

Kamila Shamsie, *A God in Every Stone* (Bloomsbury, 2014)

A God in Every Stone is the prolific, award winning Pakistani writer, Kamila Shamsie's sixth novel. It follows on the success of her previous work: *the City by the Sea* (1998) and *Kartography* (2002), both shortlisted for the John Llewellyn Rhys Prize; *Salt and Saffron* (2000); *Broken Verses* (2005); and *Burnt Shadows* (2009), which was shortlisted for the Orange Prize for Fiction and has been translated into more than twenty languages. In 2013 she was named a *Granta's* Best of Young British Writers. Much like these previous works, *A God in Every Stone* explores the intricacies of human relationships against the backdrop of historical forces that shape the destinies of both individuals and nations. A sharply political novel, *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. *A God in Every Stone* tells the stories of an amateur British archeologist Vivian Spencer Rose, and a Pashtun soldier, Qayuum Gul, who is blinded in one eye at Ypres in World War I fighting as part of the Allied forces on behalf of the British. The novel closes with the little known Kissa Khawani Bazar massacre of 23 April 1930 in Peshawar in which over 400 peaceful demonstrators protesting discriminatory colonial laws were gunned down by the British and their bodies removed by trucks and buried unceremoniously.

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.

The grim battlefields of Somme and Ypres that have become hallowed names in British collective consciousness for the valour and courage shown by British soldiers are recalled in the novel with a different agenda. The novel illuminates the sacrifices made by these soldiers with compelling empathy while indicting the hypocrisy of the British. In particular, *A God in Every Stone* pays homage to the unsung sacrifices of proud Pashtun soldiers fighting an unfamiliar enemy in unfamiliar lands in Flanders, France, through the characters of Qayuum Gul and Kalam Khan and evokes the intense, almost homoerotic, bonds of brotherhood engendered by war. Returning home from England, Qayuum muses, 'If a man is to die defending a field, let the field be his field, the land, his land, and the people, his people', only to discover that he feels no emotional connection to the maulvis and merchants, the courtesans and beggars he sees in the streets of Peshawar as he walks home from the train station (101). Even his proud tribal affiliations to the Yusufzai pale in contrast to the affinity he feels for the regiment he has left behind, the 40th Pathans, comprised of men of all different ethnicities: 'Rajputs, Punjabis, Dogras, and Afridis'. Through his longing to return back to these men, *A God in Every Stone* questions the socially constructed divisions of race and nation that pale into insignificance in the face of the deeply call of brotherhood forged in the battlefield. More tellingly, the novel illuminates the divided loyalty of Muslim soldiers of the Indian Army who refuse to fight fellow Muslims in Turkey. It traces the slow disillusionment of Indian soldiers at the

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discriminatory treatment they receive in British hospitals in Brighton and their consequent radicalization against the hypocrisy of an empire that exhorts the natives to fight for freedom and justice but denies them these very rights as second class citizens in their own countries.

And yet, World War I is merely a small part of the sweeping historical backdrop of the novel which is structured by the intersecting narratives of Qayuum Gul and Vivian Spencer Rose, a young British archaeologist who spends her life trying to become the son her father never had. Her quest to locate the lost circlet of Scylax takes Vivian Rose to Peshawar where she befriends a young boy, Najeeb, who turns out to be Qayuum's brother. Najeeb becomes Vivian's 'civilizing mission', as she takes on the task of tutoring him in the Greek language and inspiring him to discover his own heritage and patrimony in the many archaeological ruins surrounding Peshawar.

According to Herodotus, Scylax, who was tasked by Persian Emperor Darius I to chart the course of the Indus river in the fifth century BCE, is thought to have begun his explorations from the settlement of Caspatyrus, which some historians conjecture was located in the vicinity of the present day city of Peshawar in Pakistan. And it is this tumultuous region of the South Asian subcontinent, bordering Afghanistan, that Shamsie renders with deep pathos. In evoking Peshawar's fragrant orchards, storied bazars, as well as its layered history as a once thriving seat of Buddhism, the novel complicates the one-sided representation of Afghanistan in the western media today as a strife-torn region embroiled in the 'War on Terror.' By presenting Peshawar through a historical lens as an ancient city which has been an important part of several great empires, including the Gandhara, Kushana and Mughal empires, and the Hellenic empire under Alexander the Great, among others, *A God In Every Stone* forces the reader to take a long view and re-vision the city and its people as complex, multi-layered, cultured. Peshawar emerges then, as a once hallowed seat of Buddhist learning, and the pacifist protestors, the *Khudai Khidmatgars* (servants of God) led by the venerable Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan who are ruthlessly gunned down by the British in April, 1930, are framed within another lineage extending back into history, beyond the immediate influence of the non-violence preached by Gandhi.

And so it is that Peshawar emerges as the truly vibrant character in the novel, beyond Qayuum Gul and the indefatigably curious Najeeb Gul tutored by Vivian Rose. Shamsie writes with a painterly eye and successfully evokes not just sights and smells of the differing cultural locales such as Qayuum's humble house in the old city but also the created 'English' atmosphere of the British club and hotel. While the details of the archaeological dig at Labraunda and Shahji Ke Dehri in Peshawar are rendered with imaginative richness, capturing the deep time of history, other details such as references to the suffragette movement, the VAD, and the Armenian massacre are hurriedly passed over. The walled city which is the site of the violent melee of the Kissa Khwani Bazar at the end of the novel has more emotional resonance and texture than the cast of new characters hastily introduced in the end. After a leisurely pace delving deftly into the subjectivity of Qayuum and Vivian Rose, and describing in detail the various obstacles and clues in the quest for the circlet of Scylax, the narrative becomes overloaded toward the end with new subplots.

The novel careens to a close by introducing a whole new cast of characters when Vivian returns to Peshawar in the waning days of Empire. The mysterious green-eyed girl, Diwa, who ministers to the wounded, is an enigmatic but ultimately an unrealized character; similarly unrealised is the romantic encounter between her and Najeeb Gul. Shamsie has captured with particular skill and empathy the emotional contours of an intensely male world and female characters like Diwa and her sister-in-law, or Qayuum's female relatives, are peripheral to this world.

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