

The Hideous Beauty of Bird-Shaped Burns: Transnational Allegory and Feminist Rhetoric in Kamila Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows*

By Gohar Karim Khan

But wherever I lived, Karachi was the place I knew best and the place about which I wrote. I knew its subtexts, its geography, its manifestations of snobbery and patriarchy, its passions, its seasonal fruits and their different varieties. I knew the sound of the sunset...

–Kamila Shamsie, “Kamila Shamsie on leaving and returning to Karachi” *The Guardian*

Borderlands [...] may feed growth and exploration or [...] conceal a minefield.

–Margaret Higonnet, *Borderwork: Feminist Engagements with Comparative Literature*

[The novel] is written from the very experience of uprooting, disjuncture and metamorphosis [...] that is the migrant condition, and from which, I believe, can be derived a metaphor for all humanity.

–Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*

Pakistani women writers of Anglophone fiction are somewhat of a rare breed, even when compared to their neighbouring counterparts in India and Bangladesh. Though Bapsi Sidhwa, Feryal Ali Gauhar, Uzma Aslam Khan and Monica Ali are established names in contemporary international fiction in English, it is only very recently that women's writing has become a prominent presence in Pakistan. At the launch of *And the World Changed: Contemporary Stories by Pakistani Women*, a collection of short stories by Pakistani women writers, Feryal Ali Gauhar (author of *The Scent of Wet Earth in August* and *No Place for Further Burials*, a novel about recent American intervention in Afghanistan) claimed, “In an increasingly insecure world, a (Pakistani) woman speaks of conflicts generated, engendered and perpetrated by men.” Gauhar positioned creative writing as possibly “the only avenue of expression for many women. Women who were courtesans discussed sexuality over the centuries, and strung words together to compose songs. But those who composed at home were not recognized. It is the positioning of women—

performing is out of bounds for us, as it was for middle-class Indian women a hundred years ago. You cannot sing and dance without being noticed, but you can write quietly” (Gauhar 2005). The paucity of women writers stems most likely from the “dismally parochial and indiscriminatorily gendered systems of education, opportunity, modes of acculturation, and general devaluation of the arts,” (Hai 386) hence making the work of existing Pakistani women writers even more valuable and momentous. In addition to their marginalised positions in terms of gender, the hybridised status from which most of Pakistan’s female writers currently express themselves is also significant. Being suspended between diverse cultures and inhabiting the East and the West simultaneously, many Pakistani women writers profess their mode of writing to be a stabilizing and emancipating process, whereby geographies, histories, nations, races and genders are reconciled.

In the context of the positions and aspirations of Pakistani women writers as discussed above, in this paper I would like to focus predominantly on the work of the Pakistani-born writer Kamila Shamsie, in particular on her most recent novel *Burnt Shadows*. Reading the novel as a political and transnational allegory, along the lines of Fredric Jameson’s “Third World Literature in an Era of Multinational Capitalism,” I will locate alternative axes of globalisation, nationalism and feminism in Shamsie’s writing. To begin with, I will assess Shamsie’s own position in the category of what Ambreen Hai refers to as “border workers,” establishing the multiplicity of her own existence, and its translation into a novel that transcends space, time and race. I then proceed to explore *Burnt Shadows* for its nationalistic rhetoric, arguing the case for its attempt to critically analyse the status of Pakistanis and Muslims in a post “9/11” world order, particularly within the contemporary discourses on terrorism, capitalism and Islamic fundamentalism. From here I proceed towards connecting the novel’s alternative version of nationalism with the forces of feminism, via the novel’s unusual and ubiquitous protagonist, Hiroko Tanaka. I argue that while Hiroko poses serious challenges to existing and normative power structures, her physical body serves as a manuscript upon which national and political upheavals are literally and metaphorically transcribed, reflecting the novel’s demonstration of women’s bodies as sites of conflict between nationalism and colonialism. Finally, I read the novel as an attempt at ‘psychic healing’ — a work that embraces nationalism transnationally, hence propounding an “imagined community” (Hicks xxiii-xxx) that makes possible the existence of a kind of “horizontal comradeship,” transcending national borderlands and cultural boundaries.

