

## The Dynamics of Post-Colonialism, Nationalism, and Diasporic Identity in Burnt Shadows by Kamila Shamsie: A Critical Analysis



Mahnoor Ahmad	MPhil Scholar Department Of English Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan <a href="mailto:mahnoorahmad815@gmail.com">mahnoorahmad815@gmail.com</a>
Khadim Nawaz	MPhil English Northern University Nowshera <a href="mailto:khadimnawaz@gmail.com">khadimnawaz@gmail.com</a>
Dr Hashim Ali	Shanghai Jiao Tong University School of Media and Communications 800 Dongchuan Road Minhang District Shanghai China <a href="mailto:hashimali786@hotmail.com">hashimali786@hotmail.com</a>

**Abstract:** *This study attempts to explore the complex dynamics between post-colonialism, nationalism, and diasporic identity as shown in Kamila Shamsie's literary work, Burnt Shadows. This study provides a diligent analysis of the text to investigate how Shamsie effectively handles complex themes, providing insight into the lives of characters that cross geographical, cultural, and ideological borders. This research examines the influence of colonial legacies, nationalist fervor, and diasporic struggles on the identities and interactions of the protagonists in the novel, drawing upon post-colonial theory, nationalism studies, and diaspora discourse. Through an analysis of Shamsie's narrative methods, character depictions, and symbolic rudiments, this study seeks to explain the complex dynamics of post-colonialism, nationalism, and diasporic identity in Burnt Shadows. It further attempts to provide valuable insights into the wider socio-political and historical contexts and the complex nature of human experiences.*

**Keywords:** Nationalism, Post-colonialism, Diasporic, Brunt Shadow, Pakistan

### Introduction

Burnt Shadows is a novel published in 2009 by Kamila Shamsie, a writer of Pakistani-British origin. The narrative revolves around the union of two families, commencing on the last day of World War II in Japan, subsequently tracing their journey to India and Pakistan throughout the early 1980s, and culminating in the events of 9/11 in New York. This article aims to conduct an analysis of the events that took place in Pakistan during the 1980s and in New York between 2001 and 2002. It will apply postcolonial theory to inquire the text and examine the themes of nationalism and diasporic identity. Shamsie employs visual, linguistic, and nativism concepts to explore many features of nation and state, particularly in the context of collective belonging in Pakistan. In addition, she offers background information on the emergence of nationalism in Pakistan during the 1980s, as well as the growth of the Mujahidin, a nationalist movement in the 'third world', and the

CIA-funded resistance against the Soviet Union in the Afghan-Soviet conflict. This study aims to examine the utilization of postcolonial theory by Shamsie in the literary work Burnt Shadow while also exploring the implications of post coloniality on the boundaries of diasporic identity within a historical and theoretical framework.

### The post-colonial theory and diasporic identity

Postcolonial theory can be characterized as a comprehensive intellectual framework that centers on the examination of the political, economic, historical, and social consequences resulting from European colonial dominance spanning from the 18th century to the 20th century. This idea posits that the colonial world is marginalized in the context of global modernity due to the significant dominance of Western literature and intellectual endeavor. The theory gained prominence and developed

significantly throughout the initial half of the 20th century, particularly in relation to anticolonial ideology originating from South Asia, Africa and Latin America. Within the realm of literature, certain writings have been subject to interpretation by postcolonial theory, which encompasses an examination of their national and international histories as well as the political ramifications of our understanding (Elam, 2019). The thematic interests of Kamil Shamsie's work encompass the state, military rule, cultural difficulties, and poverty. The novel *Burnt Shadows* takes place in Pakistan during the 1980s, namely from chapter 13 to chapter 27. Shamsie's novels incorporate her personal experiences as a Pakistani and her recollections of the process of Islamization within the state throughout the 1980s. Shamsie employed her political and cultural context to examine nationalism via a postcolonial lens in her artistic endeavors. According to Omaishat (2015), *Burnt Shadows* explores both local and worldwide concepts of colonialism, focusing on the East-West relationship and its consequences, as well as the manifestations and political aspects of global events like 9/11 and the bombing of Hiroshima. Within the framework of diasporic identity, the offspring of the diasporic movements that emerged as a result of colonialism have cultivated their own unique cultures that not only maintain but also frequently advance their original cultures. The emergence and evolution of diasporic cultures inherently challenge essentialist frameworks. Radhakrishnan (1993) challenges the underlying assumptions of nativism, which suggest that the process of decolonization might be influenced by the restoration or rebuilding of pre-colonial society. Regarding motifs and symbolism in the story, Shamsie effectively establishes a connection between birds and the bodily and psychological anguish experienced by Hiroko due to cartographic territorialisation. In addition, she employs languages to symbolize the boundaries and potentialities of intercultural closeness, both symbolically and literally, through the characters Raza and Hiroko. Shamsie establishes a correlation between the act of speaking multiple languages and the notion of characters assuming new identities.

