

Exploring Postmodern Aspects in Kamila Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows*

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Abstract

Kamila Shamsie's "Burnt Shadows" (2009) provides a fragmentary account of some most important socio-politic historical events through the journey of a hibakusha, Hiroko Tanaka. This Pakistani English novel is written in a new literary style which creates difficulty for the novice readers. Though the novel has been analysed from several perspectives yet rarely any critic ever describes the novel's new literary trends. Therefore, to make the text explicable and understandable for the novice readers, this paper explores the selected novel in the light of postmodern literary theory. Relying on textual analysis, the study finds that the narrative embodies multiple elements/characteristics of postmodernism including questionable narrator and fragmented characters. Likewise, pastiche technique, temporal distortion and magical realism etc. the dominant postmodern literary aspects, are thematically present in the novel as well.

Keywords: *Burnt shadows, postmodernism, questionable narration, pastiche, magic realism, historiographic metafiction.*

1. Introduction

Kamila Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows* (2009) provides a fragmentary history of bombing at Nagasaki (1945), partition of Indian subcontinent (1946-1947), freedom of Pakistan (1947), terrorist attacks on USA (2001), and Afghan – America Jung through the story of the lifelong journey of its protagonist, Hiroko Tanaka. Being a hibakusha, Tanaka leaves Japan for India, India for Pakistan and Pakistan for America in a quest of peace in her life. Together with these fictional historiographic elements, the author writes this novel in a new literary style (Ashraf, 2016). This new literary style creates some difficulty for its novice readers to understand the text.

Though the selected novel has been analysed from several perspective (see Zinck, 2010; Khan, 2011; Nackachi, 2012; Sarah, 2012; Watson, 2012; Chun, 2013; Sarvat 2014; Nida, 2015), yet rarely any critic ever describes the literary trends of the novel in detail. In that way, the question of problematic reading still seems unresolved. Therefore, to fulfil this gap in knowledge, the paper explores and analyses the chosen novel in the light of postmodern theory and provides an answer to the following question:

- Which postmodern literary elements and characteristics are embodied in the selected text?

By this, the present study aims to make the narrative easy for its readers. Moreover, to explore the underlying meanings of the narrative, the study applies the technique of close reading. Finally, the study finds that the novel embodies some postmodern literary and thematic elements viz. questionable narrator, temporal distortion and magic realism etc. The plot of the story is structured into the philosophy of Feng Shui and mythical webs of spiders etc. Further, herein Shamsie creates socio-culturally constructed characters who play their roles in their context according to their socio-cultural demands.

2. Literature Review

Burnt Shadows has been analysed from several perspectives including nationalism, globalism and feminism (e.g. Khan, 2011; Watson, 2012). Khan (2011) argues that the novel is a political and transnational allegory which focuses on the aspects of globalization, nationalism and feminism as well. His study, being a feminist study, illuminates hideous beauty of Tanaka's bird shaped burns. The study further explores Tanaka's physical body as the symbolical manuscript which reflects the socio-political, national and colonial aspects of our world. Watson (2012) focuses on the experiences and insurgencies of Tanaka's life in the destructed world of war. This study further discusses the theme of loss in Tanaka's life from personal level to the political level. Saira and Mumtaz (2012) interpret the novel under the concept of intertextuality. Their study claims that *Burnt Shadows* is a conflicted reference index of Forster's *A Passage to India* wherein Shamie applies the literary techniques of double voice as a solution to answer back to every mis-portrayal presented in Forster's novel.

Similarly, *Burnt Shadows* has also been discussed and analysed in the light of deconstructionism and post-colonialism etc. (see Nackachi, 2012; Sarah, 2012; Chun, 2013; Sarvat 2014; Nida, 2015). However, despite of the great research on our chosen text, rarely any critic ever describes new literary trends in the novel. Therefore, keeping up with the aim to make the selected text understandable for its novice readers, the study takes the theory of postmodernism as the theoretical framework.

Postmodernism is an umbrella term which covers multiple aspects of changes, occurred from 1940-1950s in different fields of knowledge including philosophy, art, and literature etc. (Cuddon, 1999). The critical and complex nature of postmodernism challenges the critics to describe it in a clear and concise way. However, some critics have attempted to explore the salient features of postmodern literature. Cuddon (1999) defines postmodernism as an "ambiguous" and "controversial" literary theory (pp. 659-660). According to him, literary postmodernism pleads for duality as it follows as well as criticizes the epistemology of literary modernism. Further, Hutcheon (2004) argues that "[postmodern theory] uses and abuses, installs and then subverts the very concept..." (p. 4). By this description, she claims postmodernism as the critique of all the existing concepts. Due to such complexity, postmodern literature becomes problematic for its readers.

