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Kamila Shamsie's novels of history, exile and desire

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The richness of Shamsie's fiction is in the ways in which varied themes and stories within a novel are multilayered, interact and are part of each other, so that the narrative about a person or a couple is viewed within a larger, more socially dense context. 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. The novels treat the relationship of national events to the personal. The military is important because it controlled Pakistani politics since the partition of India: *Burnt Shadows* shows the effects of the Japanese and American military upon individuals.

Keywords: Kamila Shamsie; Karachi; history; desire; memory; family; love

A central theme of Kamila Shamsie's novels is the emotional discomfort that results from leaving the security of the past, a past represented by home, family, friendships and Karachi. Such unwillingness to leave the world one has known might be explained by her characters growing up and having to face the harsh realities of life, but nostalgia for home is also characteristic of an exile or expatriate. Four of Shamsie's novels are set mainly in Karachi, as is part of her fifth, *Burnt Shadows*; in these narratives memory has a major role. Shamsie likes the multicultural and cosmopolitan and shows that Islamic culture is varied and has connections with the wider world, but she also shows the difficulty in leaving the society in which one feels at ease. Gain brings loss.

Her article "Mulberry Absences" tells of one summer when returning home from the US she suddenly became aware that there were no mulberries. Her sister replies that Kamila is never around during the mulberry season. "Prior to this moment, I'd had no trouble convincing myself that though I was at college in the US, the fact that I returned home for four months of the year meant I was not really missing out on life back home" (87). Her illusion shattered, she stayed awake all night trying to remember what else she had forgotten and decides "reacquainting myself with the mulberry would be the only sane way of reclaiming those eight lost months of the year".¹

In her first four novels the central character faces loss of family or friends; such loss is either the result of public events or the indirect influence of the political on the personal. In her fifth novel the main characters attempt to move on and go beyond the past. While most of the novels concern the relationship of national events to the personal there is also the politics of social hierarchies such as class, language, culture and origins. The richness of Shamsie's fiction is the ways in which varied themes and stories within a novel are multilayered, interact, and are part of each other, so that the narrative about a person or couple is viewed within a larger, more socially dense, context.

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Each of the five novels is about how history affects several generations of a family. The novels often have a love story, which is challenged by differences of class, culture, or ethnicity – challenges resulting from events that weigh upon the present. The narrator's earliest memory in the untitled prologue to *Salt and Saffron* is "of Dadi cackling when she heard news of Hussain Asif's marriage to Natasha Shah. 'Shia Muhajir marries Sunni Sindhi! How will the bigots react? Disown your own kind, or accept the enemy!'"² Marriage or love across class, sect and ethnicity can be painful, and the novel examines the pains brought about by relationships over generations of a family. In *Kartography*, the secession of East Pakistan in 1971 results in a hatred of Bengalis, forcing the breaking of the engagement of the narrator's father from his Bengali fiancée. The narrator's boyfriend does not want to return to Karachi in 1991 after studying in the US, as he regards the communal violence between the Sindhi and Muhajir as similar to the conflict between East and West Pakistan in the past.

Burnt Shadows begins with an ill-fated love between a German and a Japanese; the Japanese later marries an Indian Muslim but the happy crossing of cultures is unusual. This one affects the son who wants his mother and himself to be like the Pakistanis among whom they live.

To understand present problems it is necessary to understand the past. In *In the City by the Sea*, Pakistani history explains why Uncle Salman is thought a threat to the new military government. In *Salt and Saffron* Aliya needs to trace the history of her family, and especially of Aunt Mariam³ before making up with her paternal grandmother (and Mariam's aunt) Dadi and accepting the love of Khaleel. Raheen and Karim in *Kartography* need to understand how the civil war that created Bangladesh led to their parents changing partners. *Broken Verses* tells of the wild love affair between Samina and a poet, the true facts about which Aasmaani must discover before she can be freed of illusions and have a fulfilling life of her own.

Although the centres of consciousness range from the young boy Hasan in *In the City by the Sea* to Hiroko Tanaka in *Burnt Shadows*, in four of the five novels they are women – Aliya in *Salt and Saffron*, Raheen in *Kartography* and Aasmaani in *Broken Verses*. Shamsie has a woman's perspective with sensitivity towards manners, class, friendships between women, and how politics and war affect women. The narratives tell of those whom the main character loves such as Hasan's uncle, Aliya's Aunt Mariam and their cook Masood, Aasmaani's mother Saminia and her lover The Poet, Hiroko's husband Sajjad and their child Raza. The family is the subject as well as a context and provides a social world from which the central character is or may be exiled. *Burnt Shadows* is different in that the expectation of a happy ending is frustrated by a last minute turn in events, but the form of the novel, a flashback, means that events were already determined. Significantly it is a foreign "Uncle", Harry Burton, a family friend, who misleadingly offers the comfort that Raza does not find at home.

