

**Reading Silenced Histories of Pakistan : A Study Of Kamila Shamsie's
*Kartography***

Arnab Ranjan Dhar

Student, M.A in English (2021), NET, The University Of Burdwan

Article Received: 12/09/2025

Article Accepted: 10/10/2025

Published Online: 12/10/2025

DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2025.7.10.266

Abstract:

Kamila Shamsie is an eminent Pakistani writer who has written a number of novels like *Burnt Shadows*, *Kartography*, *Home Fire*, *Broken Verses* etc. The superiority of Shamsie's novel depends on the ways in which, as Bruce King argues, "varied themes and stories within a novel are multilayered, interact and part of each other, so that the narrative about a person or a couple is viewed within a larger, more socially dense context" (King 147). *Kartography* is her third published novel in which she not only undertakes the task of uncovering Silenced Histories of Pakistan, but also has tried to lay much emphasis on the perspectives of marginalised Muhajirs. *Kartography* has keen insights of the author in that this novel is infused with the exploration of the predicament of rootless marginalised diasporic subjects by showing their repressed private histories. As the Title of this article indicates, it will try to critically explore the ways Shamsie has tried to uncover Silenced Histories of Pakistan. Simultaneously it will also try to demonstrate how refugees, also called Muhajirs, have been marginalised in post partition Pakistan.

Keywords- Private histories; Marginalised Muhajirs, Intergenerational trauma, Fracturing of identity, Non narrative devices, Perspective of territoriality

Introduction-

The task of uncovering Pakistan's silenced histories is at the core of *Kartography* "which interrogates the war's legacies, specifically in the ethnic violence of 1980s and 1990s Karachi" (Herbert 160). These Silenced histories are private histories of Raheen and Karim's parents, Raheen and Karim being the two central characters of the novel. These private Histories have become Silenced in post-1971 period because post-1971 Pakistan has been formed on the basis of Muhammad Ali Jinnah's motto ¹ and his one nation Theory ². Besides Shamsie has tried to portray how the Muhajirs ³ have been marginalised in post-1971 Pakistan, therefore Karim's perspective has been given much importance throughout the narrative as he is a Muhajir. Shamsie has shown how the phenomenon of partition has created a negative impact upon people by fracturing their identity and has produced an intergenerational trauma.

Discussion- The silenced histories that Shamsie uncovers in this novel are integral parts in the lives of Karim and Raheen's parents, i.e Zafar, Maheen, Ali and Yasmin. Through these Silenced histories, we come to know about the feelings and attitudes of Raheen and Karim's parents towards the events of 1971 in Pakistan. Shamsie, by uncovering these Silenced histories, simultaneously is trying to look at the bigger scenario of 1971 and figure out the attitudes, sentiments of all Pakistanis towards civil war and partition of 1971. Here the roles of both Raheen and Karim are very significant because they get access to certain non narrative private documents of their parents to know private Histories of their parents. In this way, Shamsie relies on certain non narrative devices to uncover Silenced Histories. By uncovering Silenced Histories, Shamsie is trying to draw our attention to the differences between private Histories and National history. National history of post-1971 Pakistan is singular and monolithic, endorsed by the Government of Pakistan which aims at demonstrating the achievements of the native Pakistanis, ignoring the Muhajirs. This National history has been composed on the basis of one singular and dominant perspective and doesn't consider alternative perspectives. This history is infused with the aspect of territoriality, composed on the basis of one nation Theory. As such, this history has been composed keeping in mind the hopes, dreams and aspirations of the native Pakistanis, ignoring the Muhajirs. In stark contrast to National history, private histories involve the negative impact of partition upon people and their sufferings. Shamsie, by uncovering Silenced Histories, critiques the logic on the basis of which National history of post-1971 Pakistan has been written, and also critiques the perspective of territoriality. Through these Silenced histories, we get to know the reason ⁴ due to which parents of Raheen and Karim who were engaged to each other, were compelled to swap their respective fiancés when they married.

