

## VARYING FACETS OF WOMEN EXPERIENCE IN KAMILA SHAMSIE'S 'BURNT SHADOWS'

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### ABSTRACT

*A true literary artist reveals life quite accurately and with some insight along with historical facts and statistical details, because he/she deals with the truth of the human heart with the realities of man in the society. Being a Part of the cultural process that generates and appropriates sexual difference, literary representations are decisive in determining the functional and ideological aspects of gender. Fiction as a cultural practice is a device whose delineations, referents and effects attain embodied expressions in the 'real'. Any analysis of the gender question under the circumstances must stem from an understanding of the socio-political conditions and relative historical factors. Kamila Shamsie's novel Burnt shadows is a feminist text which explores the feminine psyche of its protagonist Hiroko and other women characters. It is psychoanalysis of a woman's experiences in her journey from young age to old age. The present paper is an endeavor to explore how Shamsie in her novel Burnt Shadows has presented her women who know their predicaments and choose to fight against the general, accepted norms and currents. What is new and different about these women is that they are prepared to face the consequences of their choices.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Kamila Shamsie is a Pakistani novelist who represents the new generation of writers writing in English. Her mother Muneeza Shamsie is a critic and short story writer, and her aunt Attia Hosain and her grandmother Begum Jahanara Habibullah are both novelists. Therefore she is one of those few women born in Pakistan in the 1970s who could have hoped to become professional writers and who could have got the encouragement of their family. Kamila Shamsie's novel *Burnt shadows* is a feminist text which explores the feminine psyche of its protagonist Hiroko and other women characters. It is psychoanalysis of a woman's experiences in her journey from young age to old age. Shamsie portrays her female characters as bold and progressive in the society. In the narration of incidents she is very frank and straight forward. She has a gift of exploring depths and the subdued portion of women psychology. She is a freelance Pakistani writer who shocks the very ethics and taboos of the society through her writings.

Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows* presents a theme of personal loss of Hiroko Tanaka, the female protagonist, as it relates to larger, worldwide tragedies and the political comparisons that can be drawn between major events in world history. The protagonist Hiroko Tanaka is introduced in the very beginning of the novel—she is a young Japanese woman who has always lived in and loved Nagasaki, the city of her birth and youth. Standing at the edge of a dangerous precipice, Hiroko shares the fear of losing home with thousands of fellow Japanese families who inhabit this city amidst the horrifying destruction of the Second World War. But then, on the morning of August 9th 1945, in a matter of seconds, Nagasaki is nothing more than a “diamond cutting open the earth, falling through to hell.”<sup>1</sup> This marks an end of not only of her home but also an end of her first love Konrad. This incident serves as a permanent caution against attaching too many sentiments to the relationships and the pain of their loss being unrelenting. This scene of devastation is crucial from feminist perspective. Before the dropping of bomb she is shown as on the verge of an age where she experiences the sensuousness of love for the first time. She feels the glimpses of her physical intimacy with her lover, Konrad. She clothes herself in her mother's cherished silk Kimono embroidered with two large and magnificent birds on its back. Everything around her seems more beautiful to her but all of a sudden everything turns white leaving permanent numbness on her body as well as her life. The novel describes it as,

Hiroko steps out on to the verandah. Her body from neck down a silk column, white with three black cranes swooping across her back. She looks out

towards the mountains, and everything is more beautiful to her than it was early this morning. Nagasaki is more beautiful to her than ever before. She turns her head and sees the spires of Urakami Cathedral, which Konrad is looking up at when he notices a gap open between the clouds. Sunlight streams through, pushing the clouds apart even further. Hiroko. And then the world goes white.”<sup>2</sup>

As Shamsie always portrays her women characters progressive, Hiroko is also depicted as an adaptive woman who believes in moving ahead. Her positive attitude towards life makes her to move to Delhi to meet Konrad’s sister Elizabeth. There she meets James Burton and Elizabeth Burton, a typically patriarchal family with the dominance of James over Elizabeth. Hiroko tells them that she is the beloved of Konrad who died in the bomb dropping incident and she has come long way from Nagasaki to Tokyo( where she works as a translator for some time) and to Delhi via Mumbai. James shocks when he hear about her long journey all alone as it does not suits to his patriarchal thoughts where woman is not allowed to do so,