The military is important because in various guises it has controlled Pakistani politics since the partition of India: *Burnt Shadows* also shows the military dominating Japan during the 1930s and 1940s and the effects upon the US of becoming a major military power. Shamsie's novels allude to conquests, wars, interventions, struggles for independence, and other events in which violence affects society and private lives. Each novel has at its core a past which has led to the present and which the novel might be said to be about. *Burnt Shadows* makes explicit the concern with how we got from there to where we are.

The US figures in these stories because its emergence as the leading power after the Second World War resulted in involvement with other nations such as Pakistan and Afghanistan; the Americans financed Pakistan's military and armed the Islamic fundamentalists during the Cold War against the Soviets. The US influence had such consequences as

strengthening dictatorships and the spread of fundamentalist terrorism. This is a version of the postcolonial empire writing back with its own history. Although the US is admired for welcoming immigrants, many Americans in Shamsie's novels are ignorant, prejudiced, or shed their humanity for patriotic reasons. Her two most sympathetic Europeans are both German exiles: Konrad and Ilse in *Burnt Shadows*.

Shamsie alludes to an Islamic history and cultures richer and more interesting than the present fundamentalism; she mentions poets, feminists, international relations, political ideals, customs, and connections between families. Rather than Saudi Arabia or Iran, Turkey is often mentioned as a place of origins or where Muslims have gone. Unlike the puritanical Islam of recent news, her portrayal of Muslim society is more varied. Her women have sexual desires, sexual experience, and lovers, and if married lead independent lives. They are usually from a cosmopolitan elite (corresponding to her own family). While she mentions a Muslim society where arranged marriages and puritanical distaste of sexual imagery are the norm, she shows a variety of Muslim cultural life.

There are different emphases in each book, such as the novel of manners and the foregrounding of storytelling, but Shamsie is always a writer of political fiction (although the kind of narrative she tells and the ways of telling are unlike those of most political novelists) and of desire. Writing about the desire for the unobtainable affiliates her work with Islamic literary tradition, but whereas a Sufi mystic writes about love of the divine, Shamsie writes about friendships, family, food, and other aspects of the security that her characters felt when young. Her writing is self-conscious in pointing to her use, even parodies, of literary models, whether Shakespeare's plays, popular romance, or Sufi writings.

Her first four novels are set mostly in Karachi. Such fiction might be regarded as novels of memory in which the past is recalled to avoid loss; such fiction is common to authors who live abroad before they write about other societies. Each of the four Karachi novels concludes with fantasies, wish-fulfillments. While the stories are concerned with obsessions, they show how fantasies mislead; it is necessary to come to terms with the present. Significantly her fifth novel, a new departure in being set in Japan, India, Afghanistan and New York as well as Karachi, coincided with her own move to London. Its story and tone are less romantic, less linguistically playful.

In the Karachi novels she writes of its elite, their children, and the city's social levels and ethnicities. The narrative about individuals, their emotions, and their relationships to others is impacted by history and politics. Affection, love, rights, actions, manners and morals are influenced and shaped by who governs and how. In writing of Karachi, Shamsie tells of Pakistan from before the partition of the Indian sub-continent to the recent past. Her subject matter includes the crisis caused to local society and the long-lasting divisions within some families by the migration of north Indian Muslims at Partition (*Salt and Saffron*); the constant military coups against democratically elected governments (*In the City by the Sea*); the civil war and ethnic hatreds that led to the independence of Bangladesh and the violence of the 1990s (*Kartography*); and the feminist movement within Pakistan and the Islamic world during the 1970s and 1980s, and the military's encouragement of Islamic fundamentalism which paradoxically occurred alongside the emergence of liberalized communications and other signs of increased modernity (*Broken Verses*). Outside the cities Pakistan remains feudalistic, beyond government control. The stories take place in more than one time period, the present being a gateway to events in the past.

