

Khadija Hussain

Program: Citizens Thinkers Writers Yale University

University: Barnard College

Texts: Albert Camus, *The Plague* and James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*

Bio: Khadija Hussain grew up in New Haven, Connecticut, where she participated in the inaugural class of Yale University's Citizens, Writers, Thinkers program in 2016. She graduated from Wilbur Cross High School in 2017, and now attends Barnard College, where she studies history. In her free time, she enjoys running along the Hudson and learning the guitar.

Profile: In her application essay, Khadija wrote of the lasting impact Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem* has had on her life: "It seems unexpected, perhaps, that a contentious work of political theory analyzing Nazism has shaped my character, as a Muslim-American raised in New Haven, Connecticut. But Arendt's appraisal of human complacency, of the dangers of bureaucracy as a state in which we are liable to unthinkingly follow the rules set before us, has spoken volumes to my experience entering adulthood in an age marked by crises."

"Much of my life has been spent thinking about how, in the most mundane and everyday sense, my individual actions can be justice-oriented," Khadija wrote. For her, Arendt's "meditation on tragedy" reveals humanity's ability to normalize atrocity and rise above it. Thinking of Arendt's work, Khadija entered the Fellowship with a distinct set of questions in mind: "How do I participate in and uphold unjust political systems, consciously or unconsciously? How do I accept the normalization of particular forms of violence... Why do I see the law as a neutral object, when history has shown us it is anything but?"

These questions were clearly at the forefront of Khadija's mind when reading James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* and Albert Camus' *The Plague* with the help of her mentor Angela Xue. Early in her essay, Khadija notes that for both authors, "History serves as a source of both solace and anguish," with death serving as its metaphor, constantly repeated and absolutely inevitable. For residents of the town of Oran in Camus' *The Plague*, Khadija shares that the historical fact of death strips them of free will: "The past then, becomes all-encompassing: there is no foreseeable future other than that which has already occurred in history." Khadija is interested to discover that while death is also an inevitability in *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin does not find it as unifying a force.

Khadija read Baldwin and Camus in conversation and in tension with one another in light of the pandemic. Unlike in Oran, where the indiscriminate nature of the plague binds the townspeople in a "collective destiny," Khadija read Baldwin's argument that in America, "white people do not believe in death--are able to ignore it and deny it in ways that others are not" as

resonant in a moment when as she wrote, the pandemic disproportionately "clings to and threatens the lives of marginalized communities."

Since Baldwin and Camus are both attentive to "the past and its ever-near presence," Khadija asks how they would each frame the current pandemic. She notes that "the deep inequities in who lives and who dies has shown us that death is not a universalizing experience—not a necessary truth—in the sense that Camus seems to have imagined." Realizing this, Khadija returns to Baldwin's notion of history as something we ought to learn from. "Today's pandemic is, of course, a new reality for many of us," Khadija writes. "But its impact is inextricably tied up in and reliant on our already existing structures of power and marginalization: it exacerbates the violence and suffering of poor people of color that was already, to an extent, normal. To think otherwise is to willfully ignore history."