

The Family Crypt and the Nation: Reading Kamila Shamsie's *Kartography* after 1971

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Kamila Shamsie's *Kartography* (2002) was, by the time of its publication, already an unusual object. Madeline Clements, writing in *The Literary Encyclopedia*, notes that it was "the first full-length Pakistani English novel with the 1971 war as its central concern" (Clements). That primacy is itself revealing, for the Pakistani literary field was late to confront 1971, having inherited the very habits of silence the novel sets out to expose. The Hamoodur Rahman Commission's report was classified for twenty-six years, and *Kartography* appeared two years after the report was finally leaked, first in the Indian press, then in Pakistan¹. The novel was part of a shift, the moment when 1971 became, for a generation of Karachiites, a past they were able to confront. *Kartography* is set in Karachi across two time periods, 1971 and 1995, and follows Raheen and Karim, two childhood friends from the city's Anglophone upper-middle class, as they circle a family secret that goes back to the year Bangladesh was born.

Fiction here does something that official discourse cannot do. It holds the crypt open, in Abraham and Torok's sense, without demanding immediate resolution. *Kartography* does not name the trauma so much as make the naming thinkable, which is a different operation. The trauma the novel engages is not sudden and no single event triggers the pathology. It is the product of decades of state policy, of events that were taught or withheld, and perhaps most importantly in Kamila Shamsie's fiction, of the way a family absorbs a national lie and passes it on. The canonical frameworks in trauma studies, derived almost exclusively from Holocaust testimony and calibrated for individual, bounded experience, have little purchase on this kind of damage. Such damage calls for a vocabulary adequate to the slow, manufactured, and collective nature of the silence, and this is what Abraham and Torok's notion of the crypt, together with Derrida's spectrality, provides. The present article reads *Kartography* as a response to a specific historical predicament, the systematic suppression of the events of 1971 within Pakistani national culture and its consequences for two generations of Karachiites who inherited a past that had been carefully withheld from them. The article begins with the

¹ The supplementary report, submitted in October 1974, was first published in excerpts by the Indian weekly *India Today* in August 2000 and immediately reprinted by Pakistan's *Dawn* as a standalone supplement ("Tragic events of 1971: Hamoodur Rahman Commission Report," *Dawn*, 14 Aug. 2000). The Pakistani government officially declassified the full report on 30 December 2000. *Kartography* was published in 2002, two years after this first public exposure.

historical event Shamsie is writing against, then turns to propose a reading of the novel's aesthetic choices through the psychoanalytic framework of the crypt.

Kartography found its first substantial readership outside Pakistan. The structured state silence it underlines was, paradoxically, reflected in the local critical silence around it, while international reviewers praised it primarily as a love story set against a political background, a framing the novel's formal architecture consistently resists. The scholarly literature that has emerged since, however, is notably more attentive to its political and historical dimensions. Caroline Herbert's 2011 analysis in the *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* established the "lyric map" as the novel's central formal contribution. More recent work by South Asian scholars, Sen, Biswas and Tripathi, Kamran and Rukh, has brought the questions of class, gender, and cognitive mapping into focus. This article adds the psychoanalytic dimension to the conversation, which, in the scholarship reviewed here, remains perhaps underdeveloped. Before turning to the scholarship, the premise on which the argument builds can be stated briefly. A family secret lies at the heart of the novel, a silent pact whose consequences affect the lives of the two main protagonists, Raheen and Karim. Anagrams and a fascination with mapping their city, Karachi (the *Kartography* of the title) point at the paradoxical nature of a language which conceals more than it reveals.

The psychoanalytic vocabulary of Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok developed in *The Shell and the Kernel* (1994) offers an available framework for the kind of concealment the novel is enacting. A crypt, in their psychoanalytic lexicon, is an enclave within the ego, the site of an unelaborated secret, preserved intact and inaccessible, and transmissible across generations. The conjunction of this framework with Jacques Derrida's spectrality (the notion that a figure returns because it was never properly buried) offers more vocabulary for the particular quality of forgetting that *Kartography* maps.

The Historical Ground: 1971, Its Silences, and Their Architecture

The silence the novel confronts has a precise history, which needs to be laid out first. Pakistan in 1970 was a country in two wings separated by a thousand miles of Indian territory². The political crisis that broke this arrangement apart accelerated under a convergence of disasters. In November 1970, Cyclone Bhola struck the East Bengal delta and killed an estimated five hundred thousand people in a single night. The central government in Karachi took several days to respond with any seriousness, and the disproportion between the disaster and the official reaction became, in the months that followed, a crystallizing grievance. In the

² See Christophe Jaffrelot. *The Pakistan Paradox: Instability and Resilience*. Trans. Cynthia Schoch. Hurst / Columbia UP, 2015.

