



BEYOND THE CANON: INTERSECTIONAL APPROACHES TO KAMILA SHAMSIE'S *KARTOGRAPHY*

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Abstract

This study investigates how ethnic conflict, class stratification, and gendered subjectivity intersect in Kamila Shamsie's Kartography (2002) and demonstrates how an intersectional reading challenges canonical postcolonial narratives that treat these axes of identity in isolation. Employing an interdisciplinary framework that integrates Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality, postcolonial concepts from Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak, and feminist perspectives from Judith Butler and bell hooks, the analysis reveals that Kartography resists singular interpretations of postcolonial identity by foregrounding female subjectivity, interrogating collective memory, and examining the precarious relationship between love and friendship. The novel demonstrates that ethnic violence cannot be separated from class privilege, that female agency remains conditional upon intersecting axes of power, and that intimacy is always mediated by political conflict and historical trauma. The study concludes that Shamsie's novel expands the literary canon by illustrating how intersectional methodologies enrich our understanding of both the text and its socio-political context.

Keywords: Kartography, Intersectionality, Postcolonial Criticism, Feminist Criticism, Ethnic Violence

1. Introduction

Kamila Shamsie stands as one of the most significant voices in contemporary Pakistani Anglophone literature. Her novel *Kartography*, published in 2002, unfolds primarily in Karachi, a sprawling and volatile metropolis on the edge of the Arabian Sea. The narrative traces two childhood friends, Raheen and Karim, whose bond is tested by family secrets, political violence, and the slow unraveling of the city around them. At the heart of the novel lies the 1971 civil war that led to the creation of Bangladesh, an event that haunts the characters long after it has ended. Shamsie weaves together personal memory and public trauma, showing how the past reshapes love, friendship, and identity across generations. The novel also presents Karachi as a living presence: fractured by ethnic conflict, divided by class, and held together by fragile threads of belonging.

The novel presents a challenge that existing approaches have struggled to meet. *Kartography* does not separate ethnicity from class, nor class from gender, nor gender from the memory of political violence. Instead, it presents all of these forces as operating simultaneously. A young woman like Raheen experiences Karachi not first as a Muhajir, then as elite, then as a woman; she experiences all of these identities at once, each shaping the others. Similarly, Karim's half-Bengali background cannot be understood apart from his parents' troubled marriage, just as that marriage cannot be separated from the larger history of the 1971 war. The problem is that most readings take these dimensions apart, treating class as separate from ethnicity or gender as separate from urban memory. This creates a mismatch between the novel's logic and the way it is studied. Without a framework that can hold overlapping forces together, the novel risks being reduced either to a story about national politics or to a story about private relationships, when it is always both at once.

This study is important for several reasons. It allows for the recovery of silenced voices, particularly those of women, ethnic minorities, and migrants. It provides a more accurate understanding of how urban violence operates in Karachi, where political conflict is filtered through gender, class, and ethnicity. It challenges traditional canon formation by making a case

for works and approaches that resist simplification. And it contributes to broader conversations about memory, belonging, and urban life in postcolonial cities.

The study first identifies how ethnic conflict, gendered subjectivity, and urban memory intersect within the novel, paying attention to moments where characters navigate multiple forms of marginalization at once. It then analyzes the mediating role of love and friendship, asking whether intimacy reinforces social divisions or offers space for resistance. Finally, it demonstrates how the novel challenges conventional canon formations by centering marginalized communities. Throughout this analysis, the study seeks to understand what forms of identity and belonging emerge within a city defined by political conflict, why overlapping structures of gender, ethnicity, and class demand critical attention rather than separate treatment, and how love and friendship function as sites where political violence and personal intimacy collide, reshape one another, or temporarily suspend social hierarchies.

This paper argues that reading Kamila Shamsie's *Kartography* through an integrated lens reveals how ethnic conflict, class stratification, and gendered subjectivity co-produce identities and recode intimacy, thereby challenging canonical postcolonial narratives that treat these axes in isolation.

2. Literature Review

Kamila Shamsie's *Kartography* has received considerable scholarly attention, with researchers examining various themes such as identity, memory, violence, hybridity, and class. However, despite this critical focus on ethnic conflict and post-Partition politics, few studies have explored how gender, ethnicity, class, and political conflict intersect within a single framework. This paper contributes to the existing scholarship by applying an intersectional lens to examine the overlapping structures of oppression and belonging in Shamsie's novel.

