Language: An Archive of History and Experience in Kamila Shamsie's Novels

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ABSTRACT*: Kamila Shamsie is a Pakistani novelist who represents the new generation of writers writing in English. In her novels, she makes language a means and tool to consolidate the identity of her nation through her syncretic linguistic strategy of appropriation and abrogation of English. She combines her poetic English prose with Urdu words and phrases and gives her readers a glimpse of her native culture and tradition. This paper will discuss certain techniques which allow Shamsie to bring to consciousness and articulation a richly tessellated society which is subsisting under the weight of destructive cultural encounter, i.e. the encounter between East and West. Shamsie's alchemic response to the crisis and confusion in the country is impressive exploration of linguistic permutation in her narration. She resolves the pull between native and imported or received language by hybridizing her discourse through metonymic gap, syntactical and lexical abrogation, appropriation and syntactic relexification. The paper will elaborate as to how Shamsie seizes and replaces the borrowed English language to adapt it to her own usage and negotiates the gap that exist in different nations in the world at large.*

Keywords: identity, syncretic language, appropriation, abrogation, linguistic permutation, syntactic relexification

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We, today, are living at the cross-roads of culture. Chinua Achebe (1975, 67) puts it thus: 'We lived at the cross-roads of culture. We still do today… still the cross-roads does have a certain dangerous potency; dangerous because a man might perish there wrestling with multiple-headed spirits, but also he might be lucky and return to his people with the boon of prophetic vision.'

In her novels, Kamila Shamsie writes about an existence on such cross-roads. She writes about contemporary Pakistan, about postcolonial survival in a society that is essentially hybridized in nature, where dangers of perishing while "wrestling with multiple spirits" is always looming large. Shamsie's Karachi is the contact zone of multiple ethnic classes, all retaining their complex yet peculiar identities under the roof of one country. Bill Ashcroft and his colleagues write in *The Empire Writes Back* (1989,180) that, "Syncretism is the condition within which post- colonial societies operate." This may aptly be applied to the postcolonial society that Shamsie depicts in her novels. What makes this society syncretic is the collision and fusion of distinct traditions that has brought forth an entirely new cultural dynamism. In *Salt and Saffron* (2000), Aliya, while sitting on Clifton beach in Karachi, observes: "Between my jeans and the black *burkha* of the woman climbing gingerly down the rocks to the sand beneath, between Sameer's pin-striped shirt with French cuffs and the bright pink *kameez* of the man selling kites, there was a whole range of styles and colors and materials." (212)

Shamsie's novels are an acceptance of difference on equal terms. This is evident in Shamsie's deployment of polyphony of voices that the society has incorporated. She brings to consciousness and articulation a richly tessellated society which is subsisting under the weight of "destructive cultural encounter" (Ashcroft 1989, 36), i.e. the encounter between East and West. This encounter has led to cultural plurality within the same nation, resulting in class fissures and ethnic feuds. However, Shamsie's alchemic response to the crisis and confusion in the country is impressive exploration of linguistic permutation in her narration. She resolves the pull between native and imported or received language by hybridizing her discourse. Through the use of an alien language, she gives new perspectives to her rediscovery of past. According to Bill Ashcroft and his colleagues, the recovery of past, "…will work best if the concepts of traditional aesthetics are subject to adaptation and change. They can be discovered and kept alive…not by academic study, but by being 'lived' and molded through use." (1989, 120) Shamsie seizes and replaces the borrowed English language so to adapt it to her own usage and so to

negotiate the gap that exist in different nations in the world at large. In his foreword to Kanthapura, Raja Rao says:

> One has to convey in a language that is not ones own the spirit that is ones own. One has to convey the various shades and omissions of a certain thought-movement that looks maltreated in an alien language. I use word 'alien' yet English is not really an alien language to us. It is the language of our intellectual make-up. We are all instinctively bilingual, many of us writing in our own language and in English. We cannot write like the English. We should not. We cannot write only as Indians. We have grown to look at the large world as part of us. (Rao 1999, 5)

