

Burnt Shadows: A Chronicle of Travel or Exile

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Abstract

Kamila Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows* spans over 5 decades and over two continents, raising pertinent questions about nationalities, political histories and the traumatic aspect of travel rarely discussed which underlies migration, displacement, and even exile. The paper discusses the political and material dimensions of exile through Said's defining work, *Reflections on Exile* and attempts to stretch its understanding through the narrative in terms of its motivations and political ramifications. The protagonists all belonging to politically volatile times, find themselves not only exiled geographically but also historically; and while Said suggests that such exile is always accompanied with a nationalist zeal for the nation, Shamsie's novel attempts to look at exile not through the lens of nostalgia but the painful realization of there being no return as the homelands alter due to international political events. The paper thus attempts to complicate the idea of exile and travel.

Keywords: exile, migration, travel, nationalism, 9/11, history, displacement, diaspora

"How did it come to this, he wonders".(1) The prologue of Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows* ends with this sentence, a sentence that introduces a supposedly unexpected, peculiar turn of events that seem almost implausible even as you look back. The "he" here who is in the custody of American CIA, arrested, shackled and naked, is Raza. Raza, the son of Hiroko and Sajjad, who came into existence by the unusual presence of a German Konrad in Japan, his unfortunate death in the Nagasaki bombing during the Second World War, Hiroko's subsequent decision to visit his only sister in India, meeting Sajjad, an Indian Muslim and falling in love and marrying him to produce Raza 26 years later in Pakistan. The prologue is therefore in retrospect. But a retrospection that ranges over about 5 decades and three generations beginning from the end of the Second World War with the bombing of Nagasaki in Japan, to India's Independence, Pakistan's crumbling state with seething terrorism and cross border infiltration of the Taliban, to finally the catastrophic demolition of the World Trade Centers and resulting American operatives in Afghanistan.

The displacement that I am focusing on is not of its protagonists alone but that of the narrative as well and also the travel and movement of history and the resulting continuities from one nation to another, which becomes more evident and observable with the movement of the protagonists. What Shamsie is attempting in this ambitious project is to understand the nature of travel, exile and displacement not alone in the context of India and Pakistan, but through extension the world over. She is trying to arrive at an understanding of exile and displacement, and the related travel as an unalterable condition of the modern world. While the novel almost verges on the unusual and implausible in terms of its narrative and might appear tedious and even slightly exaggerated, what she's trying to bring to attention is the direct relation between historical events and the kind of travel such as exile or migration undertaken in the event of catastrophes such as the bombing of Nagasaki in Japan, the Partition of India and Pakistan, or 9/11. The story although a little farfetched is not entirely impossible. The range of her narrative and her characters in fact allows for the understanding of such events from multiple perspectives to finally observe how modern world is in fact in a state of perpetual exile to some extent.

I will therefore in the paper attempt to look at the state of exile and displacement that the characters experience by virtue of their individual histories that have links to larger historical events. To see how travel in this particular novel has on the one hand allowed for movement from one place to another but at the same time this mobility both physical, cultural and linguistic has also caused for a state of a modern exile which has rather been caused by forces of globalization. The wide range of her narrative which spans over 50 years, and three generations has allowed her to look at the perception of exile and migration in these different generations, the aspirations of the first generation, its dissipation after events such as the Second World War and partition in the case of Indian subcontinent and its re-emergence in the third generation. By marking the time from the Second World War to the post 9/11 era, Shamsie has undercut the romanticization of a transnational world that had been imagined by the likes of Konrad and Hiroko and towards the end of the novel with the arrest of Raza and through the character of Abdullah who is an illegal immigrant in America and an ex-Mujahideen member to show the idealists of the first world such as Kim, that their vision of a truly globalized world is rather tainted by history.

The novel in addition to raising these questions regarding history and its relation to individual lives also contemplates on the modern understanding of categories such as exile, expatriates, displacement, and even diaspora. However, it might be observed that Shamsie is conscious of falling into the entrapment of romanticization of the experience of exile or such a displacement as that of Hiroko. Said in his famous essay, *Reflections on Exile*, notes,

Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted. And while it is true that literature and history contain heroic, romantic, glorious, even triumphant episodes in an exile's life, these are no more than efforts meant to overcome the crippling sorrow of estrangement.