December elections of the same year, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's Awami League, the dominant force of Bengali nationalism, won an absolute majority in the entire Pakistani federation. General Yahya Khan's government, under pressure from Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, refused to recognize the result and convene the National Assembly.

On 25 March 1971, the Pakistani army launched Operation Searchlight against the Bengali population. Political leaders, intellectuals, students, university staff, and independence activists were systematically executed in Dhaka and the surrounding towns. The nine-month war of liberation that followed left between three hundred thousand and three million people dead, according to Bangladeshi estimates³. Srinath Raghavan, in his global history of Bangladesh's creation, puts the figure at the lower end of this range, and Gary Bass, drawing on declassified American diplomatic archives, characterizes the overall event as a "forgotten genocide" (Bass 2013).

The debate about the number of victims is also part of a historical and political narrative. In Bangladesh, the figure of three million dead has become part of the founding mythology of the state; it appears in the constitution, in school textbooks, on commemorative materials. Its function is therefore both evidentiary and political, and it aims at establishing the scale of the crime as comparable to other recognized genocides of the twentieth century. In Pakistan, where the events are classified as an internal military operation against rebels rather than a genocide, the low-end figures serve to minimize what occurred. The asymmetry of the numbers is itself the argument that *Kartography* is making. When the same events are described so differently in two national historiographies, the space between the descriptions is a wound that has not been named, and in that space fiction can work.

Sexual violence was a distinct dimension of this record. Nayanika Mookherjee, in *The Spectral Wound* (2015), draws on documentation suggesting that between two hundred thousand and four hundred thousand women were raped by Pakistani army soldiers, making 1971 one of the most systematic deployments of rape as a weapon of war in twentieth-century history (Mookherjee 1–2). The Bangladeshi government of Mujibur Rahman designated survivors as *birangona*, "war heroines", in what proved to be a deeply ambivalent official gesture. The honorific signalled recognition while simultaneously enforcing a visibility that many survivors found as violating as the original assault. Yasmin Saikia, in *Women, War, and the Making of Bangladesh* (2011), has argued that "forgetting is imposed as a strategy to hide the haunting

³ For Operation Searchlight and the systematic killings of 25 March, see Bass (2013, pp. 56–83) and Raghavan (2013, pp. 71–97). On the targeted killing of intellectuals and civil society figures, see D'Costa (2011). The divergence between the Bangladeshi figure of three million dead and the lower-end academic estimate of 300,000 to one million reflects the asymmetrical political stakes of the historiographical debate: the higher figure is inscribed in the Bangladeshi constitution (1972), while Pakistani official discourse has consistently minimized it. For the most rigorous scholarly discussion of this range, see Raghavan (2013, pp. 171–179) and Sisson and Rose (1990, pp. 306–308).

memories that cannot be revealed without destroying our romance with nationalism” (Saikia 12). In Pakistan, silence was administered from above, expelling what could not be admitted into the national narrative. In Bangladesh the situation was more complex. The figure of the *birangona* was officially honoured, yet her suffering was made public in ways that many survivors experienced as a renewed violation rather than a recognition. India entered the war on 3 December 1971, though its involvement had been prepared for months through the training of *Mukti Bahini* fighters and driven, above all, by the pressure of ten million Bengali refugees who had crossed the border into West Bengal (Raghavan 2013). On 16 December 1971, the Pakistani army surrendered to the Indian forces and the *Mukti Bahini*, and the state of Bangladesh came into being. Pakistan had lost half of its territory and population in a matter of weeks, and the surrender to India and Bangladesh nationalists was perceived as a humiliation, deepened by the ninety-three thousand prisoners of war held in India, and this humiliation made the erasure of the defeat from collective memory a political necessity.

The Hamoodur Rahman Commission, established by President Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in late 1971 to investigate military and political responsibility for the defeat, delivered its report in 1974, and the report was immediately classified. It remained undisclosed until excerpts appeared in the press in 2000, creating what Cilano describes as a “narrative vacuum at the national level” (Cilano 2). But no truth commission was established, and, to date, no Pakistani government has officially recognized the genocide perpetrated against the Bengali population. In school textbooks, the secession of Bangladesh is systematically presented not as the result of state violence but as the product of an Indian and Hindu conspiracy to dismember Pakistan, a distortion that K.K. Aziz documents systematically in his analysis of Pakistani curricula, entitled, with deliberate bluntness, *The Murder of History* (Aziz 1993). Yet this is not a silence by default but a manufactured one, and what was closed off was not a version of events but, as Muneeza Shamsie has argued, the possibility of mourning what had been lost (M. Shamsie 23). It is this paradoxical structure that Mookherjee’s term “spectral wound” captures, a wound that persists because it cannot be fully recognized and that haunts the living because the dead have not been buried with dignity and the survivors have not been worthily acknowledged (Mookherjee 27). The generation born after the war inherited this unmourned wound, and the novelist belongs to it.

