

## POLITICS OF IDENTITY IN KAMILA SHAMSIE'S NOVELS

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### Abstract

Pakistan is a country that is notorious for its male chauvinistic society and male dominant rules. It is noted that if a writer addresses the issues of partition or ethnic conflicts in his/her writings, it often ends up invoking controversies. This paper analyses how Kamila Shamsie, a Pakistani woman transnational writer, deals with sensitive issues about nationalism, the partitions, ethnic conflicts, etc., without creating any serious political or religious tremors. The paper will focus on different forms of identities given to the character to avoid hitting on the sensitive nerves.

**Keywords:** Identity, Identity Crisis, Transnationalism, Objectification

*“The fundamentalists are increasing. People, afraid to oppose those fundamentalists, shut their mouths. It is really very difficult to make people move against a sensitive issue like religion, which is the source of fundamentalism.”*

- (Taslima Nasrin)

### Politics of Identity in Kamila Shamsie's Novels

Pakistan is the 36<sup>th</sup> largest country in the world. The country 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 tremors. but has not gone beyond throwing a number of questions about the societal set up of Pakistan and left them unanswered.

While dealing with issues of high sensitivity such as partition and nationalism, the chances of getting into controversies are pretty much on the higher side. The physical, mental and social attacks faced by Taslima Nasrin for an outright attack on Islamic philosophy through *Lajja* is a very good example for such a situation. Nasrin had faced several death threats and eventually had to go on exile for quite a long time. Similar controversies arose after the publication of *The Satanic Verses* by Salman Rushdie in 1988. Kamila Shamsie writes about the issues related to *The Satanic Verses*, “I was a teenager in Karachi with dreams of one day being a writer and a book called *The Satanic Verses* became the biggest news story of the day. With the exception of Turkey, every Muslim-majority nation - as well as several with large Muslim minorities-banned the novel on the grounds of its offensiveness to Islam.” (*Offence: The Muslim Case* 6). The question that had kept Shamsie more confused was, “why are the British burning copies of this book? Even at 16 I could entirely understand the reasons for reactions in Pakistan being what they were, but what was going on in Britain ?” (*Offence: The Muslim Case* 8).

With the chances of invoking a controversy always around the corner, Kamila Shamsie adopts a cautious strategy in her novels. She tries to deal with questions regarding the issues of politics, history, nationhood, etc. with utmost care and with a kind of neutral stand bringing in different perspectives. Another possible reason for this approach would be an indifferent attitude developed by the common population of Pakistan over the years against such incidents. In *Kartography*, she writes:

... Pakistan have become so efficient at never speaking about it. When we do refer to those events, it's as personalized stories-about that time after the air-raids when we said we'd go out as soon as it was dawn to inspect the damage the bombs had done down the street, but we sat and sat and dawn never came because the oil refineries had been bombed and a cloud of smoke covered Karachi...

... We tell the stories and make war personal-but not in the way it should be; not in a way that makes it such a personally. We make it personal in a way that excludes everything and everyone who was not part of that four-line story about the war days that we tell over tea and biscuits. (*Kartography* 311)

She employs an impressive narrative technique to mould the identity of her characters where we find all the major characters are caught in confusion about themselves. There is a constant swing between their personal and social identities. There are transnational identities, objectified identities and then characters facing an identity crisis in her novels which provide her enough chances to bypass the threats of controversies. Let us look at them in detail.

### 1. Transnational Identities

“In my second and third novels, both America and England get referred to but only because they are the places from which people return to Karachi or to which people go and become cut off from home or fear becoming cut off from home.” (“Tri-Sub-Continental” 89). Rehana Ahmed has argued that the role of England is not a passive one in Shamsie's novels through her essay, “Unsettling Cosmopolitanisms: Representations of London in Kamila Shamsie's *Salt and Saffron*.” The role of possessing a transnational identity plays a significant role in holding the story the story line together and does more than giving an idea of “ideological repression of

the social hierarchies that structure the space of London.”(Ahmed 12). The story of *Salt and Saffron* is all about the legacy of Dard-e-Dil family, the concept of “not-quite” twins and the beliefs associated with it, and more importantly a bunch of stories they say and some secrets they hide. The focal point of the novel is the protagonist Aliya, a transnational figure, who is considered a “not-quite” twin to her aunt, Mariam in a way that would hardly sound sensible to many.

