

Mapping Roots and Routes: A Critical Study of Kamila Shamsie's *Kartography*

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Abstract

In this paper, I shall offer a critical reading of Kamila Shamsie's third novel, Kartography. In almost all her novels, she engages with the troubled history of her motherland, but in each of her novels, her perspective towards history is markedly different. Rather than focus her attention on the macro-narratives of her country's collective history, she shows definite preference for the micro-histories of her characters. It's another matter that each time, she configures this micro-narrative in an entirely unexpected and ingenuous manner. Her novels may be regarded as personal tales of her protagonist's histories, though these do intersect with the national history, too, thereby blurring the lines between 'history' and 'fiction', a la Hayden White. This paper will focus on majorly four aspects of the novel vis-a-vis, the correlation between physical geography and abstract nature of memory; the sense of belongingness as opposed to the despair of alienation, the inherent nature of historical fiction and the interrelationship of the three.

Kamila Shamsie is a front-line contemporary Pakistani English fiction writer who has truthfully captured the essence of a nation in turmoil in all her novels. Politico-historical novels are an important aspect of her creative identity and her novels can be rightly called as socio-cultural document in an era of hope and despair in her country. She maps a trajectory of human emotions and conflicts propelled mostly by politics. Shamsie's debut novel *In the City by the Sea*, set in the turbulent times of a military dictatorship, is a story of the heavy price that dissenting voices have to pay in a country where military rule is the norm and democracy an aberration. The third book, *Kartography* is one of the more widely read books of Shamsie. It received widespread critical acclaim and was shortlisted for the John Llewellyn Rhys

award in the UK. Both *Kartography* and her next novel, *Broken Verses*, have won the Patras Bokhari Award from the Academy of Letters in Pakistan.

The first thing that strikes the readers is the use of ‘K’ instead of ‘C’ in the title of the book. The ‘K’ perhaps stands for Karachi; maybe because to this date the city of Karachi has no printed maps and the locals apparently rely on their intuitive knowledge and personal experience to get from one place to another. The two main protagonists of the novel Raheen and Karim have almost been twins since the time of their birth. Their parents are each other’s closest friends and share a history that nobody except the four of them is aware of. Karim and Raheen are almost inseparable; they speak in anagrams, complete each other’s sentences and speak through silences. Everything starts to change when Karim develops a fascination for maps. He realizes that there is no real map of Karachi and people find ways and routes through memory. The roads and buildings have colloquial names, borne out of family tales and history. Karim starts penning down maps of all the places he visits with his friends. Raheen tries to understand his obsession and be supportive but there is only so much understanding that her teenage sensibilities would allow her the luxury of. She finds herself being replaced by maps and tries to cope with the sense of losing her best friend. Things worsen when Karim’s family moves to London to escape the violence in Karachi. Silence engulfs the friendship of Karim and Raheen. They can no more find their best friend in each other but neither can they snap off the bond they both share. Karim completely withdraws when he finds out the truth of their parent’s past but refuses to share his pain with anybody. And Raheen can’t help in making the pain go away because she is still unaware of the memories of the past. To understand Karim and why he stands off from her, she has to learn what happened to their parents in the civil war, when Bangladesh declared its independence from Pakistan and what it means to face up to individual political responsibility.

Kamila Shamsie makes memories her symbols of going back into the past that was buried long years ago and makes maps the tool of return. The maps Karim gets obsessed with aren’t only maps of physical boundaries; rather they become the maps of interior landscape of the characters. These maps become a tool of finding ways of forgiving each other for the mistakes of the past and making peace with the memories that continue to haunt the present.

