

## Rewriting Third World Women in Kamila Shamsie's Broken Verses

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**Abstract:** Kamila Shamsie's work is marked by feminine sensibility. In her novel *Broken Verses* the idea of a conventional third world woman hegemonized by the patriarchal ideology is completely subsumed by a western liberated free willed woman. The Post Colonial Woman is not caricatured as a submissive subaltern but strong woman characters are portrayed. In a society segregated on the lines of caste, class and gender, Shamsie tries to give a new image to the third world woman.

**Keywords:** Third World Women, Hegemony, Patriarchy, Chandra Talpade Mohanty

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Women's Literature written in Pakistan is a marginalized entity compared to its male counterparts. Female narratives are on the periphery as a practice. Patriarchal ideology is a given for the Pakistani society and voicing out their experiences in such a stifling atmosphere is a daunting challenge for the women. More so in a language considered to be foreign. This paper explores the new feminine consciousness which marks the narratives of the woman characters through the author, Kamila Shamsie. It analyses how Shamsie succeeds in creating a new feminine assertion out of her characters defying the norms, in the process creating new standards. Also the stereotypical feminine ideal is subverted rewriting these third world women as *beings* having a will of their own. During this course of action the assertion of these new women is type casted as brazen western feminists. The other model characters, as defined by the hegemonists, are contrasted with them to emphasize their otherness.

Shamsie's works can be set apart not only due to her gender but also her position as a British national. The trajectory of her life makes her a fitted candidate to articulate for the marginalized Pakistani women. She can objectively narrate her experiences as an outsider, with a neutral perception. As a female born in Pakistan in the early 1970's, in a culture in which girls were expected to become only wives and mothers, Kamila Shamsie was fortunate in her family background and the support she received; her affluent and literary family already included several female writers, including her mother, Muneeza Shamsie, and her great-aunt, Attia Husain. Her international experiences have given her a different perspective on her home environment, and this underpins her fiction- she often explores cross-cultural relationships and cultural identity, particularly the burden of cultural history and family expectations vis-à-vis women.

Kamila Shamsie in her first novel, *In the City by the Sea*, was shortlisted for the John Llewellyn Rhys Prize, and her second, *Salt and Saffron*, won her a place on Orange's list of '21 Writers for the 21st Century'. In 1999 Shamsie received the Prime Minister's Award for Literature in Pakistan. Her third novel, *Kartography* (2002), explores the strained relationship between soul mates Karim and Raheen, set against a backdrop of ethnic violence. Both *Kartography* and her next novel, *Broken Verse*, (2005) have won the Patras Bokhari Award from the Academy of Letters in Pakistan. Her next novel *Burnt Shadows*, published in 2009 was shortlisted for the Orange Prize for Fiction and won the 2009 UK Muslim Writers Award for Fiction. Her next work *A God in Every Stone* was shortlisted for the 2015 Walter Scott Prize. In 2013 she was included in the Granta list of 20 best young British writers.

### II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK:

The questions that I confront include how the feminine consciousness of a third world woman is constructed in regards with cultural practices in the twenty first century of different races, classes, religions, and national origin. It includes the way women forge identities in postcolonial contexts. This categorization as 'third world women' lowers them to multiple marginalizations. They are the *other* in ethnic, national, racial, and gender aspects, a part of the minority discourse. The literary narratives characterize the Third-world women as alienated in terms of being on the margins either by choice or because of ethno-social hierarchies, which renders the women to form identities that are in a constant state of flux. I employ the theoretical concept of third world

feminism in relation to *these* women. The contemporary South Asian women writers challenge socio-cultural hierarchies and their position of being the stereotyped other which becomes central to my study. I probe how the new world experiences of the author Kamila Shamsie help to create independent women defying stereotypes. She offers a fresh outlook and an alternative perspective into female realities. Rewriting a new consciousness in an attempt to balance the honouring or breaking of traditions.

It is very essential to understand, what is Pakistani literature, who are Pakistani writers and when did Pakistani literature start to delve deeper into the evolution of the entire oeuvre as a distinct category. As a category of literature which has been on the sidelines, the literature produced by the women writers would be doubly marginalized. Moreover, the categorization as a third world woman writer or otherwise pushes them on the fringe.

Sara Suleri opines that there are no women in third world while Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak questioned whether the subaltern can speak. These critiques direct my paper while addressing the questions of the third world women.

In Western feminist discourses, women from Africa and other parts of the so-called "third world" are often represented as objects against which some writers affirm their own supposedly liberated status as Western feminists. Rather than interrogating the social, historical and economic conditions that oppress or disadvantage specific groups of women, many feminist writers have constructed a singular, ahistorical image of the oppressed, powerless 'Third World Woman'. In her article "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses", Chandra Mohanty deconstructs this stereotype and asserts the need to historicize all analyses of women's oppression. (Mohanty,335)

Mohanty asserts that there is no universal patriarchal structure that conspires against all women universally as a group. Rather economic, cultural, religious and political factors can intersect in various historically specific moments to create situations in which women are oppressed. Women do not enter into social relations as oppressed people; they may become oppressed due to a variety of factors, which in some instances may include gender.

