

In search of the saintly

Nazma Yeasmeen Haque is exuberant over a tale of Islam's early women

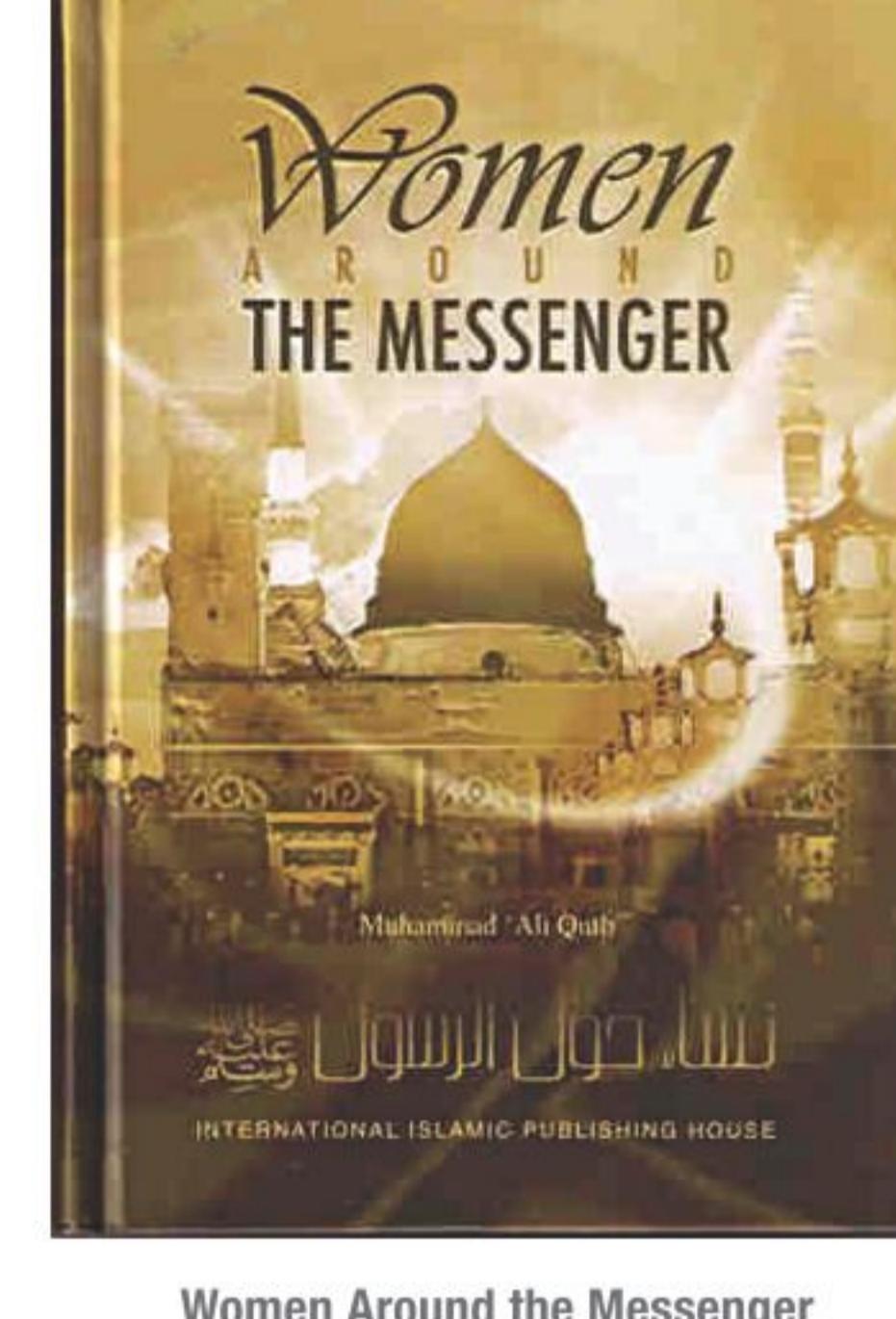
An amazing book containing amazing stories of the lives, activities, struggles and sacrifices of some outstanding women who lived during the time of our beloved Prophet (Peace be upon him). They are the luckiest of women. No, I am not talking about his mother and mother-like figures, neither of his wives nor his daughters because they are either related to him by blood, or as foster parents or by marriages that are only natural, but about those women who were outside of such bonds yet by association with the Prophet shone into prominence. Of course, they fortified themselves with strong will, indomitable spirit and fortitude that came into full fruition because they experienced the company of the Prophet (pbuh), could seek his advice through waiting on his decision, oftentimes taking decisions on their own knowing that they would be endorsed by him because they knew the Prophet (pbuh) so well and would listen to his deliberations. Therefore, although this book is divided into four groups of women, nevertheless, the section on such women merits attention in its own right much more than the other sections.

