

Challenging the Colonial Archive of Conflict in Kamila Shamsie's *A God in Every Stone*

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This article reads Kamila Shamsie's novel *A God in Every Stone* (2014) as postcolonial historical fiction that seeks to question and complicate colonial archives of conflict – specifically, the British archives documenting the experiences of Indian sepoy in the First World War and inter-war colonial conflict in the Punjab. Taking my cue from the work of scholars such as Karin Barber, Santanu Das and others, I show the value of reading the novel with attention to the way it juxtaposes fictional ephemera on the one hand (letters, photographs, souvenirs) and fictionalised archaeological objects on the other (Gandhara statuary in the Peshawar Museum and stone edicts linked to King Asoka). By incorporating both kinds of material traces of conflict in her novel, I argue, Shamsie questions distinctions between important and unimportant histories and experiences, and highlights the significance of establishing emotional connection with the past(s) we narrate.



Introduction

This article explores how contemporary postcolonial historical fiction about the First World War engages with material culture, and particularly ephemera, to challenge, critique and augment real-life colonial archives of conflict for 21st century audiences. By colonial archives of conflict, I refer to Western archives of (former) colonial powers documenting these powers' conduct of war, including but not centring the involvement of their colonies and/or colonial subjects. I offer a case study of one historical novel, Kamila Shamsie's *A God in Every Stone* (2014), which revisits Indian involvement in the First World War by placing it in a wider context of imperial power both in temporal and geographical terms. Drawing on archival records and colonial ephemera of the period, Shamsie highlights, among other issues, the way colonial archives and narratives about the war amount to what Karin Barber has termed 'documentary forms of domination' (2006: 6), that is, documentary practices that limit not only physical freedoms but the way colonial subjects were represented in official narratives. These narratives encompass official histories, textbooks, as well as commemorative practices (such as rituals or memorials). I conceive of ephemera very broadly to include not only printed and handwritten paper items such as letters, photographs or postcards, but any small, portable items such as notebooks and souvenirs. The fictional ephemera Shamsie imagines in her novel are used to push back against colonial narratives of both Indian sepoys' experiences of the First World War and their subsequent involvement in nationalist movements.¹ In the novel, ephemera are fragile traces of the recent past that are placed alongside archaeological artefacts which constitute more durable material remnants of a distant past, highlighting throughlines of colonial domination and possible routes of resistance from antiquity to the early 20th century.

A central theme of Shamsie's *A God in Every Stone* is the material culture that documents the affective, personal experience of conflict from antiquity to the inter-war period, and the way this material culture links to the writing of history, both in terms of what is included and what is omitted. This article looks at Shamsie's novel in the context of the First World War and its aftermath in modern-day Northern India and Pakistan. For Indian sepoys, the experience of fighting in the First World War was not a stand-alone experience of conflict, but part of a matrix of pre- and post-war colonial conflict and violence. In her article on colonial soldiers serving in the British Army in the immediate aftermath of the First World War, Samraghni Bonnerjee notes:

¹ My broad definition of ephemera follows archivists' understanding of ephemera, which centres on the qualities and intended purposes of ephemeral materials as well as their non-standard forms, and includes, to cite archivist Michael K. Organ, 'non-printed materials and objects such as flags, clothes, glasses, badges and medals' besides print ephemera (Organ 1987, 106).

Indigenous veterans from the colonies returned home from the First World War to witness and be subjected to the reimposition of colonial force. The process of demobilisation [...] was also complicated in non-settler colonial societies (like India), where British soldiers shifted their function and purpose from fighting in a major war to, in the 1918–1920 moment (and beyond), maintaining colonial power and quelling anticolonial insurgency (Bonnerjee, 2022: 82–83).

In the last decade or so a small number of authors of historical fiction – virtually all writers of colour – have begun to unpack the connections between the First World War and the imperialist violence that preceded and followed it.² Although Brigitte Johanna Glaser rightly notes that there has been a ‘striking number of texts dealing with the First World War’ in postcolonial imaginative writing in recent decades, these have mostly been limited to former settler colonies Australia, Canada and New Zealand (Glaser, 2014: 427), all of which have rich official archives documenting their involvement in the conflict. Because Shamsie writes about the Indian experience of the First World War and its aftermath via material traces – letters, notebooks, photographs, archaeological objects – she pushes back against the limits of the Western colonial archives that have been informing canonical narratives about the war for over a century. Her novel portrays colonial administration and the academic discipline of archaeology alike as tools of colonial oppression that can be resisted or circumvented by colonial subjects’ subversive personal responses to, and uses of, the artefacts generated by administrative and archaeological practice. Whereas the novel’s use of archaeology to explore the wide-reaching impact of imperialist and colonialist thought has been well studied, its attention to ephemera has not attracted attention to date.³ This article connects both of these avenues used by Shamsie to critique colonialist narratives about the First World War and the war’s aftermath in British colonial India.

A God in Every Stone has been marketed and reviewed in the UK primarily as a novel about the First World War – as Shamsie noted when she contrasted the novel’s reception in the UK with that in India and Pakistan in a 2021 interview (Fox, 2021: 27). However, various critics have recognised that it is not so much a war novel as a novel that takes the war as a starting point to offer a broader critique of imperialist and colonial violence as a pre- and post-war continuum. Maggie Ann Bowers reads the

² Anna Branach-Kallas’s monograph *Decolonizing the Memory of the First World War: The Poetics and Politics of Centenary Interventions* (Routledge, 2024), offers the most comprehensive study of postcolonial contemporary historical fiction dealing with the war to date.

