

**Burnt Shadows: Transnational identities, Linguistics Consciousness and Hybridity
'Open the Universe a Little More!': Transnational identities, linguistics consciousness
and Hybridity in Burnt Shadows**

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Abstract

This paper argues about the processes of negotiating and re constructing identities in Kamila Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows*, particularly by the two main characters Hiroko Tanaka, a Japanese language teacher and her son Raza Konrad Ashraf. Drawing on Rushdie's concept of migrants as translated men and women, imaginary homeland, Diaspora and identity, I aim to see how the cultural identities are shaped and reformed in a transnational dimension through linguistics consciousness, concerning different social and cultural conventions like gender, race, religion and national belonging. I argue that Hiroko Tanaka and Raza Konrad Ashraf are multi-lingual transmigrants who constantly migrate and negotiate their identities through the different languages they know, thus challenging the traditional notions of nation, home, community and sense of belonging; and even then keep their individuality having multi-linguistic abilities. I also take into consideration how these two characters are different from other characters in the novel; and the challenges and conflicts they are faced with during the course of the novel in re shaping their identity.

Keywords: Diaspora, Imaginary homeland, Migrants, Translated men.

Introduction

Burnt Shadows is a story of a Japanese woman, Hiroko Tanaka, with whom, moves the tale from 1945 Nagasaki, World War II to 1947 Partition in the Subcontinent, briefly in Turkey and then straight to the Post-9/11 United States. Hiroko, the survivor of the Nagasaki atomic bomb moves to pre partitioned India and is welcomed by Anglo-German step sister of her German fiancé who has died in the 1945 American attack. There she meets, develops her trust in and falls in love with Sajjad Ashraf, her Urdu tutor whom she marries afterwards. Living the most terrible times of post partition in Turkey with her husband, Hiroko moves to Pakistan unexpectedly when Sajjad is denied going back home (India). The last phase of the story is, however, set in the United States, where ironically Hiroko finds escape from the atomic conflict between India and Pakistan. It is here that she witnesses the 9/11 event. She and Sajjad have a son Raza, named by her as Raza Konrad Ashraf, who, thanks to his

mother's multi-linguistic powers becomes the same. His Japanese, Indian, and Turkish ancestry enables him to pass as a Hazara Afghani, with unexpected effects. Knowing many languages help him secure a job of a translator in CIA. Both the mother and the son act as Rushdie's 'translated man and woman' and thus keep on re constructing themselves in relation to their lived experiences through their journeys. All these historical events have shaped their physical relocations and they keep on re-negotiating their identities through a process of adaptation.

Analyzing the novel from the perspective of Salman Rushdie's *Imaginary Homelands* helps bring out the transnationalism and Hybridity in the characters of the novel. *Imaginary Homelands* explores the notion of "homeland" within the context of transience and flexibility. It is a collection of essays written during 1981 to 1992 about the controversial issues of the decade. It covers the experiences of Rushdie as well as his contemporary time period.

Research Methodology

This is a qualitative research and it highlights the events and incidents of the novel being the first hand information, through the technique of close Textual Analysis, with the novel as a primary source. Different secondary sources like books, Journal articles and websites have also been used.

Moreover, to explore the novel I have used the concepts of migrants, translated men and women, and hybridity by Salman Rushdie in his *Imaginary Homelands*.

Literature Review

The novel offers multiple interpretations and perspectives such as sociological, political, ethnic, moral and psychological etc. Many researchers have mentioned about the struggle and trauma that the protagonists go through in their life journey. Many articles discuss the symbolism in the novel

Sandrine Soukaï in her article 'The Hybridity of Partition Novels in English: Reshaping National Identities in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* and Kamila Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows*' writes about 1947 partition that led to the creation of two countries Pakistan and India, and how the effects of this partition are highlighted in the works of the above mentioned authors. But this research is more about the techniques employed by these writers to show their own multiple identities. It lacks the characters' transitivity.

