2021) notes, "the characters return to a concern for future generations that has haunted them since the beginning, asking 'What's the country you want your children to grow up in?'"

Kaan's adaptation departs significantly from Sophocles' original. Characters such as Eteocles and Tiresias are omitted entirely, and the traditional Greek chorus—often used as a moral or philosophical sounding board—is replaced by technology. Aaliyah and Imani communicate with their community through mobile phone videos, distributed via social media and messaging platforms, emphasising the role of digital activism in contemporary resistance movements. Despite these structural changes, the core themes endure: the conflict between

state authority and familial loyalty, the courage of a young woman standing up for justice, and the moral complexities of citizenship in an unequal society.

Perhaps the most striking deviation from the original is the ending. While Sophocles concludes with the devastating downfall of Antigone and her loved ones, Kaan offers a more hopeful vision. Aaliyah survives. Rather than dwelling in the tragic, the play looks forward with cautious optimism, imagining a Britain where, as Ward (2021) writes, "everyone is treated justly regardless of the colour of their skin, the faith that they practise, or even whether they are guilty or innocent of the crime they have been accused of."

In the final section of the play, Parveen asks with a sense of realisation:

> How do we build a country if we continue to ignore the voices of all those who go ignored?

This point underscores the pressing need for ongoing conversations about British citizenship, particularly the sense of insecurity that many, especially within the South Asian Muslim community, feel as they are treated as second-class citizens by the British government. This notion is central not only to *Home Fire* and *Aaliyah (After Antigone)* but also plays a significant role in Inua Ellams' 2022 production of *Antigone* at the Regents Park Open Air Theatre in London. Ellams' adaptation continues to explore the themes of identity, belonging, and the fragility of citizenship, reflecting the broader societal concern about the experiences of marginalized communities within the UK.

Ellams' *Antigone*

Sophocles' *Antigone* did not immediately resonate with Inua Ellams in the same way it did for Kamal Kaan. Having encountered various translations and adaptations of the play previously, Ellams found them unsatisfying, so when asked to create his own interpretation, he initially rejected the idea. He struggled to connect with Antigone's political stance. However, upon focusing on the broader concept of a woman defying power and seeking contemporary parallels, the narrative began to take shape for him. At this point, Ellams decided to reframe Antigone as a British Pakistani Muslim woman, which opened up new avenues for his adaptation (APGRD, 2022).

Born in Nigeria and having lived in London since his late teens, Ellams was in the process of seeking UK citizenship during the theatrical run of his production (Gentleman, 2022). Drawing from his personal experiences as an immigrant, he crafted a version of *Antigone* that speaks to the complexities of identity and belonging in Britain. Ellams describes himself as an outsider looking into British society, a perspective that, in his view, enables him to explore and present alternative viewpoints, particularly those rooted in the lived experiences of the South Asian community (APGRD, 2022). In the production the chorus exclaims:

> …How the hell are we meant to feel British,
> How are we meant to just be and just breathe
> When they're pushing our families down to their knees. (Ellams, 2022 p. 32)

Ellams has publicly criticized the Conservative government for nearly eliminating the vital youth and library services that played a key role in his life during his late teens. He argues that, coupled with the rise of social media, this has created an environment where young people struggle to find safe spaces for meaningful dialogue. Instead of fostering open conversations, this has led to isolation and a sense of rejection from mainstream society, which in turn can fuel extremist ideologies (APGRD, 2022). This trajectory is explored in his adaptation through the character of Polyneices, whose actions and the resulting consequences deeply affect his immediate family.

Ellams' *Antigone* adheres most closely to Sophocles' original plot among the three adaptations discussed here. However, it opens before the action of the original play, with Antigone, a young British Pakistani Muslim woman, performing at a closing event for her local community youth center. Like Shamsie, Ellams weaves a terrorism theme into his narrative, portraying the descent of Polyneices into Islamic extremist ideology. His radicalization leads him to carry out a terrorist act that results in the deaths of both himself and his brother, a police officer trying to protect civilians. In Ellams' version, Creon begins the play as the Home Secretary, but eventually becomes the country's first South Asian Prime Minister. He denies Polyneices a proper burial to protect his political career, prompting Antigone to challenge her uncle, citing the Islamic belief that the dead must be buried quickly. When Antigone is caught attempting to break into the facility holding her brother's body, she is imprisoned as a national threat. Despite the pleas of Ismene, Haemon, Eurydice, and the chorus for Creon to show leniency, his advisors manipulate him into maintaining his rigid stance. Ultimately, Antigone takes her own life in prison, feeling abandoned by her country, just as Creon arrives to release her. In the aftermath, Haemon, devastated by her death, attacks Creon with a knife, and in the ensuing struggle, he is fatally injured.