Shamsie is unusual in mentioning and quoting those writers who have influenced her. In the early novels a model is Salman Rushdie's playing with language, punning, caricature, stories within stories, comic names, foregrounding of storytelling and amusing allusions. There are the Rushdie-influenced descriptions of food:

There was no need to announce that dinner was served – the aroma was dinner-gong enough. There was *pulao* with peas nestling in the rice; prawn *vindaloo* which made Hasan’s eyes stream and throat burn just from looking at it; *murgh mussalum* made with such tender pieces of chicken that Imran was seen hugging three members of the Bodyguard after he sampled it [...] At the end of the table a basket of *na’an* was surrounded by various *achaars* chutneys and the delicacy which Aba claimed Shakespeare had foretold: “Such stuffed chillies as dreams are made on”. (*City by the Sea* 61–62)

A Rushdie influence is the use of an individual’s life as a way of writing about national and international politics. The personal has a larger context. Agha Shahid Ali, the Kashmiri-American poet who was one of her writing teachers, encouraged her imagining of and nostalgia for a past not experienced, a willingness to entertain alternative histories, an active reaching out for and incorporation of Islamic traditions along with western literature. Agha Shahid Ali also encouraged Shamsie’s use of extending a poetic image throughout a novel so that it takes on multiple significances.⁴

There is sometimes an autobiographical connection to these stories. *Salt and Saffron* makes use of the memoirs originally written in Urdu by Shamsie’s grandmother, Begum Jahanara Habibullah. The main story, the relationship between Aliya and Khaleed, revises Attia Hosain’s (1913–98) excellent autobiographical novel *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961) in which the narrator Laila marries a man who is not her social equal. The sub-plot of the eccentric cousin Mariam who elopes with the cook is a further thematic echo, possibly based on the mention in *Sunlight* of a village cousin who has a “defect” in her “lineage”. Attia Hosain was Kamila Shamsie’s great aunt. One problem in establishing a canon of Pakistani authors has been what to do about Hosain since she was against Partition, and would not move to Pakistan. Kamila Shamsie’s solution is to incorporate a version of the family quarrel about Partition within *Salt and Saffron* where it is given a happy ending.⁵

In the City by the Sea, Shamsie’s first novel, takes place during a time when the Pakistani military usurped power but was still divided in its aims, unlike later when it formed an alliance with the Islamists, limited women’s rights and imposed Sharia law. Salman Mamoo speaks of “The inability of democracies to succeed in this country. The cycle of failure” (209). The novel tells about Salman Mamoo, an opposition politician as seen by his nephew Hasan, a ten year old who dresses in a mixture of “*kurta and jeans*” (3). Hasan’s mother Saira is an artist with a gallery that exhibits such works as *Reclining Nude*, although more conservative clients prefer her *Still Life With Flowers*. The details are significant. This is a society with a range of views. Saira and her husband Shehryar are a loving, playful, well-off couple, at home in their society yet different from the conservatives.

In the prologue Hasan watches as another boy falls from the roof of a building and dies. Both boys are so engrossed in kite flying that they are unable to see the dangers around them; this foreshadows events later in the novel when Salman Mamoo will be tried for treason. Salman lives under continual surveillance, his house bugged, his telephone tapped, as the government waits for a slip of the tongue that will excuse killing him. Although he appears relaxed and can be amusing about his confinement, he must assume that relatives and friends are spies who will report his conversations. There is pressure on his supporters. Saira loses the lease to her art gallery. Salman’s wife no longer manages her schools as that would result in their closure. The children of supporters are not accepted at the university. After house arrest for three months, Salman is taken to prison to be tried by a military court for treason.

The social elite, including the military, are English speakers closely knit by family, marriage, love affairs, schools, neighbours, and sometimes obscure, but unquestioned family and feudal rights. The Widow who stays with Uncle Latif after the death of her

husband is a cousin of his. She is similar to Mariam in *Salt and Saffron*, in being a widow who suddenly appears and is accepted as part of the family – one of Shamsie’s females concerned about the treatment of women in the Islamic world. She defends other widows from unscrupulous male in-laws who evict women from their home and take their money by falsely citing Pakistani and Koranic law. The Widow has loyal followers and protectors called the Bodyguard who aid her but, being poorly dressed, cause an amusing conflict with Imran, Uncle Latif’s snobbish cook, who will not work for employers who have bad taste.

This Rushdie-land of eccentric cartoonish characters mingles with harsher social realities and fundamental questions. What is Pakistan? The characters often look up the etymology of words:

“Ho, Shehryar!” Uncle Latif said. “What’s the etymology of ‘etymology’?”

“From the Greek *etymos* meaning ‘true’, akin to *eteos* which also means ‘true’, which comes from the Latin *esse* meaning to ‘to be’,” Aba shouted back. “Why are you pretending to be interested?”