Humaira Sarvat in her article Cultural Hybridity in Kamila Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows* also writes about the hybridity in culture reflected in the novel. This research focuses on the cultural hybridity within the field of Postcolonial studies. The writer writes about different cultures like Indian, Pakistani, English and American. Her area of research is the legacies of colonialism on cultures by applying Homi Bhaba's theory of 'Cultural Hybridity'. This research does not cover the aim of my research.

'*Burnt Shadows*: "Home", "Cosmopolitanism" and "Hybridization"' by Shazia Babar also discusses the hybridization of identity within the protagonists from Bhabha's perspective. The article reflects upon the process of developing hybrid identities in the novel.

Wahid Pervez in his article ‘Critical Study of Kamila Shamsie’s novel *Burnt Shadows* in the light of Post-Colonial Theory’ also discusses the novel’s story from the perspective of Post-Colonial Theory.

Another research article ‘The Performance of Identity in Kamila Shamsie’s *Burnt Shadows*’ is written by Daniela Vitolo in which the researcher discusses the processes of identity construction enacted by the main character Heroko in the novel *Burnt Shadows* by Kamila Shamsie focusing on the performative relationship existing between agency and identity. The aim is to explore the ways the author portrays the relationship between relevant political events and the dynamics of identity formation as they take place in a transnational dimension. This research partially sides with my intentions of carrying out a similar research but I take into consideration the character of Raza also and represent the mother-son duo through the lenses of Rushdie’s critical attitudes towards nationalistic ideas of national belonging.

These and many other studies have not only enhanced my understanding of the novel, but also have allowed me to work for the gap in this research area. Therefore I apply Rushdie’s *Imaginary Homelands* and look into the two major characters, Hiroko and Raza critically to highlight their Diasporic identity.

Text Analysis

According to Rushdie, migrants are translated men and are expected to adapt the ways of their adopted homelands. This concept of Multiculturalism and transnationalism is seen in Hiroko and Raza’s characters. They represent a homing desire rather than a desire for homeland as both are strangers at home. Hiroko and Raza recreate their home wherever they move or stay and adapt to the places’ languages and cultures with the help of the gift of languages they know “for language came on very easily as if [they are] retrieving some forgotten knowledge. ...” (Shamsie)

The word ‘translation’ Rushdie points out, comes from the Latin for “bearing across,” and “having been born across the world”, he says, we are “translated men”. It is normally supposed that something always gets lost in the translation but Rushdie clings to the point that “something can also be gained.” As he writes in his essay on John Berger, “the migrant is not simply transformed by his act; he also transforms his new world.” (Rushdie) One such gain is the tremendous potential for reinvigorating both the language and the culture. Languages spoken by the particular character serve as markers of both history and identity. For Hiroko, the languages she speaks reflect her experiences and place in the world. For example, her use of language with Konrad, her first love, is shaped by both their relationship and their separate identities: “As ever their conversation moves between German, English and Japanese. It feels to them like a secret language which no one else they know can fully decipher.” (Shamsie 19) The ease and skill with which she masters different languages help her dwell successfully in different cultures. She has already thrust herself forward to experience the new possibilities of cultural hybridity. Interestingly, Hiroko not only carries their languages with her, after Konrad’s death, she also learns Urdu and teaches her son Raza to speak German, in addition to Urdu, English and Japanese.

Thus Shamsie traces the complex and interconnected web of relationships that Hiroko develops through her languages during her journeys. Identity, as Gilroy puts it, actually involves “an ongoing process of self-making and social interaction” (2000, p. 103). Hence wherever she travels or stays, Hiroko is able to adapt to that particular land and nation; society and its language and customs. Doing so, she still retains her individuality and is not

bound by any societal pressures. She is a multi-lingual transmigrant, who is undergoing constant flux in terms of migration. We see that Hiroko's own people become strangers for her after the atomic bombing of Nagasaki. Among her people she feels alienated. She becomes a victim of their indifference. Her identity is reduced only to a survivor of the atomic bomb attack, i-e, 'Hibakusha'. As Shamsie puts it, "It was a fear of reduction rather than any kind of quest that had forced her away from Japan. ... To the Japanese she was nothing beyond an explosion-affected person; that was her defining feature." (Shamsie 49)

