

***Burnt Shadows: “Home”, “Cosmopolitanism” and “Hybridization”***

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The individual exists only within a social and cultural context. Therefore, we can really know ourselves only if we know others, and we can really know others only if we know the cultures in which they (and we) exist. (Lindholm 2010, 10)

**Abstract**

Multi-cultural societies, according to the cultural theorist Homi Bhabha, are in the process of developing hybrid identities that are in a state of flux. Shamsie’s *Burnt Shadows* reflects an individual who retains a strong link with the past but also develops in the future. For the protagonist displacement and loss is an on-going process yet is a living example of a person who can adjust in varied cultures. In contrast Raza the cosmopolitan, with a fluid identity has the capacity to form a new identity from diverse cultural sources. Bhabha’s concept of cultural identity provides the backdrop for the reader to reach an understanding of identity.

**Keywords:** Multi-cultural Societies; Hybrid Identities; Fluid Identity

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The concept of cultural identity in a postcolonial situation is presented with a new perspective after the emergence of the concept of ‘hybridization’ and ‘the third space’ by the cultural theorist Homi Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* (2004). This methodology is particularly effective in our analysis of Kamila Shamsie’s *Burnt Shadows* (2009).<sup>1</sup>*Burnt Shadows* (2009) is Kamila Shamsie’s (1973- ) latest novel. Her first novel was *In the City by the Sea* (1998), followed by *Salt and Saffron* (2000), *Kartography* (2002) and *Broken Verses* (2005) ([www.bloomsbury.com/author/kamila-shamsie](http://www.bloomsbury.com/author/kamila-shamsie)).

Bhabha argues that the cultures of the present multi-cultural societies are in ‘the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion’ (Bhabha 2004). From a reading of his work *The Location of Culture* (2004) we come to understand that no culture and its identity, whether national or otherwise, is pure because, like language, it is open to change, to interactions and to adoptions. As languages evolve and develop so do cultures. As most languages borrow words from other languages, modern languages today are an amalgamation of influences of other languages. In the same way cultures combine within themselves influences and ideas from other cultures they meet.

Hence, languages, cultures and cultural identity are always in the process of transforming, varying and evolving. Bhabha further argues that cultures that conflict with a dominant culture evolve towards a hybrid identity whether they have been post-colonial, migrant or diasporic. This happens both among nations and within nations. Thus, those communities within a nation who make a movement, say from the rural area to the urban, can have a hybrid identity. As Bhabha says: “the regional movements of people within nation-states and the financial and cultural impact of migrants upon their “home” communities and societies, should not be neglected in favor of a celebration of diasporic communities” (Bhabha 2004).

In the development of a hybrid identity both cultures, the national culture (i.e. the dominant culture) and the migrant culture (i.e. the minority culture or sub-culture in a society),<sup>2</sup> meet in a “liminal” space --- what Bhabha calls the “third space” of the “interstice.” For it is “in the emergence of the interstices --- the overlap and displacements of difference --- that the intersubjective and collective experiences of *nationness*, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated” (Bhabha 2004). Both these cultures (i.e. the national and the migrant) negotiate their cultural differences and create a culture that is hybrid in the “third space”. In an interview Bhabha elaborates on his idea of the “third space” when he says: ‘for me the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity to me is the “third space” which enables other positions to emerge’. He goes on: “This third space displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom.” (Rutherford 1990). He further says that “the process of cultural hybridity gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognizable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation” (211). Bhabha argues that the third space is not just where new ideas and ideologies are made and produced but also the place where they are practically carried out and imposed. These hybrid communities negotiate in the third space so that “otherness” is not suppressed but rather included to make something new.

Bhabha then argues that “Where, once, the transmission of national traditions was the major theme of a world literature, perhaps we can now suggest the transnational histories of migrants, the colonized, or political refugees” (Bhabha 2004) as the major themes of literary works. An important figure in these transnational histories is what Bhabha calls the “unhomely” individual. Bhabha opines that the “unhomely” individual is caught between two cultures and both make him feel a foreigner and an outsider. One result is that the familiar is no more familiar rather, feels like a guest/stranger in his home. The desire to go back home, the recreation of home or the rejection of home are some of the major

themes that are used in the literary works of postcolonial, diasporic or migrant writers.<sup>3</sup> And to see these themes enacted in the “house of fiction” according to Bhabha creates a desire for social solidarity for the un-homed individual who is “looking for the join” (Bhabha 2004) meaning he is trying to unite his past and his present to create something new that will allow him to be comfortable. The identity, individually or en masse, is never pre-given: it must be enunciated or performed: “It is the ‘Third Space’, though un-representable in itself, which constitutes the discursive condition of enunciation; that ensure the meaning and symbols of culture and have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew” (Bhabha 2004). The result is that the people who have a hybrid identity open the way to “conceptualizing an international culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the *diversity* of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture’s *hybridity*” (Bhabha 2004).