Kamila Shamsie, born in 1973, grew up in Karachi, in the social milieu the novel depicts, educated, upper-middle-class, Anglophone, and shielded from the 1971 war by the same combination of class position and ethnic privilege conferred by her aristocratic Lucknow and Delhi heritage. She came of age under Zia ul-Haq’s military dictatorship, which lasted from 1977 to 1988, the years that shaped her generation and whose consequences run through her first four novels. The censorship of the period was pervasive. Newspapers, including *Dawn*,

would appear with large blank spaces where articles had been pulled by the authorities under pre-publication censorship, and what could not be printed circulated instead as rumour and private conversation. “A lot of history, as it was unfolding, wasn’t being officially acknowledged and wasn’t in the newspapers,” Shamsie recalls, “so stories became the carriers of history and politics” (Shamsie 2018). *Kartography* is one product of that formation, and it belongs to a broader body of Pakistani Anglophone fiction shaped by the same years. Shamsie’s *In the City by the Sea* (1998) and *Broken Verses* (2005) approach the Zia period obliquely, through childhood and family memory. Another example is Mohammed Hanif’s *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* (2008), which exposes the same decade through satire. What distinguishes *Kartography* from these novels is its focus not on the dictatorship but on what the dictatorship made impossible to say, and on what that impossibility produced in the following generation. The novel is, among other things, an act of self-reckoning. The Karachi of *Kartography*, “a violent, fractured place” (*Kartography* 331) is the Karachi of the MQM years⁴, a city shaped by inter-ethnic violence, particularly between Muhajir groups and Sindhi or Pashtun communities, as well as recurrent confrontations with state security forces. Curfews, riots, and political killings form the background against which Raheen and Karim come of age (Gayer; Khan). The aesthetic project of the novel is to map the fractures that official discourse cannot admit.

Bass, Raghavan, Mookherjee, and Saikia have established the historical background of the violence of 1971, its survivors, and the political silence that followed. *Kartography* shifts the focus towards the intimate. The novel exposes a family secret, a crypt inherited rather than understood, against the background of Karachi’s inter-ethnic violence in the late 1980s and mid-1990s. The tensions between Muhajirs, Sindhis, Pashtuns, and the state’s security forces appear in the history of Pakistan, and in the novel’s background, as the afterlife of unresolved fractures inherited from 1971. The criticism has read these fractures, but perhaps not the crypt beneath them.

⁴ The “MQM years” refers to the period of ethnic and political violence in Karachi from the mid-1980s to the late 1990s, marked by the rise of the Muttahida (formerly Mohajir) Qaumi Movement and recurrent clashes involving Muhajir (Indian Muslim migrants who had migrated after the 1947 partition, and whose name evokes the original followers of Mohammed, Sindhi, Pashtun factions, and the State. See Laurent Gayer, *Karachi: Ordered Disorder and the Struggle for the City* (2014); Nichola Khan, *Mohajir Militancy in Pakistan* (2010).

Itineraries: Cartographies of the Novel

The scholarship on *Kartography* has converged on a set of related questions about silence. Clements's early characterization of the novel's reception as marked by "official and public amnesia" (Clements) names both the condition the novel works against and the condition in which it was first read. Saikia's argument that 1971 has been pushed into "a realm of forgetting" in Pakistan (Saikia 3) provides the historical ground. Forgetting here is not the natural decay of memory but something imposed and maintained, because acknowledging 1971 would require acknowledging that the state's founding 1947 compact was already broken. These are the conditions of possibility for the novel's existence, and they are also, as Sen's analysis in *Angles* (2022) establishes, reproduced within its world. The elite Karachi household manages the past the way the state does, through strategic non-transmission rather than active suppression (Sen 3).

Herbert's account of the lyric map raises a further question about the form this silence takes. Where official cartography aspires to a view from above, the lyric map works from inside the inhabited place, treating space as something felt and remembered rather than measured (Herbert 160). Karachi in *Kartography* is a set of stories, not a set of coordinates, and the cartographic anxiety Herbert identifies captures how the unspoken past inhabits and deforms the present city. David Waterman's geocritical reading extends this account of space as felt and remembered, arguing that Karachi exists in the novel in a "space/time compression of cataclysmic events" where every eruption of contemporary violence is legible only through the sediment of earlier catastrophes (Waterman 2015 np).

