



**TITLE: DIFFERENCE AND DISCORD: ETHNICITY AND FORMATION OF  
IDENTITY IN KAMILA SHAMSIE'S *KARTOGRAPHY***

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**ABSTRACT**

*The present paper examines the process of identity formation and its relationship with the cultural conflicts prevalent in Pakistan in select novels of Kamila Shamsie. The study performs a thorough analysis of Shamsie's novel Kartography to understand how Shamsie represents themes of diaspora, displacement. The study examines the process of narration and the ploys of characterisation, considering different cultural contexts and it uses postcolonial approaches for the purpose. The study considers the impact of history, society and cultural conflicts on the individuals and the characters' struggles to maintain and form a steady identity with a sense of belongingness and being.*

Key Words: Identity Formation, Ethnicity, Diaspora, Transnationalism

Difference and Discord: Ethnicity and Identity Formation in Kamila Shamsie's *Kartography*

Ethnicity has a substantial impact on the formation of both an individual's social and personal identity. Ethnic identity is formed based on an individual's sense of belonging to a certain ethnic group, which is defined by a unique way of life and conduct. An individual's ethnicity influences their opinions on society and determines their social status. Ethnic identity and individual identity have great influence one another. Social factors like racial discrimination, casteism, marginalisation and different other power dynamisms are closely connected to the concept of ethnicity and play key roles in forming the identity of the individuals. Collective historical experiences, similar emotional responses and behavioural characteristics, religious sensibilities, skin colour, languages etc. are the key elements of ethnicity that one must consider.



Talking about the origin and the history of the word ethnicity *The Cambridge Dictionary of Sociology* explains:

The word ethnic descends from the Greek noun *ethnos*, which has entered into modern languages, including English, variously as “people” and “nation.” Yet, the somewhat awkward derivative “ethnicity” did not come into play until relatively late in the nineteenth century when sociology and other academic social sciences, still immature institutionally, were forced to account for the social conflicts arising from the presence of immigrant groups in European and North American cities. (Turner 174)

Ethnic and cultural disparities emerge from the differences in skin colour, language, and religion observed among varied groups of people. Conflict emerges when multiple ethnic groups begin to distinguish and segregate themselves based on their ethnicity. That is the point at which the rivalry for social standing within a particular society begins, which is widely known as ethnic conflict. The power dynamics between dominant and submissive cultures might originate from discrepancies in religion, economy, politics, or society. As the minor cultures are constantly neglected by the larger community, they begin to give more importance to the expression of their ethnic identity.

Race plays an important roles in the study of ethnicity. Whereas the term ‘race’ basically focus on the complexion of the individuals, ethnicity differs in its emphasis on the cultural aspects of this discrimination. Racism as a social construct must be given importance though it primarily focusses on biological aspects. In *The Ethnicity Reader: Nationalism, Multiculturalism and Migration* there is an argument in this context, “Racism, obviously, builds on the assumption that personality is somehow linked with hereditary characteristics which differ systematically between ‘races’, and in this way race may assume sociological importance even it has no ‘objective’ existence” (Guibernau i Berdún and Rex 34). Race also may be called to have a part in the formation of the ethnic identity of an individual. But the racial identity is not fully capable to identify social distinction as in every society it is not the only factor that differentiates the majority from the minority as is presented by Eriksen, “Race or skin colour is not the decisive variable in every society.” (Guibernau i Berdún and Rex 35) Race and ethnicity are overlapping factors but ethnicity is more complex because of its invisibility sometimes as it more depends on the cultural factor such as language, religion, behavior etc. Obviously in formation of a social identity race as well as ethnicity plays major roles.



While considering the various levels of social stratification, the issue of caste is also to be considered. According to the Concise dictionary of Social and Cultural Anthropology, “The word ‘caste’ derive from Spanish and Portuguese, *casta* (“Race”)” (Morris 33). Caste is defined based on lineage, hierarchy and breed and it is often used to create social differentiation. The social prejudices and stigmas practiced in India and the other Asian countries leads to social stratification. Caste systems promote the systematic exclusion of individuals from society based on a hierarchical grading system.

