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Thems in Kamila Shamsie's Novel *Broken Verses* – A Study

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Abstract – British Pakistani author Kamila Shamsie's riveting novel Broken Verses weaves intrigue, suspense, politics, and a mother-daughter tale into a Karachi-based narrative, exploring universal themes love, loss, politics, activism, feminism, hope, and trauma. Aasmaani Inqalab, the thirty-year-old protagonist, faces each of the narrative's themes as she unpacks the startling mystery surrounding her mother's disappearance fourteen year earlier. Complicating this disappearance is the presumed death of her mother's lover, a famous Pakistani poet who was reportedly beaten to death two years earlier by government henchmen. Rootless, without answers, and suffering from abandonment issues, Aasmaani moves from job to job, in her thirties and single. Shamsie is multi-award winning author. In 2005, Broken Verses won the Patras Bokhari Award from the Academy of Letters in Pakistan.

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INTRODUCTION

In English literature fiction is the most powerful form today. It is the replica of society, and has acquired a prestigious place not only in Pakistan but across the globe. It occupies its own proper space in the field of English Literature. In Pakistan, the tradition of English creative writings could be traced back in the English Literature produced during the colonial period. The traditions have proud patrons in the names of Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand, R K Narayan and Kamala Markandeya. After independence the tradition continued in both the countries across the border. If, in India, they have such literary luminaries like Khushwant Singh, Dom Moraes, Balachandra Rajan, Arundhati Roy, Amitav Ghosh, Anita Desai , we, in Pakistan, too have Ahmed Ali, Zulfikar Ghose, Kaleem Omar, Bapsi Sidwa to make us proud on international scene. English creative writings in Pakistan are growing with grace. New voices are joining in this expanding tribe. These new voices include the names of Tariq Ali, Moniza Alvi, Hanif Kureishi, Sara Suleri, Mohsin Hamid, Bina Shah, Kamila Shamsi and Mouhammad Hanif.

Literature is no doubt a reflection of what we have in our mind and in our surroundings & society. A writer is possibly believed as the presenter and painter of all the happenings, customs, cultures, history and civilization of any society to which he or she belongs. In Pakistan the number of well known Pakistani female writers is countable on finger tips, but among the content of those names we do find the name of Kamila Shamise, who is a well known Pakistani novelist with a vast literary background. No doubt, she is a professional writer who got huge encouragement from her family. Her writings have presented a very positive image of Pakistani women. Shamsie, who is twice marginalized on account of her race and gender, she belongs to the first generation of immigrants of Pakistan Diaspora in the UK.

Broken Verses (2005), the fourth and intriguingly multilayered novel of Kamila Shamsie set in Karachi, explores idealist fundamentalism, and the conflict between personal life and political activity. It is largely the mental mappings of the 31-year-one year old protagonist named Aasmani Inqalab is a young woman is struggling with tragedy. Her search for elusive answers about her life as she is haunted by the unresolved tragedies of her childhood, especially regarding the disappearance of her mother without as much as a farewell note. Her mother, Samina, a feminist activist, has been missing for 14 years, along with Samina's lover, a revolutionary known throughout the country as 'The Poet' who is presumed murdered. Samina was dating him, and whenever he went into exile, Samina would leave her daughter behind to follow him. In fact, Aasmaani' parents were married for less than a year before her mother fell in love with the Poet. Aasmaani was raised by four parents: her mother, her stepmother, her father, and the Poet. Aasmani remains in a state of intense grief, but she has mixed feelings towards her mother - she is intensely proud that Samina fought for her beliefs, yet also angry and hurt that she was neglected and abandoned for the sake of

politics. Consequently, Aasmani has not fully grown-up, and is uncertain about her own belief-system and sense of identity she is torn between her wish to continue her mother's work and her need to free herself from the shadow of this powerful woman. Aasmani's character does not develop extensively at the end of the novel she is making a documentary about her mother's life and work, and still seems unable to move forward. Yet this perhaps represents a country that is still held back by idealistic visions of the past. And her mother's lover The Poet was the breath and soul of their generation's resistance to military dictatorship and the excesses of the government. The Poet's outspoken opposition to the government in a regime of unacceptance of any critique led to his numerous spells in prison and in exile before his brutal murder and complete disfiguration of his face through the hands of unknown assailants. The unwavering Samina finds herself completely broken down after his mysterious death and starts questioning the beliefs that she had so fiercely fought for all her life. Struggling for two years in a state of acute depression to find a meaning in her life after the poet, she is finally unable to bear her grief anymore and goes to the sea side never to return back, following the trail of The Poet in making hers a mysterious death as well. Whether she committed suicide or got accidently drowned in the sea remains an unsolved mystery till the end.

