

History, Archaeology and War in Kamila Shamsie's *A God in Every Stone*

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Abstract

A God in Every Stone (2014), a novel by Kamila Shamsie that documents history from 515 BC to 1930. The author successfully amalgamates the ancient history with the modern history of Indian Freedom Fighting Movement and the Partition of India and Pakistan. The narrative enables the readers to peep into the history of Persian King, Darius I and Scylax, the great explorer. It also gives the record of the World War I, Indian Freedom Fighting Movement, Civil Disobedience and the practice of non-violence. Shamsie introduces the various historical characters like Herodotus, Scylax, Alexander the Great, Gaffar Khan and Gandhi. Shamsie narrates the major historical events. She captures the history very minutely. The present research paper attempts to examine Shamsie's skill of intertwining historical instances with fiction. Her lucid narrative makes the readers to visualize and sense the historical events. The paper also attempts to study the historical facts uncovered by Kamila Shamsie in her highly praised novel, *A God in Every Stone*. The novel encompasses history from ancient times to the unrest of mid twentieth century in India.

KEYWORDS: History, World War I, Freedom Fight

History usually mentions an account of the ancient of human civilizations. Kamila Shamsie in her novel, *A God in Every Stone* (2014) beautifully revives the past that plays a very significant role in the lives of every character. Her novel is a product of systematic historical research based on the systematic and objective location, evaluation and amalgamation of evidence in order to set facts and draw conclusions about past events. She dexterously puts the idea after examining the past events. Kamila Shamsie's *A God in Every Stone* chronicles the saga of two Pashtun brothers—Qayyum Gul and Najeeb Gul—during the pre-Independent India that uncovers the history, multiple journeys and cultures beneath the veneer of society, communities and people in variant places. Secondly, it also deals with a British archaeologist, Vivian Rose Spencer and her adventures with history and places. The novel encompasses varied references from history, people with different nationalities, their mobility and the culture they represent. The novel begins in ancient Caria including the site of Labraunda, situated in present day Turkey. The novel delves deeply with the theme of history, migration and culture as the subjects in the narrative exhibit largely these issues as the writing progresses. Kamila portrays Peshawar and its history in this novel. Thus, Peshawar becomes the centre of every activity. The first page of the novel deals with a quotation from *The Histories* by Herodotus that explicates the importance of history, stating:

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)

This citation in the opening page of the novel draws the readers towards history of ancient Caria of 515 BC, of ancient civilization, myths and ancient historian, Herodotus, Persian king Darius I, Scylax and the ancient mythological Greek gods. Shamsie opens her novel with history of Greek characters to draw the readers towards the theme of history which gives the brilliant record of multiple journeys and cultures.

Further, Book I, of the novel captioned, “FOR KING AND COUNTRY” deals with instances of ancient Caria, exhibiting the navigations of Scylax, the barbarian adventurer navigated the mighty Indus. Scylax is the Commander-in-chief of Darius who sets for adventure in history. This instance touches upon the areas of history of 515 BC. Kamila Shamsie opens her narrative deliberately with the ancient times as her characters are archaeologists who excavate history along with their adventures in ancient remnants.

Further, Vivian Rose Spenser, an archaeologist from London, with the permission of her father moves on to her adventures to excavate Labraunda along with her father’s friend, Tahsin Bey, a Turkish archeologist. Kamila Shamsie shifts her narrative from ancient history to another important historical happening- the World War I, with a caption, “July-August 1914” which makes aware the readers about the time and significance of history. Shamsie’s character, Vivian Rose Spenser traverses from London to Labraunda for her love for archaeology and excavation. Kamila also introduces Tahsin Bey as a senior archaeologist from Turkey who is also on the trip to excavate the Cirlet of Scylax at Labraunda. He is known for his skills of converting instances from history into stories. Both Tahsin and Vivian migrate from place to place uncovering facts from history. Tahsin traces the history of ancient and mythological characters at Labraunda. Shamsie narrates the history of Carian forces and the valor of King Darius and also Alexander, the Great. She also touches upon the mythological characters like Amazon queen and Zeus. She says:

Here, the Carian forces fled after losing a battle against the might of Darius’ Persians; here, the architects of the Mausoleum, that wonder of the world, honed their craft; here, Alexander came to see the mighty two-headed axe of the Amazon queen held aloft by the statue of Zeus. (Shamsie 10)

Gradually, Kamila introduces how Vivian and Tahsin Bey move from place to place for their passion for history. This also touches the nomadic aspect of their personality. *A God in Every Stone* uncovers history, past, space and itineraries of time and subjects. Shamsie’s characters dig the ruins of the temple complex and transgress into past. They attempt to study history through the tombs, inscriptions and the old coins.