Before trying to tackle the various issues that the novel tries to unravel and comprehend, it almost becomes incumbent to talk about the relationship between history and fiction. The scientific aspect of history in the nineteenth century claimed that the past could be reflected as it actually happened. History was considered as an empirical search for external truths corresponding to events that were considered to be the absolute reality of the past events thereby treating history as a scientific search of knowledge. This view of treating history as a pure science was later opposed by many postmodernist philosophers of history,

Hayden White being the most prominent amongst them. He argued that historical facts cannot be represented objectively because they cannot exist independently of the historian and his consequent subjectivity. Historical events can only be reached through historical documents and other texts and it is the process of writing these events as historical ‘facts’ that most bothers thinkers like White. Such an argument stresses the role of the historian as a determining factor in giving significance to certain historical events and inserting only these events into historical accounts while ignoring others, sometimes only for the reason of ideological clashes or a difference of opinion.

Keeping in view all the above said, it becomes apparent that history and fiction have very close ties. More so in literature that deals with some historical epoch or the other. Works like *Kartography* and the other books by Kamila Shamsie all deal with a retelling of the official Pakistani historical narrative. Just like the historians use the historical documents and archives to present their accounts of history, similarly Shamsie uses the official historical narrative to present the personal histories of her protagonists. Her tales are personal to her characters but they do not hesitate to engage, and if need be, question and conflict with the accepted history of the nation. In other words, Shamsie uses the micro-histories of her protagonists to present a counter narrative to the macro-history of the nation and subsequently of the Indian subcontinent.

Kartography is tasked with uncovering Pakistan’s silenced histories. The book interrogates the war legacies, specifically the ethnic violence of 1980s and 1990s Karachi. While there is a growing archive of interdisciplinary work interrogating the effects of Partition, much of this has focused mainly on India. Furthermore, despite assertions that the breakaway of East Bengal is one of the most important discontinuity in the process of nation building for a still recovering Pakistan, an event whose “consequences are still being worked out” (Talbot 31), there is an almost “near silence on the memorial complications caused by the Independence of Bangladesh” (Kabir 488). It almost seems as if the entire nation is in a state of denial and most adamantly averts its gaze from the events of 1971, as if willing away the atrocities of the war by maintaining an official silence. Shamsie uses the tale of Raheen and Karim to help us understand what transpired during those surcharged times of distrust and violence that had engulfed the whole nation. She uses the micronarratives of her characters while building the macro-narrative of her country’s past. Shamsie skilfully employs the fabricated stories of Karim, Raheen and their parents and places them at a time when the official history of the nation refuses to provide any answers. She attempts to raise all those unasked questions that have plagued the entire subcontinent with its stoic resolve of non engagement. When the two friends part initially they try and keep in touch with each other through letters; its these letters that will first make Karim aware what he had refused to

see all those years being with Raheen; the fact of Raheen's self-indulgence and a larger indifference about the violence that surrounds the city they both love. Karim thereby becomes the voice of a common man grappling with the consequences of the decisions that take place far beyond his reach and comprehension. Given the human element in the treatment of the novel, it becomes apparent that Shamsie does not consider Partition as a national tragedy but rather more of a human tragedy wherein she mourns the human loss; loss in the form of lives, material and most importantly the loss of memories. Her characters, big and small are all grappling with a deluge of memories, some of which they are trying to will away and forget and some of which they are desperately trying to hold on to as a keepsake of the people they once were. In essence they are all trying to configure a map of memories; their own and those of their loved ones. This book more than the physical etching and sketching of the Karachi landscape is essentially cartography of memories.

