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3

HISTORY, BORDERS, AND
IDENTITY

Dealing with silenced memories of 1971

Daniela Vitolo

Looking at the country through the lens of Benedict Anderson's theory, which states that a nation is an 'imagined community' (1991), Salman Rushdie defined Pakistan as an 'insufficiently imagined community' in his novel *Shame* (1995: 87). Studies by scholars in different fields echo Rushdie's words when they state that Pakistan is a country where the process of national formation has failed (Cohen 2004; Jafferlot 2002; Jalal 1995). The reasons for this failure are found partly in the fact that, in Pakistan, the sense of collective belonging to the nation seems to give way to stronger forms of affiliation, such as to ethnic, regional, or religious groups. For this reason, nationalism has emerged as a possible solution to the problem, as it proposes a clear definition of national identity by stressing the Muslim origins of the state, fostering the idea that a sense of collective belonging lies in the religious belief that unites the citizens of the state. However, not only has nationalism failed to heal the cracks that divide Pakistani society, it also seems to have played a part in deepening the split between the majority of the population and its minorities, principally because proposing the image of a prototypical Pakistani has favoured discrimination against those who do not fit that model. It is not surprising that Pakistani society should experience an identity crisis as a consequence, and that writers feel a need to participate in a debate addressing the issue. While society seems to be looking for a definition of the Pakistani nation and of Pakistani identity, Cara Cilano's study of a corpus of works of Pakistani anglophone literature demonstrates that on reading the texts it is possible to note they do not convey a uniform representation of Pakistani identity. Rather, they 'offer readings that conjure a myriad of possibilities, creating a spectrum that runs from a reinforcement of dominant modes of belonging to a reinvention of the terms of collective attachments' (Cilano 2013: 1). Consequently, Cilano states that because they show that the sense of belonging to a nation can theoretically be conceived in a limitless number of ways, these works of fiction respond both to nationalist narratives that promote a monolithic definition of Pakistani identity, and to the idea that Pakistan has failed in the process of creating an 'imagined community'.

Postmodern thought conceives identity not as something unique and clearly defined but rather as something composed of various fragments. In 'The Question of Cultural Identity', Stuart Hall explains how the understanding of the nature of identity has changed over time, moving from an early phase when it was thought to be a stable entity whose essential core

was internal to the subject and remained unchanged throughout the lifetime. Today, identity is believed to be a product of the interaction between the subject and society, on which depends the shaping of personal and collective identities. If, in the past, the individual experienced society as composed of organised blocks creating an ordered picture where elements like class, race, gender, and ethnicity had a determined place and frame, today the internal coherence of those blocks has crumbled, each revealing its complex nature. This transformation has undermined the sense of integrity of the individual who, being unable to relate to a stable pattern, has found himself to be partial, composed of a number of fragments that interact and articulate themselves in different ways according to the circumstances. Therefore, being fragmented and continuously changing, 'the structure of identity remains open' (Hall 1996: 600).

Following Hall's analysis, a question arises as to how the contemporary subject relates to cultural identities and, in particular, how s/he deals with national identity. Hall reminds us that national identity is also fragmented, being composed of different elements: on the one hand, a person can be a member of a nation state and, on the other, feel part of a national culture. Even the latter is not unitary because, as Anderson's theory implies, any nation is a product of the encounter between people of different origins and cultures who become part of one political entity. However, a nation is a 'structure of cultural power', where national culture constitutes 'a *discursive device* which represents difference as unity or identity' (Hall 1996: 61).

