

Cultural Chromatology in Kamila Shamsie's *A God in Stone*

^aShashikant Mhalunkar, ^bAnita Vasant Ubale

^aDepartment of English, B.N.N. College, Bhiwandi, Maharashtra, India

^bDepartment of English, University of Mumbai, Maharashtra, India

Abstract

Kamila Shamsie's *A God in Every Stone* (2014) is one of the best examples of cultural chromatology that Kamila Shamsie, one of the reputed Pakistani writers brings to light through archeology and excavations. Shamsie uncovers the ancient Persian, Greek, Buddhist, Muslim and European cultures. Shamsie connects the cultural aspects with the history and migration. The author intertwines the story of archeologists and soldiers with the historical discoveries and happenings like the World War I and Freedom Fighting Movement of colonized India. Shamsie's characters are migratory subjects who experience multiple cultures of various nations and places. Shamsie pinpoints cultural multiplicity during the World War I. The paper is an attempt to analyze the cultural instances from *A God in Every Stone*.

Shamsie uses narrates how an array of characters that represent various national identities, religions, attires, food and traditions as cultural markers who explicate culture and ethnicity of various nations and times. The author artistically pinpoints the uniqueness of every culture; and at the same time, she explicates the beauty of cultural amalgamation. Najeeb Gul, younger brother of Qayyum exemplifies the charm of the unification of the cultures.

KEYWORDS: Culture, ethnicity, History, Migration

Kamila Shamsie's *A God in Every Stone* (2014) throws light upon contours of multiple cultures of people in variant places, nations and time. The author presents the Western culture which is curious to unearth the hidden historical facts of the world. The novel delves deeply with the theme of culture as the subjects in the narrative exhibit largely these issues as the writing progresses. The novel begins in ancient Caria including the site of Labraunda, situated in present day- Turkey. Kamila portrays Peshawar and its culture as well as history in this novel. Thus, Peshawar becomes the cultural hub where Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, and Christians exist together.

Wikipedia defines culture as "the characteristics and knowledge of a particular group of people, encompassing language, religion, cuisine, social habits, music and arts." (Web) Further, it is also defined as "The cumulative deposit of knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, attitudes, meanings, hierarchies, religion, notions of time, roles, spatial relations, concepts of the universe, and material objects and possessions acquired by a group of people in the course of generations." (Web) Kamila Shamsie's *A God in Every Stone* presents all these aspects of various cultures right from 515 BC to 1930. In the beginning, the author vocalizes the curiosity of the ancient Persian culture to discover and understand the other Asian cultures of the same era. The instance from *The Histories* by Herodotus explicates curious Persian culture which inspires the Persian king, Darius I to discover the greater part of the Asia in order to understand the different cultures:

The greater part of Asia was discovered by Persian king, Darius I who had wished to know where it was that the sea was joined by the River Indus (this being one of only two in the world which provides a habitat for crocodiles), and so sent ships with men on board whom he could trust to report back truthfully, including Scylax, a man from Caryanda. These duly set off from the city of Caspatyrus, in the land of Pactyike. (Shamsie, 2014)

Through Herodotus Kamila explicates culture and history of ancient Caria of 515 BC, ancient civilization, myths and Greek gods. Shamsie opens her novel with Greek characters in order to introduce the ancient cultures and their multiple journeys to get the knowledge of other cultures. Kamila exhibits the navigations of Scylax, the barbarian adventurer navigated the mighty Indus. This instance touches upon the areas of history, migration and culture of 515 BC. She also puts forth the culture of the navigators in the ancient times. The author traces the ancient cultural practice of sponsoring the journeys which afterwards boosts migrations for the archeology, excavations and also plants the roots of colonization in the Western culture.

Kamila Shamsie also brings to the light how culture gets affected at the time of war. She narrates the impact of the war on the culture. She explicates the important historical happening- the World War I, with a caption, "July-August 1914". She also pinpoints how women voluntarily participate and contribute at the time of crisis like war. He feels proud about Vivian's contribution as nurse. He feels Vivian as soldier and the hospital as a battlefield.

