

Memory Politics and Forensic Temporality in Kamila Shamsie's Selected Works

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Abstract

This article examines the intersection of forensic temporality and memory politics in Kamila Shamsie's novels Kartography (2002), Broken Verses (2005), and A God in Every Stone (2015). It argues that the forensic objects featured in these novels, such as newspaper clippings, wedding photographs, and the Temple of Zeus, function as narrative sites through which Shamsie's female protagonists reconstruct repressed histories and uncover concealed truths. These memory-bearing objects reveal how patriarchal and politicised structures shape contemporary identities. By examining narratives distorted or suppressed by power, this article explores what collective memory loses or misrepresents. Drawing on Michel-Rolph Trouillot's concept of "historical silencing," it demonstrates how Shamsie reclaims marginalised female voices and interrogates dominant historical narratives through a forensic lens. Finally, the paper contributes to scholarly discussion about memory politics, gendered silences, and object-agency.

Keywords: Kamila Shamsie, Memory Politics, Forensic Temporality, Michel-Rolph Trouillot, Historical Silencing.

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Introduction

Memory is fundamental to forming both individual and community identities. It is inherently connected to place, experiences, and events that shape cultural consciousness. Yet memory is never neutral; political power structures shape it, and when deployed selectively, it becomes a key tool of memory politics. Memory Politics is a process of shaping, contesting, and using a society's collective memories of its past to achieve contemporary political goals by emphasising certain historical events and silencing or forgetting others.

Set largely in Karachi, Shamsie's fiction frequently addresses state-sponsored conflict, ethnic violence, and the suppression of marginalised histories. This paper examines how Pakistani-British novelist Kamila Shamsie merges narrative structures with historical memory. Her female protagonists often resist silenced histories by transforming objects into forensic sites through which they reclaim the past.

This study argues that the politics of memory and the framework of forensic temporality illuminate the functions of ordinary objects like newspaper clippings, the Temple of Zeus, and wedding photographs, all of which appear in Shamsie's works *Kartography*, *Broken Verses*, and *A God in Every Stone* and act as narrative catalysts. These objects enable protagonists to confront the dominant and patriarchal erasure in a male-dominated past.

Aim

This study examines the connection between forensic temporality and the politics of memory through a close textual analysis of three selected works by Kamila Shamsie. By understanding memory as a societal and human phenomenon and examining forensic temporality as a framework for reconstructing unresolved histories and material traces, the study investigates how these narratives originate, contest, and reinterpret the past. Rather than viewing memory as a static record of historical events, the study explores it as a dynamic process shaped by political and cultural factors. Similarly, forensic temporality refers to understanding the past through material evidence. By focusing on these three selected works, the study seeks to show how literature contributes to ongoing discussions of memory and historical violence that reflect on the traumatic past. It also aims to show how literary narratives function as sites of forensic temporality and the politics of memory, and how they provide historical viewpoints that dominate narratives.

Objectives

This study examines a series of interrelated objectives aligned with the article's aim. To understand the role of memory politics in power, ideology, and conflicting historical narratives, this study analyses the politics of memory in various literary works. It explores how remembering and forgetting shape social and collective identities, and highlights the political dimensions of memory.

Secondly, by examining how artefacts and associated narratives are used to reconstruct the past in the works selected for this analysis, this study explores the

concept of forensic temporality. It focuses particularly on the relationship between the past and the present, and how unresolved historical concerns still affect present realities.

Thirdly, this study attempts to identify the sites where the politics of memory and forensic temporality intersect by examining how these concepts relate to the questions of truth and historical accountability.

Finally, this study aims to contribute to the growing interdisciplinary dialogue on the politics of memory and forensic temporality by demonstrating how literary works offer valuable insights into the political issues of remembering violence, uncovering repressed histories, and interpreting material remains as evidence in broader cultural contexts.

Methodology

This research uses a qualitative approach grounded in literary and cultural analysis. As the study is primarily interpretive, it analyses the depiction of the politics of memory and forensic temporality in three selected works through close textual analysis, guided by Michel-Rolph Trouillot's concept of "historical silencing."

For this study, the primary analytical method used is close textual reading with a special focus on narrative structures and the interplay between memory and materiality. Through this approach, the study explores how literary devices shape the depiction of memory and how the selected texts express forensic temporality.

