

## *Nowhere girl* **Anisa Mustafa**

She stares out of the screen. A young woman with skin the colour of muscovado sugar and eyes like a Tim Burton character. Her hair sun-buffed brown, straight, streaming from a blue cap. She is wearing a vest with 'catstagram' printed across the chest, her arms thin but toned. She blinks a few times.

'Do you regret saying those things?' Male voice from somewhere behind the camera.

'Of course, I regret saying it, you know.'<sup>1</sup>

Her hand comes up and she pinches her nose a couple of times as if she has an itch. Her nails are painted postbox red, a digital watch bulging on her thin wrist. She has just been reminded of a scene from four years ago.

It is 2019. American-led forces have just liberated areas of Syria from ISIS control. Former ISIS fighters are in prison, their families and children in camps managed by Kurdish forces. British journalists are in a frenzy over the discovery of Shamima Begum amidst the charred remains of the Islamic State.

A girl dressed from head to toe in black walks into a room, only her face visible, even the two-day old baby she is cradling is hidden beneath layers of the jilbab.

'She stuck with the extremists till the very last moment but now she wants forgiveness.' Faceless voice over the scene.

*As if she could have Ubered her way out  
of the Islamic State*

The girl sits down and looks off camera at the person interviewing her. The camera cuts to the reporter.

'So here's your opportunity now to apologise to some of the people who were murdered by the group that you joined. Some of the British men, some of the women, some of the kids, some of the kids from Manchester, from Manchester Arena, you must have heard about that attack. What did you think about that?'

The words come out in a snarl, the reporter's face is scrunched up, as if contempt is pulling it out of shape.

Shamima stares back, blank-faced. Then a stream of words blunder from her mouth. She says she is sorry innocent people died, she thinks this is wrong, she says she didn't know about the kids, says it's a two-way thing 'really,' done in retaliation. She says women and kids are being killed in Islamic State right now.

'Their justification for it was that it was retaliation and I thought ok that is a fair justification.'

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<sup>1</sup> All quotes included in the piece are from the BBC documentary: Josh Baker, 'The Shamima Begum Story' BBC iPlayer 7 February 2023, <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/m001j079/the-shamima-begum-story>> [accessed 24 April 2023].

## ***Non-Fiction***

**Section Editor:**  
Rosanne van der Voet

***The University of Sheffield's  
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## Nowhere girl Anisa Mustafa

The statement hangs in the air like a foul stench. The documentary I am watching snaps back to the current time in which Shamima Begum is aged 23 years. Her face is more chiseled, childhood has shrunk away from her bones. Instead of the austere black veil she wears a blue P cap and keeps playing with her hair self-consciously. She is blinking as if trying to find an antidote to the poisonous words uttered by her younger self. She has just lost her appeal against the home secretary's decision to remove her British citizenship back in 2019. She is barred from returning to the UK, deemed a risk to national security. Although there was 'credible suspicion' of trafficking for sexual exploitation in Begum's case, the Appeals Commission said there was 'insufficient' evidence to overturn the decision.<sup>2</sup>

This is a BBC documentary by Josh Baker, who has also produced a 10-part podcast containing much more detail of his eight-year investigation into the Shamima Begum story. I watched the documentary after listening to the podcast titled 'I am not a monster 2'. Despite the frivolous title, I suspect this is as serious an investigation into this issue as we are going to get in mainstream media.

During the documentary, Josh Baker's voice comes from behind the camera. We never see what he looks like. As the narrator, he comes to be a familiar presence, taking us through events, shaping our understanding of them. Shamima appears in a traditionally framed portrait shot. She looks straight into the camera, directly into the eyes of the audience. This positioning of Shamima creates a feeling of complicity with the out-of-shot person; his gaze, commentary and questions. The camera zooms in and out of Shamima's face, as the film stitches together disparate moments to create a narrative between past and present. We see what Josh Baker wants us to see: a stoney face, with fleeting glimpses of defiance, regret, shame. We don't know what other expressions Shamima presented. We have no way of knowing if she laughed at some points, cried at others, or whether she just does not do public displays of emotion.