In her essay, “Global and Textual Webs in an Age of Transnational Capitalism; or, What Isn’t New About Empire,” Elleke Boehmer posits an active connection between “massive economic, political and technological

transnationalism worldwide...and the internationalisation of literature and literary studies,” suggesting that postcolonial writers travel widely and “furiously” across borders. They are hence empowered to blur these boundaries, creating an almost “anarchically fluid world order” (11). Shamsie, I would like to suggest in this context, has made a significant political contribution to the world in *Burnt Shadows*, and she has done so at a moment in time when Pakistanis and Muslims are in a particularly precarious position in the globe. In circumstances where the religion of Islam is becoming increasingly synonymous with violence and fundamentalism, Shamsie has intervened with an intricate psychological exploration of contemporary global politics. She has done this firstly by professing a deeply sensitive appreciation of the causes that underlie stereotyping against Muslims—being “westernised” in several ways herself, and living between England, America and Pakistan allows her this privileged “insiders” perspective. This sense of double belonging, sometimes categorized as an enabling homelessness, empowers Shamsie with the ability to ask questions as an insider and an outsider simultaneously. As a transnational intellectual involved in the process of “border work,” Shamsie’s endeavour is aptly defined as undertaken by one “who both belongs and unbelongs, who can offer crucial perspectival shifts, can have liberatory potential, because it can undo binaristic and hierarchical categories of opposition, offering useful critique and reconceptualization of either side of an opposition – be it cultural, political or intellectual” (Hai 381). Additionally, writing in a post “9/11” world which is currently gripped by the notion of America’s “war against terror,” Shamsie has explored the notions of terrorism and nationalism from a postcolonial angle, encouraging her readers to access these phenomena from alternative and unfamiliar positions. She uses her own diasporic “double vision” is used in *Burnt Shadows* to rescue and restore the image of Muslims in a contemporary global context I argue that it is an important example of the “empire writing back,” made all the more powerful as it is written in the “centre” for the “centre.” What we witness as critical readers is a subversive attempt at “negotiating the contradictions of cultural heterogeneity, modernity, nationalism, or diasporic identity,” that pave the way to the construction of an anticolonial, liberationist nationalism that is not overly concerned with borders or national segregations (Hai 382).

Anglophone literature by writers of Pakistani origin (who are not necessarily residents in their original homelands any longer) inhabits a unique space, providing its inhabitants with a contact zone that balances nationalism with internationalism. This zone, or “interstitial space” as Homi Bhabha puts it, is absolutely crucial in the initiation of “new strategies of selfhood” and identity formation (Bhabha 1-2). It facilitates collaboration and contestation,

agreement and dissent, and as Elleke Boehmer avers, provides a site of “potentially productive inbetweenness [between the first and third worlds]” (Empire 21). I wish to argue the case that third world intellectuals are additionally, and perhaps necessarily, also political interveners and commentators. Kamila Shamsie, for instance, is a regular writer of political articles in *The Guardian* and write on the significant global issues which concern South East Asia, Pakistan or Islam. In Pakistan, she is regarded as a powerful national voice and is assigned an ambassadorial status, irrespective of her in-continuous geographical relations with the nation. In, “Global and Textual Webs in an Age of Transnational Capitalism; or, What Isn’t New about Empire” Elleke Boehmer is interested in a similar “contact zone of cultural and political exchange” where nationalisms lie not just within nations, but find their stimuli outside it, among other postcolonial nations that have similar agendas and experience analogous to liberation struggles. Boehmer’s work becomes particularly relevant to my argument, especially her description of transnational intellectuals whom she calls “like-minded colonial nationalist ‘pilgrims’”, those who, failing to fall into the category of the colonial rulers or the colonized masses-- though they have more in common intellectually and culturally with the former--form a group quite unique to themselves. Impelled by the desire to at once embrace the globe and the nation, they “reach beyond cultural and geopolitical boundaries to discover ways of constituting a resistant selfhood” (Empire 20). Though Boehmer’s discussion makes colonial leaders and intellectuals such as Jinnah, Gandhi and Platjee its focal point, I would like to suggest that a similar case could be made for the contemporary group of diasporic Pakistani writers of fiction in English. Not unlike Boehmer’s group of colonial elites who inhabit an exclusive space owing to their middle-class status, educational background, geographical experience, fluency in European languages and intellectual leanings, this group of writers, too, find “themselves to be more at home in the colonizer's culture than in their indigenous environment” (Empire 20). Boehmer further explains:

anti-colonial intelligentsias, poised between the cultural traditions of home on the one hand and of their education on the other, occupied a site of potentially productive inbetweenness where they might observe other resistance histories and political approaches in order to work out how themselves to proceed” (Empire 20-21).

This state of “productive inbetweenness,” leads to a novel like *Burnt Shadows*, which not only subverts conventional notions of nationalism, capitalism, colonialism, feminism and terrorism, but also contains a “psychic healing’ power.” In the words of Trinh Minh-ha:

The moment the insider steps out from the inside, she is no longer a mere insider (and vice versa). She necessarily looks in from the outside while also looking out from the inside [...and] she also resorts to non-explanative, non-totalizing strategies that suspend meaning and resist

closure[...]Whether she turns the inside out or the outside in she is like the two sides of a coin, the same impure, both-in-one insider/outsider. (Minh-ha, Trinh74-75)

United by a common philosophy and enterprise, that is, to protect and promote the rights and privileges of postcolonial nations, contemporary Pakistani writers of Anglophone fiction are confronted by a mammoth undertaking. *Burnt Shadows* is thus a political tour-de-force, a work that proposes alternative approaches to capitalist globalisation and to the traditional understanding of nationalism as a nation-specific phenomenon. In *Burnt Shadows*, Shamsie explores globalization from an unconventional axis and her global centres are deliberately unrestricted to the familiar metropolitan capitals such as London, Paris or New York. Transcending the norm, she alters these axes to access the globe via more unanticipated centres such as Tokyo, Kabul, Delhi, Istanbul and Karachi—all of which are part of strategically and politically vital landscapes on the world map. Shamsie is interested primarily in the nationalistic rhetoric that connects these otherwise very distinct and separate nations, in the process offering nationalism as a transnational phenomenon.

In a recent article about her relationship with the city of her birth and also her most powerful literary muse, Kamila Shamsie allows us to momentarily glimpse the tension in her mind about “home” and “away” (*Kamila Shamsie on Leaving and Returning to Karachi*, Guardian 2010). While her first four novels are all based mainly in Karachi (which she once saw as her safety zone of fiction) *Burnt Shadows* begins in Japan and ends somewhere between Afghanistan and New York. The obvious question “what’s changed?” is interestingly not just the readers’ reaction but also the author’s, who suggests that in order to widen her fictional imagination she felt compelled to leave the city with which she feels so “intimately acquainted.” She explains that “this geographical widening of [her] imagination was one of the most important factors in [her] decision to move to London three years ago—[she] was eager to alter [her] relationship to Karachi from part-time resident to visitor” (Guardian, 2010). But far from rendering her “unmoored from [her] subject matter,” this geographical furthering from her homeland has, if anything, reinforced her relationship with Karachi. In response to the irony and hypocrisy stereotypically associated with diasporic writers representing “homelands,” Shamsie argues that this distancing from her country and the revisiting of it from abroad has enabled her to re-envision Pakistan in a manner never before possible: “I discovered a previously unknown pleasure: how to make a distant place feel intimate.” In order to be intimately acquainted with a place, or to be able to “reach out of thousands of windows in the city, rub the air between [her] fingers and feel texture,”

Shamsie argues that a writer need not commit her physical presence to a particular country (Guardian 2010). It is the ability to step out of “home” and see things from a more nuanced perspective that gives a writer like Shamsie the power to assess and express her nationalistic concerns. That she chooses to work and write in metropolitan cities such as New York and London and that her linguistic mode is always English, I argue, have little to do with impeding this representational process. If anything, they give it a momentum.

