



RECLAIMING HISTORY: TRANSNATIONAL MEMORY IN KAMILA SHAMSIE'S *BURNT SHADOWS*

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Abstract:

*This paper investigates how Kamila Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows* reclaims historical narratives through the lens of transnational memory, challenging dominant Eurocentric historiographies and emphasizing Pakistani agency. Spanning multiple geopolitical moments — Hiroshima, Partition, Afghanistan, and post-9/11 New York — the novel mobilizes a non-linear structure and intergenerational storytelling to critique colonial legacies and disrupt fixed national boundaries. Drawing on Homi Bhabha's theory of hybridity, Edward Said's critique of Orientalism, and Sara Ahmed's framework of affective economies, this study explores how Shamsie's characters negotiate cultural trauma, exile, and belonging across continents and decades. Particular attention is paid to the emotional and political entanglements between Hiroko and Sajjad, which illustrate the affective dimension of memory in resisting imperial erasure. Through a comparative nod to Adichie's *Americanah*, the paper also situates *Burnt Shadows* within the broader discourse of transnational postcolonial literature, arguing that memory operates not only as a personal archive but as a decolonial tool. Ultimately, this research highlights the novel's contribution to reframing Pakistani identity in global literature and proposes a critical pathway for further exploration of memory, displacement, and resistance in contemporary South Asian writing.*

Keywords: Transnational memory, postcolonial identity, decolonization, , hybridity.

Introduction

Postcolonial literature serves not only as a critique of empire but as a site of memory—an imaginative space where silenced histories are retrieved, re-narrated, and reframed through the lens of those historically marginalized. In this context, the concept of transnational memory has emerged as a vital narrative strategy within contemporary postcolonial fiction, allowing authors to trace the long afterlives of colonialism across time and space. Kamila Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows* (2009) exemplifies this project by mapping a multi-generational, transcontinental story that stretches from Hiroshima in 1945 to post-9/11 Afghanistan and New York. Through its nonlinear narrative and mobile characters, the novel reveals the enduring psychological, cultural, and political scars of colonial violence while foregrounding the agency of Pakistani and diasporic subjects. This paper argues that Shamsie uses transnational memory to decolonize historical narratives and reposition Pakistani identity within a global framework—challenging both Western historiography and regional amnesia.

Set against moments of geopolitical rupture—including the Partition of India, the Cold War in Afghanistan, and the War on Terror—*Burnt Shadows* reconstructs historical trauma not through linear cause and effect but through the affective, embodied experiences of its



characters. Hiroko Tanaka, a survivor of the Nagasaki bombing, becomes the novel's narrative anchor, linking disparate nations and histories through her personal and familial connections. Her migration from Japan to Delhi, then to Pakistan, and eventually to the West, underscores the complex entanglement of personal memory with collective trauma. As Homi K. Bhabha (1994) posits in his theory of cultural hybridity, identity in postcolonial contexts is not fixed but formed in "the third space"—a liminal realm where cultural meanings are negotiated rather than inherited. Shamsie's narrative enacts this hybridity structurally and thematically, destabilizing national and historical boundaries in favor of a more fluid, interwoven account of the past.

In conjunction with Bhabha's theoretical lens, this study draws on Edward Said's (1978) critique of Orientalism to examine how *Burnt Shadows* resists reductive East–West binaries and interrogates the racialized discourse of terrorism, especially in the wake of 9/11. By embedding her Pakistani characters—particularly Raza and Sajjad Ashraf—within transnational circuits of war, migration, and surveillance, Shamsie challenges the dominant narratives that equate Muslim identities with threat and violence. This is particularly significant when considered alongside *Americanah* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, which similarly explores how global mobility shapes and fragments postcolonial subjectivity. While *Americanah* focuses on cultural exchange and transatlantic racism, *Burnt Shadows* expands the field of inquiry to include intergenerational trauma and historical continuity, emphasizing that decolonization is not merely political or economic, but also mnemonic and affective.

Here, Sara Ahmed's (2004) theory of affective economies becomes useful in unpacking how emotions circulate among displaced bodies, carrying traces of history, power, and loss. In *Burnt Shadows*, affective bonds—between Hiroko and Sajjad, Raza and Kim, and others—are shaped by larger political forces, but they also resist those very forces by affirming shared humanity across borders. These emotional connections function as sites of resistance, disrupting the cold bureaucracies of war and migration with warmth, care, and memory.