Bhabha makes us aware that culture is not stagnant; it is not something set in time but rather a flowing process where its interaction with new experiences and norms cause it to evolve and develop. The keyword here is the *performance* of culture. A healthy hybrid culture based on the migrant experience (in the host nation), depends on the fact that its “terms of cultural engagement, whether antagonistic or affiliative,” are produced performatively. “Representation of difference must not be hastily read as the reflection of *pre-given* ethnic or cultural traits set in the fixed tablet of tradition” (Bhabha 2004) but rather the “social articulation of difference.” A migrant culture is a continuous intricate performance based on “negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation.” In short, the “right” to signify from the periphery of authorized power and privilege does not depend on the persistence of tradition; it is resourced by the power of tradition to be reinscribed through the conditions of contingency and contradictoriness that attend upon the lives of those who are “in the minority” (Bhabha 2004). Bhabha addresses the migrant experience in their new “homes”, but he also addresses the experience of formerly colonized countries. Bhabha argues that talk of “homogenous national cultures” rather than the consensual or contiguous transmission of historical traditions, or organic ethnic communities.” In opposition to the idea of a pure national identity Bhabha posits “the complex interweavings of history and the culturally contingent borderlines of modern nationhood” (Bhabha 2004). For a culture to survive, it requires that it is in contact with new cultures: this “newness” creates “a sense of the new as an insurgent act of cultural translation” and we see that “the ‘past-present’ becomes part of the necessity, not the nostalgia, of living” (Bhabha 2004). For me this is best displayed by Vaclav Havel, President of the Czech Republic in a speech at Independence Hall in Philadelphia on July 4, 1994<sup>4</sup>

These are periods when all consistent value systems collapse, when cultures distant in time and space are discovered or rediscovered. (neoenglishsystem.blogspot.co.uk)

This speech outlines the essence of post-colonialism: the mixing, the disintegration, and the instability of identities.

### I

Hybridization is associated with cosmopolitanism. They are integrally related, for cosmopolitanism is more exemplified in diasporic societies. Cosmopolitanism means literally that an individual is a citizen of the world. Indeed, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Scheffler argues, that “The hybrid lifestyle of the true cosmopolitan is in fact the only true response to the modern world in which we live” (qtd in Scheffler 1999). Cosmopolitan culture is always changing and being reconstructed but that must not be taken as a sign of its weakness. Rather it is one of its main strengths. The constant change in culture and society and its adaptability is the strategy for being able to prosper and thrive (Scheffler 1999). Traditionalists and critics of cosmopolitanism have the fear that, as the individual now is no more associated with any community, he loses his contact with the culture of a community to morally guide him and make him aware of his responsibilities and obligations. There is the danger; they feel of such individuals falling into a moral vacuum (Scheffler 1999). Furthermore, traditionalists feel that, with the emergence of new cultural practices, many established practices and beliefs are threatened with extinction. Bhabha’s answer to this fear is that “the borderline work of culture demands an encounter with ‘newness’ that is not part of the continuum of the past and present” (Bhabha 2004).

Bhabha argues that this hybridization will lead towards what he terms “global cosmopolitanism” where the greatest virtue should be tolerance (Bhabha 2004: xiv). But this global cosmopolitanism is in practice limited to affluent communities. He refers to them as “imagined communities that consist of silicon valleys and soft-ware campuses” for they celebrate “a world of plural cultures and peoples located at the periphery, so long as they produce healthy profit margins within metropolitan societies” (Bhabha 2004). Countries like the United States and India that encourage these global villages pledge their allegiance to “diversity, at home and abroad, so long as the demography of diversity consists largely of educated economic migrants” (Bhabha 2004). Bhabha argues that this globalization should commence at “home” (Bhabha 2004) where a nation can deal with “the difference within” (Bhabha 2004). Bhabha advocates a vernacular cosmopolitanism that “measures global progress from the minoritarian perspective. Its claims to freedom and equality are marked by a ‘right to difference in equality’, rather than a diversity founded on a ‘dual economy’” (Bhabha 2004) that forces a poor nation to live in a culture of conditionality that

is enforced upon them by international economic bodies like the IMF or the World Bank. The lives of the migrants make them vernacular cosmopolitans translating between cultures, renegotiating tradition from a position where “locality insists on its own terms, while entering into larger national and societal conversations” (qtd in Sam Knowles 2007: 7). There are migrants in all communities but as Arendt says, “we are not born equal, but *become* equal as members of a group on the strength of our decision to guarantee ourselves mutually equal rights” (qtd in Bhabha 2007).

What is vital for these communities, cultures and individuals who have been diasporic, migrant or displaced is to feel at “home” when they cross the boundaries of not only geography but also of identity because their race, gender constructions, traditions, culture, language, nationality are challenged by their migration or displacement. They are wrestling with their identities to understand what they are and who they think they should be. What they desire is to adapt to their new environment and feel at home in the new situation so that it develops into a place of comfort and belonging.

