



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 7. Issue.1. 2020 (Jan-Mar)



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

A POSTCOLONIAL STUDY ON KAMILA SHAMSIE'S SELECT NOVELS

SOYIMLA AKUM

Ph.D. Scholar, Nagaland University, Kohima: Nagaland



Article information
Received:04/1/2020
Revised& Accepted:
06/02/2020

Published online: 11/02/2020

doi: [10.33329/ijelr.7.1.44](https://doi.org/10.33329/ijelr.7.1.44)

ABSTRACT

When a writer talks about sensitive issues related to nationalism, it invites controversies but this paper focuses on different types of identities coated in the characters of the writer. The study aims to investigate the presence of post colonial perspective in the fictional characters of the two novels, *Home Fire* and *Burnt Shadows*. Kamila Shamsie is considered more of a traveler than a writer and hence it is proved in her novels where her characters travel from one place to another acquiring cross cultural differences. The paper will discuss on various issues related to identity, and adjustment in alien land, region, society and polity of the homeland and host land.

Keywords: Postcolonial, hybridity, assimilation, identity and politics.

Introduction

The present society is not a result of permanent settlement but an outcome of nomadic people. No more called a nomad, but the journey from one place to another continues. The need for social stability has compelled people to adapt into different domain even to the extent of acquiring the name 'expatriate.' Kamila Shamsie in her select novels presents the journey of the characters wherein they are forced to leave the place where they earlier lived with little happiness. The eras in which the novels are set are different but the readers can ally them under the umbrella of post colonialism. The female characters surpass the male figure in their dealing with the environment.

The novel *Home Fire* is modeled or 'marrowed' as the writer says on Sophocles' *Antigone* an interplay literature with mythology and politics. It revolves around the problems and tribulations of British-Muslim family with their father's legacy of terrorism in the present day England. The plot is constructed with Isma Pasha and her two twin siblings: Aneeka Pasha and Parvaiz Pasha. Parvaiz is known to have left to follow their father's step. Aneeka the twin sister devises a plan to bring back her brother back home through the help of Eamonn, the son of Britain's Home Secretary with whom she later falls in love. Parvaiz realizes his mistake and tries to return to London but is killed outside the British Consulate in Istanbul before reaching. Karamat Lone, the newly elected Home Secretary and the father of Eamonn passes a Bill introducing the law of revocation of citizenship for those British denizens who have joined terrorist forces and possess dual citizenship. Thus, this further adds to Aneeka's sorrow where her brother Parvaiz' dead body is denied burial in England as according to the new laws he lost his British citizenship. Parvaiz' dead body is sent to Pakistan, his other nationality with no family members to mourn. Aneeka travels to Pakistan and seeks justice for her brother but later she and Eamonn both die in bomb blast which was belted against Eamonn's waist. The lovers embrace their deadly fate

at each other's arm leaving Isma's world shattered as she lost both her brother and sister. In one of her interview Shamsie says that

In *Burnt Shadows* the protagonist Hiroko Tanaka travels around the places along with the mind of the author acquiring cross-culture differences. The story is set with her character starting her journey from Japan to India, then to Pakistan and finally to the USA. She is exposed to the bombing of Nagasaki in 1945 where she lost her loved ones, the partition of India in 1947, the political chaos in Pakistan and the attack on the World Trade Center in USA. The incidents of history are not mentioned in details but the shadows of history-personal, political are cast over which follows her throughout her journey. *Burnt Shadows* on the other hand represents the trauma of wars. Her identity as a Japanese woman takes various forms as she travels around different places. The author presents an interesting perspective through her protagonist Hiroko Tanaka about the sense of belonging. Shamsie narrates on how violence causes infliction on human personality which results in the importance of primal struggle for survival.

Hiroka Tanaka has marks impeached on their backs. They have not seen it but the marks are constantly with them reminding the cruelty of their respective lives. Tanaka has "three charcoal-coloured bird-shaped burns on her back, the first below her shoulder, the second halfway down her spine, intersected by her bra, the third just above her waist" (Shamsie, 2009. P. 90-91). Sajjad, Tanaka's husband called it "Birdback" when he was allowed to see the marks for the first time. The female protagonist in the novel has mark on her back which reminds her of the incident where her life was shattered. Her past life is not forgotten but is attached with her giving a separate identity. Hiroko Tanaka is seen as 'hibakusha' which means victim of bombing and a foreigner in the places she lived. She embodies the colonized people who became a subject of destruction in the name of world politics and to bring peace.