Hence she is forced to move to Delhi due to estranged behavior of her people. She moves in order to find solace with step sister of her dead fiancé as she thinks, "there was nowhere else for her to go." (Shamsie 48) In India, she feels at home when she meets Sajjad Ashraf. His open and welcoming attitude makes Hiroko reveal her heart in front of him and she compares her identity with his as she says; "It seems to me that I could find more in your world which resembles Japanese traditions than I can in this world of the English." (Shamsie 90) She even finds Urdu easy to learn. Gohar Karim Khan argues that interestingly Hiroko does not allow language barriers or cultural differences to stand in the way of her relationship with nations and their people. She adapts to "foreignness" with unbelievable ease. She spends time with Sajjad and shows interests in knowing him through his language Urdu rather than in English. In an exquisitely poignant scene in the novel, Hiroko explains to Sajjad how, after the blast, she found a rock on which a large shadow was imprinted. Believing it to be Konrad's shadow, she rolled the rock to a cemetery and buried it. Sajjad replies, "there is a phrase ... in English: to leave someone alone in their grief. Urdu has no equivalent phrase. It only understands the concept of gathering around and becoming 'gham-kaur' – grief eaters-who take in the mourners' sorrow. Would you like me to be in English or Urdu right now? There was a moment's hesitation, and then she said, 'This is an Urdu lesson,' and returned to sit at the bridge table, pen poised to write the word 'ghum-khaur'." (Shamsie 55) She could even trust him in showing him, her 'Bird back' and telling him that she will remain single all her life. Her marriage with Sajjad is also a "series of negotiations" according to Hiroko (Shamsie 132). Hence [Her] "identity is at once plural and partial." (Rushdie 15)

Languages also play a very important role in Raza's life. He adopts the profession of a 'polyglot' and thinks that "through this he will be able to play with words in every language." He further reveals his heart to his mother, "I think I would be happy living in a cold bare room if I could spend my days burrowing into different languages." (Shamsie) This flexibility and comfort with the words and languages suggest that he has received the same versatility and quickness as his mother to adopt any language in the world and be comfortable with it. A hybrid child and a gifted linguist from an early age, he readily absorbs new languages from those around him:

"In his decade in Dubai, ... , he sought out as many nationalities as possible, acquiring language with the zeal of a collector – Bengali and Tamil from the hotel staff; Arabic from the receptionists; Swahili from the in-house jazz band; French from Claudia – the most consistent of his many lovers; Farsi from the couple who ran the restaurant at the corner of his street; Russian from the two hookers who lived in the apartment next door to his studio ... ; and beyond this, a smattering of words from all over the globe. The more languages you learned, he discovered, the more you found overlap: 'Qahweh' in Arabic, 'gehve' in Farsi, 'café' in French, 'coffee' in English, 'kofi' in Japanese . . ." (Shamsie 193)

This linguistic diversity and exploration also points towards multiculturalism and hybrid identity. He possesses linguistic consciousness of belonging to different cultures of the world. He combines the traces of almost five cultural forms in his identity. He is in a position

which denies any access to a single cultural identity. He always lives on the ‘threshold’ of the well defined tropes of identity. He belongs to everywhere. The very name Raza Konrad Ashraf has been taken from three different languages and cultures, Raza from Pakistan, Konrad from German and Ashraf from Indian culture. Moreover he tells his name to a fourteen year old Afghan boy Abdullah as Raza Hazara, thus adding another identity to his multi lingual and multi cultural identities.