The story is built around Mariam’s elopement with their family cook, Masood and the fear of the family members that Aliya being her “not-quite” twin might repeat the same mistake of getting into an affair with a low-class man, which she eventually does. She falls in love with Khaleel, who is residing in Liaquatabad, a place preferred only by poor. He is an educated man, and of a transnational identity, they end up together at the end of the novel without much fuss from the family. What Shamsie bypasses in this pattern of storytelling is a chance to directly display the class politics existing in the Pakistani society and the injustice done to poor.

Instead, she uses Aliya’s character to point out, rather passively, how class prejudices exist but are overcome through transnational identity. Aliya, when she was told about Mariam’s reaction to Masood leaving the family, her response was something that had exhibited the thoughts of her family:

‘In her room. When Masood was leaving he told her to keep eating, otherwise she’ll fall ill and cause him much pain. And she smiled and ... hugged him. Briefly. She hugged him goodbye.’

I stared. A hug-across class and gender. (*Salt and Saffron* 79)

The same Aliya, at the beginning of the novel, is found to be hugging a total stranger whom she has met on the plane on her way to London from America. “We hugged goodbye (his initiative, but I saw no reason to resist)” and after this act we find her wondering “What would my grandmother say if she knew I’d been hugging strange men in airports?”(*Salt and Saffron* 4). Undoubtedly, the developing of a different perspective on her education and life abroad, Aliya is able to overcome her on class prejudices for she lets Khaleel kiss her hands even after knowing that he belongs to Liaquatabad.

Another transnational figure, Meher Dadi, also can be cited as an example of how a transnational status can be a neutralising factor in the class conflicts existing within the realms of Pakistan. Meher Dadi, Aliya’s great aunt, has migrated to Greece and is in a live-in relation with a banker there. The discussion ponders over the possibility of a marriage and Aliya being told that it is an extra-marital affair. At the end of the conversation, we find Aliya wondering “I tried imagining any of my friends having this kind of conversation with a great aunt. Impossible.”(*Salt and Saffron* 162).

The point here is not just the freedom of thought enjoyed by Aliya over the other girls of her generation in dealing with such a topic but how transnational identities are utilized to bypass the focus from sensitive issues and how such an identity can work in favour in one's attempts to cross the barricades of class politics; it worked in Meher Dadi’s case and also for Aliya and Khaleel. With Mariam and Masood becoming a part of memory and the love relation of Aliya and Khaleel finding a solution through their transnational identities, the novel receives a satisfactory end, but the issue of class conflict remains unresolved.

Karim in *Kartography* is another character who plays the dual role of speaking about ethnic politics and simultaneously deviates the focus to the personal life of his and other

characters. *Kartography* is based on the Civil War of 1971, the consequent birth of Bangladesh and the atrocities caused by ethnic politics. The community in focus is the *Muhajirs*, the Indian Muslim migrants who moved to Pakistan as a part of the partition.

Adeel Khan in his book *Politics of Identity: Ethnic Nationalism and the State in Pakistan* speaks about the Mohajirs in detail in the chapter “Mohajir Ethnic Nationalism: El Dorado Gone Sour.” He introduces the Mohajir community like this:

The Urdu-speaking Indian Muslim migrants, the Mohajirs, who migrated from the Muslim minority provinces of India to Pakistan after the partition of British India, were the most ardent supporters of the state nationalism of Pakistan until the 1970s. In the late 1970s, however, they began to think of their separate ethnic identity, and in 1984 they formed their own political group, the Mohajir Quami Movement (MQM) to assert that identity. By the end of the 1980s the MQM not only succeeded in winning the overwhelming support of the Mohajirs but also became an increasingly organised and violent political group, turning the major towns of Sindh province into the most dangerous places in Pakistan. (Khan 161)