#### ***Broken Verses, the novel:***

*Broken Verses* is a feminist voice in the difficult times in Pakistani society. In this novel Kamila Shamsie assimilates various elements of national, socio-political and cultural aspects of Pakistan. It analyses the position of women in Pakistan; the predicament of the educated, liberal woman who find themselves on the threshold of a dominating society and only too aware of the independent world outside. Kamila Shamsie narrates a tale of the quest of a daughter for her mother who left her around her adolescence. The plot revolves around the disappearance of Samina Akram, a feminist activist, two years after her lover a famous Pakistani poet, described as The Poet, and is brutally murdered by government minions. Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* can be the referral point for the kind of intersection of history and politics. The juxtaposition of the public and the private marks the unfolding of the plot with reference to the characters in the novel. The daughter Aasmaani, is overwhelmed with grief and anger over the abandonment by her mother. Through Aasmaani's quest for the truth about the disappearance of her mother and the murder of her step father, Shamsie's *Broken Verses* draws parallel with the state of affairs in a thinly disguised autocracy in Pakistan. The ideologies practiced by fundamentalists in an atmosphere of stiff biases vis-à-vis the religion and democracy is the markers of revolution in the novel. The agents of change in this rigid atmosphere happen to be the Poet and Aasmaani's mother, Samina Akram. In the course of action Kamila Shamsie has created a "fiercely independent woman" (*Broken Verses*,87) in the character of Samina. She becomes the muse of the radical, anti-government poet Nazim. The open defiant way in which she involves with him is critiqued as the influence of western liberalism on the third world women. The hegemonic society essentially treats her attitude as brazen amounting to be exactly contrary to the ideal of a woman which has been perpetuated by them conventionally. Shamsie narrates how the Poet "made her a figure of rebellion, of salvation, she played into it" (*Broken Verses*,88). She becomes the symbol of the educated class willing to taste emancipation and soon finds herself invited to speak at girl's colleges and join panel discussions on Women's Upliftment. But what Shamsie achieves through the narrative is the image of a free woman in the real sense of the word. Samina's character is crafted with a fiery resolve; she is not a woman contented to live in the shadows. In fact in search of her own identity she walks out on her relationship with the poet. She becomes an agitator, an activist often risking physical harm and imprisonment as she seeks to protest against the government's misogynistic policies. She is at the forefront of the feminist movement in Pakistan during the 1970s and 1980s, which paradoxically coincides with the Pakistani military's encouragement of Islamic fundamentalism. The 1980s, as Aasmaani recalls, "was all prison, protest and exile and upheaval". Samina creates a niche with her discourse on carving a feminism suited to their needs. Exactly what Chandra Talpade Mohanty talks about in her discourse of the third world women, that the women conventionally are marginalized and the local factors like religion and politics embroil these third world women to a space which is completely on the periphery. The patriarchy employed in these third world countries is

fundamentalist in its approach relegating the women *no space* in the scheme of things. In a country based on such a regressive attitude for women the character of Samina Akram is idyllic. With her secular outlook, she also has deep knowledge of religious texts and tackles intractable clerics to point out their biased interpretation of the Koran. *Broken Verses* also records Samina's protests against the Hudood Ordinance, a legislative initiative introduced by Zia-ul-Haq in 1979 that, in part, decreed "an accusation of rape could only be proved in a court of law if there were four pious, male Muslim adults willing to give eye-witness testimony" (*Broken Verses*, 92). In the actual history of Pakistan, the Hudood Ordinance stands as one of the high water marks of Pakistan's English-language press's involvement in the public sphere, particularly by its female journalists. The formation of Women's Action Forum was a direct result stimulated by the English-language press's coverage with educated professional women in Pakistan, particularly lawyers, welfare workers. Apart from discussing issues of democracy and Islamization, *Broken Verses* also touches on Pakistan's contentious relations with India, and its role in Afghanistan and with the US. Samina warns the cleric she is debating with of the dangers of his interpretation of Islam and how it is turning young, idealistic and confused boys into jihadis trained and armed by the US to fight the Soviet infidels. She questions the Maulana: 'What happens after Afghanistan, have you considered that? Where do they go next, those global guerrillas with their allegiance to a common cause and their belief in violence as the most effective way to take on an enemy? Do you and your American friends ever sit down to talk about that?' (*Broken Verses*, 286) Kamila Shamsie weaves the story of the struggle put up by Samina and the Poet to raise their voice for their country against despotism and oppression with the nostalgic recollection of the daughter Aasmani.