Besides race, religion is another factor that has an important role in ethnicity. The concepts of culture and even nation emerge from the concept of religion in some countries. For example religion is a crucial factor in forming the Pakistani identity. The birth of Pakistan mostly sprang from the religious partition between the Hindu and Muslim communities. In 1947, Pakistan was established as a distinct territory from India, with a predominantly Islamic character. According to Zamir Akram, one of Pakistani Ambassador to UN, it was not planned that Pakistan should be only based on Islamic identity. He argues:

We should first understand that Pakistan is a country that was based on Islamic identity but was not created as a theocratic state, nor as a state that was meant to be exclusively for Muslims, to the exclusion of other religious groups. It was really a state that was established to protect the religious, cultural and historical identity of the Muslims of the subcontinent when the British withdrew from South Asia. (Akram)

The heterogeneous ethnic identities that are prevalent in Pakistan lead to political disasters, and religion is an essential factor in this, which works as the catalyst. The Shia-Sunni conflict in Pakistan yields catastrophic consequences. The presence of religion and the resulting divisions within it contribute to the increased complexity of racial conflict.

Another aspect of ethnic identity building is social and cultural marginalisation. Based on the skin colour, racial orientation, and distinct historical background, an ethnic group can be marked as “other” in a society or culture. These kinds of segregation can lead to marking a group as a minority and it can also make them vulnerable to potential assaults and even ethnic riots. Pakistan, with its diverse ethnic groups and the inclusion of Muhajirs has the potential to such ethnic strifes. The marginalization of the Muhajirs by other ethnic groups and their endeavor to build their own identity in their adopted country led to the eruption of violent ethnic clashes in Pakistan in the 1980s.



Ethnicity is intricately linked to both nationalism and the state. The politics of Pakistan heavily relies on the ethnic diversities and distinctions among diverse ethnic groupings. The incorporation of the concept of ethnicity adds complexity to the national identity in Pakistan. According to Farhan Hanif Siddiqui, “As political actors, ethnic groups instrumentalise objective cultural markers in order to pursue desired political goals and objectives.” (*The Politics of Ethnicity in Pakistan: The Baloch, Sindhi and Mohajir Ethnic Movements* 8) The role of the ethnic groups in Pakistan in changing the course of politics is undeniable. For example the Muhajirs in Pakistan are constantly trying to take part in the political scenario and it is leading to more complex problems in the governance.

The novel *Kartography* by Kamila Shamsie tells the tale of love between Karim and Raheen. They are unaware of their family history and hence lead an emotional and passionate life. Their relationship and its depth become the centre point of the narrative. Karachi as a city is the centre of ethnic unrest and it is really striking that the couple is able to avoid these strife while living in the city. They have such proximity that they complete each other's words. Raheen's description proves the strength of their bondage, “I thought, no, there's no one I would rather be here with than my best friend, my one-time crib companion, my blood-brother ... no one else who will catch me not because of quick reflexes but because of anticipation” (*Kartography* 15).

But parallel to this description is the context of this love story which is disturbed by the riots and ethnic violence. The racial profiling is the cause of the social segregation and the novel projects the picture vividly with some details and commentaries. Raheen and Karim's childhood is disturbed by these events of violence. Raheen describes a particular incident when a girl was killed by a running bus. But somehow this became the source of an ugly riot and the explanation is not clear to Raheen:

None of what was going on in Karachi made much sense to me – not since last year when that girl was killed by a speeding bus and you'd think that was a domestic tragedy ... but instead of being a family tragedy it all ignited a terrible ethnic fight. The girl Muhajir, the bus driver Pathan, and somehow, somehow, that became the issue, though my mother said ‘a catalyst, no more’ and Uncle Ali said, “all being orchestrated to create divisions and factions”, and my father responded, ‘Don't the fools know these things can't be contained’, while Aunty Maheen kept talking about ‘the perils of amnesia’. (*Kartography* 11)