³ Three critics to date have paid sustained attention to *A God in Every Stone*, including its use of archaeology as a framework to discuss colonial war experience: Maggie Ann Bowers (2015), Tara Talwar Windsor (2020) and Anna Branach-Kallas (2024). The novel also receives brief mention in Santanu Das’s *India, Empire, and First World War Culture* (2018).

novel alongside Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* (1992) as an example of anti-colonial historical fiction that interrogates and exposes 'European attitudes towards history, colonialism and nationalism' (Bowers, 2015: 185), and notes the importance of Herodotus as a touchstone of European historical thinking in both novels. Tara Talwar Windsor argues for an understanding of the novel as not simply an exercise in narrative recuperation of a forgotten past, but a more comprehensive attempt to dismantle the idea of singular stories competing for attention in our historical consciousness: as Windsor argues, 'Shamsie takes up the existing memory discourse and not only inserts neglected stories and perspectives, but also shifts and reframes familiar themes and motifs' (2020: 234). Anna Branach-Kallas, meanwhile, stresses that '*A God in Every Stone* is a war novel which depicts the long-lasting sequels of the global conflict in British India, yet it is also a novel about Peshawar [...] as a site of Persian, Greek, Buddhist and Islamic cultures' (2024: 114), and argues that Shamsie's emphasis on Peshawar as part of a millennia-long history of imperial conquest and resistance is in the service of decolonising our understanding of the First World War alongside our Eurocentric understanding of history more generally. My article furthers these readings of the novel by proposing that the links Shamsie establishes between ephemera and archaeological objects as affective traces of the past on the one hand, and telling stories about conflict and empire on the other, are a core part of her critique of those historical narratives about the First World War that leave out its connection to colonialism and its long tail of violence.

Linking imperial histories of conflict

A God in Every Stone offers a multiperspectival panorama of the experience and aftermath of the First World War in relation to three entities or groups commonly sidelined in mainstream British commemoration and the canon of war literature alike: first, the Ottoman Empire as a major player in the war (with special reference to the genocide of ethnic Armenians linked to the Ottoman war effort); second, women who rejected the accepted wartime roles of military nurse or war worker; and finally, Indian soldiers, veterans and civilians embroiled in the British war effort and its aftermath. In this article, I focus primarily on the parts of the novel dealing with British colonial India. The story of Indian sepoys serving in the First World War has been told to and for British audiences to a greater extent than the war experiences of other colonial subjects, such as East African askaris. Nevertheless, the diverse experiences of different groups of Indian sepoys, let alone labourers, are not well or widely known in Europe. Shamsie's novel, published in the first year of the First World War centenary commemorations, was the first successful mainstream novel to tell the story of 'Indian' war experience

explicitly for anglophone Western audiences from the perspective of Indian soldiers since Anand's *Across the Black Waters*, as both Talwar Windsor (2020: 231) and Branach-Kallas (2024: 113) note. This is surprising given that, in Das's words, the 'colour of First World War memory in Britain today is no longer white; the Indian sepoy have in recent years been more visible than ever before' (2018: 406). Yet the dearth of 21st-century literary representations of the war from the perspective of the Indian sepoy perhaps owes much to the corresponding dearth of archival documentation capable of conveying the Indian experience of war as actually experienced by Indian soldiers. Das argues that sepoys who experienced the war 'have been doomed to wander in the no man's land between the Eurocentric narratives of the "Great War and modern memory" and nationalist histories of India' (2018: 16). This is because material documenting their experiences has long languished in private homes and various larger and smaller archives and museums until the war's centenary finally sparked renewed interest in Indian war stories. As is the case elsewhere, educated middle- and upper-class perspectives are overrepresented in the written records, and the multilingual and multiethnic nature of the British Indian army imposes further barriers to access, certainly for anglophone writers and researchers.

Besides recalling many elements of Anand's *Across the Black Waters* (1940) and *The Sword and the Sickle* (1942), parts two and three of the author's *Lalu* trilogy, Shamsie's historical novel also expressly draws on existing archival sources that are actually accessible to writers based in Britain, such as extant archives of censored letters by Indian sepoys – David Omissi's collected volume of Indian soldiers' letters is credited in Shamsie's acknowledgements. As Branach-Kallas notes, Shamsie 'also found an important source of inspiration in Mukulika Banerjee's book *The Pathan Unarmed: Opposition and Memory in the North West Frontier* (2000), largely based on interviews with surviving veterans of Khudai Khidmatgar' (2024: 113). Though not necessarily explicitly acknowledged, there are also clear echoes of other documentary evidence, such as contemporary photographs of Peshawar's Qissa Khwani neighbourhood, and ephemera such as '*Indian Military Hospital: Royal Pavilion Brighton 1914–1915*, a propaganda booklet in three languages, Urdu, Hindi and Gurmukhi', as noted by Branach-Kallas (2024: 116). And finally, the novel ends with a partial transcription of a document relating to the aftermath of the 1930 Qissa Khwani Massacre in Peshawar, a central event in the novel, which is part of the India Office Records, now held at the British Library. While recognising the complexity of the novel and its intertexts, in the following, I focus specifically on the way Shamsie engages with material traces of conflict and their relationship to historical storytelling: namely, the potential for these traces to throw established narratives into question. Through their affective potential

and their openness to decontextualisation and re-interpretation, which presents both a risk and an opportunity, archaeological artefacts and ephemera alike are used by Shamsie to complicate and challenge canonical historical and literary narratives. The interactions of Shamsie's protagonists with physical traces of the recent and distant past, and their use of these material artefacts to shape their own stories about war and colonial violence, afford the reader a greater understanding of not only the First World War in a colonial context but also that conflict's place in a much larger web of violence.