Kamila Shamsie's *Broken Verses* can be read as a narrative of women's quest for self in a patriarchal society. The themes and characterization in the novel, questions the status of Pakistani women in the society, their aspirations and abilities to become self-determining, autonomous beings. Shamsie achieves a masterstroke with the nature of her characterization who is the deviant of the society. They raise their voice of dissent and express their rage and frustration with their conditions and attempt to establish themselves as free individuals who can defy restrictions imposed upon them by the patriarchal society. Shamsie has portrayed female characters that are nonconformist and radical. The narrative interweaves the lives of three modern and educated women belonging to the upper stratum of the society, i.e. Aasmani Inqalab, the protagonist and the narrator of the story, Samina Akram, Aasmani's mother and an activist for women's rights and Shehnaz Saeed, a famous actor and Mir Adnan Akbar Khan's mother. The secondary female characters are Aasmani's step mother Beema and half-sister Rabia who acts as contrasts to them.

Shamsie while characterizing Samina has transcended the stereotypes of a wife and motherhood in a traditional society. Her independence and free willedness in matters of marriage, family and raising up a daughter defines her as the most independent of women characters portrayed in the novels by Pakistani female authors. The watertight compartment created by the society is broken away to assert her autonomous, decisive self.

Samina Akram, a Cambridge graduate, at twenty three, decides to work for the welfare of women in her country when she witnesses the miseries inflicted upon the women of lower classes. It is during this period of radiant youth and great passion to contribute positively to the society that Samina, who "could speak with passion and intelligence and flashing grey-green eyes" (*Broken Verses*,87) falls in love with the thirty six year old Poet. She feels thrilled at receiving such attention from a renowned poet, but it doesn't take her long to recognize the damage being done to her individuality. And in order to have "an identity that wasn't caught up in his shadow" (*Broken Verses*,88), Samina decides abruptly to enter into a wedlock just to prove to the poet that she is the one who is in complete charge of her life. But her rationality takes over as she contemplates over the fact that she and her husband are strikingly different only to end the marriage in a short span of four months. Her decision to live separately from her husband and in a relation with the poet is on her own terms. Not to be the one to accept any kind of binding as a free woman she is living in an adjacent house to her lover, but not together. This unconventional woman affirms her own self with her decisions shattering the norms exemplifying a liberated woman.

Samina Akram's personality adds charisma to her struggle for women's rights. Samina is the seminal woman who challenges the assumption of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak that subaltern cannot speak. Shamsie has refuted the conjecture of woman being unable to speak. Samina is the one of the most vocal female voices in Pakistani literature.

Conventionally women who choose their individuality over familial roles are ostracized by the society and that happens with Samina as her own daughter questions the conformity of her actions. But Samina's qualities enable her to defy social confinement and she is not bothered by the criticism. Unsympathetic attitude of her own daughter Aasmani doesn't deter her from her own will.

The second most important feminine voice in the narrative is of the daughter, Aasmani. Nostalgically she reminisces, "I'd spent all those years shuttling between the picture-perfect normality of life with Dad, Beema and Rabia and the utter unconventionality of my mother's house with its connecting door to her lover's garden"

(Broken Verses, 102). Her attitude towards her mother is the result of the feminine construct conditioned by the dominant society. In the portrayal of Aasmani's step mother, Beema, Kamila paints an idyllic picture of a forgiving, nourishing, caring woman who is only too willing to sacrifice her individuality for the family. Beena is identified merely in relation to her family, her lack of identity as a woman stands in stark contrast to Samina Akram.

### III. CONCLUSION

Shamsie has portrayed all these women characters as Samina, Aasmani, Beena, and Shehnaz to highlight the oppression prevalent in a patriarchal society on women. The ideology which has entrapped women since civilizations subordinates them. Shamsie successfully creates a counter creed for the third world women to liberate themselves from this marginalization. Aasmani's rite of passage to evolve from a confused daughter to an awakening of her inner strength as a woman herself builds up the feminine consciousness in the narrative. Her quest for her mother initially leads her to reassess all her worldly relation.

The culture of Pakistan which is deeply entrenched in patriarchy has given rise to this constructs of ideal femininity as devotion, endurance, loyalty and self-sacrifice. Literature is considered to be one of the most important means of perpetuating such images which seek to marginalize women and ensure male domination. This study examines the nature of characterization Shamsie has in respect to the female characters. She advocates women's independence with the portrayal of strong, rebellious Samina deconstructing the stereotypes perpetuated in the Pakistani society. Kamila Shamsie, on being asked about being a woman in the world today, says, —Wherever in the world you go, you're living in the world's oldest and most pervasive empire, which is the empire of patriarchy. I don't know a place I've been to where it doesn't exist. (WEB)

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