Despite the novel's critical acclaim, *Burnt Shadows* remains relatively underexplored as a decolonial project in academic discourse. Existing scholarship often emphasizes its transnational scope or its gender politics, but few studies have analysed the role of memory as a literary and political tool for reclaiming marginalized histories—particularly from a Pakistani perspective. This paper seeks to fill that gap by closely examining how Shamsie's narrative strategies challenge dominant historical frameworks and affirm postcolonial agency through memory, emotion, and hybridity.

Using close reading and postcolonial theory, this paper will analyse three interlocking dimensions: first, Shamsie's use of nonlinear structure and narrative shifts as a means of disrupting Western historical time; second, her reframing of global events like Partition and 9/11 from a South Asian perspective; and third, her portrayal of affective connections as vehicles of resistance and ethical solidarity. A brief comparative thread will link Shamsie's approach to that of *Americanah*, reinforcing how transnational memory redefines postcolonial identity in the Global South and diaspora alike.

In reclaiming history through the voices of the displaced and the wounded, *Burnt Shadows* offers a compelling intervention into postcolonial memory politics—one that resists forgetting, refuses simplistic binaries, and reimagines belonging across ruptured geographies.

Literature Review

The intersection of transnational memory and postcolonial identity in contemporary literature has emerged as a crucial space for interrogating colonial afterlives and constructing decolonial imaginaries. Within this field, theorists such as Homi Bhabha (1994), Edward Said (1978,



2000), and Sara Ahmed (2013) provide foundational frameworks for understanding how memory, hybridity and affect operate across borders. Their ideas prove particularly valuable for analysing Kamila Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows* (2009), which spans from the atomic bombing of Nagasaki to post-9/11 Afghanistan and the United States. The novel's narrative arc destabilizes Eurocentric historiography by foregrounding the intimate, embodied experiences of characters shaped by global events yet rooted in specific postcolonial contexts.

Edward Said's critique of Orientalism (1978) underscores the ideological foundations of empire that persist in cultural representation, especially regarding Muslim identities and the Global South. In *Burnt Shadows*, these representational logics are disrupted through the life of Hiroko Tanaka, a Japanese woman who survives Hiroshima only to witness the disintegration of personal and political life in Delhi, Karachi, and eventually New York. Said's later reflections on exile and memory (2000) become especially relevant in understanding how Shamsie's characters carry historical wounds across national boundaries, refusing the binary logic of colonizer/colonized and resisting reductive victimhood.

Complementing Said's geopolitical analysis, Bhabha's (1994) theory of hybridity provides insight into how Shamsie's characters inhabit the "third space," a zone of cultural negotiation that resists the fixity of colonial identity categories. Hiroko's transformation—from victim to witness, from lover to migrant—reflects Bhabha's idea that identity is not pre-given but forged in ambivalent, shifting spaces. Her transnational journey creates narrative openings through which postcolonial memory can challenge dominant historiographies and assert subaltern voices. Moreover, the novel's nonlinear form itself embodies Bhabha's emphasis on liminality and rupture, as the plot refuses chronological order and instead connects temporal ruptures across generations and continents.

Trauma theory further illuminates the novel's structure and affective weight. As Balaev (2008) notes, trauma narratives often fracture linear temporality to reflect the fragmented nature of traumatic memory. Shamsie uses this technique to move between Hiroko's past in Japan and Pakistan and her descendants' experiences in a post-9/11 security landscape. These narrative shifts not only collapse chronological time but also emphasize the continuity of imperial violence. For Kanwal and Aslam (2018), Shamsie constructs a "*transhistorical tapestry*" (p. 89) in which global trauma and memory circulate across bodies, cultures, and regimes of power.

Sara Ahmed's (2004) theory of affective economies adds further dimension by framing how emotions travel between subjects and spaces, producing collective feelings of fear, grief, or belonging. In *Burnt Shadows*, emotional connections such as the love between Hiroko and Sajjad, or the grief over Raza's radicalization and loss, are not merely personal—they register political histories and colonial aftershocks. Ahmed's work helps explain how affect operates as a currency of resistance in postcolonial fiction, enabling characters to claim their humanity even within systems that seek to objectify or erase them.