The achievements of exile are permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind for ever. (175)

However, Shamsie restrains from heroising the exiled status of Hiroko by both focusing on Hiroko's nostalgia for Japan yet retaining the sense of loss and pain that defines her life for most part. Additionally she tries to understand her struggle to assimilate first in India and then in Pakistan not as an achievement but as her will to survive. She makes clear that Hiroko's knack for language has helped her make herself home in India unlike the Burtons. Nowhere does Shamsie exalt it as a gain in either humanistic values or skills. Hiroko cries in absolute exasperation when Sajjad tries to romanticize her struggle by calling her burns beautiful and she vehemently reacts saying that nothing about the bombings or such warfare could ever be beautiful. Similarly Raza's sense of permanent displacement and homelessness is as much as his peculiar condition in which he is born as his struggles as a clueless and aimless boy growing up in a country that is anyway rift with insurgencies, infiltration and fundamentalist politics. While Raza continually fails his Islamic studies exam, he joins a refugee Pashto speaking boy from Afghanistan onto an expedition to a training camp ahead of Peshawar. It is as much his craving to belong as his sense of dislocation in his own house, his country and its education that he takes on this journey. There is nothing heroic or worthy in Raza's journey, in fact it ends up in his desperate need to get back home to his parents in Karachi. He returns home as a disappointment and failure to Abdullah and with the burden of having led him on to a life which lands him amidst war and wreckage and finally with the realization that it was because of him that his father lost his life.

In the same essay, Said also introduces the immediate ideological accompaniment of exile that is almost inevitable given the struggles imposed by the status of the exiled, that of nationalism. He notes, and again I quote.

Nationalism is an assertion of belonging in and to a place, a people, a heritage. It affirms the home created by a community of language, culture and customs; and by doing so it fends off exile, fights to prevent its ravages. Indeed, the interplay between nationalism and exile is like Hegel's dialectic of servant and master, opposites informing and constituting each other. (178)

Shamsie doesn't allow her protagonists any nationalist fervor or lamentation for a country that is lost to them. Hiroko only sparsely recalls her Japanese home, most poignantly only in Mussoorie, where her future is unsettled and she has to make arrangements for her movement from the Burton house. Although, as she talks about it with Elizabeth she also considers that she had always thought of moving to Tokyo even before the bombings, to live a more cosmopolitan life, but the aftermath of the destruction, and her identity as the Hibakusha, (a Japanese term for bomb victim) forced her out of Japan. The fact that she now cannot return to a life she had before is what she is most lamenting even as she mentions how much she misses Japan later in the novel when she loses the company of the Japanese women stationed in Karachi as wives of those

working in the Japanese embassy. Also this loss of Japan and her decision to travel out of it raises this essential difference between travel and exile that we are trying to address. Hiroko was to marry Konrad if Nagasaki had not been bombed. She had always desired to live in a city like Tokyo that was cosmopolitan or even move to New York to live in a transnational world as they had idealistically imagined. One wonders what would be the nature of Hiroko's travel if the bombs had not destroyed everything in her life. What if she had moved out of Japan for other reasons, would that be migration too? Would her longing for Japan and her homeland differ? The option of return being open and possible, her sense of loss different? Or otherwise her sense of migration also accompanied with a sense of romanticized diasporic pride in Japan? Her Japanese mannerisms differently altered? Would she ever have considered moving to India or Pakistan? It is true that for all technicalities, Hiroko left Japan out of choice, in fact even a few months after her recovery when the prospect of travelling with someone presented itself to her, but then it was the utter despondency about her life in Japan that forced her out. It was in fact ultimately a cruel hand of history that made her leave Japan not out of absolute will but for survival. She landed in India, to Konrad's only living relation, than in any other part of the world. She exiled herself from a bomb wrecked Nagasaki to come to India in search of some semblance of family, and home.

The novel in fact begins with Konrad writing about a "cosmopolitan world" and which ironically is mocked by the Nagasaki bombing which not only kills him but also destroys his work. The novel begins on the precipice of a new world where Nagasaki is a cosmopolitan center, where as Yoshi Watanabe insists there are increasing number of English newspapers and a rise in marriages between the Japanese and other Europeans. A world where the German Konrad and Japanese Hiroko dare to imagine a future together in either Japan, India or else even New York. She does indeed visits both India and New York eventually and in between unexpectedly Pakistan too. Both the narrative and the protagonists travel. As the novel begins it is suggested that the world that Konrad and Hiroko live in, despite the war is a truly transnational globalized world, but the travel that the protagonists undertake eventually are all shaped by the bigger historical events around them so that Hiroko is forced to take an exile from Japan after its devastation, Sajjad is exiled from his Dilli, because of Partition and his minority status as a Muslim, Abdullah migrated and also exiled from Afghanistan until his return can be nebulously arranged. And finally Raza's permanent exile when he's jailed at the end of everything. All these characters initially had relatively more agency to travel freely but are then made to exile, migrate or be permanently displaced because of the history of the countries to which they belong, never being able to shirk off its shadows. Thus the choice and agency to travel overlaps with utter inevitability to move, and migrate at several instances in the novel therefore problematizing these categories.