Shamsie prefers to abrogate and appropriate the language of the center, and remolds it to suit to her purpose. According to *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies* (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 1998, 5), word abrogation refers to, "the rejection by post-colonial writers of a normative concept of 'correct' or 'standard' English used by certain classes." It is further written in the book that this concept of abrogation is inevitably tied up with the process of appropriation, "which describes the process of English adaptation itself." (5) This process of abrogation and subsequent appropriation of a language ensures to free that language from the imprisonment of the few and liberates it through transformation and reconstitution. It allows a native to fill in the gaps of a received language with the vernacular, and thus localize a LWC (language of wider communication), as referred to by Brandon Brown (2007). This has always been a debate in postcolonial writers that whether they should reject the language of the former colonizer or should they subvert it. Chinua Achebe chose the idea of subversion rather than rejection of English language. In his novel, he used the language of colonizer to depict the experience of the colonized under the colonizer. He abrogated the language of the colonizer by inserting several idioms, proverbs and imagery of his Eastern Nigerian culture. He writes that, "The price a world language must be prepared to pay is submission to many different kinds of use." (Achebe 1994, 433) Thus refusal to accept the illusory standard of correct English is the first step of a writer towards abrogation of the language. If a writer has some exotic idea to play with and something new to tell his audience in a new way, he or she should not hesitate at making syntactical or lexical abrogation in the *world language*. According to Achebe, a writer should aim at, "fashioning out English

which is at once universal and able to carry his particular experience." (433) He vehemently advocated the concept of "a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings" (434).

This is the kind of English that Shamsie has used in her novels. Her novels render a reality to Achebe's wish of making "an imperfectly learned second language do amazing things" (433). Although her learning of second language might not be imperfect, but deliberately abrogating and appropriating a seemingly *perfect* language has made her do wonders with it. Through this exploitation of language, she has falsified the perceived notion that a borrowed language cannot describe the flora and fauna, the physical and geographical features and the cultural practices of one's native land. Through her peculiar adaptation of English language, she also renders false the concept of *universal* and reasserts the authenticity of so-called marginal and peculiarity and plurality of all experiences. Her prose gradually grows into being syncretic and hybridized as one proceeds to examine her novels chronologically. By liberating the words and associating the concepts in new patterns, Shamsie attempts to narrate the peculiar experiences of the people of her country.

Skimming through her first novel *In the City by the Sea* (1998), one may not lead to substantial explorations of linguistic syncretism, for here author seems more inclined to fabricate a fairy tale world for an eleven-year-old and that too on western paradigms. In these higher planes of imagination where her narration floats, we find characters from Greek mythology and Arthurian legends more than the tales of real Pakistan. Her prose here is replete with witticisms, compound words and abbreviations mostly borrowed from and inspired by anglicized tongue twisters such as "Razzledazzle Mirza" (3), "licketysplitcky" (35), "gawk-and-talk-of-the-town to bemusing-but-amusing-institution" (57), "OOQ DICOOC" (11). In this novel, her frequent references to *Olympus, Aphrodite, Artemis* and *Hermes* lend her prose a kind of prosaic complexity. There are few insignificant words of Urdu that she has used here, such as *Kurta* (3), *mali* (5), *jaan* (19), *baba, yar* (17), *chowkidar* (26) and *motia* (59). None of these words change the anglicized aura of the narrative. Here, Shamsie keeps on writing within the paradigms of hegemonic discourse. However, a single instance of significance is found where Zehra and Hassan both have a dialogue infront of seven 'bodyguard':

> Zehra was on her knees just outside the bodyguard circle, braiding the grey hair of Razia Bibi, smoker of imported cigarettes.
>
> 'No school tomorrow, I suppose', Hassan said to Zehra.
>
> Zehra frowned at him. 'Don't be rude. Speak Urdu. Although—' she glanced around, grinning and switched to English herself, 'I bet they all understand English, right?'
>
> Khalida-the-Heartbreaker laughed. 'No school. More strike,' she said in English.
>
> There were whistles and applaud all around… (105)

