

In The City by the Sea: A tale of Sadness, loss and Political Instability

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Abstract: Apart from many other themes, political instability is the one that has inspired many authors to produce remarkable literary pieces in Pakistan. Kamila Shamsie's *In the City by the Sea* presents its readers the plight of the civilians who silently suffer the onslaughts of military rule. Melancholy and losses are part and parcel of such a rule. This research paper proposes to present the actual picture of Pakistani society to the readers.

Key Words: instability, riots, dictatorship, political struggle

Kamila Shamsie's first novel, *In the City by the Sea*, was published in 1998 and set in the turbulent times of General Zia ul Haq. It is a story of the heavy price that dissenting voices have to pay in a country where the military rule is the norm and democracy only an aberration. And while the writer has voiced her country's disturbances in her novels, what sets this novel apart is that she has an eleven-year-old Hasan as the protagonist, through whose eyes she sensitively portrays the times of dictatorship in her native country where house arrests, the tradition of silencing the dissenting voices, street protests, strikes, rallying, riots, curfew, mindless killings, loss and fear are the normal order of the day. And it is ruled by a sunken-eyed General who takes pleasure in house arresting and killing his critics. Hasan's uncle, Salman Haq, is a political dissenter who heads a party ACE for Anti-Corruption Enterprise. Hasan's idyllic, sheltered family life is shattered when Salman Haq is arrested and charged with treason.

Portraying a land ruled by an oppressive military regime, this eloquent, charming and quietly political novel is set in an unnamed city in Pakistan that is in the midst of a political struggle under the rule of an unnamed dictator, who is General Zia. Hasan lives a satisfying life with his loving parents, untouched by the turmoil in his city. However, this change is when Salman is put under house arrest for leading a rebel political party.

As the troubles in Pakistan worsen, Hasan sees the atmosphere of his family turning gloomy in anticipation of Salman's trial. Uncle Salman is Hasan's favourite, and in his childhood attempt to save him from being executed by the dictator, he frequently slips into a world of imagination. In several fantasy quests touching on magic realism, he carries on an imaginative journey as Sir Huss in a land of castles and dragons, knights and armours.

One early summer morning, while lazing happily on the roof, Hasan watches a young boy flying a kite fall to his death. Hasan's quiet life is riven with guilt at not having done anything to save the boy. Hasan suspects that the boy was trying to impress him by getting the kite to fly higher and therefore ignored where he was stepping. Had Hasan not been there to impress, the boy would not have tried to get the kite to go higher, would have watched his step and not fallen from the roof. The mention of his name plunges Hasan instantly into remorse and guilt, where he thinks himself to be responsible for the boy's death.

In contrast, we have a General who does not restrain himself from inflicting a death sentence on anybody who speaks against his tyranny. Studied on another plane, the novel is a study of the loss of childhood innocence that turns adults into people with sinister motives as they adorn the adult garb. Struggle for democracy under military rule, rampant violence, political life under the dictatorial regime - house arrests, protests, involvement of intelligence agencies, etc. The world of fantasy against reality is the central thematic concern of the novel. The country is driven by ethnic violence that permeates everything and makes everyday life dangerous. The story moves forward as Salman's trial date comes closer. Hasan sees how his uncle, aunt, mother, father, neighbours and others are helpless in the face of oppression by the government.

The idea of how restrictions come to govern the lives of those house arrested, a theme which is fully developed later, is given effectively right at the beginning of the novel, "Hasan had never before known the need for Presidential approval to reschedule a lunch with one's uncle" (8). Hasan's intellectual development and moral awakening are propelled by brutal, authentic history as it unravels before his eyes. The novel delineates a landscape of upheaval in terms of the city's political unrest, which progressively unveils itself as Karachi. Of the mental anguish of Hasan Coming from a political family, Hasan comes to know what dangers are in dissenting with a dictatorial regime. Here even a young boy is exposed to political currents, to the critiques of the government that the elders participate in. The lines, "The truth was out: people die because

of bullets and gravity and rope. And because a President is alive to sign the execution orders ' (183) can again directly be linked to the execution of Bhutto.