Though critics have explored *Burnt Shadows* in relation to 9/11 and its geopolitical scope (Ahmad, 2021), few have analyzed the role of memory as a deliberate decolonial strategy. The novel does more than portray displacement or historical trauma; it reconfigures whose memories are preserved and how they are narrated. Adriana Kiczkowski (2016) underscores this by describing Shamsie's narrative as a "glocal" configuration, where global histories such as 9/11 and Hiroshima are intimately refracted through individual and familial experiences. This narrative strategy, she argues, bridges localized suffering with broader global events, thereby reclaiming historical agency for non-Western subjects. The intergenerational continuity in Shamsie's novel—linking Hiroko to Kim, Sajjad to Raza—illustrates what



Marianne Hirsch (1997) calls “post memory”: the transmission of trauma through intimate, affective bonds. This memory work challenges the amnesia embedded in both colonial archives and contemporary security narratives. When situated alongside Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah* (2013), *Burnt Shadows* reveals how transnational memory varies across geopolitical and cultural contexts. While *Americanah* centers cultural exchange and race in the transatlantic experience, *Burnt Shadows* focuses on the transmission of colonial violence across generations in South Asia and the Middle East.

Critics like McCoy (2017) and Eze (2010) have praised *Americanah* for disrupting Western notions of race and migration, yet Shamsie’s novel expands this critique by inserting Pakistani and Muslim subjectivities into global memory politics. In both texts, memory is not just a narrative device but a form of epistemic resistance—capable of reimagining identity, community, and belonging.

Despite increasing scholarly attention to global Anglophone literature, there remains a critical gap in how *Burnt Shadows* is positioned within memory studies and decolonial frameworks. Much of the existing research privileges either the historical context (e.g., Partition or 9/11) or its commentary on terrorism. This paper addresses that gap by foregrounding memory as a narrative and political force that enables the reclamation of agency, history, and identity within and beyond Pakistan.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on three key pillars of postcolonial theory to analyze *Burnt Shadows* by Kamila Shamsie: Homi K. Bhabha’s hybridity, Edward Said’s Orientalism and exile, and Sara Ahmed’s affective economies. These theoretical lenses collectively enable a deeper understanding of how Shamsie narrates the entanglements of history, memory, identity, and emotion across transnational geographies.

Homi Bhabha’s (1994) theory of cultural hybridity and the “third space” provides the foundation for analyzing how characters in *Burnt Shadows* navigate in-between cultural identities. According to Bhabha, hybridity emerges in postcolonial contexts when colonial and native cultures interact, creating spaces of negotiation where fixed meanings are dissolved and new subjectivities emerge. In the novel, Hiroko Tanaka’s journey from Japan to India, Pakistan, and the United States exemplifies this hybridity: she is neither rooted in any single nation nor fully displaced but instead embodies a mobile, hybrid consciousness shaped by overlapping histories of war, empire, and migration. The third space becomes both a psychological and narrative site where past traumas and future possibilities coexist.

Bhabha’s emphasis on nonlinearity and ambivalence also underpins the narrative structure of *Burnt Shadows*. Shamsie disrupts chronological history by weaving multiple timelines—Hiroko’s survival of Hiroshima, Partition, Cold War Afghanistan, and post-9/11 New York—into a single, transhistorical framework. This narrative strategy reflects what Bhabha calls the “unhomely” condition of the postcolonial subject: a sense of dislocation that is both spatial and temporal, born out of colonial disruption but generative of new forms of identity and resistance. Alongside Bhabha, Edward Said’s (1978, 2000) critique of Orientalism and exile is central to understanding how *Burnt Shadows* engages with Western narratives of power, war, and surveillance. Said’s concept of Orientalism exposes how the West constructs the East as exotic, inferior, and static—an ideological framework that continues to inform global media representations, foreign policy, and popular culture. In Shamsie’s novel, Pakistani and Muslim characters are repeatedly caught within these Orientalist logics—particularly in the post-9/11 context, where identities are flattened into categories of suspicion and threat. The character of



Raza, for instance, becomes enmeshed in the security-industrial complex, not simply as a political figure but as a product of Orientalist fear and global securitization.

Said's reflections on exile and memory (2000) further illuminate how displaced characters in *Burnt Shadows* resist cultural erasure. Exile, for Said, is not just a physical condition but a structure of feeling—marked by loss, longing, and narrative reclamation. Hiroko, Sajjad, and Raza embody this existential exile, as their lives are shaped by historical violence yet animated by personal memory and emotional resilience. Their stories resist hegemonic historical narratives by foregrounding lived experience, emotion, and complexity—qualities often denied to colonized or racialized subjects in imperial discourse.

To deepen the emotional and affective dimensions of this analysis, the study also draws on Sara Ahmed's (2013) theory of affective economies. Ahmed argues that emotions are not private states but circulate through and between bodies, communities, and institutions, producing "sticky" attachments to fear, love, anger, or hope. In *Burnt Shadows*, emotional relationships—between Hiroko and Sajjad, Raza and Kim, or the memory of Konrad—serve as powerful conduits for historical memory and political resistance. These affective bonds are not sentimental distractions from geopolitical concerns but sites where identity and ideology are contested, negotiated, and sometimes reimaged.