Postmodern literature also responds to postmodern philosophy which undermines the concept of absolute truth and absolute reality. Concerning this notion, Smart (1997) states that a man of postmodern society cannot accept an existing "reality", "objective truth" and "absolute history" (p. 37). In contrast, Hutcheon (2004) attempts to rectify the misconception of critics about the subversion of universal Truth. She (2004) states the man of postmodern society does not undermine the "Truth" but he transfers the absolutism of truth into arguments (p. 13) by which he creates multiple "truths". Dealing with such obscurity and ambiguity of postmodern philosophy, every postmodern literary writer produces an uncertain and problematic narrative (Malpos, 2005) and thus his/her writings celebrate the ambiguous themes of fragmentation, schizophrenic subjectivity and questionable narration, etc. Hutcheon (1988), further highlights that postmodern novel questions every interconnected idea either it is about "autonomy, certainty, authority, unity, universalization, continuity, or uniqueness" etc., (p. 57). Similarly, postmodern texts possess some key features like pastiche technique, meta-fiction, parody, magic realism and self-reflexivity, etc.

(Dodhy, 2012). The exploration of all these elements or characteristics that were underlying in the selected novel are discussed and analysed in the section after methodology.

3. Methodology

The qualitative text-based study is analysed in the light of close reading method for the method helps the critics to explore the textual meanings of the chosen narratives and their effects on readers in detail (Cuddon, 1999; Brummet, 2010; Mashori and Zaib, 2015). Following the technique, at first we examined the text line by line and word by word. By this, we attempted to understand the point of view of the author, style of narration, tone of the narrator, art of characterization and symbolism etc. Then, we explored certain postmodern characteristics embodied in the plot construction, characterization and narrative techniques etc., of the novel. Finally, corresponding to our findings, we divided the paper into several thematic postmodern literary aspects which are now discussed and analysed in following section.

4. Discussion and Analysis

4.1 Questionable Narrator

MacHall (1987) pointed out that an uncertain voice of speaker in a postmodern fiction often creates an equivocality for its readers. One can find the obscurity of narration in the pages of *Burnt Shadows* in which the narrator possesses questionable identity. Here, the reader discovers collision between third person and first person point of views. The third person narrator of the novel performs dual role i.e., s/he appears both as a limited as well as an omniscient speaker. Same obliquity moves with the first person point of view where the reader also encounters with two kinds of narrators. Sometimes, the first person 'I' refers to an individual character as the narrator of the novel while sometimes it stands for a first person omniscient narrator having all the knowledge about the events.

The novel opens as: "later, the one who will survive will remember the day as grey..." (Shamsie, 2009, p. 4). Here by prognosticating about future, the third person omniscient narrator assures that the dull and gloomy day of 9th of August, 1945 of Nagasaki will never be forgotten by the explosion affected survivors. Then, the narrator introduces the characters of the novel by mentioning their past and present identities as "Yoshi Watanable is the 'Jap'... His grandfather, Pater Fuller of Sorphshire, had been George Burton's closest friend and neighbour" (p. 8). In these lines, the narrator comments about Yushi's present state as he is a Japanese and by referring the friendship of Yushi's grandfather with the grandfather of Burton and Konard, the speaker describes the past of Yushi's family. This voice proves itself as the voice of an omniscient third person narrator.

Similarly, part II of the novel starts with a certain voice where the narrator speaks about Delhi and about Sajjad with confidence and certainty. But slowly and gradually the voice becomes uncertain and creates an enigma for the reader about the absolute identity of the narrator. When the narrator says "perhaps this would be the year she'd reveal that it was not the winter flower for which she waited all year" (Shamsie, 2009 p. 19) so the use of the word *perhaps* clarifies the uncertainty of the narrator who previously speaks in certain voice. The ambiguity in voices of the narrator dismantles the conventional trend of narration.

Nevertheless, the third person narrator also gives opportunity to the characters of the novel to narrate their stories in their own voices. For example, Hiroko narrates her life story to Sajjad by

using first person singular “I”. She tells him about Konard and WWII as “I worked as a translator for over a year” and “I knew straightaway I could not keep working them” (Shamsie, 2009 p. 35) etc. By this, the third person narration converts into the first person narration and this ambiguity of the narrators remains alive throughout the novel. Here, sometimes a third person omniscient narrator and sometimes a limited one, while sometimes the individual characters (as first person speakers) narrate the novel in their different voices which altogether question the identity of the narrator.

