Neo-colonialism, Elitist Discourse and the Silent Subaltern in Kamila Shamsie's novels

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In 'The Post-Colonial Studies Reader', Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin state:

> All Post-Colonial societies are still subject in one way or another to overt or subtle forms of neo-colonial domination, and independence has not solved this problem. The development of new elites within independent societies, often buttressed by neo-colonial institutions; the development of internal divisions based on racial, linguistic or religious discriminations; the continuing unequal treatment of indigenous people…all these testify to the fact that post-colonialism is a continuing process of resistance and reconstruction. (Ashcroft 2)

The world in Shamsie's novels is a postcolonial world where neo-colonialism reigns supreme. Here the past and present forms of resistance, oppression and exploitation exacerbate and perpetuate. While condemning neo-colonialism, Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana's first post-independence president, said:

> Neo-colonialism… is the worst form of imperialism. For those who practice it, it means power without responsibility and for those who suffer from it, it means exploitation without redress. In the days of old-fashioned colonialism, the imperial power had at least to explain and justify at home the actions it was taking abroad. In the colony who served the ruling imperial power could at least look to its protection against any violent move by their opponent. With neo-colonialism neither is the case. (Nkrumah xi)

Neo- colonialism suggests the indirect control of former colonies through the exploitation of their economic and cultural dependence. In this case a country is unable to exercise its own power and take any vital decisions about itself, but is governed and dictated through the native elite who is compliant with the neo-colonial powers. This article explores the representation of neo-colonialism in Shamsie's novels *In the City by the Sea, Kartography,* and *Salt and Saffron.*

In her first novel *In the City by the Sea* she portrays a developing society where man is crushed under the pressure of inhuman social mechanism that girdle him in a traumatic political state. Karachi is Shamsie's *In the City by the Sea*, where she brings to life the era of 1970s, the era of tyrant presidents, strikes and arbitrary arrests of political opponents. It is set in a time just after Pakistan was divided and Bangladesh happened but before the generals took over the country imposing martial law, during the time when a kind of flawed democracy was in place. The novel records a young child's growing perceptions of an ever-changing world around him. Set in a land ruled by an oppressive dictator, this political novel recreates the confusing world of Hasan who is on the edge of adulthood. One way in which neocolonialism appears in the novel is in its representation of politicians and the political system. For example, an acclaimed politician, Salman Haq, suffers at the hands of a military ruler and a bunch of foreign powers. Hasan, the nephew

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of Salman Haq, is unable to understand the whole drama when his father tells him: "'You know, Huss, whenever we talked about Salman Mamoo and what would happen to him, we were always sure that he would not be… that no harsh measures would be taken against him.' 'Yes,' Hasan said. 'Ami told me. Because the foreign powers wouldn't let the President harm him.'" (81)

"Foreign Powers", here symbolize the flagrant yet disguised prevail of neo-colonialism in the country. These powers may decree life or death to anyone and only they can carve the fate of the state they covertly rule as they bestow *carte blanche* on the president, and "permission to do what he likes". (82) Thus pre-existent colonial rule persists in the present. Robert J.C Young, in his book *Post Colonialism: A very short introduction* says:

> When national sovereignty had finally been achieved, each state moved from colonial to autonomous, post-colonial status. Independence! However, in many ways this represented only a beginning, a relatively minor move from direct to indirect rule, a shift from colonial rule and domination to a position not so much of independence as of being in-dependence. It is striking that despite de-colonization, the major world powers did not change substantially during the course of 20th century. (3)

People like Salman Haq are the direct victim of this indirect rule. They are the Subalterns hailing from a system that blatantly perpetuates tyranny in a free country, where democracy has been derailed and martial law has been imposed, ripping people off their basic rights and denying them justice and freedom.

In the preface to the first volume of *Subaltern Studies I*, Ranajeet Guha defined the subaltern very broadly as anyone who is subordinated "in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way" (35). In her influential essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Gayatri Spivak also refers to Guha's analysis of the social structure of neo-colonial societies by means of a "dynamic stratification grid":

> Elite 1. Dominant foreign group
> 2. Dominant indigenous groups on all India level
> 3. Dominant indigenous groups at the regional and local levels
> 4. The term 'people' and 'Subaltern classes' has been used as synonymous throughout this note. The social groups and elements included in this category represent the demographic difference between the total Indian population and all those whom we have described as 'elite'. (79)

It is further emphasized that depending on the situational considerations the same class may fall under the category of dominant or dominated. "The same class or element which was dominant in one area… could be among the dominated in another." (79) This is the case with Shamsie's characters. They are dominated some times, but most of the times they are dominant. Sometimes, their fate forces them to play subaltern actors on the social stage, but mostly they spend their time in leisure, enjoying their luxurious lifestyle in their big homes and loitering and whizzing around in their brand new, expensive cars. They do not have any financial problems to bother their economically sound lives, and

this keeps them busy in their leisurely cocoons. For instance, her novel *Kartography* is placed in the troubled times of unrest, riot and ethnic divisions of 1970s and 80s, but the culprits she chose for narration are those who are shielded from the worst effects of the bloodshed going on in the country. The story of *Kartography* is the story of rich kids, born on the *right side* of the Clifton. Living in the high class enclave has made them immune to Karachi's ongoing barbarity and violence, the consequence of religious and ethnic intolerance; they sit secure in their gated society and continue enjoying their joyrides. The kids are happy even if the violence continues, 'long enough, for the exams to be cancelled' (5). If they hate the bloodshed around, it's only because the entire sports calendar is thrown into disarray. 'And they say the elite aren't affected by what's happening in the city…' (77), Raheen quips. Raheen's reductionist's view of violence happening around her in Karachi of 1990s in *Kartography,* and the lavish parties thrown by Hasan's parents by the poolside in their million-dollar home in *In the City by the Sea,* both instances indicate that elite class's one-dimensional gaze and narcissism has blinded their social consciousness regarding their responsibilities towards the lesser privileged.