As a novel, *Burnt Shadows* keenly engages with the themes of home, nations, diaspora and foreignness, poignantly bringing to light the loss of homelands, nations and families and calling into question the conventional signification of the familiar concepts such as identity and nationality. Central to the novel is its female protagonist, Hiroko Tanaka, and it is both with her and through her that readers of *Burnt Shadows* explore the vast periods and places covered in the story. We are introduced to Hiroko 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. It is a world in which human lives hang by threads and where bomb shelters are as familiar as homes. Shamsie artistically paints the picture of a world where the earth was “more functional as a vegetable patch than a flower garden, just as factories were more functional than schools and boys were more functional as weapons than as humans” (*Burnt Shadows* 7). But then, on the morning of August 9th 1942, in a matter of seconds, Nagasaki is nothing more than a “diamond cutting open the earth, falling through to hell” (Shamsie 27). And thus, in the political corridors of the United States, the annihilation of an entire nation is planned, and upon orders by powerful leaders, executed. For Hiroko, this day marks the end of love and of home, and Shamsie treats the fragility of the concepts of home and identity as a crucial priority in the rest of the novel. The devastation of Nagasaki, from Hiroko’s perspective, ends not only her home but on a personal note also her first love, Konrad-- the incident serving as a permanent caution against attaching too many sentiments to nations and relationships and the pain of their loss being unrelenting. From both a feminist and nationalistic perspective, this scene of devastation is a crucial moment in the novel. For one thing, there are several references to the “blut and boden” nationalism of Europe and America which thrived at the expense of cities such as Nagasaki and Hiroshima, but additionally, this nationalism is described as a predominantly masculine sphere which leaves its indelible marks on Hiroko, in the form of the hideously compelling bird-shaped burns on her back. She bears the brunt of this monstrous and destructive form of nationalism for the rest of her life, and, perhaps even more significantly, is deprived of all sensation on her back where the burns are imprinted. This enforced numbness

both literal and figurative, and the ironic painlessness that accompanies it, are important to bear in mind while following Hiroko through the rest the narrative about her life experiences. Ironically, this violence that Hiroko's body suffers is preceded almost immediately by a sensuous and evocative scene during which Hiroko, for the first time in her life, experiences glimpses of sexual pleasure associated with her body. She begins to understand the power of her physicality in arousing such pleasurable sensations, and to heighten their impact, clothes herself in her mother's cherished silk Kimono embroidered with two large and magnificent birds on its back. It is within minutes of this unique realisation of her physical body that her back is permanently numbed of any further physical sensation, metaphorically serving as a manuscript for the transcription of capitalist violence.

From Nagasaki Hiroko moves to Delhi, a city gripped by anticolonial sentiments and poised for freedom from the Raj, followed by Partition. Here, after meeting Sajjad, an Indian-Muslim friend who later becomes her husband, Hiroko is seen to embrace India wholeheartedly—culturally, linguistically and emotionally. Her atypical nationalistic perspectives and her desire to assimilate into an alien environment are depicted in stark contrast to the members of the Burton household, her hosts in India, led by the patriarchal figure, James Burton. In this predominantly masculinist society of colonial India, where women were consciously denied any voice or agency in colonial or anti-colonial discourse, (existing, as Shamsie demonstrates, in the world of the Delhi garden parties) Hiroko disrupts this unequal, yet hitherto unquestioned, balance of power.