Uncle Latif held up his massive red dictionary. “Because I already looked it up. From *esse* meaning ‘to be’! So in his solo-liliquy Hamlet was saying ‘Etymology or not etymology’. Finally the light, the light. This is why he’s your favourite literary character.” (66)

The state is usurped by the military, and Salman is supposed to set it right. He inherits his role because of his looks and because he is a nephew of Zafar Haq (Haq means justice), a former leader against military rule who after imprisonment was made Prime Minister. As Salman, Hamlet-like, does little, the leadership of the opposition passes to those who enforce a strike against the government. These people die battling with the police, use violence to close schools, and bring the nation to a standstill. The elite regards the democratic leaders as trouble-makers and rather than joining with them feels threatened.

Salman’s family and friends fear the lower classes. Hasan’s father says “I would rather live under a dictator and have Salman safe at home, than achieve democracy through his imprisonment” (90). The troublemakers will eventually save Salman through violence, which the military respects, whereas when Shehryar contacts friends among the foreign powers he is told that the president has signed treaties giving their countries raw material at bargain prices, and they need his help in other matters (an allusion to helping the Americans against the Russians in Afghanistan).

The ousting of the president is not explained. The army possibly decided that the trade agreements were ruinous to the nation and themselves. Another explanation is that the opposition had organized a strong enough strike that the army and president knew the end of military rule had come. The novel leaves much unsaid. Shamsie raises questions about the central characters and the responsibilities of their class. Hasan’s father and mother, although charming, do little, unlike those generals concerned with the nation’s economy or the political activists willing to die for democracy. A story about how Pakistani society is affected by tyranny, the novel implicitly contrasts those who take action against injustice with those who merely talk.

The narrator in *Salt and Saffron* warns of the necessity of understanding silence; in each of Shamsie’s novels much is alluded to but not explained. There are stories to follow but the background information is scattered and insufficient for clarifying puzzles and symbols. Memory, the rediscovery of the past as part of facing reality, can be false. In *Salt and Saffron* it is necessary to get to the truth behind false memories. Beginning and concluding with a love story, the novel delves into the history of a family; the search for the truth about family is linked to reconsidering how and why Pakistan was created. *Salt and Saffron* begins with a family tree introducing the House of Dard-e-Dil, formerly rulers of a feudal princi-

pality in north India. Starting with the Begum and Nawab the various lines include “Hairless Nawab” who fathers “Binky” (a dead end) and Rehana, mother of “Smelly” and “Stinky”. Another line leads through Nasser and Ayesha to Aliya, the narrator. A related line leads to Mariam, who defied family honour and whose life is the untold story which Aliya must recover. In an untitled prologue the narrator says her family lives in fear of “not-quite-twins” and that such fear is prejudice against marrying those outside noble families. Supposedly for 500 years the family has been jealous of its privileged position and not-quite-twins are a recurring curse that brings disaster and confuses purity of lineage. Aliya, returning to Pakistan from the US, is helped with her luggage and physically attracted towards a Pakistani-American whose relatives live in an area of Karachi that her family considers socially untouchable. The novel will bring the two together.

Chapter 11, just before the middle of the book, starts the process of reversing earlier assumptions about people and history. Aliya meets her grandmother Dadi for the first time since she slapped her for saying “That whore” after Mariam married Masood. Dadi, the supposed arch-snob, reveals that she was a Marxist when young, while Aliya admits that slapping Dadi was a displacement of her own anger towards Mariam for marrying a cook. It is Aliya the narrator who is socially prejudiced. Later we learn even the remark “That whore” was not aimed at Mariam. The second half of *Salt and Saffron* has other surprises about the House of Dard-e-Dil and especially of the three brothers, Akbar, Sulaiman, and Tamur, and their love for the same woman. There is a family history of love and sexual relationships with the lower classes. Aliya, prudish by comparison with her cousin Samia, is shocked to find her grandmother Meher living openly with a married man in Greece. Unveiling the history of the family allows Aliya to accept Khaleel, the attractive Pakistani-American.

Salt and Saffron offers a version of the marriage plot found in such novels as Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, in which the heroine is tested and will be rewarded with the object of her affection. Prejudice is bad but pride gives women standards and self-assurance, creates challenges for men, and helps protect women against wrong choices. The novel warns of the many problems that result from socially and culturally mismatched romantic relationships, while also criticizing those who believe marriage is only to ensure or better social and financial standing. Something is needed between social rigidity and giving in to lust, especially now that upper-class Muslim women are being educated and becoming independent:

Her grandmother had lived and died in purdah, unseen by men who were not of the family, her life a life unconcerned with the world outside the palace, her principal interest the matter of marriage. And then, just two generations later, there was her granddaughter: Abida who went to college, Abida who rode on donkey-carts to the refugee camps in 1947 to help those who needed it, Abida who told me I had to learn to be independent because she didn’t want me to become one of those women who relied on their husbands for everything. (219)

Although Khaleel physically attracts Aliya and shares her interest in poetry, can he fit into the Dard-e-Dil clan? He first is approved by relatives in London and then by Aliya’s parents. When he brings Masood’s kebabs from Istanbul, he is an amusing conquering hero, as he has symbolically reunited the family, the previously divided Indian and Pakistani Dard-e-Dils, and also calmed Aliya’s fear about Mariam’s life after marrying Masood. That Mariam and Masood are doing well implies that Aliya should not fear her future with Khaleel.

