

BURNT SHADOWS: A NARRATIVE OF TROUBLED (H)STORIES

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Abstract

Burnt Shadows (2009) deconstructs, decentres and challenges the popular post-9/11 western discourse and presents a counter narrative advocating a transnational world and the possibility of dialogue between the western and the Islamic world. Shamsie revisits the nationalist rhetoric through her protagonist's journey during the various phases of state violence in different parts of the world triggered as an aftermath of their capitalist policies. This paper highlights the need for revision and reconstruction of history as a significant and an alternate mode of exploring and questioning the past. It is in the context of postmodernist and Linda Hutcheon's poststructuralist critique of history that this paper analyzes *Burnt Shadows* as a narrative which is intended to explore and revise some of the key historical moments of the last few decades. Moreover, the paper establishes that Shamsie, as a political commentator, uses her text to neutralize the hegemonic ideologies purported by these events and argues in favor of a meaningful dialogue between the west and the Islamic world.

Key Words:History, Pakistan, Discourse, Ideology, Terrorism, 9/11, Burnt Shadows

Introduction

Like many other Anglophone Pakistani fiction writers, Shamsie, with her formative years in Pakistan, has spent most of her life divided in Pakistan, UK and USA. Living as a member of the Pakistani Diaspora community in UK, she writes in a third space (Bhabha, 1994, p. 2) by situating herself physically in the West and writing about the land, nation and culture she was born and raised in. Because of her hybridized status and her being continuously exposed to the hegemonic discourse of the West, Shamsie enjoys a vantage point from which she can not only deconstruct it with authority but it also allows her to create a counter-narrative challenging the unilateral and hegemonic Western media and political discourse. Khan (2011) in *The Hideous Beauty of Bird-Shaped Burns: Transnational Allegory and Feminist Rhetoric in Kamila Shamsie's Burnt Shadows* contextualizes the novel in a post-9/11 world where feminist Muslim postcolonial writers are struggling with issues like home, nation and identity and argues that "Pakistani women writers profess their mode of writing to be a stabilizing and emancipating process, whereby geographies, histories, nations, races and genders are

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reconciled” (p. 54). She considers *Burnt Shadows* a fine example of the empire writing back as it is a novel which is “written in the centre for the centre” (p. 55).

Burnt Shadows is about belonging, uprooting, suffering and healing and finding means of peaceful existence in today’s geographically and ideologically divided world. The novel unfolds the journey of a Japanese woman, Hiroko Tanaka, who travels through many lands and cultures and witnesses different civilizations in clash with each other. The novel begins with the atomic bombing of Nagasaki in 1945 and ends in post 9/11 USA; exploring the city of Delhi under the British colonial raj, Afghanistan during and after the Soviet military invasion, Karachi during General Zia-ul-Haq’s martial law regime, Islamization and rising religious extremism in Pakistan, its impact on the West and the resultant reactions and responses. The journey of Hiroko Tanaka, and various other characters, through these historical periods and places further explores the possibility of different civilizations coming into contact with each other, or creating a “transnational zone” (Apter, 2011, p. 19), and individuals living together under the burdens of their histories, personal and political both.

The novel is divided into four parts with each part foregrounding specific time periods from history. Each part explores the violent and military actions of legitimate governments to maintain and strengthen their supremacy during various periods of history and how these actions have affected the lives of common people. Mainly it’s Hiroko’s journey through time and space which connects all the four parts to one another. She becomes the lens through which we come to know of the suffering and loss brought to many individuals’ lives as a result of these legitimized and institutionalized acts of violence and atrocities. The novel suggests the fact that the whole world shares a common history with the same patterns and cycles of destruction.

The reliability of historical narratives and the possibility of its truthful representation are contentious issues, dealt with differently by different theorists. Dennis Walder (2005) insists on the need of continuous revision of history as “the real human dimension can only be read through a sense of history, which is a form of collective memory, continually revised” (p. 190). The postmodernists, on the other hand, challenge the possibility of an objective and unbiased account of the past

as Ermarth (1992) argues: “There is *only subjectivity*. There are *only* illusions. And every illusion, because it has no permanently objectifying frame, constitutes reality and hence is totally ‘objective’ for its duration” (p. 111).