The author through the narrative of Tahsin Bey portrays historical events in a story form. The narration is so dramatic and picturesque that the readers can visualize the events from history. Tahsin Bey exhibits vivid description of the ancient warriors. Kamila projects Tahsin Bey as, “The storyteller of the Ancients. In her first clear memory of talking to him he had told her he was from Anatolia – ancient Caria – like Herodotus the father of History and Scylax the Great Explorer.” (Shamsie 17) He narrates the warfare of Carian army that returns to the Temple of Labraunda after losing the war. This instance is from 515 BC narrated artistically by Tahsin Bey. The instance comes to life from history as Bey chronicles:

The remnants of the Carian army. Listen – you can hear their weary footsteps as they drag themselves and their wounded brothers up the Sacred Way to the Temple of Labraunda. It isn’t the physical wounds that make their steps falter

– it is failure. This morning they were men of a vast empire, ready to cut through the chains that bind them to their Persian overloads. Now they are a tattered, spent force – not one of them hasn't lost someone he loves to a Persian sword. They go now, limping past us, towards the Temple of Zeus. . . no, Mehmet, not that one. . . their hearts filled with either sorrow or rage towards the god who has deserted them. (Shamsie 17)

A God in Every Stone chronicles instances from history and from the Greek times. Vivian Rose Spencer and Tahsin Bey bring to light facts from history and at the same time they not only migrate from their homeland to Peshawar but also they transgress into past through their discoveries. Vivian Rose finds out the Temple of Zeus which throws light upon Greek history. In a way, they also attempt to trace culture of the past along with history.

Tahsin Bey is from the land of Herodotus and as Herodotus was a historiographer, Tahsin maintains the tradition. The characters of Herodotus, Scylax and Tahsin represent an amalgamation of history, culture and migration. Tahsin Bey is interested in finding the Circlet of Scylax, the Greek explorer. This circlet was given to Scylax by his king, Darius I. Though Scylax was very trusted courtier of the king, Scylax prefers to rebel against all the injustice done by Darius on the Persians. These facts are never mentioned by Herodotus in history. It is Tahsin who uncovers these instances to Vivian. Kamila chronicles:

Let me tell you the part Herodotus never mentioned, Vivian Rose: Darius so trusted Scylax he gave him a silver circlet fashioned with figs – a mark of the highest honour. But twenty years later when Scylax' people, the Carians, rebelled against Darius' Persians, Scylax was on the side of his countrymen, not his emperor. (Shamsie 23)

Through archaeology and the archaeologists the author takes the liberty to switch over to ancient history and come back to the present like pendulum. Throughout the day they engage into the activity of digging the relics, with an attempt to uncover histories. Every summer they leave their homes and migrate to Shahji-ki-Dheri at Peshawar. As the work for summer gets over, these archeologists move back to their respective homes and homelands.

Kamila brings about a galaxy of historical figures right from the Roman, Greek kings, rulers and historiographers till the freedom fighters and the leader in the Civil Disobedience in colonial India. Her narrative envelops histories, nations, places, scholars and leaders. RajenderKaur in her scholarly article opines:

A God in Every Stone examines the underside of empire through the lens of the intimate and the personal, ambitiously telescoping wide swathes of time and space from the Achaemenid empire in the time of Darius I in the fifth century BCE to British colonial rule in India in the early twentieth century. Herodotus, Odysseus, Alexander, Darius I, Scylax, Chandragupta Maurya, Gandhi, and Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan: these are but a few of the names mentioned in this sweeping tale spanning centuries, connecting India and the West. (RajenderKaur 2)