Descriptions of Masood’s cooking occur in the novel so often that they seem almost a main character. His food is part of the past, home, and comfort that Aliya needs and which she regains through Khaleel and the Indian branch of the family in London. Presumably

now that the connection to Mariam and Masood has been restored, it will flourish on a new basis in which the cook, an artist, is no longer regarded by Aliya as a servant.

The many allusions to Ghalib in *Salt and Saffron* highlight such similarities to his poetry as themes of yearnings and desire and the self-conscious style; as the novel moves backward in time to tell of the past, the story line and behaviour belong more to that age's romanticism than to the ironic present, of which Shamsie's self-conscious novel is an illustration:

"Oh, come on. A celibate love affair for possibly eighteen years?" I stubbornly replied, "Pakistan isn't as obvious as America. Our love stories are all about pining and separation and tiny gestures assuming grand significance." But Celeste rolled her eyes. "Hormones are hormones," she said. (99)

The small Indian principality Dard-e-Dil (literally "The Aching Heart") might be figuratively translated as the heart's yearning or desire. It represents the large, unrealizable emotions in much of the literature that Pakistani and north Indian Muslims inherited from Farsi and the Sufi traditions. While desire is attached to a lost home in India it is also applicable to Aliya's yearning for Masood's cooking. The family's pride is a yearning for an ideal when the family was whole, united, respected, and obeyed in a princely kingdom, unlike being challenged by the lower classes and nouveau riche of contemporary Pakistan. It is a desire to be securely loved regardless of what you do or have done.

There is, however, a thin boundary between taste and excess, whether in seasoning food or between old families and the nouveau riche. The self-consciousness of the writing, with its many pointers to what that narrator is doing, is itself poised between homage and showing off:

When Sulaiman finishing talking I was close to tears, but Dadi did something entirely unexpected. She laughed.

"Sulaiman, that's sheer melodrama. My life! Such passion, such tragic miscommunication, such revelations in the aftermath of the main action. It's too absurd." (233)

Even displays of wit are identified by the narrator:

"I'm a uppie. A yuppie no longer young. Sameer suggested prefixing 'geriatric' but I will not be a guppie."

I wouldn't allow myself to laugh, so instead I said archly, "Nothing less than smoked salmon for Dadi."

"I was thinking along the lines of a swordfish."
Had she always possessed this virtue of self-parody? (107)

We are given the aesthetics that form the novel and what we should be noticing and appreciating. It is not enough to tell history through striking or major events that are part of a general large canvas:

You have to isolate each life, have to say that here lies the first discordant note and look how it is echoed in this life and see the discordance transformed into a necessary part of the whole as it, through contrast, heightens the harmony of this chord. (117)

Shamsie's fiction is packed with references to and parodies of the Muslim world, including literature, culture, and history. In *In the City by the Sea* Hasan tries to recite a poem by Nazim Hikmet; in *Salt and Saffron* Mariam's books include Turkish authors, and we learn that members of the family were part of the Khilafat Movement "which tried to show the British that Muslims around the world would not accept the break-up of the Ottoman Empire" (177) and some had gone to Turkey "before Ataturk declared Turkey a secular state" (178). Taimur, one of the triplets, had sought work in Turkey from a relative; that is where Mariam

was raised and where she returns with Masood to start a gourmet restaurant. Aliya might have guessed earlier that Mariam knew Turkish as Mariam has books by Turkish authors and as she laughed at the dialogue of a Turkish film. Pakistanis are connected to many places; Aliya has relatives in Greece and France as well as England and India.

This is the former empire answering back by showing it has a history and culture of its own. It has its own stories to tell. Dard-e-Dil had a minor role in a long complicated history starting with the various conquerors who came from the north and which continued through Akbar and the Mughals to Partition. Dard-e-Dil became independent from the Mughals in 1773 and soon became a vassal of the empire. During the Great Rebellion of 1857 the ruler of Dard-e-Dil was uncertain which side to join and through an amusing mix-up backed the British, although he had instructed a messenger to support the Mutineers; consequently he was one of the Muslim nobles who instead of being hanged had his lands enlarged and was given a high-sounding title, which continued until Partition. The Pakistani part of the family idealizes a lost golden age, while those who remained in India had to adjust to a state which eliminated private fiefdoms within its boundaries.

