

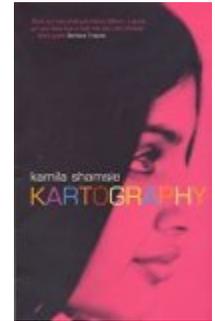
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Kamila Shamsie. *Kartography*. London: Bloomsbury, 2002. 343 pp. No price listed (paper), ISBN 978-0-7475-5730-2.

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A Mental Map of Place

The making of maps is about more than objective representation of different places and their distances from one another. It also involves tracing how different spaces have very different meanings and associations to different people. A city, and the conflict which might seem to engulf it, is lived in many different ways by the people who inhabit it. This novel sets a love story in the context of the conflict-riven Karachi of the 1980s with a back story of flash-backs to the war of 1971 which led to the independence of Pakistan's Eastern Wing as Bangladesh.

The characters in the novel are members of a party-throwing elite who are united by their privilege, their closed social circles, and their in-group language and geographies. The main protagonists are Raheen and her childhood friends, especially Karim with whom she has a will-they-won't-they romance which forms the central narrative of the novel. The story begins with the friendship of 13 year-olds who have grown up together and traces the growing attraction between the two. This relationship is disturbed by hidden family histories and different approaches to the city they live in and the political turmoil which is engulfing it. The novel examines how the different conflicts—between Bengalis and the rest of Pakistan in 1971 and between “native” Karachites and “mohajirs” or immigrants in the 1980s—can produce fissures in families and in the tight-knit social group.

As the children grow up, they begin to realize that their own parents' histories are far from simple. Raheen and Karim's parents were always friends, but swapped partners just before their marriages. The reason for this

exchange are far from clear to their children and becomes an increasingly significant question as Karim's parents' marriage begins to collapse. What emerges is a story set in the ethnic tensions produced by the 1971 war. A class-based group of friends, who can joke about those who do not have the right social credentials, fail to be immune from the ethnic hatred that rages in a country about to be split into two.

As Karim starts to piece together this story, and Raheen tries her best to avoid it, they also have to work out their own responses to the current conflict in Karachi. This time, class and the international mobility that it affords, allows them to avoid direct contact with the spiralling conflict. Yet Karim argues that this is a choice that should not be exercised. He tries to remain in touch with the city of his birth by extending his mental map of the place to include those who have a very different experience of it. He obsesses about drawing a map of the city which could have meaning outside their small social group.

The novel is written in an accessible and lively style. The mystery surrounding the parents' relationships as well as the various romantic narratives make it a page-turner. The teenagers are, perhaps inevitably, a little unconvincingly over-articulate but the dialogue is nonetheless adept and often funny. The novel raises a number of complex issues with a light touch. It enables the reader to engage with the ways in which living in times of conflict impacts the lives of even those who seem shielded from the worst effects of unrest and ethnic division. However,

the coupling of these difficult questions with a somewhat clichéd live-story does not always work. The ending was perhaps too neat, leaving a slightly sickly sweet after-taste. This is also the result of a failure to really explain or examine how, in the story of the parents' lives, instances of real and damaging ethnic prejudice are overcome seemingly so easily.

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