Ahmed's framework also helps analyze the circulation of fear, guilt, and desire in the novel's post-9/11 setting, where Muslim identities are produced through regimes of emotional governance. The "affective labor" of characters like Raza—who must perform loyalty, suppress grief, or navigate suspicion—reflects the emotional toll of living under surveillance and within contested spaces of belonging.

Together, Bhabha's hybridity, Said's Orientalism and exile, and Ahmed's affective economies offer an interdisciplinary theoretical foundation for analyzing *Burnt Shadows*. These frameworks not only illuminate the novel's engagement with transnational memory and postcolonial identity but also help articulate how literature becomes a form of decolonial resistance—challenging imperial histories, exposing racialized logics, and affirming the affective complexity of global subjects.

Research Questions

1. How does *Burnt Shadows* use nonlinear narrative structure to challenge colonial conceptions of historical time and sequence?
2. How does Shamsie critique Orientalist representations of Muslim and South Asian identities, particularly in the post-9/11 context?
3. What role does memory—both personal and collective—play in resisting historical erasure and reclaiming agency?
4. How are emotional relationships used as tools of survival, resistance, and narrative reconstruction within the framework of Ahmed's affective economies?

Discussion and Analysis

1. Narrative Displacement and the Politics of Time

Kamila Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows* constructs a deeply political narrative by disrupting linear conceptions of time and historical continuity. The novel spans multiple geopolitical traumas—Nagasaki, Partition, the Cold War, and 9/11—not as discrete historical moments, but as emotionally and ideologically interconnected nodes of imperial violence. Through this fragmented temporality, Shamsie challenges dominant Eurocentric historiographies and offers what Homi K. Bhabha might describe as a "disjunctive temporal order," wherein the postcolonial subject experiences time not as progress but as rupture and repetition. This



approach enables a transnational re-mapping of memory, unmoored from the neat chronologies imposed by colonial archives.

The protagonist Hiroko Tanaka emerges as a living archive of such ruptures. Scarred by the atomic bombing of Nagasaki, her body bears three birds seared into her back, a visceral reminder that historical trauma marks not only public memory but also private flesh. Rather than presenting Hiroko's scars as a metaphor, Shamsie literalizes them— "*Her back was a map... of a place no longer inhabitable*" (Shamsie, 2009, p. 3)—making her the embodiment of intergenerational grief and global violence. In this way, the novel aligns with Veena Das's (2006) assertion that violence infiltrates the ordinary, reshaping the subject's inner world as much as their external circumstances.

As Hiroko journeys from Japan to India, Pakistan, and the United States, she carries with her the emotional residue of past traumas. Bhabha's theory of hybridity becomes crucial in this context; Hiroko's transnational identity disrupts essentialist understandings of nationhood and ethnicity. Her shifting affiliations illustrate what Bhabha calls the "Third Space"—a site where cultural meanings are negotiated rather than inherited. In *Burnt Shadows*, this space is not geographical but temporal and emotional, created through Hiroko's continual navigation of grief, longing, and dislocation.

The novel's refusal to follow a linear trajectory reflects Edward Said's critique of Western historiography, which he argues often flattens non-Western histories into static or reactive categories. By threading together global crises across decades, Shamsie reclaims agency for postcolonial subjects who have been silenced or caricatured in dominant narratives. The emotional flashbacks to Nagasaki that punctuate Hiroko's experiences in Delhi and Karachi defy chronological distance, foregrounding affect over temporality. This reorientation destabilizes Orientalist paradigms, insisting that history be read not through imperial teleologies but through intimate, embodied memory.

In her relationship with Sajjad Ashraf, a Muslim clerk in British-ruled Delhi, Hiroko challenges the racialized hierarchies of colonial intimacy. Their love defies the social codes enforced by the Burtons, who represent the entrenched structures of colonial power. When Elizabeth Burton expresses discomfort at Hiroko and Sajjad's growing closeness, it becomes evident that the colonial order seeks not only territorial control but emotional regulation. Sara Ahmed's theory of affective economies offers insight here: emotions, she argues, do not simply reside in subjects but circulate among them, shaping bodies and boundaries. In *Burnt Shadows*, love becomes a political force, one that resists the disciplining gaze of empire.