Fourteen long years later Aasmaani, frequently abandoned by her mother while carrying on her political activities or accompanying The Poet in exile, is still tormented by her refusal to believe her mother and The Poet whom she lovingly calls Omi dead. Desperately holding on to every little bit of hope, she talks about her dead mother in present tense, enlivening her in her uttering's and desperately waits for her mother's return. The novel can be read as a study in a daughter's deep longing for her mother and the difficulty of letting go of the people who make up our lives. Then most unexpectedly, Samina's best friend Shehnaz, a legendary actress about to make her comeback in television, presents Aasmaani with a puzzling note, written in the secret code that Samina and The Poet shared. Shehnaz's son, Ed recently returned from New York post-9/11, plays the enigmatic messenger. Against all logic, Aasmaani begins to believe that The Poet might be alive, perhaps even her mother as well, leading to the unrelenting quest the reading and re-readings of the arrived letters, treading of newspaper archives, meetings with The Poet's friends the resultant anguish, disappointment, contestations with all others and then finally, her acceptance of her mother's death. Moving through its course, the novel gives an insight into the political and social life in Pakistan especially during General Zia's regime and portrays the plight of women under the Hudood ordinance. It addresses a number of themes - homosexuality, complexities in the behavior of celebrity kids, the therapeutic property of doing loved ones' last rites, the consequences faced by the political dissenters woven seamlessly into the novel. The novel also is an insightful meditation on the fibers that characters are made of.

This is a mystery novel with social and political commentary. In this novel, Shamsie beautifully captures the promise of Pakistan and the country's divisive political reality. Told through the eyes of a young television journalist working in the flourishing seaport of Karachi, the novel also traces one's family incredible experience of Pakistan from the 1970's to the present, part mystery, part romance, and part coming of age tale, the novel combines a compelling story with a larger meditation on the meaning of poetry, politics, religion, and Pakistan itself.

At the heart of all this mystery is plenty of commentary on what it means, ideally and realistically, to be a woman in contemporary Pakistan, in the form of monologues like the following:

When I was twelve and Mama was at the forefront of political activism with the Women's Action Forum the mother of one of my friends said I mustn't be angry with my mother for getting thrown in jail when she should have stayed at home and looked after me; after all, the woman, said she was doubtless just doing it because she thought she could make the world a better place for me. I looked the woman in contempt and told her I didn't have to invent excuses or justifications for my mother's courage, and how dare she suggest that a woman's actions were only of value if they could be linked to maternal instincts. At twelve, I knew exactly how the world worked and I thought that by knowing it I could free myself of the world's ability to grind people down with the relentless of its notions of what was acceptable behavior in women. (Shamsie *BV* 254)

In this story of Aasmani Inquilab, whose quest is to discover what happened to her 14 years prior to the events described in the novel. She is an independent young woman from Karachi. She begins a new job, and shortly after receives a letter in a secret code that only she, her mother, and the Poet knew more and more letter arrive, leading Aasmani to believe that the Poet is still alive, what about her mother? Needless to say, things don't work out as Aasmani fantasies. We are given to believe that Aasmani is mildly unstable her family fusses and clucks over her, giving her license to behave as peculiarly as she wants and her plotted history of her own career and dead end jobs gives us a portrait of somebody who has not yet found herself.

Through the recreation of Samina and the Poet in Aasmani's memory, Shamsie gives us a complex and moving picture of Pakistan and its repressive history. The many subsidiary characters who enter the novel in the course of the recreation are all authentically portrayed, as are the protagonists'

father, stepmother and half sister; in fact, the trio represent the triumph of decency: her stepmother brings her up in her mother's frequent absences.