A God in Every Stone begins and ends with a narrative that underpins the First World War plot, even though it takes place centuries earlier: the story of the Carian explorer Scylax, who 'discovered' Peshawar (then Caspatyrus) for the Persian emperor Darius I, but later turned against Darius in support of his own people. The brief narrative in the opening pages of the novel outlines Scylax's journey to Caspatyrus, while the closing pages relate his encounter with Darius's widow many years later, who has come to find and punish Scylax for betraying his erstwhile benefactor. The re-imagined story of Scylax, set apart in different font and later revealed to be the imaginative writing of one of Shamsie's protagonists, Najeeb Gul, precedes and follows the main story. The typewriter font used for these two sections deliberately recalls the physical appearance of ephemera, imitating the authority of official records for something that turns out to be a subversive re-imagining of history that may or may not be based on facts in the first place. The story of Scylax and Darius, taken from the work of Herodotus, the so-called 'Father of History', underpins all elements of Shamsie's novel and serves to weave together and connect the different threads of the main plot, which takes place between 1914 and 1930. The link with Herodotus also emphasises, moreover, the novel's critique of the kinds of materials out of which Western, European history is commonly fashioned: classical European antiquity and its remnants, taken up by Western historians and archaeologists (including one of the novel's protagonists), is pitched against other modes of telling stories about the past, specifically in the context of imperialism – a connection Bowers, Talwar Windsor and Branach-Kallas explore in detail in their work on this novel. It is significant, too, that – as David Farley points out – Herodotus himself 'was writing between two wars: the Persian Wars, which ended when he was still young, and the Peloponnesian War, the beginning of which he lived long enough to witness' (2010: 21–22). Like Shamsie's protagonists, Herodotus' fashioning of history occurs against the backdrop of war and imperialism.

The plot of the novel proper begins in 1914 in the Ottoman Empire, where one of the main protagonists, a young Englishwoman called Vivian Rose Spencer (Viv), has joined Tahsin Bey, a Turkish archaeologist who is also an old friend of her father's, for a dig in Labraunda relating to their shared interest in the history of Scylax and Darius.

This section of the novel builds on the opening narrative and introduces Herodotus as a touchstone for critiquing both the history of writing history, and the intertwined nature of imperialism and history. Viv falls in love with the older Tahsin Bey, who confides in her about his Armenian roots just before they are parted by the outbreak of war. Viv hurriedly returns home and is persuaded to betray Tahsin Bey's secret Armenian sympathies to British intelligence as a means of aiding the British war effort, learning only later that her betrayal led to her lover's assassination at the hands of the Ottoman authorities. Viv attempts to please her father by signing up to nurse injured soldiers and is so traumatised by her experience that her mother intervenes and enables her to travel to British India instead to pursue archaeological enquiries in Peshawar, in a location highlighted to Viv by Tahsin Bey as a site of interest in his quest for a lost artefact, a silver circlet gifted to Scylax by Darius I.

By beginning the novel in the Ottoman Empire rather than in Britain, Shamsie decentres her narrative straight away, a strategy furthered by moving from Viv to Lance-Naik Qayyum Gul, a young Pashtun serving as a non-commissioned officer in the British Army whose story is interwoven with Viv's nursing experience and journey to Peshawar. We are first introduced to Qayyum on his arrival in France with his regiment. On first seeing action near Ypres, Qayyum sustains a serious injury that costs him one of his eyes and results in his early return to Peshawar. Qayyum is saved by his friend Kalam Khan and spends time recuperating in the Royal Pavilion Hospital for Indian soldiers in Brighton, where he is fitted with a glass eye before being discharged home. While in Brighton, Qayyum experiences racist imperial policies, including restrictions on Indian soldiers' movements and the removal of female nurses from Indian war hospitals. These experiences lay the groundwork for his later turn towards campaigning for India's independence from the British empire.

Qayyum's story not only offers a counterpoint to Viv's white British perspective, but also introduces a different strand of storytelling. Where Viv's story is closely entwined with the writing of history on a grand temporal scale, reaching back to the ancient world, Qayyum's is intimately connected with telling personal stories. While in Brighton, Qayyum assists fellow wounded sepoys as a scribe, since he is literate in Pashto and Hindko, as well as being able to speak (though not write) some English. In this, Qayyum follows in the footsteps of his father, a professional scribe who works from a stall in Peshawar's market. Following his return home, Qayyum supplements the family income and his military pension by working as a scribe but feels this work to be degrading compared to his former military career. Although he continues to long for the sense of fulfilment and companionship of his service with the 40th Pathans and resists the calls of Kalam (who has likewise returned home, having deserted from the British

Army) to join him in armed insurgency, Qayyum increasingly begins to question British colonial and military presence in the region. He eventually joins Abdul Ghaffār Khān's peaceful resistance movement, the Khudai Khidmatgar, to help educate and organise the local population around their native languages and heritage. His commitment to the Khudai Khidmatgar serves to tell a story of Peshawar and the Pashtuns that rejects British narratives of Pashtun violence and volatility linked to the so-called martial races ideology that underpinned British Army recruitment practices.⁴

Finally, the stories of Viv and Qayyum, who arrive in Peshawar on the same train in the summer of 1915, are connected by Qayyum's younger brother, Najeeb, who meets Viv at the train station by accident and becomes her guide and pupil. Educated in an English Mission School, Najeeb is hungry for the Western and classical education that Viv can offer, and after initial bewilderment picks up her passion for archaeology and the history that links his home region with ancient Greece and the Persian Empire. Tutored initially by Viv and, once Viv returns to London, by employees of the Peshawar Museum and then at Islamia College, Najeeb himself becomes an archaeologist and a noted expert on the Gandhara history and artefacts that first connected him with the story of Scylax and Herodotus over which he and Viv bonded. As Bowers points out, Najeeb is temporarily seduced by the primacy of Western, imperialist narratives about the past and 'neglects the need to produce a history of India of its own, allowing the British to create their own imperial history which promotes their superiority' (2015: 192). However, by the end of the novel, Najeeb (to cite Branach-Kallas) 'becomes involved in epistemic decolonization – he abandons imperial tools to dismantle Eurocentric research methodologies and the historical records of empire' (2024: 131) and comes to appreciate the power of shaping narratives of the past from the perspective of Pashtuns and Peshawaris.