These textual insights are examined alongside the discussed theoretical frameworks to support logical, critical interpretation. The combination of qualitative literary analysis and close textual reading makes possible a comprehensive understanding of how literature serves as a framework for negotiating contested memories, recreating fractured histories, and grappling with concerns of historical responsibility. This research highlights the importance of literary texts as critical interventions in larger conversations about memory, history, and forensic temporality. This study uses Michel-Rolph Trouillot's stages of "historical silencing" to examine how memory politics and forensic temporality operate in three works by Kamila Shamsie. It focuses on how these narratives highlight the intricate connections between memory and objects in defining the forensic temporality of history, and how they transform into historical violence.

Theoretical Frameworks

Forensic temporality refers to the process of recovering the disputed or suppressed history through objects. It describes how Shamsie's protagonists, acting as investigators, examine material remnants to recover the overlooked or manipulated historical incidents. This aligns with Christina Sharpe's concept of "Wake Work," which highlights how lingering traces of past violence shape the present.

Michel-Rolph Trouillot's *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (1995) outlines the stages of historical production: fact creation, fact assembly, fact

retrieval, and fact retrospective significance. Trouillot argues that history is a socially constructed process shaped by agents and actors who determine which events are recorded and which are silenced. Applying this framework to Shamsie's novels clarifies how her female protagonists subvert dominant narratives and recover suppressed female voices. Here, forensic temporality functions, not literally but metaphorically, as a narrative mechanism that reveals how objects destabilise official histories and expose gendered silences.

The Temple of Zeus in *A God in Every Stone*

In the novel *A God in Every Stone*, the British archaeologist and protagonist Vivian Rose Spencer explores how the Temple of Zeus transcends archaeological achievement, symbolising the intersection of history and personal identity. "The novel is the story of non-violence, violence, Pashtun's leadership, Pashtun's identity crisis, and the Pashtun role in the decolonization of All India" (Ali et al. 2840). The inscription, treated here as a forensic object, is more than historical evidence; it represents women's struggle for recognition in the male-dominated field of archaeology. She exclaims, "I've found it!" I've found the Temple of Zeus! (Shamsie, *A God* 19). This moment is not merely a professional triumph, but also a symbolic assertion of female agency. The inscription marks the moment of creation, in which a speculation in historical narrative becomes authenticated through material proof. This insertion of the fallen slab into historical discourse illustrates how control over evidence reinforces identity, especially for women whose involvement has been historically overlooked.

However, the eventual withdrawal of excavation during the conflict exemplifies historical silencing because colonial action interferes with the creation and preservation of information. Therefore, the material is situated at the intersection of gender politics, colonial power, and forensic temporality. Here, the material reminds us of suppressed ancient history.

Wedding Photo in *Kartography*

In the novel *Kartography*, Raheen's discovery of a wedding photo's authenticity becomes a moment of realising how something seemingly ordinary can bear painful traces of the past. This study attempts to deconstruct how an ordinary wedding photo can be considered a political archive that links individual lives with the history of the war between East and West Pakistan that led to the creation of Bangladesh in 1971. Raheen states, "*They were not looking at one another, not at all*" (Shamsie, *Kartography* 36). What was considered a symbol of love and unity becomes a document that illustrates the brutality of ethnic violence, and it is viewed as an object that conceals traces of the past and presents a false appearance. That is why the wedding photo is considered a forensic object here. Trouillot sees this incident as a stage of fact assembly. It is created as a collection of facts arranged to obscure the pains, rejections, and truths of the past and to selectively present a specific matter to the future and the present, in accordance with Trouillot's statement.

This incident, like a crime scene, with Raheen as the investigator probing it, illustrates how a scene reveals silence, violence, and oppression in a society. This wedding photograph is not a testament to happiness but an indirect reflection of sadness because the real reason for the financial swap is concealed. Raheen's father, who fell in love with Maheen, calls off their engagement because she is a Bengali. After this break-up, Raheen's mother, Yasmin, a Pakistani woman, and Raheen's father, Zafar, a Muhajir, got married. Maheen, a Bengali woman, and Karim's father, Ali, a Punjabi, got married.