Kamila Shamsie showcases how Tahsin Bey and Viv engage themselves in an array of topics apart from the excavation. On the site, they talk about Scylax and Herodotus, Darius and the ancient Greek history. They also talk of Alexander the Great, his voyage to India through the Indus. But as the dig gets over, their topics for discussion shift to topics other than Labraunda. They talk of subjects overlapping from history, religion, art, stones and birds. The variations in discussion also explicate

a mixture of history, various disciplines, times and culture. Kamila states, "...but as they rode she saw there was nothing he didn't hold in his mind – the story of every ancient stone, the calls of individual birds, the plays and sonnets of Shakespeare, the overlap and contrasts of the Bible and Qur'an, the history of the tango." (Shamsie 26)

The third chapter entitled 'January-June 1915' exhibits the instances of World War I and it's the darker side as the soldiers in hospitals are ill-treated. Vivian Rose facilitates the nation by working as a nurse. The soldiers in VAD hospital in London discuss joyfully their deformed identities as one of the soldiers has lost a leg, the other, his right hand and the third, his eye. The German army encroaches everywhere, and, Indian soldiers are used by the colonial rule to fight back the Germans. Vivian Rose Spencer works to assist humanity by nursing the soldiers. Voluntarily she works to prove to her father that she is as good as his son. Shamsie underlines the hardships of the nurses during the World War I through the voluntary services of Vivian Rose who prefers to serve humanity during the war. Vivian also helps the officers by providing the information which Tahsin Bey shared with her regarding his real identity as an Armenian.

Kamila explicates the forced migration of Indian soldiers as the British rule forces them to take part voluntarily in World War I. Indian soldiers fight with valor and enthusiasm for their ruler. 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. 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 run, they fight our wars with as much fervour as any Englishman would do. (Shamsie 40)

History of the common men and common soldiers who die on the front is never reflected in any official records of any nation. On the other hand, history is written by elite class that is about elitism. Every nation is governed by the elites. The soldiers and commons never get any space in the books of history. "But the world has changed beyond all recognition now . . . Every day, the numbers killed or maimed." (Shamsie 42)

Vivian works as an archaeologist with her connectivity with the past. She uncovers history from the relics and attempts to feel the ancient world along with the objects of history. She feels, 'ancient words imprinted on her palm.' As an archaeologist she knows the importance and pains of war. A war, for her is making of history or history in process. She witnesses how war creates blemishes in history. The certainties of life due to political decisions are universal phenomena. The common soldiers do not know the details of war. Sometimes, they do not speak anything about the war, though they know the facts. The discussion between Vivian and her father throws light upon the darker side of the World War I and history as well. The writer knows how media is coerced and intellects in the society are abducted. Atrocities are forced on social intellectual class and media by governments during war. This act never gets any space in history. Kamila observes:

"This soldier refuses to speak of the war today. Except for this."

"From her pocket she pulled out a column of newsprint, carefully folded, and watched as he read the account of Armenian intellectuals in Turkey rounded up and deported. The article had no information about what happened to them but said the worst was feared." (Shamsie 45)

Gradually, Kamila intertwines the colorful threads of ancient history, modern history in making, objects from history through excavation, the World War I and the migration of archaeologists to trace the footprints of history and cultures of these varied times, populations and nationalities. The place Shahji-Ki-Dheri provides the material for uncovering history. The archaeologists across the world reach Peshawar during the unrest of the World War I. Tahsin Bey migrates temporarily to Peshawar to see the Sacred Casket of Kanishka. This casket not only throws light upon the Kanishka dynasty but it uncovers the culture of the Kanishka clan regarding Buddha and Buddhist philosophy. Further, these archaeologists go back into the history and trace the history of Peshawar. In ancient times, Caspatyrus was the name for Peshawar. It is the land of mountains, men, flowers, figs, adventures and history. The author traces the change in the name of Peshawar from time to time. She says:

“Caspatyrus, Paruparaesanna, Paropamisadae, Gandhara, Parasapur, Purashapura, Po-lu-sha-pu-lo, Fo-lu-sha, Farshabur, Peshawar.”(Shamsie 49)

The archaeologists in Peshawar unearth the history. They are interested to dig out evidences of history through the objects they discover. They select Peshawar as Peshawar has, “Two and a half thousand years of history beneath its soil.” (Shamsie 52) Vivian goes along with other archaeologists to Peshawar for her studies.