My initial reaction as I read this book was a compounded form of emotion that has in it, first of all, pride because it is all about those illustrious women of the sixth and seventh centuries who strode on the most turbulent paths of life with an aim held resolutely, that is, for the sake of upholding the foundation and propagation of the new faith. I feel as if I also share a bit of this glory, being myself a woman. Secondly, a degree of envy crept into my mind on finding that these women had access to the Prophet in times of conflict and distress, that they could see him, talk to him. And then there was this too strong a wish to have been born in those times, being in some of those places. Having studied the very facts about these women's interactions with the Prophet, one finds those absolutely overwhelming. Thirdly, along with the awe that these women inspire, one feels much humility within oneself at discovering what actually consists of the definition of a modern and liberated woman over which feminists all over the world have been so vociferous

since long. And, last but by far the most perceptible emotion is an arousal of self-esteem that is born of the innumerable cases and situations involving women when every time the Prophet exemplified his righteousness in treating them. He never gave less importance to the women in terms of their freedom of expressing themselves, their participation in battles and many other activities. Therefore, it is small wonder that the women could communicate with him directly, never contemplating that their entity as women could be a bar to a hearing from him. It is a matter of serious concern and at the same time regret as to how far and for how long we have deviated from the edicts of Islam. The so-called pious Muslim leaders have played the role of brutes only to fulfill their parochial motives. To them, religion is a tool to be used for suppressing development of intellect, particularly among women, lest people become conscious of themselves, of their position and rights and overtake the bigots. What the Messenger and his virtuous companions, both men and women, taught was a freeing of one's mind from all kinds of narrowness, false beliefs, superstitions and arrogance and thus developing one's character in the light of the true teachings of Islam, which in fact is fundamentalism. Unfortunately, the word 'fundamentalism' has been used in an inverted way, denoting the fanatics of religion whose beliefs, actions and fulminations are far from the truth inherent in the fundamentals of Islam or any religion for that matter. This book through the descriptions of the life and activities of these distinguished women once again shows Islam as a flexible, accommodating and a tolerant religion.

Before giving a quick rundown of the biographies of some of these women who elevated themselves to being worthy of being around the Prophet, one cannot but mention the names of two other women who had been pioneers in embracing the faith of Islam during its most turbulent period and certainly at the risk of their life. They are Khadeejah (Radia-Allahu Anha), the first person to accept Islam, and Sumayyah, the first person to be martyred in the way of Allah from among the

companions of His Messenger. What is most unfortunate is that most probably no one knows this sensational part of history about Sumayyah. One of the valiant warriors in the battle of Uhud who at first did not intend to fight but actually went to look after the wounded, she was transformed into a fearless soldier by the turn of the



Women Around the Messenger
Muhammad Ali Qutb
Trans Abdur-Rafiq Adewale Imam
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events on the battlefield. She is Nusaybah, who fought so valiantly with a sword, bow and arrow protecting the Messenger of Allah that she was awarded a medal for her valour in the historically famous battle of Uhud! Umm Sulaym took part in a number of battles but she showed her highest bravery in the battle of Hunayn. It is also an established fact that she used to go out with the Prophet on military expeditions and was always one of the soldiers of the Muslim army. The other side of resoluteness in her character is manifest in her insistence on making her husband-to-be accept the faith of Islam as *mahr* (bride money),

something unheard of for a Muslim woman. Another outstanding woman in terms of her strong faith and integrity of character is Umm Kulthoom, who was one of the earliest Muslims. What is more confounding is the fact that she was not yet married when she decided to become a Muslim of her "personal freedom of choice and she was proud of that." She was also the first person to migrate to Madinah after the Prophet's own migration. It is absolutely incredible to think of such women exercising their free will in taking decisions that are crucial to one's life and in such gruelling times when one had to live day by day. Again, such an act is unthinkable not only in terms of a male dominated society in those days in Arabia but also now in the twenty-first century even in our country. We salute these women!

