



RESEARCH PAPER

**Analysing Socio-Political Overdetermination in Kamila Shamsie's
*Burnt Shadows***

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ABSTRACT

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This paper explores whether and to what extent various fictional elements such as plot and locale have been overdetermined by the employed author in view of the socio-political context(s) of late. The study presents an in-depth analysis of how the employed author of *Burnt Shadows* (2009) gets the narrative conditioned within the prevalent global political contexts and dominant/popular discourses. This has been done through a close textual reading/analysis of the novel while concentrating on the way the author situates the narrative in the contemporary political backdrop and exploits the narrative in so doing. The paper draws from Huggan's concept of "postcolonial exotic" –which problematizes the so-called "global commodification" of postcolonial works. The study explores and analyses the construction of the plot as well as the exploitation of narrative devices by the author while relying on the close textual reading of the novel. In the end, the findings of the study detail the ways of the fictional objectification with reference to the text.

Introduction

This study is inspired by the ideas that suggest that the process of production, promotion, and consumption of literary arts including fiction are often covertly influenced by various external factors including the popular political narratives, dominant discourses, and (publishing) market. The analysis has been worked out from the close textual reading of the text—involving symptomatic reading technique—that offers a deconstruction of text(s) insofar as the generation of political discourse through what I call the politicisation of textual narrative is concerned. The study, thus, investigates the ways the author marshals her textual narratives and political discourses especially as regards the constellation of international politics, which, I think, has been an important determinant in shaping the direction of the Pakistani anglophone fiction of late. That is why this study has taken into account

Aijaz Ahmed's idea of politicisation of Commonwealth anglophone literature (Ahmed, 1999, p. 69) as well as Huggan's concept of "postcolonial exotic" (Huggan, 2001, p. vii). Both Ahmed and Huggan are skeptical of the emergence and status of the so-called postcolonial/Commonwealth literary traditions as well as the debates that have been initiated in the literary and political circles especially in the present political context(s).

Shamsie's *Burnt shadows* recounts the impact of global conflicts on various common people and their societies worldwide but most particularly in the war-torn regions such as Nagasaki in Japan in the wake of the destruction caused by the American bomb, New Delhi in India following the partition of India and parts of Pakistan as well as Afghanistan in the aftermath of the Afghan conflicts involving the so-called Afghan Jihad of the 1980s against the Soviet and the US-led "war on terror" following the 9/11.

Background and Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study has mainly been drawn from Aijaz Ahmed's idea of politics of literary production as well as Graham Huggan's concept of 'postcolonial exotic'. Ahmed and Huggan believe that the expansion of the so-called postcolonial or commonwealth literature has a lot to do with the global political as well as neo-liberal realities of late (Ahmed, 1992, pp. 1-2, 203; Huggan, 2001, pp. 1-4). Ahmed analyses how literary culture has been developed over time in a way that it "rarely addresses the question of its own determination by the conditions of its production and the class location of its agents" (Ahmed, 1992, p. 6). He believes that "'Third World Literature' is, despite its polemical charge, an impossible category both politically and epistemologically" (p. 15), despite that, he says, it has been popularised in order to cater to the demands of the neoliberal (publishing) market. That is, its value is determined not because of its polemic qualities but due to economic reasons. That is why Ahmed suggests demystifying Third World literature while challenging the conditions of the emergence of this literature (p. 45).

Huggan believes that the anglophone literature of the former colonies is determined by the external (political and neo-liberal) factor(s), that is, it often gets shaped and promoted for the purpose of catering to the requirements of the global market that is mostly constituted by and consisted of the metropolitan consumers/reader. That is why, he says, an exoticism is created about the so-called postcolonial literature just like the advertisement of exotic destinations/cultures for the international tourists. He relates how the postcolonial writings have been influenced by the cultural exoticism and/or politics of cultural value that is "constructed through global market operations involving the exchange of cultural commodities and, particularly, culturally 'othered' goods" (Huggan, 2001, 6). The idea of cultural commodification is interesting perspective to the study of contemporary Pakistani anglophone fiction; however, it is, not just about the so-