This matters, because the documentary implies the way in which Shamima presented herself to the world in 2019 condemned her and, in all likelihood, the child she was trying to get back home to deliver. There are newspaper stories (not in the documentary) about how she did not 'shed a tear'<sup>3</sup> when she buried this baby in an unmarked grave in Syrian sand.

The story told by the documentary goes something like this. Intense public interest in Shamima Begum began in 2015 when she and two of her friends travelled from Bethnal Green to Turkey to join ISIS. Other young Muslims from all over the world had done the same, but this story skyrocketed because of the ages of the 'Bethnal Green trio'<sup>4</sup> (two 15 and one 16). Their gender was also remarkable, since ISIS was largely associated with black balaclava-branded, gun-toting aggressive young men. Another concern was how easy it appeared to be to join a terrorist organisation, operating in the midst of a war everyone had their eagle eyes on. Eventually, when efforts to bring the girls back failed, the media storm subsided.

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2 Haroon Siddique, 'Shamim Begum loses appeal against removal of British Citizenship', BBC News, 22 February 2023 <<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/feb/22/shamima-begum-loses-appeal-removal-british-citizenship>> [accessed 13 May 2023].

3 Tiffany Lo, 'ISIS bride Shamima Begum 'didn't shed a tear when her baby was buried'', Mirror 2 April 2019 <<https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/isis-bride-shamima-begum-didnt-14221650>> [accessed 12 May 2023].

4 Mercedes Masters and Salvador Santino F. Regilme Jr, 'Human Rights and British Citizenship: The Case of Shamima Begum as Citizen to Home Sacer', *Journal of Human Rights Practice*, 12 (2020), 341 – 363 <<https://doi.org/10.1093/jhuman/huaa029>> [accessed 8 April 2023].

## Non-Fiction

Section Editor:  
Rosanne van der Voet

The University of Sheffield's  
Creative Writing Journal

## *Nowhere girl* **Anisa Mustafa**

Four years later, Begum emerged in the Syrian al-Hawl camp for people from the former Islamic State. This part of the story is led by Andrew Lloyd, a silver-haired, blue-eyed, bearded war correspondent for The Times. His eyes light up when he describes meeting a woman covered in the black ISIS shroud, speaking in a familiar London accent.

Heavily pregnant, she was seeking passage back to the UK. As Lloyd is giving his account, we see images of a dusty camp crackling in hot dry sun, full of tents, enclosed in tall metal and barbed wire fences. Black burka-clad women and carefree children are wandering amidst a swarm of cameras and mikes. An empty bench appears outside a rustic limewashed building with cables hanging from the roof. The bench on which Shamima Begum perched as Lloyd took a photo of her pouty, puffy, pained face peeking out of the black shroud. The photo splashed across Lloyd's exclusive cover story, 'Bring me home'. Soon every newspaper and television screen was emblazoned with the same image.

Back from the dead  
She said she had no regrets about going  
Jihadi bride, London girl  
Wants baby on NHS  
I joined ISIS and all I got was this T-shirt  
I don't know if Britain wants people like that  
back in this country  
Is she still filled with hatred  
for this country  
This country, this country, this country  
If you have a no-deal Brexit do you  
want to come back to the UK  
Lots of laughter  
I mean this is a woman who married  
an ISIS terrorist and  
is for all intents and purposes  
herself an ISIS terrorist.  
She is 19 years old she is an adult.  
ISIS bride stitched suicide bombers into explosive vests  
Do you think Shamima Begum should be allowed  
back into the UK from Syria?  
No no no no no no no NO definitely not she should be done for treason she's a risk for this  
country  
This country, this country, this country  
BYE BITCH

As I watched this flurry of charges cascade in pictures and voices, I was acutely aware of seeing a completely different person to this 'international hate figure.' I saw a young girl, whose misguided and ill-informed decision to seek a thrilling new life had catastrophic consequences. The woman they were all talking about did not look much like an adult, her teenage face still showing puppy fat. Journalists were pounding her with questions to try to extract some form of apology, some sign of remorse from the 'terrorist bride.' In one scene, just after she has given birth and can barely hold herself upright, a reporter asks her what it was like living in the Islamic State. Under hot probing lights, Shamima appears lost and confused. The dart-like questions seem to confound her. Her head drops in what looks like exhaustion as she replies:

## ***Non-Fiction***

**Section Editor:**  
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*The University of Sheffield's  
Creative Writing Journal*

## Nowhere girl Anisa Mustafa

'Yeah it was ok. It was just like the propaganda videos, you know.'

