

## COMING TO TERMS WITH THE FRACTURED MEMORIES: A READING OF KAMILA SHAMSIE'S BURNT SHADOWS

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**Abstract:** Kamila Shamsie's novel *Burnt Shadows* (2009) throws light on the experiences of the women who are bold, progressive and ready to face the challenges of life, striding purposefully across Japan, India, Turkey, Pakistan, Afghanistan and America and covering and coming to terms with some of the major events of world history; from the time of the Second World War and bombing on Nagasaki, through the 1947 partition of British India, to the new Pakistan and later to Afghanistan, and to the present time of the war on terror and the 9/11 terrorist attack. Such a trajectory coincides with a woman's experiences in her journey from youth to old age, touching family loyalties, national allegiances, and betrayals.

In my paper I wish to show the way Shamsie succeeds in focusing on the impact of shared histories, and weaving the interrelated worlds of the Burtons, the Ashrafs, and the Tanakas as they are transported from Pakistan to New York and then to Afghanistan in the immediate wake of 9/11, leaving their shadows on the sands of time. If Hiroko survives the atomic blast, the image of some cranes from a kimono she was wearing during the time of the explosion was forever burnt on to her back, and the scars become a personal symbol of the painful event and also a larger metaphor for the traumatic displacement it has caused in the lives of millions of victims over the years..

**Keywords:** Shared history, 9/11 Terrorist Attack, Traumatic Displacement, Women.

**Introduction:** *Burnt Shadows* (2009) is a work of art by the London based Pakistani writer Kamila Shamsie, short listed for the prestigious Orange prize, is a work of art that makes its reader think about religions ethnicity and their roles and functions during the time of conflicts. It spans more than half a century, sixty years covering five countries from World War II to the 2001 World Trade Centre attacks and the post-9/11 world.

Shamsie has presented the multi generation stories to refer to the present scenario. Throughout this, it moves from the atomic bombing of Nagasaki, Japan in its first chapter to the 1947 partition of British India, in the second one to the Pakistan of 1983, when Pakistan Afghanistan and soviet were in fight and later to Afghanistan and the US in 2002 in the wake of 9/11 in its fourth and final chapter. All this is set around the stories of two families belonging to different nationalities and dealing with several cross-cultural relationships. Such a trajectory coincides with a woman's experiences in her journey from youth to old age, touching family loyalties, national allegiances, and betrayals.

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painful event and also a larger metaphor for the traumatic displacement it has caused in the lives of millions of victims over the years.

Though its a tale of personal loss or trauma but it refers a bigger theme, a tale of millions of people who are involved in these events and who have experienced all these things.

*Burnt Shadows* is a narrative of personal trauma: it is the trauma Hiroko Tanaka, the protagonist of the novel experiences in her life from her youth to the old age.

It starts with Hiroko in love with a German man, Konrad Weiss at the backdrop of the Second World War when Japan was under constant threat and restlessness and fear was in the air. When people were taken to shelter houses to stay protected from the expected attack Hiroko recounts such an experience,

"In the shelter at Urakami, Hiroko is packed in so tightly between her neighbours she cannot even raise a hand to wipe the sweat damping her hairline." [13]

Amid such threats when nothing was predictable and certain, Hiroko dreams of a time when she and her fiancé Konrad will leave the country once the war is over. But all her dreams get shattered when she gets exposed to the bomb and losses Konrad in the atomic bomb blast. All that remain in her life were the burnt shadows.

"Hiroko runs her fingers along her back as she climbs the stairs down...there is feeling, there is no feeling-skin and something else. Where there is skin there is feeling, where there is something, there is none . . . she runs her thumb over what was once skin. It is burned and raw, lifeless. [26] [ 27]

Shamsie foregrounds Hiroko's experience of trauma and its lifelong impact clearly in the novel. Hiroko recalls this dehumanising act when she lost her love- "Those nearest the epicentre of the blast were eradicated completely, only the fat from their bodies sticking to the walls of and rocks around them like shadows...I looked for Konrad's shadow. I found it. Or I found something that I believed was it. On a rock. Such a lanky shadow." [76]

The loss of Konrad has a lasting impression on her life resulting in the trauma from which she barely escapes ever. Hiroko survives the bomb but she was scarred by it both physically and psychologically. The three black cranes on the white kimono she was wearing that day was permanently tattooed on her back. She was forced to live the rest of her life with those bird shaped burns. It becomes a part of her existence and identity also. She explains it to Elizabeth, Konrad's sister-

"I don't want to hide these burns on my back, but I don't want people to judge me by them either. Hibakusha. I hate that word. It reduces you to the bomb. Every atom of you." [100]

She was pained by the identity she has got from others for her exposure to the bomb. She has to suffer because of something which is not under her control. Her experience as a bomb survivor makes her leave Japan and she decides to go to India to meet Konrad's sister Elizabeth and her husband James Burton. During her stay with the Burtons she came in contact with Sajjad who was her Urdu teacher and later became her husband. But after her marriage also she was not free from the effect of that dreadful event which always pulls her back from leading a normal life like any other girl of her age.

