



READING KAMILA SHAMSIE'S *KARTOGRAPHY* AS A NATIONAL ALLEGORY OF THE CHAIN OF PARTITION AND ITS CONTINUING LEGACIES

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Abstract

The long chain of South Asian partitions (1947 and 1971) continue to haunt and affect the lives of several communities that got affected by its new borders. Each of these partitions have also led to several instances of violence in the name of religion, nationalism and ethnicity—some occurred during the partitions, others followed the socio-political and demographic changes that the partitions entailed. South Asian literature has variously captured this history of the chain of partition and the multiple facets of its continuing legacies, performing the function of what Frederic Jameson calls “national allegory”. This paper reads Kamila Shamsie’s *Kartography* (2001) using Jameson’s idea of national allegory to argue that the lived experiences of the two generation of characters in the novel serve as vehicles for Shamsie to excavate the repressed memory of the partition of 1971 in Pakistani nationalist histories and dominant narratives—a kind of national amnesia that Shamsie’s novel tries to undo. The paper also argues how through the trajectory of its second generation characters, Raheen and Karim, the novel emphasizes the need to confront the past and its shame and guilt so as to learn lessons from it and address problems of the present. The political issue in the present of Raheen and Karim that the novel explores is that of ethnic conflicts between the native Sindhis and the Muhajirs, a conflict that eventually acquired the form of the military crackdown against the MQM in the 90s.

Keywords: *Kartography*, Muhajir, Partition, National Allegory, Xenophobia.

Kamila Shamsie’s *Kartography* (2001) presents a tale of two generations trying to come to terms with the violent and traumatic political forces of their times and of the past, and with the after effects of these identity-shaping forces. The narrative shows an intertwining of the personal with the political and the historical, while constantly reminding that it is impossible for its characters to cut themselves away from the historical consciousness of Partition and its continuing

legacies in their lives. The characters from both the generations try to draw and re-draw the coordinates of their lives and personal relationships (an act similar to an exercise in cartography) in order to adjust themselves to the changing cartographies of the subcontinent during the Partitions of 1947 and 1971. The novel, then, explores the consequences of these moments of disruption in the history of the subcontinent by delving into the effects that it produced in the lives of the people of

Pakistan, especially the immigrant population of the Muhajirs who became dominant in the city of Karachi (and Sindh region) in the aftermath of these Partitions.

The story of the swapping of fiancées between the parents of Raheen and Karim brings the Partition of 1971 as a sub-text in the novel. The Liberation War of Bangladesh and the resultant creation of a new cartography—the new, independent nation of Bangladesh—alters the cartography of Zafar-Maheen relationship and of the lives of Yasmin and Ali. Yasmin Saikia, in her essay “Beyond the Archive of Silence: Narratives of Violence of the 1971 Liberation War of Bangladesh” observes, “In the wars ethnicity colluded with national interests and state politics” (Saikia 275). She briefly delves into the history of the 1971 War and documents that it was an year in which two wars actually took place: the first one was a civil war that broke out between East and West Pakistan, and the second one was an international war in which the *Mukti Bahini* joined hands with the Indian Army and fought against West Pakistan. While the latter ended with the defeat of the Pakistan Army and the Partition of Pakistan (leading to the creation of Bangladesh), the former civil war was accompanied by ethnic violence and hatred not just in East Pakistan but also in West Pakistan. *Kartography* explores this phenomenon, wherein Bengali Muslims living in West Pakistan or Karachi (like Maheen) suddenly become strangers in their own homeland and city. They become victims of ethnic violence and hatred. The violence of 1971 exposed the failure of the idea and vision of Pakistan: an Islamic country that was meant to safeguard the interest of the Muslims of the *entire* subcontinent fractured along the lines of ethnicity. Karachi, which had been home for Maheen for so many years, suddenly turns into an enemy territory, transforming her into a stranger and an outsider inside her *watan*. Her closest friends ostracize her. Even her lover, Zafar, fails to remain unaffected by the *madness* of the period. After the secret is revealed to Raheen, Yasmin defends Zafar by explaining the violent strangeness of the circumstances that had reduced Zafar into being a traitor in his own homeland:

He only had one major fault, your father, when we were all young. One flaw. He lacked strength. But somewhere along the way he found it. . . . I don't know why he said what he said, but I know that after he did it he was able to look the country straight in the eye. Until then he'd been looking from a height, a position of remove, and suddenly he was down there. . . with the rabid crowd, saying the kind of things that came out of their mouths, believing that a part of him may have believed what he was saying, though I can tell you he didn't. (Shamsie 251)

The above moment when Zafar is able to look at his country straight in the eyes and share a moment of commonality (though momentary, and provoked by circumstances to a large extent) with the “rabid crowd”, paradoxically, also becomes the moment when he is most estranged from himself and utters words that had no real conviction behind them. The ethno-nationalist frenzy of the time infects him in the weak and emotional moment of the death of Bilal. The moment echoes Lawrence Buell's warning against the dangers of place attachment in “The Place of Place”: “place attachment can itself become pathological, can abet possessiveness, ethnocentrism, xenophobia. . . A certain capacity for self-deterritorialization seems needful for resiliency and even survival” (Buell 76-7). Despite all his individual attempts at resisting the ethnocentrism of his time, the violence and fear in the environment shake the foundation of Zafar's beliefs and compel him to utter the unsayable: “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 blood line.” (Shamsie 210).

Through this incidence, Shamsie shows the inevitability of the individual in getting drawn into the dominant discourses of exclusionary nationalism and ethnocentrism during moments of war and national crisis. But what is remarkable in Shamsie's treatment of the character of Zafar is that this is also the moment of Zafar's estrangement from himself. At this point it is imperative to consider the fact that Zafar himself is a Muhajir, an outsider, who resists the usage of this label for

himself. This also becomes a crucial moment in which, willingly or unwillingly, Zafar becomes a perpetrator. Yasmin Saikia raises the poignant issue of the necessity of studying not just the victims of mass violence, but also the perpetrators of these physical, mental and psychological horrors. She writes, "the perpetrator in our midst can teach us something about ourselves, and about the possibilities and limits of being human" (Saikia 286). Zafar's estrangement is not a momentary affair in the narrative, but comes across as something that was gradually growing in his unconscious self. The above, final outburst is anticipated in the scene where he discusses with Yasmin his plans to migrate to London after getting married to Maheen. He thinks of Karachi as his home and is pained at the thought of leaving it. But he forgets that Karachi has been home for Maheen *too*, until Yasmin reminds him of it:

Zafar felt nauseous. Of course it was. And yet, when he mentioned moving he'd thought that would mean leaving home for him, and leaving what was rapidly becoming enemy territory for Maheen. But this was her home, too. How could he have forgotten that? Not for a second, or an hour, but for days, for weeks . . . How insidiously this madness spread. God, when did things get so complicated. (Shamsie 171)

The novel delves into the physical and psychological violence that accompanied the two wars of 1971. Maheen becomes a stranger in her own home, a victim of ethnic hatred at the hands of her closest friends. While moving towards Ali's car, an old beggar woman spits at her. She starts receiving anonymous abusive phone calls: "The worst are the ones whose voices I recognize" (173). Laila's husband slaps a Bengali waiter for spilling a drink accidentally over Laila's new, expensive saree, and screams, "Halfwit Bingo! Go back to your jungle!" (167). But besides Maheen, Zafar too gets labelled as a "Bingo lover" and is beaten up by Bunty and his friends. At this point the novel becomes, what Jameson calls, a national allegory—the lives of the people becoming a reflection of the larger, macro political events. The novel shows the

inextricable intertwining of the personal and the political through Zafar's transformation into a 'traitor' at the hands of ethno-nationalist discourses. Maheen explains to Raheen at the end of the novel: "I was just a Bingo, nothing to be done about it. But your father . . . your father was something much worse. He was a turncoat, a traitor. A Bingo-lover." (276).