Scholars have extensively examined the ethnic identity formation, Muhajir migration, and post-Partition political tensions in *Kartography*, analyzing how Shamsie engages with the legacies of the 1947 Partition and the 1971 civil war. Herbert (2011) examines how Shamsie fuses Urdu lyric poetry and maps to produce "lyric maps" of Karachi that disrupt national narratives seeking to censor or forget the loss of Bangladesh by interrogating "cartographic anxiety" affecting Pakistani subjectivities. Biswas and Tripathi (2020) examine how Shamsie portrays Bengali women who migrated to Pakistan after Partition, arguing that women become vulnerable targets in ethnic conflicts and that the novel creates a "cartography of struggle" that transcends political lines. Ali (2025) analyzes *Kartography* through a Marxist lens, arguing that Karachi functions as a microcosm for exploring power, inequality, and globalization, with Raheen and Karim representing the privileged class. Rahmani and Sharma (2019) argue that the foundational ideas of Pakistan failed to sustain themselves, presenting an alternative based on spatial justice and social inclusion that closely resembles Edward Soja's concept of Thirdspace. Neogi (2019) traces the evolution of Muhajir ethnic identity across generations, contrasting Husain's first-generation characters who experience alienation with Shamsie's later-generation characters who accept Pakistan as home, employing Hirsch's postmemory concept to explain how trauma is transmitted. Khan and Satkunanathan (2025) employ Bakhtin's chronotope theory to investigate transgenerational trauma, identifying three overlapping chronotopes: the 1947 Partition, the 1971 civil war, and Karachi itself, and arguing that the younger generation inherits trauma through stories and behaviors.

Feminist critics have interrogated the representation of women in *Kartography*, the influence of Western feminist discourse on diaspora writing, and the intersection of gender with ethnicity and class. Hamdani, Khan, and Shahzadi (2025) analyze covert racism within elite Pakistani society as depicted in the novel, employing critical race theory to examine how hate speech and the multiplicity of narratives between elites and marginalized communities

reveal hidden racial discrimination, particularly concerning Bengalis and Muhajirs. Al-Sheikh and Humayun (2024) critique *Kartography* as a diaspora narrative that falls under the occidental gaze, arguing that Shamsie has been conditioned by Western feminist philosophy and consequently projects Pakistani women as affluent elites who mimic Western ideals rather than representing authentic indigenous experiences, identifying nostalgia, negative stereotyping, objectification, and victim studies as techniques reflecting Western feminist responses. Jadoon (2017) investigates the Pakistanization of English in *Kartography*, finding that Shamsie employs hybrid innovations and lexical borrowing to indigenize English, presenting a language that is English in letter but Pakistani in spirit. Arshad, Nawaz, and Kakepoto (2021) explore identity gaps using Hecht's Communication Theory of Identity, focusing on personal-relational gaps and personal-enacted gaps, finding that these discrepancies negatively influence interpersonal relationships and lead to greater strife and tension.

Scholars have also examined how *Kartography* engages with collective memory, the transmission of trauma across generations, and the novel's formal strategies for representing history. Liaqat and Mukhtar (2022) examine the novel as a literary rendition that fictionalizes collective cultural memories of post-Partition Pakistan, arguing that it functions as a "mythistorical" text that mythologizes Pakistan's history while simultaneously critiquing it, with characters condensed into ethno-racial stereotypes and human relationships serving as metaphors to revisit political mistakes of the past. Sen (2022) examines the paradoxical relationship between collective amnesia and generational memory, arguing that the elite circle of Karachi serves as a microcosm for the Pakistani nation at large, where attempts to silence the past mirror the suppression of the Hamoodur Rehman Commission Report. Drawing on Hirsch's postmemory and Rothberg's concept of the "implicated subject," Sen demonstrates how young characters like Karim identify with a war they did not experience directly, and how the novel breaks new ground by compelling readers to confront the censored and manipulated memory of the 1971 war.

