

Vivian Rose: The Soft Face of Colonization in Kamila Shamsie's *A God in Every Stone*



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Abstract: *Kamila Shamsie's A God in Every Stone (2014) offers a multifaceted critique of British colonialism in the subcontinent region of India through the lenses of archaeology, history, and individual connections. This article analyzes Vivian Rose Spencer, British archaeologist protagonist, as an example of "soft colonization" – a form of cultural domination that functions under the pretense of academic scholarship and historical preservation. Although sympathetic and intellectually inquisitive, Vivian's ethnological work in India through excavation and interpretation of ancient sites propels and sustains colonial structures of knowledge and power. This paper employs postcolonial theory—most notably the writings of Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, and Homi Bhabha—to examine the paradox of Vivian's archaeological undertakings which, draped in academic neutrality, actively deny the realities of colonization, the silence imposed on, and the theft of indigenous histories. It also responds to relevant contemporary scholarly discourse on the place of archaeology in colonial and postcolonial studies, drawing from journal articles and critical essays to contextualize Vivian's character within the frameworks of the politics of knowledge and imperialism.*

This study reveals, through close textual analysis, that Vivian's intellectual sovereignty, her scholarly engagements with colonized peoples, and her idealized interpretations of the act of discovering history are all forms of soft colonialism. This characterization remains true, even as her intimate relationships with members of the colonizing nations serve to complicate her situatedness within imperial social structures."

Keywords: Soft Colonization, Archaeology, Imperialism, Postcolonialism, Knowledge Production

Introduction

Background and Context

A God in Every Stone (2014) by Kamila Shamsie is a historical novel analyzing the personal and political aspects of British Imperial India in the early 20th century, especially related to excavation, nationalism, and the anti-colonial movements. It features the character of English archaeologist Vivian Rose Spencer, who excavates in the North-West Frontier Province, a part of modern-day Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan, bringing her under the umbrella of British imperial expansion. Vivian is depicted as a woman who, while progressing and

independent in her personal life, functions within the suffocating frameworks of her society. At the same time, her colonialist 'scientific' achievements further engrave indigenous systems of knowledge and governance into the hierarchical colonial systems of knowledge and power. This is what contemporary postcolonial scholars have come to term as "soft colonization," while the Hagiographic power of Western nations over their colonies intellectually dominates them under the pretext of 'civilization' (Loomba 45; Stoler 112).

Methodology

This paper employs postcolonial literary criticism drawing from the foundational theories of Edward Said with *Orientalism* (1978), Gayatri Spivak's *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988) and Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (1994). It also integrates colonial archaeology Smail's "Archaeology and the Historical Imagination" examines the imperial roots of archaeological practice, and Rizvi's "Decolonizing Archaeology in South Asia" critiques the colonial legacy of South Asian archaeology. Careful analysis of particular passages from *A God in Every Stone* will demonstrate how Vivian's archaeological damage, as would be described in her biography written to glorify and justify British Imperialism, colluded with colonial frameworks, even when she personally abhorred blatant imperialism. These and other peer-reviewed sources will be drawn from Postcolonial Studies, *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History*, *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, to explore soft colonization as it occurs in the novel.

This article posits that Vivian Rose Spencer acts as a facilitator of soft colonization in *A God in Every Stone*, as her seemingly neutral apolitical archaeological activities sustain British imperial constructions of history by subsuming and repackaging colonial history within a Western framework. Vivian's relationships with colonized individuals, alongside her personal sentiments, do not absolve her from the authoritative scholarly position she occupies, which, through the institutional power she embodies, serves colonial dominance—this is an example of the subtle violence of intellectual imperialism.

Literature Review

Archaeology has historically participated in colonial endeavors serving as an instrument to justify the use of dominion by the control of historical narratives. The orchestration of Western scholarship portrayed "the Orient" as an object of study, reinforcing imperial control. This construct was introduced by Edward Said in his 1978 publication 'Orientalism' (Said 3).