Nietzsche goes a step further when he highlights many barriers that exist between language and truth and hence claims that “[n]ot only can language not represent reality but also the attempt to do so [...] serves hegemony” (2005, p. 47). The idea that history is a constructed discourse, through language, to serve hegemony undermines its ability to represent the *real* past. Moreover, as a linguistically maneuvered discourse, history gives power to the dominant society to interpret past and hence the ability to control the present. Keeping in mind this poststructuralist critique of the possibility of an objective past, Linda Hutcheon’s term historiographic metafiction becomes significant as she argues:

Historiographic metafictional texts [...] both recount historically real events and administer a denaturalizing critique of them (Politics of Postmodernism 3), reminding the reader of the subjective, ideological, and linguistic contributors to the historical text’s constructedness. (1988, p. 39)

Hutcheon contends that postmodern fiction reminds us of a lack of reality in the historical narrative and helps to undermine the hegemonic historical discourses without surrendering its own autonomy as fiction. Even though rooted in the context of six decades of human history and contextualized in state-approved atrocities on other nations, *Burnt Shadows* ambitiously seeks to unravel some answers.

The first part of the novel is set in Nagasaki, Japan, describing the day of 9th August 1945 during the Second World War, the day when USA dropped atomic bomb on Nagasaki, the second one in the history of mankind. The two characters Hiroko and Konrad are introduced in the opening paragraph of the chapter. Konrad is sent to Japan by James Burton, his brother-in-law and a British bureaucrat serving in Colonial India, to take care of an abandoned family property there. Hiroko on the other hand is a Japanese girl who works as a translator for him. As a language translator she “provides the keys to the novel’s ciphers” (Zinck, 2010, p. 47). The atomic explosion takes place exactly after Hiroko and

Konrad kiss each other for the first time and dream about their beautiful future ahead. 9th August 1945 marks a break in the human history separating the past and the future by the atrocious act of dropping a nuclear bomb on Japan, planned in the corridors of the US government. Hiroko loses both her lover and her father in the nuclear blast and is cursed to live the rest of her life with their memory. It is not just the loss of her father and Konrad that she has to live with but the images of three cranes also got imprinted on her back as physical marks of the memories of that day. She bears the curse of *Hibakusha*¹ on her back as a testament of violence. Hiroko not only survives the atomic blast but also lives long enough to witness many other atrocious acts of state violence. Capitalism also emerges as a dominant theme as Shamsie uses these violent episodes from the history and goes on to connect capitalism with terrorism. Hiroko's body is a manuscript on which the powerful discourse of capitalism left its imprints forever. Shamsie asserts through *Burnt Shadows* that capitalism has flourished on the expanse of human lives whereas the US nationalism on the destruction and annihilation of other nations.

'Veiled Birds', the second part of the novel is set in Delhi of 1947 during the time of the crumbling British raj in India. Like all the other parts of the novel this part also narrates the story of characters from two different families, the Burtons and the Ashrafs, belonging to different cultures and different parts of the world. James Burton is a British bureaucrat serving in India and has hired Sajjad Ali Ashraf as his clerk. Their lives are also affected by a significant event from the history of mankind, the partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947. Sajjad and James Burton's relationship is no more different than that of a colonial master and a servant. When Elizabeth, James' wife, asks him not to give Sajjad his discarded clothes, he replies:

Discarded clothes as a metaphor for the end of Empire.

That's an interesting one. I don't care how he looks at my shirt so long as he allows me to choose the moment at which it becomes his. (Shamsie, 2009, p. 35)

¹*Hibakusha*, a Japanese term, literally means 'explosion-affected people'. The word refers to the victims who survived the atomic bombing of the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki during the World War II.