Ultimately, Shamsie's historiography is incomplete. Ran Greenstein, in his essay "History and the Production of Knowledge" says that: 'History is seen as a process that allows alliances across a colonial divide, not a dichotomy between the powerful and the powerless.' (217) However, this "dichotomy between the powerful and the powerless" is evident in Shamsie's fictional narration of history. Ania Loomba, in *Colonialism/ Postcolonialism* states that, 'Colonialism' is not just something that happens from outside a country or people… but a version of it can be duplicated from within.' (12) What Shamsie depicts is a world that is divided into compartments, and is inhabited by myriad classes; however, its only one peculiar class that is the subject of Shamsie's narratives, and that is the elite class. In *Salt and Saffron*, the narrator acknowledges the diverse class dynamics in Karachi:

> … affluence and lack sat cheek by jowl in Karachi. Between the large old houses near Mohatta Palace and the smaller modern houses on Khayaban-e-Shujaat, which displayed their wealth in accessories rather than in size, was a shortcut that took you past streets where shiny cars and designer Shalwar Kameezes and English-speaking voices all but disappeared, replaced by tiny, storefronts, narrow streets crowded with people and cycles and the occasional goats, children selling vegetables or fixing tyres or chasing each other along the road without pavements. (196)

In Shamsie's novels, the protagonists English- speaking voices that wear designer shalwar kameezes and have shiny cars. They are rarely, if ever, those who run tiny stores or fix tires or sell vegetables. While reviewing *Kartography* in "Mapping Karachi's Charms and Contradictions", Zeynab Ali says: "Brushing aside assertions about her portrayal of Karachi, and consequently Pakistan, not being representative of all sections of society, Kamila pointed out that she has written about 'a very specific socio-economic class'." (6) This specific socio-economic class comprises of eminent politicians, famous painters and other party-throwing elite, and they have been wealthy for generations. See for instance the way Aliya in *Salt and Saffron* describes her Dadi's photograph in Dard-e-Dil:

> I sat cross-legged on the bed beside her, directly across from a framed photograph of Dadi and her female cousins in their childhood, all decked out in *ghararas*, with *tikas* of precious and semi-precious stones hanging over their foreheads. Three strands of pearls going over and around the girls' heads held each tear-shaped *tika* in place. I used to assume the photograph was taken during some momentous occasion, like Eid or wedding, but Dadi had told me, no, that's just how they used to dress every day. (198)

This description of her memory, I want to suggest, reproduces tropes of exotic East. The magnificent descriptions of Dard-e- Dil palace and and its residents, the mention of precious jewelry, are complicit with the project of 'Orientalism'. They play into colonialist discourses of the East as outlandish and people living in the East as self-indulgent, extravagant, ostentatious and sumptuous. Another instance of this latent orientalism is in the representation of Hasan, the eleven-year-old protagonist in *In the City by the Sea*, who enjoys his evenings at the "poolside at the club" (40). Shamsie here portrays a scene from a party that Hasan's parents are hosting by the poolside. She describes how the elite women dress:

> Saris, *pishwazes*, sleeveless *kameezes*, and some garbs that even Zehra couldn't name. Ami's *Angarkha*, worn over a *Shalwar*, was black and fell to mid-calf. Gold paisleys bordered by gold piping made a dramatic hem and played off against the gold and emerald choker around Ami's throat. (60)

Here again, like in *Salt and Saffron,* Shamsie fetishizes the Eastern jewelry worn by the upper class in a country where majority of the population is striving hard to meet ends. The novel depicts Pakistani elite as wealthy and indulgent, squandering their money in lavish pursuits and care little about the people getting annihilated in extra judicial killings and strikes. In *Kartography,* Raheen writes in answer to Karim's letter: "No until your last letter, I didn't know the right number of people reported killed in Karachi's violence so far this year. Thank you Mr. Reuters, I'm sure the dead feel much better about being dead now." (132) Shamsie hardly ever talks of that dispossessed class of her country that does not have enough to eat and wear or have sufficient shelter for a decent existence. These people are doubly marginalized, for not only are they subjects of a neo-colonial state but they are only partially represented and voiced in an elitist discourse like Shamsie's. While Shamsie's attempts at exposing the blind spots in the history of Pakistan, the picture that she represents still has gaps and fissures in it.

Those who are liquidated are the ones that are already deprived and impoverished. The brother-in-law of Hasan's watchman gets arrested in *Kartography*, because he was an ardent supporter of Salman Haq, Hasan's uncle: "'So are most people I know,' Hasan said. 'Yes', Khan acknowledged. 'In their hearts and in their drawing rooms. Besides, wealth changes things'" (108). What wealth grants is an invulnerable refuge, an impregnable fortress to hide in. In *The Colonizer and the Colonized* Albert Memmi states that: "I have often noted that the deprivations of the colonized are almost the direct result of the advantages secured to the colonizer." (10) This is applicable to the bourgeoisie and proletariat in Pakistan, where the utter disregard of those who are privileged, for the miseries of those who are under-privileged, only intensify the deprivations of the destitute.