‘April 1915’ is a chapter that deals with the warfare at Vipers. It is an instance of Indian Muslim soldiers – Kalam Khan and Qayyum Gul – the friends on the war front. On the one hand, they celebrate their friendship and on the other they fight war for the British rule. Both are soldiers in 40th Pathans, the regiment that holds soldiers from varied communities of India- Pathans, Punjabis, Dogras and Pashtuns. Qayyum Gul loses his right eye. He is an Indian soldier wounded in warfare but he does not know where he is brought to. Kamila vocalizes the plight of Indian soldiers who fought with valor and patriotism in alien lands against alien enemies without knowing the reason. It is the Imperial Rule that posts them at various fronts to fight war. They succumb to injuries and die sometimes. This sacrifice by the Indian uncelebrated soldiers who do not get any space in the books of history, get space in Shamsie’s narrative, *A God in Every Stone*. RajenderKaur observes:

A God in Every Stone is nicely timed. Published in the centenary year of World War I, which is currently being commemorated widely across Europe, and especially in Britain, it participates in revaluations of the ‘Great War’ by addressing more than a few of the blind spots in the collective memory of the British by foregrounding the heavy toll paid by thousands of Indian soldiers who fought for the Allied cause as part of the British empire. Shamsie underscores the grand irony of these humble soldiers, most from peasant backgrounds with little education, laying down their lives in distant Europe for a foreign cause they scarcely understood. (RajenderKaur 2)

Kamila also comments upon the restrictions that a war brings. The brave soldiers who when wounded are restricted on their beds. Even they cry and weep. Kamila Shamsie satirizes the hypocrisy of the Colonizers as the Colonizers utilize the army from India to fight against the Muslims in France. On the one hand, the Muslim soldiers are in the service of the British Rule, and on the other hand, they are against their own sect and religion. They either withdraw from the battlefield, and return to their homeland, or prefer to die in jails at the hands of British.

World War I becomes one of the major reasons for forced migration. It forces soldiers to scatter in different parts of the world without their will and wish. Further, they are restricted in their activities in the hospitals due to injuries. Further, Kamila

notes how Indian soldiers are captivated and they are put as prisoners. When Qayyum wants to meet Kalam, he is prohibited. One of the prisoners states, “We are prisoners here. You will make it worse for your friend.” (Shamsie 77) Eventually, Qayyum returns to India from Britain without meeting Kalam as his treatment gets completed.

Kamila Shamsie interlinks history with migration and culture. She selects characters from different historical time- Herodotus, Scylax, Alexander and Asoka who are mobile, adventurous and who add to history. Similarly, Tahsin Bey, Vivian Spencer and Qayyum Gul represent different nationalities, cultural backgrounds, adventures and linguistic identities. Vivian states that Herodotus was a Carian and not a Greek. For the places wherever these great historical persons belonged, people claimed their linkage with these people. Archaeologists find the influence of Greek figures in different parts of the world.

A God in Every Stone deals primarily with the instances of events from history through the remains in Peshawar. Vivian Spencer uncovers the history of the Kanishka dynasty. Peshawar was the headquarters of the Kanishka dynasty. She talks about the Great Stupa which was seven hundred feet tall. She states there is a god in every stone as everybody respects the stupa and figure of Buddha.

Further, Kamila Shamsie makes a comment on how incessant attacks on historical monuments destruct history and glory of the time. Vivian Spencer observes that the Great Stupa has turned into relics and it is in abandoned condition. Kamila talks about different places in Peshawar through her narrative. She talks about Haji Turangzai, Khyber Pass wherein the Indians revolt non-violently against the British rule. They are suppressed and shot dead by the rulers.