These are some of the issues and problems that will be highlighted and examined below in our analysis of *Burnt Shadows* (2009) by the award-winning novelist Kamila Shamsie.

### **Burnt Shadows: An Analysis**

*Burnt Shadow* (2009) is a novel where the main character around which the story revolves is repeatedly displaced, and where previous tribulations are replaced by new ones. As Stuart Hall very aptly says in “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” “Cultural identity ... is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’” (Rutherford 1990). This means that an individual’s identity is always in a state of adaptation and change but there is a link between what we were in the past and what we have become in the future. In *Burnt Shadow* (2009) central characters like Hiroko and Sajjad adapt to changing circumstances while Raza radically transforms his identity. The Sajjad in Karachi learns to adapt in Karachi and shelve his dreams of becoming a lawyer for one as manager in a soap factory.<sup>5</sup>In Delhi, a city he loves very much and would never imagine leaving, before the partition of the sub-continent, he had been promised a job by James Burton in his law firm. But his dreams come to nothing when he comes to Karachi and finds he cannot practice law because he had no qualifications and the Delhi solicitor who could vouch for his abilities was dead. He hides his disappointment behind a beaming smile and gets on with being a manager in a soap factory “as though that was all he had ever wanted from the world” (137). Hiroko adjusts in the cultural environment of Karachi as she had done in Delhi and further adjusts when she goes to New

York. In comparison, Harry and Raza the two transnational spies can transform their identities to any situation.

The novel has a brief Prologue and is divided into four sections. Each section takes place in a separate country. First it is Nagasaki in 1945 (the atomic bomb), then Delhi 1947 (the partition of the sub- continent into Pakistan and India), thirdly Pakistan 1982-3 (the time of the Afghan Jihad when co-operation between the Americans and the Pakistanis was at its peak) and the final section is in New York and Afghanistan 2001-2 (the period after 9/11). The historical backdrop for each section is significant for each date has played a noteworthy role in world history. The story is simple; it follows the relation of two families, the Ashraf-Tanaka and the Burton-Weiss over the years, with one-character Hiroko Tanaka being present throughout. In fact, she is the protagonist, the central character around whom the story revolves. Her time in Nagasaki is one of happiness though it is against the setting of the Second World War. She is in her twenties and is in love with Konrad Weiss, her fiancé and a German. With the dropping of the atomic bomb over Nagasaki on 9 August 1945, in a matter of seconds, Hiroko's world is turned upside down. She is wearing a white Kimono with a pattern of three black cranes across its back "when the world goes white" (23). She survives but her back is burnt and the black cranes remain imprinted on her body.<sup>6</sup>They symbolize for her all that she has lost:<sup>7</sup>

Her fingers can feel her back but her back cannot feel her fingers. Charred silk, seared flesh. How is this possible? Urakami Valley has become her flesh. Her flesh has become Urakami Valley. She runs her thumb over what was once skin. It is bumped and raw, lifeless (27).

The scars are a personal reminder for her and a symbol of her great loss. They also become a symbol of the taint of "hibakusha" (49) with which she has to live all her life. At the same time, they form part of the larger metaphor for the shadow of nuclear destruction that hangs over the world still. The most poignant moment in her life and in the novel, is when the burnt body of her father crawls towards her:

Hiroko looks down, sees a reptile crawling up the path towards her house...The reptile raises its head and the girl drops the spear, calls out Hiroko's father's name. 'Tanaka-san, Tanaka-san,' hands gripping the sides of her face as she stares at the reptile (27).

She only tells Sajjad her heart-breaking account of the horror of what happened, for she knows he would understand as he had understood Konrad:

Those nearest the epicenter of the blast were eradicated completely, only the fat from their bodies sticking to the walls and rocks around them like shadows...and 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. I sent a message to Yoshi Watanabe and together we rolled the rock to the International Cemetery...' She pressed a hand against her spine at the memory. 'And buried it' (77).

In the second section, the theme of personal identity that leads to the novel's major theme of cultural identity enters the story line. Konrad has a half-sister living in India during the end of the British Raj. In search of a fresh start, for 'she had started to feel that word "hibakusha" start to consume her life' (49), she goes to India to meet Konrad's sister. Here she also meets Sajjad Ashraf who teaches her Urdu. Just as with Konrad she falls in love with a man who belongs to a different cultural and social background. As already mentioned previously, Sajjad loves his "Dilli" and would never think of leaving it, but is forced to do so at the time of Partition. After that he cannot return:

'They said I chose to leave'. He said the words slowly carefully, as though they were a foreign language whose meaning he was trying to grasp. 'They said I'm one of the Muslims who chose to leave India. It can't be unchosen. They said Hiroko; they said I can't go back to Dilli. I can't go back home' (125).