Human rights abuses, frequent use of state terror against Pakistanis in the name of Islamic punishments and law and order were common in Zia's Pakistan. The same excesses of the government are revealed when Shehryar muses on the political situation, "The government puts someone under house arrest, and you double the height of his wall to increase that prison sensation. And all at the prisoner's expense. Ah, our glorious law enforcers!" (9). Zia pacified the public against the dictatorial regime by repeatedly promising elections. Still, the polls were time and again postponed, and he ruled the country for eleven years, till his mysterious plane crash, humorously called 'hell copter' in the novel.

The violence in the country had reached levels where people had to live with it as a regular feature of their lives. The instances of people missing or killed in riots so in numerous that no family is left out from its share in this misfortune, "But at the police station the gates were locked, though men and women with sweat stains shaped 28 like continents on their clothes stuck hands and faces through the grilles of the gate and cried, 'My son ...My husband...' And one anguished cry, 'Oh God. my daughter' " (107). The dangerous regularity with which the cases of violence erupt in the country pains Salman. He sharply brings out the sheer magnitude of such incidents through the comparison of bullets with numerous stars, "There are moments, Hasan, when I like to think that the stars are bullet holes for every bullet shot by an oppressor their springs to life a star, with so great a radiance that it can never be put out, it can never be imprisoned. But if that were true, the last three months in this city would have erased every trace of blackness from the sky" (22). Lieven pointing to the grim situation of frequent violence in the country, says, "the perennial discontent of the urban masses in most of Pakistan continues to express itself not in terms of political mobilization behind new mass movements, but sporadic and pointless riots and destruction of property - including most notably the buses in which the rioters themselves have to travel every day" (29). Hasan has firsthand experience of all the violence when he is caught in it in his school. This violence is shown to have ransacked the whole fibre of Pakistan's society:

For one terrible moment, all Hasan saw was a mass of bodies, running, yelling, brandishing weapons and then . . . they're just students, he realized. Their uniforms were not of some terrorist organization, but the government-run school up the road and their weapons were twigs, stones from the roadsides and pebbles used in hopscotch games. Hasan raised his head a little. 'This is not a time for studying, this is a time for unity . . . 'Close your school. Tell your students to join our rally ' . . . Hasan blinked at the unfamiliarity of the scene. Gone: the bustle, the almost accidents, the games of chicken between the drivers and pedestrians. Gone also: the newspaper hawkers screaming out headlines that included Salman Mamoo's name, the beggars are dragging deformed limbs towards car windows, the vendors are selling smuggled goods on pavements, the fruit sellers are carving guavas into roses to show off the pink flesh. Shutters were shut at: The T-shirts store when cool teenagers thumbed through hundreds of shirts which were identical except for the foreign designer's name emblazoned across each one: the fur-shops where foreigners gaped over clothing too warm for the city's clime, the cloth shops where merchants unravelled bolts upon bolts of cotton and linen to dazzle all eyes, especially the Widow's. (26-28)

The scare of the bomb also became part indispensable in the growing up of the later generations. All these incidents of violence have become a part of the nation's conscience and seep in various dimensions into its life, "Before he had even reached the last row of chairs, Mrs Qureishi had ushered on the next orator with a speed she hadn't exhibited since the bomb scare two years earlier" (190).

The way Hasan's character sees the events is what drives forward this story of oppression and lawlessness. Through her characters, Shamsie successfully discusses the political and ethnic clashes that have plagued the city. The government also forces the closure of Saira's art gallery. The trauma of living in a house surrounded by government guards who watch over a day in and out keeping a count of every minute is felt by Hasan, "That night in the stillness of the bedroom, Hasan felt as though he was surrounded. People in uniform watching him, listening to every breath, wondering why he was not asleep" (19).