Hiroko offers herself as a contemporary version of Kipling's Lalun—a fantastical and unique figure in the short story "On the City Wall," inhabiting a hybrid and borderless space and thereby enabling all cultures, religions, nations and races to intersect. Though in many ways starkly dissimilar—Lalun is an accomplished courtesan who attracts a variety of gentlemen to her door—they are both symbolic figures offering spaces of contact and facilitating communication across borderlands. Very early on in the novel, we are introduced to Hiroko as the daughter of a "traitor"—a Japanese politician who fights with his life against the ideologies he loathes. Hiroko, we realize, doesn't only accept her father's beliefs and reputation but is also prepared to endanger her own life to protect his. Furthermore, living in the times when even a cursory association with a white European could be potentially life threatening in Nagasaki, Hiroko risks being in love with a German man, Konrad. Though the novel is set in Nagasaki only over the span of a few days, it is enough to establish Hiroko's love for her country and her attachment to Nagasaki. After the nuclear devastation, which also brings about the tragic end of her first love, Hiroko makes the decision to pursue Konrad's past and

travels to India alone, an almost unimaginable thought at the time. Shamsie makes it clear to the reader, almost immediately, that Hiroko is a woman who defies norms and resists stereotypes, and this aspect of her personality becomes deeply pronounced in her associations with the Burtons, a sophisticated and highly educated English family living in India during the time of the “Empire.” Hiroko’s feminism is also unusual and unique like her: it revolves around a different, alternative axis, dispelling any traditional accusations of incompatibility between feminism and nationalism.

The reaction that James Burton fails to conceal on first his meeting with Hiroko is also an important statement about his perception of women as a gendered category that is woven in with his limited understanding and tolerance of difference, both in terms of gender and race. Their first meeting is a classic example of James’s narrow-mindedness: at Hiroko’s explanation of her travels from Tokyo to Bombay, and then further to Delhi, James’s reaction is one of horror, followed by disbelief—“What alone?” Significantly, Hiroko is equipped with an almost intimidating practicality and she responds, “Yes. Why? Can’t women travel alone in India?” (Shamsie 46). Both Elizabeth and James find themselves struggling, (Elizabeth to a much lesser extent) with this stereotypical image of “demure Japanese” women, brought up exclusively on the principles of tradition and domesticity. Instead, their first exposure to a Japanese woman is in the form of Hiroko, a woman 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” (Shamsie 46). What is significant about their first meeting in particular is the impact it has on James, who, with grim irony, offers a tame and sophisticated, “English” version of patriarchy. 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*” (Shamsie 35). 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. She maintains, despite her better sense, the façade of a happy marriage in the face of weak and ineffective channels of communication with her husband. Linguistically, too, James denies agency to his wife; he speaks in terms of “allowing” and “not allowing” Elizabeth to do certain things, but interestingly, any attempts to do the same with Hiroko are instantly rebuffed.

James’ reception and understanding of Hiroko are painfully limited. He finds himself “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?” (Shamsie 46). The

confusion and frustration he feels at encountering this woman, who exists and functions outside his realm of experience, significantly reveals him as a patriarchal colonial figure. He struggles to accept what he finds unfamiliar and is possessed with a fierce need to transform her—to make her more familiar, and hence more accessible and natural to him. There is arguably a political dimension to match this attitude, encapsulated in the clichéd notion of the “white man’s burden,” which is often reiterated in the novel, particularly in the form of Sajjad’s approach towards the English. He questions James’s “Englishness,” which no extent of exposure to India has been able to blur: “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—become Indian. If—when this Pakistan happens, those Muslims who leave Delhi and Lucknow and Hyderabad to there, they will be leaving their homes.” Bitterly, he adds, “But when the English leave, they’ll be going home” (Shamsie 82).