Given the recurrent references to various kinds of language translation, the relationship existing between this kind of translation and the physical translation across borders appears evident – ‘to translate’ means to transfer something across a line. It could be said, to quote Salman Rushdie, that Hiroko is a ‘translated woman’ and Raza a ‘translated man’. Linguistic translation is a productive process where a negotiation between the languages involved, and the result is that ‘something can also be gained’ despite something that is lost according to Rushdie. For Rushdie, Bhabha and Benjamin, translation is a notion that means survival as a migrant is the person who has crossed the borders and must adapt to the new environment in order to survive. For Hiroko as well, translation is survival in the sense that it allows her to survive her loss by living on the borders of several distant worlds. Using translation in her process of identity construction, Hiroko herself becomes a cultural hybrid and shows her cosmopolitan attitude by performing translation as she uses the languages she speaks to cross the cultural borders she comes across. Linguistic translation is thus one of the mediums the character uses to actively build her subjectivity.

Rushdie’s concept of return to home is based on imagination. In his words,

... exiles or migrants or expatriates, are haunted by an urge to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. But if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge- which gives rise to profound uncertainties – that our physical alienation ... almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost: that we will, in short, create ... imaginary homelands, (Rushdie 10)

Thus it is impossible to return to the original homeland, it can only be re constructed in memory. Furthermore his concept of homeland is not based on geography, it is rather spatial. Past is a place of no return, as he says, “past is home, albeit a lost home in a lost city in the mists of lost time.”(Rushdie 9) Hiroko and Raza represent a true picture of this concept. Hiroko has understood it very early in her life; when she leaves Japan; that returning to this homeland will never be possible. Raza also has this in mind while leaving Pakistan for the first time. This fact does not hinder in their future movement. They rather re construct their identities through the languages they know. So Hiroko returns to her homeland in her imagination when while in Karachi she meets the Japanese women, she uses her own language, talks, jokes and laughs in her own language with the people of her own breed and skin. Hence by cherishing Japanese festivities, cooking Japanese food at home and wearing Japanese dresses she is able to relive her lost life.

According to Rushdie, sense of loss is transformative, it changes a person for the better, it is positive and worth celebrating which can be clearly seen in Hiroko’s personality. For her sense of loss is very strong but so is her adaptability. After the loss of her homeland and the death of her father and fiancé, Hiroko cherishes every memory belonging to them, but does not make these memories her only precious possessions and hence moves on. Her loss does not hinder in her progression into the future. Hall (1996b) notes that

identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not ‘who we are’ or ‘where we came from,’ so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves. (p. 4)

Conclusion

Identity is therefore mediated by different representations, language practice, memory, fantasy, and so on. Hence we see that Hiroko and Raza are multilingual transnational and hybrid characters. They prove to be borderless persons and accept all languages, cultures, nations, religions and societies with great ease. They may not have any country to call it their own, but they have a home everywhere. For Rushdie, being an immigrant is bliss. He says in *Imaginary Homelands*, "the immigrant who loses his roots, language and social norms is obliged to find new ways of describing himself, new ways of being human". (Rushdie 66) This is how we see that humanistic values are cherished in Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows*. To put it in Chamber's words,

Faced with a loss of roots, and the subsequent weakening in the grammar of 'authenticity', we move into a vaster landscape. Our sense of belonging, our language and the myths we carry in us remain, but no longer as 'origins' or signs of 'authenticity' capable of guaranteeing the sense of our lives. They now linger on as traces, voices, memories and murmurs that are mixed in with other histories, episodes, encounters. (1994, 18-19)

Hiroko does not passively accept the various kinds of limitations that have been imposed on her by events that are part of a nationalistic view, events that might have caged her into a specific set of social as well as cultural, linguistic, and maybe geographical limitations. On the contrary, she reacts to the occurrences that profoundly affect her life, challenging the roles that social and political powers seem to have chosen for her. She enacts a process of autonomous identity construction by crossing social and cultural boundaries as well as frontiers among nation-states. As a consequence, she inhabits a hybrid space where the never-completed process of identity construction develops through the negotiation of several differences. Through such a discursive practice, the protagonist questions both social norms and nationalistic ideas. Through the development of the story, questioning nationalisms appears to be the *trait d'union* connecting the parts of the novel. Nationalistic feelings and policies are indeed the reason that justify each of Hiroko's movements from one place to another, not only making her develop a transnational identity, but also prompting her to sustain ideas of transnational solidarities.

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