Partition, too, is not presented as a historical event with a clear beginning and end. Instead, it erupts into the narrative as a personal catastrophe. The dislocation of Hiroko and Sajjad from Delhi to Karachi mirrors the larger displacement of millions, but Shamsie centres the emotional bewilderment rather than geopolitical rhetoric. "*We no longer understand what it means to belong,*" Hiroko observes (Shamsie, 2009, p. 87), echoing Gayatri Spivak's emphasis on the epistemic violence of colonial cartographies, which redraw borders without accounting for lived attachments. In this way, Shamsie critiques not only the politics of empire but also the failure of nationalism to provide coherence or healing in the aftermath.

The novel's temporal jumps—sudden, unannounced, and emotionally charged—reject what Rita Felski (2015) identifies as the "linear logic" of conventional realist fiction. Instead, *Burnt Shadows* adopts what Rebecca Walkowitz (2006) terms "cosmopolitan style," privileging mobility, multiplicity, and ethical ambiguity. The narrative moves fluidly from post-Nagasaki grief to Cold War espionage and then into the surveillance regimes of post-9/11 America. These shifts are not random; they illustrate how colonial and neocolonial violences are structurally



connected, each one giving rise to the next. As Said (2000) argues in *Reflections on Exile*, exile is not a single rupture but a continuous condition—one that reverberates across generations and borders.

Raza, the son of Hiroko and Sajjad, embodies this historical entanglement. His path—from Karachi to Afghan training camps to U.S. detention—traces the residues of imperial manipulation that reconfigure identity and loyalty. Shamsie does not depict Raza as a victim or hero but as a subject caught in the crosscurrents of history. His trajectory underscores how postcolonial identity is always already shaped by external geopolitical forces. As Priyamvada Gopal (2019) observes, postcolonial narratives must account for the structural inheritances of empire, not just the cultural aftershocks. Raza's confusion, guilt, and eventual alienation reflect these structural inheritances, dramatizing the ethical disorientation of subjects caught between global war machines.

In the closing pages of the novel, Hiroko, now aged and largely silent, witnesses the world re-enter the cycle of fear and militarism following 9/11. Her reflection—“*I have come to believe the world is always divided between those who have experienced such horror and those who have not*” (Shamsie, 2009, p. 356)—functions as a thematic anchor. The line encapsulates Shamsie's argument: history is not a sequence of wars and treaties but a repository of felt experience. By re-centering affect and memory, *Burnt Shadows* displaces official narratives and allows for a re-imagining of global history from the standpoint of the wounded, the wandering, and the unheard.

In sum, the novel performs a radical act of narrative decolonization. Its refusal of linearity, its privileging of transnational affect, and its critique of imperial epistemologies combine to present an alternative mode of historical consciousness. Shamsie does not merely tell a story; she unsettles the architecture of storytelling itself. In doing so, she joins a lineage of postcolonial authors who insist that to reclaim history is also to rethink time, identity, and the ethics of remembrance.

2. Transnational Memory and Decolonial Historiography

Kamila Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows* traverses vast temporal and geographical terrain, moving from the nuclear devastation of Nagasaki to the Partition of India and Pakistan, through Cold War espionage, and into the post-9/11 global security state. What binds these disparate historical moments together is memory—specifically *transnational memory*, which Shamsie mobilizes not only to narrate individual trauma but to contest dominant historical narratives. In doing so, *Burnt Shadows* performs what postcolonial scholars refer to as decolonial historiography: a rethinking and rewriting of global history from the perspectives of those historically silenced or marginalized.

Transnational memory refers to the circulation of memory across borders, identities, and cultures, a process through which individual and collective experiences of trauma find echoes in global contexts (Rothberg, 2009). In Shamsie's novel, memory is not confined by national borders or linear chronology. Instead, it is transgenerational and transcontinental, embodied most vividly in the figure of Hiroko Tanaka, who becomes a literal carrier of memory through the bird-shaped scars imprinted on her back from the atomic bombing of Nagasaki. These scars, introduced on the very first page—“*the three birds had burned themselves onto her back*” (Shamsie, 2009, p. 3)—serve as a symbolic archive of historical trauma that migrates across time and space. As Rothberg (2009) notes, memory becomes a “multidirectional” force in transnational literature, producing new solidarities and intersections rather than competitive victimhood.