This photograph, which acknowledges this marriage bond, attempts to explain how a woman's identity is denied through the hidden history that has shaped the relationship between the two families and the complex identity of Karachi, West Pakistan. It illustrates the politics of memory, the fabrication of what is remembered, and the impact of women's identities in recovering the truth of the past through remnants. Therefore, the wedding photograph mentioned here is accepted as a political archive.

Newspaper Clipping in *Broken Verses*

Aasmaani, the protagonist of the novel *Broken Verses*, is a thirty-year-old woman who works at a television station in Karachi. She is troubled by the disappearance of her mother, Samina Akram, fourteen years ago, as well as the death of the well-known poet who was both her mother's lover and Aasmaani's mentor. Rabia, Aasmaani's half-sister, drives her effort to uncover this enigmatic history. Rabia is portrayed as an everyday, pragmatic voice.

Through this, Rabia calmly instructs Aasmaani to "Read it,'... and retreat to her flat again" (Shamsie, *Broken Verses* 31). Here, Rabia refers to a file of newspaper clippings related to Akram. While this incident is a direct act of unleashing repressed history, it also functions as a forensic code. This newspaper clipping, identified not only as a record but also as traces of a woman's identity destroyed under dominant rule, marks the moment of retrieval and retrospective significance in the third and fourth stages of Trouillot's framework.

Through this incident, it illustrates how the identity of the woman dissatisfied with the State has been silenced by dominant rule. It also shows how Akram's voice is restored. Furthermore, this idea also includes the notion that the newspaper clipping is an awakened work through the remaining material, bearing the impact of the politics of memory and traces of forensic temporality.

Forensic Narrative as a Source of Temporality and Memory

This article uses forensic narrative to challenge the dominant historical narratives in Shamsie's works *Kartography*, *Broken Verses*, and *A God in Every Stone*. While attempting to explain the effects of memory politics and forensic temporality through Trouillot's four stages of silence from *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* and Christina Sharpe's concept of "wake work" from her work *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, the present article addresses the urgent need to confront the identities of women that have been hidden or

deliberately erased in the past through forensic objects like the wedding photo, the Temple of Zeus, and newspaper clippings. “Ultimately, Kartography demonstrates how personal identities and familial relationships remain deeply entangled with the political divisions and historical memories of the nation” (Hassan 2095).

This article focuses on the process of empowering women in *A God in Every Stone*; how Kartography hides and presents history to the next generation under a false guise; and the tension between past and present in *Broken Verses*, which explores the connection between reclaiming history and confronting silences.

As a result, this article examines the role of memory politics and forensic temporality in each period, highlighting the need to reclaim the identities of women destroyed, distorted, or oppressed by patriarchal society through memory politics and other factors historically denied or marginalised. Furthermore, it explores how an object functions as forensic evidence that holds memories and injustices of the past, through the lens of forensic storytelling and the implications of historical silences. Therefore, this article probes the identity dilemma of women caught between political memory and forensic temporality.

Conclusion

This article explores the general context for examining the patriarchal politics of memory, historical silencing, and women’s identity in Shamsie’s works. The article shows how objects act as catalysts for recovering lost or hidden history. It draws on the structures of forensic temporality and memory politics, as well as Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s concept of ‘historical silencing’.

In *A God in Every Stone*, the novel explores gendered biases in identity formation; in Kartography, it addresses the repression of ethnic violence and emotion; and in *Broken Verses*, it examines struggles between the past and the present in recovering a deliberately hidden identity.

The British Raj in the Indian subcontinent has been an area of academic and scholarly inquiry. The period has deeply impacted the indigenous culture and political system. Studies have highlighted a plethora of political, military, and economic reasons accounting for the establishment and collapse of the Empire. However, Kamila Shamsie’s novel *A God in Every Stone* (2014) adds another dimension to the subject, which is not power but rather the colonial discourses which settled and unsettled the Empire in India (Ullah et al. 282).

In this study, each object mentioned in the three novels is treated as a forensic object, and the feminist characters who investigate it are regarded as investigators of silence, offering a new perspective on Shamsie’s works. Rather than revealing the complete truth, Shamsie’s works aim to uncover the authenticity of stories suppressed and hidden by patriarchal society and highlight the contributions of oppressed women. Through this, this study shows that memory and forensics function as a political practice that helps recover voices silenced by dominant society, along with remnants of what the patriarchal structure has attempted to destroy.

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