Another star in the galaxy of women is Rufaydah al-Aslamiyah, who set up a medical tent where she herself would treat the wounded at her own expenses. She was so fully dedicated to her job of medical treatment of the soldiers that her tent would be moved from one battlefield to another. The author compares her tent to a field hospital in modern military terms and comments, "It was certainly one of the founding cells of Islamic civilization." We come to know about Safiya bint Abdul-Muttalib, the first Muslim woman to kill an unbeliever in a situation when the man in charge of their security would not do so in fear. How ridiculous things can be in some cases! And this proved "her strong personality and her courage in defending her faith, herself and her dignity." Her poetry bears witness to this trait of her personality as well. Another poet possessing the same kind of valour in her character that found expression in her poems coming out spontaneously to befit occasions is Al-Khansa, whom the Prophet would greet saying, "Hey, Khanas!" when he would be eager to hear more poetry from her. He loved "refined and truthful poetry" naturally as an Arab and would regard poetry as a potent social weapon that "hurt the disbelievers more than do our showers of arrows upon them". And then there is another erudite woman called Umm Mabud who describes the Prophet in terms

of his physical appearance, way of speaking, his countenance when he kept silent, reactions of the people around him as they observed and heard him so accurately and in such fine detail that it leaves the author marvelling, "... Umm Mabud, illiterate Bedouin woman, daughter of the desert! From which university did you graduate and in which field of literature did you excel? ... We are also in need of the science of physiology so that we can be in tune with your delicate and subtle descriptions!" Hear the expression of one of the women who raised the Prophet in his childhood and who wept only twice during the final years of his life. When asked why she was crying on hearing news of the Prophet's death, Umm Ayman replied, "I am crying because the revelation from Heaven has stopped." The second time, hearing that Umar had been martyred, she asserted, "Today, Islam has been weakened." These two sentences are not only insightful but speak of a mind so highly cultivated and energized by such strong faith that it spoke only the truth, and precisely. One wonders: if this is not education, then what is! They are the most precious jewels or illuminations who light up our path and will keep on shining if only we open our eyes to see them, our hearts to receive them and our minds to fathom their attributes if a colossal nature. The author has done a great service not only to women but to all of humanity as well by dredging out the stories of these distinguished women. They would have remained in oblivion but for the labour of this research-minded author. The light honey-coloured pages contain and exude a fragrance of holiness. The title of the book along with the dome of the mosque embossed on the hard cover elevates the women to their highest status as human beings. There is an ocean of knowledge in this book that is to be learnt by all of us in order to practise them as much as possible.

Bless us, O you saintly women!

(The review is a reprint, in reader interest)

DR. NAZMA YEASMEEN HAQUE IS A CRITIC AND EDUCATIONIST.

Defining borders that only cause pain

Jackie Kabir studies conflict and war

Salt and Saffron; Kartography

Kamila Shamsie's second novel *Salt and Saffron* (2000) is a work on the partition of India in 1947. Dard e Dil, a feudal family suffered during the partition like any other in India and Pakistan. Kamila has brought out the pain, sorrows and love of the triplets Sulaiman, Taimur and Akbar in her writing. Their father, a wealthy land owner thought "bearing the names of great kings would enable his sons to face up to any crisis, but he never paused to think what would have happened if the namesakes Sulaiman the Magnificent, Akbar the Great and Taimur, sometimes called Taimur Lang or Tamburlaine, had been born brothers!"

In 1938 Taimur disappeared while the boys were being sent to Oxford to get their degrees. He later wrote a letter saying that as they were born the year after the Jalianwalla massacre and "I lack your gift for erasing, nay! Evading history."

This is our curse: Akbar and Sulaiman, we are kites that have their strings snipped. We went to school in a place with out any sun, and believed this meant we had no need for our shadows. I am not an Englishman 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.

I am now Taimur Hind."

All the three brothers were close to Aliya's dadi, Abida, who loves them all. What Shamsie does in *Salt and Saffron* is that she breaks apart the fake pride or snobbery of the Dard e Dil family by carefully depicting a character like Taj's mother, who works as the midwife of the family but gives birth to Taj, whose father was an unidentified member of Dard e Dil. Since the Dard e Dil family later lived in a posh area of Karachi, Aliya and Samia, who were educated in the west, feel uneasy when Aliya meets a boy from Liaquatabad, which is not an area where the rich and famous of the city can even think of treading upon. When Aliya tries to get close to him the only thing keeping her from that is the locality of his ancestral home even though he has never been there himself.