The above quote is a typical example of the manipulative colonial attitude where the master subjugates the colonized by deciding his fate and that too on his behalf. Sajjad knows his status in the Burton's house and never tries to challenge the hierarchy of power, even after Hiroko arrives at the Burtons' house. Shamsie has woven a web of various crises in both the Burton's and Sajjad's families' parallel to those of partition of the Indo-Pak subcontinent. It is as if both the personal and the political are happening more or less at the same time, affecting and influencing each other. King (2007) also identifies the impact of national and international politics in Shamsie's fiction and stresses that in her novels individuals' "emotions and their relationship to others is impacted by history and national politics [...] personal cannot be kept separate from the public" (2007, p. 686). Elizabeth and James's married life is falling apart as is the British Empire whereas Hiroko and Sajjad are beginning to fall in love with each other similar to newfound romance by the emergence of two new nations, India and Pakistan. Be it the Burtons, Hiroko or Sajjad, all are struggling to redefine their identities.

Hiroko is a character who has the ability to transcend time and space, accept new cultures and create a contact zone for the people with different nationalities. She loses her German fiancé during the war, travels to India to see her fiancé's half-sister, marries Sajjad (an Indian Muslim), migrates to Pakistan after partition and finally moves to New York after the death of her husband. It is through her character that Shamsie subdues nationalism in the favour of trans-nationalism, hence advocating the possibility of a third space or as Bhabha calls it an 'interstitial zone' (1994, p. 2) where different cultures can negotiate instead of maneuvering each other for supremacy. For this purpose, Shamsie further explores issues like language, history and Indians' relationships with their colonial masters through her narrative of love, loss, recreation and separations. One day when James, Elizabeth, Hiroko and Sajjad visit Qutb Minar and Sajjad tells them all about his ancestors, he wonders: "This was how things should be – he, an Indian, introducing the English to the history of India, which was his history and not theirs. It was a surprising thought, and something in it made him uneasy" (p. 80). Sajjad's realization of the fact that it should be him who is to narrate 'his' story to the rest of the world instead of the British colonizers, makes him aware of the impossibility of a truthful representation of his ancestors'

history through the colonial discourse of his masters. His comment that, “My history is your picnic ground” (p. 81) highlights Sajjad’s desire for a proud identity for himself. He further wonders:

Why have the English remained so English? Throughout India’s history conquerors have come from elsewhere, and all of them – Turk, Arab, Hun, Mongol, Persian – have become Indian. If – when – this Pakistan happens, those Muslims who leave Delhi and Lucknow and Hyderabad to go there, they will be leaving their homes. But when the English leave, they will be going home. (p. 82)

As the Partition of the Indian subcontinent is approaching, Sajjad’s realization for the need for a stable identity is also getting stronger. For the British it was a journey back home as in spite of living in India for such a long time their British identity had remained intact and stable. On the other hand for the Indians it was not just the winning back of their freedom from the British and becoming an Indian again but this division of the Indian subcontinent caused a ruptured identity for them in the form of a new country Pakistan. The Indians were to be further divided into two nations and their identities to be re-determined as a result of this division. Their identity had become a shifting reality. All the characters in *Burnt Shadows* (2009) are displaced from their roots at some point. Hiroko leaves Japan, partition displaces Sajjad and the Burtons both and they leave for Pakistan and England (their native country) respectively. Elizabeth’s identity oscillates between her German and British roots. This sense of displacement and feelings of not belonging anywhere leave them with feelings of personal and collective loss which haunts them throughout the narrative.

The identity crises, triggered by various political changes of historical significance, for the female characters in *Burnt Shadows* are also profound. What appears to be retrospective tales of the women from their lives at the first look turn out to be highly penetrating episodes carrying much connotative and symbolic significance and meaning. Their characters are developed through loss of identity and belonging. In order to survive they have to undergo a metamorphosis and reinvent themselves. Hiroko suffers the most in this process. With “three charcoal-coloured bird-shaped burns on her back” (pp. 90-91) her body is literally and figuratively a script which history had chosen to write its verdict

upon. Hiroko is a character who resists norms right from the beginning of the novel. She has the ability to re-contextualize and change herself and she does so by trying to leave history behind herself. The suffering that she has seen and experienced during the atomic explosion in Japan has taught her not only to live with grief and pain but has also taught her the importance of letting go of the past in order to go for new beginnings. Through Hiroko, Shamsie argues that only by subduing the political and personal differences and by emerging out of troubled histories, there can be a possibility of a peaceful coexistence between different cultures. By contextualizing her narrative in wars, destruction and competing ideologies, Shamsie criticizes the global capitalist forces on the one hand whereas on the other hand favors a world where national identities matter less and different characters have to undergo a shift in terms of their identity.