Another instance of the violence of 1971 in the novel is the death of the young Bilal, Shariq's brother, in East Pakistan. It comes as a final blow to Zafar-Maheen relationship. The novel offers a nightmarish connection between drawing room conversations or casual remarks passed while watching television and the violence inflicted upon women's body in East Pakistan in 1971. Ali tells Zafar: "This country's turned rabid - the soldiers are raping the women, Zaf, raping them, all over East Pakistan, and in drawing rooms around Karachi people applaud this attempt to improve the genes of the Bengalis." (173). Through these instances, Shamsie examines the manner in which people's identities get crystallized because of the larger public and nationalist discourses. Saikia too explores the horrors of this mass, hysterical identity crystallization process and the manner in which it gets linked with ideas of ethnic superiority. It leads to infliction of violence in the garb of ideologies of nationalism and nation-building. Saikia writes: "Pakistani soldiers and their Bihari supporters raped and killed to save a nation; Bengali men also raped and killed in the hope of making a new nation, which they did. Who is guilty? What was the power that transformed ordinary men into criminals?" (Saikia 286). Saikia goes on to critique the absence of women's voice in governments' official records as well as in scholarly investigations of the Partition of 1971. She attempts and aims to write an alternate history by giving voice to the victims and survivors of gendered violence of 1971. From about 50 testimonials and 200 witnesses that Saikia records in her research, she points out that in most of these cases, "the victimizer was within", that is, either a family friend or a trusted neighbour or a person from the person's own community. Saikia links these acts of violence with state perpetuated ideologies and nationalist jingoism. She writes, ". . .

both action and ideology were carefully planned and upheld by the elite State actors who glorified gruesome violence as acts of valour and national pride" (284).

The second generation characters in Shamsie's novel fail to remain unaffected by the horror of 1971 and the ways in which it had affected their parents' lives, and consequently, their own. The ghost of Zafar-Maheen's failed relationship haunts Raheen-Karim's relationship for a long time, at times verging on the possibility of "repeating patterns". Raheen's ideal (Zafar) festers overnight when the secret is revealed to her. She undergoes an estrangement within her own home, from her own parents. At the individual level she also feels estranged from her own self, an alien within her body; the model on which she has been fashioning herself all her life disrupts suddenly in the revealing of the family secret which brings back memories of 1971 that had remained suppressed under an artificial, self-imposed amnesia for a long time. Raheen wonders, "What did something that happened nearly a quarter of a century ago have to do with our lives?" (Shamsie 211). At another moment in the novel, she realizes that she and Karim got separated way back in 1971, when they were not even born: a separation or a failure in understanding each other that they had inherited from their parents, or rather, a *legacy* of the Partition of 1971. The fact that Raheen feels like a stranger, makes Karim also a stranger in her eyes for the two had remained connected in their heads right from their cradle, like Siamese twins. She clenches her fist and screams like Camus' outsider, "Who told you to come back, you outsider!" (212).

Kartography as a national allegory examines the dangers and threats of personal and national amnesia: a self-imposed forgetfulness of the painful and shameful memories of the past. The second generation becomes a victim of this dangerous amnesia that their parents had established in their lives in order to avoid the shame and guilt of past. When this silenced past knocks at the doors of Raheen's life, it renders her into a stranger. The entire city of Karachi becomes, what Freud calls, "uncanny" (*unheimlich* = strange yet familiar) for her. She locks herself in Sonia's

bathroom and scribbles on a piece of toilet paper using Sonia's eyeliner, "(1) *What does 1971 have to do with now?*" (241). The personal gets intertwined with the political once again, digging out skeletons from the collective unconscious. Raheen wonders:

Between our birth in 1947 and 1995, dead bang between our beginning and our present, is 1971, of which I know next to nothing except that there was a war and East Pakistan became Bangladesh, and what terrible things we must have done then to remain so silent about it. It is shame at losing the war, or guilt about what we did to try to win that mutes us? (242)

In moments like this, the novel makes a marked shift as it moves from the personal to the collective. Here, Shamsie is critiquing the institutionalized silence and amnesia regarding the 1971 war in Pakistani nationalist narratives, and is showing ways in which this repressed past can always come back to haunt the subsequent generations. The shame and the guilt fester into a canker once they get repressed. Zafar's letter to Maheen also addresses the same problem:

. . . it is less than two years since Bangladesh was born, and already we in Pakistan have become so efficient at never speaking about it. That scares me more than anything else. When we do refer to '71, it's as personalized stories about sitting on the roof, sipping whisky and watching the dogfights in the sky . . . We tell these stories and contain the horrors of war into four-line anecdotes that we tell over tea and biscuits. . . What happens when you work so hard to forget a horror that you also forget that you have forgotten it? It doesn't disappear - the canker turns inwards and mutates into something else. (278)