If it is true that a nation cannot exist as such if it does not define its concrete limits and exercise a form of control over them, then borders play a part so relevant in Pakistan's life that the country's history can be retraced by recalling several episodes and situations involving the creation or protection of borders. Pakistan was created by drawing lines that partitioned the Indian subcontinent in 1947, forming a state comprising two separate wings. From that moment, the wars that have broken out between Pakistan and India have been major events involving a border constantly in the spotlight. Since the tensions between the two countries have not softened over time, the line separating them stands as a concrete sign of the wound inflicted by Partition – not yet healed in either nation – whilst also standing as a reminder of the 'two nations theory'; it further serves to define Pakistan itself in a negative way with respect to 'the "other nation"' (Jafferlot 2002: 8). In 1971, Pakistan witnessed another reconfiguration of its territory when, at the end of the conflict between the two wings of the country, East Pakistan became an independent state, Bangladesh. Furthermore, the war had been fought between Muslims who, in 1947, had become part of the same state, finding in religion the element that kept them together and distinguished them from Hindu and Sikh communities. Being fought in the name of ethnic diversity and resulting from politics that did not guarantee a fair share of political and economic power, the war prompted reconsideration of what defines Pakistani identity. Moreover, the Kashmir issue and the course of events that, since the 1980s, have unfolded on the troubled border between Pakistan and Afghanistan have had a direct impact on society, serving as further examples of how 'identity' and 'border' are two intertwined concepts that participate in compelling discourses that affect Pakistan's everyday life.

The phrase 'line which separates two countries' is one of the definitions of the term 'border', which also describes a frontier zone, an area of transition where the traits that characterise one region give way to the aspects that define an adjacent region. In this sense, we can think of a border not as a line separating sharply distinct identities but as a space where different elements converge, such as those characterising two national cultures, and where the fixity of identities is questioned. As theorists such as Gloria E. Anzaldúa (1987), Edouard Glissant (1989), and Homi Bhabha (1994) have argued, a deconstruction of identities otherwise supposed to be invariable can take place within a frontier dimension generating potential transformative energy. A liminal space can be thought of as a hybrid terrain of cultural difference where subjects and

communities can think in a new and critical way about their identities. Finding themselves in a space where imposed conceptions of identity are contested, individuals and groups can also redefine their idea of the society to which they belong. As Homi Bhabha writes, 'It is in the emergence of the interstices – the overlap and displacement of domains of difference – that the intersubjective and collective experiences of *nationness*, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated' (1994: 2). Within the interstitial space, individuals and groups can thus redefine their relationship with a place, a culture, or a nation.

Sorayya Khan's novel *Noor* (2003), which revolves around the consequences of the war between East and West Pakistan, is part of a consistent production dealing with the role played by memories of traumatic past events, such as the 1947 Partition and the 1971 conflict, in the shaping of identities. For this reason, while proposing a reading of Khan's novel, this essay suggests reading the novel within its literary context. As authors tend to create stories that move between the present and memories of the past, their works seem to convey the idea that certain determining episodes, which have both a public and private nature, are still affecting the lives of individuals and communities. Since recalling and transmitting memories implies creating a narrative version of the past, authors can pay attention to the roles played and the power retained by narratives that participate in shaping how people think about their common past and understand their relationship with the nation. In *Salt and Saffron* (2000), for example, Kamila Shamsie holds that because certain narratives of the past can be partial and distorted, younger generations need to examine events related to Partition in order to develop their understanding of that fundamental moment in history. In addition, several stories approach historical fact from a minor perspective that narrates the event from the point of view of characters that experienced it from a marginal position. The most famous case is Bapsi Sidhwa's *Cracking India* (1991), which chooses as narrator an adult woman who recalls her memories of 1947. The novel narrates Partition as experienced by women through adopting the point of view of a child belonging to a middle-class Parsi family – and therefore a context not touched directly by the clashes between rival groups. Shahbano Bilgrami's *Without Dreams* (2007) makes comparisons between the country's history from 1971 onwards and the life experiences and identity formation of two boys, one from East and one from West Pakistan, introducing two different perspectives on the conflict as well as on Pakistani history and society in the years that followed the war.