What collectively do these works tell us?

Each of the adaptations discussed is compelling in its own right for various reasons. However, it is the shared key similarities among them that truly highlight the enduring relevance of *Antigone*. Through its exploration of the tension between the power and motivations of the state and the agency of the individual, the play has provided a powerful framework for expressing the British South Asian Muslim experience. These adaptations demonstrate how the narrative of *Antigone*—a woman defying authority in the name of familial and moral duty—resonates deeply with contemporary struggles around identity, citizenship, and belonging in Britain. By adapting *Antigone* to reflect these realities, these playwrights have created poignant works that not only reflect the socio-political challenges faced by South Asian Muslim communities, but also underscore the universal themes of resistance, loyalty, and justice.

1. Multiculturalism in Britain

In 2011, then-Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron claimed that the arrival of immigrants who refused to assimilate into British culture had created a "kind of discomfort and disjointedness in some neighbourhoods." Many interpreted this as a declaration of the failure of multiculturalism in the UK. However, others argued that this view represented a narrow and negative misinterpretation by the state of what British multiculturalism truly is (Abbasov, 2015, pp. 85-87). For South Asians, particularly those born in the UK, their experiences diverge significantly from the picture Cameron painted.

Kaan reflects the fusion of cultures he personally experienced growing up in Bradford through his work. Aaliyah, the protagonist, embodies this cultural hybridity. She adopts Western forms of dress, does not wear the hijab like her sister, enjoys contemporary dance music, and effortlessly moves between regional slang, such as using Northern English expressions like "summat" and "owt," while also switching to Arabic when speaking to her sister. Kaan himself recalls being expected to communicate in this hybrid style in his own daily life, reflecting the complex identity of the British South Asian community.

Ellams' production was developed through extensive conversations with his predominantly British South Asian cast to ensure an authentic atmosphere (APGRD, 2022). He captures the melting pot effect of an ethnically diverse area in the opening scene, where a group dances the "Electric Slide" while others play video games (Ellams, 2022, p. 3). In a powerful moment, Antigone discusses the diversity of her community during a performance of her poem:

> ...you who always prays are my people
> You who never prays are my people....
>
> You in the kurta and you in the flip flops,
> You in trainers and you in your socks...
>
> You in the hijab and you without any
> You are my people, you are my plenty... (Ellams, 2022 pp. 3-4)

2. Dispelling stereotypes and highlighting racism

Shamsie, Kaan and Ellams have used their works as an opportunity to dispel misinformed stereotypes. Shamsie stated in an interview:

> If you are a woman wearing a hijab then you are an oppressed woman — that boring, tedious kind of narrative...I wanted to have in there something that you rarely see in portrayals of Muslims: that, yes, religion is one component of their lives, but it isn't everything. (McDonough, 2017)

Aaliyah's dialogue in Kaan's play is filled with references to the racist tropes and stereotypes that the South Asian Muslim community often faces. Lines such as "Shari'a law is tekking over" and "lock up ya girls before they all turn muslamic" are shouted mockingly by Aaliyah, representing the anti-immigrant

sentiment and the stereotyping that particularly targets this community (Freedom Studios, 2021). The role of the British print media in fuelling anti-Muslim sentiment is also highlighted, particularly when Aaliyah accuses her sister Imani of believing her brother is guilty of "summat" just because of what she's read, exclaiming, "What, in the Daily fucking Mail?" (Freedom Studios, 2021). Similarly, Shamsie weaves the media's harmful rhetoric into her narrative, using sensationalist newspaper reports and tweets to highlight the media's influence on public opinion.

Ellams' *Antigone* also boldly confronts racist attitudes. His Antigone openly asks:

> Is it to paint Muslim men as oppressors? Why are you so obsessed with what we wear? It's none of your business. It's never asked why Muslim women are attacked for wearing hijabs. (p. 69)

Addressing these negative views head-on is both refreshing and incredibly brave, especially considering that their audience is likely to be predominantly white.