She made it sound so normal. No wonder everyone thought she was evil. The documentary explains what none of the reports at the time alluded to. Shamima was not endorsing the beheadings and massacres in the propaganda videos better known to the public. She was referring to propaganda videos showing an idyllic Muslim state where families and children played in a park in Raqqa. This park, the focal point of Shamima's desires, features in the documentary several times.

As an LSE scholar of Islamist terrorism explains in the film, the violent propaganda was only a small part of the ISIS marketing strategy. Ninety percent of ISIS videos, designed to recruit young Muslims, depicted a peaceful Islamic state with parks, hospitals and schools. The beheadings were a marginal theatre, posturing to the infidel enemy.

What is also missing from the media coverage in 2019 is the context of her statements. She had spent her last days in the Islamic State fighting to stay alive, to save her unborn child. She had already lost two children, a girl and a boy, both under two years of age. Having already lost two children, *two, under the age of two. Two under two.*

*She had been pregnant five times in the last four years.  
There were no headlines about this.*

In Baker's interview, a visibly transformed, much harder-looking Shamima, is reminded repeatedly of her media performance four years ago. In what feels like an uncanny echo of the past, Baker keeps asking similar questions to the ones fired at her then, presumably to see if the new look, 'more TikTok than terror state',<sup>5</sup> is matched by some shift in her attitude.

She knows. Four years ago she failed to denounce ISIS with a vehemence sufficient to appease public outrage. At the time she was protecting her unborn child from women in the camp who were still loyal to ISIS. Denouncing ISIS could get your tent burnt to the ground.

Shamima says, 'I felt very used by the journalists, I felt they did not care about my mental health and where my mind was at that time'.

Even when she confirms regret, when she says how sorry she is, but without accepting blame for ISIS crimes, Baker tells the audience he remains unsure if she is telling the truth. He wonders if she really was afraid of retribution or whether she was still under the influence of ISIS when British journalists uncovered her presence in the Syrian camp.

*What if Shamima had shown more remorse,  
shed a few tears?*

Andrew Lloyd, the Times journalist who broke the Begum story, says she was talking like someone who had lived with ISIS for four years, as you would expect. Regardless, the public wanted a body to flay for all the crimes of ISIS.

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<sup>5</sup> Bagehot, 'Bring back Shamima Begum and then put her in prison', The Economist 22 February 2023 <<https://www.economist.com/sheffield.idm.odc.org/britain/2023/02/22/bring-back-shamima-begum-and-then-put-her-in-prison>> (accessed 12 May 2023).

## Non-Fiction

Section Editor:  
Rosanne van der Voet

The University of Sheffield's  
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*Nowhere girl*  
**Anisa Mustafa**

*A 19-year-old pregnant with the ISIS terrorist's baby  
did the job nicely.*

What captures the appetite for retribution most profoundly is an extract from an ITV news report, a few days after Shamima Begum gave birth to her baby boy.

Shamima is desperate for the British government to allow her to return home. She is sitting next to an ITV reporter, cradling her newborn son.

'Until this morning Shamima Begum had assumed she was coming back to Britain,' says the reporter's voiceover the scene.

'Have you heard anything new about your case?' he asks her.

*I am guessing he asks for effect because he knows  
what is coming next.*

'No, I only get information about my case every time a journalist comes to me,' Shamima says.

*The irony, considering  
what comes next.*

'What was the last information you had?'

'That not everyone wants me to come back and that it might take a bit of time for me to come back.'

The reporter hands her a copy of a document sent to her parents the day before.

She opens it, not knowing what is coming next, although the audience is primed by the voice over. 'But I've come here with a copy of the letter sent to her parents yesterday, stripping her of British citizenship.'