Among the most relevant features which emerge from novels and short stories like those cited above is their focus on the relationship between memory, narrative, and identity. The authors point out that recalling and narrating the past are fundamental parts of a process that allows younger generations to understand the country's history as they develop their relationship with the nation and, as a consequence, their national identity. Likewise, such a process participates in the shaping of personal identity. According to the theory of narrative identity, the construction of personal identity happens through the construction of a story. Indeed, in order to understand who they are and what is their relationship with the world around them, individuals need to create a narrative version of their life experience and produce a story that combines the present, as they perceive it, and the past, as they reconstruct it, projecting themselves into an imagined future. Likewise, the studies proposed by Anderson (1991) and Bhabha (1990) move from the idea that, for a national identity to be developed, it is necessary that citizens access the same narrations which disseminate the same stories and ideas about the past and the present of the community that forms the nation, thus creating among the citizens a sense of belonging. Marianne Hirsh coined the phrase 'postmemory generation' (2008: 111) to refer to the generation born after a major dramatic event who develop deep knowledge of events they never witnessed through memories shared with them by older generation. Consequently, they need to confront those memories in order to create their own understanding of past events

they have not experienced yet which form part of their identity. The concept proposed by Hirsh becomes particularly relevant in works of fiction about the 1971 conflict because, when writing about younger generations' awareness of that event, authors address the absence of a 'postmemory generation' in Pakistani society.

The war between East and West Pakistan and the victory of the former over the latter were a shock to the population of the then West Pakistan, which was unprepared to face the turn of events that reshaped Pakistan within just a few weeks. Indeed, as military operations took place, the media coverage did not reveal the actual situation on the ground, for which reason news of the defeat was entirely unexpected. Likewise, in the aftermath of the war, the state's approach to the matter was one of promoting a general amnesia about what had actually happened. After the conflict, Pakistani society confronted the need to understand the reasons for a war fought because ethnic diversity had proved stronger than religious unity, during which there had been high numbers of casualties on both sides and in which the West Pakistan army had committed systematic atrocities against the local population.¹ The solution favoured by the authorities was to avoid any public discussion of the subject that, when it was addressed, was mainly presented as a consequence of Indian interference in Pakistan's internal matters, given that East Pakistan had prevailed in the war in part thanks to support from the Indian army.

Recalling the war in *Noor*

The two protagonists of Khan's *Noor* experienced the 1971 war in different ways: Ali, as a soldier, arrived from West Pakistan to fight in East Pakistan, while Sajida was an orphaned Bangladeshi child. They later formed an unusual kind of family, living in Pakistan, when a few months after his arrival in East Pakistan, Ali was discharged, having contracted typhoid, and brought home the little Sajida, whom he found living alone on the streets of Dhaka. Before the war broke out, Sajida had been the sole survivor of a cyclone that killed her family in the village where they lived by the Gulf of Bengal. From the moment she reaches West Pakistan, Sajida thinks of Ali as her father, while Ali's mother, Nanijaan, becomes a maternal figure for the girl. The novel's eponymous character, the youngest child of Sajida and her husband Hussein, has a special gift that gives her insights into the experiences of older members of the family. Realising that Noor knows their past, the principal characters are forced to deal with memories of the war that they had put aside after 1971, thus mirroring the public demeanour adopted by the state. As they recall past traumas, the characters begin a process that helps them to recall what they experienced in East Pakistan. During this process, they also come to realise that before Ali found Sajida in Dhaka, the two had already once met, when Ali and his comrades had opened fire on a group of helpless villagers, killing almost all of them, sparing a child, only by chance – Sajida.

As the story reveals, *Noor* is a novel that addresses the silence that fell on 1971 and which, in the absence of public discussion, prevented citizens from developing an awareness of what had taken place. In an interview given to Cilano, Khan explains that her aim was:

to address the silence, to pinpoint it as something that is out there, that defines the history of '71 in Pakistan, the way we think about who we are, as a way of not taking responsibility for what's been done. It's in the doing of the writing – that I'm writing 'about' the silence.

(Cilano 2011: 221)

Through a story set in the present yet which could not develop without characters able to recall the past, the author highlights the intertwined nature of both private and public memories of

the 1971 war, making it clear by opening with a quote from Agha Shahid Ali: 'your history gets in the way of my memory'. Pierre Nora (1989) has explained the difference between history and memory, stating that while the former is the reconstruction, problematic and incomplete, of a succession of past events, memory is the product of a collective process based on the continuous elaboration of something that happened in the past and which, for this reason, is never complete. Since the official version of history has been manipulated, Khan stresses both the discrepancies between personal memories and official histories and how the public record affects the manner in which people can relate to their experiences. Creating a novel which recalls such a problematic event, and thus participating in the development of a shared narrative, the author develops characters who are directly involved in factual events that happened during the conflict, but who can relate to those facts from marginal perspectives.

