

## Identity crisis in Burnt Shadows

This essay will focus on the crisis of identity in Kamila Shamsie's novel *Burnt Shadows* which traces the complex, interconnected web of relationships that the protagonist, Hiroko Tanaka, develops during her journeys, beginning from Nagasaki 1945, moving to India, Pakistan, Afghanistan and ending up in post-9/11 New York. At every location, she is able to adapt and resist the culture without becoming bound by the societal pressures, at the same time, is able to retain her individuality. She is a transmigrant, who is, in constant process of migration. This essay will also examine the identity crises faced by other characters in the novel and will locate the effects of mixed roots and cultures in moulding and reshaping the lives of the characters; the way they question their existence and identity in the society, the extent of their alienation from their inner and outer self, and from the world, at large; consequently, how they went along or bereft.

The Japanese woman, Hiroko Tanaka, is a victim of American nuclear bombs at Nagasaki in 1945, where she loses her home, her father, her German lover Konrad and all the memories with it. She is presented as the prototype of all the atrocities taking place in the world by the so-called super powers. In the very opening of the novel, because of the Nagasaki incident, Hiroko is made to question her existence in the society and in the world at large; where she has been reduced to a play thing in the hand of nature; this fact of Hiroko's life will be heightened by the end of the novel even more.

After the 1945 incident, Hiroko feels alienated from her own people; the society where she has spent all her innocent childhood and spring of youthful days, the school where she used to teach, all forgotten, and her identity is reduced to a 'hibakusha'; ironically, her native people's love is replaced by indifference and strangeness. "It was a fear of reduction rather than any kind of quest that had forced her away from Japan. Already she had started to feel that word 'hibakusha' start to consume her life. To the Japanese she was nothing beyond an explosion-affected person; that was her defining feature." [Shamsie: 49]

The novel criticizes at the power-stricken Americans for bringing such massive destruction on the countries that have nothing to do with these nuclear tests; they seem helpless and static because of the incredible nature of sights that they witness. The underlying irony of the fact is that these Japanese people lose identity in their own land and among their own people. This harsh reality suffocates the existence of Hiroko and compels her to move to Delhi, India, where she is warmly welcomed by her Intendant Konrad's sister Ilse Weiss, because in Hiroko's memories of Konrad, Ilse finds the relics of her own brother, from whom she had to break all relationships in order to set a new 'identity'-that of an Englishman's wife.

Hiroko's warm reception by Mrs Burton also makes the fact clear, that "there was nowhere else for her to go." [Shamsie: 48] but even Elizabeth's concern and care towards Hiroko could not let

her feel at home; she remained obsessed with the idea of moving somewhere else. Consequently, it is the company of Sajjad Ashraf that eventually gives her an opportunity to express her identity. She further reveals her heart to Sajjad: "It seems to me that I could find more in your world which resembles Japanese traditions than I can in this world of the English." [Shamsie: 90]

This shows how Hiroko is lurking between various kinds of culture and identities; one is that of Sajjad as an Indian, the other is that of Elizabeth being German, and then that of James Burton being English and finally her own identity of being a Japanese; it is only Sajjad's generous Indianness and his relationship with Konrad because of which she finds herself most comfortable with him and feels at home; showing of her 'Birdback' -stating it as a reason for remaining spinster all her life, is a quite reasonable proof of the trust that she starts showing on him.

While Hiroko poses serious challenges to existing and normative power structures, her physical body serves as a manuscript upon which national and political upheavals are literally and metaphorically transcribed, reflecting the novel's demonstration of women's bodies as sites of conflict between nationalism and colonialism. [Karim, Gohar:

It can be said, in periods of crisis, spatial and physical dislocation in the form of internal and external migration is often pervasive, as people, facing difficult situations, move away from their places of location to seek new livelihoods and other forms of survival. Closely related to migration is the notion of 'disembedment', which, according to Giddens, refers to the 'lifting out' of social relations from local contexts of interaction and the restructuring of these relations across indefinite spans of time and space (Giddens 1990: 21)

Hiroko's sense of a lost identity is explicit when everyone in India is talking about their future; whether they would like to stay in India or Pakistan, but only Hiroko is speechless at the prospect: "Hiroko could not find a place for herself in any talk of tomorrow-so instead she found herself, for the first time in her life, looking back and further back." [Shamsie: 96] They are Burtons who take the responsibility to try to set Hiroko's life by all means, because of her missing background; they seem to exercise their power over her by asserting "of course" she will go with the Burtons wherever they will take her because of the basic fact that she is all alone in the world without any proof of her identity.