The novel's structure echoes this transnational logic. It does not adhere to traditional Western notions of historical continuity or national-centered history. Instead, it jumps across timelines and borders, linking Hiroko's trauma in Japan with Sajjad's displacement during Partition, Raza's indoctrination during the Cold War, and the Islamophobia and surveillance following 9/11. These linkages deconstruct dominant historiographies that view such events in isolation. As Edward Said (2000) writes, imperial narratives tend to produce "a geography of the imagination" where Western hegemony is naturalized through selective historical framing. *Burnt Shadows* undermines this by showing how Western interventions—be they nuclear bombings, colonial borders, or counterterrorism—are all part of a larger, continuous machinery of empire.

A particularly striking example is how Shamsie connects Partition and post-9/11 politics through the lives of Hiroko and her son Raza. Hiroko's forced departure from Delhi after Partition— "*the city she had come to think of as home, gone in a breath*" (Shamsie, 2009, p. 91)—foreshadows Raza's eventual entanglement with global intelligence networks decades later. Raza's complicity in handing over Abdullah, a fellow Pakistani, to American forces in Afghanistan reflects how colonial legacies mutate into contemporary forms of oppression. The handover is portrayed not just as betrayal but as a consequence of a fractured, postcolonial identity—an identity shaped by multiple histories of loss and displacement. "*It was only later, when he saw the news reports and knew Abdullah had disappeared into Guantánamo, that he understood what he had done*" (Shamsie, 2009, p. 304). In this moment, the novel makes visible how memory and guilt transcend individual culpability and implicate broader systems of historical violence.

Homi Bhabha's (1994) concept of "hybridity" and "in-between spaces" is essential to understanding Shamsie's historiographic project. Hiroko, a Japanese woman who becomes a Pakistani matriarch, and Raza, a Pakistani raised with German and Indian influences, both inhabit liminal identities that resist categorization. These hybrid identities challenge the rigid binaries of East and West, colonizer and colonized, and foreground a decolonial mode of remembering that is necessarily complex and layered. Hiroko's reflection— "*Languages of hate. That's what they all become eventually. War, terrorism, hate. Always this language in the end*" (Shamsie, 2009, p. 316)—underscores the failure of national narratives to accommodate the emotional and historical complexity of transnational subjects.

Sara Ahmed's (2004) theory of affective economies further illuminates how memory in *Burnt Shadows* operates politically. Emotions like grief, fear, and longing circulate between characters and across generations, shaping political decisions and ethical alignments. Hiroko's grief for Konrad is not simply personal—it colors her relationships with Sajjad, Elizabeth, and eventually Raza. Similarly, Raza's desire for belonging makes him vulnerable to manipulation by intelligence agents. As Ahmed posits, emotions "stick" to bodies, accumulating historical weight and shaping how subjects navigate the world (p. 119). In this sense, memory in the novel functions not only as historical record but as an emotional cartography of empire.

This affective dimension becomes especially important in the novel's portrayal of intergenerational trauma. Unlike conventional histories that isolate traumas to specific events, Shamsie portrays them as cumulative and inherited. Hiroko carries the trauma of Nagasaki, which is later mirrored in Raza's guilt and alienation in post-9/11 America. The novel suggests that history is not merely something that happens; it is something that lives on in the body and psyche. "*There are times when history no longer feels like the past,*" Hiroko muses, "*but has welled up and become the present*" (Shamsie, 2009, p. 326). This line encapsulates the novel's



core insight: that trauma, memory, and identity are not bounded by time or geography but are fluid and continuous.

Burnt Shadows also critiques Western-centric historical narratives by foregrounding Pakistani and South Asian perspectives on global events. The trauma of Partition, for example, is not presented as a backdrop to the emergence of modern India but as a rupture that permanently dislocates millions and haunts generations. “*There is no going back,*” Sajjad says after their expulsion from Delhi, “*there is only forgetting or remembering*” (Shamsie, 2009, p. 105). This binary—between state-imposed amnesia and personal remembrance—highlights the political stakes of memory in postcolonial contexts. Shamsie insists that remembering is itself a form of resistance, a refusal to allow colonial and imperial violence to be sanitized or erased.

In sum, Shamsie’s *Burnt Shadows* exemplifies how transnational memory can be harnessed to decolonize history. Through its nonlinear structure, emotionally charged characters, and historical interconnections, the novel reframes global history from the perspective of the colonized, the displaced, and the silenced. It does not offer closure or reconciliation but insists on complexity, contradiction, and continuity. In doing so, it aligns with a growing body of postcolonial literature that seeks not only to represent trauma but to re-narrate history through alternative epistemologies. As Walkowitz (2006) suggests, cosmopolitan narratives like *Burnt Shadows* challenge readers to see beyond the confines of national history and instead embrace a world of overlapping memories and shared futures.