That form has limits, and the scholarship has located them. They are, in the first place, limits of class. Kamran and Rukh's Jamesonian reading shows that the "burgers" of Clifton are structurally unable to see the city they claim to map (Kamran and Rukh), and the novel itself seems aware of this. They are also limits of gender. Biswas and Tripathi's 2020 article demonstrates that the gendered cartography of 1971 is largely invisible within the novel's surface narrative and argues that this invisibility is part of the argument rather than a failure of representation (Biswas and Tripathi 2020). Mookherjee's *birangona* is the figure in whom this logic reaches its most concentrated form. In Bangladeshi memorial culture she is invoked in ways many survivors experienced as a further violation; in Pakistani discourse she is simply denied. In the novel she surfaces once, in Ali's sentence to Zafar, before the narrative closes over her again. What none of this scholarship has fully addressed is the mechanism that organizes these silences, the psychic structure that makes certain secrets untransmissible as memory while remaining operative as absence. That mechanism is what the crypt names.

The Family Crypt and the National Archive

The novel is structured around two temporalities that are never explicitly named as related but that continuously reflect and infect each other. The first is 1971, the year of the civil war and of the birth of Bangladesh. The second is 1995, the year in which the confrontation between MQM militants and Pakistani security forces reached its peak, with estimates placing the annual death toll at close to two thousand⁵. Between these two dates lie twenty-four years of silence, sustained by an effort to present 1971 as a question already settled rather than one suppressed or foreclosed. As Sen shows, Shamsie's elite Karachi household functions as a microcosm of the nation's historiographical distortion: "their attempt to silence and avoid the past is the author's way of representing the distortion of events in national historiography" (3). The household administers what may be said of 1971. The ideology that Zafar's sentence articulates has a long history. Bengali Muslims had been consistently constructed in West Pakistani military and administrative culture as insufficiently Muslim, too Hindu in language and custom, too close to India; they had been constructed, in other words, as an internal enemy whose loyalty was inherently suspect, and whose racialization as radically "other" made the violence of 1971 thinkable (Jaffrelot 2015, 161–165; Bass 2013, 56–61; Mookherjee 2012).

The novel's central secret is the sentence uttered by Zafar, Raheen's father, in 1971 about his Bengali fiancée Maheen: "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 blood line" (Shamsie, *Kartography* 218). Whether Zafar spoke out of cowardice or in an attempt to protect Maheen from an armed neighbour remains deliberately ambiguous. The ambiguity lies at the heart of the novel, for the secrets that constitute the crypt of 1971 are precisely those that resist resolution. When Maheen reminds him, years later, that he too had once been on the verge of leaving the country, Zafar's answer is: "That was completely different: '71 was madness" (114). By classifying the events as pathology, as a madness that simply descended and for which no one answers, the reply forecloses the possibility of moral accountability and compresses into a single utterance the rhetorical structure of national forgetting. Zafar was neither a soldier nor a perpetrator of the violence, but, in a moment of crisis, he articulated the dehumanizing language of the Pakistani military establishment. What the sentence reveals is that the racism of the military establishment had penetrated far enough into Karachi's educated milieu that a man of Zafar's background could produce it under pressure.

⁵ Estimates vary according to the sources and methods of counting, but the most cited figures for 1995 alone are around 2,000 deaths, including 600 in June and July alone, leading many analysts to compare the situation to the Kashmir insurgency. For a rigorous academic context, see Laurent Gayer, *Karachi: Ordered Disorder and the Struggle for the City* (Hurst, 2014), which remains the most comprehensive reference on political violence in Karachi in the 1990s, and Nichola Khan, *Mohajir Militancy in Pakistan: Violence and Practices of Transformation in the Karachi Conflict* (Routledge, 2010), which analyzes the social dynamics of Muhajir militarization in the same context.

Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, in their theory of the transgenerational crypt, describe the mechanism by which an unelaborated family secret is transmitted to subsequent generations not as memory but as a gap, a significant absence whose origin the inheriting generation cannot name but whose effects they cannot escape (171–176). Nicholas Rand's distinction between the crypt and the phantom clarifies the generational dynamic. A crypt is built from one's own experience; a phantom is what the children of "cryptophores" inherit, the involuntary reception of another's secret, transmitted not as narrative but as the "gaps left within the living by the secrets of others" (Rand 60). Zafar and Yasmin, Raheen's parents, are what Abraham and Torok call "cryptophores". Their repression is active, a deliberate sheltering of something they know. Raheen and Karim, by contrast, have no equivalent knowledge to shelter. What they carry is the mere shape of an absence, the effect of a silence whose source they cannot name. They are not haunted by 1971 directly but by the silence about 1971.