Postcolonial theorists such as Gayatri Spivak Bhat defended Said's thesis claiming that dominator Western scholarship often silences subaltern voices, imposing its interpretative dominion (Spivak 28). Within the scope of archaeology, Daniel Lord Smail and other scholars have explored the evolution of this discipline as a byproduct of European imperialism, arguing that many excavations were "acts of possession," rather than unbiased scholarly undertakings (Smail 67).

More recently, scholars have focused on the impact of colonialism and its relation to archaeology in South Asia. Rizvi claims that archaeology regarding India has been a process of ignoring the local paradigm, instead opting to embrace Western presuppositions about ancient India (Rizvi 145). This pattern appears in *A God in Every Stone* where Vivian's excavation of ancient sites represents British archaeologists desperate to "claim" history rather than understand it (Chakrabarty 56). Her pursuit of Scylax's lost silver circlet is illustrative of colonial arrogance to reclaim and reconstruct history according to their narrative (Shamsie 89).

The idea of "soft colonization" develops from Antonio Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony, where systems of dominance are maintained through ideological means rather than force (Gramsci 12). In the context of colonization, this occurs via education, museums, and archaeology which provide artificial constructions of the past in support of Empire (Dirks 78). Stoler furthers this by examining how colonialism functions through intimate interactions and mundane habits of life, blurring the colonizer-colonized dichotomy (115).

Vivian exemplifies this paradox. While she opposes some normative gender roles and shows genuine interest in indigenous cultures, she uses her scholarly power from within the colonial framework. Her relations with Qayyum Gul, a Pashtun soldier, illustrate the struggle between personal compassion and professional status (Shamsie 112). "Colonial knowledge production was never merely about discovery but possession," as Robert Young puts it (45), which is the very opposite of what Vivian's

archaeological work seeks to achieve.

Feminist postcolonial scholars like Anne McClintock and Antoinette Burton have examined the multilayered and often contradictory involvements of western women in the colonial projects. Although often sidelined in a patriarchal imperial order, white women had some measure of control over the colonized in certain areas like education and social reform (McClintock 6; Burton 89). Vivian's role as a female academic in a masculinized discipline is multifaceted; she does not conform to some imperial standards, yet she maintains her compliance to other norms. "Uncovering the past for the world to see," (Shamsie 201) as her archaeology is performed romantically, ignores the British interests served by such work, demonstrating what Bhabha refers to in his notion of colonial discourse ambivalence (85).

Archaeology as an Imperial Project

Vivian's archaeological endeavors in *A God in Every Stone* come off as a selfless pursuit of knowledge and scholarship, albeit one that resembles the colonial mindset. Shamsie's novel unmasked the fact that British archaeology in the Indian subcontinent was more about dominating than discovering, a sentiment which captures real history. I refer to Shamsie's portrayal of the search of Scylax's lost silver circlet; it encapsulates the colonial attitude towards historical past, and a yearning to dominate it (Shamsie 89). Her zeal to identify ancient sites is mixed with colonial ideologies. Britain's colonizers in the guise of archaeologists often regarded themselves as the 'real' historians of India's cultures, with little respect for local Knowledge systems. As Said states, such activities are not undertaken for the sake of neutrality, but alongside them, there exists an intention to "reorganize and possess" the spaces that have been assimilated into the empire (32).

Rizvi has already pointed out how colonial archeology has acted as a form of 'epistemic violence'— *terreur d'esprit*—violating Indigenous history as if it did not exist and privileging imperial historiography (Rizvi 150). Vivian's articulation of, "The Greeks were here first," (Shamsie 134) illustrates this and

reinforces, Spivak's claim that subaltern voices, even if coming from well-meaning Western scholars, "are silenced" (Spivak 72). This is further elaborated when Vivian participates in the excavation of the temple, in which British overseers remove artifacts while supervising. Both the local workers and the character Najeeb, who has personal and cultural ties to the site, are drowned out by the dominant narrative (Shamsie 88-93). Chakrabarty claims, British colonials would oftentimes remove artifacts to display them in British Museums, promoting colonial superiority while depriving local histories of their narratives. This is what local narratives. This aligns with locally based colonial chronicles where, as Chakrabarty describes (56),