In "PostColonial Criticism", Homi K. Bhabha opines that, '…it is from those who have suffered the sentence of history--- subjugation, domination… that we learn our most enduring lessons.' (106) However, learning is partial if the subjugated and dominated hardly ever speak in the narratives of postcolonial writing. In Shamsie's all three novels under discussion here, a persistent similarity marks the representation of working-class Pakistanis--- they are largely invisible and voiceless objects in her stories about families, domesticity, and politics. Thus, the *Mali* (gardener), Cook, *Chowkidar* (watchman) and others like them are mostly dumb and deaf. In *In the City by the Sea*, throughout the novel Hasan is unable to get acquainted with or even know the name of the new cook. 'The new cook---Atif? Asif? Arif?' (66) He is a 'new no-name cook' (58). Once asked if his name is Atif, Asif or Arif, the cook tells he is 'Aqib' (170). The irony thus lies in the very situation where Shamsie cracks a joke! This object construction, rather 'thingification'[i] of the working class is extremely problematic. These people are used by Shamsie not more than necessary artefacts in the setting of a scenario; 'the beggars dragging deformed limbs toward car window, the vendors selling smuggled goods on pavements, the fruit seller carving guavas into roses to show off the pink flesh.' (28) In an interview to Helen Brown, Shamsie claimed: 'I am writing about actual Pakistanis rather than stereotypes', however, she *has* relegated the cook, *chaukidar* and *mali* to typical stereotypical roles. Her 'actual Pakistanis' are the highbrow elites, and her subject of discussion is how they get affected by the histrionics of political drama going on around them. In an interview to Huma Khalil, Shamsie says, 'But you can't write about the social elite of Karachi without acknowledging that they are the social elite. Or without saying there is the whole other world which this tiny band is not reflective of----- or even the most important part of.' For her it is vital to acknowledge the 'social elite' than to represent the 'whole other world'. The root of the problem lies in Shamsie's inability to complicate and challenge the hackneyed group classifications of social orders and hierarchy typically used to represent South Asian societies in the colonial discourse. She is simply unable to bridge the clichéd polarities. The common man remains the common noun in her narrative, such as the Widow in *In the City by the Sea*. Although the Widow is the champion for the rights of the poor and downtrodden, she is deprived of a proper name, the very basis of one's identity. The "Garbage girl", however, has been blessed with a certain degree of self-respect and consciousness. 'One hand fisted on her hip, the other holding the book, she stared at Hasan quite at odds with his expectations of a dirty barefoot girl who scrounged through garbage.' (39) Hasan's gesture of throwing the mathematics book toward the garbage girl is quite symbolic and symptomatic. It is his incomplete but worthy attempt to get engaged with the circle of people he is completely out of touch with. However, the attempt stays incommunicado, for neither the girl accepts the offer, nor Hasan's parents approve of his kind gesture. 'Exactly what did you think you were doing? Aba asked as Hasan stepped back in the car.' (39) This elite class feels no link, what so ever, friendly or antagonistic, with other classes; theirs is an attitude of utter disregard and detachment.

In her review of *In the City by the Sea*, Fawzia Afzal Khan writes in *World Literature Today*:

> Shamsie's novel focuses on the privileged existence of its main characters--- the young prepubescent Hasan and his close relatives, who all live in neighboring homes in an upper-class part of town—not seeking so much to critique their own

> lives of indolent leisure (Hasan's lovely mother owns an art gallery and is a painter herself, the father a lawyer but at heart an etymologist, sparring witticisms and playing clever word games with his brother in law the politician as well as others), but rather to create sympathy for the intellectual and political elite class they represent. The problem with Pakistan, as viewed by this young author is not the poverty or the gap between rich and poor, or even the corruption of the elites; rather it resides in the suppression of democracy by successive military regimes. (827)

She further says:

> … the English-medium elitism of this particular cast of characters, who rarely spoke a word of Urdu or any other native vernacular, grated on my nerves. They, like Hasan (and the author by extension), seem to live in a fairy tale world of glittering parties and verbal witticisms, quite cut off from the realities confronting the majority of people in that part of the world. Shamsie seems to use myth to create a parallel universe which is meant to be more appealing and enduring than the real one; the only problem is, the appeal seems intended more for the creative writing student than for the broader audience. (828)

Shamsie does not cater for universality in the experiences that she narrates; there are plenty of dark areas which she fails to penetrate and fill up. Life and observations of elite are not the sole means to determine what happens to the people at large and through which we may understand the changes through which the common people must live. The task of recovering lost or suppressed experiences of the masses *is* the burden of a native intellectual. In *Black Skin White Masks*, Frantz Fanon writes:

> Man is human only to the extent to which he tries to impose his existence on another man in order to be recognized by him. As long as he has not been effectively recognized by the other, the other will remain the theme of his actions. It is on that other being, on recognition by that other being, that his own human worth and reality depend. It is that other being in whom the meaning of his life is condensed. (154)

All efforts, thus, should be directed towards recuperating and recovering the identity of those who are somewhere submerged in the social schema, by reclaiming them their recognition, instead of imparting them a feasible objectified identity. Object formation of a subject may distort factual into facetious and factitious. Quoting Spivak in *White Mythologies*, Robert Young writes: 'Spivak shows…that history is not simply the disinterested production of facts, but is rather a process of 'epistemic violence', an interested construction of a particular representation of an object, which may… be entirely constructed with no existence and reality outside its representation.' (158) As a vigilant reader, one must scrutinize the mechanics of representation and object construction, and should deconstruct the apparent so to fathom the real.

The word *Subaltern* has been drawn from Gramsci. He used this word as a synonym to "subordinate" and "instrument", however Spivak further enhanced the horizons of meaning, and used this word for those dominated and exploited groups who do not possess a general class consciousness. This subaltern class has been relegated to

periphery by Shamsie as their representation is strangled by her bourgeoisie-centered narration. According to Spivak: 'To ignore the subaltern is, willy nilly, to continue the imperialist project.' (159) In my opinion, Shamsie continues following the imperialist project. Bridget Byrne, in her review of the novel says that: 'The characters in the novel are members of party-throwing elite who are united by their privilege, their social circle, and their in-group language and geography.' The split between classes remain evident throughout the novel. The rich kids are not allowed to mingle with the rest of the classes, and this keeps them ignorant of the harsh realities of life. Sonia, a rich kid in *Kartography,* observes, 'We don't know the half of the things that go on. My father won't let my mother go and visit all our relatives in other parts of the town. He says there's much they'll expect us to do…' (78). Shamsie doesn't let the subaltern bubble up to the surface to show its tortured contours, and most of Shamsie's characters maintain their insufficient gaze. Frantz Fanon, in *Black Skin White Masks* says:

> …there's an absolute reciprocity which must be emphasized. It is in the degree to which I go beyond my own immediate being that I apprehend the existence of the other as a natural and more than natural reality. If I close the circuit, I prevent the accomplishment of movement in the two directions, I keep the other within myself. Ultimately, I deprive him even of this being-for-itself. (154)

To Fanon, 'the concept of recognition is essential' (155). However, this recognition factor is found lacking in majority of Shamsie's characters. A glaring Example is Raheen, who writes a letter to Karim, telling him, 'No, until your last letter, I didn't know the exact number of people reportedly killed in Karachi's violence, so far this year' (132). Although Shamsie seemingly condemns Raheens ignorance of the world she lives in, but isn't she herself doing the same by imposing silence on most subjects marked subalterns in her stories? The characters she writes about are just observers, not sufferers; they stand to look, but do not endure. None undergo any physical injury. They are not amongst those who bleed in the violence or lose near and dear ones in it. They listen to the woebegone tales of the crestfallen unfortunates, feel sorry for them and then pass by. Mini Kapoor puts it in this way: 'They can hold forth on divisive politics for hours on end, but it's the wavering timing of 'Naila, the *Malishwali*' that provide a true index of Karachi's daily disturbances.' If the *Malishwali* provides the true index of Karachi, then one may interrogate as to why she exists in limbo in Shamsie's novel. When Raheen starts a conversation with her, Naila expresses her surprise at having been addressd. 'Three years I have been coming to your house every week, and this is the first time you have asked me a question.' (198) Naila laughs away the sorrows and pain of the rich, when Raheen tells her that she was upset about her boyfriend. 'What you people need are a few real problems. Like, should I leave the house to get the medicines for my son even though I might get shot on the way?' (199) Shamsie gives Naila a moment to question Raheen: 'Why don't you ask me any question? About my life? Do you think my life is so uninteresting?' (198) Ironically, the question that Naila asks Raheen, can be equally put to Shamsie. Why did she give Naila's life only one and a half page? Was her life that much uninteresting to Shamsie? Naila's story must be more complex, intricate and convoluted than Raheen's. Subaltern here has been given voice by the author, but the underlying paradox is that the subaltern's elocution does not achieve the dialogic level of utterance. This absence of dialogue is signified by Raheen's refusal to get knowledge about Naila's life and her problems. 'What will I do with the information if I had it?'

(199) Thus Naila's locus of enunciation is peripheral and marginalized, fragile and feeble in its constitution. In *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West*, Robert Young elucidates on the silent subaltern, 'The problem is not that the woman cannot speak as such, that no records of the subject constitution of the woman exist, but that she is assigned no position of enunciation.' (164)

Young calls moment of subaltern disappearance as 'an *aporia*, a blind spot where understanding and knowledge is blocked'. (165) Does Raheen refrain from asking Naila personal questions because Naila and her situation is beyond Raheen's (and rather Shamsie's) comprehension, because Naila occupies a place where their understanding and knowledge are blocked? In an Interview with Howard Winant, Spivak talks about the subaltern's relegation to the margins: "To that extent, the subaltern is the name of that place which is so displaced from me and the organized resister, that to have it speak is like Godot arriving on a bus." The subaltern will remain a displaced place, an *aporia*, a blind spot, till the "reciprocal recognitions" (Fanon 155) will not enunciate. The disinterested position of Raheen in *Kartography* is quite controversial. She tells one of her uncles, 'I think there's nothing I can do about the situation… so why waste brain cells thinking about it'. (225) While the city is submerged in blood and gore, Shamsie's elites seem sick of their indolent lives inside their homes. While visiting some farm house, Raheen reflects: 'In Karachi we never had this freedom, this space to wander in. Too dangerous to walk around, and too humid to walk most of the times. Besides, walk to where? Life compressed into houses and cars and private clubs and schools and gardens too small to properly hide in'. (29)

Shamsie's characters care little to pry in the lives of the dispossessed and held stereotypical views about them. Raheen tells: "…refugees were still to me, little more than a hassle that streamed across the Afghan border…" (KT 73) Shamsie doesn't bother to render unstable those fixed identities of subalterns that don't speak, and she doesn't take pains to delve deep in their lives. One rare instance where we feel Shamsie's desire to articulate the view point of those who are subaltern is Raheen, Zia and Karim's meeting with the car thief in Kartography. The details about the car thief are realistic yet brazen, mixed with a kind of disgust and contempt for him. "He was wearing sneakers with his shalwar kameez. Nike. Undoubtedly fake." (KT 173) From now onwards, he becomes "fake-Nike man". (KT 174) Karim asks the man: "'Where do you think we live?' Karim said. 'Defence.' Karim laughed. 'Right. That obvious, huh?' The man nodded. 'Burgers,' he said." (KT 174) This was the term used "to refer to the English-speaking elite", (KT 175) Raheen tells. The car thief had a long story to tell. He wanted to join civil service, however he ended up as a car thief because of quota system. Only Karim shows sympathy towards him, and promises to get him some job. However, here again, the encounter between the possessed and dispossessed does not end on a positive note. Zia reprimands Karim for showing kindness towards the car thief. "'You are behaving like such a fresh-off-the-boat, Karim. Don't buy his 'I'm forced into crime because I have no options' story'." (KT 177) Raheen finds car thief petulant and muses:

> Privilege erased 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. (KT 175)

All Karim could do was force Raheen to *feel* the dichotomy in the structure of society, they could *do* nothing to erase it. And just like always, the recuperation of subaltern as a subject is left half way through and rather stays enclosed within the hegemony of dominant discourse.