The partition of 1947 left the Dard e Dil family divided in India and Pakistan and the differences exist even though they lived in America and England. Taimur's daughter Mariam comes to live with Aliya's family as her parents have passed away. A lady who only speaks to the cook Masood later elopes with him. This causes immense shame to the family and they see it as a disgrace, with one of the aunts saying clearly, "Family reputation is the most precious jewel in a young bride's *jehez*." She sighed. "There was a time we were so close to the heavens no stigma could reach us. But what we were no longer are."

Along with the story Kamila Shamsie shows a lot of wit in her book. The question of identity is a primary one in *Salt and Saffron*.

Aliya wants to retain her Pakistani identity and choose a life partner who values that identity. While her family tries to get her married into an aristocratic family, she is very much in love with Khaleel, a 'desi' living in the UK. When she meets her dad's cousins in the UK, who are from the Indian side, she realizes that they are enemies and don't even support the same cricket team. Even though Shamsie describes the pride or *Naz* of being a Pakistani, she herself travels around the globe, getting her education in the United States of America and later going to live in the UK. That is how her entity has been shaped.

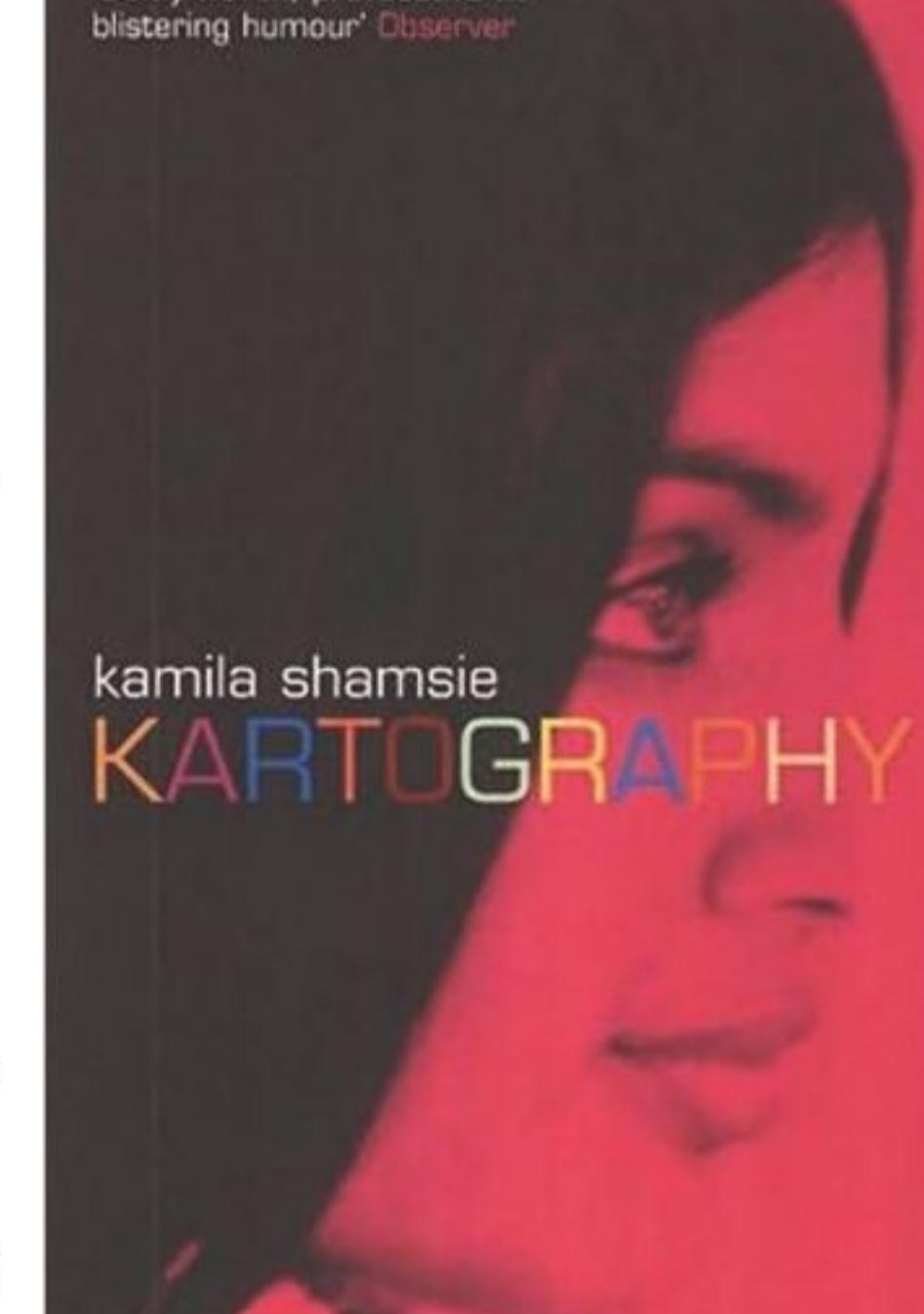
Kartography (2002) is Shamsie's third book set in Karachi, the spider plant city where you might find, according to the narrator, fossilized footprints of Alexander the Great. The book deals with a heart-breaking love story, depicts the ethnic conflict which pervades Pakistani society. The story is about 1971 war of independence of Bangladesh, which the writer terms as a civil war.