This is exemplified by Hiroko's repeated need to redefine her sense of belonging in India, Pakistan, and New York throughout the novel. Similarly, Ilse Weiss undergoes a process of translating herself into Elizabeth Burton in order to appease her English spouse, only to subsequently revert back to her original identity towards the conclusion of the novel when she abandons him to Ilse Weiss. Similarly, Raza, despite his proficiency in multiple languages, struggles to establish his own identity until he ultimately reverts back to Urdu, his native tongue, during the final encounter with Kim. It is noteworthy that Hiroko's affinity for languages is intricately linked to her profound cultural sensitivity and capacity to establish meaningful connections with individuals from diverse backgrounds. In association to her offspring, Raza, Hiroko refrains from endeavouring to conform to diverse cultural norms, opting instead to leverage her comprehension of cultural expectations as a means to establish shared perspectives with people while upholding her own principles (Perveen, 2021).

### **Nation, State and Shared Ownership**

*Burnt Shadows* explores the interconnectedness of geographical boundaries through its portrayal of India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. The presence of intertextuality within the novel serves to reinforce the concept of postcolonialism as well as the responses of individuals and their encounters with colonialism during the period of British governance. The novel is divided into four distinct sections. The initial section portrays the atomic blast that occurred in Japan in 1945. Subsequently, it transitions to the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947. The subsequent section takes place in Pakistan during the 1980s, coinciding with the emergence of Mujahedeen nationalism. Lastly, the story delves into the post-9/11 era in New York. Each section is imbued with a feeling of inclusion and incorporates postcolonial aspects, such as the concept of the urban. The concepts of Eurocentrism, diaspora, and nationalism. The concept of 'unhomeliness' is a prominent feature of diaspora, as exemplified by Sajjad's

experience of being forcibly removed from his country of origin, India, and subsequently relocating to Pakistan. In the context of metropolitanism, Sajjad is depicted as the central character of the work, serving as a symbolic representation of India. During his tenure as British Raj, James Burton served as his boss. The portrayal of lost culture, specifically nativism, is evident in Sajjad's reminiscences of Dilli (Delhi) during his time residing in Pakistan. The interactions among the characters in *Burnt Shadows* serve as indicators of elements pertaining to the thesis of post-colonialism. Shamsie's statement of Sajjad and Hiroko preserving paintings and poetry pieces for Dilli in their Karachi residence serves as a symbolic representation of their home, Dilli. Sajjad's love for Hiroko allows him to embrace his native culture and completely reject all elements of English society, therefore establishing himself as a nativist (Wahid 2018). The novel elucidates the interconnected historical narratives of numerous nations, encompassing concepts of post-colonialism, the consequences of partition, and the American portrayal of warfare in Afghanistan. The book demonstrates how languages validate this interconnected element. On page 228 of the novel, Raza's encounter with language acquisition across various global contexts is noteworthy. During his time in Dubai, he articulated that as he acquired more languages, he observed a growing convergence in their meanings. For instance, he mentioned the Arabic term 'Qahweh', the Farsi term 'gehve', the French term 'café', the English term 'coffee', and the Japanese term 'kofi'. But he refrained from interrelating with the Afghans. According to Shamsie (2009), appropriating even a single word from them appeared to be an act of theft. This observation highlights the complex nature of Afghanistan's interconnected historical narrative, suggesting that Raza may have unconsciously showed culpability by assuming the identity of a Hazara individual from Afghanistan.