This is the "unhomely moment"<sup>8</sup> that fills him with incredulous terror for now the familiar has become the strange. However, as discussed previously, Sajjad learns to adapt in the society at Karachi. Now he cannot bear to visit Delhi because it has become unfamiliar to him and he finds himself a stranger there. This feeling of being a stranger begins with the death of his mother when for the first time he feels uneasy with the naive thought he had always believed in that "the world would change around him but his own life would stay unaffected" (80). He realizes that it was the presence of loved ones that gave one a sense of belonging for as he looks at Delhi after his mother's death "it was absence, not belonging, that the Old City echoed back at him" (103). At the beginning of the novel nothing can replace his sense of belonging to his beloved Dilli. With the passage of time there grows within him an acceptance of Partition and a love for another city, Karachi. He thus realizes that home is never static: it can be many places and spaces. He who believed in "continuity" (113) has to accept that the world was changing: he could not hold on to the old world for that world was just 'kite-strings attached to air at either end'; instead he had "to learn how to live in a new world" (113). It pains him in the beginning when he realizes that what was once "home" (Dilli) is now the "Other", but he finds that, in his search for a location

where the “self” is at home, he is able to find it in Karachi. However, the sense of nostalgia does not allow him to forget his love for Dilli, a Dilli he had known, but he knows no more exists. As he tells Harry “Dilli is Dilli” but he goes on to say “My first love. I would never have left it willingly. But those bastards didn’t let me go home” (161). And once he has left it, “Dilli” exists only in his memory. Shamsie also foregrounds the divisions within a culture. She explains how the British Raj divided the culture of the Indians and the British into water tight compartments.<sup>9</sup>Sajjad sees this in the separateness of Dilli and Delhi: “I am like those occasional pigeons, Sajjad thought. At home in Dilli but breaking free of the rest of my flock to investigate the air of Dehli” (34).

It is also seen in his outburst to James Burton when he is called a Young Turk by him:

‘No, Mr Burton,’ Sajjad said not understanding the reference. ‘I’m Indian’...He looked at James, as though considering something that had never occurred to him before.’ 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’ll be going home (82).

The psychological impact of Partition for Sajjad that caused him to be “unhomed” is tremendous. Many migrants like him realize that when new geographical boundaries were set these boundaries not only severed ties but also problematised their identity. For the first time they see their culture and identity challenged. Altamash and Bilal explain how the suspicion that follows all migrants is reflected in the labels/names given to them:

In India when they want to insult Muslims they call us Pakistani. Bilal had laughed out loud. In Pakistan when they want to insult Muhajirs they call us Indian, he replied. (190)

Sajjad goes through a painful process of evolution and development but, as we have seen, he is able to overcome the loss of identity by merging and accepting this new society that he encounters in Pakistan. Sajjad also felt he had survived the Partition and its aftermath because of Hiroko.

Sajjad is able to find contentment in Karachi through his cultural negotiations with the society he encounters there. By taking his marriage negotiations as a model he is able to adjust. In his married life Sajjad knew he would have easily



given in to every “negotiations” (135) if he had not known Hiroko would “disdain him for it” (135); to keep her respect and love he had to calculate where to give in and where not to. Life after Partition had been a painful process for along with thinking of home (here the new Karachi society) as an emotional space Sajjad also considers it a social place where he (and particularly his wife) would be welcomed if she conformed to their way of life by wearing their clothes and celebrating their religious holidays. But he realizes the truth that, in the society, just as in his marriage, he had to find his own space through negotiations and compromises. He can adjust for he is able to adapt between the old and the new. Thus, when Harry enters Sajjad’s home for the first time, he finds that “the flower pots filled with marigolds, snapdragons and phlox which were clustered near the tree recalled another Delhi world” (152). These flower pots reflect similar flower pots found in the Englishman’s bungalows before partition that for Sajjad symbolized separateness and demarcation. For the British it was a reminder of their home in England. For Sajjad, in Karachi, they were a reminder of his life in Delhi when he would visit the Burtons and admire their garden and flowers.

## II

In contrast to Sajjad, his wife Hiroko, is a character for whom displacement and loss is an ongoing continuous process. She is displaced time and again. The first time is in Nagasaki after the nuclear bomb, an incident that throws a continual shadow over her life. She finds comfort, security and respite in the home she creates with Sajjad in Karachi but is forced to be displaced once again after his death to the completely new environment of New York. A city built on immigration where Kamila Shamsie suggests its denizens have the freedom to seek their identity, in just being American. As a character Hiroko negotiates and adjusts in whichever society she encounters. However, she also appears as a firm character that lives on her own terms. In Karachi in the home that she creates with Sajjad she lives and is accepted on her own terms by the society around her and “it didn’t bother her in the least to know she would always be a foreigner in Pakistan --- she had no interest in belonging to anything as contradictorily insubstantial and damaging as a nation” (204). When she takes up a teaching position her students become “her first allies --- recognizing in her a woman who could never be fooled or flattered, but whose smiles of approval or encouragement could transform a day into glory” (139). Through her students she was able to win over the mothers and through them her neighbours. Similarly, when she steps into New York her “love affair” (288) with the city begins. The cosmopolitan atmosphere delights her for she is in a city where she could hear “Urdu, English, Japanese, German all in the space of a few minutes” (288). Above all, she felt there was “nothing foreign about foreignness in this city.... She felt she had been waiting all her life to arrive here” (289). And when the 9/11 incident occurred she felt an empathy with the grief stricken. She goes to donate blood but when it is not accepted as she belongs to a malarial country she feels