Vivian's Complicity and Resistance

Vivian's engagements with Qayyum Gul encapsulate her ambivalent stance with regard to colonial relations of power. As a British scholar, she commands respect and attention, which overrides local perspectives, including indigenous forms of knowledge. A crucial instance is when Qayyum tells Vivian the oral traditions of his people regarding an ancient site; she overlooks them in favor of Greek writings (Shamsie 134). This incident crystallizes what Smail refers to as "textual bias," the dominant oversight of colonial archaeology that relies upon texts for verification at the expense of unwritten histories (72).

Nonetheless, she starts to reflect on the ethics of her work after realizing how the Indian viewpoints were neglected in archaeological discourse. She understands that her occupation is part of a colonial venture. Vivian's character is not impermeable in her colonial complicity. Her growing knowledge of British savagery, especially during the 1919 Amritsar Massacre, compels her to confront the imperial project self-reflection (Shamsie 210). Therefore, her moral ambivalence parallels the postcolonial criticism of archaeology as an imperialist instrument wherein mastery over ancient sites served to justify British dominion. Even Qayyum Gul, an Indian soldier of the 40th Pathan regiment and later a nationalist in Bacha Khan's Khudai Khidmatgar movement, considers the British excavation an act of cultural theft (Shamsie 150-

155). His anger underscores the conflict between colonial archaeology and Indian sovereignty. This conflict supports Stoler's assertion that colonial power functions through "fractions and contradictions" instead of total subjugation (120).

The Limits of Sympathy and the Illusion of Neutral Scholarship

Vivian's privilege prevents her from fully disentangling herself from imperialism, even with her relationships to colonized subjects. "Uncovering the past for the world to see" (Shamsie 201), as Bhabha notes, archeological work serves British imperial interests and boils down to "ambivalence." British geopolitical reasoning has already been characterized as sympathetic. Vivian's colleague further elucidates this lack of self-awareness: "The British were right to take charge of these excavations—Imagine the disorder if the Indians were left to their own devices." (Shamsie 42-45). Although unexamined, Britain comes off looking bad in this quote. Britain looks equally horrible through Vivian's eyes, as she does nothing to confront this dreadful comment. This illustrates the colonial rescuer complex that British archaeologist, and all other colonizers held: they thought they were liberating India's history from the carelessness of its denizens. In this case, Vivian's silence reveals an ethical predicament. She bears guilt because she refrains from action while questioning a project, she knows is wrong.

The idea of "neutral" scholarship in relation to colonial contexts has been critiqued by more recent scholars. Rizvi states that archaeology in South Asia was not simply an act of receiving knowledge; it was intricately linked with imperial dominion (152). Understanding Vivian's failure emphasizes the illusion of soft colonization – a form of self-colonization where the oppressor masquerades as a supporter. In another example from Shamsie's work, where an excavation at a temple was in progress, there is a quote "The laborers uncovered a frieze, and the British officer immediately began discussing its shipment to London." In this instance, young Pashtun Najeeb the assistant commented, "This belongs here" and further elaborated but was

ignored (Shamsie 89-93). The excerpt highlighted the fact that archaeology acted as an instrument of imperialism instead of neutral scholarship.

Vivian's failure to resist the colonial paradigm results in a moral dilemma. Her character seems split in a quote Shamsie shares "her crisis became put like this: she had always believed in the purity of knowledge. But now she saw how the maps, the digs, the catalogues—all of it served the empire" (Shamsie 120). The transformation from a scholar to critic is, at least in part, irreversible.

Conclusion

With *A God in Every Stone*, Spencer Vivian Rose portrays the paradoxes of soft colonization vividly. Though she refrains from extreme acts of imperial violence, her academic endeavors appropriated and advanced colonial historiography, undermining indigenous narratives. Through the character of Vivian, the novel criticizes the notion of benign imperialism, portraying how even deeply imperialistic individuals that are considered 'enlightened' reinforce hegemony.

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