called local/domestic cultural commodification that is often exoticized in contemporary fictional writings. The so-called international/cosmopolitan culture and political events also get politicised in the same vein more often than not. Thus, I think that by applying Huggan's idea of 'postcolonial exotic', we can understand how the promotion of certain trends mainly those related to the idea of cultural determination with regards to the contemporary Pakistani anglophone fiction have been promoted. Sarah Brouillette has expanded on Huggan's idea by analysing the relationship between the emergence of the so-called postcolonial anglophone literature and the global publishing market. Brouillette thinks that it is imperative to analyse the role of the market in order to understand literary production and authorship (2007, p. 3). Like Huggan, she has analysed how literary "authors attempt to show that they understand the ways in which they are being asked to present the Third World or global South to a presumably apolitical metropolitan audience" (Brouillette, p. 5).

Pakistani anglophone fiction has drawn tremendous attention of academia and literary critics mainly in the West largely due to its relevance in the conflict-ridden global political context of post-9/11 and Kamila Shamsie is no exception in that regard. There are a number of important scholarly contributions as regards the issues of (mis)representation and portrayal by the critics and academicians of Pakistani anglophone literature. Claire Chambers has studied the Islamicate context of the UK in relation to the selected Pakistani anglophone writers including Shamsie (Chambers, 2016, 2019). Aroosa Kanwal has analysed the socio-cultural ramification of 9/11 in view of how contemporary Pakistani anglophone fiction (including that of Shamsie's) has dealt with the issues arising from 9/11 (Kanwal, 2015). Madeline Clements has examined Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows* and other novels in relation to debates about Islam in the present context. She views that "Shamsie's novels make readers party to intense experiences of intra- and intercultural alienation and connection, seen through analytical and self-critical elite transnational Pakistani and, later, Asian and American eyes" (Clements, 2016, p. 124). Faisal Nazir has questioned the narrative discourse as presented in the selected Pakistani anglophone fiction from the perspective of neo-orientalism (Nazir, 2019). Although Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows* attempts "in grasping the "idea" of the nation" (Soukaï, 2018, p. 70) while doing so her text gets overdetermined politically which in my view results in the objectification of fiction. In this regard, Liao explores Shamsie's use of and engagement with the local as well as global politics in what she calls "Shamsie's critical cosmopolitanism, which is locally rooted, universally diverse, and essentially self-reflective" (Liao, 2017, pp. 263-264). In that sense, Madeline Clements thinks that Shamsie is quite aware of the commercial side of her fiction even when and if it is not her focus while writing (p. 129, 133). In the context of this study, I contend that the employed author has consciously schemed the plot of the novel as well as narrative and characters in view of the global politics and international conflicts which is reflected through the multiple cross-geographical movements and various temporal lapses in relation to the narrative. I think that *Burnt shadows* provides an interesting

account of what I call the political overdetermination of fiction in a tale of three generations told over a period of more than half a century (i.e., 60 years). The story takes place in seven countries (i.e., Japan, India, Pakistan, Turkey, Afghanistan, Germany, and the US) and is spread over several socio-political issues including the Second World War, the partition of India, the war in Afghanistan against the Soviet aggression, the event of September 11 and the post-9/11-US and its war in Afghanistan against the Taliban.