In *Noor* the interwoven nature of the processes that produce self and national narrative identities is presented through a story in which unsilencing memories of war means that the characters move from a state of acceptance of an official behaviour towards the 1971 events, to a position of reviewing events as they remember them. This journey parallels the characters' personal progress from a condition in which they try to fit within a normative definition of a Pakistani citizen to a state of acceptance of their composite nature and of their complex relationship with the nation. When Ali returns from the front, bringing Sajida with him, Nanijaan, who had warned him of the risks of leaving for East Pakistan, asks no questions, either about Ali's experiences or about the child, and her curiosity seems to be satisfied when Ali says just a few words about Sajida: 'She says she's five and six. Little girl from East Pakistan. She'll stay with us' (Khan 2003: 52). When, many years later, Sajida asks Nanijaan why she did not enquire about her story and the reasons why she joined their family, the old woman answers: 'Your father told me. He brought you from Dhaka. You told me about the cyclone, when you were pregnant with Noor. Remember?' (2003: 122). Given her choice to remain ignorant about things that happened in East Pakistan, Nanijaan can be regarded as a representative of that part of Pakistani society that did not question the censorship of the war, accepting as exhaustive the partial official accounts. When, many years after the war, Nanijaan asks Ali if he ever killed someone during the conflict and learns that indeed he did, she understands that, 'until then, she hadn't wanted to know, and still didn't want to know, because she had been afraid of the answer' (2003: 136). Although Nanijaan knew that, for her, it would have been difficult to bear the truth about the brutalities committed by soldiers, once she exposes herself to the facts, she is obliged to elaborate her personal understanding of the situation and comes to accept her son's deeds as part of his past. Ali appears as a symbol of that part of society that knew and chose to hide the truth about the war and the atrocities perpetrated by the army against civilians. When he arrives home, he takes a long purifying bath which he performs as a symbolic act that will allow him to put aside memories of the war in order to return to his life: 'He imagined his story, the sum of horrible details, so neatly stored away, he'd done away with any reason to retrieve it. Ever. And that was how Ali had planned to return to life' (2003: 55). Since she was very young when the event happened, Sajida possesses only scattered pieces of memory of her life in Bangladesh. These are fragments of her first years and the cyclone that killed her family – 'My mother was a seamstress' (2003: 10), 'In one swoop. The water [...] was as high as the hills. [...] The water, it was alive' (2003: 11) – and of the moment Ali found her:

A man got out of the jeep. She heard him, but she didn't turn to look. She was suddenly exhausted, so overcome that when this man – Ali, Aba, her father – picked her up [...] from the side of the road, she let him.

(2003: 108)

In the beginning, it seems that she has no memory of what happened between those two key events, and therefore of the war that began after the cyclone. Unlike Nanijaan and Ali, Sajida does not choose to forget; rather she prefers not to interrogate her past, which tries to come back to her in the form of dreams and flashbacks. This is a sign of her unwitting effort to put aside her Bangladeshi identity and integrate herself into Pakistani society, where she has built her new life, a life where she is a daughter, a happy wife, and a mother. She sees this as a second chance, and thus she lives her life in a positive way, in contrast to her previous existence: 'As much as He took, He gave much more. Love, laughter, children, second chances. Especially second chances. She believed that her big, healthy son was God's way of giving her another chance' (2003: 15).