Samina Akram, a feminist argues about Islamic law and Quran thus:

The laws of the Quran? '…. *Maulana Sahib*, it embarrasses me profoundly to have to remind a scholar such as you of what is written in the Quran and I don't mean in your translation of it, which I have read with astonishment and wonder. 'She argues about the concept of *Purdah*, *burqa* or *hijab*: Within the Quran itself, as you well know, there are two verses which refer to the apparel of women. Verse thirty-one of *Surah –an- Nur* and verse fifty-nine of *SurahAl-Ahzab.* In one, the word *khomoorehenna* comes from the word khumar rather than a veil. It doesn't specify what is covered or how. And *jalabib* means a shirt or cloak. If the Almighty had wished to use the word *hijab* to more precisely indicate a head-covering I'm sure He would have done so. Then she talks about the concept of *Purdah* which she had understood. It seems fairly evident from a close examination of the text that women are being enjoined, *Maulana Sahib*, to cover our chests in public, which I am really more than happy to do when in your company.' (Shamsie, *BV* 284)

The protagonist is reminiscent about her mother: I looked around for something that wasn't younger and more stylish than me, and found a painting of a line of Arabic on the wall behind me. *Fabeayye aalae rabbekuma tukazzebaan*. The repeating line from *Surah- al-Rahman,* beloved of calligraphers for its variedness and balance. *Fabeayye aalae rabbekuma tukazzebaan.* Which of your Lord's blessings would you deny?

When my mother in one of her attempts to give me career advice –told me that I should learn Arabic in order to translate the Qur'an into both English and Urdu, in versions free from patriarchal interpretations, the Poet said that, And translate *Surahal-Rahman* especially for me'. *Surah-al-Rahman* is one of the main verse of Qur'an. (Shamsie, BV 5)

Again there are references to *Surah-al-Rahman*: He created man and taught him articulate speech. The sun and the moon pursue their ordered course. The plants and the trees bow down in adoration….. When the sky splits asunder, and reddens like a rose or stained leather-which of your Lord's blessing would you deny? (Shamsie, *BV* 5)

Shamsie writes about Ramzan, the holy month having a strict structure but can be helpful in modern days- In any case, with Ramzan's strict structure it was all too easy to pretend there was no time for phone calls or visits. (Shamsie*, BV* 161)

The conflict between the Muslim and Christian world is depicted by Shamsie in the novel. The political, social and religious scenario of Pakistan has been described by Shamsie realistically in the novel: …Rabia raged up and down the room, cursing anyone she could blame for the debacle…the Americans, the President, Al-Qaeda, the other political parties, the Americans again, everyone but the 11 percent of the electorate who voted for the beards. (Shamsie *BV* 60)

Kamila Shamsie lashes at the war in the name of religion i.e. jihad in her novel:

…You take a territorial issue in Afghanistan and you make it into a matter of religious duty you and your unlikely bedfellows in the West and you spout phrases like the unity of the *ummah* as you hand those boys those young, idealistic, confused, angry, devout, ready-to-be-brainwashed boys the most sophisticated weapons and the best combat training in the world and tell them to get the infidel Soviets off Muslim soil. Soil has no religion, *Maulana.* (Shamsie, *BV* 286)

She further attacks that: What happens after Afghanistan, have you considered that? Where do they go next, those global guerrillas with their allegiance to a common cause and their belief in violence as the most effective way to take on the enemy? Do you and your American friends ever sit down to talk about that? (Shamsie, *BV* 286)

After 9/11 the world was changed. Kamila Shamsie gave the following explanation for the change of attitudes in her novel:

And then?'

And then the Towers fell.'