Zafar's letter to Maheen, which Raheen discovers near the end of the novel, is the text that the novel has been circling from the beginning without being able to reach. Its central statement is unambiguous in a way that nothing in the novel ever is: "Pakistan died in 1971. Pakistan was a country with two wings [...] How can Pakistan still be when all of that, everything that East Pakistan added to the country, is gone? [...] We should have recognised that the Pakistan of dreams died and was buried in the battle fields of '71'" (290). Zafar is a lawyer from an upper-class Karachi family, the kind of milieu in which the official version of 1971 circulated uncontested; he is neither a dissident nor a Bengali. The private letter, to the woman he failed, suggests that the knowledge was always available, but, at the same time, it was foreclosed in the national doxa. This private articulation of a publicly foreclosed knowledge is Saikia's "realm of forgetting" rendered in the intimacy of correspondence.

The letter is, in Abraham and Torok's terms, the monument of the crypt, the preserved, inaccessible site of an unelaborated event. It exists and contains the truth, but it was never delivered. Raheen finds it too late to ask Zafar the questions it generates. The Pakistan of dreams that Zafar writes about has the status of a ghost in Derrida's sense, a figure that returns because it was never properly buried. The phrase "buried in the battle fields of '71" is Zafar's own, and it is deeply ironic since it evokes the burial that did not happen. Pakistan refused it, classifying the Commission report, rewriting the textbooks, and maintaining the fiction of an Indian conspiracy. What haunts the novel is not Bangladesh but the Pakistan that, in 1971, chose to become something other than what it had imagined itself to be at its creation in 1947, a country whose very name, based on an acronym, had always excluded Bengal⁶.

⁶ The name "Pakistan" was coined by Choudhry Rahmat Ali in his 1933 pamphlet "Now or Never: Are We to Live or Perish Forever?" as an acronym of five northwestern Indian Muslim regions: Punjab, Afghania (North-West Frontier Province), Kashmir, Sindh, and Baluchistan. Bengal, which at Partition

The novel's double temporality of 1971 and 1995 points at Karachi's historical and political tensions. The ethnic violence that tore Karachi apart in the 1990s was directly connected to the consequences of 1971. The Muhajir community had been central to the Pakistani establishment and to the bureaucratic and commercial life of Karachi. After 1971, the loss of East Pakistan and the arrival of Bihari refugees who had supported the Pakistani army produced a new politics of ethnic grievance and displacement in the city. The violence that Raheen reads in the newspaper each morning, the daily death tolls that the novel renders in a deliberately unesthetic prose, is the 1971 war continuing under different names.

The Derridean dimension of spectrality sharpens this interpretation. In *Specters of Marx* (1994), Derrida proposes that a spectre "is someone, and some one other, and this alterity is what makes it affect" (6). The spectre, in this account, has agency: it acts upon the living and expects an answer. Bangladesh haunts every silence in *Kartography*, not as an absence but rather as a presence that cannot be acknowledged without disrupting the entire network of identifications and denials on which the characters' social world is built. The uncanny repetition of 1971 in 1995, the ethnic violence in Karachi reproducing, in miniature and with different actors, the logic of the civil war, is the return of the repressed at the level of historical form. The novel does not state this repetition, however, but it maps it, and mapping is where its two protagonists part ways.

Two Geographies: Measurement and Story

Karim's obsession with maps of Karachi, which he annotates and revises compulsively from his exile in London, is a symptom, in the psychoanalytic sense, an unresolved anxiety returning in displaced form, here through the attempt to stabilize space against the instability of history and memory⁷. He is the child of a Bengali mother and a Pakistani father, and he grew up between Karachi, London, and Boston, belonging fully to none of these cities but partially at home in all. His cartographic drive is what Herbert calls a "multiply layered cartographic anxiety" generated by "a country cut in two" (Herbert 159), the anxiety of a subjectivity that cannot find, in any available geography, a map adequate to its experience of belonging. The Karachi he is mapping from London is not a stable referent but a palimpsest, constantly

in 1947 became the most populous wing of the new state, was absent from the founding name. For the structural implications of this exclusion, see Jaffrelot (2015, pp. 15–18).

⁷ Freud defines the symptom as a compromise formation through which repressed conflict returns in displaced form. See Sigmund Freud, *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety* (1926), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 20, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1959), pp. 87–172. See also Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis* (London: Karnac, 1973), s.v. "symptom."

rewritten by the ethnic violence he is following in the news. He is trying to fix in representation something that is dissolving as he draws.