Shamsie makes it clear to the reader, almost immediately, that Hiroko is a woman who defies norms and resists stereotypes, and this aspect of her personality becomes deeply pronounced in her associations with the Burtons, a sophisticated and highly educated English family living in India during the time of the "Empire." [karim]

It is interesting that Elizabeth compels Hiroko to come with her, and warns her not to marry Sajjad: "It was impossible. His world is so alien to yours," [Shamsie: 97] forgetting the fact that

her own world would be “alien” for Hiroko. Elizabeth says with great concern to Hiroko: “His is a world you either grow up in or to which you remain for ever an outsider.” [Shamsie: 98] Indeed, they all have their separate identities and roots with them, cutting off a person from his roots and origins can be a matter of great challenge. It is only Hiroko and Sajjad’s adaptable nature that provides them a chance to begin with their lives all over again.

Elizabeth also talks of a female identity which she says, does not really exist: ‘Women enter their husbands’ lives, Hiroko-all around the world. It doesn’t happen the other way round. We are the ones who adapt. Not them. They don’t know how to do it. They don’t see why they should do it.’ [Shamsie: 98] When Elizabeth remembers her “Wants”, the reader notices that she is also the victim of a lost identity; she leaves her German origins behind her in order to be the Good wife of an Englishman, now, she is also unwilling to go back to London.

Mrs Burton’s dilemma is that she was also an “outsider” like Hiroko would be in Sajjad’s world; she realizes the fact that, ultimately, the woman has to mould herself; she is the only one who can or who would surrender her identity in order to be accepted in her husband’s world. There are instances in the text when Sajjad disapproves of her Japanese clothes, because of which he cannot afford to invite his friends at home, consequently, she starts wearing “shalwar kameez”.

Hiroko and Sajjad’s marriage, as viewed through Hiroko’s eyes, is a series of “negotiations” that persons of two distinct worlds make in order to move smoothly together. Indeed, she assimilates most of the time and restricted her identity to herself, for instance, showing the proof of her “practicality” by embracing Islam to avoid further conflicts for Sajjad, on the other hand, Sajjad also tried to surrender a part of his culture which shapes his identity; as a matter of fact, they both proved themselves to be the enduring sorts: “The success of their marriage was based on their mutual ability to abide by the results of those negotiation with no bitterness over who had lost more ground in individual encounters.” [Shamsie: 132]

Sajjad, being a male, could have asserted his identity and culture on her, but it is their natural bond of love and mutual understanding that they show acceptance for each other’s culture and self and are prudent to make compromises for one thing or the other. For instance, Hiroko cooks every kind of meal, she develops taste for Indian food and Sajjad for Japanese ones: “All her other Japanese food I have learnt to appreciate.” (162)

The crises of identity are quite visible from the very beginning of the novel, and they are crucial for Sajjad too, where he is divided between two distinct mindset of the society, one is that of Burtons, the other of his own. The reader finds that Sajjad has great admiration for his master-the Burtons, he used to wear the clothes of James Burton, try to behave like him in the most civilized manner, let him win game of chess every time in order to please him; as a matter of fact, the identity given to him by the colonizers is that of a servant. Throughout his early life, he remained obedient to the Burtons, playing chess the whole day, and not toiling for his law degree, in the end makes him leave his very own Dilli for what Sajjad considers his real “home”.

Even in his early conservation with Hiroko, he is warned by her not to waste his time in playing

chess. To this, Sajjad boasts: "he's promised, there will always be a place in his law firm for me." (89) But after the partition 1947, the ground reality shows him another aspect altogether which comes as a shock to Sajjad. "My first love. I would never have left it willingly. But those bastards didn't let me go home." (161)

Sajjad, in this way, becomes the victim of Hindu-Muslim conflict, his existence and identity becomes a question mark, just as this crisis of identity expelled Hiroko from her mother land, so it does to Sajjad, he loses his mother, siblings and relatives all of a sudden, no degree in hand, migrates to Pakistan, and couldn't become anything else than a manager in a soap factory.

The novel also highlights the fact, that there are people in the Sub-continent who are overwhelmed with the idea of separation. Muslims love Dilli and the other cities too, they are reluctant to leave India. Although, the people are given choice to stay in their desired country or to leave it and go to settle in Pakistan, yet there are Hindu extremists who do not want any Muslim to stay in their country any more, this way, Sajjad is also compelled to leave his place that he declares as his "first love", whereas his family has been killed in the Hindu-Muslim fights. History only tells us that Hindu Muslims have hated each other ever since and this led to their separation, however, it can be argued that these nations had lived a major part of their lives with each other so they got accustomed to each other's difference of opinion and lifestyle. They share a collective history of their power and grandeur, and then the history of colonization that actually give them identity in the world.