Najeeb Gul, a young archeologist has his interests in English language and culture that indicate his urge to learn the culture of the West. In other words, he is like Vivian Rose reading foreign culture. Like Vivian, Najeeb also shows his interest in exploring the journey of Scylax. Thus, he becomes one of the eminent persons to trace history and migration of Scylax. He says, “There was a man called Scylax who came here long ago. Longer ago than anything in the Museum. He travelled from Peshawar all the way down the Indus, and when he went away he took stories of the tribes who lived here.” (Shamsie 110)

Vivian Rose and Najeeb discuss about the Cirlet of Scylax. They attempt to trace where exactly the Cirlet is after the death of Scylax. The Cirlet is like a crown given to Scylax by Emperor Darius. After Scylax’s death in Caria, a dynasty called Hecatomnids possessed the Cirlet. They even stamped the Cirlet on their coins. The historical records about the Cirlet are not available after Alexander conquered Caria. In the rule of Kanishka, the Sacred Casket is considered as Kanishka Casket. The archaeologists try to find it out from the relics in Shahji-ki-Dheri. They also believe that Alexander might have taken away the Cirlet from Caria after he conquered it.

Further, Kamila observes how certain regiments do not follow the orders of the colonial rulers. During war, the oppressors force their soldiers to kill the opponents. Here, the soldiers in both the parties belong to the same sect, who kill each other blindly. But soldier like Kalam resists the orders of the oppressors. His resistance throws light upon his rebel and it also exhibits Muslim culture. This pinpoints the beginning of opposition to the Colonial rule in Peshawar.

Gradually, the author shows Kalam as a young soldier of twenty-one years who is a very close friend of Qayyum Gul. He joins British Indian army but rebels and joins his cousins, Mohmands which is against the law. His joining the Mohmands is also a sort of tracing history of rebel in the valley. Kalam khan joins Haji Sahib and becomes active in his activities against the English.

Kamila projects history as a major tenet of *A God in Every Stone*. Along with the characters of Scylax, Vivian and Tahsin Bey, Najeeb undertakes study of History and Archaeology. He prefers to live among the relics and develop his fetish for History and Archaeology. He finds a god in every stone. His interest in History and Archaeology is due to migration of Vivian Rose who hires Najeeb's services by paying him occasionally. Also she gives him books to read, which ultimately makes Najeeb to revolt against the preachings of maulvi. Gradually, Qayyum also joins Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan in his movement of non-violence against the British to become a part of history.

Meanwhile, Vivian receives a letter from Mehmet, a nephew of Tahsin Bey that states how Tahsin Bey was shot dead by the army. His knowledge in History and Archaeology contains several secrets that work against him. Shamsie, through this instance underlines how intellectuals are killed by dictators. Such killings are part of history but killing of archaeologist shuns history.

'BOOK II' of the narrative explicates the achievements and growth of Najeeb as the twentieth century Herodotus. Najeeb Gul works as the Native Assistant of Peshawar Museum. He is a B.A. from Islamia College, Peshawar. His letters to Vivian explicate his new identity as an archaeologist. Being a native, he understands better than anyone the history of Peshawar, India, Buddhism and the dynasties that entered and ruled India. It is Najeeb who articulates how energy is stored in the Buddhist stupas. He states that Emperor Asoka who converted to Buddhism built stupas almost everywhere in his kingdom. Every stupa had a treasury of certain objects. These objects in the treasury provided energy. For centuries the treasure remained in Buddhist stupas. The Huns started destroying the stupas. Maya, a Buddhist nun escapes and brings safely the Circlet of Scylax and buried it beneath the Great White Statue of Shahji-ki-Dheri. These historical assumptions exhibit Najeeb as modern Herodotus who excavates the history and succeeds in finding the Circlet of Scylax. In this instance, Najeeb proves superior to Vivian and Tahsin in his achievements.

Further, Najeeb in his letter to Qayyum states, 'English who dig up our treasures because they want you to know your own history.' (Shamsie 232) This also signals that Najeeb knows well the intentions of the English in India. He does not like English as rulers or oppressors. His mature stance shows how Najeeb treats them as equals to Indians. Further, he wants to treat them as visitors.