Zafar goes on to say that with the Partition of 1971, Pakistan died and got buried in the battlefields of 1971. The dream and vision with which its forefathers had established the foundation of Pakistan got betrayed and mutilated during the violence of the civil war. And to add on to it, the

amnesia imposed upon the country to hide away its shame and guilt. Zafar's letter perhaps brings out Shamsie's perspective on 1971. She seems to be calling upon the need to do away with this amnesia, and acknowledge and avow the past, reflect upon it and come to terms with it, so as to begin imagining a peaceful co-existence for future generations. The 'stranger' or 'the other' amidst and within us needs to be acknowledged and then exorcised. Zafar almost becomes a mouthpiece for Shamsie in this letter, when he writes: "*But what must be done to restore it to what it could have stood for? Perhaps our children will answer that question one day, if we give them the tools – the information – they need for that task.*" (279). Zafar promises Maheen that he would not hide away the secret from his daughter, but fails to do so. As a consequence, the second generation has to go through a series of trials and estrangements within their own homes.

Raheen and Karim finally acknowledge the past and face the personal as well as collective shame and guilt that they had inherited. They learn lessons from their personal and national history and re-draw the co-ordinates of their lives by mixing up the two models of cartography in an organic manner that the novel upholds, as exemplified in the final cartographic imagery in the novel. Strabo and Eratosthenes come together and acknowledge each other. They envision a map of not just names and landmarks, but also of stories, memories and lived experiences; a map that blurs boundaries while simultaneously upholds the contours and lines of difference. They conjure up a map that takes into consideration human life, stories and anagrams (like the first map that Karim had drawn on his way to the airport): a map of Raya (or *yaar* or friendship or togetherness). The novel upholds a vision of cartography that starts not with 'C' but with 'K', as in "Karachi Kars", "Karachi Karpets" and "Kwik Kababs". The title starting with 'K' emphasizes the specificity of the city of Karachi, and the specific lived experiences of the people living in it.

But before attaining this unified vision, Raheen has to be drawn out from the tiny box of south Karachi in which she has been conducting ninety percent of her life and is forced to acknowledge the reality, history and lived

experiences of the city of Karachi as a part of her consciousness. Similarly, Karim too is compelled to move out from the warmth and security of home in Karachi and undergoes a series of odysseys across the world before he is able to give up "the luxury of being compassionate from a distance" and adopt a new spelling of cartography (124). However, both of them have to go through the intermediate stage of being an outsider or a stranger before they can register these changes in their consciousness.

While tracing these developments in its two protagonists, the novel also probes and examines the failure of Muhajir naturalization in Pakistan in the aftermath of the Partition of 1947. Sarah Ansari, in her essay "Partition, Migration and Refugees: Responses to the Arrival of *Muhajirs* in Sind during 1947-1948" observes that anti-outsider sentiments were developing in Sindh with its increasing economic prosperity since almost a decade before the Partition actually took place in 1947. She notes a "level of continuity" in the history of Sindh, which started with the development of these sentiments before 1947, continued through ethnic clashes in post-independence period, and maintained its continuum in the 80s and the 90s in the form of violence that Sindh experienced in the wake of MQM disturbances (Ansari 107). This historical understanding of the changing topography of Sindh is vital for tracing the roots of the problems that the Muhajirs were facing in the 80s and 90s.

Kartography, then, becomes a Partition narrative, probing into the liminal spaces and identities that got created in the wake of, what Liisa Malkki calls as "Partition as a rite of passage into the national order of things" (qtd. in Yacoobali 183). We encounter various liminal identities in *Kartography*, like Karim (half Bengali), Maheen (a Bengali stranded in Karachi), Zafar and Raheen (Muhajirs), and the car-thief (a Muhajir, who becomes the victim of the newly introduced quota system). Arnold van Gennep, in his book *The Rites of Passage* (1960) conceptualizes the three phases of every rite of passage that accompanies any change of place, state and social order: Rites of Separation, Rites of Transition/Limen and Rites of Incorporation. Yacoobali sees the Muhajir identity as a "liminal