Communication remains incomplete without logical transaction between the speaker and the listener. In *Glossary of key terms in the work of Gayatry Chakravorty Spivak*, the word *Subaltern* is described as follows:

> 'Subaltern' Spivak insists is not 'just a classy word for oppressed, for Other, for somebody who's not getting a piece of the pie'. She points out that in Gramci's original covert usage, it signified 'proletarian', whose voice could not be heard, being structurally written out of the capitalist bourgeoisie narrative. In post-colonial terms, 'everything that has limited or no access to the cultural imperialism is subaltern…'

Shamsie's characters keep on eclipsing subaltern presence. The repulsion they feel for the common people is enough for them to dismiss them as sordid. Raheen's intolerance for the people outside her elitist circle is obvious. As she reaches airport to pick Karim:

> A man smelling as I imagined the inside of a local bus would smell, tried to elbow me aside so that he could secure a spot right against the barrier, and I wondered how to push him away without actually making any physical contact with him. (KT 156)

Her vain *imaginations* are ample for her to construct stereotypes. Zia's geographical ignorance of the city he lives in doesn't let him leap the class barriers. He tells Raheen about Sonia: "Her father's gone mad, wont let her out of the house because he knows someone who died recently in Korangi or Orangi or some such area." (KT 62)

Karim, who retains better sanity than his other pals, and keeps more knowledge of Karachi than any of them, when comes back from abroad keeps himself busy in mapping Karachi's roads than having any original moments of transaction with the lower class. The only good he could do to someone was proposing marriage to Sonia, who according to this elite clan was "just not like us" (KT 80), and belonged to a conservative and *nouveau riche* class. Raheen tells:

> Sonia's family was the most 'not like us' of all because none of our parents knew her parents, none of our cousins were married to her cousins, none of our uncles had done business with her uncles. So naturally everyone concluded that it was shady, very shady, dealings that had enabled her father to move his family to the poshest part of the town, enroll his daughter in the most elite school of the nation… (KT 80)

Ania Loomba, in *Colonialism/ Post colonialism* says: "Human subjects are not fixed essences, but are discursively constituted. Human identities and subjectivities are shifting and fragmentary."[30] Human identity is thus not a transcendental, pregiven entity, but is in a state of constant flux. This is what Shamsie asserts when she states that "class is a fluid concept". (SS 184) Hailing from an elite class, Shamsie's protagonist in *Salt and Saffron*, Aliya, has more qualms about the in-built class barriers and biases than any of the characters in *Kartography*. During her search for her feudal and aristocratic roots, Aliya falls in love with Khalil, a *cool guy* from the slums of Karachi. The whole novel revolves around the theme as to how two people from antithetical backgrounds could be weld together. Aliya, as the family myth goes, is destined to bring bad luck to her family, and this bad luck might embody Aliya's marriage into an inferior class. While thinking this through, Aliya tries to deconstruct her family's aversion towards the lower classes and concludes:

> I think our family's attitude towards the *nouveau riche* is another symptom of fear. We are uncomfortable around them because they remind us that class is fluid; the Mushtaq parents may be considered *nouveau riche* but their kids are being sent to finishing school to acquire polish and within a generation they'll marry into a respectable but no-longer-rich families, and they'll start turning up their own noses at the *nouveau rich.* This reminds us that status is not permanent; as the Mushtaq rise, someone else will fall, and that someone might be us. (184)

Nearly the same thing Sonia tells Raheen about her father's success and the jealousy of others for him in *Kartography*: "He's richer and more successful than any of your lot with your old money and your generations-old friendships with the high and mighty." (221) Sonia thought this was the reason that others with "old money" and contacts were afraid of him. If anyone can climb up or down the social ladder, then why can't these class barriers be broken? According to Ania Loomba: 'Power does not emanate from some central or hierarchical structure but flows through society in a sort of capillary action.' (41) Power may then flow over to anyone at any time. Loomba refers to Foucault who says that power "is a part of daily action, speech and everyday life" (50), however the dilemma of our society is that the one who grabs power once thinks it to be his property all alone. He then does not cower from asserting this power on others through *daily action, speech and everyday life* through all unfair means. This thus becomes the major source of violence and corruption in a society.

According to Ania Loomba in "Situating Colonial and Postcolonial Studies": 'Human beings internalize the systems of repression and reproduce them by conforming to certain ideas of what is normal and what is deviant.' (41) To Aliya's family what Maryam did was totally deviant and against the family values. She had married a cook! In doing this, she perhaps tried to avenge for her family's disregard for the downtrodden or those who didn't share their royal lineage. Maryam is the silent character of the novel, who rarely ever spoke, and if she ever did, it was only to the cook. Her entry into the family was quite elegant yet covertly mysterious. According to Aliya's friend, Maryam was, "Our likeable but flawed heroine", who: "Walks out from her elite neighborhood and…she notices the poverty in other parts of the city for the first time--- No! She feels empathy for the first time---and she turns her back on her life of privilege and dedicates her days

to helping the needy." (182) Let's assume, that it's the correct version of the story and Maryam really marries the cook, because helping the needy is her only end, then the consequences of this generous gesture are no worse than her expulsion from her *noble* tribe. After she leaves, she is accused by her clan that, "For some reason, she's just attracted to that type." (128) Her marriage is regarded as a grave transgression from the blue-blooded propensity and result of wickedness of character; it is a *stigma* to the family's honor. Everyone in the family holds strange views about her silence, about her strange entry and mysterious departure. However, the only missing point of view is that of Maryam's own. Can we regard her as the silent subaltern who has thousands to speak for but in their re-presentations she speaks not! Neelam Hussain, in "Women as Objects and Women as Subjects within the Fundamental Discourse" tells:

> To be the object of another's discourse is to suffer an erasure, for representation can only be of that which is not there. The 'real' is displaced by the image, the signified by the signifier. As a result, the recognition of the object is based on the connotation or meaning conveyed by and inherent in the signifier. The disjunction between the two is glossed over by the image and metaphor which define the object of representation. As these come replete with pre-given meaning, carrying the weight of time and history, to stand in for that which they represent, they are part of the process which reduce and transform it into another entity. (108)