Karim's main aim in life is to become a cartographer and give names to the places in Karachi 'where the streets have no name'.

Both Karim and Raheen are fascinated by the city of their birth and they keep coming back to it, abandoning the luxuries of the west. Maybe that is why the author has titled the book 'Kartography', with a K.

To me, though, this book is about a beautiful Bengali girl growing up in Karachi

and her plight in 1971. Maheen, who does not know any other city as her hometown, is humiliated and tortured verbally and morally as things go from bad to worse during the Bangladesh war. She is alienated, ostracized from the very society she has grown up in. Just then her fiancé declined to marry her which was like the last nail on

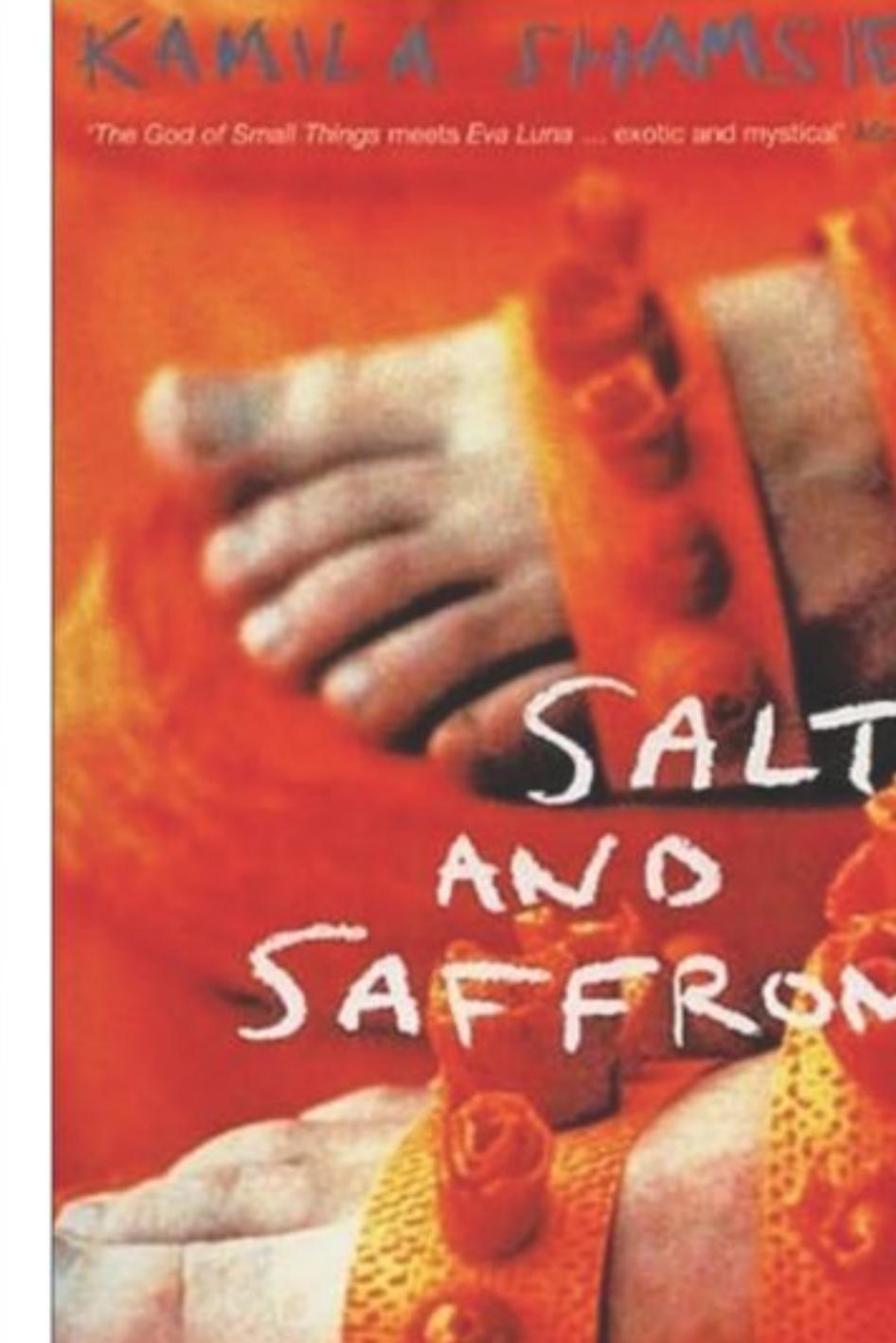


her coffin. Maheen is a Bengali, but love knows no borders. So she is in love with a Pakistani boy named Zafar. In 1971 Zafar's friend Shafiq asks him: "How can you do it? You are going to marry one of them. You are going to let her have your children. How?" Shafiq's baby brother's body was mutilated in erstwhile East Pakistan and his remains could not be identified. So Zafar's friend will mark him as a traitor if he marries a Bengali woman. Maheen marries Ali and has Karim. Zafar, on the other hand, marries Maheen's best friend Yasmeen and they have a baby girl who is named Raheen, the suffix borrowed from his ex fiancée's name.

Kamila Shamsie brings out the pain Bengalis living Pakistan felt in those days. It is unthinkable how drawing borders can

transform friends into enemies overnight. A waiter spills a drink on Laila, another friend. Her husband stands up and lands a slap across the waiter's cheek and screams,

"Halfwit Bingo! Go back to your jungle." Maheen witnesses the episode and is close to tears. A beggar spits on Maheen in public. Even Zafar is hated by most people



for being a 'Bingo lover'. "71 was madness", says a friend. After the war is over Zafar says: "Happy? Why should I be happy?..... Three days ago we surrendered to the Indian army. Of course we are not happy. We've lost half the country and most of our souls."

Karim, Maheen's son, who has always thought of himself as a Bengali and thus in a minority like the Muhajirs of the Muhajir Qaumi Movement, said to Raheen and her friends: "We didn't learn anything, did we, from '71?"