Although indirectly, Shamsie here asserts that English is no more an elitist language to which only the privileged have access now. It is not a metropolitan *parent* language anymore, with certain standards to observe while writing or talking in it, but there are thousands of new possibilities and versions to which it can be subjected to. The way Khalida-the-Heartbreaker speaks "No school. More strike", is pure instance of the narration of what is rendered in *The Empire Writes Back* as "real life English" (1989, 54). While speaking English wrong, Khalida does not seem suffering from inferiority complex or guilt. Indirectly, she claims her authority over the language by speaking it the way she knew it best. This may emphasize another significant notion that language and identity are in turn dependent on each other. One may abrogate a *global language* and declare his/her peculiar identity, and this is the price that a world language has to pay in the end. Khalida's syntactic appropriation of English gives her power and a domineering supremacy over the language. In *The Alchemy of English*, Baraj B. Kachru (1999) says, "The alchemy of English… does not only provide social status, it also gives access to attitudinally and materially desirable domains of power and knowledge. It provides a powerful linguistic for manipulation and control" (295). Kachru is true when he says that, "The English language is not perceived as necessarily imparting only western traditions. The medium is non-native, but the message is not" (294). Thus a single language can be manipulated in myriad ways. In her research paper, Katherine Williams refers to Wilhelm Humboldt's book *On language*, where he has referred to the *energia* of language. According to him, "language is *energia*, a force born out of the peculiar energy of each culture, an unceasingly creative process that has been indelibly masked by the culture that created it" (1991, 54). Moreover, "a writer can recreate linguistic *energia* by

infusing the expressions and syntax of one language into another", thus a writer may reconstitute a particular experience by using the tools of language of one society, while still remaining faithful to the experience of another culture i.e. his own. Language is not a static phenomenon, for it is subjected to transformation through the strategy of exploitation and manipulation and thus can easily be molded for the new contexts. Language burgeons, if tilled and toiled upon. In *The Voice*, Gabriel Okara writes: "What of spoken words? Spoken words are living thing, like cocoa-beans packed with life…they will enter some insides, remain there and grow like the corn blooming on the alluvial soil at the river side." (Okara 1970, 110)

In this multi-linguist, multi-cultural world of ours, the myth of a fixed and *standard* language cannot last long. Land of language is fertile, where the complex knit of social conditions and catastrophic experiences lead to the psychic regeneration of a nation by endowing it with new ways of expression. A civilization combating the threat of imminent erasure may try to retrieve or reconstruct its culture through linguistic syncretism and thus aim at the consolidation of crumbling identity. Shamsie aims at the same in her narratives. She makes language a means and tool to consolidate the identity of her nation through her syncretic linguistic strategy of appropriation and abrogation of English. She combines her poetic English prose with Urdu words and phrases and gives her readers a glimpse of her native culture and tradition. Language has a creative potential which constructs culture by capturing the very essence of it. In *Homecoming*, Nagŭgĭ wa Thong'o defines culture as "a way of life fashioned by a people in their collective endeavor to live and come to terms with their total environment" (1986, 4). According to him, "The choice of language and the use to which a language is put is central to a people's definition of themselves in relation to the entire universe" (Thiong'o 1986, 4). Just as language remains in the process of change and continuity, culture is also not a static entity, but keeps on changing in relation to the new social institutions that keep on evolving in a society. A hybrid language thus suits the mosaic culture of a society that Shamsie depicts in her novels. Her novels show author's genuine love for her country, its traditions and its culture. In her novel, *Salt and Saffron*, Shamsie has chosen to exhibit not only the pre-Pakistan, sub-continental cultural dynamics of an aristocratic family, but also depicts as to how the new generation is evolving the received culture and taking up challenges and gearing up strength in the cross-cultural, multi-dimensional arena of Pakistan. Most of her characters belong to the higher strata of society and

keep on shuttling between their native and foreign lands. The challenge they face is that of constructing a formidable identity for them, for being a diaspora, one's identity is not only plural but also partial at the same time. Bill Ashcroft writes, "The place of a diasporic person's 'belonging' may have little to do with spatial location, but be situated in family, community, in those symbolic features which constitute a shared culture, a shared ethnicity or system of belief, including nostalgia for a distant homeland" (2001, 125).

