

A Legacy of Violence: Interview with Kamila Shamsie about *Burnt Shadows* (2009)

Conducted via e-mail on October 26, 2010

Harleen Singh

Kamila Shamsie is a Pakistani novelist who divides her time between Pakistan, England, and the United States. She has written five critically-acclaimed novels. Her first novel, *In the City by the Sea* (1998), was short-listed for the John Llewellyn Rhys Prize in the United Kingdom and also received the Prime Minister's Award for Literature in Pakistan in 1999. She then published *Salt and Saffron* (2000), *Kartography* (2002), *Broken Verses* (2005), and *Burnt Shadows* (2009), which was shortlisted for the Orange Prize in Fiction.

Burnt Shadows follows the life of Hiroko Tanaka-Ashraf, a survivor from Nagasaki who makes her way to British India, marries and moves to Pakistan after Partition, and finds herself in New York in the aftermath of 9/11.

Though Hiroko is not the narrator of the novel, the reader is positioned to view Nagasaki, Partition, and 9/11 through her perspective. What were your considerations behind your choice of a Japanese woman, a survivor of Nagasaki, as the most appropriate voice for this novel?

It's probably necessary to say, at the very start, that the novel took shape while I was writing it, and there was no plan beforehand which resembled the final shape of the novel. I had intended to write a novel that centered on a part-Pakistani, part-Japanese character living through India and Pakistan's nuclear tests and beyond—and Hiroko herself was only going to be prominent in the very short opening section of the novel. But as soon as I started to write her she took hold of my imagination, and I found that it was impossible to write her out of the novel. So it isn't that I chose her as the voice for this novel—the novel shaped itself around her voice.

From the beginning she was, in my mind, a multilingual woman, in love with a German man and disdainful of official attitudes towards foreigners—but she was living in a highly xenophobic society and later experienced the most unspeakable act of war by one nation against the people of another nation. So these two divergent currents—her own open nature and the us versus them nature of wartime nation-states—were established early on, through Hiroko, as being important to the novel.

Much of the theorization, postulation, and plain chatter around 9/11 begins and ends with that date. However, Burnt Shadows, at least in my opinion, is positioned precisely against such a narrowing of topic. What prompted the geographic and chronological sweep of the novel?

Well, as I said I didn't know what I was doing when I set out. I was going to have a very short section in Nagasaki and then move to the period of 1998-2002 in Pakistan. But novels always change course as I write them. I wanted to follow Hiroko's story—it wasn't until very late in the day that I understood where all that would take me. I wrote the Delhi section without any idea of what would happen in the later part of the book. But our own concerns and obsessions come through in the writing of a novel—it was around 2005-06 that I started work on the book, and the War on Terror had been going on for some years at that point. In all these years I was moving between the U.K., U.S. and Pakistan and seeing increasingly how attitudes in these countries towards each other were hardening, so inevitably Hiroko's story with its divergent currents started to find an echo in my own present.

But also, yes, I was aware that conversation about 9/11 tended to treat it as though that date was the Ground Zero of history, as if it occurred in a vacuum, and as someone who grew up in Pakistan in the 1980s, during the U.S.-Pakistan involvement in Afghanistan and the political support given to *jihād* as an anti-Soviet tool, I couldn't possibly see things that way. There were earlier stories feeding into the story of 9/11, so there's no possibility I would write a novel that looks at that one date as if history proceeds from it but doesn't precede it.

Hiroko is understandably distraught at the nuclear tests conducted by India and Pakistan. In fact, the nuclear tests warrant more of a reaction from

her than 9/11. The world, as she points out to the young Ms. Burton, does not begin and end with New York. Yet the novel begins with an inmate at Guantanamo. Could you talk a bit about this particular de-centering of the United States?

Well, the first page of the novel is actually the last thing I wrote—and I did it because I wanted the readers to have some sense of where the action would end; it felt too dislocating to place the readers in Nagasaki with no sense of where or how the book might propel itself forward. So that's the reason for starting with the inmate.

But yes, of course, the very fact that the book “skips” 9/11 and picks up with the war in Afghanistan and the Indo/Pakistan stand-off knowingly undercuts the mythologizing that has taken place around 9/11 and given it a narrative primacy over all other world events of the last few decades. I don't see history that way, so of course my novels won't reflect history that way. At the same time, it remains important to talk about the organic process of storytelling. I didn't sit down and think “how do I de-centre America” but that de-centering followed from the way I view interconnected world events.