Shamsie's use of non narrative devices to uncover Silenced histories (such as old photographs, private discussions, letters etc.) is very interesting. All these non narrative devices are non scripted private and historical documents to which Shamsie is anchoring. The old photograph that Raheen and Karim get access to, is an important evidence of forgotten private histories of their parents. It is through this photograph that they are trying to engage with the retreat of forgotten histories ⁵. This photograph brings about painful memory. They seek to decode this photograph to have clues that would help them to get acquainted with the feelings of their parents. This photograph was taken at the wedding of Ali and Maheen in which Zafar and Yasmin were present as married couple. The photograph presents parents of Raheen and Karim are all smiling, maintaining little distance from each other and it seems to Raheen that there is pain underneath this apparent smile; and Raheen and Karim want to study this repressed pain behind seeming smile. Therefore, this photograph, as a non scripted historical evidence, is a visual representation of non documented trauma and pain of partition. Raheen's approach to study this photograph is very important because she is not merely looking at it, rather she is deconstructing it; and in this process, she is decoding the semiotics of laughter.

Apart from photograph, non documented private discussions and conversations are also used by Shamsie to unveil private histories. The private conversation between Zafar and Maheen on the occasion of New Year's eve in Rahim Yar Khan shows the intimacy between them as they were engaged as couple. Zafar wants to become intimate with Maheen but Maheen, being a Bengali, fears to become intimate with Zafar because of the anti Bengali sentiment of native Pakistanis; and she is trying to make Zafar aware of it by telling him the reaction of his Boss after he came to know about Zafar's engagement with a Bengali woman : "Pity about his fiancée. Number of our clients won't like working with someone who has a Bengali wife" (Shamsie 52). Yet, Zafar is desperate to marry Maheen. Even if he has to change his job for marrying her, he will : "So, I'll change jobs" (Shamsie 52). The intensity of anti bengali sentiment on the part of the people of the then West Pakistan becomes crystal clear at a time when civil war of 1971 was approaching rapidly. Zafar could not fulfill his profound love for Maheen into marriage because of this anti bengali sentiment. Caroline Herbert notes, "With war approaching, anti-Bengali sentiment renders Zafar and Maheen's lives increasingly difficult; for Maheen as a Bengali, and for Zafar who is called "a traitor", a "Bingo-lover" (308)" (Herbert 160). Although Zafar is not quite imbibed by anti Bengali sentiment despite the fact that he himself is a native Pakistani, yet he is, to some extent, imbued with anti Bengali sentiment for he respects his native Pakistani lineage; that's why when a neighbour of Zafar whose brother has been killed in East Pakistan asks Zafar angrily how it is possible for Zafar to marry Maheen, a Bengali, Zafar replies, "Think of it as a civic duty. I'll be diluting her Bengali blood line" (Shamsie 232). It clearly reveals that he can never forget his native Pakistani heritage. It also shows Zafar is proud of his native Pakistani bloodline. For him, his identity as a native Pakistani comes first and then comes everything be it his love or anything else. This obviously demystifies native Pakistani's pride of nationalism through Zafar. Native Pakistanis like Zafar will never let their ego down to the Bengali people whom they used to think as inferior to them. Commenting upon this, Herbert opines, "This moment gestures towards the (often gendered) violence of the civil war (Mookherjee), and the genocidal repression of Bengalis in East Pakistan, atrocities which are excised from official histories, just as the parents censor the context for their re-arranged relationships. It also demonstrates the intimate relationship between individual and national histories that Raheen and Karim must negotiate decades later" (Herbert 161). Here Shamsie plays a clever trick by incorporating Karim and Raheen's negotiation while making a structure of their own relationship much later in the 1990s because both of them, after getting access to the private silenced histories, come to know the hidden complexities and suppressed tension in their parent's relationship in the 1971s. Therefore the events of 1971 included in the private histories are very important. Caroline Herbert points out, " As the violence of contemporary Karachi closes in, and as Maheen and Ali's marriage disintegrates, Raheen and Karim must confront the meanings of 1971 for their own relationship in the 1990s" (Herbert 161). Another private discussion that takes place just few weeks before the civil war of 1971 began, incorporates the views of the parents of Raheen and Karim, and of Asif, Laila. Shamsie, by projecting this kind of private discussion, not only refers to the historical political events, but also upholds private history to look at official history. Through this discussion, we get to know the responses of Pakistani people towards civil war of