Analysis of Socio-cultural and Political Overdetermination in *Burnt Shadows*

The novel begins in Nagasaki, Japan, during the World War II in 1945, that is significant because it is exactly at the time when the US drops two atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Nagasaki and Hiroshima. It seems that the choice of the timing and physical space in this particular context is politically significant, which I think has been made deliberately to situate the story amid the global conflicts and their aftermaths, such as World War II and then the Indian partition and subsequently Afghan crises in the wake of Soviet war and post-9/11 “war on terror”. The Japanese Hiroko Tanaka and German Konrad Weiss are shown to be in love as they prepare to get married, but the bomb kills Konrad and leaves Hiroko broken with burnt shadows all over her back that become a permanent reference of her past and horror of war throughout the novel and her life. The narrative then takes a twist as Hiroko moves to India exactly during the time of the Indian partition of 1947. This time the author casts Sajjad Ashraf, an indigenous Indian character, who falls in love with Hiroko partly because of the burnt shadows the bomb leaves on Hiroko’s back that reflect the remanence of the war tragedy, as Sajjad is moved to hear her tragic story. In this regard, it is interesting how Hiroko Tanaka appears in Nagasaki precisely at the time when the city becomes a helpless victim of the American atomic attack which alters her life dramatically, as her lover and the future husband gets killed by the American bomb. This is important because it provides an example of how the employed author manipulates events and characters to politicise the narrative. Likewise, the author brings Hiroko to India later as she is made to fall in love with an Indian man, Sajjad, as she becomes a witness of the horrors of partition and ensuing violence. Hiroko becomes a part and thus an affectee of the two major political events of the same decade happening in two distant parts of Asia which cannot be a coincidence but rather a well thought out plan on the part of the author as the purpose has been to situate the story in the political events, which becomes even more obvious when we meet the following generations of Sajjad and Hiroko and James and Elizabeth as they cope with the realities of their relationship. Harry, one of the cousins, who initially works in the US embassy in Pakistan becomes a CIA contractor in war-torn Afghanistan during the Soviet war in the 1980s. Yet again, we meet some of these characters including Hiroko and Kim (Harry’s daughter) in the US amid the incident of 9/11, and subsequently during the American-led “war on terror” in Afghanistan we meet Harry and Raza (Hiroko’s son) in Afghanistan, which seems to be too much of coincidence, given the twists and turns of the plot. This

shows how the plot has been contrived with a clear purpose of situating the story in the political events of the time, as I have explained before. That is exactly what I mean by the objectification of the fictional writings and conditioning of the plot within the global/international political contexts – that is term as political overdetermination” and subsequent objectification of fiction. It is that the author seems to have taken it as her responsibility to cover each political upheaval of the last two centuries in her narrative. That is why she has incorporated a range of issues and conflicts within the single novel, whether it is American nuclear attack on the Japanese cities of Nagasaki and Hiroshima, the partition of India and massacre that follows, Zia’s regime and his project of Islamisation in Pakistan, Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the CIA’s sponsored war against the Soviets, 9/11 and its aftermath, the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and American-led war of post-9/11, Islamophobia in the wake of 9/11 and infamous Guantánamo prison and so on.

The narrator then explains how Hiroko moves to New Delhi where she becomes acquainted with Sajjad as the latter teaches her Urdu. Their relationship that is initially friendly grows into more intimate; as during one of the lessons, Hiroko asks Sajjad about the prospects of his wedding with his cousin to which Sajjad asks Hiroko if she would ever marry after what had happened to her with respect to Konrad. Hiroko explains that she will never be married but that is not because of losing Konrad but in fact due to what the American bomb did to her. That is when she shows Sajjad her burns which moves him into sentimentality as he starts caressing her body that gets sensual. Hiroko screams out loud that brings Elizabeth out to see Hiroko half-naked and Sajjad holding onto his paints (Shamsie, 2009, pp. 90-92). The incident is understood as an attempt of rape by Elizabeth who then reports that to Mr. James Burton and advises him to fire Sajjad immediately that Burton does despite Hiroko’s insistence that it was not Sajjad’s fault. What is important in this incident is the way Shamsie creates *A Passage to India* type controversy around the cultural cliché of India and for the purpose of bringing Sajjad and Hiroko closer into rather an intimate relationship. As Hiroko senses that Sajjad’s feelings for her are genuine, while Sajjad feels the same warmth for Hiroko they start thinking about each other more seriously. That is why when Sajjad returns to Burton’s he marries Hiroko.

It is also interesting how in the beginning Matsui Tanaka, Hiroko’s father, is cast to report the ensuing cultural disputes in the xenophobic Japanese society during the Second World War. The story relates how the tolerant Japanese society gets overtaken by xenophobia and hatred as the social space for the foreigners and radical artists and thinkers becomes shrunken. We are told that “[t]here was even less place in wartime Japan for an iconoclastic artist [like Matsui] than for magazines about modern girls” (Shamsie, 2009, p. 13). Matsui Tanaka was arrested by the military police for his “outbursts against the military and the emperor which had become “a symbol” of anti-state or treason as put by the omniscient narrator in the novel. Hiroko Tanaka was also dismissed from the school where she was teaching for being the daughter of a traitor. The principal tells her that “there was no room in his school for