Elizabeth, in contrast to Hiroko, is subjugated and subdued by her husband and her existence has become limited to her household duties and James' official parties. She acknowledges:

Women enter their husbands' lives, Hiroko – all around the world. It doesn't happen the other way round. We are the ones who adapt. Not them. They don't know how to do it. They don't see why they should do it. (p. 98)

Both Elizabeth and Hiroko's lives suffer at the hands of history and their characters challenge any nation's right to bring destruction to other ones for their own benefit.

After partition, Sajjad in spite of all his desire to stay in Delhi is forced to go to Pakistan as a migrant. Delhi, his first love, is lost and he feels betrayed and displaced. The creation of new national borders has changed his life altogether, and more importantly his identity. He is no more an Indian but a Pakistani now. The British Empire was not concerned about his history and roots and his individual loss of identity was too insignificant to be noticed.

The third part of the novel is set in Karachi, Pakistan during the years 1982-3 where Hiroko and Sajjad have moved to after their displacement from Delhi, India. *Burnt Shadows* (2009) explores the rise of a religious narrative in the city during the military regime of General Zia-ul-Haq during 1980s. Shamsie's fiction, "alludes to conquests, wars, interventions, struggles for independence, and other events in which

violence affects society and private lives” (King, 2011, p. 147). She believes that in order to understand Pakistan’s political culture and national discourse a study of the effects of history on several generations of a family, an understanding of the past and the role of military in a country’s history are significant.

The decade of 1980s was a time when Pakistan saw a wave of Islamization dominating the socio-political milieu of the country as Rouse comments on the phenomena that, Zia’s regime witnessed “a powerful alliance between the guardians of the state and guardians of public and private morality” (1986, pp. 59-60). Bearded men, Afghan mujahedin, Taliban and CIA are a recurrent presence in *Burnt Shadows*. Hiroko is once told in a bookshop by a bearded young man not to read *War and Peace* as it is a book written by an enemy of Islam. She wonders about Pakistani society’s acceptance of willful religious exploitation at the hands of the government:

So many sleeves all the way to wrists instead of just part-way down the upper arm, and covered heads here and there. It made no sense to her. Islamization was a word everyone recognized as a political tool of a dictator and yet they still allowed their lives to be changed by it. She didn’t worry for herself but Raza was still so unformed that it troubled her to think what the confusion of a still-forming nation might do to him. (p. 182)

Raza Conrad Ashraf, Hiroko and Sajjad’s son struggles to find his identity, torn between his mother’s Japanese origin, his father’s love for Delhi, Harry Burton’s promises of admission in a US university and a newly emerging Islamic nationalist discourse in the society during the 1980s. Even his name speaks of his ruptured identity as it contains the links to three different cultures and lands; Pakistani, German and Indian. Moreover, his Japanese mother adds a fourth dimension to his identity. Divided between so many identities, he finds himself struggling for any stable roots. His love for different languages highlights his efforts to transcend any fixed identity and like his mother he also realizes that identity in itself is a fluid concept which keeps shifting. Hiroko and Raza’s love for learning other languages indicates an effort to translate their identity from abstraction into solidity. The act of translation is “removal from one language into another through a continuum of

transformations” (Benjamin, 2004, p. 70) and both Hiroko and Raza, realizing that their transnational roots make their identity complex and unstable and try to find a solace and solution by contextualizing themselves in different languages. Emily Apter (2011) in *The Translation Zone: A New Comparative Literature* argues:

Cast as an act of love, and as an act of disruption, translation becomes a means of repositioning the subject in the world and in history; a means of rendering self-knowledge foreign to itself; a way of denaturalizing citizens, taking them out of the comfort zone of national space, daily ritual and pre-given domestic arrangements ... Translation is a significant medium of subject re-formation and political change. (Apter, 2011, p. 6)