3. Educating (or Not) the Audience

Just as Sophocles' play would have sparked discourse among its audience regarding the themes it presented, these contemporary adaptations have similarly done so. We are invited to step into the shoes of Antigone, a young woman, which would have been a challenging experience for the original male Athenian audience to relate to. This same challenge exists in these adaptations, where an educational process is subtly taking place. Despite efforts to make these works more accessible to minority groups, audiences in Britain would still have been predominantly white, often with limited knowledge of their fellow citizens with South Asian heritage. In *Aaliyah*, Imani expresses, 'We are foreigners in their country,' echoing the sentiment discussed earlier in this paper (Freedom Studios, 2021). On the other hand, Aaliyah frequently references the contributions of their community to Britain, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic: 'Without people like us, this country would've been on its bloody knees during this past year' (Freedom Studios, 2021).

Ward (2021) notes that Kaan's play was not written with a majority white audience in mind, and it includes Arabic phrases that are part of the everyday vocabulary for Bradford's Muslim communities but would be unfamiliar to many secular people. Kaan intentionally refrains from offering explanations or context for these words and rituals, choosing not to create a sense of 'otherness.'

Ellams, too, reminds the audience that the South Asian community didn't choose Britain as a place to settle randomly. The relationship is deeply rooted in the legacy of empire and colonialism:

> You forgotten what this country did to us? Dividing India? Three wars over Kashmir? Millions killed in Pakistan, our great aunts and uncles. (p. 9)

These creative works are not explicitly trying to educate their audiences by emphasizing potential differences. Rather, they serve as a reminder of how

intrinsically linked all British citizens are, regardless of where their ancestral home may be. They highlight that some members of the population still face societal barriers that prevent their full participation and inclusion.

4. Criticising Government

Criticism of the fourteen years of Conservative government rule, which ended in 2024, is evident in all three adaptations, particularly regarding how decisions during this period negatively impacted the South Asian Muslim community. Though the works do not explicitly reference specific events, the audience and critics immediately drew connections to high-profile cases like Shamima Begum's, which highlighted the precarious nature of citizenship under Conservative leadership (Akbar, 2022; Gentleman, 2022; Saville, 2022; Ward, 2021).

The political rhetoric of the time exacerbated divisions, and the fact that South Asians like Sajid Javid and Priti Patel held high government positions only made these divisions more difficult to accept. While having South Asians in prominent roles should have been a source of pride, many in the community felt these figures did not advocate for their own people. Instead, their actions often reinforced barriers to equality and perpetuated a sense of disenfranchisement. This resonates strongly with the depiction of Creon's refusal to listen to Antigone in both Kaan's and Ellams' works—where leaders, despite their positions, do not heed the pleas of their citizens.

As Daly, the co-director of *Aaliyah*, aptly put it:

> There is a clear reason why we have had a series of Black and South Asian Home Secretaries. Because they can say things that are nakedly racist but they can't be racist because they are brown.

These works reflect the disconnect between those in power and the voices of the communities they are meant to represent. This dynamic is central to both the adaptations and the ongoing discourse surrounding citizenship, equality, and representation in the UK.

Conclusion

The trend of featuring British South Asian Muslim communities in adaptations of *Antigone* in the UK since 2017 can be attributed to several key factors, both cultural and political. Greek theatre, particularly the work of Sophocles, provides a space for audiences to reflect on universal themes like power, justice, family, and duty. These themes resonate deeply with the experiences of marginalized communities in a post-colonial era, especially in times of political tension and division.

For British South Asian Muslims, particularly in the wake of rising anti-Muslim sentiment and the challenges to citizenship, *Antigone* offered the perfect vehicle through which to explore their struggles. As previously noted, the 2010s were marked by a growing sense of insecurity around the status and rights of British South Asians, with issues like the Shamima Begum case brin-

ging the question of citizenship to the forefront. The government's increasing hostility towards immigrants and minority communities, paired with the lack of supportive representation in politics, meant that themes of fighting against the oppressive state and the tension between personal belief (religion) and state law became especially relevant.