the child of a traitor and no need for the students to learn a foreign language any way" (p. 14). Hiroko is then recruited to work at a munition factory while living in a shelter where a voice often tells her that she is the daughter of a traitor. People avoid engaging with her in a way that suggests they do not want her amongst them (p. 14). Yoshi Watanabe, a friend of Konrad Weiss, tells him clearly not to visit him as he tells him that he simply will not give the Japanese authorities "any other reason to think [that he had] divided loyalties" (p. 12). Konrad responds that that was like telling "your Jewish friends [in Germany during the genocide]: I'm sorry I can't hide you in my attic but come over for dinner when the Nazi government falls" (p. 12). After a while, we are told how Hiroko and Konrad maintain their fortnightly meetings and that on the occasions when military presence is felt "they [would] speak loudly, in Japanese, about the glorious history of Japan about which she pretends to instruct him" (p. 18). That is how Shamsie portrays the fear, anxiety, and uncertainty that Hiroko faces every now and then while living in Japan during the post-war period. She uses multiple narrators to depict the transformation of Japanese society from a pluralistic, hospitable, and peace-loving society into rather a claustrophobic one amid war, but what is more important is that the novel does not seem to be about the people in the novel rather it is more about the socio-political events that seem to have determined the narrative. That is how the author conditions her characters as they are objectified and made to sink into the political quagmire of the narrative, as we will see in the following sections of this novel that relate the political tales of Pakistan and Afghanistan in the backdrop of the Afghan conflicts, both in the wake of the Soviet invasion during the 1980s and following the post-9/11 American attacks, that have led to the endemic insurgency in the region. That is how the author creates an environment in which Hiroko has to leave Japan and come to live with Elizabeth, Konrad's sister, at Burton's in Delhi and that is where the entire family saga begins through which certain complex issues related to the Indian partition and violence is narrated. All that is happening so fast in the novel that sometimes one feels as if one is watching an old Bollywood movie where the time period of a generation passes in a span of a song. It is also important how Shamsie has made sure to portray the way transnational loyalties amongst German, English and Japanese change as Konrad Weiss is told by his brother-in-law James Burton in Delhi, India, that he is not welcomed there just because of being a German national but when Germany surrenders to the allied forces the German nationals were considered enemies just like the rest of the Europeans in Japan. Later, the author also plays with the political transformations in the context of the Indian partition of 1947 as well as the Afghan conflict of post-2001. It indicates how allegiances change as the once patriotic Indians are denied citizenship because of their religion and Pakistanis become enemies of their ancestral land. Similarly, the same Afghans who were once considered friends of America suddenly become America's archenemy. It is also interesting how several characters like Sajjad in this and other novels selected for my study tend to be quite aware and educated about the national and international affairs as their characters are objectified and made to comment every now and then about the socio-political issues – which is how the author operates at the level of the narrative to voice their

partisan views and political opinions.

The narrative then moves to the rising tensions between the Muslims and Hindus and Sikhs in the wake of the partition of India. Lala Buksh, one of the domestic employees of Burton's, whose family lives in a Hindu majority area in Punjab, tells the stories of the rising tensions and riots to Sajjad according to which "Muslim men [were being] slaughtered, Muslim shops set on fire, Muslim women abducted – he had to force himself to stay at home because if he went out and saw a single Hindu his eyes would reveal what was in his heart, and it would get him killed" (pp. 87-88). Sajjad resents the situation as for "years he'd watched Lala Buksh joke with the Burtons' cook, Vijay, and flirt with Henry's ayah, Rani, and sometimes he'd walk into the kitchen to find the three of them grumbling amiably about the Burtons. Now the only break Lala Buksh took from his duties was this one, with Sajjad" (p. 88). Also, the narrator tells us that while "talking to Lala Buksh, Sajjad realised that atrocities committed on Muslims touched him far more deeply than atrocities committed by Muslims – he knew this to be as wrong as it was true" (p. 88). That is how Shamsie brings the narrative to the conflicts in India in order to cover the political and religious divide in the Indian society amid the Indian partition. This indicates how international politics influences local narratives.