The act of learning new languages in *Burnt Shadows* not only highlights various characters’ desire to transform their identity but it also challenges the concept of nationalism. In congruence with Apter’s (2011) idea of “subject re-formation and repositioning” through the act of translation, Shamsie also favours a transnational world where different characters learn new languages to (de)stabilize and transform their old identity. These characters challenge the idea of an individual’s identity, rooted in the national space and discourse, in search of a more inclusive and forbearing brand of transnational identity. Apter (2011) further goes on to argue that the translation zone is:

[...] a zone of critical engagement that connects the “t” and the “n” of translation and transNation. The common root “trans” operates as a connecting part of translational transnationalism [...] as well as the point of debarkation to a cultural caesura – a trans – ation – where transmission failure is marked. (Apter, 2011, p. 5)

Hiroko’s ability to learn new language, her disregard for the national borders and her unrestricted and free movement to various parts of the world indicates her call for a world which can think and act beyond the limitations of national borders. Furthermore, the plot arrangement in *Burnt Shadows*, allowing Hiroko to move to four different countries with a particular ease, favours a transnational world where people are not identified and restricted because of their specific national identities and borders. Moreover, Shamsie takes Hiroko on a

journey of different countries during moments of destabilization and crisis. Her suffering, be it in Japan, India, Pakistan or USA, is because of a violence and terror which was unleashed on common people in the name of protection and sovereignty of nation-states. She keeps on moving, across national borders, from one place to another, but state-controlled violence follows her wherever she goes.

Hiroko is worried for her son Raza as she understands the pain that this loss of identity and feelings of displacement carry with them. Raza, during his moments of despair, meets Abdullah who is a young Afghan boy living in Karachi, travels to Afghanistan to join one of the Mujahidin camp. During the whole process he tries to find and create a new tangible identity for himself. While Raza is in Afghanistan, Sajjad is killed by a CIA agent when he goes to the harbour in search of his son. Each war brings more loss to Hiroko. She lost Conrad during the Second World War and now she has lost Sajjad when her son gets involved in the Russian invasion in Afghanistan. Shamsie uses innumerable historical events including Second World War, British colonial raj in India, partition of the Indian subcontinent, Russian invasion of Afghanistan, rise of Islamic fundamentalism in Pakistan, 9/11 and then War against Terror to build a nexus between capitalism at work and the current wave of terrorism in the world and, 'insists that the reader acknowledge the historical relationship between imperialist world order and terrorism' (Singh, 2012, p. 9). America was very much involved in creating and training an army of Islamic jihadists to counter the Russians in Afghanistan which ultimately backfired in the form of 9/11.

The fourth, and also the last, part of the novel is set partly in USA and partly in Afghanistan and discusses a post-9/11 world. Hiroko has gone to USA under the looming threats of a nuclear war between India and Pakistan. Raza has joined Harry Burton and works in Afghanistan for a US military contractor. The US government has launched another war in Afghanistan to avenge the deaths of 9/11. The CIA and the FBI are after all the terrorist suspects and abettors, mainly Afghan and Pakistani Muslims. US image of a super power has been challenged. The US nation has fallen back on its national symbols in order to show its solidarity with the government. Kim recalls post-9/11 USA:

[...] she'd noticed flags. Despite these months of seeing so many of them in the city she'd still been taken aback by their profusion. Flags stuck on back windows of cars; flags on bumper stickers; flags impaled on antennae; flags on little flag poles adhered to side mirrors; flags hanging out of windows; flags waving a welcome at service stations. (p. 342)

The US cities were swarmed with the national flags as a symbol of desire to recapture and regain the old sense of authority over the rest of the world.