The protagonist of *Burnt Shadows* is a Japanese diaspora through whom Shamsie lays the traumatic displacement of innocent humans caused by world power politics. Hiroko embodies those people who spend their lives in migration from one place to another searching for a peaceful environment. Kamila Shamsie falls under Postcolonial writers and so does her characters' lives caught in transnational identity. The 'bird' in Tanaka's back may perhaps be a symbol of her life where she is to fly to different places like a bird.

One of the key features of the classical, victim diaspora as elaborated by Robin Cohen is:

the idea of dispersal following a traumatic event in the homeland, to two or more foreign destinations. Migration scholars often find it remarkably difficult to separate the compelling from the voluntary elements in the motivation to move. However, when we talk of a trauma afflicting a group collectively, it is perhaps possible to isolate a class of events characterized by their brutality, scale and intensity so as unambiguously to compel emigration or flight. (*Global Diasporas: An Introduction 2*)

Hiroka Tanaka falls under this feature where she migrates to India after she loses her loved ones in bombing. The trauma of the war is attached to her body no matter how far she tries to escape. It was her own decision to leave Japan but at the same time situation compelled her as she disliked the tag labeled on her as 'hibakusha'. Later in 1947 she is forced to migrate to Pakistan during the partition of India. She refuses the invitation of the Burton-Weiss to move to England and instead marries Sajjad who embodies the colonized Indian who is treated with paternalistic benevolence by the British James Burton. Tanaka's departure from Japan was not a result of tyrannical leader or force but it was her inner self that made the decision. It was an indirect result of political hunger of the nations. She wanted the war to be over soon so that she can marry her fiancée but the bomb destroyed her dreams. The politics of power between nations ruined the lives of many innocent citizens. Tanaka is seen shifting from place to another not out of her will to migrate but the circumstances led her to.

Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin views that "Colonialism itself was a radically diasporic movement, involving the temporary or permanent dispersion and settlement of millions of Europeans over the entire world" (*Key Concepts in Post-Colonial studies 69*) and during this process it is not only the colonized who become diasporas but also the colonizers. They leave their homeland and settle in a place very different their

environment. For instance the Burton family and the other English families settled in India. Elizabeth did not want to return to London to her mother-in-law's place so she decided to migrate to New York after the British left India for good. The freedom that she enjoys will be limited once she gets back to her homeland. She lived a life as a colonizer and going back to England would mean being colonized by the rules and regulations of her in-law and the society. A paradoxical situation is presented through her. The colonizers colonized India for so long and wanted the colonized people to dance to their tune. However when it is time for them to return, they do not want to for they will be under someone's command. Like the way they want freedom so does the colonized people want to be free and function their lives without external involvement.

In Bhabha's theory, "ambivalence disrupts the clear-cut authority of colonizer because it undermines the simple relationship between colonizers and colonized" (qtd. *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial studies* 12) and suggests that the colonial relationship is always ambivalent and it generates the seeds of its own destruction. Here Parvaiz becomes an ambivalent character where he is a Muslim or Pakistani by lineage at the same time British citizen. He realized his mistake and tried to return but the colonized in the form of the British Home Secretary disrupted and transferred his dead body to Pakistan. The center here is London and when Parvaiz tries to return to the center, he is termed as traitor and the center would not want any disturbance from the colonized people.

In the use of word 'hybrity' one cannot ignore 'mimicry'. The two goes hand in hand. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin define hybrity as "An increasing important term in post-colonial theory, because it has come to describe the ambivalent relationship between colonizer and colonized" (qtd. *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial studies* 139). The Home Secretary disillusioned by mimicry and considered himself as British but the fact remains as Rudyard Kipling writes "Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet," ("The Balled of East and West" 1). He tried to be one of them (occident) but he will always remain an orient to the occident.