Hasan's cheerful childhood plunges into the gloom with the atmosphere around. As he searches for ways to save Salman, he, in childhood innocence in a seemingly Hamlet fashion, says he would follow the President everywhere and whisper 'murderer' in his ear until his conscience could not take it anymore. He would restore democracy just so that he could get a peaceful night's sleep in a witty manner; the writer has created the

character of Ogle, Zebra's pet dog. Ogle, an acronym for Our Glorious Leader, has similarities with General Zia. They are shown to be connected in several ways - they have the same birthday, they both have a scar above their left eyebrow, and when the President got ill, so did the puppy. The parallel is made hilarious when the dog injures its left paw; a televised interview shows Zia with a bandaged left hand. Zia's and Ogle's scratching their ears also happen at the same time.

Hasan has his first encounter with death while sitting on his roof, admiring his neighbour Azeem to fly a kite. So, involved in launching his kite, Azeem steps fatally back over the edge of his roof and crashes to his death. Hasan goes through trauma, thinking that Azeem did not look for the top to end and died because he was engaged in impressing Hasan, who watched his kite-flying intently. Hasan suspects that the boy was trying to impress him by getting the kite to fly higher and therefore ignored where he was stepping. Haunted by the finality of death, he intensely believes the accident did not happen and believes a pair of arms would catch Azeem and that one day Azeem would walk up to him and say he did it; he flew.

However, the most enjoyable part of the book is the way the author has played with the narrative, constantly shifting from Hasan's harsh reality of politically oppressed family, particularly his uncle, to his fantasies. Shamsie delves deep into young Hasan's mind and takes the reader back and forth from the reality of the world as it exists to the boy's very own private world of fantasy. Hasan's world of imagination touches on magic realism and houses his friends from another world - goblins, knights, and dragons. They help him out of his predicaments, clear his dilemmas and provide him with the much-needed elements of fun and adventure in a world gone dangerous.

As Sir Huss, he carries on a quest to defeat death or deflect it away from Salman. And in his journey, Zehra turns into the wizard Ms Zed, Najam turns into the pale knight Sir No-Jem, and Uncle Latif becomes Latif, the uncle. Also, the language changes to 'thou' and 'hast' and Latif, the uncle with his monocle, tells what to do in some exciting dialogues, "Look Lance little-told you once to avoid bad eyesight by eating carrots. You became a bugs bunny with the eyes of a hawk. I told you to avoid bad skin by rubbing lemon juice and salt on your skin. You stole all the lemons from my trees and look your skin glows like a worm" (117). The fantasy world becomes a haven for Hasan, "blue flaps of the tent slapped open. Salman Mamoo walked in. dusk fairies swarmed in front of him in a mass of wings and stringers" (168), and "A unicorn lowered his horn in greeting as he strolled past. From amidst the cluster of warriors around I fire someone with gleaming

teeth flashed a victory sign" (169). Sir Huss recalled that he was approaching alien soil, with its own rules. He cast off his knighthood. He transformed himself into Hasan, a commoner" (120) and "We're on Olympus. I'm Aphrodite - no, Artemis - and you're Hermes. We have to decide whether to exterminate the human race or not based on this party" (59). Hasan is convinced that if he can only figure out what Salman's spirit wants, he can win his precious uncle's freedom, "He just wanted arms around him and voices, too, telling him 'Hey Hasan, Huss, pehlvan, son, knobbly - knees, hussy, my dear, jaan, it's okay, but it wasn't okay, it wasn't, and maybe it would never be" (192).

The country's turbulent political environment and oppressive military rule thus infiltrate the novel as it infiltrates Hasan's sheltered world. The whole atmosphere of the struggle for democracy amidst the suffocating dictatorship comes alive in the book. It captures the essence of people struggling for democracy. Amidst the oppressive repressed voices, democratic aspirations assist. The young protagonist responds by using his imagination and creativity with his make-believe friends, including characters from Shakespeare and Arthurian legends. His incorporation of fantasy and reality is uplifting and life-affirming; it demonstrates the power of imagination to transform one's existence and helps Hasan see magic in the sultriness around.

Work Cited

Shamsie, Kamila. *In The City by The Sea*. Bloomsbury, 1998.