The Muhajir community is portrayed in a rather positive way in *Kartography* with the focus kept on the difficulties faced by this community during the partition of 1971 and the subsequent years. To speak of it in Rushdie’s style, “denying the official”(14) version of the truth. Once again, Shamsie stays away from addressing those issues in deep but keeps certain issues as a root cause for the changes that happen in the lives of the protagonists of the novel. Karim’s parents Ali and Maheen and Raheen’s parents Zafar and Yasmin had actually undergone a swapping of pairs. Zafar was initially engaged to Maheen and Ali to Yasmin. This swapping had a lot to do with the Bengali roots of Maheen. She was considered a Muhajir and hence hated by many. The swapping had happened because of one particular statement Zafar had made to Shafiq. Shafiq’s brother had died in the violence that had happened in East Pakistan as a part of the Civil War, and he came into Zafar’s house in anger and grief who was engaged to Maheen at that point. Zafar said, “How can I marry one of them? How can I let one of them bear my children? Think of it as a civic duty. I’ll be diluting her Bengali bloodline” (*Kartography* 232)

This is the flashback that Karim comes to know at one point in his life which makes him aware of the ethnic conflicts that are existing in the Pakistani society, Karachi in particular. Once he moves out of Pakistan following the divorce of his parents, he starts sending maps of Karachi to Raheen. She finds it pretty weird for she prefers to find the places through landmarks, her memory of places, or even trial and error method. Her identity is built on the love she has for the place and people she knows; very much limited to her social circle. On the other hand, Karim’s effort to create a map of the roads of Karachi is rather objective that comes from rational judgement. His map would be filled with information about other classes and ethnicities which might be aloof to Raheen.

Raheen’s attitude towards things happening around her in Karachi was rather passive. She says, “I think there is nothing I can do about the situation, Uncle Asif, so why waste brain cells thinking about it.”(*Kartography* 225). Karim tries to explain this to Raheen. He says, “The city is falling apart and you are the same. That’s why I sent you those maps. Because I wanted you to find a way to see beyond the tiny circle you live in, I wanted you to acknowledge that you’re part of something larger.”(*Kartography* 244). But then, the larger picture that Karim is speaking about, that of the troubles faced by Muhajirs is found only in bits and pieces in the novel.

But the more important question is how does the transnational identity of Karim help the narrative? The answer would be Raheen's thought on Karim after their confrontation with a car thief who is denied a government job because he is a Muhajir. "As if distance gave him a bird's eye view, while I was locked up in the four walls of some elite members-only conclave." Raheen had not confronted the harsh ethnic conflicts in Karachi at its face nor did Zia, their childhood friend. After the episode with the car thief, when Karim says "I'm a Muhajir, Zia" (*Kartography* 178), both Zia and Raheen are found uncomfortable with the statement. Had he been in Pakistan like others, he may not have looked at the ethnic conflicts in its eye that was prevailing years after 1971; even for the injustice done to his mother. At the end of the novel, the ethnicity issue becomes all the more personal, and if at all it has gathered a social face at some point of the narrative, it was through the transnational identity of Karim.

At the same time, the transnational identity makes it impossible for him to address the issues of ethnicity directly. All that he is able to do is to draw maps of Karachi to make Raheen aware of the other ethnicities existing in the city beyond her circle. But then, that is rather personal. He is not anymore one of them, he has migrated, and his association with the community is, to a great level, passive.

Another easy pick to add to this category would be Hiroko Tanaka in the *Burnt Shadows*. With her character starting her journey from Japan to India, then to Pakistan and finally to the USA, she witnesses the Nagasaki bombing of 1945, the partition of India in 1947, the political chaos in Pakistan and the World Trade Center attack in the USA but with not any of the incidents getting a detailed mention.

Hiroko's life in Japan gets only a brief mention in the first part of the novel which deals mostly with the development of a romantic life between her and Konrad Weiss. There is hardly any mention of Japanese nationalism or related topics even when the development is going on at the time of World War II. The description of the life of Hiroko in Nagasaki ends with the bomb blast, and then the story moves to India of 1947. Whatever we hear of Japan after this point is vague recollections of Hiroko about the atrocities caused by the atom bomb.

India of 1947 had the nationalist feeling running at its peak then. The Muslim nationalism that demanded a separate state caused so many communal riots, and its reverberations are found in every nook and corner of the country. But with a Japanese woman in India, whose interests were focused initially on learning Urdu and then in developing a romantic relationship with Sajjad didn't help the portrayal of nationalism in India by any means. Her stay in India was brief, not more than a few months, and then they migrate to Pakistan.