Pascal Zinck (2010) argues that *Burnt Shadows* 'offers an insight into Islamic terrorism, not perceived as merely a response to Islamophobia, but as a reaction to and a by-product of cultural globalisation' (p. 45). He believes that Shamsie criticizes US-centred globalization through an exploration of a culture of homegenization which is governed by geopolitics. He further argues that by making Hiroko the protagonist and the interpreter of the novel, Shamsie 'transcends the narrow confines of ethnicity and religion responsible for the worst excesses of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries' (p. 51). Through the characters of Hiroko and Abdullah, Shamsie challenges the popular western discourse which constructs and deepens the binaries of West versus non-West, USA versus rest of the world and USA versus Islam. When Kim is transporting Abdullah across the US border into Canada, Abdullah's comments about the US people's attitude towards wars disturb Kim:

War is like disease [...] countries like yours they always fight wars, but always somewhere else. The disease always happens somewhere else. It's why you fight more wars than anyone else; because you understand war least of all.

You need to understand it better. (p. 344)

Abdullah accuses USA of a lack of understanding and hence waging wars on other countries in the name of national interests. Through a narrative of unbearable loss and displacement, Shamsie questions the legitimacy of the US War against Terror.

Raza is accused of Harry Burton's murder and Kim becomes the reason of his arrest. When Hiroko demands an explanation, Kim's reply

is of great relevance in defining the increasing distance and apprehensions between the West and the Islamic world:

I trusted my training. Don't you understand? If you suspect a threat you can't just ignore it because you wish – and I really really wish this – you lived in a world where all suspicion of Muslims is just prejudice, nothing more. (Shamsie, 2009, p. 360)

Through Kim, Shamsie rejects the West's training and information, about those existing on the peripheries, as faulty and inadequate. Raza has neither murdered Harry nor is he a terrorist. Similarly Abdullah is also not a terrorist but Kim, in spite of all her skills and the Western education, fails to recognize this. Both Kim and Hiroko have seen wars waged on their people and countries and both have lost their loved ones during these wars. But both have a different perspective of a post-war world. Kim is unable to transcend the fact that her country and family had to suffer at the hands of a war as she shouts back at Hiroko that, 'it wasn't Buddhists flying those planes' (p. 361). Kim, 'develops a paranoid sense of nationalism together with a deep mistrust of anything un-American' (Zinck, 2010, p. 48) and believes that she served her country by getting a terrorist suspect arrested. Hiroko on the other hand, after having seen horrors of nuclear war, partition of the Indian subcontinent and the resultant displacement of millions of people, 9/11, War on Terror and losing all her family to these wars, has shown an ability to transcend time and geographical identities. It is this ability of hers that allows her to start anew every time. She tells Kim of her understanding of past as:

You just have to put them in a little corner of the big picture. In the big picture of the Second World War, what was seventy-five thousand more Japanese dead? Acceptable, that's what it was. In the big picture of threats to USA, what is one Afghan? Expendable. Maybe he's guilty, maybe not. Why risk it? Kim, you are the kindest, most generous woman I know. But right now, because of you, I understand for the first time how nations can applaud when their governments drop a second nuclear bomb. (Shamsie, 2009, p. 362)

Hiroko understands the need to overcome loss and grief for new beginnings. Kim becomes the reason for her to understand how stronger nations can exploit and destroy the weaker ones to ascertain their hegemony and supremacy over the world. Hiroko, having seen the horrors of war and the loss that accompanies it, does not criticize Kim on her inaccurate and erroneous judgment. Instead she accepts and understands the pain that Kim had to go through after 9/11 and the loss of her father in Afghanistan.

Burnt Shadows (2009) challenges the post-9/11 unilateral US discourse and makes use of the complexities of the historical narrative to discuss 9/11 as a logical outcome of the west's imperialist policies and exploitation of the Third World countries during the latter half of the 20th century. She has used the concepts of nationalism and trans-nationalism to initiate meaningful dialogue and engagement between the west and the Islamic world. She argues in favour of creating a space where two powerful and opposing discourses of today's world can engage in a debate and explore each other. Moreover, Shamsie reverses the power structures in *Burnt Shadows* (2009) where West is not defining the identity of others but West's own identity is being deconstructed and redefined through the Third World migrant discourse. While doing so the narrative builds a case in favour of a transnational world where national and cultural affiliations do not become a reason for bringing death and destruction to those who exist on the other side of the border.

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