While the repercussions of the 1947 Partition of India and Pakistan have been talked and written about extensively both in history as well as literature, as stated before, the events of 1971 Partition of Pakistan have been steadfastly avoided and overlooked; more so by the Pakistani population. But no matter how much silence is willed and sought, what happened cannot be undone. While the suppression of Bengali language and culture demonstrated the fraught processes of nation-building in the post-Partition period, the secession of Bangladesh brought crisis to the two-Nation theory upon which Pakistan was founded (Bose and Jalal 179). The actions of West Pakistan in East Pakistan in 1971 were strictly censored and in the post-war period, first Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and then Zia ul-Haq attempted to repair the physical and ideological damage incurred by the loss of Bangladesh by reinventing national identity through referencing and re-imagining Jinnah's version of Pakistan as a Muslim homeland (Talbot 4-5): that is, by forging a national narrative that omitted the loss of Bangladesh in the interim between 1947 and 1971. It was as if the people of Pakistan were made to believe that Bangladesh was never a part of Pakistan to begin with and East Pakistan had never really existed. The national narrative during that time invoked the solidarity of its population by convincing its people that they had lost Bangladesh right in 1947 and were just mourning the dual loss of its land and people in the after effects of that first Partition; the ripples of which they were still trying to iron out. However, attempts to suppress cultural difference in favour of a narrative of a united national identity that elides the loss of Bangladesh failed to prevent the re-emergence of ethnic and regional tensions (Talbot 15-19) and, since the 1980s, Karachi has become a particularly contested site for competing cultural claims between Sindhi and *muhajir* communities, claims that are themselves legacies of Partition. The term *muhajir* refers to those people who migrated from India to the newly created Pakistan, but has special significance for Urdu speakers in Karachi, to which a substantial proportion of *muhajirs*

moved. While *muhajir* communities dominated government in the early years of independence, perceived cultural and economic marginalisation by Bhutto and Zia regimes, and the “Punjabization” of the state, has led to the emergence of *muhajir* nationalist movement in Karachi, and to violent confrontations between *muhajir*, Sindhi, and Pathan communities (Ahmar 1039). Kartography draws together questions of narrative form with those of national forgiveness, to suggest that Karachi emerges as a conflicted, but potentially productive site for processes of reconciliation structured by difference and discontinuity.

With this crisis and context in mind, Raheen, the narrator of the Kartography reflects back on her childhood in the Karachi of 1980s. Taking in the events from 1970-71, 1986, and the mid 1990s, the book considers the intersecting impacts of war and the recent ethnic violence on the post-1971 generation, through Raheen’s friendship with Karim, and on the post 1971 Partition generation, through Karim and Raheen’s parents. Both the protagonists have been aware of the importance of the year 1971 only as the year that their parents “swapped” fiancés but the real reason of the swap is censored by the parents just like the atrocities of the war are purged from the official histories of the nation. This re-arrangement of relationships becomes indicative of the intimate relationship that exists between an individual and national histories. It goes on to show that an individual cannot exist in isolation of one’s circumstances and surroundings. Even though Karim and Raheen were not even born in 1971, but the decisions that their parents took has repercussions on their present. Even the monumental episode of fiancé swap is dictated less by personal reasons and more so by the charged atmosphere of distrust and fanaticism that had taken hold of the entire country during the troubled times of the war. The parents were as much victims of their time and history as Karim and Raheen are the inheritors of that burden. As the violence of contemporary Karachi closes in, the two eventually confront the meanings and implications of 1971 for the reconciliation of their own relationship in the 1990s.

In the novel the concept of local history manifests itself in the conflicting views of Raheen and Karim. While on a vacation to their Uncle Asif’s farmhouse, Karim develops a fascination with maps. It is here that he realizes that Karachi does not have a physical map. This fact bothers Karim maybe because he is aware that he will have to say goodbye to the city very soon when his family migrates to England. Karim’s desire to map the city stems from his fear of losing his moorings and his self definition. Raheen who is perhaps in denial of the fact that she’ll soon be separated from her best friend does not understand this urgency. For her putting those official street names to use seems irrelevant and an unnecessary hassle. She believes that doing so will alienate her from the pulse of the place that she breathes and lives daily.