4.2 Socio-Culturally Constructed Characters

In *Burnt Shadows* almost all the characters possess fragmented identities. They, in real sense, appear as the true dwellers of postmodern world. Sim (2001) points out about postmodern literary characters as “...[for] postmodernist, the subject [character] is a fragmented being who has no essential core of identity, and is to be regarded as a process in a continual state of dissolution rather than a fixed identity or self that endures unchanged over time” (p. 366-367). In the light of this statement, it can be said that postmodern literary characters construct their identities according to the demands of their dynamic social world. They hide their originality and pretend whatever they like or whatever they are asked to be.

One of the glaring examples of such characters in the selected novel is Raza, the son of Hiroko and Sajjad Ashraf, a Pakistani boy whose mother tongue is Urdu. Shamsie portrays him as an artful linguist who uses his languages to change his role or identity as per the situation. When Harry, an American FBI agent, first sees Raza, the boy (Raza) speaks Urdu. Harry remarks that “your Urdu is very good” (Shamsie, 2009 p. 88). Being an English, Harry gets anxious that how an Urdu speaker can understand his English language. At the time, Raza reveals that “I speak English and Japanese and German. And Urdu, of course. Pashto also. What do you speak?” (p. 90). His remarks clarify that he is a peculiar postmodern man who seems credulous to change himself according to the situation.

Raza meets with Pashtu speakers and among their company he introduces himself as *Raza Hazara* from Afghanistan who is an expert in Pashtu language (Shamsie, 2009 p. 97). More than this, he settles in Afghanistan in the guise of an Afghani citizen. Similarly, when he enters in Iran he startles Ahmed, an Irani fellow, “with his command on Farsi” (p. 200).

Likewise Hiroko is a Japanese by birth but her individuality undermines her own traits. She leaves Japan for India. How different the countries are! But despite of their different cultures and beliefs, she soon accepts Indian culture. Nevertheless, this hibakusha Japanese woman becomes the wife of an Indian Muslim, Sajjad Ashraf. She also becomes a friend of Elizabeth Briton, a German English girl.

The same case is with Harry, James and Ilse. Ilse (also named as Elizabeth), a German born girl marries with an English James and makes close friendship with a Japanese Hiroko. During the perusal of the reading, the reader gets puzzle to understand the signs of the national identities of the characters. All these characters prove themselves as the true representatives of postmodern world with postmodern characteristic of playing their roles as per the requirement of their contexts.

4.3 Schizophrenic Subjectivity

The sentence that *it may be true for you, but not for me* is an appealing sentence for every postmodern man because he sees the truth from his personal perspective. In *Burnt Shadows*, Shamsie represents such schizophrenic behaviours of the characters who motivate their lives by their own truths and beliefs.

Japanese perceive that war is bad, as Hiroko Tanaka hates war but for Americans it is a tool to save their Nation (Shamsie, 2009). In the novel, the whole world engages in war with one another without any particular "Truth", the universal truth. Herein, for most of the Afghans, the reward of killing an American is Heaven (p. 215) while it is the matter of Americans to judge every Muslim as a bigot. These beliefs do not concern with their religions, for neither Judaism, nor Christianity and nor Islam establish such principles for its followers. These are the acquired beliefs of the characters to understand the world from their personal perspectives.

Raza requests Kim to save Abdullah because he did no harm, he just left FBI in despair. Kim gets anxious at Raza's request and she does opposite to his will. She calls police to arrest Abdullah and instead of Abdullah the police arrest Raza. Though, she appeals to American police to emancipate Raza for he is innocent. In contrast, the policeman replies "the person did a lot wrong... Miss your (late) father would be proud of you" (p. 218) for helping us. When Hiroko asks Kim that why she is creating hindrances for Abdullah? She openly mentions that she suspects a threat and "when we Americans suspect a threat we can't just ignore it" (Shamsie, 2009 p. 216). In all over the novel, every character understands the world from his/her individual perspective and thus truth seems different from nation to nation and man to man.

4.4 Pastiche Technique

In *Burnt Shadows*, Shamsie uses pastiches. This technique refers to the use of different styles/modes/genres (Jameson 1991) in a single text by which writer tries to create a unique story (Zaib, 2015). Though pastiche technique is classified by some critics as a modern literary aspect yet some postmodern writers also use it for they believe that postmodern literature follows as well as rejects modernism (Cuddon, 1999). Therefore, the selected text is a combination of multiple styles by which Shamsie creates a unique narrative. The novel, here, focuses on multiple styles and multiple genres.