Gradually, Najeeb through his letters chronicles the facts and the political happenings during Freedom Fighting Movement in India. Qayyum, who joins Khan Gaffar Khan writes to Najeeb about the Congress leaders like Gandhi and Nehru - their meetings with Gaffar Khan and the Freedom Fighting Movement in Peshawar valley. The meetings of Congress leaders are history in making. Qayyum is an active participant and a witness in the Freedom Fighting Movement of India. On the other hand, Vivian Rose says nothing about India, the British Empire and Gandhi.

Gradually, the novel also surveys the historical events being shaped during 1930s. Kamila takes the opportunity to bring forward how the Congress leaders negotiate with police for their movement of non-violence. Subsequently, Kamila vocalizes the history of Non-Cooperation Movement in India which was crushed down by the British at several places, killing hundreds of innocent and unarmed Indian protesters. She observes the psychology of Indian policemen who remember merciless massacres of mobs. Kamila writes, "ChauriChaura, eight years earlier, when a clash between police and Congress volunteers during the first Non-Cooperation Movement led to the deaths of twenty-six civilians and twenty-one policemen, the

policemen all burnt alive in their thana.” (Shamsie 255) Subsequently, the author portrays the picture of the massacre of the innocent and unarmed protesters. Kamila shows how political tyrannies increase during Freedom Fighting Movement.

Subsequently, the Freedom Fighting Movement is not merely of peace and non-violence but it turns into firing, bullets and deaths. The writer observes how the oppressors ravished people and their lives. She also captures the collective madness of commons for free India. People throw their lives fearlessly and face guns and bayonets. Kamila describes the crucial moments of history from Indian Freedom Fighting Movement wherein more than four hundred innocent picketers are massacred by the British. The KhudaiKhidmadgars who protest against the British Police run away one by one into the shelter of Courtesans. Similarly, Kamila chronicles unrecorded mutiny of innocent people in Peshawar at the hands of the British. She vocalizes how the Imperial police massacred several innocent unarmed people. The dead bodies are removed by people and without any agitation they are carried away to the crematory.

A God in Every Stone chronicles adventures of archaeologists and historiographers who excavate facts from history, uncovering certain things to the present world that are turned into relics. No doubt, Vivian Rose Spencer dominates the narrative but the characters of Tahsin Bey, Najeeb Gul, Herodotus, Scylax and Pactyl dominate the novel equally. The novel records history, especially archaeological details of the lost generations. Excavations not only unearth the history but at the same time, they vocalize the cultural practices of the time. The records in the notebook made by Najeeb about the relics are the attempts to capture the history. Further, Kamila chronicles the unrest of 1930s in the East. This is an era before World War II, where every colonized nation revolted against the tyrannies of the oppressor. Similarly, the author also underlines the freedom fighting movement of Civil Disobedience under the influence of M. K. Gandhi. In Peshawar, picketers rebel against the English rule are massacred by the police and army. Almost every family loses a son, a brother or a father. Countless people are mercilessly killed. The dead bodies of Indian picketers are carried away to crematories. Army does not show any mercy towards the dead or alive Indians. Kamila talks about missing persons during massacre, the messy situation during freedom fighting struggle and Civil Disobedience.

On the backdrop of Civil Disobedience in India, Kamila portrays temporal and instant love between Najeeb and Diwa, a young and beautiful girl from Peshawar. During the massacre, Najeeb wears a white turban with the Cirlet of Scylax hidden beneath it, which showcases his success as an archaeologist. During the massacre, his white turban falls down where the armed soldiers coarse and kill many innocent Indians. Diwa, who does not know Najeeb by his name, who is hardly introduced to each other, develops fetish. She goes into the public with her bare face and brings back Najeeb’s turban. Unfortunately, she is killed in the massacre. Zarina, the sister-in-law of Diwa considers Najeeb responsible for Diwa’s death. As a result, Zarina and her husband torture Najeeb Gul thinking that Najeeb has done something with Diwa before her death. Eventually, Najeeb is relieved to greet Qayyum. In the end, Zarina carries the white turban with Scylax Cirlet and buries it on the tomb of Diwa.

To conclude, *A God in Every Stone* narrates the history from 515BC to 1930. The Cirlet of Scylax is the main object which motivates and becomes the reason that encourages the characters to uncover the history.

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