In the novel, one can notice a clear distinction between a white man Burton and the Indian Sajjad, this discrimination is crucial to Sajjad's identity; he is just no better than a servant, there seems a great distance between these two different nations, here too, one nation hates the other, it shows how these nations have built concrete walls between one border and the other, and they have also claimed it to be unbreakable and absolute. As Konrad puts it: "There was no need to imagine such walls between their worlds. Konrad had been right to say barriers were made of metal that could turn fluid when touched simultaneously by people on either side." [Shamsie: 82]

In the accomplishment of Konrad and Hiroko's relationship, they would have to cross the borders to be united forever; their union would be symbolic of the fact that in this way nations can also come to friendly terms, no matter how great their differences are. For the major fact, that the people of the whole world share a collective identity as being human, which can serve as the only reason to be kind and sympathetic to each other.

Hiroko could not make a place at her in-laws' home because of her foreignness, Sajjad also realizes this fact that "his Japanese wife would always be an outsider to his family, her presence reason for discomfort on every side." (176) People in Pakistan never completely accepts her, psychologically, they have the feeling of strangeness towards her. It is only when she finds some Japanese friends in Karachi that she is able to give vent to his heart using her own language, joking and laughing in her own language with the people of her own breed and skin. In these gatherings, she is able to relive her life, is able to feel her individuality Japanese

identity fully.

In the course of the novel, it can be argued that women seem to have a double loss of their identity and origin than the others. Among many others, one of the reasons for tension between Elizabeth and Sajjad stems precisely from this sense of a lost homeland and identity that Elizabeth experiences: "Elizabeth wanted to catch Sajjad by the collar and shake him. I was made to leave Berlin when I was a little younger than him—I know the pain of it. What do you know about leaving, you whose family has lived in Delhi for centuries?" [Shamsie: 83]. Gohar argues that it is on this theme predominantly that Hiroko and Elizabeth are united—on their love and attachment with their nations and the sense of loss accompanied with this attachment and love, followed closely by a sense of hatred against the ability of the greater global powers to implement such destruction.

In the third part of the novel, the reader is introduced to the character of Raza Konrad Ashraf, the only son of Hiroko and Sajjad, who is regarded as the "smartest boy" in his class, excelling throughout his academic career through his brilliance and sharp mind, even, Harry Burton, an outsider, in the very first meeting declares him "a great kid", on account of his being polite and well-mannered demeanour. Raza Ashraf seems reserved and quiet even with his family members, his subdued nature is a depiction of his detachment and aloofness with his surroundings, where he finds himself uncomfortable.

Raza is a hybrid child, it can be argued, that for his hybridity, he seems more influenced by his mother, Hiroko, who is a multilingual person. K. Gohar argues that remarkably, Hiroko does not allow language barriers or cultural differences to stand in the way of her relationship with nations or their people; she adapts to "foreignness" with unbelievable ease. Spending her time in the company of Sajjad, Hiroko shows interest to know him in his own language as opposed to in English, which, being the language of the his colonial "master," would prevent her from acquiring true insight into the mind and heart of a true "Dilli" man like Sajjad. As their relationship unfolds in the novel, first as friends and later lovers, one realizes increasingly the extent to which language influences sentiments and relationships.

Where Hiroko assimilates languages and culture, her son Raza, seems confused in deciding what he should do and what not? He shows the desire to adopt "Polyglot" as a profession, through that he would be able to play with "words in every language." He further reveals his heart to his mother: "I think I would be happy living in a cold, bare room if I could just spend my days burrowing into different languages." (146)

Raza's revelation discloses two things about his personality: first, that he has received the versatility and the quickness to adopt any language of the world, his flexibility and comfort with the words and languages suggests that he is also a pacifist like his parents, who defended themselves against the slogan of nationalism, and tried to adapt and assimilate in every culture and land in order to maintain an identity of their beings, especially, his mother Hiroko who is "at home with the idea of foreignness."



Second thing about Raza's personality, is that he is an extrovert child, who never expresses himself in front of his loved ones even. Until the point, he gets fail in his Islamic studies paper, he never has shared the problems that he was facing while understanding this subject, the reality of which comes to him as an acute embarrassment. With tears in his eyes, he asks his mother: "I don't want to be the new neighbourhood Donkey."(145)

This incident has may be projected to show the devastating results of the restlessness that Raza feels in his own country and tries to create an identity for himself by entering into the groups of Mujahidin, Shamsie presents it as a critique on the Pakistani contemporary society and the prevailing educational system, where Islam might has been imposed upon people, a certain group of the society shows its bend towards one extreme, and compels others to follow those extremes, whereas the mixed-bloods like Raza, in these situations, are unable to find a way out. Pakistan, in the novel, is presented as a homogenous country, it welcomes people of every nation, Baloch , Pathan Sindhi, Hindu even Americans, Japanese, but whether these people can afford to stay in a place which imposes its religion through educational system.