The generation of children born after 1971 hardly know anything about the war, as evident from a letter Raheen writes:

"We are nearly forty-eight years old as a nation, young enough that there are people who have lived through our entire history

and more, but too old to put our worries down to teething problems. Between our birth in 1947 and 1995, dead bang between our beginning and our present, is 1971, of which I know next to nothing except that there was a war and East Pakistan became Bangladesh, and terrible things we must have done then to remain so silent about it. Is it shame at losing the war, or guilt about what we did try to win that mutes us?"

Towards the end of the novel there is a letter from Zafar to Maheen explaining what made him betray her after the war, what made him decide not to marry her. At one point he says:

"Pakistan died in 1971. Pakistan was a country with two wings. I have never before thought of the war in terms of that image: a wing tearing away from the body it once helped keep aloft --- it was a country with a majority Bengali population and its attendant richness of culture, clothing.... Oh, everything. How can Pakistan still be when all of that, everything that East Pakistan added to the country?.... How can Pakistan still be when we so abused that image --- first by ensuring that the Bengalis were minimized and marginalized both politically and economically, and then by reacting to their demands for greater rights and representation with acts of savagery?" Zafar's confession does make one wonder who Kamila Shamsie has in mind. Maheen can grow out of her character to become the pervasive national identity that is so abused, humiliated at the hands of the Pakistani military. Born in 1973, Shamsie may represent the post-71 Pakistan generation's view.

In both the novels Shamsie aptly describes how drawing borders will make people suffer through insurmountable pain no matter what the cause may be. Since both *Salt and Saffron* and *Kartography* deal with nations emerging out of chaos, one can understand that the writer has a strong sense of history. But both the novels have too many characters. That makes the reader go back and forth to find out who is related to who. The stories about families are woven in the political turmoil of South Asia, which makes them a very interesting read.

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