As a historical fiction, the novel narrates the fragmentary history of partition of (Indian) subcontinent into two separate nations namely Pakistan and India. The part II of the novel opens in Delhi in 1947, the time of partition of Hindustan. Due to the demands of Muslim league for their separate homeland, Pakistan, the sub-continent becomes the centre of regional riots (Shamsie, 2009). The letter of Elizabeth to her son Harry gives testimony of this confusion in which she informs her son about the conflicts between Sikhs and Muslims in Punjab (p. 41). She makes her American son conscious about the tension in her country. Finally the country splits into India and Pakistan.

As a war fiction, the novel deals with the story of World War II and war in Afghanistan. Hiroko Tanaka is the central character of the novel who experiences the havoc of Second World War in Nagasaki, Japan in 1945. She escapes from war scene and finds shelter in Delhi (at the time of partition). She comes here as she is a lost star whose lights have twinkled under the *brown mushrooms clouds*. She loses her father and her betrothed, Konard, in war field after which she wishes to quit from this inhumane world. The narrator uses the character of Hiroko to throw light on the bitterness of War. Similarly the novel also connects with the American and Afghan war.

There are Taliban who are fighting for the sake of their country and also there are Americans who are trying to finish terrorism from the world.

As a fiction of suspense, the story encompasses the characters from different countries. There are Japanese (Hiroko and Yoshi), British (James Burton), Americans (Kim and Harry), Indians (Sajjad and Mola Bux), Pakistanis (Raza, Salma), Russians and Germans (Konard and Ilse), Afghans (Taliban), and Iranis (Ahmed and other Irani fellows) etc. There are references of FBI, CIA, A and G, TCN, the world secret agencies. There are spies, policemen Taliban and mujahidin. They all are interconnected with one another as the reader becomes enigmatic about their relationships and reads the novel with great suspense.

4.5 Temporal Distortion

Following modern and postmodern trend, Shamsie uses another modern technique i.e., temporal distortion. She writes her *Burnt Shadows* in non-linear time line. Herein, the narrator jumps backward and forward in time easily. Such distortion creates confusion for the readers. When Hiroko first sees Elizabeth Burton “walking down the stairs”, so she reminds Konard and at the moment the narrator remarks that “seeing Elizabeth descend[ing] the stairs made it only yesterday that Konard walked away from her to his death” (Shamsie, 2009, p. 24). Similarly the narrator also speaks about Hiroko’s past time that when she was “dancing with an American GI in Tokyo”, so his jazzy movement “recalled Konard’s departure” and after that she burst into tears (p. 24). Likewise when Sajjad touches the burning back of Hiroko, the luxury feelings of his touch reminds the physical intimacy of Konard (p. 53).

When, in the same way, Raza first sees Kim at the time of his harassment, her eyes reflect such anger and fury that compel Raza to remind Harry and he thinks that “Harry’s quick temper manifest in her” (p. 213). In all over the novel the narrator jumps back from present to the past time and peeps into the mind of his/her characters to mention their inner jumbling of thoughts. This technique breaks the linear time line of the novel.

4.6 Magic Realism

Magic realism, a postmodern literary characteristic, refers to the merging of fantastic and mythical elements into a realistic fiction. Moreover, comprising of dreams, fairy tales, elements of shocks, and myths etc., a magic realist text represents characters connected with some traditions and faith of their community (Cuddon, 1999; Foreman, 1992). *Burnt Shadows*, being a magical realist text, entwines around the complicated plot with dreams and exotic elements. Most importantly the role of burnt shadows and the story of spider in the novel play an unusual role in the plot and themes of the novel.

In dealing with the magic of burnt shadows, Shamsie follows the philosophy of Feng Shui. The philosophy comprises of three postulates according to which everything (person, place or things) lives with and adheres by Ch’i, the vital force/energy (Kellen, 2012) while Ch’i (in everything) changes continuously. In all over the novel, Hiroko’s wisdom, her life, relationships, family, children, fame and fortune etc. everything keep alive with Ch’i and connect by Ch’i through her burnt shadows. The narrator remarks that “no one else in Nagasaki could cast such a long shadow” (Shamsie, 2009 p. 17). It is just Hiroko, a hibakusha who gets three charcoal coloured bird shaped scars on her back. Her burning scars, according to the first principle of Feng Shui, are the alive things with Ch’i, the vital energy/force, which evolve certain memories and feelings of Hiroko.

Secondly, the birds, being vital and forceful, connect her with everything on earth. When, Hiroko shares the secret of her burning body with Sajjad so the magical effect of the birds compels him to marry her. Here, this husband –wife relationship between Japanese Hiroko and Indian Muslim Sajjad builds up due to the vital force (Ch'i). Moreover, as the Chi is everything, changing so the magical power of the birds (the living objects) changes Hiroko's life at every stage.

