
Title: Juvenility and the Problems of Identity Formation : A Study of Kamila Shamsie's *In the City by the Sea*

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Abstract

Age and the process of growth of an individual effects/affects his/her perception about the world and ultimately influences the identity formation. Alongside the social, cultural, economic factors of identity formation, age also becomes an important phenomenon which plays a decisive role in determining the status of a person in the society. Childhood experiences often govern the way a person perceives the world in his/her adulthood. The experiences of a child raise queries in his mind about his role in the society. His innocent mind is perplexed with the intrusion of harsh social realities and his responses to those realities make a significant impact on his personality. The present paper explores these issues with reference to Kamila Shamsie's novel *In the City by the Sea* which minutely represents the troubled childhood experiences against the backdrop of Pakistan's rising political turmoil.

Key Words: Identity Formation, Juvenility, Childhood Trauma, Adolescence

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The constant change in the atmosphere and the experiences of a child or a young person affect his education and behavioural pattern. The lack of experience and understanding in the childhood can be a source to the misconceptions of the child regarding the society. The child can feel excluded in the process as his innocent feelings do not hold that much of importance to be counted as essential. Different theories regarding the child development explain the role of the social atmosphere and its effect on the child psyche. Erik Erikson's theory regarding the psychosocial development of a child holds a seminal position. The behavioural pattern can also be a scale to measure up the development of a child. The social and cultural atmosphere the child receives determine the way he behaves. A conservative and patriarchal society can result in lesser social interaction of a child. On the other hand a liberal and interactive society can lead to more interactions resulting in better personality development.

Family and friends play an important role in the behavioural development in the child or the adolescent. The atmosphere of the family, the interaction between the family



members, the importance of the child or the adolescent in the family – all of these are part of the perfect upbringing of the child. The peers of a child or an adolescent can be an important factor like the parents in the home. The acceptance or rejection of peers and interaction with them can effectively influence social behaviours. Peers can be influential in the early childhood but its real impact can be felt in the adolescent when friendship and peer groups becomes more influential.

Childhood trauma is another factor that can affect the mind of the child in a considerable way. Any devastating incident in the childhood can make a permanent place in the mind of a child exert a long lasting effect. It is very difficult for the child to fight the situation as he/she is inexperienced and cannot represent their feelings freely. The reason of the trauma can be domestic, social or historical as well. The traumatic experiences resurface through the memory and can be disturbing even in the adulthood. A child who is living in a war ridden society or experiencing communal riots can be affected by the events and loss of innocence and prematurity can happen in an early age.

The adolescent period is the most important in term of forming a stable identity. Adolescent is the period of realizing one's self and one's role in the society that he/she lives in. Erik Erikson while talking about the adolescent period and its nature discusses some of its features:

They are sometimes morbidly, often curiously, preoccupied with what they appear to be in the eyes of others as compared with what they feel they are, and with the question of how to connect the roles and skills cultivated earlier with the ideal prototypes of the day. In their search for a new sense of continuity and sameness, which must now include sexual maturity, some adolescents have to come to grips again with crises of earlier years before they can install lasting idols and ideals as guardians of a final identity. They need, above all, a moratorium for the integration of the identity elements ascribed in the foregoing to the childhood stages: only that now a larger unit, vague in its outline and yet immediate in its demands, replaces the childhood milieu-"society." (*Identity: Youth and Crisis* 128)

It is one of the most turbulent time in the life of a person as he/she can be confused regarding their choices in life. Choice of peer groups and companionship can cause disaster or it can go the other way as well. A certain distance from the family and the parents may work as an element in the formation of identity. The childhood has a very important role in the formation of a strong perception regarding the society; any disturbance in this process is long-term as argued by Richard Jenkins in his book *Social Identity*:

Individual identity formation has its roots in our earliest processes of socialisation. Recent post-Piagetian understandings of learning in infancy and childhood and the 'new' sociology and anthropology of childhood allow the development of cognition and the development of identification to be located side by side in primary socialisation. This further suggests that identities which are established this early in life – selfhood, humanness, gender and, under some circumstances, kinship and

ethnicity – are primary identities, more robust and resilient to change in later life than other identities. (41)