It is significant that Elizabeth insists on Hiroko residing in the Burton home during her stay in India, a thought that in the first instance is unthinkable for James, who has immediately felt subordinated by this unexpected and unpredictable Japanese visitor. For Elizabeth however, Hiroko’s entrance into the household has something of a symbolic value, as it initiates the realisation of her own power as a woman, accompanied by the courage to think outside her marriage. Her rebellions, which in the past were nothing more than imaginative excursions—“my imagined rebellions get more pathetic by the day” she earlier claims—take on a more tangible form and she begins to interrogate the reasons to keep her relations with James alive. 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” (Shamsie 100).

Elizabeth’s hitherto latent feminism, activated by Hiroko’s clarity of mind and personal ambition, also has a bearing on her nationalistic leanings. The reader is now informed that Elizabeth’s passive acceptance of her wifely role in India also suppressed a desire to be German: “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” (Shamsie 83). This last revelation is particularly significant, aligning Elizabeth’s interpretation of nationalism to

that of Hiroko's transnational version of it. Of British origin, having a German step-parent and currently living in colonial India, it is interesting that Elizabeth should feel "entirely German" in the face of American and British capitalist politics. Among many others, one of the reasons for tension between Elizabeth and Sajjad stems precisely from this sense of a lost homeland that Elizabeth experiences: "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?" (Shamsie 83). It is on this theme predominantly that Hiroko and Elizabeth are united—on their love for their nations and the sense of loss accompanied with this attachment, followed closely by a sense of resentment against the ability of the greater global powers to orchestrate such destruction. Their spirits of nationalism, as it were, do not take flight until they physically leave their nations. Moreover, similar to her transnational version of nationalism, Hiroko's feminism, too, is a broad and encompassing one. Not only does she demonstrate her ability to transcend space, time, history and tragedy, she manages to exert a remarkable influence on Elizabeth, who belongs, ironically, to an ostensibly more liberal and advanced world than Hiroko.

Hiroko's assessment of her personal wants, especially in the context of nationalism, warrant further attention. She has never made any lofty claims to patriotism in the past and declares that she always intended to leave Nagasaki for the world, except she disclaims, "until you see a place you've known your whole life reduced to ash you don't realise how much we crave familiarity" (Shamsie 100). Hiroko's nationalism is, ironically enough, supplied by forces of violence outside Japan; she experiences a profound sense of national love and loyalty that have been triggered by bitter anger and revenge. Only after leaving Nagasaki for Delhi does she sense her desire for Japan much more forcefully, "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" (Shamsie 100). Home and nation then are fluid and dynamic concepts in *Burnt Shadows*, and the novel is interested in what life is like for the same people living in multiple locales, exploring the significance of topographic barriers that are subjective yet meaningful.

Languages, in both spoken and written forms, are intimately connected to the themes of nationalism and transnationalism in the novel. Shamsie considers the role of language in forming and sustaining identities, with a particular emphasis on the ability of the English language to serve as an adequate means of enunciating thoughts and feelings outside the English speaking world. There are indications in the novel that psychological and

emotional expressions do not necessarily tally when articulated in different languages. It is of considerable significance that, professionally, Hiroko is a translator of languages since this fact already contributes a certain degree of transnationalism and globalism to her character, given that she enables and facilitates linguistic and cultural communication between nations. Beyond this, she also serves the role of what Robert Young calls “cultural translation,” constantly negotiating between cultures and dissolving strangeness, as it were. Hiroko’s job as a language translator is hence a symbol for her broader role as a figurative anthropologist, expanding conceptual boundaries and resisting “difference.” Slipping from language to language with the ease and naturalness of a native speaker, Hiroko is equipped with an exceptionally powerful gift for learning languages and immersing herself into them. What is important is that her interest in languages transcends the practical aspects of linguistic acquisition, extending into a much more deeply seated appreciation for the relevant nation’s literature, history and traditions. Significantly, too, we find that Hiroko is most at “home in the idea of foreignness.” Hiroko thus embraces nationalism as a tool of “horizontal comradeship” that marks her stance different from the more normative perception of the concept. Throughout the novel, she is more inclined to align with nationalism in the sense of an “imagined community”, a term that is elucidated by critics like Chandra Mohanty who expresses the urgency of transnational feminist alliances in a Eurocentric world. She advances the necessity of the formation of communities to serve in “oppositional political relation to sexist, racist, and imperialist structures” (Mohanty 7). One way of looking at it might be that it is not that Hiroko loves Japan less, but that she loves the value of freedom and harmony more, and in making this choice she is able to participate in resistance communities spread across the globe. It is this nationalistic spirit that aligns her to some extent with individuals such as Sajjad, Elizabeth and Abdullah, all of whom have experienced and understood the loss of homelands.