Raheen's geography is of a different order: "[m]aps weren't about going from point A to point B," she tells Karim, "they were about helping someone hear the heartbeat of a place" (180). In Raheen's closing letter, directions in Karachi are given with landmarks and anecdotes: one turns into "the lane where the car thief accosted Zia," Zia being a school friend of Raheen and Karim, and drives on until "you come to Sonia's father's office." (331) Raheen's most extraordinary lyric map is the "lunar street," the unnamed alley that exists only during Muharram, when Shia women pass through the interconnected hallways of private houses to reach the Imam Bargah⁸. The street is invisible to the state's grid and follows the moon's calendar rather than the municipality's. It is a form of what Michel de Certeau calls "spatial practice" (de Certeau 1984), a belonging created through repeated acts of neighbourly openness and ritual passage.

But Raheen finally recognizes the limit of her own map: "You can only be familiar with those you know well, you can only know the stories of those to whom you've bothered to listen. What happens to all those streets that hold no stories for us? Do we simply stay away from them?" (331). Her lyric map has a class dimension. She knows her social Karachi, the Karachi of Clifton, Defence, and the Sind Club, but not the rougher Karachi of Orangi, Lyari, or Korangi. The streets that hold no stories for her are the streets where the ethnic violence of 1995 draws its heaviest toll. Raheen's cartographic blindness perhaps also signals a certain form of complicity with the violence. Applying Jameson's concept of cognitive mapping, Kamran and Rukh have argued that the "burgers" of Clifton are structurally unable to map the city they inhabit because their privilege ensures that its most violent spaces remain invisible to them (Kamran and Rukh).

Read through Westphal's geocritical attention to spatial layering and Andreas Huyssen's notion of the urban palimpsest, Karachi in *Kartography* appears as a city in which multiple historical temporalities remain partially legible beneath the present⁹. The city of the late 1980s and mid-1990s, marked by curfews, ethnic violence, and political fragmentation during the MQM years, is repeatedly overlaid by earlier histories that refuse to disappear. The violence between Muhajirs, Sindhis, Pashtuns, and state forces is never represented as entirely new; rather, it appears as the residue of fractures left open since 1971, themselves

⁸ Shamsie's "lunar street" is fictionalized, but it reflects documented Shi'a ritual practices in South Asia, where women's Muharram gatherings often depend on informal networks of houses, neighbourhood access, and privately maintained ritual spaces (*imambargahs*). See Mary Elaine Hegland, "The Power Paradox in Muslim Women's Majales," *Signs* 22, no. 3 (1997): 489–512.

⁹ Huyssen, Andreas. *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003.

haunted by the migrations and dislocations of Partition. The city is thus experienced not as a stable present but as an accumulation of unfinished histories. Shamsie renders this layering visible through repeated acts of spatial remembrance. Urban space becomes readable only through temporal depth, as every contemporary eruption of violence carries the trace of anterior catastrophes that have never been fully worked through.

Language as Crypt: Anagrams and Cryptonymy

If the lyric map and the urban palimpsest are the novel's primary spatial resources, the anagram is its linguistic one. Raheen and Karim share a private language of reshuffled letters, revealing what names contain and conceal. In the novel's most compressed example, Raheen answers Karim's suggestion that they go to the beach with "Certes, my lord", then silently glosses the word: "Certes. An anagram for secret" (47). This is what Abraham and Torok call "cryptonymy," a condition in which the trauma is present in the surface of language, encoded in the words, yet inaccessible to those who read them at face value. Karim uses the same device in the opposite direction. For him, "Home is an anagram of oh, me!" and "Karachi" contains "hack air" (18,19) Raheen dissolves signifiers to render them harmless; Karim dismantles them to extract what they suppress.

The anagram device ramifies through the novel in ways that extend beyond the certes/secret dyad. Shamsie embeds the anagram of "anagram" itself in Raheen's retort "Nag a ram" (66-67), and the word "cartographers", which Karim writes out in a circle on the page, is dissolved by the two children into "Strap her cargo" and "Crop rag hearts" (25). The anagram as a formal principle is the novel's argument about the link between surface and depth. "Raya", the City of Friendship in the Calvino-inspired essay Raheen sends Karim, is an anagram of "yaar", Urdu for "friend", which is also Karim's most constant address to her (242). The anagram enacts the same argument the novel makes about 1971, namely that what a name evokes and what it conceals are inseparable.