The three main characters are reunited in 1930, when Viv returns to Peshawar at Najeeb's invitation to undertake the dig for Scylax's lost circlet that she was unable to pursue in 1915. Viv's return coincides with the Qissa Khwani massacre, a violent confrontation between unarmed Pashtun protesters (including the Khudai Khidmatgar of whom Qayyum is a part) and the British Army in April 1930, in which dozens of civilians, including women and children, were killed, as well as one white British soldier. Najeeb becomes embroiled in the violence by accident, and Qayyum and Viv finally meet in the aftermath of the massacre as they search for Najeeb together, discovering in the

⁴ First articulated by Frederick Sleight Roberts, First Earl Roberts, in the 1880s, martial races ideology held that certain 'races' were culturally, biologically and psychologically more suited to fighting than others – which, as Heather Streets (2004) explores in detail, included not only Pashtuns and other North Indian colonised subjects, but those closer to home, most prominently Scottish Highlanders.

process shocking details about the British administration's hurried anonymous burial of the bodies of dead civilians. In this final part of the novel, the main characters' stories intersect with one final set of characters, two young Pashtun sisters-in-law, Diwa and Zarina, whose stories become entangled with those of Najeeb, Qayyum and Viv when first Diwa and Najeeb, then Najeeb and Zarina, and finally Qayyum, Viv and Zarina cross paths during and after the massacre. Diwa is killed during the eruption of violence in the act of retrieving Scylax's silver circlet for Najeeb and is one of the dead removed and hastily buried by the British authorities. The circlet that Najeeb had uncovered for Viv, stained by Diwa's blood, is ultimately buried by Zarina in lieu of being able to bury her sister-in-law's body. Through this act of defiance and obliteration, Zarina connects Peshawari resistance to British rule in the novel's present with Scylax's centuries-old resistance to Persian imperialism.

Pushing back against the colonial archives

The intricate plot of Shamsie's novel connects historical moments, between different empires past and present, and between those who resist imperial power and those who act as its apologists. As Branach-Kallas suggests, citing Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, whereas 'imperialism works by "separating the histories of people and objects precisely at the moment that these people and objects are forced to share one history" [...], in *A God in Every Stone* potential history reconnects them all as victims of imperial violence' (2024: 131). The novel is also, however, a sustained attempt at offering alternatives to the enduring stranglehold of imperial, colonialist narratives on the story of the First World War and its aftermath in India, specifically the independence movements of the inter-war period. The parts of the novel set in Peshawar offer alternatives to the colonial archive and its rendition of events by approaching the events portrayed by the British authorities through alternative means of storytelling and documentation.

In her discussion of Shamsie's novel as a decolonial text, Branach-Kallas uses Azoulay's understanding of photography as an oppressive imperial tool that is 'forcing us to remember a selected vision while erasing others' to explore Shamsie's alternative construction of memory.⁵ Yet photography underpins a key component

⁵ While photographs are notably absent, letters are one of the most important categories of ephemera in *A God in Every Stone*. This tallies with the real-life importance of Indian soldiers' letters: despite the fact that far fewer letters of Indian soldiers survive compared to their European counterparts, and despite the often invoked challenges of illiteracy among sepoys, Das notes that 'the translated and censored letters by the sepoys' are nevertheless still our 'main sources of information' about Indian lives at war in this period (2018: 204). An unspoken presence through the first part of the novel are the censors' archives of translated transcripts of letters by Indian soldiers, now held in the British Library, on which Shamsie's work clearly draws, both in its descriptions of the sepoys' experiences on the Western front and in the scribal practices it portrays.

of Shamsie's novel, albeit not in the way we might expect, and links indirectly to the novel's use of Herodotus and the story of Scylax as a framing device and foil for the Pashtun independence movement and its challenge to the British empire. Frequent references to Herodotus are symbolic of a merging of storytelling and the writing of history, including an awareness that not all of Herodotus' 'histories' were his to tell – in one instance, Herodotus is described as a thief of the stories of others, appropriating Scylax's own written narrative account, itself now lost to posterity (Shamsie, 2014: 22). Towards the beginning of the novel Tahsin Bey tells a dramatic campfire story in praise of the ancient Carians' rebellion against the Persian empire, in which he strays close to revealing his Armenian sympathies. This tense moment introduces the danger inherent in telling stories that deviate from approved narratives: Scylax's story in the context of the Persian empire is dangerous because it speaks to the Armenian story in the context of the Ottoman empire (Shamsie, 2014: 17–18, 30). Scylax's story, forgotten but for Herodotus' theft of his material, also illustrates the vulnerability of dissident stories to being effaced, altered or co-opted, even when they are written down.

In the final sections of the novel, Shamsie demonstrates the rewriting of history in the making, namely a peaceful protest being re-cast as a violent riot by the colonial authorities to justify their killing of civilians. The power of such storytelling is evident in the present well beyond the confines of Shamsie's novel, and Shamsie writes an account of the Qissa Khwani incident that overtly challenges the British narrative of the Peshawar 'riots' as a violent uprising. It is here that photography becomes a useful lens through which to approach Shamsie's historical fiction. Anyone currently consulting the online collections of the National Army Museum in London will find, among other items illustrating British rule in colonial India, a number of digitised contemporary photographs documenting colonial Peshawar in the early 20th century, including three that capture the moment of the 1930 uprising. Among these is one of two photographs titled 'Riots in Peshawar, 1930', which serves as an ideal illustration of the narrative Shamsie's novel pushes back against. The photographs, and the way they have been preserved, digitised and described by NAM, constitute a 'documentary [form] of domination' in Barber's terms; the photos privilege the perspective of the British colonial army, and the explanatory captions frame them in such a way as to support the coloniser's view of events as a riot rather than a massacre.⁶ The photograph I refer

⁶ All three photographs appear to stem from an album of photographs 'compiled by C G S Clarke, 1st King George's Own Bengal Sappers and Miners, 1930-1931', cited as the source of the second image showing soldiers marching down a street in the Old Town either before or after the 'riots' that is also featured in the National Army Museum's online collections, 'Riot control duties in Peshawar, 1930', Photograph, India, North West Frontier, 1930, National Army Museum, NAM. 1977-02-39-3, accessible at: <https://collection.nam.ac.uk/detail.php?acc=1977-02-39-3>.

to shows rows of armed, uniformed British soldiers facing away from the camera and down a street in the Old Town of Peshawar, with an empty stretch of dusty street and two vehicles, one of which is armoured, in the foreground.⁷ On the right hand side of the image, a row of houses is visible, recognisable as business premises by the awnings and signs at ground level, while the upper stories are residential, with carved balconies and some Peshawari onlookers just visible on roof terraces. The vantage point of the image, taken at street level and a short distance behind the rows of soldiers blocking access to and view of the street beyond, conveys a massive military presence that suggests a need for military intervention, but the photograph offers no sense of what is actually happening in Qissa Khwani Bazaar (or Street of Storytellers in the novel) beyond the lines of soldiers.