Noor, a child 'born not of this world, but of another' (2003: 81), whose drawings are 'windows into another world' (2003: 106), embodies both knowledge of the past and a need to deal with it. For this reason, she represents a social group that seems difficult to find in Pakistani society but which might have formed naturally. To address the absence of a 'postmemory generation', Khan gives Noor special gifts, thus introducing to the novel an element of magic realism, and uses her to unmask a trait that also defines other characters. Ali and Sajida share with this special child both a peripheral position within society and personal knowledge of a historical event. However, although the child proves to be aware of her family's past, she also appears as a projection of the adults' need to give space to something that they have repressed. This seems to be suggested in the incipit of the novel – 'Noor was Sajida's secret' (2003: 1) – which literally refers to the fact that, soon after conceiving her, Sajida has a premonition about the fact that her daughter will be different to other children yet chooses to hide this from other members of the family. The moment that Noor begins to name the places in Bangladesh that she illustrates in her drawings, Ali and Sajida, who associate those places with specific memories, understand that they cannot escape their past any longer. Noor's pictures hanging on the walls of their home create a gallery of memories suddenly made public and encourage the protagonists to go back to 1971 and Bangladesh. A definition of *lieux de mémoire*, as first proposed by Pierre Nora, is that of physical sites to which a specific function is attributed, that of recalling and symbolising historical events. Because 'memory attaches itself to sites' and 'takes root in the concrete, in spaces, gestures, images and objects' (Nora, 1989: 22, 9), a *lieu de mémoire* is, according to Nora, a place to which is attributed a specific, symbolic and usually public, meaning that helps to remember a specific event whilst being different from the event itself. A site of memory is something concrete, like a monument or an archive, which creates a public memory preserving and recalling something that a community risks forgetting. Although Bangladesh does not entirely fit Nora's definition in *Noor*, it might be read as a site of memory as long as it is presented as a physical place in which determining events happened and to which the protagonists metaphorically return to face their past. The concreteness of a geographical space which belonged to the Pakistani nation and whose partition left Pakistan severed of a piece of its identity is rendered through detailed descriptions of the places Ali sees: 'East Pakistan was beautiful. Lush and green the way West Pakistan never was, even during the monsoons. Snaking rivers and endless tributaries flowing like life itself through the rich fields' (2003: 84). The vivid pictures of places are echoed by similarly strong images of the violence suffered by West Pakistani soldiers – 'The roads were raised. They were the only elevation in the fucking flat land. [...] We were target practice for them. Dead, we rolled [...] down slopes. Our blood and guts fertilized their fields' (2003: 165) – and of the cruelties enacted by them – 'The mother shaking, begging for the life of her child. The child whimpering. The smell of a mother's milk: sweet. She: wet, cut open, on the desk' (2003: 182). Thus, while 1971 Bangladesh is appointed a symbolic role and becomes a tangible sign of Pakistan's past, the house where the family moves soon after Noor's birth also

becomes a symbolic site of memory. Indeed, it hosts Noor and her pictures, each of which has a title and is placed on the walls in alphabetical order, showing a need to organise memories in a clear way. As with her gallery, Noor also characterises the house as a private space of memory that she soon refuses to leave, showing herself to be afraid of borders: 'of walls that marked the property, the doorways she was forced to pass under, the cracks on the brick walkways' (2003: 42). Noor's fear of crossing borders, which helps to characterise the house as a distinct site symbolically related to Bangladesh, might be explained either as a reminder of the violence that the child associates with the scission of the nation or as a mirror of what the characters feel about the possibility of recalling the past.

When the characters begin to help each other to remember – 'You killed someone?' (2003: 133), Nanijaan asks Ali, while Sajida enquires, 'What *was* it like? There?' (2003: 183) – a process starts which allows them to become self-aware, aware of how they place themselves concerning the 1971 events. They thus become conscious of the relationships that bond their unusual family while they reveal the intricacies of the subject's connection with the nation. Ali's war trauma has resulted in his loss of faith in God. This loss of faith means that he distances himself from the founding value of Pakistani society, something that he keeps private but which can be noticed by those living with him, as Sajida makes clear: 'she'd never seen her father pray or hear him utter commonplace, daily phrases like "inshallah," the minute references to God that peppered everyone else's speech in Pakistan' (2003: 146).