Pakistan in 1971. It is through this discussion that Shamsie is looking at the bigger scenario of 1971. We get to know the attitude and outlook of an indigenous native Pakistani through Asif who regards that if Bengali masses from East Pakistan declare war against West Pakistan, then they wouldn't stand before the army of West Pakistan due to their lack of courage and so army of West Pakistan "will decimate them if they try to make some kind of one-legged stand" (Shamsie 182). Asif further believes that no war probably would happen because Pakistan Government would take the policy of appeasement by giving ministerial portfolios to Mujib and his followers and as such, Mujib "will back down on his six points" (Shamsie 182). In stark contrast to this, Maheen upholds the sentiment of the Bengali people by saying "No one wants to be enslaved either" (Shamsie 182). So it is obvious that Bengali people want to get rid of injustice, marginalisation and discrimination by means of war. Ali, despite being a native Pakistani, can very well understand the sentiment of Bengali people as he echoes it by offering the statistics to show how Bengali people are being marginalised and discriminated; Ali says that despite Bengali people have formed majority of population of Pakistan, East Pakistan is being given less than 20 percent of civil service jobs, less than 10 percent of military positions, less than 30 percent of foreign aid allocation, fewer schools, universities. In this way, Bengali people were being discriminated by the Government of pre-partition Pakistan because this Government was consisted of political leaders from West Pakistan who had imbibed anti Bengali sentiment. Native Pakistani like Zafar regards that the discrimination, faced by Bengali people, is happening due to discord between Bhutto and Mujib as their perspectives do not match. So he is not taking this issue seriously by saying "Why don't Mujib and Bhutto just have a duel to the death, pistols at dawn, and leave the rest of us out of it?" (Shamsie 183). At the end of this discussion, we find that Zafar is imbued with the feelings of unhappiness and sadness due to occurrences of partition and emergence of Bangladesh. Zafar is both angry and sad because he knows that he won't be able to retain intimacy with Maheen and marry her; they are slipping away from each other due to partition of the nation. Due to his sadness and anger caused by partition, he is ridiculed by his friends as they mock him as "Bingo lover" (Shamsie 191).

Shamsie also has used Karim's hand drawn map of Karachi as a non narrative device to unveil non documented Silenced histories. Karim's hand written map is itself a testament of forgotten repressed history. This map of Karachi that Karim draws is not a mere map, rather it is an attempt to connect to past. Through it, Karim tries to connect him closely with his own known Karachi, the place where he has been born and brought up. As an outsider, to be precise non-native Pakistani, he tries to link him to his fractured history through this map. This map contains within it Karim's personal emotions and childhood memories; roads, places, buildings of Karachi have been drawn from his own perspective. All these of Karachi have a special place in his heart. This map shows his diasporic dilemma- although he does not live here, yet he can not forget Karachi. It is not easy for him to forget Karachi where all his love and emotions are infused with. Caroline Herbert observes that this hand drawn map of Karachi is imbued with the dialectics of separation and union because of Karim's post partition entity. Commenting upon this map, Herbert opines, "Karim's map inscribes the city

as a site of anticipated loss, where a sense of “home” is already disrupted by an anticipated experience of displacement” (Shamsie 167).

Conclusion-

Kartography thus becomes unique due to uncovering of Silenced histories of Pakistan using certain non narrative and non scripted private documents. Shamsie’s use of non narrative devices to uncover Silenced Histories, heightens the novel to a superior position. A new historicist Reading of *Kartography* is possible because the narrative is infused with certain non narrative devices such as photograph, letters, private discussions and conversations; these non narrative devices act as co-texts which help us to get certain clues to decode non documented private histories of past. *Kartography* can also be studied from postmodern perspective because Shamsie here critiques both the logic behind the creation of post-1971 Pakistan and the grand narrative of national history of post-1971 Pakistan by uncovering Silenced Histories and incorporating alternative perspectives.

Notes

1. Jinnah’s motto is “Unity, Faith, Discipline”. It is the national motto of Pakistan.
2. One nation Theory is “one nation, one race, one culture”.
3. Muhajirs are those Muslims who migrated to Pakistan after partition of 1947 and 1971 from various parts of India, Bangladesh.
4. The reason is anti Bengali sentiment which Native Pakistanis began to develop long before partition of 1971 took place. Due to this, Zafar could not marry Maheen as his relatives insisted that his native Pakistani heritage would be diluted if he would marry her.
5. By retreating forgotten past histories of their parents, Raheen and Karim try to engage in anamnestic retreat of the past while their parents are trying to engage in amnesia by forgetting the past. The contest between amnesia and anamnestic retreat of the past thus becomes evident.



References:

- Herbert, Caroline. "Lyric maps and the legacies of 1971 in Kamila Shamsie's *Kartography*." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, vol. 47, no. 2, 2011, pp. 159-172.
- King, Bruce. "Kamila Shamsie's novels of history, exile and desire." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, vol. 47, no. 2, 2011, pp. 147-158.
- Shamsie, Kamila. *Kartography*. London: Bloomsbury, 2019.