The text accompanying the image carefully sanitises the events of the massacre and implies that the fault for subsequent events rested with Ghaffār Khān as a ‘political agitator’ who ‘began to arouse the Pathans’, despite acknowledging that the ‘paramilitary body known as the “Red Shirts”’ he formed was, in fact, ‘unarmed’ (Riots in Peshawar, 1930). The second of the two paragraphs contextualising the image likewise succeeds in placing blame for the incident on the Khudai Khidmatgar, portraying the colonial administration and military leadership as having their hands forced by the actions of Khān’s followers, who are being conflated with other armed groups of insurgents operating at the same time: ‘Though the movement drilled openly and preached sedition and violence along the Frontier’, notes the description, ‘no action was taken until the authorities felt compelled to arrest its leaders at a huge rally in Peshawar on 23 April. The action provoked savage rioting which the Police were unable to contain and military assistance was requested.’ The caption of a third, related image in this digital collection, titled ‘Riot Control Duties in Peshawar, 1930’, makes the even more explicit claim that British Indian army troops were ‘forced at one point to open fire on the rioters’ [my emphasis]. The clear implication is that any violence which occurred was retaliatory and instigated by Pashtuns, not the British military. The photographs and their accompanying text alike engage in an act of storytelling that asserts a colonialist narrative and disempowers Peshawar’s own story. This colonialist story is the more powerful because it has the weight of established institutions behind it: the National Army Museum, as well as others such as the British Library, which holds the India Office Records that Shamsie consulted as part of the research for her novel. As Windsor points out, the paperback edition of *A God in Every Stone* concludes not with the ‘fictionalized historical document’ of Scylax’s story, fabricated by Najeeb, but with an

⁷ ‘Riots in Peshawar, 1930’, Photograph, India, North West Frontier, 1930, National Army Museum, NAM. 1977-02-39-1, accessible at: <https://collection.nam.ac.uk/detail.php?acc=1977-02-39-1>.

actual archival document: ‘an “End Note”, which presents an official British account relating to the disposal of bodies after the 1930 massacre, complete with a British Library reference number’ (2020: 232). While engagement with the archival photographs is implied, Shamsie’s engagement with this latter account makes the ‘official’ narrative that the novel’s portrayal of the Qissa Khwani massacre challenges explicit.

Counteracting the colonialist narrative, Shamsie’s fictionalised re-creation of the incident, which is relayed through the various perspectives of her protagonists, takes us behind the rows of massed soldiers in the NAM photograph referenced above. Shamsie leads us onto the roof terraces and balconies, challenging the story of Pashtun militancy by showing us a version of events in which unarmed men, women and children are killed and their dead bodies removed and buried anonymously to gloss over the culpability of the colonial apparatus, much as the archival image and accompanying description set out to do. While the surviving images force us, quite literally, to adopt the blinkered vantage point of the colonial authorities, the novel penetrates the obfuscation of colonial and military archives to flip our perspective. British colonial photography thus provides the unspoken foil to Shamsie’s version of events. The imperialist story of the Qissa Khwani massacre, embodied by the photographs in NAM’s digital collections, is the catalyst for Shamsie’s own storytelling that pushes back at the official version of events as portrayed by the colonial authorities and the British institutions that perpetuate a version of events that casts anti-colonial resistance as the aggressor rather than the victim.

It is telling that photographs, which form such a mainstay of British and generally Western war memory, are notable by their relative absence in the novel. In the context of post-war Peshawar, photographs are clearly identified as a luxury beyond the grasp of most Peshawaris. Among the items Qayyum distributes on behalf of the sepoy in his regiment upon his return home from the war, only one is a photograph, and that depicts not the sender himself, but ‘a female aviator’ (Shamsie, 2014: 127). Rather than a personal photograph, it is presumably a postcard sold for the novelty value of depicting a woman transgressing gender boundaries. Later in the novel, when Najeeb is missing in the aftermath of the massacre in the Street of Storytellers, his family and neighbours are ‘striding around the Walled City with his photograph in hand, knocking on doors, saying, Have you seen this man?’ (Shamsie, 2014: 313). The luxury of possessing this means of identification is highlighted when ‘a very old woman touched the photograph and said, You’re lucky to have this; my son is missing and all his father can do to try and find him is take our daughter to unveil herself in front of strangers and say imagine if she were a boy’ (Shamsie, 2014: 314). Such marking out of photographs as unusual also obliquely draws attention to the fact that in Peshawar, memories of the war and those

lost in it are likely to have been preserved by different means than in, say, the British context, where the soldier's portrait photograph on the mantelpiece was a staple in many homes.

In *A God in Every Stone* – bearing out Das's call for a 'redefining of the "archive"' in relation to Indian First World War experience (2018: 23) – the personal archives by which Indian families remember their loved ones take on a variety of forms and extend beyond photographs, letters and official documents to a range of other items, many of which are mass-produced and imbued with meaning primarily through emotional investment. On his return to Peshawar following his medical discharge from the army, Qayyum is the bearer of numerous souvenirs entrusted to him by other Pathan soldiers alongside verbal messages to their families. These trifling souvenirs are invested with an emotional significance above and beyond their surface value as curiosities. We are told that any 'object he brought with him – pebble or bullet or photograph – was passed from hand to hand as if it were a piece of the Black Stone brought by the angel Jibreel himself' (Shamsie, 2014: 138), suggesting that these items will be kept and treasured as a link to the absent loved one. In one case, news of the death of the sender of the souvenir has already preceded Qayyum's arrival, further heightening the importance of the object. The novel's evocation of religious relics echoes the often quasi-religious nature of post-war mourning as described in Western war writing, where visits to war graves become pilgrimages and personal objects can take on significance as part of personal shrines.⁸