The anagram works when it erases, rather than decodes, hidden meaning. When Karim leaves Karachi for the second time, Raheen asks: "Who'll speak in anagrams with me now?" (111). The anagram language is the only mode of communication in which the secret of 1971 has been spoken without being confronted. For Raheen, losing Karim means losing the interlocutor for whom the crypt was legible without being named. In fact, the language of the secret is also the language of intimacy, and the two cannot be separated. Ben Driss has analyzed the novel's use of place-telling as a narrative strategy that makes the unspeakable indirectly present. In her account, Shamsie's particular deployment of cartographic language, anagram, and lyric geography constitutes a form of "oblique witnessing" that circumvents the impossibility of

direct narrative about 1971 (Ben Driss). Rand's "gaps left within the living by the secrets of others" describes what the novel produces, a representation that has the contours of what cannot be represented. In that sense, *Kartography* is a historical novel about the impossibility of naming and confronting the violence of 1971, and about the absence of that violence from official and inter-generational narratives. The crypt, however, is not equally legible from every position in the city; class and gender determine who can read it.

Class, Gender, and the Limits of Silence

The car thief is the figure in *Kartography* who inhabits the space between Raheen's lyric Karachi and the Karachi that holds no stories for her. He identifies the three teenagers, residents of the upmarket Defence neighbourhood, as "burgers" the moment he sees and hears them (174), and then explains how the quota system that allocated civil service positions by rural domicile rather than merit closed off the one route his education had prepared him for. The novel, focalized through Raheen's point of view, allows him the analytical vocabulary to describe his own situation: "But I get frustrated. Don't you? You live in this city, after all," he tells Raheen (175).

The exchange between the thief and Karim, when he identifies himself as Bengali, shifts the novel towards social commentary. The car thief then comments: "We didn't learn anything, did we? From '71," and Karim responds: "We learned to forget" (176). The exchange becomes a statement of what connects the two temporal layers of the narrative: 1971 and 1995 are not parallel histories of exclusion but rather the same unresolved tension returning under different ethnic alignments. The car thief's final words seem to propose a political program, the one taking place in the streets of Karachi: "Already I can imagine myself doing things that a few months ago would have been unthinkable. I own a gun, and I'm imagining things. That's not a good combination" (177).

The scene also points at the nature of forgetting in *Kartography*. Indeed, the silence surrounding 1971 is not simply private, nor is it imposed only by official censorship; it operates simultaneously at familial and social levels. Mookherjee and Saikia approach the memory of 1971 from different angles. For Mookherjee, the wound is spectral, persisting in the social fabric because the community cannot process it into stable narrative without simultaneously erasing the subjectivity of those who suffered it. For Saikia, forgetting is imposed from above, as a deliberate strategy of nationalist myth-maintenance, and from below, as a survival mechanism for women who cannot afford the cost of public testimony. *Kartography* does not choose between these accounts. The silence in the novel has two sources that cannot be

separated, structural and personal, and what fiction can do, unlike historiography, is hold both at once.

The gendering of silence is where the novel's logic is the most constrained. Biswas and Tripathi have argued that the cartography of the 1971 war is also a gendered one, and that *Kartography* encodes this gendering in its structure of visibility and invisibility. The only explicit mention of wartime sexual violence in the novel occurs when Ali, Zafar's friend, warns him: "[T]he soldiers are raping the women, Zaf, raping them, all over East Pakistan" (189). The sentence remains within the private register of a conversation that itself becomes part of the encrypted past; it is never subsequently discussed or acknowledged. Women who survived rape in 1971 were twice victimized, by Pakistani soldiers, then by their own communities, who rejected them as "impure", and they are invisible in the novel, present only in the sentence that names them before being swallowed back into silence (Biswas and Tripathi 2020). What remains, once these limits of visibility are acknowledged, is the question of what the novel does with a past it cannot fully show.

Refusing Resolution: The Ethical Compass

The repetition of the same political logic in Karachi in 1995, ethnic exclusion, paramilitary violence, the conversion of civic grievances into armed conflict, is not simply historical continuity. It has the structure of a repetition compulsion, the compelled re-enactment of an unresolved event, driven not by conscious intention but by the failure to work through what the earlier catastrophe meant. Pakistan could not mourn 1971 because mourning requires acknowledgment, which would have destabilized the entire symbolic order of the state. Faced with this structure of repetition, the novel refuses both melancholy and the false comfort of resolution. The question it poses about a past that keeps returning because it was never adequately mourned, is the question that Calvino's *Invisible Cities* (1972) addresses, and whose presence throughout *Kartography* is discreet yet significant. When Raheen tells Karim that maps were once "about helping someone hear the heartbeat of a place" (175), she is thinking in Calvino's terms.