Kamila Shamsie brings in Hiroko Tanaka in a situation where she cannot free herself from the burden of the nuclear explosion that has marked her body. She becomes a curious medical case for the researches who want to study the consequences of the atomic bomb on the survivors. Her miscarriage was believed to be the consequence of the exposure to nuclear radiation and also it was believed that the only son born to her could also be deformed in some way. However she uses her body to rebel against the external force to free herself from the scheme in which her body has been framed. In the novel, we see her with short haircut and trousers; she is an East Asian with a modern westernized look in India, a barelegged woman in Pakistan at the time of the Islamisation policy, and Japanese with a Pakistani passport in the United States. She inhabits multicultural traits during the process of primal sting to survival. This makes it impossible to place her within a geographical, cultural, and social frame.

'Hybridity' in the views of Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin "...takes many forms: linguistic, cultural, political, racial etc." (*Key Concepts in Post-Colonial studies* 118) here, in the case of Tanaka she takes the form of various hybridity where she speaks Urdu, Japanese, English and German. She is exposed to different political scenario and displaced from one place to another. The Nagasaki event has irremediably affected her body, but doing so it has also given her a reason to start a process of self-definition where she enters into the world of diasporas who shift or leaves their original place. Shamsie writes of Tanaka's situation as, 'It was a fear of reduction rather than any kind of quest that had forced her away from Japan. Already she had started to feel that word 'hibakusha' start to consume her life. To the Japanese she was nothing beyond an explosion-affected person; that was her defining feature' (*Burnt Shadows* 49). To make a distinction of the bomb victims into a narrow means to reduce them with all their unique and complex identities. The one event that had tragically acted on their lives without leaving them any chance to react cannot define them as one. Clubbing them as a separate category means to marginalize them into a particular social group. Nevertheless, Tanaka's journey starts at the moment when her body is marked with burns. Tanaka says, "I don't want to hide these burns on my back, but I don't want people to judge me by them either. Hibakusha. I hate that word. It reduces you to the bomb" (*Burnt Shadows* 100). She realizes that people are exercising a power on her that reduces her subjectivity to a specific set of social conventions when she is identified as a 'hibakusha'. The protagonist

emerges as an individual with autonomous identity constructed by crossing social and cultural boundaries as well as frontiers among nation-states. She adapts and embraces to whatever situation she is placed at. And the result is her inhabitation of a hybrid space where the never-completed process of identity construction develops through the negotiation of several differences. At the end of the novel she is seen in America the country in which she was not interested at the beginning of the novel, indirectly unhappy for the destruction of her life.

In *Home Fire*, Shamsie places her characters in multicultural situations. They are British Muslim living in London and Isma goes to America to pursue her education. Like the writer's mind the setting is set in different places like London, Massachusetts, a bit of Syria and Karachi. Parveez is disillusioned about ISIS and leaves home to join the Jihadi movement. It has seen that during the recent years the politics has been confronted with various demands for recognition of cultural and ethnic plurality coming from groups of citizens, cultural and ethnic minorities especially in European countries like USA and UK. In this respect, Multiculturalism as part of Post colonialism is now no longer confined to sociological studies but brought to common level through literature. Rise of immigration is not only a concern of politics but the problem is to be faced by all. On the lighter side promoting multiculturalism can lead to protection of cultural identity and also the universal right of an individual. UK, the home to the largest Pakistani-British community in Europe is reflected in the novel. Isma's interrogating scene represents the situations experienced by many British Muslims in European countries who are under surveillance. The London to whom the Pasha siblings had full faith led them down.

The characters are displaced and so does their identity becomes fluid resulting in inner-alienation. When a writer talks about historical events, it tends to hurt the sentiments of the readers as it brings back the bitter memory. Kamila Shamsie discusses that bitter major history of the world without hurting the readers. She does not take side but act as a mediator presenting the situation to the readers.

References

Ashcroft, Bill, Griffiths and Tiffin. *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies*. London: Routledge, 2004. Print.

Cohen, Robin. *Global Diasporas: An Introduction*. 2nd ed., London: Routledge, 2008. Print.

Kipling, Rudyard "The Balled of East and West." *Verse*. London: Definitive Edition, 1940.

https://literaryballadarchive.com/PDF/Kipling_2_B_of_East_and_West.pdf

Shamsie, Kamila. *Burnt Shadows*. New Delhi: Bloomsbury, 2009. Print.

_____. *Home Fire*. New Delhi: Bloomsbury, 2017. Print.