His changed relation to God becomes an indicator of the way in which the war modified Ali's connection with the nation. Indeed, for Ali, remembering means admitting to himself that his ideals crumbled as soon as he confronted reality in the field. As a young soldier, he asked to be sent to East Pakistan, where the war was soon to begin, driven by the desire to live an adventure, but also because he was proud to fight for his nation, as he told his mother: 'I'm going [...] I'll fight for my country. You'll be proud' (2003: 49). However, his nationalist ideals soon die after he finds himself in the field: 'It took one day to know he wasn't fighting the war for his country, yet another to realize he wasn't fighting for Nanijaan or, for that matter, any family. On the fourth day he felt like a mercenary' (2003: 167). Years after that moment, Ali expresses his scepticism regarding the politics adopted by the central government based in West Pakistan towards the eastern part of the country: 'Now, he wasn't certain any of the things he'd been told (except the facts about the Indians) had ever rung true to him. That Bengalis, dark and stupid, not *really* Muslims, didn't deserve their own country, their own leaders' (2003: 167). At the same time, this critical position does not exclude his racist attitude towards Bengalis remaining unaltered. Voicing a position common in West Pakistan, Ali recalls 'Those people, we used to call them Bingos' (2003: 120), and on more than one occasion represents them as stupid (2003: 115), dark, and short (2003: 190). Likewise, he entertains Noor with some expressions and commonplaces about Bengalis that were frequently heard at that time:

Effortlessly, as if he'd learned them yesterday, Ali remembered several similar jokes.
How can you tell a Bengali from a fly? Bengalis smell. [...] What does independence mean for a Bengali? Not having to be told to wash his hands after having a shit.

(2003: 118)

Even Nanijaan demonstrates that she has acquired a stereotyped image of the citizens of East Pakistan when she is surprised to hear Sajida whisper "'alhamdulillah," giving praise to God' (2003: 61). Nanijaan shows that she has unwittingly received an idea common at the time, that Bengalis also differed from Pakistanis because they were not proper Muslims: 'Nanijaan's first thought was, *Where did she learn that?* Before the thought was complete, she was ashamed.

East Pakistanis, Bengalis, were Muslims, too' (2003: 61). Giving space to the issue of the racist representation of Bengalis, Khan highlights one of the aspects of the narrative that supported the war and seems to suggest that between the two wings of the country there was a sort of colonial relation. Unsurprisingly, Sajida is a victim of such racism because her complexion is darker than is common in Pakistan, and so she is recognisably Bengali. For this reason, for example, her classmates call her, '*kohl-ki-larki*' (2003: 9), the girl made of coal.

Notwithstanding their parental love for Sajida, both Ali and Nanijaan have an ambiguous relationship with the girl. Indeed, their actions are the reason why she has abandoned her motherland and lost her original culture. This means that, for Sajida, dealing with her memories also means reconsidering her family relations. Ali's choice to take the girl with him might be the act that saved Sajida, and yet, because the child did not consent, and could not have consented, to follow him, the man's act also looks like an abduction. Read as such, this is the second act of violence against Sajida, the child whom Ali might have shot dead some time before in the village. In addition, as soon as she reaches Ali's house, she begins to undergo a process of redefining her identity, because she soon forgets her mother tongue – 'a different language – Bengali – which she had long since lost' (2003: 74) – in favour of Urdu – 'the first Urdu word she learned [was] *razai*, for the stack of quilts at the foot on Nanijaan's bed' (2003: 110). Likewise, she finds herself unable to remember her brother's name or the name of the village she was from. At the same time, in an effort to make her feel Pakistani, Nanijaan tells her that her dark skin is nothing but a consequence of God's choice to give her more colour (2003: 9). However, Sajida's reaction to her rediscovery of the past means that she becomes conscious of what happened to her without regarding Ali and Nanijaan as culpable of depriving her of her identity, and she is able to rethink her identity and connections with Pakistan and Bangladesh. Thus, the woman, who can remember that as a child she knew that 'Bangladesh, simply translated, meant home for Bengalis' (2003: 175), can herself eventually claim to be Bengali – 'I'm from somewhere else, really. [...] I'm not from here. [...] I am from somewhere else' (2003: 176) – which also requires her to recognise openly that Ali is not her father. In this way, she also lets the other characters understand that she fully accepts her life in Pakistan and them as her family.