### **Nationalism Analysis**

In *Burnt Shadows*, Shamsie effectively portrays cosmopolitanism by emphasizing the interconnectedness of all individuals within a

global community while also highlighting the influence of nationalism on this ideal concept. Part one of the work explores the presence of American, British, Japan, and later Pakistani nationalism in the story of Konrad and Hiroko. The connection between Konrad and Hiroko was impeded by Japanese biases and certain elements of American militarism. In Pakistan, Raza has a strong desire to acquire language skills, but he encounters Islamic fanaticism as he endeavors to establish a friendship with Abdullah. The commencement of Part 2 of Shamsie's novel takes place in Karachi, a city renowned for its status as a prominent migrant centre during the 1980s. This is due to the significant influx of migrants from various cities across Pakistan who have relocated to Karachi (Jan, 2022). The Balochs, Pathans, Sindhis, Hindus, Afghans, and Sikhs are among the ethnic groups present. Sajjad highlights the presence of Makranis, an ethnic community residing in Karachi, who trace their lineage back to African slaves. Shamsie emphasizes that Karachi was a metropolitan city characterized by frequent movements and interactions even before the partition with India. Shamsie's selection of Karachi as the setting for her novel is motivated by its ability to encapsulate the complex changes of postcolonial movements and the diverse diasporic populations, characterized by varied ethnic backgrounds and power dynamics arising from the connection of identities and class disparities. The post-British colonial era witnessed a contestation of the new power structure and the politics surrounding the identification of indigenous claims. During the 1980s, there was a notable emergence of Muhajir militant nationalism. The term "Muhajir" in Urdu was derived from the word "migrant," denoting Muslims originating from Central and Northern India who relocated to Pakistan in 1947 after the partition. According to Yacoobali (1996), the Muhajir community's struggle in British India was predominantly politicized as an ethno-political identity, with its primary followers being the concept of Pakistan during the anti-colonial campaign. The concept of destruction, as exemplified by the Mujaheddin battle, evoked profound religious sentiments, as evidenced in the novel through

the interaction between Hiroko and the shop clerk. This discourse revolves around the actions of certain individuals who selectively removed books from the bookstore based on their covers, specifically those depicting women that were deemed 'un-Islamic'. The conflict served as a forerunner to the political divide between the United States and Afghanistan. The aforementioned battle was predicated upon the postcolonial concept of resistance against an additional imperialistic entity, namely the Soviet country. The novel portrays recurring elements that originated from a post-colonial perspective. The inclusion of Islamic studies in schools during the 1980s reflected the shifting era of significant religious influences. As Americans and CIA operatives became more dominant in Pakistan, anti-American sentiments began to align with the mujahedeen and their cause. This alignment subsequently shifted towards the events of 9/11. The CIA's support for the mujahedeen resistance war against the Soviet Union and their subsequent abandonment can be seen as a manifestation of betrayal, guilt, or loss. This sentiment is also evident in the analysis of Kim's and Abdullah's conversation, where Kim asserts that "everyone simply wants to share their knowledge about Islam, emphasizing their superior understanding compared to your own, considering your lifelong commitment to Islam." (Shamsie, 2009). Kim Burton, despite not perceiving herself as a radical, carelessly perpetuates prejudice against Muslims through her actions of dropping Abdullah off at a fast-food establishment and subsequently reporting him to the Canadian police, based on suspicions that Abdullah may have played a role in Harry's murder. Nevertheless, Raza assumes the role of Abdullah's spokesman when he manages to evade capture and is subsequently apprehended. Despite being the incorrect individual, Raza is dispatched to America, and it appears that he is being referred to as the detainee at Guantanamo Bay in the opening of the novel. Raza, who aspires solely to acquire linguistic proficiency and cultivate friendships, becomes entangled in the pervasive influence of Islamic extremism within Pakistan as a consequence of his endeavors to establish a friendship with Abdullah. Upon Kim's arrival in New York,