This is perhaps the essential difference that emerges when talking of categories such as exile and displacement, migration and travel. While agency is the most distinguishing feature, the need for survival is the paramount concern with which the migrant or the exiled decides to undertake the journey. Whether it's the movement imposed by a war wrecked state, the danger of violence, or otherwise for very basic economic purposes to fend for oneself, the need at the

center of all such travels is survival necessities to be able to acquire basic life needs. If here there are no ostensible physical needs, both Hiroko and her son feel the emotional need to escape their lives of which they can make no sense, a life where they feel estranged because of the conditions that history has landed them in. Hiroko or later Raza had not imagined the future that they were going to end up with, they had both desired choice, in fact their mutual love for language made them crave for such mobility where they could move into and out of places out of their choice in the hope of a liberalized world. However, the incidents of the Nagasaki and Partition in Hiroko's case and Raza's peculiar parentage, his Afghani looks and the post 9/11 paranoia in his case once again reminded them that the world was not yet ready to welcome such imaginations of a liberal world. They would have to still respond to their histories as it signs its marks on their bodies forever.

Others in the novel are also somewhat exiles for some part of their lives, James Burton is always only a British Indian, Elizabeth fondly remembers the Germany of her childhood and is made conscious of her feeling of estrangement with both her husband and British governed India in Hiroko's presence. Her son, Henry can only think of India and their Bungalow while imagining home, and feels dislocated as he also shares his time between England and America. At the same time in the figure of Kim, Henry's daughter and Raza's peer, Shamsie introduces the modern exile whose sense of dislocation is because she has moved from one first world country into another. In the event of her parents' divorce, Kim shunts between France and America and finally moves to New York towards the end of the novel. It is in New York however, where all of the exiles are finally stationed in the novel, including Hiroko, Elizabeth and even Abdullah, a migrant from the Taliban governed Afghanistan, whose return journey to his home in Afghanistan is made to be the most significant part of the last portion of Shamsie's novel. While Kim's exile introduced in the last portion of the novel is a romanticized modern exile in which the modern man/woman finds themselves, it is juxtapositioned with the exile and migration of Abdullah, which is not in the least bit heroic, romantic or even desired. Abdullah would have continued living in America if not for his illegal immigration and America's aggressive inquiry into all such Muslim presences in America. His presence in America is not an economic advancement, but only a survival necessity.

Not only the protagonists but the choice of the political spaces where Shamsie chooses to place her action is in a state of exile and permanent change so that the continuity from the past is irretrievably lost. Nagasaki is never the same after the bombing, the Indian subcontinent gets divided after the partition, America's attitude to middle-east is irrevocably altered since 9/11, and Afghanistan is irredeemably mutilated and destroyed after American intervention. It is then no surprise that the protagonists end in tragic ends with utter destruction because the spaces that they belong in have also been destroyed by history. Shamsie's protagonists then are allegorical to the extent that they contain the histories of their birth and their nation within themselves and are doomed by this inextricable link with their pasts. This can be also observed in their choice of life, which might seem to be of their own but is influenced by the histories to which they belong.

While travel is always a journey from a focal point, which is home, and radiating in different directions, but then always getting back to where one began, both migration and more

importantly exile is about a movement that is essentially one sided, with little to no possibility for return. What makes the journey of Hiroko and Raza that of no return, is their respective histories, their connection to events and places that had been singed with utter destruction. Both Hiroko and Raza travel freely towards the end of the novel, but this travel is forever tainted with their historicity that has been mapped on their bodies. Raza ends up in American jail for a crime he has not committed. But it is linked to the entire course of his history from Hiroko's marriage to Sajjad, their relations with the Burtons, their migration to Pakistan, Raza's sense of estrangement from the rest of his peer group because of his partly Japanese features and even genes, his involvement with Abdullah and finding some self-validation in it, Sajjad's death, his reuniting with Harry, the 9/11, and then his attempts to right his wrongs and eventually landing in the American jail for the choices or the lack of choices thereof he has made in life thus far. Hiroko too does end up in New York as she had once imagined with Konrad, but is left alone in the end, with neither Konrad, or Sajjad or even her son Raza by her side.

What Shamsie repeatedly stresses in her literature is the inextricable link between people and the historicity into which they are born, therefore the symbolic articulation of this idea in the form of the birdlike burns that are permanently mapped on the back of Hiroko. Looking like birds that are in flight, they emphasize on how the globalized world in which international travel seems more convenient than ever before is also a world that is seared with a troubled past and consequently an increasingly fearful and disturbed future. The haunts or shadows of past don't only exist in nostalgic longings of the exile but are in fact perpetuated beyond themselves onto the next generation, often times directing the course of the apparent "choices" they have and the decisions they make, thus eventually complicating the idea of free will and choice.

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