the need, like any Pakistani, to quote Prophet Mohammad. The point to be made is that, even though New York and its influence is becoming an important part of her life and personality, she cannot shed her past in Pakistan that is a part of her make-up. She evolves and develops to adopt parts of the new and the old. Maybe that is one of the reasons she is able to adapt wherever she goes. Stuart Hall calls these “Diaspora identities...which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and differences” (Rutherford 1990).

We see that Hiroko evolves and develops towards a hybrid identity from the beginning of the novel. She lives in Nagasaki which was a cosmopolitan city before the war. She falls in love with Konrad who is a German. Being with Konrad she encounters a completely foreign culture but is able to relate to it. After his death she moves to Delhi where she begins to negotiate a completely new culture and way of life. Her ability to learn new languages quickly is a talent that allows her to make friends in new environments. Languages play an important role in her life. It is because of languages and her desire to learn and teach them that she meets Konrad Weiss and Sajjad. For Raza her son the recollections of childhood “were bound up in his mother’s gift of languages to him” (200). She is always in the process of evolution and hybridization. She comes to Karachi, a melting pot of different cultures,<sup>10</sup> and establishes a comfortable home with Sajjad but we are led to believe that always at the back of her mind is the knowledge that her final destination is New York living with Ilse --- and Sajjad plays no role in that part of her life: “She never denied she used to imagine a life without him...that the new life would have been in the company of Elizabeth Burton, now Ilse Weiss, whose every letter in the first years implored Hiroko to come and stay with her in New York, while never mentioning Sajjad” (136). In Karachi nevertheless, Hiroko feels her appearance and behaviour is a source of shamefulness for her son. Beset by his own desire for acceptance, Raza is critical of his mother for not conforming to Pakistani society’s intolerant attitude towards western clothes. As he tells his mother:

“I can’t ask any of my friend’s home,” he had yelled, the sound so unexpected Sajjad had run into the room. “With you walking around, showing your legs. Why can’t you be more Pakistani?” Afterwards, she and Sajjad hadn’t known whether to howl with laughter or with tears to think that their son’s teenage rebellion was asserting itself through nationalism (130).

Hiroko briefly tries to conform but gives up when she still doesn’t meet her son’s requirements.

For a while, though, she had packed away her dresses and taken to wearing shalwar kameezes at home.... But a few months later, Raza said her kameezes were too tight, she returned to the dresses (130).

If Hiroko does not conform to the Pakistani views on dress, at the same time she is also not at home with the Japanese women who live in Karachi and represent her old world, Japan. In the beginning it had felt good to “sit and laugh in Japanese” (140), but she never told them that she had been in Nagasaki at the time of the bomb and “Considering it now, she decided the day she knew her life had tilted into feeling “at home” in Karachi was when she found she was able to tell her neighbourhood friends that she had lived through the bombing of Nagasaki, while still insisting to the Japanese women that, although she grew up there, she was in Tokyo when the bomb fell” (141). She also felt that the new members of the Japanese group started to appear foreign to her as she did to them. This estrangement from Japan she also feels in New York where she is intrigued by the young Japanese women whose “unabashed laughter, their vocabulary peppered with words she didn’t understand,” force her to recognize “that her own Japanese belonged to “Grandmother’s generation”” (289). This makes her realize that the world she knew in Nagasaki is now no more. She tells Elizabeth that she had always planned on leaving Nagasaki, but only when she saw it “reduced to ash you don’t realize how much we crave familiarity ... I want all those things that never meant anything, that still wouldn’t mean anything if I hadn’t lost them .... But should I tell you what I don’t want? I don’t want to go back to Nagasaki. Or Japan” (100). Just as Sajjad loses touch with the Dilli he loved, in the same way the familiar has become strange in the case of the Japanese women that Hiroko encounters. The only person she was comfortable with was Rehana, a Pakistani woman who had lived in Tokyo with her Japanese husband and now lived in “Abbottabad, that hill station with its echoes of Mussoorie” (254).<sup>11</sup> After Sajjad’s death Hiroko makes her home there and enjoys the peace of the hills. Here Hiroko discovers herself as a woman who could enjoy her own company and the solitude of the place. But too soon the world intrudes once more and with the expectation of Pakistan testing its nuclear bomb, she goes to New York, her final destination, with the expectation and “the belief that there are worthwhile things still to be found” (99).<sup>12</sup>

As already mentioned, she learns to love New York because Hiroko finds that she finds no strangeness in being a foreigner in a city where it was possible for her to hear all the languages she knows so well. It appears to be a city that can absorb and be tolerant towards all cultures. All the characters in the novel including Hiroko, Harry, Raza, Illse and Kim move to the pulsating city of New York. It is a city where Hiroko notices the Indians and the Pakistanis live without animosity. These immigrants have apparently found harmony and unity in just being an

American citizen. Her taxi-driver tells her about the strike by Indian and Pakistani drivers ---

‘No, no, please,’ Omar said. ‘Don’t ask how it’s possible that we can strike together when our countries are in the middle of planning the Day of Judgement. It’s what all the journalists ask. Aunty, we are taxi drivers, and we’re protesting unjust new rules. Why should we let those governments who long ago let us down stop us from successfully doing that’ (2)?