Since its inception, Pakistan has been characterized by ethnic diversity and bloodshed, as several ethnic groups vie for control of administrative power. Pakistan experienced severe consequences due to its involvement in political maneuvering, ethnic conflicts, riots, and religious instability. Punjabi, Sindhis, Baloch, Pukhtun and Bengalis are the primary ethnic groups in Pakistan. The primary ethnic groupings in Pakistan encompassed Sindhis, Pukhtun, Punjabi, Baloch, and Bengalis. Bengalis established their own country called Bangladesh in the year 1971. However, starting from 1971, the Muhajir ethnic group was also included. Adeel Khan in his book *Politic of Identity: Ethnic Nationalism and the State in Pakistan* presents the case of the Muhajir and their inclusion in the Pakistani politics:

After partition yet another ethnic group was added to the five indigenous ones, in the shape of the Indian Muslim migrants, the Mohajirs, who had not only been at the forefront of the movement for Pakistan but were after its creation the most ardent supporters of the centralizing politics of the state. After three decades of Pakistan's existence, however, they too began to express their disillusionment with the administrative structure of the state, and in the early 1980s they formed their own ethnic political group, the Mohajir Quami [National] Movement (MQM). By the mid 1980s the MQM emerged as the most organised ethnic group, with widespread popular support among the Mohajirs. Soon the MQM transformed into the most violent political group, confronting other ethnic groups as well as the state establishment. (15-16)

The Muhajirs faced a lack of natural acceptance from the surrounding ethnic groups, who viewed them as foreigners without any connection to Pakistani culture. The work portrays the dissatisfaction among the other groups. The ethnic rioting and violence depicted in the novel serve as a portrayal of the discriminatory targeting and marginalization of a specific ethnic community. The Pakistani identity is deeply rooted in ethnic distinctions, and the narrative portrays a widespread animosity towards the Muhajirs. The social understanding seems to be narrowing when a particular group is abandoned and distanced based only on their ethnicity, "I mean, Muhajirs will never understand the way we feel about land. They all left their homes at Partition. No understanding of ties to a place" (*Kartography* 39). Ever since their formation of a political group, Muhajirs are considered as rivals to the other ethnic groups of Pakistan. They are always excluded from the Pakistani core society and they live as others in their own homeland. The general attitude of the most of the Pakistanis can be traced in the following excerpt from the text:



‘Karachi is my home, you know. Why did those bloody Muhajirs have to go and form a political group? Once they’re united they’ll do God knows what. Demanding this, demanding that. Thinking just because they are a majority in Karachi they can trample over everyone else. Like they did in ’47. Coming across the border thinking we should be grateful for their presence ... Do you hear the way people like Zafar and Yesmin talk about “their Karachi”? My family lived there for generations. Who the hell are these Muhajirs to pretend it’s their city!’ (*Kartography* 40-41)

Raheen was unaware of the fact that this history of ethnic hatred had its effect directly into her family. The war of 1971 was a result of political conflict that was very much based on language. The overwhelming win of Sheikh Mujibur Rahaman in the East Pakistan led to a hope of freedom from Pakistan which had the control of the East Pakistan. Mujibur’s announcement of rebel and freedom led to a large-scale violence. The hatred between the Bengalis and the Pakistani grew heavy and resulted in riots. The novel truly showcases the hatred as Zafar, father of Raheen, denied to marry Maheen, mother of Karim, only because she was a Bengali. The arranged relationship is swapped and history intervenes in the personal lives of the people in the novel. Maheen’s identity and its formation is a complex process as she is a Bengali living in Pakistan. Zafar’s rejection was an outcome of a terrible ethnic hatred, “Your father didn’t want to marry her because she is Bengali. Although, I have to say, I was appalled when I first heard the engagement was broken. I said to your father, she’s not even that dark, Zafar. Many people can’t even tell where she’s from’ (*Kartography* 74).