The meaning of these items in the novel is, moreover, multivalent, as they hold different emotional significance for the senders, the recipients and for Qayyum as their bearer. After a description of the items ('a pebble from Brighton with a rose painted onto it; a photograph of a female aviator; a medal; a bullet compacted by bone; a scrap of paper with a name on it in the ragged writing of someone learning to hold a pen for the first time; a teddy bear with buttons from a soldier's uniform in place of eyes'), we learn that for Qayyum, they mark a sharp dividing point between his identity as a non-commissioned officer and a civilian: 'When the objects were distributed it would be the end of his service to the Army' (Shamsie, 2014: 127). This is an end point Qayyum dreads, but the narrative hints that it is also a moment of transition that (at least to a certain extent) represents a psychic and/or emotional release: as Branach-Kallas suggests, 'Qayyum's transformation involves a shift in loyalties which requires radical condemnation of his former self as an imperial soldier' (2024: 119). The process of

⁸ For a detailed exploration of battlefield visits as pilgrimage, see e.g. David Lloyd's comparative account in *Battlefield Tourism: Pilgrimage and the Commemoration of the Great War in Britain, Australia and Canada, 1919-1939* (Oxford: Berg, 1998).

handing the souvenirs to the families for whom they were intended is, for Qayyum, a transitional period in which he gradually sheds his military identity and his perceived duty to empire, and reacquaints himself with his identity as a Pashtun, not an officer in the 40th Pathans. The objects Qayyum carries connect him both to his military identity as an NCO with responsibility for the sepoy's serving under him, and to his personal identity as a Pashtun among Pashtuns, a son and brother like the men whose gifts he delivers. The souvenirs he carries thus lead him to alter the story he tells about himself and his identity, and in the process, the reader's understanding of the story of the First World War, extending it both in its temporal and geographical reach.

Archaeology and storytelling as a force of resistance

The novel's emphasis on storytelling is not incidental to its main setting, the city of Peshawar. Peshawar is not only a city rich in conflicting histories of empires – beginning with the Persian empire of Darius I, then Alexander the Great's empire, and finally the British empire – it is also a city that values and celebrates storytelling. Early in the novel, as Qayyum is speaking to a fellow Indian NCO at the front, the other man says, when he learns that Qayyum is from Peshawar: 'Do you think one day they'll tell stories about us in the street of storytellers?' (Shamsie, 2014: 59). This reference establishes Peshawar as the centre of a lively oral culture of storytelling in the form of *badalas* (narrative poems), a recurring theme developed further throughout the novel and culminating in Najeeb's devising, with the help of an experienced storyteller, of a new *badala* about Darius and Scylax. When Viv first arrives in Peshawar, one of the places Najeeb shows her is the 'famed Street of Storytellers' (Shamsie, 2014: 100).⁹

Raised with a mixture of Western education and traditional Peshawari storytelling culture, the young Najeeb takes to telling himself stories of the past, inspired by the museum exhibits to which Viv introduces him, as when he 'walked through the Hall of Statues, a prince visiting his frozen brothers, all under an enchantment which it was his destiny alone to lift' (Shamsie, 2014: 156). Najeeb's imaginings offer up a multi-layered array of associations, from pointers to history as storytelling (as highlighted by the novel's frequent invocation of Herodotus and Scylax), to reclaiming the past through imagination, to drawing on Pashtun and Islamic traditions of folktales, since Najeeb's interpretation of the statues owes much to the stories he has been listening to in the Street of Storytellers.

⁹ A *qissa* is a type of Punjabi oral storytelling, related to the Arabic for 'fable'. The Urdu name of this street, *Qissa Khwani*, translates literally as 'story-tellers' market', which Shamsie translates as the 'Street of Storytellers'

In Viv's mind, tinged with the coloniser's gaze and supposed European superiority, Najeeb represents a living, embodied heritage linked to the Gandhara objects and monuments contained in the British-run Peshawar Museum. She draws explicit parallels between Najeeb, Herodotus and Scylax, musing that 'She might yet find a Herodotus in this city with its Street of Storytellers and its centuries of Greek influence' (Shamsie, 2014: 102). Yet where Viv sees a delightful connection to the historians of old, Najeeb's family recognises his enthusiasm for ancient history as a mixed blessing, aligned as it is with colonial influence. His brother Qayyum, for instance, responds with a mixture of amusement and concern to Najeeb's view that the Peshawari storytellers do not know many stories of ancient Peshawar, 'smiling' at the notion that Najeeb might tell an experienced storyteller how to do their job, but also worried that the 'better story than any of the old tales' Najeeb claims to know might be 'something he'd picked up at the Mission School' (Shamsie, 2014: 142).

One important lesson that both Najeeb and Viv learn pertains to the limitation of storytelling and history in relation to the everyday. In the 1915 section of the novel, Najeeb observes a small drama take place involving a little girl whose mother, he learns, is trying to prevent her being married off to a murderous spouse as soon as she is old enough, and reflects as he walks away: 'I know the stories of men from twenty-five hundred years ago, but I'll never know what happens to you' (Shamsie, 2014: 160). Likewise, Viv – who observes the second half of the drama around the little girl, her mother and the carpet-seller to whom she turns for help – understands that everydayness and storytelling are linked and that although the everyday provides the raw material of stories (and of history) not all of it can be moulded into a narrative that makes sense: 'A woman stands in the shade of a tree. A man surveys the street below him while eating an apple. Somewhere in there was a story which Viv didn't know how to imagine' (Shamsie, 2014: 190). As readers, we do learn how the story ends, as we find out in the final section of the novel that the little girl is Zarina, now married to the carpet-seller's son and mourning her sister-in-law Diwa, killed in the Qissa Khwani massacre. Viv and Najeeb, however, never discover this connection, and the novel makes clear that the story of Diwa and Zarina, two ordinary Peshawari women, will disappear without a trace, unlike the stories of important men. In their transitoriness, these everyday experiences and encounters echo the fleetingness of ephemera, though they are preserved here within the larger fabric of the novel. Yet, as the novel observes, it is the everyday that matters most of all and most deserves to be valued. This importance of the mundane is illustrated most poignantly in a scene where Qayyum's father rebuts a man sent to recruit Qayyum, who sneers at him for sitting '[u]nder a tree, writing letters from a man to his brother complaining about flour prices', by observing that 'there is nothing in the world more important than flour prices' (Shamsie, 2014: 155).