3. Affective Resistance and the Ethics of Survival in *Burnt Shadows*

Kamila Shamsie’s *Burnt Shadows* stages the ethical dilemmas of survival in the aftermath of colonialism, global conflict, and racialized geopolitics. More than a historical saga, the novel interrogates what it means to survive—not only physically but morally and emotionally—within systems structured by violence and loss. Through characters like Hiroko, Sajjad, and Raza, Shamsie presents survival not as a binary of life and death but as an ethically fraught terrain where memory, dignity, and complicity constantly intersect. Drawing on Sara Ahmed’s (2004) theory of affective economies, Edward Said’s (2000) critique of the moral landscape of empire, and Homi Bhabha’s (1994) insights into hybridity and resistance, the novel frames ethical survival as an ongoing negotiation shaped by history and affect.

From the novel’s opening pages, survival is marked by unbearable loss. The atomic bombing of Nagasaki claims Konrad’s life, but Hiroko survives—wounded, both physically and emotionally. Her “*three birds burned into her back*” (Shamsie, 2009, p. 3) mark her as someone who carries history within her body. Unlike national monuments or textbooks, her memory is intimate, painful, and persistent. The trauma Hiroko experiences is not confined to Nagasaki; it migrates with her to Delhi, Karachi, and New York. Each site of displacement brings new ethical dilemmas: whether to speak or remain silent, whether to resist or assimilate, whether to remember or forget.

Survival in Shamsie’s novel is never politically neutral. For example, after Partition forces Hiroko and Sajjad to flee Delhi, they encounter bureaucratic structures that determine who get to belong. When Hiroko’s foreignness becomes a liability, her marriage to Sajjad is perceived as transgressive, an affront to colonial and postcolonial order. This echoes Gayatri Spivak’s (1988) concern that the subaltern cannot speak—or, when they do, their voices are framed within hegemonic scripts. Hiroko’s identity as a Japanese woman in Pakistan places her in a complex affective and political position. She is both outsider and insider, griever and survivor. Her love for Sajjad is thus more than romantic; it is a form of affective resistance against the systems that sought to destroy her.



Shamsie shows that survival is also mediated by emotional and moral trade-offs. When Sajjad loses his property and profession due to Partition, he struggles to reconcile his dignity with the compromises he must make to survive in a new nation. *“It’s not just homes that were taken away,” Sajjad says, “but the right to exist without suspicion”* (Shamsie, 2009, p. 106). His struggle reflects the broader postcolonial reality in which displaced subjects must continually prove their worth to hostile bureaucracies. The ethics of survival, in this context, are not about choosing good over evil but about navigating systems where dignity is constantly under threat. These moral tensions deepen in the character arc of Raza, whose life encapsulates the ambiguities of postcolonial survival. Born to Hiroko and Sajjad in Karachi, Raza’s upbringing is shaped by transnational influences—Japanese, Indian, Pakistani, and German—and he is never entirely at home in any one identity. Recruited by Harry Burton into U.S.-backed intelligence operations, Raza becomes entangled in the moral murkiness of Cold War and post-9/11 geopolitics. His involvement in handing over Abdullah to American forces raises critical ethical questions: Is he a traitor? A victim? A survivor? Shamsie provides no easy answers. Raza’s actions are framed by his desire for belonging and validation, emotions that Ahmed (2004) argues are central to how bodies attach to social norms and ideologies.

The most ethically charged moment in the novel occurs when Raza realizes the implications of his decision: *“He didn’t think, in that moment, that Abdullah would disappear. But when he saw the news... he knew he had done something irreversible”* (Shamsie, 2009, p. 304). This moment reflects the complexity of postcolonial ethics—where intentions, actions, and consequences often diverge. Raza’s complicity in Abdullah’s capture is not depicted as villainy but as a symptom of a world where survival demands moral compromise. Said (2000) argues that such moral ambivalence is intrinsic to the postcolonial condition, especially for those who must operate within imperial institutions. Raza is not a hero, but neither is he a villain; he is a deeply human figure negotiating impossible choices.

Another axis of moral tension lies in how the novel critiques Western humanitarianism. Post-9/11 surveillance and drone warfare are portrayed not as ruptures but as extensions of colonial logic. Hiroko’s life in the United States is marked by increasing alienation. Despite her history of trauma and resilience, she becomes, in the eyes of the state, a racialized other—someone whose loyalty is suspect. Her reflection that *“the world is divided into those who have experienced horror and those who have not”* (Shamsie, 2009, p. 356) is both a lament and a warning. The ethics of survival, Shamsie suggests, must account for the unequal distribution of suffering and the structures that normalize such disparities.