identity” because of their failure of incorporation into the national order of things. The reason that Yacoobali suggests for this failure of integration is that unlike other migratory identities like the Punjabis and the Sindhis, who had a territoriality linked to their identity, the Muhajirs did not have a predefined, definite territoriality. Oskar Verkaaik offers the changing definition and meaning of the term Muhajir with time in the history of Pakistan, in his book *A People of Migrants*. He notes that, initially, the term was meant to be an inclusive one, used to refer to all migrants from India to Pakistan. It was used promptly by the Pakistani state as it carried the religious connotation of the religious people who followed the Prophet, during his exile, from Mecca to Medina, and who were welcomed warmly by the people of Medina or the Ansars. The early usage of the term imbued the religious connotation of *hijir* on this forced displacement. It also invoked the tradition of Islamic hospitality in the hearts of the native Muslims. The term gradually changed meaning in the aftermath of Partition as it started implying ideas of non-nativity/not-from-inside and started emphasizing their Indian lineage and thereby, outsider status. This changing meaning of the term is vitally connected to the increasing dominance of the Muhajirs in Sindh region which resulted in a fierce competition between the “native” Sindhis and the “new” Muhajirs. The Muhajirs and the Sindhis started feeling threatened by each other, consumed by the fear that each would completely replace the other. The growing tension resulted in Sindhi-Muhajir conflicts and the final split of the MQM, which was accompanied by large-scale violence in the 80s and the 90s. The immediate cause of the split was the quota system (rural-urban divide of the reservation) introduced by Bhutto. This is the violent background in which Raheen and Karim’s story is set.

Shamsie’s novel seems to have a sympathetic attitude towards the Muhajir cause. But she is also self-reflexively aware of the economic class to which her characters belong. She shows us that the category Muhajir has not been a monolithic category, but has had its own class stratification. For instance, the introduction of the quota system and the resultant communal violence does not affect

Raheen in the same way it affects the car-thief, who becomes unemployed and loses his brother at the end. However, the Sindhi-Muhajir divide does affect these characters belonging to the affluent class as well. The earliest instance of it appears in the novel through a heated exchange between Uncle Asif and Zafar. Asif represents the Sindhi perspective in the novel, though he is not given much space in the narrative. He is enraged by the land reform views of Zafar and links it with Zafar’s Muhajir identity: “I understand why he said those things. I mean, Muhajirs will never understand the way we feel about land. They all left their homes at Partition. No understanding of ties to a place.” (Shamsie 37). Laila too banter against the Muhajirs and sees them as outsiders who are a threat to her home and homeland. She says:

Karachi’s my home, you know. Why did those bloody Muhajirs have to go and form a political group? Once they’re united they’ll do God knows what. Demanding this, demanding that. Thinking just because they’re a majority in Karachi they can trample over everyone else. Like they did in ‘47. Coming across the border thinking we should be grateful for their presence. . . . ‘Do you hear the way people like Zafar and Yasmin talk about “their Karachi”? My family lived there for generations. Who the hell are these Muhajirs to pretend it’s their city!’ (38)

Shamsie seems to be positing a critique of these fanatic notions of territoriality: a non-accommodating sense of place attachment linked with one’s sense of ownership and superiority. Buell sees these xenophobic ideas of place attachment as the danger of place connectedness. Upon hearing Laila’s outburst, Raheen wonders: “What kind of immigrant is born in a city and spends his whole life there, and gets married there, and raises his daughter there? And I, an immigrant’s daughter, was an immigrant too.” (Shamsie 38)

Thus, by representing the complexity of the liminal identity of Muhajirs that got created in the wake of the Partition, Shamsie’s novel presents a national allegory of the chain of Partition and its

continuing legacies in lives of the people of the subcontinent. While at the same time, the novel also upholds the need to visit back history and re-assess the shame and guilt that was a natural by-product of these Partitions and that had been deliberately forgotten in the wake of nationalist discourses of nation-building. The vision of Karachi that the novel wishes to cherish is that which is "intimate with strangers", where life goes on in its usual rhythm despite all the violence and disturbances; a city where people open the doors of their houses to strangers on Muharram. Or in other words, a city which welcomes people of *all* ethnicities, nationalities and communities, countering the nativist claims of autochthony and 'superiority'.

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