Remarkably, 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. Within days of making acquaintance with Sajjad, Hiroko is keen to know him in his own language as opposed to in English, which, being the language of the his colonial “master,” would prevent her from acquiring genuine insight into the mind and heart of a true “Dilli” man like Sajjad. As their relationship unfolds in the novel, first as friends and later lovers, one realises increasingly the extent to which language influences sentiments and relationships. At a particularly poignant moment in the novel, we find that Hiroko shares a little of her love and grief for her previous love with Sajjad. Repeating to herself in

whispers “Why didn’t you stay?” and anguished by the guilt of having allowed Konrad to leave her just moments before the bomb, Hiroko exits Sajjad’s world momentarily. She returns once again to that ominous morning of 9 August in Nagasaki. It is at this point that Sajjad intervenes:

There is a phrase I have heard in English: to leave someone alone with their grief. Urdu has no equivalent phrase. It only understands the concept of gathering around and becoming “gham-khaur”—grief eaters—who take in a mourners sorrow. Would you like me to be English or Urdu right now? (Shamsie 77)

Hiroko’s response to this invitation is significant: “This is an Urdu lesson, Sensi” (Shamsie 77). It is from this point in the novel, a juncture at which Hiroko and Sajjad truly embrace the same language, that the communication barriers between them truly collapse.

Interestingly, but perhaps not surprisingly, Hiroko’s desire to acquire the Urdu language surmounts any previous requests made by the Burtons themselves, who have always been satisfied with knowing a “clutch of Urdu words to throw into the mix.” To Hiroko, this disregard for language and the obsessional preoccupation with English is as abhorrent as it is inconceivable: “It was the oddest thing (she) had ever heard” (Shamsie 57). 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” (Shamsie 57). 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.

Hiroko keeps travelling through the novel, physically, mentally and culturally adapting to new environments as she encounters them. The partition of India forces Sajjad to leave his beloved Delhi permanently, and settle with Hiroko first in Istanbul and later in Karachi, where he is mistaken to be an agent of terror and shot dead. Once again, we find that the unrelenting violence of nationalism severs yet another relationship in Hiroko’s life—having lost Konrad to the atomic bomb she loses Sajjad to CIA operations in Pakistan. During this time we find that her son Raza becomes intimately involved in Afghan Mujahedeen operations in North Western Pakistan, as a final desperate attempt at seeking a tangible and pure identity for himself, plagued for too long by a deep sense of “un-belonging” in Karachi. It is only Hiroko, ironically, who perceives in her own words, the meaninglessness of

“belonging to anything as contradictorily insubstantial and damaging as a nation” (Shamsie 204).

As we follow Hiroko ultimately, and somewhat ironically, to America we witness a final battle of national psychology that Hiroko becomes involved with, this time in relation to Kim, Harry’s young American daughter with whom Hiroko lives. As the plot of the novel thickens and Hiroko requests Kim to transport Abdullah (currently an illegal migrant living in New York) to Canada, we find that nationalistic tensions build up on fundamental misunderstandings based on culture and religion. In the wake of the recent date of “9/11,” the conversation that takes place between Kim and Abdullah on their car journey to Canada, where she is meant to facilitate his escape from the FBI, reveals the colossal misunderstandings and misperceptions that colour their views of each other. Abdullah is shy and awkward to share a small space with an American woman while Kim is judgmental and convinced of his culpability as a terrorist. She has agreed to transport him to Canada but after their conversation decides it safest to hand him over to the FBI once the border has been crossed.