When “the buildings fell” (289) Hiroko feels this sense of “solidarity quite unfamiliar, utterly overwhelming” (289) though she also tells Kim that the incident of 9/11 is not the world’s but that of the “neighbourhood” (250). However, we realize that it is the incident of the world: unless and until America is satisfied, the world will not “stop being such a terrible place” (292). As the structure of the novel suggests, the world has become a terrible place due to American foreign policy that began with the dropping of the nuclear bombs on two Japanese cities, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which killed thousands of people. Recalling that “unspeakable day” (99), Hiroko cannot understand “Why did they have to do it? Why a second bomb? Even the first is beyond anything I can ... but a second.” (99). The 9/11 incident is revealed as the outcome of American actions around the world. As Abdullah tells Kim: “countries like America always fight their wars ‘somewhere else’. ‘The disease always happens somewhere else; because you understand war least of all. You need to understand it better” (344). Once Americans understand and feel the horror of war maybe then the world will stop being a terrible place.

New York is a city where the hybridization of culture does take place, although for the moment this hybridization is accompanied by the growing intolerance of a people whose understanding and charitableness has taken a back seat to their fear of destruction--- the destruction of all they believe in. After the initial feeling of solidarity when “the buildings fell” (289), Hiroko felt things shifted: “The island seemed tiny, people’s views shrunken. How could a place so filled with immigrants take the idea of “patriotism” so seriously” (289)? This is seen in the event concerning the escape of Abdullah and the arrest of Raza. The step Kim takes is based on the fear of doing the wrong thing by not turning in Abdullah. Not realizing that the person she harms is Raza who is ready to sacrifice everything for Abdullah because “finally he counted for something” (356). Hiroko in turn, like the author, realizes that the intolerance of the world will at least stop in New York for New York represents a cosmopolitan city that accepts all differences despite the prejudice, narrowness and harsh attitude of the rest of the world for “finally, mid-January in New York, the world felt different ... at least it felt like space in which to exhale” (289-290). At the end of the novel we

feel that Hiroko will continue to adapt and adjust to the changing situations of life. Sajjad realizes Hiroko “was a woman who had learnt that she could leave everything behind, and survive” (135) as a migrant. And, even though at the end of the novel she is in her seventies, she still has the “willingness to enter into new experiences without too much concern for whether anyone might consider it either foolishness or frivolity” (249).

### III

Hiroko is a living example of the process of adjusting in cultures: she is someone who can adjust and feel at home in New Delhi, Karachi or New York, for whom “home” is not a place but the people in her life. In the words of Bhabha, previously quoted, she undergoes the process of adjustments by living “in another’s country that is also your own” (Bhabha 2004: xxv). In contrast to her is her son Raza who is one of the most enigmatic and complex characters in the novel. He is also one of the cleverest. He is a character who is caught between two cultures, the Japanese and Pakistani, and he does not know how to balance the two in his being. The only thing he feels that is holding him back is the foreignness within his makeup that is reflected in his middle name, Konrad, and “He wanted to reach into his own name and rip out the man whose death was a foreign body wedged beneath the two Pakistani wings of his name” (191). Ironically, the name is German and not Japanese as it should have been. But Raza in his own frustration misses the sentimentality and love that is behind the reason why he is named after Konrad.<sup>13</sup>

He is articulate and multilingual, a polyglot like his mother, but he is never accepted in Pakistan because of his mixed parentage that is reflected in his physical appearance. Whereas, his mother, Hiroko’s gift of learning new languages allows her to adapt in and be comfortable in a new culture, Raza’s was a “passion”: “” But it was a passion that could have no fulfilment” (146) in Pakistan. His mother understands his sorrow in the realization that “he would have to take that most exceptional part of himself and put it to one side” (146). She also knew that Raza was the “miring sort” (146) who did not have the ability to move on from a problem: he would be stuck in it. Then he allows his guilt on leaving Abdullah at the mujahideen camp dictate all his life. In this way, he was very much unlike his parents who were “two of the world’s great forward-movers” (146).