The subversive quality of storytelling is also illustrated in the novel through the fact that alongside older mythological and folk tales like *Laila Majnu*, Peshawari storytellers also offer a *badala* on ‘Hadda Mulla’s jihad against the English’ (Shamsie, 2014: 142). The existence of this *badala*, which tells the story of the late 19th century uprising of the local Mohmand tribe against the British, points to oral storytelling as both a topical and a political genre, not simply a quaint folk tradition. As Farina Mir observes of Punjabi *quisse*, such texts, in the oral tradition, are ‘more than literary texts, and more than popular entertainment’, as a medium that was ‘central to constructing and narrating historical imaginations’ (2010: 4) in the context of colonisation. Later in the novel, we learn that by 1930, ‘Darius and the Betrayal of Scylax’ has become ‘a familiar and well-loved tale’ (2014: 341–342) in Shamsie’s fictionalised version of the Street of Storytellers, thanks to Najeeb’s collaboration with a professional storyteller – but with new verses that transparently link Scylax’s rebellion against the Persian empire with the Pashtun independence movement against the British, which Najeeb suspects originate with his brother Qayyum.¹⁰ This subversive fictional *badala* serves in the novel as a reverse example of more powerful histories overwriting earlier stories, demonstrated in the novel not just through Herodotus’s appropriation of Scylax’s tales, but also through the example of British names superseding Indian ones, which in turn superseded more ancient names (Shamsie, 2014: 82). Yet as the framing story of Scylax and Darius indicates, the names Viv hopes to reclaim are themselves names imposed by empires, albeit different ones.

In the framework of the novel, archaeology (which broadly encompasses ancient history as well) is introduced as but another form of storytelling about the past, and one that is grounded in encounters with objects on the one hand, and aligned with established power structures on the other. Archaeology, though a pursuit that is usually firmly aligned with male and imperial power, is initially introduced as the means of Viv’s escape, first from the conventional path of marriage and motherhood mapped out for her by her sex and social class, and then from several tragedies that affect her life. Archaeology further serves to connect Viv and Najeeb, offering them a shared interest and vocabulary and allowing them to reflect on their own lives and the colonial context in which they meet by linking the present to the ancient history of Peshawar in the context of changing empires and faiths. This is a gradual process that begins as one of patronage (Viv introducing Najeeb to an ancient world hitherto unfamiliar to him, in

¹⁰ The changes wrought on this fictional *badala* in the course of its public performances are in keeping with real-life storytelling culture, in which, as Das notes, stories ‘evolved through constant interaction’ between poet-storyteller and audiences (2018: 97).

the same way she has been introduced to it by important men in her life, namely her father and her lover) and ends in an act of reclamation.

The very statues over which Viv and Najeeb bond also resulted from a cross-cultural encounter in the wake of expanding and contracting empires, providing Shamsie with a precedent for her story. When Viv and Najeeb first meet, she asks him about the Peshawar Museum, and his response is one of dismissal (Shamsie, 2014: 93). Channelling the ideology of colonisation as a civilising mission, Viv responds magnanimously to Najeeb's questions as to whether the items he admires in the Museum are 'all from here': 'Yes, all of it. We've left it here instead of taking it back to London so you can see your own history' (2014: 108). Yet gradually, both Viv and Najeeb begin to understand that the ancient history Viv teaches is as much, if not more, Najeeb's than hers: for instance, the gift of a small piece of Ghandaran art is 'transformed into both gift and heritage' and becomes 'precious' in Najeeb's palm (2014: 120). Importantly, Najeeb is subsequently able to gift back a piece of his own history to Viv, when he presents her with a rubbing of King Asoka's rock edicts, retrieved by Qayyum from their ancestral tribal land (2014: 186).

Considering Viv's profession, we can see that archaeology acts as something of an extreme extension of the colonialist archival project in the novel: it entails taking a past that, in this case, is largely non-European, appropriating it as European (and specifically British) property and using selected historical artefacts to tell a version of the story of the Persian empire that aligns with the British imperial vision. As Windsor points out, the novel thereby highlights the complicity with empire of both white women and the profession of archaeology, noting 'the relationship between the patriarchal structure of Empire and women's complicity in the conduct of the war and the wider imperial project', and how this connects to 'the historical collaboration between archaeologists and intelligence services to narratives of the war as an accelerator of female emancipation' (2020: 236). The parallels to the colonial archive are clear: in both cases – archaeology and archival practice – selective documentation and interpretation serve the imperial project rather than the peoples and cultures being documented. Yet the novel also shows that a level of re-appropriation is possible in both cases by connecting with these artefacts on an everyday human level, informed by personal experience rather than official historical narratives. Qayyum in particular encounters the Gandhara artefacts in the museum with a fresh view, unburdened alike by prior knowledge of ancient history and by pre-existing imperialist constructions of history.

Shamsie shows past and present connecting through physical objects and through the lens of Qayyum's war trauma. Qayyum's confrontation with a broken statue in the

Peshawar Museum triggers a post-traumatic flashback: ‘there was another stone figure standing against the wall, holding out a stump where there should have been a hand. The smell of blood, of dead flesh. Turning, he pressed his face against the giant figure and there was another smell: stone, ancient’ (2014: 174). Past and present are linked emotionally and with affective impact that challenges Qayyum’s previously articulated conviction that the ancient objects revered by the English colonial administration have little meaning for present-day Pashtuns. This becomes most evident in Qayyum’s chance encounter, during the same visit to the museum, with a Gandharan statue of a grieving man and his companion. Shamsie describes how coming across the sculpture unawares triggers an immediate physical and emotional response in Qayyum, who can hear ‘his breath change, become a noise in his throat’ (2014: 176). The sculpture, stripped of its original context, becomes the embodiment of Qayyum’s own grief for his closest friend, recently killed in a tribal feud (2014: 176). Though Qayyum later dismisses Najeeb’s attempts to make him understand his deeply felt love for archaeology as a sense of connection with the past through objects that make him ‘feel [...] linked to everyone through whose hand it passed’, arguably he himself experiences a very similar feeling when connecting with centuries-old representations of despair and suffering through the sculptures in Peshawar Museum (2014: 227–228, 176–177).