Likewise, soon after their marriage Sajjad and Hiroko are faced with the dilemma of either becoming part of the massacre in the wake of the Indian partition or moving out of Delhi. That is when they first move to Istanbul and then to Karachi as they were denied entry into India for being the Muslims who had chosen to leave India during the partition (pp. 121-125). This shows how various episodes are linked together which at times seems quite implausible. The author then manipulates the narrative to show the socio-religious changes of Pakistani society under the martial law rule of General Zia-ul-Haq in Pakistan during the 1980s in the backdrop of the Soviet war in Afghanistan. During that Henry Burton, son of James' and Else's, is shown working for the American CIA as a contractor and an undercover agent in American Embassy in Islamabad in synchronization with the Pakistani ISI to help the fight against the Soviet aggression. Interestingly, in a turn of events Raza (Sajjad and Hiroko's son) ends up being in one of the training camps along the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan which devastates Hiroko and Sajjad. Later events are even more dramatic as the Burton's and Sajjad's are once again brought closer together in their subsequent generations. This indicates how the author twists the narrative and objectifies fiction in order to cover the global political incidents and issues of an entire century within one novel.

Besides, insofar as the situationalisation of plot and political determination of narrative is concerned, I think it is important to analyse how *Burnt Shadows* gets set amid global political conflicts and international war especially the American-led "war on terror". Thus, it is interesting to examine how the novel gets affected by the politics of the war or war politics as it determines the major tropes. It involves a number of wars including the Second World War, massacre during the partition of

India, the tragedy of 9/11 as well as the post-9/11 Afghan conflict, and so on. In that sense, the author also seems to have politicised the issue of how young kids as young as fourteen (Abdullah) and sixteen (Raza Hazara) have been becoming the fuel of the war in Afghanistan even when they really do not know what wars are, why they are fought and who one fights against and why. For them, wars are about the glamour of flashy AK-47s and Kalashnikovs. We are told that all the brothers of Abdullah are *mujahideen* (guerrilla fighters) and that he “grew up knowing it was his next step the way you knew tenth grade follows ninth grade” (p. 286). Abdullah narrates how his brothers, had had him sent to live in Karachi with the promise that he would be brought back to a training camp when he becomes fourteen. After he gets fourteen, he is brought back to one of the training camps when and where he meets Raza and makes friends with him that lasts until the two are arrested together by the CIA in Canada (pp. 346-347, 363). When Raza and Harry discuss the horrors of war on individual levels Raza tells him that he could not do anything for Abdullah, his Afghan friend, for whom becoming a fuel of the war has been as inevitable as is going to a school for the kids in other parts of the world and that he and Harry, after having experienced what war really is, can say that people outside do not really know the inhuman and heartless brutalities that modern warfare involves:

‘When you don’t know the realities of war, that’s when you can put things like this out of your head. But coming here, being in this place, seeing all the young men who have been old men almost their entire lives, it does something to you. It must do something to you, Harry. Don’t you feel any responsibility at all?’ ‘Sometimes I listen to these liberals in America and marvel at their ability to trace back all the world’s ills to something America did, or something America didn’t do. (p. 286)

Apart from this, there are numerous loose ends in the narrative which indicate how the author conveniently skips several important phases from the lives of certain characters such as Sajjad, Hiroko, and Henry in order to incorporate certain other political happenings/events and their fallouts. This, I argue, results in twisting of the narrative in view of international politics. For instance, when Sajjad and Hiroko come to Pakistan, there is a huge time-lapse during which nothing seems to happen in the novel. That is why when we meet the characters in the following chapter, they had almost lived half their lives in Karachi, that is, between 1947 and the 1980s. Similarly, the author does not track the events during the 1990s to 2001 because she has to take the narrative to the 9/11 and post-9/11 “war against terror” in Afghanistan rather than showing the growth of her characters. In fact, there are too many political events to cover and too many characters to deal with in one novel. That is how the entire plot of the novel gets situated in the conflict zones around the world; that has provided the basis for this study. This indicates that Shamsie, like other fiction authors in this tradition, considers it important to create politicised dramatic narratives and plots. As a matter of fact, Shamsie’s other novels such as *A God in Every Stone* (2014), *Broken Verses* (2005), and *Home Fire* (2018) as well as the

non-fiction i.e., *Offence: The Muslim Case* (2009) are all indicative of the political overdetermination but this study has concentrated on her *Burnt Shadows* in order to provide an in-depth analysis.