Tokyo. I’ve been working in Tokyo since soon after the war ended. As a translator. Someone I knew there told me about a friend of hers who was coming to India, to Bombay. We met, and I convinced him to let me travel with him. And from Bombay I took the train to Delhi.’ ‘What, alone?’ James glanced over at Elizabeth... ‘Yes. Why? Can’t women travel alone in India?’ Elizabeth almost laughed.James gives his justifications as, “‘But there are rules, and there is common sense. I certainly wouldn’t allow Elizabeth . . .”<sup>3</sup>

The above incident highlights James’s narrow-mindedness and the control these authoritative men take over the women. Hiroko also finds Elizabeth as a submissive character who follows her husband’s rules. Her fist over her husband’s dominance is clearly seen,

So much for those demure Japanese women of all the stories she’d heard. Here was one who would squeeze the sun in her fist if she ever got the chance; yes, and tilt her head back to swallow its liquid light. At what point, Elizabeth wondered, had she started to believe there was virtue in living a constrained life? She clicked her heels against the floor in impatience at herself. Virtue really had nothing to do with it.<sup>4</sup>

Elizabeth wonders how in this predominantly masculine society of colonial India, where women were consciously denied any voice or agency in colonial discourse. Hiroko disrupts this unequal, yet hitherto unquestioned, balance of power. Though Elizabeth is shown as a modern aristocratic wife but in reality she is a victim of English patriarchal system. She is

conscious of her rights but she compromises to the fact that a woman's real position lies within the family unit with her male counterpart, which she must sustain and protect and not ignore or neglect due to the false notion of being liberated. There is no doubt that the Burton household, similar to the British Raj, is a male dominated one, and the role assigned to Elizabeth, though not overtly discriminatory, is clearly a passive one: "Elizabeth picked up her cup of tea from the windowsill and felt as though she posed herself for a portrait, The Colonial Wife Looks upon her Garden"<sup>5</sup> And this title of the "colonial wife" is perhaps most befitting for Elizabeth, who has a voice but no agency and who though free and unchained on the surface is trapped in a most frustrating and unfulfilling bond of marriage from which she is feels unable to break free.

Shamsie has highlighted Hiroko's brave and concrete steps towards better relationships and better future. Feeling subordinated by Hiroko, James finds it hard to digest her presence at his home and he feels perturbed, "James was oddly perturbed by this woman who he couldn't place. Indians, Germans, the English, even Americans . . . he knew how to look at people and understand the contexts from which they sprang. But this Japanese woman in trousers. What on earth was she all about?"<sup>6</sup> But James has to agree on keeping Hiroko with them on Elizabeth's insistence. Elizabeth realizes that Hiroko's presence in their house is optimistic for her as it increases her courage as a woman to interrogate her own relationship with James. Hiroko adds energy in her to rethink about her otherwise lose bond with her husband since many years of her marriage. She is reacquainted, via Hiroko who unwittingly becomes something of a feminist muse in Elizabeth's life, to the question of her "wants," something she has not given thought to in several years:

Want. She remembered that dimly. Somewhere. Want. At what point had her life become an accumulation of things she didn't want? She didn't want Henry to be away. She didn't want to be married to a man she no longer knew how to talk to....she didn't want to make James unhappy through her inability to become the woman he had thought she would turn into, given time and instruction<sup>7</sup>

Not only feminism but also nationalism is revitalized in Elizabeth due to Hiroko's presence. Her sense of homelessness declines. Her desire to be called as German starts reviving, "she didn't want to keep hidden the fact that at times during the war—and especially when Berlin was firebombed—she had felt entirely German"<sup>8</sup> The theme of nationalism acts as a unifying factor for keeping Hiroko and Elizabeth together. Both feel the same love and attachment for their nation. When Elizabeth recalls her memories of leaving Berlin she feels resentful,

“Elizabeth wanted to catch Sajjad by the collar and shake him. I was made to leave Berlin when I was a little younger than him—I know the pain of it. What do you know about leaving, you whose family has lived in Delhi for centuries?”<sup>9</sup> Hence, Hiroko makes a positive influence on Elizabeth. Though Shamsie demonstrates Hiroko a woman who can transcend time, space and history while moving ahead but somewhere her nostalgia for Nagasaki is also shown. Hiroko, though adaptive, finds it difficult to forget the culture of her place. She explains it to Elizabeth as,

