

Burnt Shadows

By Kamila Shamsie

Summary

Burnt Shadows (2009), a novel by Kamila Shamsie, is an epic historical novel that explores the intertwined fates of two families in the post-World War II world.

The book opens with a brief prologue depicting a man being stripped and shackled in a prison cell, wondering how his life has come to this point.

The story then shifts to Nagasaki, Japan in August 1945. Konrad Weiss, a German man working as a translator in Japan, proposes marriage to Hiroko Tanaka. She accepts. Shortly after, the air raid sirens send everyone scrambling for shelter. Konrad moves slowly and is killed in the atomic blast. Hiroko, injured in the blast, suffers from what would today be called PTSD. At a loss as to what to do, she decides to travel to visit Konrad's sister, Ilse, who is living with her English husband, Jacob, in Delhi, India.

Jacob is not happy to see Hiroko and is against taking her in. Ilse, moved by Hiroko's story and obvious distress, insists the young woman be allowed to stay with them. Hiroko is introduced to Jacob's assistant, Sajjad, a Muslim man. Sajjad begins teaching Hiroko Urdu, and they enjoy each other's company very much. Eventually, they realize that they have fallen in love. Sajjad informs Hiroko that his family is very strictly religious and will never allow the marriage; in fact, his family expects to arrange a traditional marriage for him. He and Hiroko leave Delhi, eloping to Istanbul to be married. When they attempt to return, however, the partition of India to form Pakistan has occurred; they are barred from returning to Delhi and forced to settle in Karachi.

The story jumps to 1982. After thirty-five years of marriage, the couple has a young son, Raza. Sajjad has abandoned his law career and works in a soap factory. A very good student with a good chance of attending university, Raza suffers from anxiety attacks every time he sits for his graduate exams. His friends pass easily and move on with their lives while Raza is forced to wait for the next opportunity to take the test.

One day at the fish market, a man named Abdullah begins a conversation with Raza, assuming because of his mixed ethnicity that he is a fellow Afghani. The two become friends, and Abdullah begins talking to Raza of the mujahideen and of going to a remote training camp to learn how to fight the Soviets, who are invading Afghanistan.

Harry Burton, the son of Ilse and Jacob, visits Sajjad and Hiroko. Raza agrees to help Abdullah locate and travel to the training camp, thinking he will leave Abdullah there—it will help pass the

time until his next exam. They travel into the desert and locate the camp, but Raza discovers that it is difficult to leave, because the men that run the camp are suspicious and paranoid. They discover that his family is connected to Harry Burton, whom they know as an American. Back in Karachi, Sajjad searches the fish market every day for signs of Raza, who has disappeared. His connection to Burton and his constant questions mark him as suspicious, and he is eventually killed by one of the paranoid mujahideen. Eventually, they allow Raza to return home.

In 2001, Raza is working with Harry as a military contractor in Afghanistan. Ilse and Hiroko live in New York City, where Harry's daughter Kim often visits them. Raza is using his work in Afghanistan to locate Abdullah, whom he regrets leaving behind at the camp all those years before. Through his investigation, Raza discovers that Abdullah is living in New York and working as a cab driver; he has been prevented from returning home to see his family. Raza engineers a plan to have Hiroko bring Abdullah into Canada where he will be able to return to Afghanistan.

Harry is assassinated. Raza finds that he is under suspicion and must flee Afghanistan. In New York, Kim persuades Hiroko to let her bring Abdullah across the border. Raza travels to Montreal, meeting Abdullah at a restaurant. Harboring suspicions about Abdullah's politics, Kim contacts the police, who raid the restaurant and mistakenly arrest Raza instead of Abdullah. Back in New York, Hiroko is furious with Kim for her actions. Kim attempts to contact the authorities to right her mistake, but the police tell her that she did the right thing; the government is happy to have the man she identified in custody. Kim's efforts make no progress. Hiroko goes to look out the window, noting that the world moves on despite what's just happened, taking no notice.

Summary No. 2

Plot synopsis

In four sections, *Burnt Shadows* follows the intersecting histories of two families, beginning in the final days of the World War II in Japan, following to India on the brink of partition in 1947, to Pakistan in the early 1980s, and then to New York in the aftermath of 9/11 and Afghanistan in the wake of the ensuing US bombing campaign.

In the prologue, an unidentified prisoner finds himself naked in a cell in Guantanamo, wondering "how did it come to this?". The main story then begins in Nagasaki in 1945, with Hiroko Tanaka, a 21 year old teacher-turned-munitions worker who is in love with the German Konrad Weiss. Their idyllic romance ends in tragedy, with a fatal flash that leaves Konrad a "burnt shadow" on the ground, and indelibly sears the birds on Hiroko's kimono into the skin of her back. In search of new beginnings, Hiroko travels to Delhi. She stays with Konrad's half sister, Ilse, now known as Elizabeth, and her husband, James Burton. She begins to learn Urdu with Burton's clerk, Sajjad Ashraf, with whom a relationship blossoms, to the Burtons' disapproval.

With the partition of India, Hiroko's world turns upside down once again, and she finds a new life in newly-created Pakistan. In Karachi, Hiroko and Sajjad's son Raza is born. He meets a CIA

operative, who is none other than Harry Burton, Ilse and James' son. Ilse has meanwhile reclaimed her Identity, divorced James, and moved to New York. Raza finds himself, naively, swept up into the jihaddist movement in Afghanistan. When she loses Sajjad as well, Hiroko moves to New York to be near Ilse. Though the women have not seen each other in decades, they find themselves deeply bound to each other.

Harry has meanwhile extracted Raza from his unsought extremist associations, and instead, offers him a career in the private security/intelligence sector. The parallel convergence of the families in New York and Afghanistan is the foundation from which both tragedy and support arise. Above ground zero, as she once stood over her destroyed home city, Hiroko becomes attached to Harry's daughter Kim, and meets an Afghani taxi driver who becomes a key player in the dramatic events that follow.

References:

1. Supersummary
2. Wikipedia