According to Hiroko these birds are not the mere shadows but they are the real birds who have their prey in her life. These birds have swallowed her five months inborn baby girl (Shamsie, 2009 p. 121) in her womb. When Salma tells Hiroko about Raza's departure from his home, all her (Salma's) remarks startle Hiroko who considers that her birds have flown "outwards and [have] enter[ed in] the mind of this girl and from her mind to Raza's heart' (p. 132). In the end when she loses Raza, then the narrator mentions that "the dark birds were between them and the burnt feathers everywhere" (p. 216).

The story of spiders' faithfulness with Muhammad (P.B.U.H) and his fellow magically works in the fictional world of *Burnt Shadows* especially in the lives of two families' viz. Sajjad Ashraf and James Burton. The story narrates the event in which once spiders made a web at the mouth of the cave in which Muhammad (P.B.U.H) with his fellow got shelter from their enemies in their way from Mecca to Medina. When the enemies came to the cave, they saw the webs of spiders at the opening of the cavern and so realized that the cave is vacant.

Being a fictional magician, Shamsie weaves the plot of her novel into the mythical webs of the spiders by which she coheres the characters with their traditional faiths. It is Sajjad who first narrates the story of spiders to Konard, Konard to Hiroko, Hiroko to Raza and Ilse, and Ilse to James and Harry. The narrator speaks that "this story had passed hands between their two families for three generations" (Shamsie, 2009 p. 209). All these characters consider themselves as they are the spiders and they have to help and protect one another from their enemies. Ilse three times offers her home to Hiroko: first in Delhi, second in Pakistan and third in New York. The story becomes a reality for them.

Moreover, dreams and fairy tales are also playing magic in the novel. Before the birth of her first daughter (who spoils in her womb) Hiroko sees some alarming dreams. She also encounters with some exotic dreams at the time of Raza's birth. Likewise, the dream again disturbs when Raza leaves her home. All these dreams influence on her life. Concerning Fairy tales, there is only one tale that is narrated by Hiroko to Harry.

4.7 Historiographic Metafiction

In *Burnt Shadows*, Kamila Shamsie blurs historical references with fiction that is the salient feature of historiographic metafiction (Ashraf, 2016). One of the central questions of historiographic metafiction is of the [im]possibility of knowing anything about past events from a present perspective (Hutcheon 1988). Therefore, postmodern writers re-write history with duality in which they intermingle history and current world affairs together and make the text problematic concerning reality. As Doctorow fictionalizes historical events in his novel *Ragtime* (1981) to question realism, in the same way Shamsie presents the real history of partition, WWII, Afghanistan and Taliban as fictional and makes the text problematic about its descriptive or fictional nature.

Here Shamsie consciously fictionalizes the historiographical scene of the bombardment of Nagasaki through the character of Hiroko. Hiroko's fictional burnt shadows, the real legacy of the havoc that destroys the thousands of lives in past time, appear in the novel as the symbol of hope (Watson, 2012). The transformation of the symbol of the loss (the burning bodies of real hibakusha) into a symbol of hope (in case of Hiroko) can be interpreted here as an art of Shamsie by which she amalgamates fact and fiction to represent the parody of history. Through this art she voices her female hibakusha protagonist and gives her all protection.

Shamsie, moreover, refers numerous historical characters namely Quaid -e -Azam (p. 28), Rani of Jhansi and Altamash, Razia Sultana as well as Qutb-ud- din Aibak (p. 46) and even Obama and then unites them with fictional characters. The target novel follows the convention of using and abusing, installing and then subverting the history into fiction. The self-reflexive play with text through the prism of history and the dual mode of writing (literary/historical) makes the novel a historiographic metafiction.

5. Conclusion

The textual analysis significantly indicates that the world of Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows* is postmodern world. Here all the characters are well aware of the art of pretension and acquire a questionable identity. They (as Raza and Harry) construct themselves according to their social demands and perceive the world from their subjective perspectives. Moreover, the identity of the narrator remains ambiguous due to the collision between the first person voice and the third person voice of the narrator. Further, the narrator also jumps backward and forward in time line to represent psychological reality or the inner jumbling of thoughts of the characters. Here Shamsie presents how history and fiction are blended together. The plot does not only focus at one genre but is rather a mixture of different genres. Magical realism is another rooted characteristic of the novel where the magical effects of burnt shadows, story of spiders along with dreams and fairy tales play great significance in the lives of Ashraf's and Burton's families. The explored postmodern aspects of the novel, *Burnt Shadows*, are expected to make the reading enjoyable for a novice reader.

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