Kamila throws light upon war culture during the World War I through the darker side of war as the soldiers in hospitals are ill-treated. During the war, the soldiers celebrate the death by discussing the physical deformation, personal and physical loss with pride. Further, the author makes a valid point regarding Indian culture during the World War I. She says how the Indian soldiers fight for the British rule with valor. They feel proud to exhibit their bravery. This cultural tenet is evident in the bravery and the honor of Indian army. Vivian says:

There was that one, an Indian, who won the Victoria Cross. I read about him, and I thought, there is a . . . a compact between us, the Indians and the English. We'll honour their bravery as we would that of an English soldier and, in turn, they fight our wars with as much fervour as any Englishman would do. (Shamsie 40)

Shamsie states how the army recruits multiple castes and religions and the soldiers under single canopy maintain their culture, religion, language and identity. Food is one of the major markers of culture. Kitchen, therefore, becomes a key aspect to maintain the culture of every sect, religion and community to which the soldiers belong. The authorities take precaution to maintain the culture and faith of every group. Similarly, the King-Emperor of France gives his palace to the wounded Indian soldiers to be treated. He also gives instructions for separate kitchens and good treatment. Indian culture with the greater respect is being treated in France. Kamila Shamsie pens down, ". . . nine different kitchens where food could be prepared separately for each group, and where the meat for Muslims was plentiful and halal. The King-Emperor for himself had sent strict instructions that no one should treat a black – and this word included Pashtuns – soldier as a lesser man." (Shamsie 66-67)

The writer introduces the multicultural group of archaeologists as they belong to different countries and speak different languages. They represent universal nomadism

with mixed cultures, genders, identities and habits. Kamila shows multicultural identities of the group at dinner. She underlines:

That night there were ten at dinner around a long wooden table under the night sky. There Germans, six Turks, and Viv. They started the meal in near-silence, all attention on the stew which Nergiz the cook had prepared, but when it was over they pushed their plates away, and everyone other than Viv – even the two German women – lit up cigarettes and fell into rapid chatter about their day in a mix of languages in which French dominated. (Shamsie 16)

A God in Every Stone uncovers multiple cultures through history, past, space and itineraries of time and subjects. Kamila Shamsie gathers characters from different locations of the world. As archaeologists, they not only traverse from the places to Turkey and exhibit the culture they belong to. They attempt to study history through the tombs, inscriptions and the old coins. These historical items put forth the cultural practices, traditions, art like writings, architecture and sculpture of the time they belong. Kamila comments on the royal culture which appreciate the loyalty of the subjects but the same culture exhibit cruelty towards its subject. She projects the royal as well as cruel side of the ancient Greek oppressor's culture. Kamila point out the culture of oppressors and oppressed one.

Gradually, Kamila throws light upon cultures of the varied times, populations and nationalities. The place Shahji-Ki-Dheri in Peshawar provides the material for uncovering Buddhist culture. The writer chronicles the existing cultures of Buddhist as well as Islamic cultures. It also kindles curiosity to know the cultures of ancient time. This casket not only throws light upon the Kanishka dynasty but it uncovers the culture of the Kanishka clan regarding Buddha and Buddhist philosophy.

'April 1915' deals with the multiculturalism. The multiculturalism in the nation is evident in the army also. Kamila Shamsie narrates how the regiment holds soldiers from varied communities of India- Pathans, Punjabis, Dogras and Pashtuns. In India, as people of different cultures and religions live together, they can understand each other's language but the white skinned people cannot understand each other's language. This linguistic diversity is a cultural marker of India which is not common with the Europeans. Qayyum observes how the French girl does not understand English. This cultural identity and dichotomy get revealed in, "It was only then he realized they hadn't said a word to each other, and when he spoke to her in his broken English she shook her head and laughed. He has assumed all white people could understand each other's language in the way all the Indians in the Army had at least one tongue in common." (Shamsie 57)

Kamila Shamsie touches upon the issues of culture in India and the Western nations. The soldiers in Indian regiments on warfront in the Western countries are much impressed by the European women who are much active and free, whereas Indian women are controlled in domestic spaces and culinary practices. These soldiers wish to change the women of India replacing them by French or English women that will trigger national development and the lifestyle as well. The cultural difference between these women is evident as one of the soldiers says, "Nothing about France or England was more different from India than the women – and from here it was a step some of the soldiers made to declare that if India's women changed then India too would become prosperous like the

white nation, and everything from the livestock to the people would have a gleam to it.” (Shamsie 68)