Throughout *Burnt Shadows*, affect plays a critical role in shaping ethical decisions. Emotions like fear, longing, and guilt do not merely reflect internal states but are deeply political. Ahmed (2004) contends that emotions circulate within social fields, attaching themselves to racialized and gendered bodies. In Shamsie’s novel, these emotions produce ethical alignments. Raza’s desire for validation leads to betrayal. Hiroko’s grief for Konrad fosters solidarity with Sajjad. Sajjad’s pride compels resistance to British colonial arrogance. These are not apolitical feelings—they are deeply embedded in histories of domination and resistance.

The final scenes of the novel offer no catharsis, only continuity. Hiroko, reflecting on a life of loss and survival, does not find resolution. Her scars remain. Her memories remain. What Shamsie offers instead of closure is an ethical imperative: to remember, to resist forgetting, and to recognize the moral costs of survival in a world shaped by empire. As Bhabha (1994) reminds us, hybridity is not a harmonious blend but a space of negotiation and tension. The characters of *Burnt Shadows* do not resolve their histories; they live them, carry them, and transmit them across borders and generations.



In sum, *Burnt Shadows* expands the framework of survival to include emotional, ethical, and political dimensions. It challenges the reader to rethink survival not as triumph over adversity but as a process of continuous negotiation with history, identity, and moral responsibility. Through Hiroko, Sajjad, and Raza, Shamsie portrays survival as a deeply human act—messy, compromised, and yet profoundly resistant.

Conclusion

Kamila Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows* offers a profound and politically charged literary intervention into the processes by which history is remembered, contested, and reclaimed. Through its sweeping transnational narrative—from Nagasaki to Delhi, Karachi, New York, and Afghanistan—the novel challenges linear, Eurocentric historiographies and insists on a mode of remembering rooted in affect, trauma, and postcolonial agency. The text constructs a counter-history through the lived experiences of characters like Hiroko, Sajjad, and Raza, each of whom embodies the scars, negotiations, and moral complexities inherited from imperialism, war, and global migration.

Shamsie's use of nonlinear temporality, as discussed in the first section of the analysis, acts as a decolonial strategy that disrupts dominant historical logics. Rather than offering closure or reconciliation, the novel immerses the reader in the disjointed, recursive experience of transgenerational trauma. This non-linearity parallels Homi Bhabha's notion of disjunctive temporality and serves to position memory as an active force in shaping postcolonial identity. The novel refuses to confine trauma to isolated historical episodes; instead, it renders trauma as mobile, recurring, and transnational—mirroring the displacements of the characters themselves.

The analysis also revealed how *Burnt Shadows* critiques the ethics of survival and complicity within imperial systems. Shamsie does not romanticize endurance but interrogates its costs, particularly in Raza's morally ambiguous journey through intelligence networks and Hiroko's painful navigation of loss, dignity, and geopolitical suspicion. These emotional and ethical complexities resonate deeply with Sara Ahmed's theory of affective economies, where emotions become politically charged and circulate within racialized and gendered structures of power.

Moreover, Shamsie deconstructs the notion of home and belonging, showing how borders—both physical and psychological—fracture identities and isolate affective attachments. Through Hiroko's transcontinental trajectory and the ruptured familial bonds that emerge from colonial histories, *Burnt Shadows* foregrounds memory as a decolonial tool. The act of remembering in the novel is not nostalgic but defiant; it resists the erasures imposed by official narratives, particularly those shaped by war, nationalism, and empire.

Ultimately, *Burnt Shadows* functions as a literary archive—an embodied repository of transnational memory. It resists historical silencing and affirms the political agency of the colonized, displaced, and racialized subject. By engaging the reader in a multi-sited, emotionally resonant journey through empire's aftermath, Shamsie enacts the very reclamation of history the title promises.

This study thus affirms that *Burnt Shadows* is more than a family saga or a post-9/11 novel; it is a critical postcolonial text that mobilizes memory, affect, and historical complexity to challenge hegemonic narratives. It urges scholars to reconsider how literature not only reflects history but actively reshapes it through form, voice, and affective engagement. For future research, this paper's framework can be extended to examine other South Asian authors—such as Bapsi Sidhwa or Mohsin Hamid—who similarly deploy transnational memory to deconstruct colonial legacies and assert postcolonial identity. In doing so, we continue the



project of decolonizing literature and reclaiming the narratives of those long consigned to the margins.

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