And you stopped being an individual and started being an entire religion. 'I said it in a haven't we all been down that road tones but he didn't seem to notice.
(Shamsie, *BV* 45)

Set in Karachi, and focused on the last three decades of Pakistani society and politics, Kamila Shamsie's richly woven novel explores the relationship of a young and somewhat listless elite to a previous age of grander spirit and vision. Aasmaani is assailed by memories of the 1970s and 80s, when the nation could be made to buck and rear at the sound of her mother's political speeches or the biting allegories of the Poet. Under the administrations of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and Zia ul-Haq, the unrepentant couple went through police violence, imprisonment and exile, then the Poet was violently murdered - and yet poetry, politics and love were grand, excessive and indispensable. Now, in

times of less confrontation and more TV channels, nothing is so significant or deeply felt.

Aasmaani is expending her own intellectual and poetic gifts writing questions for a TV quiz show. "Politics" is exported, and reduced to a half hearted consumer decision ("You really planning to boycott American goods when they attack Iraq?" - "Hanh, well, we have to feel like we're doing something, right?") And the Poet's erstwhile protégé has become fat and complacent, producing "verses to fit the occasion for anyone willing to pay the price, regardless of their political affiliation". Lesser times, all in all; and Aasmaani's torment at having been rudely cut off from both her mother and her intellectual and literary mentor is thus also the anguish of no longer knowing how to be the bewilderment of poverty after a rich tradition is exhausted.

Shamsie's exploration of this theme has moments of great power. The delight in words and all their shades of meaning, characteristic of all her writing, is here used as the linchpin of the plot, as dictionaries, crosswords, fairy tales and poems become keys to the coded messages whose authorship and purpose she is trying to understand. Aasmaani's lifelong familiarity with intrigue has also made her paranoid: she looks at everything with a hyper aware suspicion and this mixture of poetry and paranoia results in a scintillating and ever expanding semantic universe, as she repeatedly reexamines the same set of facts and finds each time another poetic archetype or Sufi paradox that lends them an utterly new significance. The voice that guides us around this world darts with wit and lightness in a way that is unique and often lovely.

Given its grand themes of nation, politics and art, however, this novel's philosophical arc is disappointingly constrained. When we finally leave her, she is making a documentary about her mother and the women's movement in Pakistan, still fixated on the grandeur of the past, and still anxious about the trivializing influence of foreign places and modern life.

Ultimately, she remains inflexibly aristocratic, wistful for courtly thought and expression, and unable to see in the Pakistan of today, when the state's displeasure is focused on people very different from her, anything worthy of the name "history". It would have been gratifying to see this heroine's search open up newer and more challenging terrain, and thus end slightly further away from where we began.

In other words *Broken Verses* is a poignant mother-daughter tale, and Aasmaani finds herself struggling with memories from her abnormal childhood throughout. The narrative also touches on love, with mutual attraction budding between Aasmaani and Shehnaz's son. Many critics also praise the political intrigue in the novel because it works as a backdrop to the entire narrative but doesn't overshadow other themes. The political backdrop centers on a critique of America, as well as fear of fundamentalism making inroads into Pakistan's government. Overall, Shamsie's narrative is a touching exploration of modern-day Pakistan, effectively addressing forgiveness, politics, parent-child relationship, and women's rights.

CONCLUSION:

By and large the mother-daughter relationship of Samina and Aasmaani in *Broken Verses*, far from assuming domestic tones, instead, stretches its dimensions to explore women activism in response to the unjust Hudood laws enforced in the country during General Zia ul Haq's rule. The novel also very extensively deals with the repercussions faced by the poets who dared to use their pen to make a critique on the government. It is a detailed study in the Urdu literary culture, especially the rich tradition of protest poetry. The novel addresses a number of other themes; like complexity in the behavior of celebrity kids, homosexuality, Islamo-phobia and religious fundamentalism in its thematic patterning.

The novel, thus, can be read as a deep and varied insight into wide ranging dimensions of Pakistan. Aasmaani's torment at having been rudely cut off from both her mother and her intellectual and literary mentor is, thus, also the anguish of no longer knowing how to be the bewilderment of poverty after a rich tradition is exhausted. Shamsie's exploration of this theme has moments of great power. The delight in words and all their shades of meaning, characteristic of all her writing, is here used as the linchpin of the plot, as dictionaries, crosswords, fairy tales and poems become keys of the coded messages whose authorship and purpose she is trying to understand.

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