Raheen writes, from her dormitory in upstate New York, that she has just written a paper on Calvino for her "other (not Other) realisms" class (124), and that this paper was what gave her the courage to make the first move towards Karim after years of silence. The Calvino paper is, structurally, the pivot of their reunion. By the time the novel places his words as a closing epigraph, after Zafar's "I'll never know" and before Raheen's letter about the lunar street, the reader has been living with Calvino's presence for several hundred pages.

Calvino's epigraph does not resolve what Zafar did or did not do in 1971, but it names the choice that Zafar failed to make, the same choice that Pakistan as a whole has declined to make since. Calvino's Marco Polo, at the end of *Invisible Cities*, offers Kublai Khan two ways of living with the inferno:

There are two ways to escape suffering [the inferno where we live every day]. The first is easy for many: accept the inferno and become such a part of it that you can no longer see it. The second is risky and demands constant vigilance and apprehension: seek and learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of the inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space. (330)

Pakistan chose the first option. The inferno of 1971 was absorbed into the national narrative as "something" that happened rather than an actual genocide, until it became invisible. In her letter, which follows immediately in the text, Raheen attempts the second option: "We have to every day live with the truth," she writes to Karim, "and every day find a way towards unblinking, unsentimental compassion that renders forgiveness irrelevant" (332). The sentence rewrites Marco Polo's programme in the first person plural, turning vigilance into a daily discipline. Maheen had used the same word earlier in the novel, in 1971, promising Zafar they would one day tell their children how they had survived "this inferno" (189). Calvino's passage does not resolve Zafar's actions; it reframes the question for Raheen, away from her father's motives and toward her own future.

This ethical orientation comes from Calvino, and not from any Pakistani or South Asian tradition. *Kartography* is a novel written in English, drawing on a European literary and philosophical tradition, by a Pakistani British woman who grew up in Karachi and was writing from London. The Calvino passage is perhaps an admission of the conditions under which the novel was produced, from a particular class, in a particular language, and probably at a particular distance.

Kartography holds what official memory discards. It is not an archive of fact but a record of the experience of the crypt and of its repercussions. This is also what Saikia means when she argues that "listening is a responsible as well as a political act" (Saikia 14). The novel demands a reader who is willing to do the listening that the Pakistani state has systematically refused to do. It demands that the silences surrounding 1971 and 1995, the encrypted sentences and the unspeakable betrayals, be heard and read.

The politics of *Kartography* are inseparable from its position within the global literary market. Shamsie publishes with Bloomsbury in London, and *Kartography* circulates primarily in Anglophone academic and literary culture. The risk is that the Pakistani experience of 1971 will be read through frameworks derived from other histories, and that the novel's aesthetic choices

might be absorbed into existing categories without attention to what is specific about Karachi. What the South Asian scholars surveyed here bring to the text is precisely the local knowledge that resists such absorption: the meaning of “burger” in Karachi, the history of the quota system, the class geography of Clifton and Defence. A reading of *Kartography* that ignores them will mistake the lyric map for a universal formal innovation rather than a response to a specific historical and social predicament.

Stef Craps has argued that Western trauma theory has been Eurocentric in its assumptions, presupposing a model of individual traumatic experience derived almost exclusively from Holocaust testimony and ill-suited to the collective, ongoing, and structural traumas of the postcolonial world (Craps 1–12). *Kartography*’s response is to work across multiple registers simultaneously on the understanding that no single framework is adequate to the scale of the catastrophe of 1971 and of the silence that followed it.

Forgiveness would imply a completed reckoning, and no such reckoning has taken place in Pakistan around 1971. What the novel offers instead is a form of what Amitav Ghosh, writing about the Bengal partition of 1947 in *The Shadow Lines*, identifies as “the enchantment of lines,” the colonial belief that tracing a frontier on a map would cause two peoples to drift apart “like the shifting tectonic plates of the prehistoric Gondwanaland” (Ghosh 233). The irony he names is that the line produced not separation but a violent new intimacy: “each city was the inverted image of the other, locked into an irreversible symmetry by that line that was to set us free — our looking-glass border” (id.). The mirror is political: the line of partition binds the very peoples it claims to sever. *Kartography* inhabits the same mirror structure. The Pakistan it depicts is a country constituted by lines of fracture, 1947 and 1971, whose violence persists because neither line was adequately mourned. Dhaka and Karachi can be read as Ghosh’s looking-glass cities, each the inverted image of the other, bound together by the act of separation that was supposed to sever them.

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