Subsequently, the author also underlines the nomadic culture of Qayyum’s family. The family history showcases fluctuations in dwelling places and cultural adaptations of those places through languages and food. Qayyum observes his cultural sojourn, “His great-grandfather had left the Yusufzai lands decades before Qayyum was a Peshawari, a city-dweller, with Hindko not Pashto as his first language.” (Shamsie 85)

The instances of cultural identity confusion are evident when Vivian and Najeeb, the younger brother of Qayyum Gul discuss about Alexander. For him, Alexander is an Englishman. Vivian asks, “– You don’t know who Alexander was, do you?” “–An Englishman?”(Shamsie 93) Further, Vivian observes the culture of Najeeb Gul specifically as a character from *Arabian Nights*. The turban on his head and the waistcoat that Najeeb wears reminds her of the monkey in the *Arabian Nights*. Kamila narrates the cultural similarities in dress codes of Najeeb and the fictional character, “In his turban and waistcoat he reminded her of the monkey similarly dressed at an *Arabian Nights* party in England two summers ago. The monkey held a Japanese fan which it swept up and down the length of its body in a manner so vulgar- head throws back, legs spread apart.” (Shamsie 98)

Gradually, Kamila Shamsie makes a comment on how incessant attacks on historical monuments destruct the culture of the time. Vivian Spencer observes that the Great Stupa has turned into just relics and it is in abandoned condition. Subsequently, Vivian Rose observes the culture of Peshawar wherein education is restricted to mother-tongue and religious books. Further, she also observes that this education is redundant but as it is compelled by culture, Najeeb attains his classes with the maulvi. Najeeb points out the futile process of education compelled by culture, “The maulvi doesn’t care, as long as I take him his money every month. I don’t like to waste my father’s money but my brother says as long as I use that time to learn it isn’t wrong, and I don’t learn anything from the maulvi – he’s so boring, he only makes me read the Qur’an out loud and doesn’t explain anything.” (Shamsie 110)

Vivian observes the cultural variations in Peshawar. She finds that valor and bravery are masculine symbols whereas women are considered as meek creatures confined to culinary practices. Qayyum states, “A man wears scares as a woman wears bangles.”(Shamsie 129) This indicates that bangles in the wrists of women are cultural markers. Similarly, wounds and injuries during adventures are the markers for man. In other words, adventures remain as the area only for men and it is restricted for women. Indian cultural cryptograph yoke women into familial space enchaining with bangles and bindis. It also indicates that a female like Vivian who independently migrates like a man several places and excavates relics and history of generations is never approved by the cultural parochial hegemony. Qayyum is honored in Peshawar with great zeal. People allowed him to enter the zenana. Kamila captures the cultural canons minutely:

“Everywhere he went he was asked to stay a night and a banquet was prepared in his honour, even when it meant slaughtering the chicken which the family relied on for eggs; the object he brought with him – pebble or bullet or photograph – was passed from hand to hand as if it were a piece of the Black Stone brought by the angle Jibreel himself.”(Shamsie 138)

Further, Qayyum observes how an Englishwoman enjoys liberty in cultural expression in Peshawar too. He states “. . . an Englishwoman with a pith-helmet in her head and clothes which revealed almost her entire arms and part of her legs followed after her. Even here, even in Peshawar, there were different rules for the English. No, especially here.” (Shamsie 163)

Remmick, the Governor of Peshawar feels that he belongs to the most civilized and culturally advanced nation. He does not approve Vivian Rose amalgamating with Indians, especially the Pashtuns. He says, “We are here to civilize, not to lose our own civility, he’d said. Then he pointed to Viv and added, some of us in large ways, and some of us in small.” (Shamsie 184)

The author also observes cultural tenets of Hindu and Muslim communities in India. Each community has its own stock of cultural beliefs which they maintain for generations. For instance, a Muslim never borrows money from a Hindu money-lender as the notion of paying interest is against a Muslim’s religious belief. The following instance throws light upon the cultural beliefs of a Muslim father who prefers to give his daughter in marriage to a merchant’s son in exchange of money but never agrees to borrow from a Hindu money-lender. Kamila narrates:

“The man with the long-tailed turban was in debt, and refused to borrow money from any of the Hindu money-lenders because his piety wouldn’t allow him to accept the idea of paying interest. So he’d come to an agreement with one of the prosperous merchants – in exchange for the money his infant daughter would be married to the merchant’s son when she was of age.” (Shamsie 158)

Shamsie also chronicles the subaltern cultural identities of as women are marginalized in Peshawar by the parochial hegemony. The Pathans in Peshawar follow cultural constraints by marginalizing women into familial fixities. The women also follow cultural compulsions willingly. Men should not look at women. The privacy of zenana is maintained. “The Pathans want to insist that men mustn’t look at women to ensure that no man looks at their women.” (Shamsie 190) Further, Vivian asks Najeeb to bring his sisters along with him so that she will teach them English and Greek. This idea is not welcomed by Najeeb because Muslim girls are much in periphery. The following snippet of conversation throws light upon the cultural differences between the women of the West and the East.

“Miss Spencer, they’re girls.

What do you think I am, for heaven’s sake.

You’re English.” (Shamsie 197)

Kamila states, “Islam teaches us goodness, teaches us virtue, teaches us service, teaches us brotherhood, teaches us gentleness.” (Shamsie 204) But the same Islam never makes any note about teaching females. When the eldest grand-daughter of Najeeb’s mother desires to learn English, Qayyum does not allow her to learn English. Qayyum lifts the child from the company of the books and men and places her on her grandmother’s lap. Qayyum states, “Plays with your doll, little one.” (Shamsie 205)

Kamila Shamsie unearths the instances of Buddhist culture and the itineraries of Buddhism from the time of Emperor Asoka till the excavation and preservation of statues and stupas in Peshawar historical Museum. Shamsie intertwines a story of the Circlet of Scylax, the great explorer; its discovery by Najeeb and its sojourn with Buddhism. Kamila’s characters, places and events penetrate the Buddhist virtues. The writer uses

symbols the statues of Buddha, the Sacred Casket of Kanishka, and the Stupas of Asoka to reveal the Buddhist culture.

Kamila also takes the opportunity to explicate the basic philosophy of peace, patience and virtues in Islam. Being a Muslim, she strongly believes in these virtues as the cultural markers of this religion. As majority of her characters are Muslims, they exhibit Muslim culture and the preaching of the Prophet. Kamila underlines Muslim culture of peace. “When the Muslims asked the Prophet, How should we respond to these attacks? He answered, With righteousness and patience. Righteousness and patience. These are Muslim virtues, these are Pashtun virtues.” (Shamsie 246)

Vivian also observes the cultural exchange between the natives and the guests – Indians and British. Indian men and women address the English people with titles and honorifics. Kamila points out the cultural diversities through linguistic expressions:

“Memsahib. Such a peculiar word. In this country filled with titles and honorifics nothing pre-existing had suited Englishwomen; while the ubiquitous ‘sahib’ came to rest comfortably on the shoulder of Englishmen, something other than ‘begum-sahib’ had to be devised for their female counterparts. As if to say that Englishmen and Indian men, for all their differences, could still be described in the same language but the women of the two races were so far apart that they had to be categorized separately, kept separate.”(Shamsie 300)

Kamila narrates, “The rules of the Peshawar Club were clear: if you were an Englishman you could apply for membership; if you were an Englishwoman you could enter as the guest of a member. But there were other rules in place which governed the interaction of the Indian guards with the ruling race.”(Shamsie 305) Even after the panic attack and the massacre, the cultural tenets of Peshawar city remain the same. Vivian observes the well-set cultural routine of people in Peshawar:

“The smells of cooking meat, the calls of traders, the variety of turbans, it was all as before, but even so, something was off-kilter. It took a little while to decide that the difference was in her – in making her just another local woman, the burqa took away her very English right to be eccentric.” (Shamsie 326)

To conclude, Kamila Shamsie’s *A God in Every Stone* documents the Greek, Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim and Western cultural set ups from 515 BC to 1930. Shamsie intertwines varied cultures and co-cultures juxtaposing with other cultures of nations, times, rulers, and genders. In other words, she traces stones and gods in stones in varied cultures.

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