

## The Aspect of Individuality in the Selected Fictions of Kamila Shamsie

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### ABSTRACT

*Pakistan is infamous for its male biased society and male superior rules. It is marked that if the writers approach the issues of partition or ethnic struggle in their works, it often leads to invoke disputes. This study analyses how Kamila Shamsie, a Pakistani transnational female writer deals with sensitive issues about nationalism, the partitions, ethnic conflicts, etc., without creating any serious political or religious shocks. The study will focus on various aspects of individuality given to the characters to avoid striking on the conscious hysteria.*

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### Individuality in Kamila Shamsie's Novels:

Pakistan is a great mixture of culture that had five major ethnic groups to uphold the pride of the nation at the time of partition. "Out of the initial five ethnic groups- Bengalis, Punjabis, Pukhtun, Sindhis, and Baloch- four have actively contested the legitimacy of the administrative structure of the state, with one, the Bengalis, succeeding in breaking away and creating their own state, Bangladesh." (Khan, 15). A country born out of religious hatred and differing nationalist ideology, which was further shaken by a second partition that led to the formation of Bangladesh in 1971, and its unending conflict and wars with India has made the political and religious scenario Pakistan a notoriously discussed one in the global arena. In a country where ethnic conflicts, nationalist issues, political chaos are all matters of day to day life, how can a woman writer keep her narratives away from the danger of hitting the sensitive side of people and society? This paper studies the novels of Kamila Shamsie, one of the noted woman author of the twenty-first century to analyse how she has effectively utilised issues of identity politics as a good base to develop the plots of her novels but without inviting many political shocks, but has not gone beyond throwing a number of questions about the societal set up of Pakistan and left them unanswered.

### Objectified Identities:

Kamila Shamsie uses objectification of identity as an effective tool in *Salt and Saffron* and *Kartography* to keep the issues of class and ethnic politics at the surface level. The two main characters of these novels; Mariam in *Salt and Saffron* and Maheen in *Kartography* are denied the voice to express what they felt about their own lives. It must be remembered that the story of both the novels has its roots in the life story of these two women. Mariam has been portrayed as a woman who never spoke to people but to Masood and had to only in questions to enquire about food. She comes into the Dard-e-Dil family on the day Aliya was born. Nobody knows about her whereabouts except for a letter that comes to Aliya's father mentioning that Mariam is Taimur's (Aliya's grandfather, Akbar's brother) daughter. Her silence towards the questions thrown at her about her past and her parents later provides

other characters to develop their own theories against her, but she couldn't speak because speaking would mean answering questions which would mean revealing the truth. So she remained quiet.

Her lineage becomes a topic of discussion on more than one occasion, and Dadi makes the following remark about the class to which she might be born associating it to Taimur's disappearance from the family, "No one from our social set, or we would have known. Must have been someone in town. That's what brought on that smokescreen letter of his with its talk of becoming a servant. She was probably of that class, which is why he thought of it." (*Salt and Saffron*: 201).

Mariam was the one who got caught up in the whole question of class politics. Aliya's attempt is to reason out Mariam's thought by associating it to her own love affair with Khaleel. Reasoning a thing and experiencing it are completely different from one another. What Mariam has experienced can be explained only by her. What if she was born to a low class as inferred by Dadi? Was that experience of being among the low class that enabled her to love Masood? How has she looked upon the entire concept of class politics? All these questions are left unanswered.

Masood and Khaleel are the other two characters that are objectified the same way. They are from the lower strata of society, and they are the ones were on the receiving end in the class politics is operational. The reference is made to Masood in the whole novel is limited to his cooking skills and unmatched the taste of his food. The closest point to which reference is made in his awareness about us class limitation would be (if it can be taken so), Masood almost that my shoulder, said, "Don't worry, Aliya Bibi." (*Salt and Saffron*: 76)

Khaleel's case also falls in the same line with his life in reference to Liaquatabad; the place counted to be occupied only by poor does not make any significant entry to the narrative. Khaleel's conversations with Aliya gives a fair idea that he is aware of the class politics and his association with Liaquatabad can haunt him even in a foreign land to some extent. He asserts that it was the mention of Liaquatabad that

made Samia and Aliya stop their conversation with him quite abruptly and move out of the scene when they met the previous time. Aliya is forced to confess, "Don't tell me you don't know about the great class divide of Pakistan." (*Salt and Saffron*: 60). But the subjective part of his experiences does not make it through to the narrative.

The character of Maheen in *Kartography* is an even more interesting study in this aspect.

Maheen is the character that has suffered the most in the novel. She had to face all the troubles of being a Bengali who had to live through the chaos in Pakistan during the 1970s when the Civil War was going on in the East Pakistan with the Bengali community demanding a separate state for them. For the same Bengali ethnicity of hers, she had to hear a highly offensive comment from the person whom she had loved and was engaged to; whatever the intention of Zafar was in making such a derogatory statement, it had ended up in the breakup of their engagement. Later, she fell in love with Ali and married him; but the relation proved to be a failure as they got divorced and Maheen moved out of the country and got married to another person. The significant part of all these incidents in the novel that Maheen experiences in her own words is missing.