Shamsie's novels belong with those critical of what independence produced in their societies:

“You are free. You are free to go to your temples. You are free to go to your mosques or to any other place of worship in this State of Pakistan. You may belong to any religion or caste or creed – that has nothing to do with the business of the State. [...] We are starting with this fundamental principle that we are all citizens and equal citizens of one State.” (218–19)

In a novel concerned with the supposed impossibility of marriage or an affair between a descendant of the Muslim Indian nobility and a rapidly rising member of the middle class, the words of Mohammed Ali Jinnah recall what Pakistan was intended to be:

Dadi nodded, and when she spoke I knew she had remembered me again. “Perhaps we did not pay enough attention to that part about ‘any caste’. We thought that was merely a religious term that didn’t apply to us.” (219)

The title of Shamsie's third novel, *Kartography*, alludes to the differences that divide Karachi, a city in which mental horizons are limited by class, origins and language. Partition brought communal conflict as the new nation had at its creation a division between the local peoples and the immigrants from India. Later, the civil war that created Bangladesh was accompanied by atrocities and a Pakistani denial of what occurred.

The novel opens with discussion of alternative histories. There is a garden in Karachi with a fossilized footprint of Alexander the Great and/or his soldiers. That often-cited history turns out to be false; it is more likely that Alexander's admiral, a Cretan rather than a Macedonian, sailed into the harbour of a place that later became Karachi, and even that is speculation. In the past there were invaders, conquerors, natives, those ruled over, and various identities. Communal and class differences continue into the present causing violence between Muhajirs (the north Indian Muslims who came to Pakistan) and Pathans. The Muhajirs, a national minority, are the majority in Karachi and resented for taking employment and living space from others. They are English-speaking urbanites in the professions, service industries, and manufacturing, opposed by feudal landlords who resist democracy, land reform, and the progressive policies that would destroy their local authority.

Dichotomies within Pakistan include urban/rural, immigrant/native, and various communities in multilayered conflict. There is a radical division between those who live in highly protected areas of Karachi and those who live elsewhere in the city where there is

violence, high rates of crime, fear of the police, and such signs of poverty as poor housing, power shortages, disgusting smells, unemployment and lack of opportunities. English is needed for advancement and is characteristic of the elite; others who learn English and do well in government examinations remain unemployed, as there are quotas to prevent urban communities dominating administrative positions. Violence became worse after Benazir Bhutto was elected prime minister in 1988, dismissed from power 20 months later, re-elected 1993 and dismissed from power in 1996. Lacking will to compromise and heal divisions, the urban elite lost influence to the military and the religious.

Most of the novel concerns Raheen and her relationship to Karim and to two friends, which is paralleled by the relationship between their parents, two couples who have been friends for decades. At the start Karim and Raheen are teenagers seemingly destined to become lovers and marry. After Karim goes to university in the US and no longer wants to live in Karachi, Raheen cannot understand why anyone should leave. Before she can understand, the past will be examined and seen differently. With the renewal of violence and communal hatreds in Karachi during the 1990s, the young need to decide whether to remain. Karim and the two friends leave, but Raheen stays no matter what has happened or will happen, as she loves the city, her family, and her memories of the friendships of her youth; she wants her friends, and especially Karim, to return. Although she knows she is selfish, she claims that this is really love. The various comings and goings of Karim, his arguments with Raheen, and her wilful blindness border on the tedious, but this is a novel about impossible longings which cannot be satisfied, since Raheen will not leave, Karim who is part Bengali does not want to remain, and they love each other.

When he does return to her at the conclusion of the novel it seems improbable and the prose turns to dream-like verse in which Raheen is his guide through the hell of Karachi (the allusion is to Dante's *Divine Comedy*). This tale of longing and unsatisfied desire contrasts Karim's plan to map the roads of Karachi so that anyone can find places and Raheen's hatred of such abstraction; she knows routes by landmarks, memory, trial and, often, error. Hers is the lived experience, the love of what you know; his is the objective rational judgement of someone who is partly an outsider. His map would include other classes and ethnicities than Raheen's limited social circle. Bearing on this conflict about where to live is the conduct of Raheen's father, Zafar, towards Karim's mother, Maheen, to whom Zafar was engaged at the time of the civil war. This is another of Shamsie's detective stories in which there can be no resolution without uncovering the past. Rejected by his friends and employer, and beaten up for planning to marry a Bengali (even though she lived most of her life in Karachi), Zafar gives in and insults her by saying that their children will be better than her because only half-Bengali. This causes the breaking of the engagement and an exchange of partners between the two couples.