Raza realizes he will always be a stranger standing on the outside looking in: “In contact with the world of his moholla, but not intersecting it. After all intersections were created from shared stories and common histories, from marriages and the possibility of marriages between neighbouring families—from this intersecting world Raza Konrad Ashraf was cast out” (189). In order to fit in “he sought out as many nationalities as possible, acquiring language with the zeal

of a collector” (258) and the only thing he wanted was to “spend my days burrowing into new languages” (146). The more languages “you learned, he discovered, the more you found overlap” (258).<sup>14</sup> One place he can blend in and be at home is the city of New York that is known for its diversity and sizeable portion of ethnicity but like Harry, of whom in many ways he is “another version” (273), he is not able to stay there for longer periods. He does appreciate the fact that “It would be good to be back in America, no matter how briefly” (300) for this was one place he could feel comfortable in and be himself. This is important for him for all his life he has realized the importance of being someone particularly when he has undergone the “terror of unbecoming” (308). But this is also ironic for he is imprisoned by the United States at the end.

With the increased access to international markets and means of communication there has been an increase in cosmopolitan individuals who interact with two or more societies that traverse international borders. In *Burnt Shadows* (2009) Harry and Raza are a kind of transnational travellers. They are CIA spies who, under the guise of working for a private company, “contracted to the American military” (259), are in Afghanistan as undercover agents. The only role offered (in this novel) to cosmopolitans like Raza and Harry --- is either terrorist or counter-terrorist spy.

Raza’s conformity in any situation develops into a professional skill when he becomes a spy for the CIA. This suppression of his “self” is a process that developed since he was a young boy and became a part of his personality as he grew older:

All those years ago when he’d entered a class of older boys, at an age when a year was a significant gap, his teacher had remarked on how easily he fitted in. He saw no reason to tell her it wasn’t ease that made it possible but a studied awareness ---one he had from a very young age --- of how to downplay his manifest difference (139).

Long before Raza became a spy he received his training in leading a double life from his visits to Sohrab Goth as Raza Hazara. Here, along with his friendship with Abdullah and his teaching of English to Afghan children, his confidence grows. This growing confidence enables him to pass his examination and, after his result is announced, he knows he has to choose “one life over the other” (209). He makes an emotional decision to go with Abdullah to the Mujahideen camp. In his naivety he thinks it would be easy to vanish in Peshawar after the trip and bring “the friendship of Raza Hazara and Abdullah to a close in a manner that it deserved, in a burst of adventure and camaraderie” (211). There was much he learnt on the trip but most importantly that “the closer he got to the

Afghanistan border the less people gave him a second glance” (212). As this suggests, Raza’s desire for belonging, for acceptance and approval, is very great. He appeases his guilt at his deception of his friends with the thought that he had given the children of Sohrab Goth “months of education which they would never have received if not for is charade, and those months were his gift to them, and not a commitment” (213). When reality sets in, as at the Mujahideen camp, he is overwhelmed and consumed by his guilt for leaving Abdullah behind. This incident not only builds on his feelings of remorse but also points towards his future as a CIA operative. It shows how well he is able to disguise his personality in order to live the double life of an agent.

Raza’s life is overshadowed by this enduring guilt in relation to the Afghan escapade, and all his life he is consciously or unconsciously looking out for Abdullah whom he feels he betrayed and let down at the Mujahideen camp. At the end of the novel, in order to appease the guilt of his betrayal he allows Abdullah to escape. He felt it was a gift he could finally give Abdullah and when his, Raza’s, freedom ended it “counted for something” (356). At the same time, he never feels Kim had betrayed him but rather that she had helped him in allowing Abdullah to escape and appease his guilt. This appeasement is the final sample of the subtle pattern that the two families, Ashraf-Tanaka and Burton Weiss, follow in the novel of helping each other.

### **Conclusion**

*Burnt Shadows* (2009) is a novel of adjustments, negotiations, hybridization and cosmopolitanism. The novel deals with many issues but it would be oversimplifying it if we were to take it simply as a saga of two families as they undergo the trials and tribulations that life offers them. It is a novel that can be read on various levels as the narrative moves from one place to another taking part of each location and culture into the next. Critics and reviewers have paid greater attention to the interplay of history and personal life<sup>15</sup> but I feel this novel will always be remembered for its development of characters particularly that of Hiroko and Raza. Hiroko stands out throughout the story as a firm and strong character that makes the necessary adjustments to adapt to various situations, environments and cultures but her sense of her identity remains intact. On the other hand, her son Raza is the most hybrid of identities. He is the modern cosmopolitan with a fluid identity that has the capability and capacity to form a new identity from diverse cultural sources. Shamsie ends the novel on a bleak note when “Hiroko stood up and walked slowly over to the window. Outside, at least, the world went on” (363), as she had begun it when the prisoner (whom we now know to be Raza) throws the challenge of “How did it come to this” (1) to which the novel rises.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup>Kamila Shamsie (1973- ) is a Pakistani author whose novel *Burnt Shadows* was short listed for the Orange Prize for Fiction and was the winner of the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award.([www.bloomsbury.com/author/kamila-shamsie](http://www.bloomsbury.com/author/kamila-shamsie)) All the references from her novel are to this edition Shamsie, Kamila (2009) *Burnt Shadows*: London: Bloombury Publishing. They are parenthetically incorporated in the text with page number.