Hiroko draws a parallel between Kim and the Americans, who rationalized the deployment of nuclear weapons in Japan. Hiroko is perceived as a transnational individual and expresses disagreement with America's policies, which are influenced by nationalism. The implicit nature of her decision to aid Abdullah, an undocumented Afghan migrant residing in New York, in his journey back to his country of origin is evident. This is due to her inclination to acknowledge the boundaries of nationalistic ideologies and embrace cosmopolitan solidarity, as she previously conveyed in the novel. She has no inclination to align herself with anything that would harm the nation, as nationalistic sentiments can prompt individuals to uncritically endorse political decisions in the name of national security. This is exemplified by Kim's decision to summon the police against Abdullah. The post-9/11 era has produced a universal sense of suspicion among Muslims. In the concluding scenes of the novel, Kim and Hiroko engage in a conversation wherein Kim expresses her decision to contact the police due to Abdullah's actions. Kim's rationale for this action is rooted in her confidence in her own training. Furthermore, Kim's assertion that Catholics did not shoot her father and that the 9/11 footage did not depict Jews commemorating the deaths of Americans suggests a potential perpetuation of prejudice against Muslims. Hiroko draws a parallel between this interaction and Isle's accusation of Sajjad as a perpetrator of rape. This prejudice is evident in the context of historical events, such as the colonial rule in India and the post-9/11 age, which has been marked by several painful experiences. It is interesting that the prisoner's identity in Guantanamo Bay is not directly mentioned. However, considering the events that preceded Raza's early involvement with the mujahedeen camp and his subsequent radicalization of Islam during his youth, it is plausible that he became the prisoner in Guantanamo Bay. This deceptive element refers to the occurrence and ongoing presence of Islamophobia following the events of 9/11 (Yacoobali, 1996).

## Conclusion

*Burnt Shadows*, a novel by Shamsie, offers a contextual exploration of post coloniality by delving into the experiences of Sajjad following the partition of India and Pakistan. The story explored the concepts of nationalism and nationhood through Raza's encounter with Abdullah and his subsequent involvement in the Muhajir movement, as well as the dynamic between Abdullah and Kim. The novel "Burnt Shadow" serves as a prominent illustration of fictional literary narratives that explore the concepts of nation and state within the context of post-colonialism, incorporating elements of nationalism and the formation of transnational identity. The novel's characters build a sense of belonging to Pakistan through the incorporation of Muhajir, which symbolizes the power and identity of Pakistanis (Cilano, 2013). The engagement of the United States in the Afghan-Soviet war raises concerns regarding the concept of American exceptionalism, which was also portrayed in relation to the British Raj in India. Shamsie argues that capitalism drives internationalism in the era of postcolonialism. The interactions among Kim, Abdullah, Raza, and Harry raise inquiries regarding the response to violence and the pursuit of power. Furthermore, it elicits criticisms regarding America's inclination towards capitalism, as evidenced by its strategy of divide and conquer and implicit imperialism. This is linked to the novel's initiation with the bombing in Japan and the British colonial control in India. The story is replete with minor occurrences that demonstrate the utilization of racism or nationalism as a means to create divisions among individuals. The function of religion appears to be significant in this particular section of the narrative.

## References

- Cilano. (2013). Contemporary Pakistani Fiction in English: Idea, Nation, State. In Contemporary Pakistani Fiction in English (1st ed., Vol. 67). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203552247>
- Elam, Daniel J. (2019). Postcolonial Theory. obo in Literary and Critical Theory. doi: 10.1093/obo/9780190221911-0069
- Jan, A. (2022). The Rise of Taliban in Afghanistan in 2021 and its Security Implications for Pakistan. Pakistan Journal of Social Research, 4(4), 1059-1067. Retrieved from <https://pjsr.com.pk/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/109.-Vol.-4-No.-4-December-2022-Jan-Islam-The-Rise-of-Taliban-in-Afghanistan-in-2021-and-its-Security-Implications-for-Pakistan.pdf>
- Perveen, A. (2021). Nationalism, Transnationalism and Sense of Belonging: *Burnt Shadows* as a Post 9/11 Cosmopolitan Critique of Terror. Forum for World Literature Studies, 13(2), 252+. <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A670911827/LitRC?u=googlescholar&sid=googleScholar&xid=a9413a56>
- Pervez, Wahid. (2018). Critical Study Of Shamsie's Novel "Burnt Shadows" In the Light of Post Colonial Theory.
- Qantara. (2009). Interview by Claudia Kramatschek with Kamila Shamsie: A Dark Chapter in Pakistan's History. Retrieved from, <https://en.qantara.de/content/interview-with-kamila-shamsie-a-dark-chapter-in-pakistans-history>
- Radhakrishnan, R. (1993). Postcoloniality and The Boundaries of Identity. Callaloo, 16(4), 750-771. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2932208>
- Shamsie, Kamila. (2009). *Burnt shadows*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Tayyab, Mohammad. (n.d). Literature review; a postcolonial study of Kamila Shamsie's *Brunt Shadows*
- Yacoobali, Vazira Fazila. (1996). The Battlefields of Karachi: Ethnicity, Violence and the State. The Journal of International Institute. Vol 4, Issue 1