Maheen’s crisis of identity is always related to her ethnic identity which also becomes the source of her social segregation. Maheen typical position in this society is expressed through the words of Yasmin:

If this is how I feel, Yasmin thought, how must Maheen feel, a Bengali living in West Pakistan? And every day someone new seemed to succumb to the madness that was sweeping the country, someone new said things that defied all understanding, and it was hard to say which were worse: the people who stopped dead, mid-sentence, as soon as Maheen entered the room, or the ones who kept on talking. (*Kartography* 186)

The hatred for Bengalis was rising and Maheen was constantly threatened by the violence coming from the ethnic differences. Maheen is not accepted at the parties, his language and origin became a source of her isolation. The ignorance of the people towards her is obvious



and affected her identity formation a lot. She is confused about her stay in Pakistan at that time of ethnic hatred but she was well aware of the hatred:

I was a Bengali. I was born that way. So though people turned away from me at parties, and conversations stopped when I entered the room, and all sorts of things went on that no one should have to live through, there was a certain ... resignation, almost, in people's attitudes towards me. I was just a Bingo, nothing to be done about it. but your father ... your father was something much worse. He was a turncoat, a traitor. A Bingo-lover. (*Kartography* 308)

Maheen's status in the family is also categorized by her ethnic identity. All the things that connect her to the Bengali culture is prominent to the narrator. The identity of Maheen as a Bengali is on the one hand of great interest to Raheen but on the other is also a medium of her segregation from her surrounding:

Aunty Maheen was Bengali, I knew, because every so often aunts or cousins would arrive from Bangladesh to visit, bearing gift-wrapped saris and a reminder that Aunty Maheen grew up in another language. After the relatives left, stray words of Bengali would stay clustered around her tongue, falling off in ones and twos, un-understood and untranslated. And there was another reason, also, why I knew and had known for a long time where Aunty Maheen's family was from. (*Kartography* 41)

The hatred on the basis of language, culture or skin color can be traced throughout the novel. Maheen's identity as a Muhajir is always in the consciousness of the people, her friends, her family members. The hatred I once again prominent when Laila's husband slaps a waiter tells him, "Halfwit Bingo! Go back to your jungle" (*Kartography* 183). But Maheen's presence in that place makes the situation graver as her condition is nothing different from that waiter. Her identity is very similar to that person and there is moment when Maheen looks at this waiter and a strange moment appears which is not understood by any of the other characters, "She was looking at the Bengali waiter. He walked past and caught her eye, and for a moment the barriers of class and gender became porous and something passed between them that Zafar couldn't quite identify" (*Kartography* 184). The harsh verbal attack on the waiter brought Maheen and the waiter on the same ground and their ethnic identity is the common factor.

The identity of a Muhajir and a Bengali is also contrasted in the novel. The ethnic differences work on three levels in the novel- the indigenous ethnic groups, the Muhajirs and



the Bengali identity. In a conversation with a man, who introduces himself as a car thief, Karim identifies himself as a Bengali:

Zia and I both turned to look at him in surprise. I'd never once heard Karim identify himself that way. Of course, none of us ever used to feel the need to identify ourselves by ethnicity when we were younger but it still took me off-guard that he chose to identify himself with his mother's ethnicity rather than his father's. Was he trying to imply that he existed outside the landscape of post-Civil War ethnic politics? Or was it that he felt it wiser not to associate himself with an ethnic group that this man saw as competitor or oppressor ...(*Kartography* 176)

This identification raises questions about Karim's preference about his ethnic roots. Ethnicity becomes a basis for the differences in the society. The racial profiling is the medium of segregation in Pakistan and the ethnic identity decides the acceptance or rejection of an individual in the social system. Ethnic similarities lead to formation and unity of particular group and can lead to a desire of power which is primarily political in nature. The difference in ethnicity can affect the formation of national identity of an individual too.

Ethnicity is a status marker in the society of Shamsie. Ethnic differences can create hierarchy in society. The clash of the ethnic groups is also a result of this power politics. Shamsie's novels, in their typical style present the enmity of the ethnic groups and how it is affecting the nationality as well. The large numbers of immigrants add to this complexity of ethnic confusion. *Burnt Shadows* presented this variety and difference within the Pakistani society. The novel presented the difference within the Muhajirs themselves. It happened because of their linguistic, religious and ethnic differences. The ethnic unrest affect the economy of the country as the Government is clueless about the role of these various ethnic groups in the nation. The power of the state is limited to one particular group of people belonging to a certain ethnic group. This greatly affects the stability of nation and ultimately affects the identity formation of the individuals in the society.

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