I continue to be quite annoyed when people say—and a lot of people say this—that my novel starts with the bombing of Nagasaki and ends with 9/11. It ends with the War on Terror. That's an important distinction. It begins and ends with nation-states, and what they will do in the name of self-defense.

Germany, Japan, England, Pakistan, India, Afghanistan, and the United States are all represented variously in this book, as imperialists, victims, anarchies, and diabolical modern states with all the available machinery of war. It is a rather bleak verdict on contemporary politics. Yet, members of these nations manage to forge lasting relationships (at least in two families) and hold out hope for humanity. Was that really the outlook you were hoping for in the novel?

I don't hope for outlooks. I write a novel to see where it takes me, and I'm almost always surprised. I was very surprised at the way I ended *Burnt Shadows*. I kept thinking it would be a far more upbeat ending until I wrote that final confrontation between Hiroko and Kim and real-

ized that any attempts to “make everything okay” would simply sound false.

But as I start to say in my previous answer, I do have a rather bleak view of a particular aspect of nation-states, which has to do with their ability to justify all kinds of horrors in the name of war. I’m glad you noticed that all the states within the book are represented in a less-than-kindly fashion. Too many people seem to think I’m making a particular comment on America, but really I’m taking about nations in wartime and the particular inhuman logic they start to follow when they decide what is an acceptable price for some other nation’s people to pay.

At the level of individual human interaction, of course, there’s a different logic afoot. Where love and friendship are possible—and they are possible in the most unlikely places and combination—then you have the opposite of an attitude of separateness which says “I’ll accept your suffering because it’s in my own self interest.” When there’s enough emotional connection between people we are not immune to the suffering of others (or Others).

Besides Sajjad’s mother, sisters, and sisters-in-law, and the women of the neighborhood the Ashrafs inhabit in Karachi, the women of India and Pakistan are noticeably absent as characters of note from this novel. The reader is, however, privy to the thoughts of the German-English Ms. Weiss-Burton, the Japanese-Pakistani Hiroko Tanaka, and the American Kim Burton. Why so?

Again, we’re back to the logic of narrative. Each section of the novel could only take so many characters as main characters. In Delhi, we had the English couple, the Japanese woman, and there was space for one more character without misbalancing things. That one had to be male, because Hiroko—who is heterosexual—was always going to fall in love with him. In the Karachi section, which is the other place where we could have had a South Asian female character, I again felt there was only space for one added character, which is why Hiroko and Sajjad have only one child, though this is extremely unusual in Pakistan. And in this case, that character had to be male because I knew I wanted to get him involved with the *mujahideen*, which is not possible for a female

character. And I also wanted Raza to be isolated in a particular way, which doesn't fit with having a sibling.

So it isn't that there was a deliberate exclusion of female South Asians, but the demands of structure and balance limited my options in terms of adding in new characters.

Perhaps the most poignant characterization of the novel is the young Afghan boy befriended by Konrad Ashraf, who talks of revenge and war but maintains a childlike innocence about many things. Yet, the supposedly right-feeling and right-doing Harry Burton can talk of torture and the limits of what he is willing to inflict or has inflicted to extract information. Perhaps this particular parallel was not your intention, but it immerses the novel in a critical engagement with the U.S. war in Afghanistan. Could you reflect on that, please?

Right-feeling and right-doing? I don't see Harry that way at all. He lives in a world of lies and manipulation, and all he wants (past a very early idealistic phase which we're only briefly told about) is to win. Stay in that world long enough and those lines of morality get erased.

Abdullah's talk of revenge and war precede him actually engaging in war. From the man he grows up to be, I think (I hope) we work out that the reality of war quite changes his mind on these matters, and he's far happier driving a cab in New York, away from all the madness.

I think the parallel to Harry is not Abdullah, but his brother, who Raza briefly meets in Afghanistan; as Harry will do anything to win a war, the brother will do anything to be done with war even if it means tacitly accepting the Taliban and not being at all bothered about what they mean for the women of Afghanistan. In both cases, these men lose their moral bearing because of their immersion in a world of violence.

Kim Burton's actions at the end of the novel—both in turning over her charge to the police and in acquiescing to Konrad's appeal—appear at first glance to be contradictory. Was this the intention?

No. Her charge is a stranger to her, just an Afghan, like the man who killed her father. Raza Konrad, though she's never met him, is someone she feels closely tied to through both her father and Hiroko. She has one

set of rules for a stranger, and another for someone to whom she feels emotionally connected. Or put differently, she's able to do what she does to Abdullah because she's able to dehumanize him. She can't do that with Raza, not when she's spent much of her life hearing stories about him from the people she loves.