Throughout the novel, ancient remains serve as a means of connecting old and new. On a visit to tribal lands near Peshawar, Qayyum is shown one of the rock edicts of ‘the King, Asoka, who ruled with blood and fire until one day on a battlefield he looked at the mountain of the dead, heard the sobbing of a woman whose husband and sons had all been killed, and became a follower of the Buddha, renouncing violence and inscribing stones with his belief in peace’ (2014: 139). The story told to Qayyum is a local legend, a simplification of a far more complex history of Asoka in which the rock edicts feature as powerful political and religious propaganda, which has been shaped into different forms over centuries to support different aims and beliefs. In her study of Asoka (or Ashoka) as a transnational emblem of Buddhism, Nayanjot Lahiri notes her fascination with the ‘phenomenon, of making a historical figure visible while simultaneously reinventing him, and of adapting faint memories and echoes of him to new political or other purposes’ (2023: 4). The simplified version of Asoka’s story as understood by Qayyum interprets the ancient emperor’s conversion to Buddhism and adoption of religious tolerance as a spontaneous act, driven by personal experience, rather than as a secularist strategy in aid of imperial power consolidation. This simplified story allows Qayyum to connect with the king and the artefact on a visceral emotional level, visualising Asoka’s battlefield experience and decision to end his waging of war as having taken place at Ypres (Shamsie, 2014: 139). The rock edicts point to the ancient

and indeed tactile nature of literacy in this region, claimed as heritage by the Pashtuns across the divide of different faiths and languages, but Qayyum's response to the story of Asoka also illustrates the way the present rewrites the past to serve its own needs. To Qayyum, the novel's version of the story of Asoka's pacifist conversion as a response to witnessing the human cost of warfare resonates with his own experiences of rejecting his military identity (and, by extension, his tacit support of imperialism), though the novel omits to mention the more complex historical context of Asoka's conversion narrative: the conquests of the Mauryan dynasty to which Asoka belonged, 'the first real imperial formation to span the subcontinent', and the ancient emperor's rock edicts as evidence of 'religiously pluralist but Buddhist-influenced' imperial policy (Yelle, 2022: 750).

Archaeological objects like the Gandhara statuary in Peshawar Museum or the rock edicts located on tribal lands are used in the novel to highlight continuities of human experience that transcend cultural differences and power imbalances, at least up to a point. This insight is reiterated when, towards the end of the novel, Zarina, mad with grief, also finds herself connecting with one of the sculptures in the museum that makes her realise the importance of the dead body as physical evidence of death (Shamsie, 2014: 377). Through the different ways in which the various characters interact with ancient artefacts, the novel shows physical objects to bear lasting testimony of the past, but also illustrates the way in which all physical traces are open to constant reinterpretation. This links back to the way more recent items are presented in the novel. The letters and souvenirs that Qayyum brings back from Europe to distribute to sepoys' families back home, despite in some instances being as unfamiliar to those families as a centuries-old statue, are nevertheless invested with an emotional quality that is based in connection: in this case, a connection across space rather than across time. Yet these are items that are likely to persist in the family archives, especially in cases where the sender never returns home himself and where the object becomes a stand-in for the living presence of a loved one. Retained by the family, ephemeral items and objects can maintain a powerful emotional hold and sustained significance, so long as they are connected with meaningful stories. In her work on African personal archives, Karin Barber refers to the process of maintaining personal archives outside of official colonial structures in tin trunks, bags or cabinets at home as 'a kind of local, do-it-yourself archiving', and links this impulse with 'an ambition to memorialize and make a mark that transcends time', but also 'a desire to assemble and investigate a personal self' and personal values (2006: 2, 3). Removed from the context of the family archives, however, ephemera such as the postcards and souvenirs Qayyum delivers become quickly unmoored from this emotional significance, and they are also highly

unlikely to be retained in official archives given their mass-produced nature and that they belong to peasant families without influence.

Conclusion

Shamsie's novel is much richer and more complex than it is possible to cover in one article. She uses multiple strategies to challenge simplified views of Indian war experience, as explored in detail by, among others, Branach-Kallas, Windsor and Bowers. However, focusing on the role ephemera, archaeology and archives play in Shamsie's novel, as I have done in this article, highlights the need to be attentive to the means by which different versions of war memory and stories of the war's aftermath can be constructed: the rich archives backing the colonialist story compared to the dispersed ephemera and objects that document Indian experiences. In this exploration, I have followed Das's suggestion to 're-frame' our approach to the archives of colonial war experience and to 'be alive to the role of affect in the [war's] relicts and the "reader"' of such objects – as imagined, in this case, by a contemporary novelist (Das, 2015: 1268). Shamsie herself demonstrates in her writing, which engages with precisely such items as Das identifies as valuable archives of Indian war experience, the value of paying as much attention to ephemeral and material traces as to literary accounts and official archives. By placing archaeological artefacts and ephemera alongside each other and attending to the affective qualities and opportunities of each, the novel ultimately disrupts the idea that some objects we collect are important and others are trivial, and makes the case that it is a personal affective connection to the history in which one is caught up or which one inherits that matters most.

Acknowledgements

Research for this article was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, Grant Ref. AH/V014625/1. For the purpose of open access, the author(s) has applied a Creative Commons attribution (CC BY) licence. No new data were created during this study.

Competing Interests

The author is also an editor for this Special Collection and has been kept entirely separate from the peer review process for their article.

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