Unveiling a hidden past in *Kartography*

A comparative reading of *Noor* and Kamila Shamsie's *Kartography* (2002), another work that revolves around the consequences of 1971, allows one to notice how both novels engage in similar ways with issues of narrative, identity, and memory. Shamsie's novel follows Karim and Raheen, a boy and a girl who grew up together in Karachi, the children of two couples of long-time friends, Ali and Maheen and Zafar and Yasmin. While the story is set in the 1980s and 1990s, in a violent Karachi that experiences crime as well as ethnic tensions, the two protagonists learn that their existence is inextricably bound to 1971, when there was a fiancée swap between their parents. Learning that behind the reasons that made their parents exchange their partners was Maheen's Bengali identity, leads Karim and Raheen to face the implications of an event of which they had no awareness but that they understand to be fundamental in determining who they are and how they relate to people around them. In the novel, the silence that fell on the conflict and the discomfort generated by it are mirrored in the silence that Karim's and Raheen's parents have imposed on their past, a choice explained by the fact that Zafar, and to some extent Yasmin, betrayed Maheen at a time when, in West Pakistan, she was perceived as the enemy. This explains why the four adults feel ashamed of what happened and find it difficult to explain it to their children and why they remained friends. As the story moves between the present and the adults' memories of the past, the reader discovers with Raheen

(the last to learn about the secret) that, in 1971, Zafar was engaged to Maheen, whom he had tried to protect from the social discrimination she faced, himself accepting to be regarded as a traitor. However, one of his accusers had attacked him, saying: 'You're going to marry one of them. You're going to let her have your children. How?' (2002: 231), and he had answered, while Maheen was listening, 'Think of it as a civil duty. I'll be diluting her Bengali blood line' (2002: 232). With this statement, he seems to demonstrate that beneath his claims in favour of Bengali independence lies a racist view that made him share the most common attitude towards East Pakistan. Notwithstanding, he reveals the ambiguity of his position when he admits that he is not sure whether he said those words to prevent his attacker from hurting Maheen or because he believed that it was a way to break off an engagement whose social consequences had become a burden too heavy to bear (2002: 335).

The ambiguous position of this character regarding Bengalis and their war for independence pairs with other episodes where the author points out the persistent racism towards Bengalis. Rather than being pictured as racists, the characters appear complex when faced with the necessity of confronting narratives concerning Bengali identity and the reasons behind the civil war. The difficulty of taking a clear position for or against a certain perspective shows the power of the narratives developed at the time as well as the tensions that crossed Pakistani society. 'There was violence in the air those days, and why should your father have been expected not to get terrified of it?' (2002: 308), explains Maheen to Raheen, who finds it difficult to justify her father's actions. Such a tense atmosphere of violence is cause and consequence of condemnable behaviours which, during those days, involved every single citizen: 'if you hold everyone accountable for what they said and did in '71 hardly anyone escapes whipping' (2002: 278). Being aware of this, the older generation in *Kartography* does not hold Zafar accountable for what he did, and encourages the younger characters to forgive their past faults as a way of dealing with the war and its consequences, opening up to a past-aware future.

In *Kartography* the narrator gives space to consideration of the development of narratives (2002: 4), boundaries (2002: 26), the ways memories are shaped (2002: 58–59) and belonging (2002: 165), thus giving the reader the keys to the main themes of the novel. The 'absence of narrative' (2002: 6) about what happened to the two couples of friends in 1971 becomes an issue when Raheen and Karim begin to try to match the few fragments of information they have and thus understand what happened. Karim learns the story quite early in his life but he is unable to share it with his friend, thus himself becoming a symbol of the difficulty of talking about an event which, if faced, implies unearthing issues affecting personal relationships. Therefore, as Karim suddenly becomes a sort of representative of the 'postmemory generation', he too tries to find ways to communicate to his friend that there is something unsaid in their past, but she is unable to read his silence. Consequently, Raheen, who as a young girl had been curious about her parents' story but had stopped asking questions after a while, learns the story only when Karim chooses to deal openly with knowledge that has tormented his adolescence. Indeed, he sees in Zafar's betrayal the reasons for his mother's suffering, but his anger also seems to be explained by the fact that he sees that Zafar's act as an injustice perpetrated by Pakistani society against Bengalis. When Raheen has to face the knowledge of her father's actions she is obliged to contextualise them within the political moment in which they occurred. And so she realises, for the first time, that her generation does not have awareness of what happened in 1971 because no one has told them anything about the events of that year, besides a few scattered snippets of information insufficient to reconstruct a clear picture.