The next part of the novel with Pakistan as its location takes a leap in time and goes straight to 1982. What is lost in this leap is the process of assimilation; how a woman of Japanese ethnicity got settled into a Muslim nation. Further, from this point the narrative shifts its focus to Hiroko's and Sajjad's son, Raza and Hiroko takes on the role of a second fiddle.

The last part of the novel which happens in the post-World Trade Centre America could have utilised the treatment of Muslims in the Western world as the main theme but again limits itself to some minor incidents which could be easily justified from the American perspective claiming them to be precautionary measures to ensure the security of the country.

In one of her conversations with Ilse, Hiroko says, "I've lived through Hitler, Stalin, the Cold War, the British Empire, segregation, apartheid, God knows what." (*Burnt Shadows* 266). This statement could be counted as an example that shows the extent to which Shamsie deviates

her narrative from the thrust areas. When Hiroko has lived through worse experiences, why mention incidents in which she had no active role to play? While the partition of 1971 and associated issues hardly get a mention from Hiroko, why does she bother to mention about the apartheid in her comments?

### 2. Objectified Identities

Akeel Bilgrami in his essay “Notes Toward the Definition of Identity” makes a distinction between subjective and objective identities; “subjective identity is what you conceive yourself to be, whereas your objective identity is how you might be viewed independently of how you see yourself. In other words, your objective identity is who you are in light of certain biological or social facts about you.”(5). When a person is treated as an object or commodity without considering the subjective side of his identity, objectification takes place.

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 that too 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. Except about food because she knew if she developed one eccentric trait it would shield her.”(*Salt and Saffron* 128).

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)

At a later stage in the novel, we find Aliya trying to explain Mariam’s behaviour. The conversation between Aliya and Sameer goes like this:

‘She only spoke to Masood to order meals and even then- Did you ever notice this? – she spoke in questions not in imperatives. She’d say, “*Bhujia? Koftas? Pulao?*” Basically, she was undercutting the whole employer-servant paradigm.’

I thought of all I couldn’t say to Masood’s brother. ‘Maybe. Yes, maybe. Why not?’

‘And the ultimate test of her ability to look beyond class was the act of eloping?’

‘Let’s not get carried away.’ I looked suspiciously at Sameer. Was it trying to out-Aliya me with these leaps? But he looked quite serious. ‘By that point she loved, I’m sure. But only because she first acknowledged that it was possible to do so. Do you think that is a part of the reason society was so outraged? Because

by eloping with Masood she made eloping with a servant possible?' (*Salt and Saffron* 215)

But these are all Aliya's view and not Mariams. 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 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's experiences in her on words is missing.

For a disgraceful comment from Zafar that he was marrying Maheen only to fulfil the 'civic duty' of 'diluting her Bengali bloodline', they remained friends all through their life is quite confusing. The explanation she gives to Raheen for what has happened only helps to obscure the logic of how things have turned out in the end.

'That evening- when Shafiq got the telegram about his brother- Zafar had just come back from the hospital. Broken rib, fractured thumb, bruises everywhere. He claimed he'd been mugged and beaten, but no one was fooled. There was violence in the air those days, and why should your father have been expected not to get terrified of it? Whatever he said to Shafiq, awful as it was, I don't believe he meant it.' (*Kartography* 308)

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.

### 3. Identity crisis

One aspect of societies that feature the presence of migrated people the formation of plural identities that are often characterised by inequality. The newly formed identities in such a society can be simultaneously unsettled and unsettling (Woodward 16). 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, we 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 focus 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)

But this acceptance takes place only at an objective level. Beyond this point we never find Raheen considering herself a Muhajir nor advocating for them. The distinction used by Bilgrami, "being aware that one is a Muslim or Indian or ..."; on the other, it can mean 'valuing the fact of being a Muslim or Indian or ...'(Bilgrami 5) will be useful to understand this situation.

As discussed in an earlier section, this could probably be because of the friendship and family circle she is in. 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

The limited canvas chose by Kamila Shamsie so as to avoid references to sensitive issues had kept discussions identity politics at the surface level. Though she had 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. In the words of Bruce King, "Her novels both show 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."(687). She does not make any outright criticism of the events, yet they inform the readers about the socio-political history of Pakistan and the embedded identity politics.

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