Shamsie's first novel *In the City by the Sea* presents the story of an eleven years' old boy, Hasan, as its protagonist. The psychology of Hasan as a child and its development throughout the novel is the main focus. As the political and ethnic riot within the country directly intrude the personal life of all the characters of the novel the plot takes another turn. The experience of childhood leaves a long lasting effect in the life of a person and traumatic experiences that Hasan witnesses change his perception and perspectives of the world. The novel begins with Hasan's outlook on life and it is of course the lifestyle of a typical child. Hasan's love for cricket and the imaginative power with which he creates a world of his own give a glimpse of the psychology of Hasan. His zeal for life can be well explained through one example when he cherishes the happiness and exaltation of his upcoming holidays and shares it with his imaginary toy-friend, " 'Only one week to mid-term holidays, Yorker,' he announced to the stuffed toy with smiling cricket-ball head and batsman' garb which lay sprawled atop a pair of sneakers" (*In the City by the Sea 2*).

But the imaginary and fantasy world of Hasan is shattered by an event of death of a child as Hasan becomes the only eye witness to it. Through rest of the novel Hasan is haunted by this image of death. The trauma coming out of this event affect the psychology of the boy and he constantly looks for ways to fight with it. Sadia Hasan in her thesis named *The Novels of Kamila Shamsie: A Study in Theme and Technique* comments on the situation of Hasan:

Hasan goes through trauma, thinking that Azeem did not look for the roof to end and died because he was engaged in impressing Hasan who was watching his kite flying intently. Hasan suspects that the boy was trying to impress him by getting the kite to fly higher and therefore did not pay attention to where he was stepping. (38)

It was the moment for Hasan when he experienced the change in life and it started his journey from innocence to experience. The sense of guilt within Hasan results in his constant attempt of forgetting the event. Whenever the boy is mentioned he experiences the sorrow and tries to avoid it as he thinks himself responsible for the death of the boy. The slow but gradual change in Hasan is visible throughout the novel.

On a later occasion we experience the change in Hasan's character as he tries to cope up with his feelings of guilt. When Zehra mentions Azeem, the boy who died in front of him, Hasan's ignorance to confront the real event is clear. Hasan's psychology is evident through the narration, "If Hasan had just tried, just jumped and run with arms outstretched he could have caught the boy before ... (*In the City by the Sea 47*)". The attempts to recover the situation gives birth to these improbable possibilities in the mind of Hasan. His forgetting of the actual moment of death of the boy also focuses on Hasan's attempt of distancing the event. Zehra is aware of the fact and dicusses it with him, "Whenever you talk about it, you talk about the time he was in the air, never about the moment when he actually ..." (*In the City by the Sea 47*). In reply Hasan only says that he does not remember

that part of the event. Hasan still believes that it was not a real event and Azeem would one day reappear and everything will be perfect as before.

Other than this, Hasan also experiences harsh realities when his beloved Salman Mamoo is imprisoned. This imprisonment not only present another factor for the change in Hasan but it also brings out the issue of the political turmoil inside the country. The rule of General Zia is chosen as the context of the novel and it makes the setting of the novel grim and dark. The novel presents the tough times of Pakistan, including ethnic riots, occasional bombings , and protests that were rampant throughout the country. The intrusion of these events in the life of the protagonist make it more difficult for him to come to terms with his life. Hasan is an eye witness to these political turmoils as evident from the narration:

The mob rushed in. for one terrible moment all Hasan saw was a mass of bodies, running, yelling, brandishing weapons ... The sirens drew closer. Someone near Hasan yelled in a teacher's voice, 'Unlock it! but the gate was already swarming with bodies – climbing and leaping, pushing and yelling ... The car had hurtled through three red lights before Hasan saw that Khan was leaning sideways in the driver's seat, his head inclined towards the open window as though listening for something. Within seconds Hasan heard the ringing sound of protestors- not young boys this time- warping Salman Mamoo's name into a battle-cry ... Three more times the cry repeated itself, each time arising from a different source, and each time Khan slowed, and twice changed the course. The fifth interruption was the sound of bullets (*In the City by the Sea* 26-29)

Despite the dark nature of the setting Shamsie always tries to present the world of Hasan as having some positive vigour in it. Hasan's world of imagination is a complete contrast with the setting of the novel. Hasan's childhood innocence prevents him from understanding the political implications of events and this innocence leads him to ask his father about the doubled height of his favourite Salman Mamoo's house walls. Salman Mamoo' house brings memories to Hasan and his world of myths bring the elements of fantasy which is so natural for a child:

Hasan had memorized Salman Mamoo's gate long, long ago ... Hasan would recall the latticed black metal grilles that formed the gate, and draw them on a piece of paper from Ami's sketch pad. Six horizontal strips, eight vertical strips, forming thirty five rectangles. Every rectangle but one had a name which Hasan culled from *The Book of Myths* ...But now a sheet of steel had been welded on to the gate, and each rectangle led Hasan's gaze to impenetrable blackness. (*In the City by the Sea* 10-11)

The shattering of the imagination of Hasan marks also the shattering of the childhood innocence and it gives a glimpse of the change in Hasan overtime.