The unjust allegations on Maryam thus reduce her to an entirely disparate entity than the one she might really possess. Her reality thus *suffers an erasure* at the hands of multifarious opinions passed on her character. However, to Sameer and Aliya, her silences were pregnant with a potent message. She spoke in her silence. Aliya tells Sameer:

> So her silence was a subversion… You think Maryam's silence was a protest against the prejudice built into language? That's why even when she did speak, it wasn't to the elite. She only spoke to Masood to order meals and even then--- Did you ever notice this? ---She spoke in questions, not in imperatives. She'd say, '*Bhujia? Koftas? Pulao?'* Basically she was under cutting the whole employer-servant paradigm. (214)

Shamsie has allowed Maryam not only some dialogic space but also the space that Spivak calls, Ethical responsibility/ Ethical singularity. The term has been described thus:

> It signifies not only the act of response which completes the transaction of speaker and listener, but also the ethical stance of making discursive room for the Other to exist. In other words 'ethics are not just a problem of knowledge but a call to a relationship.' (Introduction to *The Spivak Reader*) The ideal relationship is individual and intimate…The ideal relationship to the other is an 'embrace, an act of love' (ibid) Such an embrace may be unrequited, as the differences and distances are too great, but if we are ever to get beyond the vicious circle of abuse, it is essential to remain open-hearted; not to attempt to recreate the Other narcissistically, in one's own image, but generously, with care and attention.

Shamsie has carved the character of Maryam with attention and care. She has let her enjoy *room to exist* in her own way. To a certain extent, Maryam is blessed with the transaction between the listener and the speaker. She will be embraced in an act of love if she would go back to Sameer and Aliya. But what about the cook she married? Will he always remain an outcast in the family of aristocrats he married in? His presence is mitigated to the periphery of the whole discourse. This reminds one of Strindberg's cook in his play *Miss Julie*. The cook there although played his part to the fullest in sleeping with his mistress, but throughout the play, he vociferates his concerns. But the cook in Shamsie's novel is deplorably caught in the *vicious circle of abuse*. In his essay 'Representing the colonized' Edward Said writes:

> It was only when subaltern figures like women, Orientals, blacks and other 'natives' made noise that they were paid attention to, and asked in, so to speak. Before that they were more or less ignored like the servants in nineteenth-century novels, there, but unaccounted for except as a useful part of the setting. To convert them into topics of discussion or fields of research is necessarily to change them into something fundamentally and constitutively different. And so the paradox remains. (298)

Shamsie retains the paradox. Masood is there only because he serves as a useful part of the setting. He is never much talked to so to be explored as a person, he is never asked a question other than food, because he is not thought worthy of that by the author. However, it is shown that he is conscious of the class he belongs to. As Aliya offers him a ride to market, he refuses to sit beside her by silently leaving the place. (187) Edward Said, in "Representing the Colonized" uses a term "interlocutor", which he tells is "…someone who… simply refuses to talk, deciding that only a radically antagonistic, perhaps violent riposte is the only interlocution that is possible with colonial power." (298) If not subalterns, then Mariam and Masood are *interlocutors*, as both undermine the importance of dialogue with the elite, rather because both of them thought it to be fruitless and futile. Instead they tried to change the yardsticks of nobility in the society silently but through potent action, even if it was to get married!

The representation of social change, or its potential, is then limited in the narratives Shamsie offers. These *interlocutors* tried to bring change in society in their own peculiar ways. But the change perhaps can never come. Even Aliya, the most unbiased of all in the novel, cannot continue to sympathize with Maryam and Masood when she hears of their marriage:

> I had felt something other than shock. When Aba told me she'd eloped, I felt humiliation. Also anger. Worse, I felt disgust. *She's having sex with a servant.* Those words exactly flashed through my mind. Not Masood; just a servant… so much easier to say that in slapping Dadi I proved I did not think like her.
>
> I felt a terrible emotion, too complicated for a mono-syllable, well up inside me. I cried out, 'But Dadi, at the end of the day, can't we at least hope to be better than ourselves!'
>
> 'What we are, we are.' (113)

Is Shamsie suggesting that these hierarchical paradigms will never end? Is she also suggesting that blue blood will always remain blue and nobility lies in genes? Is nobility hereditary and can never be exchanged for it is untransmutable? The lower classes, the oppressed and subjugated will always remain marginalized, for it is written in their fate? I feel that if she denotes that, then it is just an irrational bias and prejudice. In *Black Skin, White Masks,* Fanon quotes Sir Alan Burns, who while discussing prejudice said that: "It is nothing more than the unreasoning hatred of one race for another, the contempt of the stronger and the richer peoples for those whom they consider inferior to themselves." (16)

A new identity is fabricated for Maryam after she is married to Masood. She's now called the "whore" (112), by those who thought that she blemished the family's honor. Aliya thinks: '…if Maryam has a daughter… you'll never be able to forget that her father was a servant.' (112) It, thus, seems that biological pecking order prevents the adjoining of diverse class dynamics. Frantz Fanon, while talking about the Negro's status in society, says in "Fact of Blackness":

> The Negro is a human being. That is to say… that like us he has his heart on the left side. But on certain points the white man remained intractable. Under no condition *did* he wish any intimacy between the races, for it is a truism that crossings between widely different races can lower the physical and mental level… Until we have more definite knowledge of the effect of race-crossings, we shall certainly do best to avoid crossings between widely different races. (85)

What Fanon states is relevant to the contemporary social scenario, where the lower classes have been relegated to the status of Black men versus White man. However, the contenders here include bourgeoisie and the proletariat. According to bell hooks, third world elites have absorbed "white supremacist thinking" and are "not likely to produce libratory theory that will challenge racist domination, or promote a breakdown in traditional ways of seeing and thinking about reality". (364) The increasing class divisions have silenced the critical voice of the marginalized in the elitist discourse. They appear as objects for a moment and then disappear as the scene ends and no more demands their presence. In *Salt and Saffron* Aliya notes:

> Sameer waved away the young boy who had darted in the middle of the road to wipe the civic's windscreen at the red light. The boy ignored Sameer and wiped vigorously with a dirty cloth, leaving streaks of grease on the windscreen. Sameer rolled down the window and yelled at the boy, who darted around to my side and wiped with more vigor. I picked up two-rupee note lying, half torn, by my foot and handed it to him just as the light changed. (90)

Thus Aliya triumphantly stands in the position of claiming her empathy with the poor:

> It's not that we *can't* empathize with those on the lower rungs of society; the problem is we *can*. We can imagine what it feels like to be so deprived, and it's our fear that we could, or our children could, end up like that which keeps our

> distance from the have-nots. Because at a distance we don't have to think about it. (183)

To Shamsie, it is true that the rich are snobs, but their "snobbery is based on fear", "Fear of squalor. Fear of being entirely powerless, entirely overlooked" as she writes in *Salt and Saffron* (183). But is such a fear justified? Here we may sense the rebellious streak in Aliya, who thinks that, 'just because a thing has always been so, it does not always have to be so' (193). To prove this, she falls in love with Khalil, so to negate the age-old norms and so-called values of her family. However, this love poses a big challenge to Aliya as Khalil belongs to the poor part of the city, where "the lower classes, the not-us" (31) live, and much as Aliya tries to console herself, the fact is bitter and cannot change. She almost wishes: "Liaquatabad had to be a lie. He'd said it just to test me. He'd talk to Baji and Samia just a few minutes before they'd ferret out names of his relatives who were known to our family, either pre- or post-Partition. May be it would turn out he was somehow distantly related to us." (135)

However, the situation is not that adverse. Shamsie lessens the *gravity of the situation* in *Salt and Saffron* by carving Khalil into a stereotypical, hackneyed mode of a handsome Hindi film hero, more tolerable to the cultured tastes of the highbrow. Khalil is an America based brat, a "Green card" holder (31) and hardly knows anything about Pakistan or Karachi. He is almost an American, speaks fluent English, and most of all quotes Eliot and Yeats in his conversation. Having spent all his life in America, he is no more "Khalil", but "Cal" (29). Thus he is impeccably delineated by Shamsie into a stereotypical mode of an idealized version of a romantic film hero. In "Women as Objects and Woman as Subjects within Fundamental Discourse", Neelam Hussain states that "stereotype is a form of dominance and a means of preserving the status quo" (9). In this representation of Khalil, Shamsie contributes to the maintenance of the status quo. Seen this way, representation is a deeply political act and an accomplice in the politics of difference and assimilation. Whenever it may suit an author, he or she can represent and register a subject as heterogeneous or homogeneous to the standard of normality so to gratify his/her stipulated agenda.

The stereotypical mock-up of Khalil reminds one of Macaulay's "class of interpreters" (1958, 49), who had to be English in taste intellect and feelings, indeed in everything but blood. Such are the men called "mimic men" by Jaques Lacan and subsequently by Homi Bhaba. Indeed, most of Shamsie's characters are "mimic men", for they are more westernized than expected. Shamsie's protagonists keep on moving between London, America and Pakistan. Majority of Shamsie's elite lot in the novels is doing, or is offered a respectable job abroad. Sameer doesn't want to turn down an offer from Hong Kong because it would be "professional suicide" and because "there are days I just want to get away from inefficiency, the violence, the corruption" (92) of Pakistan, as says a character in *Salt and Saffron*. So, for him, instead of facing and trying to change the worse, it is better to run away. (How many of us have such choices?) They all are English in their tastes, for they drink wine (Zia in *Kartography*, 248), quote English poetry, girls get dressed up in jeans (Aliya in *Salt and Saffron*, 213). In *Salt and Saffron*, Khalil is dismissed by Samia, as "his Karachi relatives" English is weak, they've never left the country and they believe in joint family system (190). Even the grandmothers of the family are well versed in Eliot's poetry (One of the old ladies from India refers to

Prufrock in *Salt and Saffron*, 27). Thus English Language, Literature and ways have been thoroughly absorbed by these people. Such absorption has been called “appropriation mimesis” by Rene` Gerard, whose basic goal is to control “reality” through representational discourse (13). While reflecting on “appropriation mimesis”, Patrick Imbert writes:

> The appropriation mimesis is directed towards the possession of an object and the assertion of power, and is filled with passion and violence. It operates between two persons or groups behaving as doubles in their endeavor to triumph one over another. The power is grounded in the desire to control what is presented as external to discourse. (Imbert, 2007)

Through appropriation mimesis, Shamsie’s mimic men control the dispossessed, as they appear in stark contrast and almost eclipse those who are external to Shamsie’s discourse; thus they appear dominant and powerful than those who sometimes appear at the margins and periphery. In *Salt and Saffron*, just as Aliya told that “snobbery is based on fear” (183), mimicry also originates from a fear of rejection and from a yearning to appear similar, to assimilate in those who are thought superior. However, as Bhaba tells, one mimics at the risk of appearing “almost the same, but not quite” (2001, 381) thus putting one’s integrity of identity at stake. According to Lacan: “The effect of mimicry is camouflage…It is not a question of harmonizing with the background, but against a mottled background, of becoming mottled…” (380). This mimicry emerges as a desire, “desire for a reformed recognizable Other” (381) and a desire to appear different from common masses. This desire makes the desirable identical to Fanon’s Black men who had worn white masks, the upwardly mobile and educated Blacks, who, as a result of inferiority complex, try to appropriate the cultural code of the former colonizer, as they can afford all the trappings of White culture. Most of Shamsie’s characters fall into this category, except one. In *Salt and Saffron*, Aliya quotes the letter of her grandfather who had refused to fall prey to mimicry. The letter goes like this:

> My brothers, we were born the year after the Jalianwalla massacre. Think of this when you are strolling down the paths in Oxford, studying how to be Englishmen and do well in the world I lack your gift of erasing, nay! evading history. The writing of this letter is the last thing I do, before entering into the employ of an English army officer, as a valet. I have accepted my historical role, and when you return from Oxford and take your positions in the ICS or in English-run companies the only real difference between us will be that I am required to wear grander uniform. You will not hear from me again for I am repudiating English and alas! Those days of English schooling have robbed me of the ability to write Urdu… Akbar, Sulaiman, we are kites that have had their strings snipped. We went to school in a place without sun, and believed this meant we had no need of our shadows. I am not an English man, nor are you. Nor can we ever be, regardless of our foxtrots, our straight bats, our Jolly Goods and I Says.
>
> No more Anglicized Percy, I. (24)

Taimur can be compared to Ralph Singh in Naipaul’s *The Mimic Men*, who said that: “we pretended to be real, to be preparing ourselves for life, we mimic men of the New World,

one unknown corner of it…" (1967, 146). Both Ralph Singh and Taimur recognize the futility of a life of mimicry. They know that this way, the desire to emerge as authentic can never be realized, for a mimic man is destined to have a partial and imperfect reality, because "Mimicry *repeats* rather than *represents*" as Bhaba puts it (383). However, Shamsie shows that Taimur's actions posed him grave repercussions, and the moral we may deduce from his subsequent fate is *once a valet always a valet*, as the husband material that Taimur's daughter chose for herself belonged to the same rank. One may then deduce from Shamsie's depiction, that she seems not to encourage Taimur's seemingly idiosyncratic notions.

According to Fanon, the juxtaposition of races and classes has created "massive psycho-existential complex" (1970, 11). He further says: "Man is what brings society into being. The prognosis is in the hands of those who are willing to get rid of the worm-eaten roots of structure" (10). A mimic man can hardly anticipate and emend the prognosis, for how one who has lost his cultural originality in his desire to adopt a *superior* culture can save the worm-eaten roots of his native land. "Zia was in New York, working with an investment bank, Nadia was in London on an extended holiday…twins were on the west coast of America… Cyrus had joined a multinational in Karachi, primarily so that he could get a foreign posting within a couple of years…", writes Shamsie in *Kartography* (321). In this massive brain drain from the country, few are left back to support the worm-eaten roots of the country. Raheen's these friends belong to that aristocracy, who only come back to their country to overtake those positions of dominance which were once enjoyed by the colonial powers that ruled this part of the continent. This native bourgeoisie does no good to the nation. Neither the place of dominance change nor the fate of the masses, what change is only the face of the dominant. This is what Aliya, in *Salt and Saffron*, reasserts in a conversation with a land lord, who had come from America to claim his empathy with the poor of Pakistan. She says:

> 'The National assembly is teeming with the landowners. Both at the government and the opposition benches. And incidently, in all your talkof the largesse you provide to these benighted souls, you never mentioned education.' Masood so often said he wanted to learn to read and write English, and I never ever offered to teach him. Worse, the few scraps of English I threw in his direction were worthless words such as 'thyme'. (150)

Aliya, thus, accuses and regards herself an accomplice in the venture of overlooking the plight of the proletariat. However, here again the subaltern does not speak, but is spoken for! Neelam Hussain in "Women as Objects and Woman as Subjects within Fundamental Discourse" writes that: "…to designate a human subject as an object in another's discourse then, is to establish a form of dominance over another. It is an act of violent appropriation that claims for the 'speaking' voice, which by its designation as such is also the voice of power, an inherent right to speak for all other voices" (108).

Although Shamsie reveals, rewrites and exposes the blind spots in the history of her country, her narrative representation of Pakistani historiography is still deficient in its composition, because invisible and passive figures within the blind spots remain obscure even here. While discussing the tragedy of 12th May, 2007, in Karachi, Zubaida Mustafa writes in *Dawn*: "Our historian will have to belong to the subaltern school of studies to

write about Saeeda, the veiled woman, who came to the peace initiative to recall in tearful tones the sad tale of her brother…" (Mustafa, 2007).

Is it impossible for a writer to cater for a class that he/she does not belong to? Instead of promoting exclusively "subalternism" or "elitism", what seems more important is the need, for intellectuals who write, to focus on connections, and to think of strategies to build links between diverse classes of society. To feel this connection and linkage with the rest of the classes in the society, the privileged need to unlearn their privilege as their loss. In *In the City by the Sea*, Zehra, after listening to Hasan's story about the garbage girl, tells him: "The girl you saw on the road yesterday… I would have envied her for being able to leave home and walk through the streets. You have to be male or poor to do that." (46)

Thus privilege breeds provincialism, as Spivak observed. In *Glossary of key terms in the work of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak*, Michael Kilburn (1996) writes[ii] about Spivak's theorization of subalternity that:

> As Audrey Hepburn demonstrated in 'Roman Holiday', privilege is also a kind of insularity which cuts off the privileged from certain kind of 'other' knowledge. One should strive to recognize these limitations and overcome them, not as a magnanimous gesture of inclusion, but simply for the increase of knowledge. The way to do this is by working critically through ones beliefs, prejudices and assumptions and understanding how they arose and became naturalized.
>
> What we are asking is that the holders of hegemonic discourse should de-hegemonize their position and themselves learn how to occupy the subject position of the other.

Only stepping down from an assumed pedestal may give an access to wider perspectives and broader view points. Emancipation of an elitist discourse lies in recognizing and overcoming its limitations and in trying to bridge its deficiencies. As Spivak argues, a silent subaltern can only speak, if a native intellectual tries "to learn to speak to (rather than listen to or speak for) the historically muted subject of the non-elite" (Spivak, 91). Only then the de-hegemonization of an elitist and hegemonic discourse may take place.