Do you see those flowers on the hillside Ilse? I want to know their names in Japanese. I want to hear Japanese...I want to look like the people around me...I want the doors to slide open instead of swinging open. I want all those things that never meant anything, that still wouldn't mean anything if I hadn't lost them. You see, I know that. I know that but it doesn't stop me from wanting them”<sup>10</sup>

Instead, Hiroko is a woman who basically has courage enmeshed in her nature as a human being helps her to take life as it comes in her stride. She never turns her face away from the truth and her surrounding reality. Her eagerness to learn Urdu language is an example to prove her adaptive nature. She asks Sajjad, first a friend at Burtons' house later her husband, to teach her Urdu. Hiroko does not allow language barriers or cultural differences, no matter how stark, to stand in the way of her relationship with nations or their people; she adapts to “foreignness” with incredible ease. When Hiroko expresses an interest in learning the “language they speak here,” James's dismissive response encapsulates the difference in their attitudes towards the nation they both currently inhabit: “It's not necessary,” James argues, “English serves you just fine.” James continues to expose his selfish ignorance by assuring Hiroko, “The natives you'll meet here are the Oxbridge set and their wives or household staff like Lala Buksh, who can understand simple English.”<sup>11</sup> Not merely does James bare his ignorance on the matter of language acquisition with such statements, he also reveals his patriarchal and parochial vision of nationalism, which offers a sharp foil against Hiroko's version of it. But Hiroko despite being uprooted several times in her life, remains consistently and transnationally connected to places, people and ideologies. Her journey from Nagasaki to America reveals her physical, mental and cultural adjustments and thus makes her a static mountain rock who remains a witness to the ravages of time passing by. Hiroko does not believe in pushing her and Sajjad's son Raza into the rat race of career building. On the contrary, she is patient with Raza and encourages him to develop the instinctive skill he is born with.

Elizabeth who is shown a submissive character in the beginning later becomes a decisive and bold character. Failing to cope up with her husband's dominance she decides to live alone. She reveals this fact to her cousin that in the process of becoming a good wife she has destroyed her life,

Yes! I will come there. But not with James. I am leaving him. Please, please say nothing of this to anyone. Even he doesn't know yet. I will go back to England with him and settle him into his life there. And then I will come to New York and see if there's anything of your cousin Ilse left to be salvaged from the lonely, bitter (but still well groomed, you'll be glad to know) wreck that is Mrs. Burton. Dearest, why didn't I simply listen to you when you said it would kill me to be the Good Wife? I will write to you from London when my plans are more assured<sup>12</sup>

She spends her later years at New York with her granddaughter Kim. After some years Hiroko also joins them after the death of Sajjad. During this time we find that her son Raza becomes involved in Afghan Mujahedeen operations in North Western Pakistan, as a final desperate attempt at seeking a tangible and pure identity for himself. Kim is Harry's young American daughter. Kim is depicted as a "pure" American, and her nationalistic sentiments and views of the world outside America are governed by this status. She is portrayed as a highly educated, trained professional Engineer, but whose education poses some fundamental gaps. She is firm and assertive in her decisions. When asked to transport Abdullah (currently an illegal migrant living in New York) to Canada, she readily agrees but soon changes her mind. Fearing suddenly that she may have set lose a terrorist amidst the public she makes a phone call to the police, who then, we're subtly but firmly informed, "take care" of everything. In offering a defense for her action to Hiroko, she further reveals her prejudice, "I'm sorry, but it wasn't Buddhists flying those planes, there is no video footage of Jews celebrating the deaths of three thousand Americans, it wasn't a Catholic who shot my father. You think it makes me a bigot to recognise this?" <sup>13</sup>She is one of the bold characters who finally alters Hiroko's idea about the world,

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 America, what is one Afghan? Expendable. Maybe he's guilty, maybe not. Kim, you are the kindest, most generous woman I know. But right now, because of you, I understood for the first time how nations can applaud when their governments drop a second nuclear bomb.<sup>14</sup> .

*Burnt Shadows* is a portrait of series of calamities in different nations and their impact on common people especially on the life of Hiroko. The details of female psyche explored in the novel make it unique and feminist. Salman Rushdie has very well said that, "Kamila Shamsie is a writer of immense ambition and strength. She understands a great deal about the ways in which the world's many tragedies and histories shape one another, and about how human beings can try to avoid being crushed by their fate and can discover their humanity, even in the fiercest combat zones of the age. *Burnt Shadows* is an absorbing novel that commands in the reader, a powerful emotional and intellectual response".<sup>15</sup>

## REFERENCES

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