As explained by Kriesberg, in his article Identity Issues (2010), there is the identity of leadership too, in which the government imposes his language and religion upon his subjects, they try to shape their identity while ignoring their personal and private preferences. In their version of identity, they may include some, and exclude the others. In this way, they do not cater the individual needs of their citizens but compels towards certain identity to strengthen their own specific agenda.

Kriesberg further explains an important characteristic of identity, that is, these identities invoke a sense of self-pity, and make themselves the victims of oppression and domination by others. Such conceptions tend to make people feel threatened and mistrustful. Fearing attacks, they may initiate to prevent them, but often things go vice versa. The result can be self-perpetuating destructive struggles.

Raza, likewise, starts losing confidence on his own self, becomes more gloomy, detached, aloof and alien to his surroundings. As Hiroko describes two sorts of survivors after her experience of Nagasaki and Partition: "those who could step out of the loss, and those who remained mired in it. Raza was the miring sort, despite the heritage he should have had from both his parents, two of the world's greatest forward-movers. (146)

Raza in this regard lacks courage and ability to face the loss and move forward, his hardships do not make a strong man out of him but even a more weaker and hollow one, they question his identity even more, to which he has no appropriate answer. Even Henry Burton realizes the strange aloofness in Raza's personality and he thus wonders:

"How was it possible, Harry thought, to have such a man as this as your father and grow up as uncertain of your place in the world as Raza appeared to be, if you were Sajjad Ashraf's son, how could you fail to regard the world as your oyster, regardless of whether you saw yourself as gemstone or mollusc?"(163)

It can be argued that some of the conflict resolution analysts and practitioners argue that all people and groups are driven to attain certain basic and universal human needs. Among these, they say, are recognition, security, and identity.[qtd, in Kriesberg: Identity Crisis] Human needs theorists and practitioners believe that the frustration of these unfulfilled needs leads to frustration and creates a feeling of alienation among people. According to these practitioners, these needs are uncompromising and non-negotiable. When the citizens of the society do not get their basic rights of recognition and acceptance, there emerges a question mark to their identity, which, afterwards, gives birth to hatred and anarchy in the country.

On their visit to Sohrab Goth, Henry was offered to wear Raza Ashraf's "shoes", because of the cold weather, which are afterwards given back. This taking off of the shoes suggests the fact that, Raza has already been dislocated from his right place, perhaps. It can also be argued that the idea of exchanging of the shoes is linked up to the idea of mixed and confused identity- Henry, "curls his toes", shows discomfort first but then is adjusted and at ease with someone else's shoes. Whereas Raza has no notion of his lost shoes, he enjoys his slumber, which is broken quite late in his life when he wonders: "How did it come to this?"(1)

Hiroko had proven herself to be a good wife throughout these thirty-five years of their married life, compromising and adjusting herself in the environment of her husband's roots and origins, trying hard to strike a happy medium between their beliefs, food, dressing, celebrations and social life. Ashraf realizes and appreciates Hiroko's adaptability: "This woman, he knew, would be chosen for him in large part of her ability to meld into the world in which he had grown up." [Shamsie: 133]

Sajjad appreciates Hiroko on her being a good mother too, who [he] had always credited [her] as being directly responsible for Raza's quick mind." [Shamsie: 140] Henry regards them: "greatest of all romantic couples", by making each other's life easy enough, this was possible, because of their flexible and resilient natures to cope up with each other smoothly. However, Henry is confessed by Sajjad that they could survive together on the ground of their shared experiences of loss and betrayal: "We both had too much loss in our life, too early. It made us understand those parts of the other which were composed of absence."(163)

Towards the end of her life, having lived through "Hitler, Stalin, the Cold War, the British Empire, segregation, apartheid" and most importantly the atomic bomb, Hiroko knows that the world would survive even this most recent horror of terror. She cannot do nothing but cannot resist to question that when these brutalities from one human being to other, will come to an end. Helplessly, she declares, "I want the world to stop being such a terrible place" (Shamsie 292).