Raheen later learns the reasons for the broken engagement and change of partners and hates her father, whom she loved until now, for his cowardliness. She is like her father in preferring comfort, security, and the world she knows rather than risking change. Learning the truth about what happened in 1971 threatens her; how can she forgive her father and how can she win back Karim, who knows that in Karachi he will always be regarded as a Bengali and that the city and nation will always be plagued by communal hatred?

The novel concludes with an alternative history. Raheen imagines that her father, by insulting Maheen, was actually saving her from a possible knife attack by a temporarily deranged neighbour; Karim returns saying that he cannot live without Raheen. What is the status of these final pages of the novel? Raheen has a dream about Karim. Heading the next page there is a quotation from Italo Calvino, "*There are two ways to escape suffering (the inferno where we live every day)*" (330). Calvino suggests that by hard work escape is

possible. Is the happy conclusion of the novel with Raheen reconciled to her father, Karim, and Karachi an alternative Calvino-esque ending, another possible, much happier, version of how the story ends? This seems unlikely. How was it possible that until now no one knew why Zafar said what he did about Maheen? If Zafar was only trying to save Maheen why did the engagement end? The conclusions of Shamsie's novels are often ambiguous and puzzling, probably because the desires that motivate the central characters cannot be resolved and require fantasy.

Broken Verses, Shamsie's fourth novel, tells of a feminist activist and her poet lover during the 1980s, as recalled almost two decades later by the woman's emotionally frozen daughter, who blames her condition on being abandoned and who fantasizes that her mother left after seeing the futility of political action. The history of her mother and the poet is told in relation to such events as the overthrow of democracy by the military, the various ins and outs of who replaced whom as head of state, how this affected human, especially women's, rights, and how the fundamentalists gained strength because the military needed their support. The consequence was the passing of laws taking away women's rights while dissent was brutally suppressed. The poet was beaten to death, his tongue ripped out, and the manuscript of his final work destroyed before it could be published. Almost two decades later no one dares seek his killers as they or their backers remain in power. Shamsie places Pakistan's degeneration from democracy to military rule within the context of international politics, such as the effect of the US's backing of the military because of the Cold War and using the fundamentalists against the Soviets in Afghanistan.

The novel is similar to *Salt and Saffron* and *Kartography* in portraying obsessions with the past and parents. Aasmaani's charismatic mother disappeared 14 years ago after suffering depression following the brutal murder of her lover. The novel is apparently set in 1991 when the Poet and Aasmaani's mother have become legends. The disappearance of her mother left Aasmaani half-crazed; she once cut her wrists, and remains unstable, a 31-year-old woman unwilling to accept reality. Aasmaani believes that her mother is in hiding and will return to her and make up for the lost years she was away on demonstrations or following her lover to foreign lands.

These lives take place within the context of Pakistan's political and cultural changes since the 1960s and especially since the 1980s. The Hudood Ordinance of 1979 took away many rights of women. An "accusation of rape could only be proven in a court of law if there were four pious, male Muslim adults willing to give testimony" (92). This led to the women's movement and in 1981 the Women's Action Forum:

It was 1983 by then, and the Women's Action Forum, spearheaded by some of my mother's closest friends, was taking on the military government with an astonishing show of bravery. Between the Ansari Commission's recommendations that women should be barred from holding high public office, and the proposed Islamic Law of Evidence which equated the evidence of two women with one man, and the Safia Bibi case in which a blind eighteen-year-old girl who was raped found herself sentenced to a fine, imprisonment and public lashing on the charge of adultery, there was plenty of work to be done ... (94)

The women were beaten by the police, kept in police custody, but kept demonstrating, challenging the laws in court, and learned Islamic law to argue their cause: "there were significant victories too [...] the Islamic Law of Evidence was amended so that it was only in cases pertaining to financial matters that the testimony of two women was equal to that of one man" (95).

Aasmaani claims to have lost all political will during 1988. After General Mohammad Zia-ul-Haq dismissed the civilian government he announced that sharia would be the

supreme law of the land. This move towards theocracy sent violent tremors down the spine of the women's movement, which knew that Zia's Islam concerned itself primarily with striking down the rights of women and befriending fundamentalists (138).

On 17 August 1988, the aircraft carrying Zia exploded, and that rather than years of protests ended his regime. Politics, Aasmaani says, are now more confusing than previously when secular and moderate Muslims opposed the military and the religious extremists. The West's, especially American, backing of the Islamists to fight against the Russians in Afghanistan strengthened the religious in Pakistan. Later the Islamists won seats in parliament and were claiming democratic rights while a military dictatorship was liberalizing the media.