Although a substantial body of scholarly analysis has been devoted to Kamila Shamsie's *Kartography*, no study to date has applied an intersectional reading to the novel. Existing research tends to examine class, ethnicity, gender, and memory in isolation rather than as overlapping and mutually reinforcing structures of power. This study addresses this gap by adopting Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality alongside postcolonial concepts from Homi K. Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak, as well as feminist perspectives from Judith Butler and bell hooks, to demonstrate how these axes of identity converge and shape the experiences of characters in the novel.

3. Theoretical Framework

To approach Kamila Shamsie's *Kartography* (2002), this paper adopts an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that integrates intersectionality, postcolonial theory, and feminist criticism. Each approach highlights distinct yet complementary aspects of identity, power, and subjectivity. Together, they provide a multidimensional lens for understanding how ethnic violence, class stratification, and gendered experiences intersect within Karachi's socio-political landscape as represented in the novel.

3.1 Intersectionality

Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989, 1991) theory of intersectionality examines how multiple forms of oppression, including race, gender, and class, interact simultaneously rather than independently. Initially developed to address Black women's experiences in the United States, intersectionality emphasizes that identity is not additive but relational and overlapping. In the Karachi of *Kartography*, class privilege, ethnic belonging, and gender roles converge to shape everyday life. Raheen, for instance, benefits from her elite background, which grants her mobility and relative safety, while Karim, a Mohajir, faces

discrimination and violence despite sharing a similar middle-class status. These overlapping identities reveal how systemic inequalities infiltrate even personal relationships such as love and friendship. Intersectionality enables a reading of *Kartography* in which intimacy, memory, and urban belonging are never isolated experiences but are continually mediated by structures of power. This lens illuminates how Shamsie depicts Karachi as a space where social hierarchies permeate both public and private life.

3.2 Postcolonial Theory

Homi Bhabha's (1994) concepts of hybridity and mimicry, along with Gayatri Spivak's (1988) interrogation of the subaltern voice, frame *Kartography* within the legacies of colonialism, partition, and migration. These theories highlight how identity in postcolonial societies remains ambivalent, fractured, and often silenced by dominant narratives. Karachi emerges as a hybrid city shaped by colonial pasts and contemporary ethnic conflicts. The silences surrounding the 1971 war and ethnic riots reflect Spivak's notion of subalternity, wherein marginalized voices, particularly those of women and ethnic minorities, remain unheard. The unraveling of family secrets in the novel mirrors the difficulty of reconstructing suppressed histories in a postcolonial metropolis. Postcolonial theory thus contextualizes the novel within broader colonial legacies, revealing how migration, violence, and national memory fracture individual subjectivities and urban spaces.

3.3 Feminist Criticism

Judith Butler's (1990) notion of gender performativity and bell hooks' (1984, 2000) emphasis on intersectional feminism provide critical tools for analyzing female agency and resistance. Gender, like ethnicity and class, is shown to be socially constructed, contested, and deeply political. Raheen's narration resists patriarchal silencing by asserting her voice over Karachi's collective memory. While her privileged status affords her agency, the novel contrasts her with more marginalized women, such as the Bengali victims of the 1971 war, whose experiences remain doubly silenced by both gender and ethnicity. Feminist criticism underscores how Shamsie re-centers women's experiences within a male-dominated narrative of political violence, demonstrating how female subjectivity becomes a site of resistance and negotiation.

3.4 Rationale for Integration

While each framework offers unique insights, their integration creates a more holistic model for reading *Kartography*. Intersectionality exposes the overlap of gender, class, and ethnicity. Postcolonial theory situates these dynamics within colonial legacies and silenced histories. Feminist criticism foregrounds women's voices and agency. Together, these frameworks prevent reductive readings, such as treating the novel solely as a national allegory or as a personal love story, and instead highlight how Shamsie depicts Karachi as a contested space of overlapping oppressions and resistances.

4. Textual Analysis & Discussion

4.1 Karachi, Ethnic Violence, and Class Division

Kamila Shamsie's *Kartography* takes place against the backdrop of Karachi's violent urban history, where ethnic tensions between Muhajirs, Sindhis, Punjabis, and other communities constantly affect collective and personal identity. The novel's protagonist, Raheen, reveals how ethnic politics invades domestic spaces. Reflecting on an overheard conversation in which her family's friends dismiss her father's views on land reforms by calling him a "Muhajir," Raheen asks: "*What kind of immigrant is born in a city and spends his whole life there, and gets married there, and raises his daughter there? And I, an immigrant's daughter, was an immigrant too. If I went back to the house and told them I agreed with my father about land reforms, if I told them Karachi was my home just as much as it was anyone else's, would they look at me and think: another Muhajir. Immigrant*" (Shamsie, 2002, p. 35). This passage illustrates what Zaidi et al. (2021) define as spatial injustice, wherein political geography transforms into lived inequality.