<sup>2</sup> The national culture is the already established traditions and beliefs, behaviour and perceptions of the majority of the people. They may be living in a complex diverse society where people have migrated from different parts of the world. These migrants retain much of their original cultural traditions and they are likely to be a part of an identifiable sub-culture in this new society. The shared cultural traits of these migrant cultures set them apart from the rest of their society. As the cultural difference between the members of the migrant culture and national culture blur and eventually disappear the migrant culture ceases to exist except as a group of people who claim a common ancestry. It must be remembered that this migration can even occur within a nation when people from the rural areas migrate to the urban.

<sup>3</sup>The concept of ‘home’ as a reaction to ‘dislocation’ and ‘cultural denigration’ is seen in postcolonial works like Chandani Lokuge’s ‘Turtle Nest’ and James George’s ‘Hummingbird’.

<sup>4</sup> This is an extract from the acceptance speech of the Czech President Vaclav Havel when he was awarded the Philadelphia Liberty Medal at Independence Hall, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania on 4<sup>th</sup> July, 1994 on the 218<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Declaration of Independence of the United States of America.

<sup>5</sup>Abdullah, like Sajjad, understands ‘lost homelands and the impossibility of return: he had looked at the photographs of Kandahar’s orchards as Sajjad used to look at pictures of his old mohalla in Dilli’ (313).

<sup>6</sup> In an interview Shamsie describes how, in a book about the aftermath of the atomic bomb in Hiroshima, ‘she had read of Japanese women wearing white kimonos with dark patterns and after the nuclear bomb had the patterns tattooed on their skin because of the heat generated by the bomb. The white reflected the heat while the dark absorbed it’. Hence, Shamsie uses the same idea in her novel concerning the tragedy. She uses the image of the cranes that symbolize life but here they form a grotesque image/picture of being on burnt skin. ([www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com) Uploaded 9 April 2009)

<sup>7</sup>The description of Hiroko’s loss is important to understand her character, especially how she develops a tenderness, love and understanding towards other people particularly those who have undergone loss. She sees the same tenderness reflected in Abdullah whom she sees helping a drunk. As Abdullah bodily lifts



the drunk out of her path and sets him down again ‘with a quick pat on the shoulder’ he was unaware she had seen his entire character in that gesture’ (313).

<sup>8</sup>For a greater understanding of the ‘unhomely’ see also Sigmund Freud ‘*Das Unheimliche*’ (1919). *Unheimliche* which means the unfamiliar and unknown is also the uncanny in German. Freud states that the specificity of the sensation of the uncanny lies in the fact that something is frightening, not because it is unfamiliar or new but because what is familiar has become strange.

<sup>9</sup> During the British Raj in India the British and the general population of India did not interact except on the official level. Hence the strict lines of demarcations between the world of Sajjad i.e. Dilli and that of the Burtons i.e. Delhi. Hiroko like her fiancé Konrad Weiss believed that ‘barriers were made of metal that could turn fluid when touched simultaneously by people on either side’ (*Burnt Shadows* 2009: 82)

<sup>10</sup>Karachi is the main sea port and financial centre of Pakistan. It is also home to a population of varied ethnic groups that include Sindhis, Baloch, Gujrati, Rajastani, MalyaliMapla, Muhajir, Punjabi, Pashtun and Bihari. Each has their own culture and language.

<sup>11</sup>Abbottabad is a city located in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province in Pakistan. The city is well known for its pleasant weather, high standard educational institutions and military establishments.

<sup>12</sup>On 11 May 1998 the Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee announced that India had conducted three nuclear tests. In the wake of India’s tests, the Pakistani Prime Minister Mohammad Nawaz Sharif was under pressure to demonstrate its own prowess in a similar manner. On 28 May 1998 Pakistan conducted five nuclear tests and became the world’s seventh nuclear power and the first nuclear weapons state in the Islamic world.

<sup>13</sup>Hiroko and Sajjad both loved Konrad and they always felt that it was because of Konrad that they met. To honour his memory, they name their only child Raza Konrad Ashraf.

<sup>14</sup>As in languages this overlap is also found in cultures when they come in contact. As already quoted previously, Homi Bhabha argues that ‘it is the emergence of the interstices --- the overlap and displacement of domains of difference---that the intersubjective and collective experience of *nationness*, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated’ (Bhabha 2004 2).

<sup>15</sup>Reviewers and critics have paid greater attention to the central characters’ presence at the time of major historical events. These include Hiroko’s life in Nagasaki at the time of the atomic bomb, Sajjad and Hiroko’s life at the time of the partition of the subcontinent and their stay in Karachi at the time of the Afghan Jihad and Raza’s relation with the Afghan Mujahideen and finally Hiroko’s presence in New York at the time of 9/11. Lesser attention has been paid to the author’s skill at developing characters and their relation to each other.

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