Language is one of those symbolic features that can help a person to reformulate his belongingness with his homeland. In *Salt and Saffron* language becomes a major tool to reabsorb the traditional myths and legends in the process of self-discovery. Through language, Shamsie's characters try to affiliate themselves with the culture of their homeland, a culture that constantly slithers to merge its borders with the ever-changing world outside. In the contemporary world of fluid borders, the constant experience of rupture of identity compels one to search for a more resilient identity. Although Shamsie writes in an alien language, she makes it essentially her own by instilling it with Pakistani sensibility. Through the witty word play, she gives glimpses not only of Pakistan, but also of its people and culture. While reading *Salt and Saffron*, one frequently comes across the words like "Come to the kitchen and answer my *savaal*" (19), "I defy you to feel no stirrings of *Fakhr* and *Nazish*" (20), "whole *pultan* of my relatives" (27), "Racy *desi"* (28), "Oh *ehmuk"* (31), "you *chuker maroed* the city" (31), "suitable *adaab* position" , "*jeeti raho"* , "*Qaida Saleeqa"* (36), "*Haath mein maza hai"* (74), "home of the *zamindar"* (78), "*Bijli* failure" (85), "a huge *tamasha"* (91), "Real *musibat"* (96), "*Puloo* of her sari" (111), "*Milao-ing* your metaphors" (112), "a *Kathak* performance" , "the *ghungroo"* (116), "so sorry to arrive in this *haalat"* , "we saw Kishoo's mother yesterday and *tobah* !" (123), "cover yourself in *burkh"* (124), "small *dholkis"* (125), "Allah *ka shukar*" (126), "Mariam was some *deha"* (127), "bride's *jahe"* (128), "*nikahna"* (154) , "even distribution of *masala"* (183), "Oh *baychari* Aliya" (184), "Shaabaash chotu" (213), "what a lovely *jora* you are wearing" (205), "supply of *niswar"*, "*Leh"* (209), "*achkan* over *churidar"* (231). In all the above sentences, Shamsie uses every kind of linguistic abrogative strategy. The language becomes the tool to express the diverse cultural experience. Her peculiar expression negates the notion of centrality or authenticity of any peculiar experience. Her language stands as a material practice in search of an alternative authenticity. In words of Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin(1989), "the

syncretic and hybridized nature of post-colonial experience refutes the privileged position of a standard code in the language and any monocentric view of human experience" (41). The Urdu words that Shamsie uses are reflective of the culture that she belongs to and that she wants to represent. She uses these particular words as metaphors which are metonymic and indicative of the whole culture she talks of. The term "metonymic gap" is explained in *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies* (1998) as follows:

> The metonymic is that cultural gap formed when appropriations of a colonial language insert unglossed words, phrases or passages from a first language or concepts, illusions or references that may be unknown to the reader. Such words become synecdochic of the writer's culture ---the part that stands for the whole--- rather than the representation of the world, as the colonial language might. Thus the inserted language 'stands for' the colonized culture in a metonymic way and its very resistance to interpretation constructs a gap between writer's culture and the colonial culture. The local writer is thus able to represent his or her world to the colonizer (and others) in the metropolitan language and at same time to signal and emphasize a difference from it. In effect, the writer is saying, 'I am using your language so that you will understand my world, but you will also know by differences in the way I use it that you cannot share it. (137)

This is the kind of strategy adopted by Shamsie. When she talks of *dholkis, nikahnamas, saaris jahez, ghungroo, tikka, burkha, adaab, and achkan over choridar*, she is actually forcing all her readers around the globe into the culture and traditions that she and her country mates share. She here asserts the uniqueness and unparalleled singularity of her culture and the people who share it. The cultural gap that she depicts not only embodies the difference but is also symptomatic of ubiquitous alliance and *oness* of the nation, for language here embodies untransferable cultural experiences from which it derives words and concepts. Here, single word is the metonym of the whole culture that it signifies. The insertion of Urdu words implies the absence of meaning for the readers who do not share the same environment, circumstance and culture and the gap it signifies is significant: "By means of this gap of silence the text resists incorporation into 'English Literature' or some universal literary

mode, not because there is any inherent hindrance to someone from a different culture understanding what the text means, but because this constructed gap consolidates its difference" (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 1989, 55).

As a result of abrogation and appropriation of English, "an english emerges from English" which establishes itself as distinct and separate (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 1989, 56). Shamsie installs this difference through the process of allusion by using untranslated words of Urdu. Here she gives discreet examples of subcontinental dresses such as *saris, dhoti shalwar and butterfly shalwar* (2000, 75) and of Pakistani food at length in *Salt and Saffron* and other novels. She thus pushes her reader to engage with the unknown, even if in thoughts and imagination only. The untranslated words in *Kartography* (2002) like "Everything *thik thak"* (101), "*bakwasi* questions" (152), "inheritance *chukar*"(204), "talking like a *goonda*" (253), reminds the reader that novel is "an/ Other language" (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 1989, 64).