"She had tried so hard the previous night to bring Konrad's face to mind but she failed. Even in fantasy she could not allow herself to believe her body could be location of such caresses from any man." [88]

Everything in her life is related to bomb her identity, her experience, even her thoughts both in her consciousness and when subconscious also. Not only has it affected her in reality but also her dreams to haunt her nights.

"All Hiroko think was the bomb. In the first year after Nagasaki she had dreams in which she awoke to find the tattoos gone from her skin and knew birds are inside now, their beaks dripping venom into her bloodstream, their charred wings engulfing her organs. But then her daughter died, and the dreams stopped. The birds had their prey." [115]

Her daughter dies in her womb and she knows the reason well. Even she was living with such an uncertainty that she herself doesn't know what may happen to her in the days to come.

"No one knows the long term effect of this thing. They don't know if it will affect my ability to have

children. They don't know if it won't kill me in another five years." [115]

Time and again she has to go through the traumatic experience and relive those moments. Later in life she relates her personal sorrow to a more universal theme. Those burns are no longer the symbol of her personal suffering rather she finds it as a way to relate to others pain and suffering. The physical, social, economic and psychological effect of the bomb on people is narrated through the characters of the novel. The effect was not limited to Hiroko only. It has already become a part of her existence which cannot be ignored. Like Hiroko, her son, Raza also has to suffer for being the son of a mother who was exposed to bomb. He was told by the girl; he was in love that he may be deformed as his mother is from Nagasaki.

"Nagasaki. The bomb. No one will give their daughter to you in marriage unless they are desperate, Raza you can be deformed. How do you know you are not? ....you might have something you can pass on to your children. I have seen the pictures. Of babies born in Nagasaki after the bomb." [189]

The psychological trauma of living a life associated with the past history where no one is at fault at personal level but still one has to suffer through out is sharply portrayed through all major characters of the novel like Hiroko, Sajjad and Raza.

Shamsie not only reflected the trauma of these characters but also the psychological displacement that they have to experience is also clearly shown in the novel. It is the result of that feeling of displacement which makes Hiroko long for her own country.

"But until you see a place you have known your whole life reduced to ash you don't realise how much we crave for familiarity....I want to know their names in Japanese. I want to hear Japanese. I want tea that tastes the way tea should taste in my understanding of tea. I want to look like people around me....I want doors to slide open instead of swinging open." [99]

This feeling is equally strong in Sajjad also. He was so much in love with his mohalla and with Dilli that its clearly visible in his words when he speaks about Dilli. But during partition in the wake of the violence and turmoil in the country Sajjad had to leave India with his wife. And there remains always a sense of displacement in his heart.

Even after living for a long time in Pakistan with his parents still their son feels the same displacement and lack of belongingness.

"Can't ask any of my friends home', he had yelled, the sound so unexpected, Sajjad had run into the room. 'with you walking around, showing your legs. Why cant you be more Pakistani?' [230]

Raza found himself in a place where his identity is questioned. He feels like a stranger because of his looks which he inherits from his Japanese mother.

"She had never truly understood her son's need for belonging, the anger with which he twisted away from comments about his foreign looks- in truth. she had thought that anger little more than affection in a boy to possess languages of different tribes, different nations- but she knew intimately the stigma of being defined by a bomb. Hibakusha . it hated the most hated word in her vocabulary. And the most powerful. To escape the word she had boarded a ship to India. To enter the home of a couple she had never met, a world of which she knew nothing." [222]

This psychological displacement takes Raza to Afghanistan where he ends up joining ISI. Then the

chain of events leads to the 9/11 terrorist attack and a world after that. Post 9/11 is a period when being a Muslim is equal to being a terrorist. When Hiroko comes to know about the 9/11 attack her reaction was-

"You just have to put them in a little corner of the big picture. In the big picture of the Second World War [362]"

In her novel Shamsie succeeds in bringing out the torment, the trauma and the psychological displacement of the people through her characters. She manages to add a new dimension to the personal trauma of the Nagasaki atom bomb attack by comparing it to the terrorist attack of 9/11 at the world trade centre.

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