She opens the letter, coughs into one hand, the camera zooms in and she reads haltingly. We see her face as she grasps the implications of this news, making her stateless, against international law and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to which Britain is a signatory.

'Ok then,' she says very matter-of-factly.

'What do you think?' the reporter asks.

'I don't know what to say,' she says, sniffing. I think she has a cold of some sort. It's not an emotional snuffle.

'I don't know why my case is any different to other people. Is it just because I was in the news four years ago? I feel like it is a bit unjust to me and my son.'

The camera cuts to a close-up of her baby wrapped in blankets, who later died of pneumonia in the camp.

**Non-Fiction**

**Section Editor:**  
Rosanne van der Voet

*The University of Sheffield's  
Creative Writing Journal*

## Nowhere girl Anisa Mustafa

'But you've done this to your son, this is a consequence of your actions.'

'I don't know what to say,' she says, head down, eyes cast low, 'I don't know what to say.'

In the documentary, many different kinds of experts offer commentary on the case. Security (LSE academic, US intelligence agent), journalists, legal experts (lawyers acting for the girls' families), community members (mosque spokesperson), even Shamima's ISIS husband from a prison somewhere in Syria. Conspicuous in their absence are experts on citizenship, academic or legal, and professionals from psychology or social services to comment on the grooming and sex trafficking angle, despite this being a key issue that has been written about.<sup>6</sup>

*As if this story is no more than a deviant  
person's fall from grace.*

In a bloodthirsty public sphere in which the documentary has been criticised for giving a platform to a dangerous terrorist, it seems a sensible approach to err on the side of the 'securocrats'.<sup>7</sup> Yet the film's impression of a country united behind the deprivation of citizenship for dangerous terrorists is neither accurate nor fair. There are a few bubbles of dissent afloat despite the oceanic scale of censure. The Guardian's Zoe Williams<sup>8</sup> rebukes the documentary for putting a traumatised victim of sexual exploitation under interrogation about her motivations for joining ISIS. Bagehot<sup>9</sup> in *The Economist* compares Sajid Javed's removal of citizenship to a Stalinist mantra of 'no person no problem', in a 'no passport, no problem' twist.

*Begum: the first-ever woman British woman stripped of her citizenship,  
There are fewer headlines about this.*<sup>10</sup>

Painstakingly, Josh Baker makes the effort to disclose how security forces knew Shamima and her friends were a radicalisation risk, but still they managed to get through multiple layers of international airport security to reach the most dangerous place on the planet. Evidence is sought and pursued, diligently, to uncover how the man who smuggled them from Turkey to Syria was a Canadian spy. Experts in security, law and theory say it in the film, loud and clear: this could have been stopped. Clear systemic failings in justice, security, social security, education; all played a role in the sequence of events in which a 15-year-old ended up in the Islamic State.

*Manipulated, lured, smuggled,  
imprisoned, raped, starved and then  
made stateless, homeless, childless.*

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6 Maya Foa, 'Don't judge Shamima Begum today; judge the cruel ministers who still won't take responsibility for her', *The Guardian* 22 February 2023 <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/feb/22/shamima-begum-child-trafficking-uk>> [accessed on 13 May 2023].

7 Masters and Regime Jr 2020.

8 Zoe Williams, 'Ham-fisted but humane: the BBC's podcast about Shamima Begum raises vital questions', *The Guardian* 22 March 2023 <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/mar/22/shamima-begum-bbc-podcast-im-not-a-monster>> [accessed on 13 May 2023].

9 Bagehot 2023.

10 Masters and Regime Jr 2020.

## Non-Fiction

### Section Editor:

Rosanne van der Voet

*The University of Sheffield's  
Creative Writing Journal*

## *Nowhere girl* **Anisa Mustafa**

Yet the documentary keeps casting doubt on Shamima's account of herself. After every clip in which she speaks, someone more articulate, more authoritative, comes along to undermine her or explain her. This is Josh Baker in dialogue with his subject: '

You did go and join ISIS.'

'Ahum.'

'You were a member of that group. That group was committing genocide and committing crimes. You are part of a group that's doing those things, and as a result of that you share some responsibility for that group's actions.'