In their own ways, both Raheen and Karim have their valid reasons to hold on to their own ideologies because they represent two different outlooks of viewing the world. Raheen represents the human or the poetic outlook wherein she prefers to hold on to the intangible feelings and Karim becomes the representative of the scientific outlook of looking at the world where every action and decision has to be guided by logic and reason. Raheen prefers to live in her memories and own up to those memories and Karim would rather live with hard cold and bare facts and own up spaces that he considers important to him. He already thinks of Karachi as a place he has to say goodbye to even before he actually leaves. For him, Karachi becomes a space he tries to remember in anticipation of forgetting. On his way back from the vacation, he looks from the car window as if he “has already started imagining what it would be like to be a stranger” (*Kartography* 59). Karim’s obsession with maps and mapping in essence are his quest for identity. Raheen’s repression of their difference feeds Karim’s anxious negotiations of his Pakistani subjectivity, and his growing sense that his history, as a Bengali-Pakistani, is being written over by narratives of national unity that seek to “forget” the loss of Bangladesh. Karim’s cartographic explorations of his post- 1971 identity echo and draw upon negotiations of post-Partition subjectivity found in a lot of artists of that time, especially poets like Faiz Ahmad Faiz. His maps re-genre these earlier Urdu poems to produce what can be called as “lyric maps” (Herbert 165) of Karachi. The fusing of two non-narrative forms- the maps and the lyric poem- enables an articulation of post-Bangladesh Pakistani subjectivity which complicates narratives that censor 1971 in order to construct continuity between the nation’s founding values and its contemporary identity. While Raheen continues to delight in the ambiguities of Karachi, Karim seeks some sort of order in maps, or at least some explanation behind the city’s rising violence. “I’ve been trying.” He tells Raheen, ““to come to grips with Karachi’s nature”” (132), a nature he believes can be found once all the names of all the streets and all the contours of all Karachi’s boundaries are fully realized. In doing so, he not only alienates himself from his lifelong friend, but he becomes distant from the city he so obsessively studies. “Karachi was an abstraction to him, in the way the past is an abstraction”.

Karim’s second map that he sends in 1990, illustrates the limits of Raheen’s knowledge of Karachi; for even though she considers Karachi to be her home, there were other subaltern identities that existed beyond Raheen’s narrative maps. His point in sending that map being that Raheen not only represses her difference from him, but also from Karachi, even if she claims to be connected with its diversities. If she fears that recognising Karim’s difference from her would cause a rift in their friendship then perhaps recognising her difference from Karachi would do the same to her sense of home. An important moment when Raheen does see the truth in Karim’s claims takes place when she, Zia and Karim are

first lost, and then stranded in Mehmoodabad, an area beyond their comfort zone of Clifton. The experience of being lost in Karachi, and then made strange to the unfamiliar topography and architecture, prompts Raheen to recognise, reluctantly, that her intimacy with Karachi is limited and that her detachment from the violence is only temporarily enabled by her socio-economic privilege, which keeps her at a distance from the day-to-day struggles of ethnic politics. Only when the adults have revealed the full context of the fiancé swap can Raheen begin to negotiate tension between intimacy and strangeness in Karachi. She realizes that her refusal to recognise differences creates distance and not intimacy and that her failure to consider the divergent legacies of 1971 “drew a diving line” between her and Karim (302). Raheen finally understands that the excessive narrativization of Karachi through personal memory has an exclusionary edge and like the “four line story” of adults, silences the complex networks of meanings, identities and histories.

In conclusion, *Kartography* as a book attempts to privilege humans over history because history happens to human beings. They are the subject material on which history operates and to sideline them in the process of writing history is a costly mistake. The book puts a human face on the process of history writing. Shamsie, while crafting the book, puts the reasons of Partition between Pakistan and Bangladesh in the background and keeps her characters and their personal tales in the forefront. The act of Partition though treated with the sensitivity that it deserves, does not overshadow micro-narratives of the story because history is guilty of papering the smaller cracks in order to preserve the continuity of a larger narrative. Macrohistories of nations have a subversive way of controlling the micro-histories of individuals and it is the function of a novelist to put a face to a faceless tragedy, and Shamsie succeeds in her attempts to do precisely that.

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