She discards the question of Raheen about Maheen's trust on her father by claiming that

Raheen won't understand what it was in 1971 as she was not there in those days. This passiveness from Maheen is necessary for the development of the story as this is the same stand she takes with her own son, Karim. Since he doesn't know what his mother had felt with the whole thing, he develops hatred towards Zafar, holding him as the reason for all the problems that have cropped up in the life of his parents, which in turn affects his own relationship with Raheen.

The personal issues in the affair kept apart, that is the even more important question of what it meant to be a Bengali woman living in Pakistan in those days. The only instance we find her speak of her ethnic roots is when she makes a mention to Zafar about the atrocities caused by the Army in Dhaka. She says, "Laila heard from some foreign journalist that the army's slaughtering my people by the thousands in Dhaka." (*Kartography*: 189).

While the subjective acceptance of her Bengali identity is seen in saying "my people", the hardship she had to face for being one does not get much mention. There is an incident of Ali informing Zafar and Yasmin why Maheen has not turned up to watch the horseracing. "You'd better go to her, Zaf. Some old beggar woman spat at her when she was walking to my car. You know, you're really go to get her out of here." (*Kartography*: 188). We hear what has happened to Maheen through Ali. He can convey that somebody has spat at her, but he nor anybody else can never understand or convey what being spat at the like until and unless you are on the receiving end. The difference is as huge as watching cricket match live and reading a newspaper report about the match.

#### Identity Crisis:

One aspect of societies that feature the presence of migrated people is the formation of plural individualities that are

often characterised by inequality. The newly formed identities in such a society can be simultaneously unsettled and unsettling. Such a situation where an individual finds himself/herself different from the existing social order can lead to a case of identity crisis.

Raza, son of Hiroko and Sajjad in *Burnt Shadows* is one such character who is caught up in no man's land. We find him, as a kid, showing reluctance to speak in Japanese, his mother tongue in public: 'Sayonara,' they all called out to Hiroko as the bus picked up speed again. Or at least, all of them except Raza called it out. He only spoke Japanese within the privacy of the home, not even breaking the true when his friends delighted in showing off his mother the one or two Japanese words they'd found in some book, some movie. Why allow the world to know his mind contained words from a country he'd never visited? (*Burnt Shadows*: 139)

Later, the readers find him repeatedly failing in his compulsory Islamic studies paper, most probably owing to the inability to cope with the extreme religious thoughts. This could possibly be for the simple reason that his parents themselves were not Muslim nationalists at a point in their lifetime. The conflict between the freedom he enjoyed at home in the strict rules of religion he had to face and outside society might have strangled Raza. In any case, the rest of the story focuses on the ups and downs in Raza's life; how he overcomes the barriers and move on in life. But the barriers in mention are Russian attack on Afghanistan and his consequent joining in the Mujahideen, his father's death, etc. with which Shamsie is able to avoid direct discussions on Muslim nationalism.

The obscurity surrounding the character of Raheen, the protagonist and narrator of

*Kartography*, also points to the fact that she too might be a victim of an identity crisis. Raheen was the daughter of Zafar who is a Muhajir but not of the Bengali bloodline. We see her admitting that she is a Muhajir during her childhood days. It followed an episode in which Zia had pushed down Karim was saying he was a "half-Bengali". She gathers her thought this way, "I was a Muhajir with a trace of Pathan and he was a Bengali and..." (*Kartography*: 43)

At the beginning part of the novel, we find Uncle Ali saying, "I share Zafar's views on land reform. And I'm not a Muhajir." (*Kartography* 43). We also find that Uncle Asif, Aunty Laila, Aunty Runty and others speaking against Muhajirs. In such circumstances, even with her father being a Muhajir and an advocate of rights of Muhajir, it is very likely that she would have found it difficult to accept that she is a Muhajir in the subjective sense of it.

The episode with the car thief, where he expresses his disgust and protest against the government that denied opportunities to the Muhajir's through the quota system, we find Karim speaking kindly to him and offering a helping hand. Raheen, on the other hand, fails to empathise and sympathise with him. With the protagonist cum the narrator of the story caught up with such a dilemma, it becomes an easy task rather for the author to keep references to sensitive topics at the surface level.

**Conclusion:**

Kamila Shamsie has not taken any revolutionary stand regarding the topics. She has taken enough care to make references to certain major events that had happened as a part of the Muslim nationalism as well as the ethnic movements. Her novels show both the difficulty of leaving the society in

which one feels at ease and the need to solve present problems through understanding the past. Besides politics threatening or causing loss of family or friends, there is a love story disturbed by differences of class, culture or ethnicity. Shamsie does not make any absolute opinion of the events, yet they inform the readers about the social and political history of Pakistan.

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