'I understand what you're trying to say but I'm not going to take responsibility for other people's actions. It would have happened regardless of whether I was there or not.'

Cut to a citizen of Raqqa who is only partially visible, a bearded chin above a t-shirt of green leaves and ferns. His voice floats over scenes of a city reduced to rubble, shattered windows, crumbling walls, metal wires and spokes jutting out everywhere like the broken limbs of buildings. The remains of a sitting room, one wall blown open to sunlight, a faded, derelict armchair with a pair of dust-caked jeans strewn across it, a picture of a blue vase with sunflowers still on the wall, maybe painted into it.

*The jeans and the painting kill me.*

'All of them did something. All of them bear responsibility no matter how small their role was. We lost so many people. We lost a beautiful country.'

His accusation reverberates across the film, hovering over Shamima's interviews, past and present, expert and anecdotal witness statements, media clips, past and present. A seemingly endless dance to find reasons to acquit or hang her.

I wonder how many people watching the documentary thought about citizenship at all. Citizenship is not something you think about on the way to the supermarket or putting the washing in. Passive citizenship has been undermining democracy for so long,<sup>11</sup> it is no wonder New Labour worked so hard to foster 'active citizenship' and later the Con-Lib coalition tried to push the Big Society.<sup>12</sup> Citizenship can mean many things but ask anyone on the street and I bet no one will call it a gift from the government.

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11 Russell J. Dalton, *Citizen Politics: Public Opinion and Political Parties in Advanced Industrial Democracies*, Fifth Edition, (Washington: CQ Press, 2008).

12 Bridget Anderson, 'Citizenship: What Is It and Why Does it Matter?' *The Migration Observatory at the University of Oxford*, 28 March 2011, <<https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/primers/citizenship-what-is-it-and-why-does-it-matter/>> [accessed 10 May 2023].

## ***Non-Fiction***

**Section Editor:**  
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## *Nowhere girl* **Anisa Mustafa**

This seems to me the crux of the Shamima Begum story. How an inalienable right has become contingent seems to me a crisis that should animate every viewer, every listener, every reader. Anja Bossow,<sup>13</sup> an academic expert on the constitutionality of citizenship, argues Begum's banishment from her birth country is a threat to everyone. Not because any laws were broken, but because laws don't speak for themselves. They require interpretation and judgement to be turned into actions. In Shamima's case, Bossow argues, the lawmakers took liberties they should not have had. Under British law, citizenship can be deprived 'on the sole basis of the Home Secretary's entirely discretionary, personal and ultimately non-transparent decision that to do so might be "conducive to the public good"'.<sup>14</sup> For the law to serve a diverse and complex society, it must have some 'latitude,' but this is not the same as having a 'blank cheque to do as it pleases'. Bossow believes the British Home Secretary's decision was shaped by negative public opinion, or that it used public opinion to help brush away the thorny issue of what to do with Islamists wanting to return to Britain.

*If public opinion shaped the decision,  
what shaped public opinion?*

Towards the end of the documentary, Josh Baker asks Shamima how many times she was pregnant, how many children she had and how she feels about them all.

'I feel I could have done more to save them. In a way, I feel guilty for even bringing them into this world, this horrible world, you know.'

Cut to scene of tents and temporary homes, satellite dishes and wires jumbled overhead, women and girls in burkas, boys in shorts, stray cats, objects flying in dry air like tumbleweed in this makeshift city for citizens of nowhere.

She is blinking, her eyes shift to the left, blinking, blinking, gaping, 'gormless'.<sup>15</sup>

*She's doing it again.*

She is still being manipulated, used, exploited. And we are all watching.

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13 Anja Bossow, 'Shamima Begum's Banishment is a Threat to Us All', Verfassungsblog: On Matters Constitutional 10 March 2023 <<https://verfassungsblog.de/shamima-begums-banishment-is-a-threat-to-us-all/>> [accessed 2 May 2023]

14 Bossow 2023.

15 Beghot 2023.

## **Non-Fiction**

**Section Editor:**  
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*The University of Sheffield's  
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## *Nowhere girl* **Anisa Mustafa**

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