

**When the Canker Turns Inward: Remembering and Forgetting in *Kartography***

**Dr.A.J.Manju<sup>1</sup>**, Associate Professor & Head, Department of English, Sreenarayana Guru College, K G Chavadi, Coimbatore

**Suhana P A<sup>2</sup>** (Corresponding author), Research Scholar, Department of English, Sreenarayana Guru College, K G Chavadi, Coimbatore.

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**Abstract:** Kamila Shamsie's novel *Kartography* parallels the war of 1971, which led to the formation of Bangladesh and ethnic violence that swept all over Karachi in 1995, to portray how the virus of ethnic othering spreads through the country if unchecked. The 'civil war' of 1971 is more or less absent in the national rhetoric of Pakistan. The collective amnesia about the event stems from the guilt and shame associated with it. Shamsie, in her novel, points out the dangers of such deliberate "forgetting" and discusses the need to acknowledge and accept past injustices of the nation to stop them from repeating in the future.

**Keywords:** *Kartography*, the civil war of 1971, ethnic violence, remembering, forgetting, acknowledging past mistakes.

“What happens when you work so hard to forget a horror that you also forget that you have forgotten it? It does not disappear — the canker turns inwards and mutates into something else” (Shamsie 305)

Kamila Shamsie's novels, often revolving around history and politics, use memory to achieve different ends. In the novel *Kartography*, Shamsie parallels the war of 1971 with the ethnic violence that tormented Karachi in 1995 to signify how important it is to remember and acknowledge past injustices for a better future. The story on intimate personal relationships is built around an incident of fiancé swap in 1971, which is a result of the political insecurities of the period. The conflict of 1971, known as the "Liberation war" in Bangladesh, is celebrated as the historical moment of attaining independence from Pakistan after long years of subjugated existence of the Bengalis. On the other hand, the "civil war" for Pakistan destroyed the dream of Pakistan as a religiously united country. It marks an excellent defeat for Pakistan, not only in front of the "rebellious," "unIslamic" Bengalis but their greatest enemy, India. The wartime atrocities committed by the Pakistan army were criticized widely and were a reason for shame and guilt at the international level. This might be why such a historical moment is not a part of popular political rhetoric in Pakistan. The 'civil war memories are always shrouded by a veil of silence, so much so that we can rarely

find official and literary evidence dealing with the event. Collective amnesia can be considered a product of the collective shame and guilt associated with it by the state and the people. Contemporary Pakistani fiction writers, however, have taken up the event as a point of discussion, as in Sorrayya Khan's *Noor*, Moni Mohsin's *The End of Innocence*, and Kamila Shamsie's *Kartography*. These works are conscious attempts to remember the atrocities of war against the state-sponsored deliberate "forgetting."

*Kartography* is one of the few Pakistani novels that use the 1971 war as its backdrop. It is set in 1995 when Karachi was facing innumerable ethnic riots. These violent events remind the older generation of the political scenario of 1971, but the younger generation is unaware of this.

The novel discusses the result of the deliberate collective 'forgetting' portraying the ethnic violence in Karachi.

Shamsie proves that the past cannot be so easily erased through the retrospective narrative structure of the novel, which moves back and forth between 1971 and 1995. The overwhelming question that governs the novel is the one raised by Raheen: "What does 1971 have to do with now?" (269). When she discusses the war of 1971, Shamsie in no way tries to glorify Pakistan but gives us a glimpse of the wartime atrocities performed by civilians and soldiers. She constantly reminds us of the cruelty people was capable of, for she wants them to keep themselves in check.

When Aunt Laila tells Raheen that if she takes people accountable for what they did and said in 1971, hardly anyone will escape it, we understand how deeply ethnic discrimination has affected the psyche of the people. Maheen was a victim of ethnic violence despite her upper-class birth, as she was a Bengali.

. . . . how must Maheen feel, a Bengali living in West Pakistan? Moreover, every day someone new succumbed to the madness sweeping the country, someone new said things that defied all understanding, and it was hard to say which was worse: the people who stopped dead midsentence as soon as Maheen entered the room or the ones who kept on talking. (186)

This madness crossed all borders of class. "Some old beggar woman spat at her' (Shamsie 188). People who belonged to entirely different cross sections of society and had nothing else in common suddenly started identifying themselves as a group based on their ethnicity and experiences. "She was looking at the Bengali waiter. Something passed between them that Zafar could not quite identify" (Shamsie 184). Maheen's use of "my people" when she discusses East Bengal also indicate how suddenly she identified herself with them and how her home country and people became enemies."Laila heard from some foreign journalists that the army's slaughtering my people by the thousands in Dhaka" (Shamsie 188).