As that compromising statement means Zafar 'stepping into history' (2002: 238), Shamsie maintains the importance of individuals taking a position on what happened as well as on the contemporary political situation in which they live. This is rendered more clearly in *Kartography*

than in *Noor* through discussions between the characters who prove to be aware of the significance of being active citizens and thus not pretending that their private lives are not affected by what happens in the public sphere. For example, Karim also wants Raheen to know about the family secret because she needs to understand the importance of perceiving oneself as part of a social and political reality. After that act which altered the course of events in the characters' lives, Zafar's self-awareness as a Pakistani citizen emerges in discussions about politics and society that he has with his friends. In this context, he defines himself as a Mohajir, thus claiming a specific kind of relationship with Pakistan. Likewise, particularly in the face of ethnic tensions experienced, Raheen reflects on definitions of identity in terms of ethnicity, for example thinking of her friends and herself as Mohajirs, Pathans, Panjabi, Sindhis, while Karim claims his 'Bengaliness' (2002: 176), choosing to identify with his mother's ethnic identity. Thus, while in *Noor* identity issues concern how the characters relate to Pakistan and Bangladesh, here the 1971 war becomes part of a broader discussion that highlights Pakistan's composite nature, as Shamsie seems to suggest that Pakistan's identity lies precisely in its hybridity.

While Karim obliges Zafar to face the past by telling his story to his daughter, *Kartography* also stresses the importance of questioning narratives of the past. Indeed, both protagonists are induced to investigate that past moment, which is only vaguely referred to by their parents. Discovery of what happened poses questions of identity and belonging that are developed through the relationship that Karim and Raheen establish with each other and with the city. Here, the creation and crumbling of borders define the stages of the relationship between the two friends. A divide arises between them when Karim learns about Zafar's betrayal and racism towards his mother and begins to believe that, being Zafar's daughter, Raheen would behave in a similar way. The separation is strengthened by the parting of their ways when Karim moves to England and, some years later, Raheen attends university in the United States. It is her discovery of the secret of 1971 that starts a process that reunites the friends when both are able to process their common past in a way that allows them to look towards the future. Within the story, identity is also looked at through the ways in which the characters relate to Karachi, a city that Karim wants to map, and about which he develops knowledge that associates topography with a chronicle of major events, thus suggesting that the identity of a place lies in its inhabitants and in the events that occur in its streets. Karim's need to create a 'kartography' of Karachi allows the author to propose a reflection on home and belonging that conceives identity as bound to a place and its defining traits. For this reason, besides the different ways in which each character understands personal identity and perceives their relationship with Pakistan, their shared identity lies in their common social and cultural experiences.

Like *Noor*, *Kartography* emanates from the idea that the country needs to enact a process through which memories of what happened in 1971, both on the battlefield and to Pakistani society, must be handed down to younger generations. Thus, the authors highlight that dealing with that event should imply questioning official narratives. This would allow citizens to develop their narratives of a crucial moment whose comprehension participates in private and collective understandings of Pakistani identity. Therefore, the novels produce representations that point out the potentially rhizomatic nature of the relationship that the subject can establish with the nation while developing multiple, non-fixed, and fragmented conceptions of national identity.

Note

1 At the end of the war, the *Report of the Hamoodur Rehman Commission of Inquiry into the 1971 War* (published 2001) proved that acts of violence were committed by the army of West Pakistan.

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