Although Aasmaani lost interest in the world after her mother's disappearance, there is now a man, Ed, who loves and hopes to marry her; he is the son of a famous actress who was herself in love with Aasmaani's mother. The complications that develop are highly improbable but lead to the start of Aasmaani's cure, and possibly in future a resumption of her affair with Ed.

In her first four novels Shamsie put Karachi on the international literary map, although mostly the areas, society and concerns of the city's educated liberal elite. Conventions of Urdu and related literatures reappear in her writing in new guises, such as the retelling of the Persian Laila and Majnun legend as a play about the poet and his love. The novels offer a history seldom noticed in the West, such as the strong women's rights movement in Pakistan and other Muslim nations during the 1980s, while exhibiting tension between nostalgia for the culture of the past and the egalitarianism and freedom of the modern world. While the Karachi novels are about politics and society, three show the struggle for female independence. Modernity, hybridity, and being part of the larger world did not depend on the West and do not lead to cultural conflict among the educated. Shamsie's writings help repair the fracture that occurred between the lively Urdu literature of India before Partition and the new English-language Pakistani novel, bringing together the literary culture of the national language with the literature of the official language.

In 2009 Shamsie published *Offence: The Muslim Case*, in which she argued that western fear of Islam was prejudice; using Pakistan as an example, she claimed that each Muslim national state had its own historical particularities, problems and causes. She also settled in London as a full-time writer after many years of dividing her life between Pakistan, England and teaching in the US. Significantly, the heroine of her fifth novel *Burnt Shadows* moves on without nostalgia for the past; it is her maladjusted sentimentalist son who comes to a tragic end.

Fear, prejudice and inhumanity threaten even the most liberal societies. While *Burnt Shadows* mentions the horrors of Japanese nationalism, alludes to Nazi Germany's mistreatment of the Jews, and shows the murderous hatreds that accompanied the Partition of India, a central theme is the effect of war on the US. The argument is structured into the plot and various conversations in a novel otherwise about loss, expatriation, and home.

The story concerns several generations of two families. The "Prologue" begins with an imprisoned "he" awaiting torture and the following chapters show how this came about. The central character is Hiroko Tanka, who loses her German fiancé and is scarred for ever by radiation from the atomic bomb exploded in Nagasaki 9 August 1945. To escape her past she moves to New Delhi where she is befriended by her dead lover's half-sister Ilse and his brother-in-law; she marries Sajjad Ashraf, a Muslim Indian. Hiroko and Sajjad come from and retain their cultures; they exemplify accepting difference. While Konrad and Hiroko were kept from marrying by Japanese nationalism, Sajjad and Hiroko marry despite advice from others. Partition riots and Indian nationalism force them unwillingly from Delhi to Turkey and then Karachi where, two decades later, their son Raza feels humiliated by lack

of racial purity and his mother's foreign customs. To prove himself he pretends to be an Afghani fighting the Soviets: Ilse's son Harry turns up as an undercover CIA agent. Later Raza will become involved with the CIA through "Uncle Harry". A series of misunderstandings, being at the wrong place at the wrong time, and a sentimental attempt to act nobly, results in Raza becoming the "he" of the Prologue, assumed to be an enemy agent responsible for the death of his "Uncle".

The novel makes a parallel between the atomic bombing of Nagasaki and US involvement in Afghanistan – with its consequences to Pakistan and Muslims worldwide. Hiroko several times mentions the horror of Americans behaving as if the lives of others did not count. This is how the Americans travelled from the dropping of the atom bomb to torturing suspected terrorists in Guantanamo. While Shamsie excels at delineating exile, class differences, women's lives, relationships between the personal and political, the contrasting perspectives and lives of different generations, and the ironies and frustrations of desire, her disillusionment with Americans appears early when they refuse to help Salman Mamoo and continues until *Burnt Shadows*.

Notes

1. "Tri-Sub-Continental" (86–91). Another version of the relevant information about homesickness and re-creating Karachi in her novels can be found in *Leaving Home* 394–97.
2. Page numbers refer to the paperback Bloomsbury editions in the list of works cited.
3. Aliya calls her "Mariam Apa". "Apa" is the appellation for "Elder Sister", but Mariam is actually first cousin to Aliya's father. In Pakistani terminology, she is an "aunt" to Aliya; in British or American usage she is a cousin.
4. "Acknowledgements" to *Kartography*; "Tri-Sub-Continental" 87.
5. The relationship is discussed in detail in Muneeza Shamsie, "Sunlight and Salt", which provides an excellent discussion of Hosain's novel and its relationship to *Salt and Saffron*.

Notes on contributor

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