Shamsie reserves the most hurtful words against Maheen for Zafar, who until then was portrayed as the most rational, judicious, agreeable character in the novel. This is to assert the toxic nature of the Pakistani society then and how little things build up to great atrocities. "Your father did not want to marry her because she is a Bengali. Although I have to say, I was appalled when I first heard the engagement was broken. I told your father, she

is not even that dark, Zafar. Many people cannot tell where she is from" (Shamsie 74). Zafar was considered a traitor by everyone as he was a Bingo lover. However, he refused to confront the crisis in any way and communicate his thoughts. Finally, when addressed by his neighbor, whose brother was killed in East Pakistan, and he felt his life was at stake, he said the craziest thing one could say about his lover.

Everyone quickly accepted Zafar's break up with Maheen and subsequent marriage with Yasmin as a part of the collective attempt to forget everything that had happened during the war. Zafar himself wrote to Maheen about how easily everything was forgotten.

Shamsie has pointed out how history as a narrative is constantly written by those in power in an interview with Caro Cilano. "(Cilano 151). Soon after the war ended, the new president Benazir Bhutto formed the Hamoodsur Rehman Commission to investigate the circumstances under which the Easter Command surrendered (Government of Pakistan 2000:11). However, the report was not disclosed until an Indian media house leaked it. Another important example of mainstream narration of war in Pakistan is Qutubuddin Aziz's *Blood and Tears*(1974), dedicated to hundreds of thousands of innocent Pakistanis whom the militants of Awami League slaughtered. Sarmila Bore's *Dead Reckoning: Memories of the Bangladesh War* (2016) similarly had great acceptance in Pakistan for its claims that the Pakistan army's actions were exaggerated by the winners who cultivated a victim culture. These works demonstrate how public memory is characterized by denial and silence. On the other hand, photography demonstrates how ethnic toxicity caught on even the most sensible and rational people, turning them into warmongers in 1971, of which they later were ashamed.

Even though the novel focuses on the happenings in the upper-class circle of Karachi, their actions during and after the war represent the nation itself. Works like *Kartography* brings into light the silence and collective amnesia associated with these events caused by shame and guilt, which needs to be addressed, and the inconclusive ending of the novel reinforces the idea that there is no easy resolution for the problems that arose from the events of 1971: "to pretend the matter can be easily discussed and resolved is to deny how deep in our marrow consequences are lodged." (Shamsie 332).

As Rhoda E. Howard-Hassman and Mark Gibney suggest: (Howard 1), This can be associated with a massive surge in international apologies from the part of different nations for the historical injustices from their past. Pervez Musharraf, President of Pakistan during 2001-08, apologized for the war crimes of 1971 when he visited Dhaka in 2002. (Cilano 2) The novel emphasizes the need for acknowledgment of past injustices by paralleling the events of 1971 and 1995 and proving how the previous generation's lack of recognition of mistakes causes similar scenarios to repeat themselves. The reason for Raheen and Karim's relationship falling apart in 1995 is the cruelty Zafar did to Maheen in 1997. Karim wonders whether Raheen, who adored her father and refused to respond to the realities of Karachi like her father, would turn out to be as cruel, insensitive, and unsympathetic as him one day. "You are your father's daughter." (Shamsie 142) He apprehends that the events of 1995

finally would reveal the “narrow-mindedness and cowardice and rage”( 297) of Raheen just like it did to her father.

When young Karim, at school, identified himself as a half-Bengali, he received blows from his friend Zia who did not want it to be true. This is very much similar to Yasmin’s attempt in 1971 to deny Maheen’s ethnicity: “God’s sake, Asif, she has lived all her life in Karachi”, Yasmin said. ‘She is not...’ ‘Not what?’ Maheen turned to her friend, ‘One of them?’ ( 183). ‘Post memory’ influences the experiences of those who grew up dominated by the narratives of their past. Here it is evident that though 1971 was treated as a forgotten event that has nothing to do with the present, the xenophobic stereotypes still influenced society and perspectives. When Raheen’s life is disrupted by her realization of the truth regarding the fiancé swap in 1971, she wonders, “What did something that happened nearly a quarter of a century ago have to do with our lives?” (Shamsie 211). At another moment, she also realizes that she and Kareem separated back in 1971 when they were not even born. She scribbled down on the toilet paper in Sonia's bathroom using her eyeliner “ What does 1971 have to do with now?” (241). Raheen wonders:

Due to shame or guilt, this repressed past always haunts subsequent generations. We can see how the politics turn personal here.

Shamsie calls upon the need to acknowledge past traumatic mistakes and do away with collective amnesia. The 'stranger' should be acknowledged and included in dominant narratives of the country. Zafar again voices Shamsie: "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) She asserts on the need to do away with the collective amnesia and silence; and to acknowledge, reflect and come to terms with the past for a peaceful existence, at least for the future generations. Raheen and Karim finally come to acknowledge and accept their past, which helps them to develop a map of Karachi that includes human life stories, memories, and experiences along with names of places and landmarks because they realize that a place cannot be understood with just its name. Personal stories and anecdotes of the past are essential in making it as it is in the present, and such a map would help blur all boundaries and lines of differences.

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