Henry Burton is another character, victim of hybridity and alienation within his own country, questioning his existence and identity. After a few years, when he comes back to America, his miserable loneliness and desolation is visible: "It was loneliness, he knew, that had brought him here, in search of a past that was irretrievable as his parents' marriage or his own childhood."

(150) Henry has been projected as a representative of the comprador class, who shows great love for India, declaring it as his "home". From Sajjad, his teacher, he learns a lot many things, he loves his presence around him, greets Sajjad's family, following the right code of conduct as expected from an Indian.

Henry's great admiration for Sajjad makes Elizabeth envious of him: "Perhaps, It's certainly true that I'm jealous of Sajjad. I'm jealous of the fact that everyone I love loves him more than me, and I resent the fact that I'm the only one in the world whose love he's never interested in. There I've said it." (98)

Henry's great "desire" of coming back to Karachi which he adored as his "home", can be seen in the light of his hybridity, where he lives in one place and adores the people and places of another country, because of the fact that he once was a part of that lost place and its culture. His memories of this place are still fresh in his mind; his innocent childhood, his parents' love for him and most of all the company of Sajjad Ashraf and his conversations and teaching. Because of Henry's adopted Indian mannerisms, he succeeds in winning the heart of Sajjad's relatives who regard him the "finest Englishman in India."

The reason for Henry's forlornness is majorly his unsuccessful marital life, his wife also migrates to Paris, leaving her daughter behind to face all the miseries of her growing up stage all alone. Henry wants his daughter to accompany him on his visit to Sajjad Ashraf's place and to know about the Indian culture and heritage too. However, as a matter of fact, she is reluctant to do so; the reader finds that Kim, Henry's only daughter has been projected in the novel, as a "pure" American who looks down upon other people and nations. It is her identity on which she feels pride upon, she is sceptical, logical and shows detachment for her surroundings along with the people.

Henry discloses to his daughter Kim his dislike for Islamabad, but one day when they wait on the traffic signal, a passer-by shows his liking for the music that is being played in their car, as soon as he appreciates the music, he is given the cassette by Henry, and is presented a bag full of apples in return. To this, Henry tells her: "I do hate the place. But I love the people. Not the ones in officialdom-the real people." (169)

Henry's experiences of his childhood are not that good, living in India among the Indians, he adopts their accent, which gives him good torture even after his educational life. He never wanted to go back to England, which is his actual place in the world, but surrenders in front of parental pressure: "the only thing worse than leaving was arriving in England." (169) He had developed familiarity with the place and people in India, he considered it his real "home", then it becomes really difficult to erase the memory of home from a child's mind where he had grown up.

In England, he fights with his own self about his actual identity, if he was destined to come back to England which is his so-called home, then why in the first place his parents took him to someone else's "home". In his school, his classmates are unable to recognize his origins: "And



what else did he have, after all? Nothing but another foreign accent.”(170) “Even so, on the first day of school his foreignness overwhelmed him to the point of muteness. He mumbled his way through the first hours, keeping his head down and paying attention to no one but his teachers. It was during recess, as he sat alone on the stone step listening to the boys around him, that he realised he was surrounded by a group of immigrants.” (170)

When Henry applies to work at the CIA’s Directorate of Operations, he is not untroubled by their blunt questioning about his “divided allegiances” and his “foreign birth”, only because he is also a transmigrant like Hiroko, moving from India to England and then America, he does not belong to one people, nation and origin.

Henry has a pacifist attitude just like his uncle Konrad, when asked about the bombs in Nagasaki; he clearly states that it should not have been done. Henry wants to see both sides of the border to be in a peaceful state, Hiroko feels about him: “He was the gatekeeper between one nation and the next.....he swung the gate open-wide.”(181) It can also be argued that he was not opening the gate only for good, but for bad too, it was because of Henry’s murder that Raza was accused and put into jail.

Hence, the novel *Burnt Shadows* is an extraordinary amalgamation of the most important damning incidents in the history of the world: the Nagasaki 1945 bombs, India-Pakistan partition (good for some and damning for the others), 9/11, and the consequent war-on-terror. The characters in the novel, are mostly transmigrants, moving from one location to the other in order to protect themselves physically, mentally and emotionally from the atrocities of war and conflicts, also working hard to retain their individual identities which become crucial because of change in locations. At times, the characters find it hard to assimilate the culture and religion like Raza a hybrid, where lack of understanding of the surrounding makes him frustrated, his energies were afterwards used for so-called jihad, following the wrong path without knowing the actual word of God, puts him in a wrong place, on the other hand, the readers find an extraordinary power of adjustability in Hiroko and Sajjad, whose resilience and adaptability is admirable.