Another abrogative strategy that Shamsie effectively absorbs in her narrative is *syntactic relexification* applied through lexical fusions. While elaborating on relexification, Chantal Zabus (Relexification 1999) writes:

> Loretto todd's felicitous formulation--- 'the relexification of one's mother tongue , using English vocabulary but indigenous structures and rhythms' … the emphasis here is on the lexis in the original sense of speech, word or phrase and on *lexicon* in reference to the vocabulary and morphemes of a language and, by extension, to word formation. As we shall see, this concept can be expanded to refer to semantic and syntax, as well. I shall thus here redefine relexification as the making of the new register of communication out of an alien lexicon… a 'new' language is being forged as a result of the particular language-contact situation. (317)

Thus the *standard* metropolitan language constantly suggests another language when relexified and thus foregrounds its distinctiveness. By relexifying a particular language, a writer also indulges in neologisms and coins new words through lexical and syntactical fusion of two languages. Shamsie does the same in her narratives. In *Kartography*, Bunty asks Ali: "Heard you are thinking of *khiskoing* from the country." (75) We get such examples in *Salt and Saffron* too, where Samia says Aliya, "you *chuker*

maroed the city" (31), or Aliya says her grandmother, "*Milao-ing* your metaphors, Dods" (SS 112). These are not only the examples of neologism, syntactic appropriation and relexification but these also reaffirm the notion of linguistic palimpsest. As Chantal Zabus (1999) puts it: "Such texts are … palimpsests, for, behind the spiritual authority of the target European language, the earlier imperfectly erased remnants of source language are still visible" (317). Thus the target language keeps on suggesting the source language and culture, which the target language has attempted to over-write. Thus both target and source languages act as catalysts to each other. Bill Ashcroft and his colleagues suggest in *The Empire Writes Back* (1989) that the absence or gap created in the metropolitan or *standard* English by the use of native vernacular actually characterizes the reconstruction of the language. "The absence, or gap, is not negative but positive in its effect. It represents the difference through which an identity (created or recovered) can be expressed." (62) The palimpsestual language thus becomes a sight of re-inscription of identity. In her novels, Shamsie narrates the dialects of people belonging to different classes but situated in the same region. She has the ability to delineate her characters linguistically. In *Salt and Saffron*, Aliya, while sitting on the Clifton beach in Karachi, observes the street vendor chanting, "Cheeng-gum, chaklait, bubbly-gum" (212). Here Shamsie emphasizes and admits the peculiar identity of a Pakistani individual belonging to particular strata of society and also acknowledges the distinct place he occupies. To further reinstate the difference, distance and distinctiveness of all languages, Shamsie in *Salt and Saffron* unscrambles the Urdu word "Khalil" and enlightens her readers with the Urdu inscription. Shamsie connotes her words with a certain kind of emotion and asserts that certain words in a certain language carry not only a specific meaning but also release a peculiar pent up passion. Aliya says in *Salt and Saffron*:

> I traced his name on my wrist, in Urdu. Wrote the words separately
> خ ل ی ل too curvy, then put them together خلیل and traced the words over and over. In the earliest days of Islam, the drawing of portraits was forbidden...But was it possible that the ban also recognized that words have a power that remains untapped? When artists turned from portraiture to calligraphy the dazzle of their art restored to words the power to make our eyes burn with tears and longing. (99-100)

Words thus do not exist in vacuum, and are not hollow from inside; they rather stand as signifiers of the signified emotion, and carry with them certain associations. They have the ability to make our eyes burn with tears and longing. However, if a word in a foreign language has the potential to surge up an emotion in a reader who is unfamiliar with the peculiar language? How can a word, unknown to a reader may hold some meaning for him/her? How a reader may interpret the words like *addab, musibat, tobah, chakar-maroing, saleeqa and qaeda*, when he knows not Urdu language? In *Constitutive Graphonomy* (1999), Bill Ashcroft somehow answers the question like this:

> But how *does* the non-English speaker, for instance, mean anything in English? Firstly, writers, like the language are subject to the *situation*, in that they must say something *meanable*. This does not mean they cannot alter the language, to use neologically and creatively, but they are limited *as any speaker is limited* to a situation in which words have meaning. Literature, and particularly narrative, has the capacity to domesticate even the most alien experience. It does not need to *reproduce* the experience to signify its nature. The process of understanding are therefore not limited to the minds of speaker of one mother tongue and denied the speaker of another. Meaning and understanding exist outside the mind, within the engagement of speakers using the language. Understanding is not the function of what goes on in the mind at all, but the location of the word in the 'message event'--- that point at which the language, the writer and reader coincide to produce the meaning. (302)

Thus the world does not cease to exist with an unknown and unheard word ahead; rather the world further enhances and expands its horizons for the reader by the virtue of innovation, neologism and imaginative use of language. A new world is textually constructed, unfolding the reality and dilating the vision and acuity of the reader. Word constituted in a particular scene, conveys meaning through its *message event*. Through this message event, the reader is transported in to another world, new horizons and exotic scenes and places. This not only signifies the differences between cultures but also transmit the images of the world beyond certain set of images that reside in the mind of the reader.

To understand an/other language, one doesn't only need to know the signifier, the written symbol but, as Bill Ashcroft (1999) puts it,

"meaning of a word is meant by the person who utters it, and is taken to mean something by the person who hears it" (298). This is exactly what Shamsie implies in *Salt and Saffron*, when Aliya listens to her grandmother talking to one of her friends in Greek. Aliya reflects:

> Why is it that when people speak in a language you can't understand, they think all meaning is lost on you? If she'd been speaking in English she'd have lowered her voice, kept it steady, but n Greek she allowed all her emotions to write themselves across her face and in her tone. That she missed him, that Dadi's fall had given her a fright, that she and Dadi had spent the evening reminiscing with tears and with laughter, that I had some strange notion in my head which required him to find out the name of a restaurant---all this I had heard without understanding a word. (223)

Shamsie reasserts Ashcroft's notion where he says that meaning of a word is not locked anywhere. Ownership of meaning has many participants in it, the utterer or writer, the hearer or reader all are 'locked in gladiatorial contest over the ownership of meaning' (Ashcroft 1999, 298). Event of a message remains incomplete without the participation of both writer and reader. Language encodes the message that writer helps the reader to decode by putting and constituting the words in particular message event. Taken in this context, all words carry message, no matter from whatever language they are derived. If put in an appropriate context, words carry in fathomable implications within themselves which reader may de-crypt if he/she makes an attempt to pry.

In her novel *Broken Verses* (2005), Shamsie again indulges and delights in the power that words are charged with and the shades of meaning that shine through them. The title of the book itself symbolizes breakage and splintering in language, and is symptomatic of apocalyptic potential of language. Here, language works as "a living, dangerous entity" (61), which may even weaken tyranny, if one moves 'the battles towards abstract space' (336), i.e. the space of language. "Force tyranny to defend itself in language. Weaken it with public opinion with Supreme Court judgments, with debates and subversive curriculum. Take hold of the media, take hold of the printing presses and newspapers, broadcast your views from private radio channels, spread the word." (336) Words, if properly utilized, can change the fate and minds, because human consciousness is constructed through language. In *Broken Verses* the Poet's play with the language wins him his beloved. He used to say to

Aasmani that language is both "most vexing and most rewarding in its imprecision and multiplicity" (53). It is rather this imprecision and multiplicity of language that becomes rewarding source of creative energy for Shamsie. She de-centres, destabilizes and interrogates the notions of *centre* and *centrality* by using syncretic language. Just as all the experiences are multifarious in nature, language can also be subjected to multiple uses to narrate the plurality of experiences.