The works of Kamila Shamsie, Kamal Kaan, and Inua Ellams created space for these communities to be represented and heard in ways that reflected their lived experiences. These adaptations allowed for the exploration of themes like loyalty to family versus loyalty to the state, the role of religion in public life, and the consequences of political decisions that disproportionately affect certain groups. They provided a platform to challenge the stereotypes of British South Asian Muslims and repositioned them as protagonists in their own stories, fighting against the forces of state power, much like Antigone did in Sophocles' tragedy.

Ultimately, these adaptations were a powerful way to open up conversations about identity, citizenship, and belonging in the context of post-colonial Britain. They used the universal themes of *Antigone* to reflect the specific struggles of British South Asian Muslims, illustrating the ongoing fight for recognition, equality, and justice in a society where they were often seen as outsiders. These works not only provided a means to discuss the complexities of belonging in Britain but also challenged audiences to reconsider their perceptions of "otherness" and the power dynamics that shape citizenship and identity in modern times.

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Abstract

As with most Greek tragedies, the appeal of these ancient texts is their ability to continually talk to our sense of humanity and ask 'what would you do?'. They specifically lend themselves well as case studies to civic discussions; therefore, it is not surprising that during a number of key moments in British history, we see revivals of certain plays. Sophocles' *Antigone* is such a production which has had a lengthy performance history in Britain, however, with the introduction of Anouilh's (1949) and Brecht's adaptations (1967) to the London theatre scene we see *Antigone* subsequently used as a vehicle for politically charged discussions surrounding current affairs, in particular anti-war messaging and criticism of government policy.
While Britain has been multicultural for a lot longer than some would like to accept, the demographic producing and creating adaptations of Greek tragedy were, and in many ways continue to be, predominantly white British, and rarely reflect the diversity within British society. However, there are a number of playwrights and authors outside of this cohort who are utilising the plays and mythologies of the Greco-Roman world to vocalise their lived experiences within the UK. This is seen notably in adaptations of Sophocles' *Antigone* since 2017.
This paper will focus on how the tragedy of *Antigone* has been utilised to discuss the moral dilemmas that multicultural Britain faces, particularly from the perspective of British-Pakistani and British-Bengali Muslims. It will explore how the success of Kamila Shamsie's novel *Home Fire* (2017) opened the door for new interpretations leading to the productions of *Aaliyah (After Antigone)* in 2021 and Inua Ellams' *Antigone* in 2022. The core of this paper will discuss how these adaptations use the tragedy to explore the question of what it means to be a British Muslim today.

Resumo

Tal como acontece com a maioria das tragédias gregas, o apelo destes textos antigos reside na sua capacidade de dialogar continuamente com o nosso sentido de humanidade e de perguntar "o que faria?". Prestam-se especialmente bem como estudos de caso para discussões cívicas; por isso, não é de estranhar que, em diversos momentos-chave da história britânica, assistamos à retoma de certas peças. *Antígona*, de Sófocles, é uma produção com um longo historial de apresentações na Grã-Bretanha. No entanto, com a introdução das adaptações de Anouilh (1949) e Brecht (1967) no panorama teatral londrino, vemos Antígona ser posteriormente utilizada como veículo para discussões politicamente carregadas em torno de assuntos atuais, em particular mensagens antiguerra e críticas à política governamental.
Embora a Grã-Bretanha seja multicultural há muito mais tempo do que alguns gostariam de aceitar, o grupo demográfico que produziu e criou as adaptações da tragédia grega era, e em muitos aspetos continua a ser, predominantemente branco-britânico, e raramente reflete a diversidade da sociedade britânica. No entanto, existem vários dramaturgos e autores fora deste grupo que utilizam peças e mitologias do mundo greco-romano para verbalizar as suas experiências vividas no Reino Unido. Isto vê-se notavelmente nas adaptações de *Antígona*, de Sófocles, desde 2017.
Este artigo irá focar-se na forma como a tragédia de Antígona tem sido utilizada para discutir os dilemas morais que a Grã-Bretanha multicultural enfrenta, particularmente na perspetiva dos muçulmanos britânico-paquistaneses e britânico-bengalis. Explorará como o sucesso do

romance *Home Fire* (2017), de Kamila Shamsie, abriu caminho a novas interpretações, levando às produções de *Aaliyah* (*Depois de Antígona*), em 2021, e *Antígona*, de Inua Ellams, em 2022. O cerne deste artigo discutirá como estas adaptações usam a tragédia para explorar a questão do que significa ser um muçulmano britânico hoje.