From an intersectional perspective, ethnicity cannot be separated from class. Raheen

acknowledges this directly when she observes: *"Privilege erased the day-to-day struggles of ethnic politics, and however Karim might want me to feel about the matter I couldn't pretend I was sorry that I had been born on 'this side of Clifton Bridge' where class bound everyone together in an enveloping, suffocating embrace, with ethnicity only a secondary or even tertiary concern"* (Shamsie, 2002, p. 175). Crenshaw's (1989) notion of intersectional oppression explains that in Karachi, there is no singular definition of identity. Raheen's elite background insulates her from direct violence, while less privileged members of the Mohajir community face severe discrimination.

Urban memory serves as another narrative strategy in the novel. The trauma of Karachi's endemic violence during the late 1980s is conveyed through disjointed recollections. As Raheen's friend Zia prepares to leave Karachi permanently, he declares: *"He wasn't planning to come back to Karachi and who knows when he'd see me again"* (Shamsie, 2002, p. 234). Akhtar et al. (2021) state that Shamsie traces the nation onto memory, revealing that ethnic violence creates scars in both physical and psychological space. The postcolonial aspect emerges in the hybridity of Karachi itself. The Mohajir identity, formed through post-Partition migration, creates a community that is simultaneously insider and outsider. Thus, *Kartography* depicts how the urban boundaries dividing Karachi never exist as pure geography; instead, they represent intertwined structures of ethnicity, class, and historical trauma.

4.2 Female Subjectivity and Agency

Raheen's narrative voice embodies female subjectivity in a city where women are often suppressed by patriarchy as well as ethnic violence. From the very start, Raheen asserts control over her own story, reflecting on the nature of memory and storytelling: *"Odd. No matter where I begin, that line finds its way into my narrative so very early on, and forces linearity to give way to a ramble of hindsight. This is the worst of our ways of remembering, this tendency to prod the crust of anecdote in the hope of releasing a gush of piping-hot symbolism"* (Shamsie, 2002, p. 4). Through this statement, Shamsie questions the male-dominated memory of Karachi's conflicts.

Through a feminist lens, women negotiate agency within oppressive situations. Female subjectivity becomes a site of resistance, and narration itself turns into a political act, as hooks (1984) suggests. Raheen's physical defiance of gender norms is evident early in the novel: *"At the time, I was about four inches taller than Karim, and just weeks earlier, in front of our whole class, I had lifted him off his feet and deposited him in the waste-paper basket during one of his bouts of recalcitrance"* (Shamsie, 2002, p. 12). This moment of physical strength challenges traditional gender expectations. However, Raheen also internalizes her father's teachings about forgiveness and condemnation, revealing the complexity of her agency: *"Aba had always said that it was easy to condemn people; condemnation was an act of smugness, wasn't it? Didn't it arise from the certainty that you would never do what you were condemning someone else for?"* (Shamsie, 2002, p. 93).

Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity helps illuminate the construction and contestation of female roles in the novel. Raheen navigates multiple identities: a good daughter to her father, a romantic partner, and an intellectual within Karachi's urban elite. Yet her emotional dependence on Karim complicates her agency. Karim himself acknowledges this bond when he tells her: *"In that part of my mind that only remembers life before fourteen, Raheen, I'll love you for ever"* (Shamsie, 2002, p. 114). The novel also contrasts Raheen's privileged subjectivity with more marginalized women, such as Bengali victims of the 1971 war, whose experiences remain doubly silenced by gender and ethnicity. Through the interplay of feminist and intersectional criticism, *Kartography* reveals that female agency is always

conditional, mediated by class advantage, ethnicity, and political trauma. Raheen's voice can be heard, but it remains shadowed by those who have no voice at all.