The intellectuals in the novel, the Poet, the activist Samina, Aasmani and Ed, the journalists and many other do not stick to one language for the peculiar expression of their emotions and feelings; they all equally share their nationalistic and anti-colonial sentiments by *polluting* English with Urdu words and sensibility. English language is abrogated here by imparting it an essentially sub-continental and eastern flavor. The Poet expresses his wonder at the unparalleled beauty that Urdu language possesses. In a letter, he writes:

> I who had always scribbled endlessly covering page after page with doodles and letters and words that merely liked to look at (you've noticed already the elaborate hand with which I've written this. I cannot bear the absence of physical beauty in the lines of English alphabets. English has lines; Urdu has curves. Perhaps my use of English is mere sign of dead libido. …But no, look, haven't I restored the splendor to this language with my near calligraphic flourishes? (BV 113) At another place, the Poet praises the alphabets of Urdu language saying that "it's a language that learned to use knife and fork, though it ripped chickens apart with its bare hands. Urdu still allows for lushness. (116)

Shamsie forces her readers to get equipped with the knowledge of Urdu Language and literature. She forces her readers into the knowledge of Urdu poetry and folk literature as she narrates the Poet's poem about Qais and Laila, which is the "reconfiguring the Laila-Majnu story" (49). Shamsie also refers to the love stories of Sassi Punoo and Saleem and Anarkali (194) in the novel. Thus throughout the novel, Shamsie keeps on covertly coercing her readers to get equipped with the unfamiliar vistas of knowledge. According to Bill Ashcroft and his colleagues (1989), through this strategy, the author, "forces the reader into an active engagement with the horizons of the culture in which these terms have meaning. The reader gets some idea about the meaning of these words from the subsequent conversation, but further understanding

will require the readers own expansion of the cultural situation beyond the text" (65). Shamsie's attempt at presenting a counter discourse as opposed to the *standard* metropolitan discourse pushes the reader into unknown, exotic and new experiences and realms. Spatial margin does not stay the marginal in her narratives, but turn out to be a stupendous source of creative energy asserting its own hegemonic plurality.

In many places, Shamsie gives references of great Muslim intellectuals of bygone eras, and thus relives their memory and accomplishments. In *Broken Verses* Aasmani writes the quiz about her "four favorite medieval Ibns" (26); Ibn Khaldun, who wrote *Muqaddamah*, Ibn Battutah, Ibn Sina, writer of *Kitab-al-Shifa*, "covering a range of subjects including metaphysics, Aritotelian logic, psychology and natural sciences" (26) and Ibn-al-Nafis. Shamsie especially appears enamored of the Arabic scholars and language as she also quotes some Arabic verses from Surah Rehman in Quran. Aasmani remembers her mother's advice, "that I should learn Arabic in order to translate the Quran into both English and Urdu, in versions free from patriarchal hierarchies" (5). Here Shamsie not only underscores the importance of interpretation and translation but also of exploring the multi-dimensionality of language and being a multilingual. While talking to Mirza, Aasmani thinks: "I was moving unthinkably between English and Urdu, as was he, and though that was common enough, it had been a while since my Urdu vocabulary and syntax heightened into that old, now vanishing courtly Urdu into which Mirza and the Poet always spoke to each other" (209). If one is equipped with the knowledge of more than one language, only then he may refute the hierarchy and fallacy of represetationist and culturally determinist perspectives.

Shamsie subtly voices the complex notions about language through her narrative strategy. Her deployment of words, Urdu or English, has significance in the situation in which she uses them. Her use of language is not only metonymic but also synechdochic, where a single signifier becomes the signified of the richness of the culture that she has made the subject of her discourse. Through appropriation and abrogation of language, she has subverted the "standard code" of English literature to somewhat a hybrid and syncretic breed of literature. The notion is explained in *The Empire Writes Back*: "We need to distinguish between what is proposed as a standard code, English (the language of erstwhile imperial centre), and the linguistic code English, which has been transformed and subverted into several distinctive varieties throughout the world" (8). Shamsie has exploited the potential versatility of English

language to its full and has used it as a gizmo to explore the cultural complexity of her land and nation. Her narratives are the site of de-colonization, where she constructs the distinctiveness and difference of the rich Pakistani culture and tradition. In words of Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (1989): "…the rich plethora of constructions and neologisms introduced by such writing continually reconstitutes that which can be called 'English literature', but is now more properly conceived as 'english literatures'" (46). In *The Empire Writes Back*, the "process of appropriation" is proclaimed as the process of "re-invasion" (70) of centre. However, in Shamsie's narratives, this process of appropriation is more like the process of re-invention and re-placement of the margin in the center and reclamation of its authenticity as real and bona fide.

Thus by using English language in particular time and space, Shamsie decolonizes it from the hierarchy of the few, seizes it to make it her very own and relocates it in her specific cultural location.

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