Moreover, later, the way the author brings the characters (from the second and third generation of Sajjad and James) together in New York City in the background of the post-9/11 political scenario is quite significant in the context of this study. Even Abdullah, who somehow moves to the US, is shown a cab driver in New York City. But interestingly, he is being chased by the FBI on terror-related suspension. In that sense, the conversation between Raza and Kim (Harry's daughter) about rescuing Abdullah is quite meaningful given the socio-political background of 9/11. The narrator explains how "[t]he whole country was jangling with fear, and all the Raza Ashrafs of the world could do was sneer about it" (p. 299). When Kim suggests that Raza should ask Abdullah to surrender as the FBI would not care if he were an illegal immigrant, Raza asks if she has read the American Patriot Act which explicitly says that the illegal immigrants could be detained for the foreseeable future "with just minor visa violations if they have even the vaguest suspicions about them" (p. 299). Raza then tells her that Abdullah cannot stay in America and that "there is a way for him to get back to Afghanistan from Canada only if Kim drives him across the border into Canada as he explains that "[t]hey'll never search a car driven by someone who looks like [Kim, an American]. None of his friends in New York look like [that]" (299). Interestingly, Kim agrees to that and does take Abdullah out of the territory of the US into Canada but during the journey, her conversation with Abdullah reveals to her that he is in fact an Islamic fanatic and remains religiously motivated as he starts talking about *jihad* being a religious obligation and glorifies what Raza has done (by teaching *mujahideen* English) and what Hiroko had done (by converting to Islam) – which he explains is better than the combative *jihad* according to the Holy Quran. Kim in response challenges him by asking if he has ever read the Quran in a language he understands as she tells him that she understands Islam better as she has read the Holy Quran in English and that "the Quran says nothing of the sort" (p. 346). She, then, asks him, "If an Afghan dies in the act of killing infidels in his country does he go straight to heaven"? Raza replies, "If the people he kills come as invaders or occupiers, yes. He is shaheed. Martyr" (p. 346). At this, Kim gets infuriated as she rebukes Abdullah by saying that such "man is a murderer" and his "heaven is an abomination" (p. 347). This upsets Abdullah while Kim gets overwhelmed by the anger mainly because she remembers how her own father was killed by an Afghans probably on account of the same logic as Abdullah's. That is why as soon as they reach their rendezvous and the moment Abdullah leaves her car she calls the FBI. But, soon Kim gets surprised to see that Raza, Hiroko's son, receives Abdullah in the hotel and as soon as the two friends meet, they are arrested by the Canadian police on the directives of the FBI. Kim thinks of intervening first to save Raza but then drops the idea as the police take Abdullah and Raza along. Later, the narrator describes how one of the police officers calls Kim (while Hiroko is in the loop) to tell her that the US "government has been searching for that man [i.e., Raza].

They're very glad to have him in their custody now" and that Kim's father would really be proud of her" (p. 363). That is how the author objectifies the idea of fiction by politicising the narrative and exploiting characters in order to incorporate all the various political happenings since 1945 including that of 9/11 and its aftermath as the narrative gets exploited and characters led to various zones of grand political events.

Conclusion

This study has explored the constellation of political events in view of the political overdetermination in relation to Kamila Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows*. The study has analysed how the employed author plays with the plot and fictional narrative so as to situate the fictional happenings within the global political contexts especially those involving socio-political and religious conflicts. Thus, the paper has offered a nuanced understanding of the way authorship operates within the text(s) and how plot, locales, and narrative are exploited by the employed author in order to include certain important political happenings from around the world. For example, in the case of *Burnt Shadows*, international politics and global conflicts happening around the world including Japan, Germany, India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the US are constellated in the text to create a political and dramatic impact. This becomes clear from the very onset as the story begins in Nagasaki, Japan, in the midst of the Second World War, which later moves to India amid its partition to witness the massacre that follows and then to Pakistan, the US, and Afghanistan in subsequent episodes. In so doing, I have contended, the natural law of cause-and-effect often gets compromised as does the fictional narrative – that – results in what I call the political overdetermination of fiction.

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