Hasan's memories of early childhood are replete with the presence of Salman Mamoo in it. His previous experiences of visiting his uncle's house, his past encounters with

his uncle, the dreamy and mysterious memories of his early childhood come gradually and naturally in his mind. In all of his experiences there is the presence of his favourite uncle, “Hasan leapt out of his chair. It had come upon him again, that old feeling of a spring curling and uncurling in his stomach as it did when he was five and Salman Mamoo pushed the garden swing higher and faster” (*In the City by the Sea* 83). His closeness with his Mamoo is very attaching and is a very intense part of his childhood experience. Shamsie, in a very delicate manner, is able to portray the mindset of a child through the pages of her first novel.

The memory of the violent image of death accompanied by the house arrest of Salman Mamoo disturbs the simplicity of Hasan’s little dreams and experiences. The up and downs in the progress of Salman’s trials, the hope of release and gradual disappointment coming out of the delay in the process also have an effect on the boy. Hasan constricts himself in his little world of imagination with all the mythical heroes in it to fight the terrible situations. His expectations from the adults of the house, especially from his father make him believe that his uncle will be saved somehow and this is why he becomes frustrated when he realizes that his father cannot do anything to save his Mamoo. His emotions burst out instantaneously as he accuses his father with the words “What good are you” (*In the City by the Sea* 102)? His anger for his father is coming out of his shattered beliefs of saving Salman Mamoo. Beneath his loud cheers and constant attempts of presenting himself as happy was the hope of saving his childhood hero, his uncle.

Shamsie in a very shuttle way presents the childhood experiences with his characters in the novel as she moulds her language into an expression of the highly imaginative and fantastic world of a child. The novel is presented from the point of view of a child and his dealings with the problems of life. But what makes it more interesting is the context of the novel. The highly charged political and ethnic turmoil around the country appears spontaneously in the novel and affects the general atmosphere and intonation of the novel. Hasan’s love for cricket, his constant mentions of the mythical figures he loves, his memories of early childhood, his change in experiences while he goes through turmoil, his tactics to prevent and cure the situations, all presented through the pen of Shamsie in a vivid and fantastic manner.

Hasan’s friend Zehra is also an important factor in considering the childhood experiences of him. A little older than Hasan, Zehra is a teenager who also has tremendous influence on the mind of the protagonist. His playmate and the sharer of many of his secrets, Zehra becomes a confidante of Hasan. Zehra’s character is vital in the novel as he provides the opportunity of knowing Hasan better and also forms a contrast which once again focuses on the features of Hasan. Their shared encounters and beliefs regarding many incidents in the novel forms many of the happy moments in the novel.

Within Zehra there can be seen a glimpse of the innocence that is possessed by Hasan but she seems to be more experienced and matured than Hasan is. Though they are different in nature and their perspectives regarding the world sometimes differ, their growth is affected by the political turmoil of the society that they are living in. The influence of politics

and its devastating consequences force these immature characters into prematurity and within their simple imaginative narrations can be found the glimpse of politics. The following conversation between Salman Mamoo and Hasan presents a different Zehra:

‘Yes. She named the puppy Ogle, after the President.’

‘Ogle?’

‘As in O-G-L. Our Glorious Leader.’

‘Oh, *pehlvan*, I’ll miss you. But why name a puppy after the President?’

‘Because they are somehow connected. They have the same birthday, they both have a scar above their left elbow, and last week when the president was ill, so was the puppy.’ (*In the City by the Sea* 37)

The humour intended in this conversation certainly presents a political satire of the contemporary situation of the society.

Shamsie presents the identity of a Pakistani individual as not separated from the politics of the country and she even presents that factor in the cases of the teenage boys and girls.

Kamila Shamsie has thoroughly portrayed the difficulty of being brought up in a troubled political atmosphere, as is present in Pakistan. The innocence of a little child is affected by the complex political games played by the Government and others. The prematurity of many characters present in the novel is ample proof of this turmoil.

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