Shamsie’s approach to the subject of terror, especially in relation to Islam is a cautious one, whereby she attempts at accessing this phenomenon from more than one perspective. Kim is depicted as a “pure” American, and her nationalistic sentiments and views of the world outside America are governed by this status. Abdullah’s faith in Islam is staunch and blind, and his version of it is simplistic to the point of naiveté, exemplified by statements such as “Raza has a place in heaven [because Hiroko] converted to Islam. The one who converts another is guaranteed a place in heaven for himself and his children and grandchildren and so on down for seven generations[...]. Even martyrs who die in jihad can’t do so much for their family. It’s written in the Quran” (Shamsie 346). This last sentence, which Abdullah evidently employs in order to validate the accuracy of his explanation is particularly significant, not just as proof of his personal approach to religion but also as it finally ignites Kim’s incense and frustration. The conversation continues as follows:

“Have you read the Quran?”

“Of course I have.”

“Have you read it in any language you understand?”

“I understand Islam,” he said, tensing.

“I’ll take that to mean a no. I’ve read it—in English. Believe me, the Quran says nothing of the sort. And frankly, what kind of heaven is heaven if you can find shortcuts into it? Seven generations?”

“Please do not speak to me this way.”

“Tell me one thing. One thing. If an Afghan dies in the act of killing infidels in his country does he go straight to heaven?”

“If the people he kills come as invaders or occupiers, yes. He is shaheed. Martyr.”

“He is a murderer. And your heaven is an abomination.” (Shamsie 346)

As Kim releases this man into freedom, and as Abdullah walks into a restaurant filled with parents and children, Kim experiences a sharp sense of panic—“what had she done?” 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.

This episode, I believe, is significant for a number of reasons. For one thing, it has a symbolic and allegorical value, encapsulating the lack of empathy that exists in the contemporary world, for religions, cultures and even nations. In a world that likes to think of itself as “global,” this is a sharp reminder of the remains of irreconcilable differences. Secondly, it highlights the role of Kim in the novel, as a highly educated, trained professional Engineer, but whose education poses some fundamental gaps. I believe that in portraying Kim, Shamsie expresses a great worry—one that addresses the impossibility of a situation where even someone as qualified and intelligent as Kim is not immune to a certain amount of bigotry. In offering a defence 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?” (Shamsie 361). Hiroko’s understanding of the world and history are shown to have altered at this point in the novel. Kim, who she has often seen as representative of the “American” psyche has aided this process. She captures her understanding of events, past and present, in just a few lines:

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. (Shamsie 362)

Towards the end of her life, having lived through “Hitler, Stalin, the Cold War, the British Empire, segregation, apartheid” and most importantly the atomic bomb, Hiroko knows that the world would survive even this most recent horror of terror. In the twilight of her life, however, she cannot help but question the fundamental inhumanity of the acts of terror and violence she has witnessed—directly and indirectly. Helplessly she declares, “I want the world to stop being such a terrible place” (Shamsie 292). When considered

retrospectively, her life brings to mind the words of the Indian born feminist writer and poet, Meena Alexander, who when addressing her position as a marginalised individual from the perspectives of both gender and nationality wrote: “That’s all I am, a woman cracked by multiple migrations. Uprooted so many times she can connect nothing with nothing [...] Writing in search of a homeland” (qtd. in *Theorising Asian America* 139) However, there is an important distinction to bear in mind here: Hiroko, as a woman having experienced multiple migrations is not “cracked” by them, and who despite being uprooted several times in her life, remains consistently and transnationally connected to places, people and ideologies. Hiroko, I suggest, presents an alternative to “homeland” in the traditional sense of the term-- she is heroic and wise not despite the multiple homelands she inhabits but because of them.

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