4.3 Love, Friendship, and Political Conflict

The central relationships in the novel between Raheen and Karim, as well as between their parents, demonstrate that intimacy is constructed within political conflict. Love and friendship do not exist beyond ethnic and class divisions; rather, they are mediated by these forces. Shamsie directly articulates this theme when she writes: *"If we had more reliable systems of law and governance, perhaps our friendships would be shallower. But with no one to rely on except one another, Karachiites come together in times of crises with attitudes which suggest that no matter what else we are in our lives, whether bankers, teachers, hypochondriacs, cynics, Marxists, feudals, vegetarians, divorcees, bigamists, anorexics, dyslexics, sexists, our real vocation is friendship"* (Shamsie, 2002, p. 156). This passage suggests that political failure deepens the necessity and value of personal bonds.

Karim's anger toward Raheen's father, Zafar, reveals how past political violence infiltrates present relationships. Karim confronts Raheen directly: *"You've had a happy life, haven't you? You never stopped to consider that your happy family existed at the cost of mine. They should never have got married, my parents. They wouldn't have, except your father said the most unforgivable thing, and then your mother forgave him for it with such a magnificent show of compassion"* (Shamsie, 2002, p. 216). This accusation demonstrates how the trauma of the 1971 war and its ethnic prejudices continue to haunt the next generation. Love here becomes entangled with inherited political guilt.

Class also mediates intimacy. Raheen's privileged background insulates her from the consequences of ethnic politics, while Karim's community faces systemic marginalization. Love does not function as an equalizer but rather mirrors unequal power relations. When Karim declares that he cannot return to Karachi because *"it's starting again. The same kind of stuff that went on in '71. The desperation, the craziness. The stench from the newspapers. This is how it begins,"* Raheen responds: *"Because, Karim, you've shown me that it's not so simple to leave a city behind"* (Shamsie, 2002, p. 215). This exchange reveals the novel's ambivalence: intimacy can help bridge gaps, but it cannot erase them entirely. The individual cannot be separated from the political; friendship and love are both facilitated and circumscribed by the violence of history.

5. Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that reading Kamila Shamsie's *Kartography* through an intersectional lens, one that integrates postcolonial and feminist criticism, reveals how ethnic conflict, class stratification, and gendered subjectivity co-produce identities and recode intimacy in Karachi. The analysis of ethnic violence, female agency, and the entanglement of love and friendship within political discord shows that no single theoretical approach can fully capture the complexity of Shamsie's narrative. By situating the novel at the intersection of ethnicity, class, gender, and urban memory, this study has shown how intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) illuminates the simultaneous operation of multiple oppressions, while postcolonial theory (Bhabha, 1994; Spivak, 1988) and feminist criticism (Butler, 1990; hooks, 1984) clarify the dynamics of silenced voices, fractured identities, and the negotiation of agency within patriarchal environments. *Kartography* depicts Karachi not merely as a geographical setting but as a symbolic and contested space where individual stories remain inextricably tied to political pasts. The ethnic divisions between Mohajirs, Sindhis, and Punjabis reveal the city as a disputed map, one defined not by neutrality but by systemic inequalities and historical trauma. Furthermore, through Raheen's narrative negotiations of silence, Shamsie foregrounds the central role of women's voices in retelling Karachi's history,



thereby broadening feminist understandings of memory. Consequently, *Kartography* serves as a paradigmatic text for demonstrating the necessity of methodological hybridity within literary criticism, showing that subjectivity is mediated by overlapping and mutually reinforcing axes of power.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that point toward future research. The analysis focused primarily on three axes of identity, namely ethnicity, class, and gender, while other significant markers such as religion, language, and generational difference received less attention. Additionally, the study concentrated on a single novel by Shamsie, leaving open the question of whether similar intersectional dynamics operate in her other works, such as *Salt and Saffron*, *Broken Verses*, or *Burnt Shadows*. Future research could extend this intersectional framework to examine Shamsie's broader literary oeuvre or compare her work with that of other Pakistani Anglophone writers, including Mohsin Hamid, Bapsi Sidhwa, and Nadeem Aslam. Comparative studies across South Asian literatures, including Indian and Bangladeshi fiction addressing the 1971 war, would also benefit from an intersectional approach. Finally, while this study has focused on literary analysis, the theoretical framework could be applied to other cultural forms, such as film, visual art, and digital media, that engage with questions of urban violence, memory, and belonging in postcolonial contexts.

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