Female Agency in Burnt Shadows & Postcolonial Feminism

This essay analyses Burnt Shadows (2009) by Kamila Shamsie from a postcolonial feminist perspective, with a focus on agency of women, representation and re-presentation, and cultural stereotypes. The degree of agency in the main characters Hiroko, Elizabeth and Kim is discussed, followed by an analysis of the re-presentation of Indian, Pakistani and Arab Muslim women characters in the text, with a focus on homogenisation and voice. Moreover, suggestions of how to teach Burnt Shadows with a postcolonial (and) feminist lens within the course English 6 in the Swedish upper secondary school EFL classroom are discussed. It is concluded that Hiroko, Elizabeth and Kim have voice and agency to various degrees.

Morover, it is stated that Indian, Pakistani and Arab Muslim women are represented in a stereotypical and homogenising way, and their lack of voice obstruct the possibilities of regarding these characters from a contextual, historical, and cultural perspective.

Analysis

The storyline of Burnt Shadows stretches between 1945 and the early years of the 21st century. The novel follows women and men through their lives, facing recurring complications caused by the Second World War, the fall of the British Empire and the Partition of India. It also illustrates the social climate surrounding immigrants and refugees during the postcolonial era, and it involves the motifs of racism, class structures, and gender inequalities.

The central character of the story is the Japanese school teacher Hiroko Tanaka. Her father and the love of her life, Konrad Weiss, are both killed in the 1945 nuclear attack on Nagasaki. In grief, Hiroko travels to British India to visit the remaining relatives of Konrad: his half-sister Elizabeth and her husband James Burton. Hiroko's arrival does not only affect the relationship between the Burtons, but also brings her together with their employee Sajjad Ashraf. Despite the critique of their cultural differences, Hiroko and Sajjad start a new life after the Partition of India. Yet their past should prove to be inescapable, and their connections to the WeissBurton family will affect them for generations.

The most important female characters in the novel are Hiroko, Elizabeth and Elizabeth's granddaughter Kim.

Female Characters' Analysis:

Hiroko

Hiroko's agency springs partially from her personality of stubbornness and her dedication to what she does, but it is also dependent on her possibilities created through her fluency in

multiple languages, her education and her freedom from responsibility of a family. The aspects of what agency can be, suggested by Klugman et al., can apply to Hiroko, especially making and acting on one's own decisions, and possesing education (35). Education, or knowledge, is a key condition for her to act on the behalf of her own decisions, as examples will show.

Hiroko states for herself that "to know [is] to want", and her wants require her to seek knowledge (Shamsie 16). If education, in the sense of knowledge, is seen as an aspect of agency, it is clear that knowledge gives Hiroko agency in multiple situations (Klugman et al. 35). Hiroko's most useful knowledge must be her language proficiency. Apart from her mother tounge and English, she also speaks German and Urdu. Hiroko's ways of "seeking assimilation", as Abdul-Jabbar writes, is to learn the language of the place where she is situated, which also gives her the possibility to "become actively participatory" in creating her own identity (225).

As Ahearn suggests, language and agency are related if seen as a sociocultually mediated practice (110-2). It is clear that Hiroko's ability to switch between languages gives her the opportunity to act on her decisions, and achieve her intended outcome (Klugman et al. 21). For example, speaking German to Elizabeth gives the two of them a space for befriending each other and share intimate thoughts, without being interrupted by Elizabeth's husband James. In that space, they can develop a relationship which in the end leads to Elizabeth separating from James. Without the possibility to talk within their own linguistic space, they might not have had the same experience of sisterhood and would not have found a common ground to share and act out upon.

In addition, Miller states that a sociocultural space can have agency when creating linguistic meaning within them (444-7). This can be compared to when Hiroko learns Urdu with Sajjad. Both characters are concerned with and aware of the linguistic and specifially semantic meaning of language and words. Their sociocultural space of action is created through language learning and language sharing discussing meanings of words in Urdu, English and Japanese. It could be interpreted that the meaning of words which they create between them, and the ability to speak with each other in each other's mother tongue, is a fundamental condition for them to have agency in acting out their love and marrying. From Miller's definition, Hiroko's and Sajjads's socioculural space is agentive in itself due to the uniqueness in their shared meaning of languages (444-7).

When Hiroko arrives in India, James Burton is surprised that she has travelled there alone. Hiroko asks him guilelessly: "Yes. Why? Can't women travel alone in India?" (Shamsie 46). Thereby, Hiroko expresses confidence in her lone travelling, and her statement makes her independence from family duties visible. Her life situation contributes thus to her agency, through the possibilities of making her own decisions (Klugman et al. 21). Moreover, mobility as an important condition for agency comes across (Klugman et al. 35). Since Hiroko's mobility enables her "capacity to move freely beyond the household" she can, as the authors state, "build and maintain social . . . networks" and be a part of "economy and civic life" (Klugman et al. 35). Hiroko travelled to Tokyo for work, and her ability to move from there gives her new social and

civic possibilities in India. Thereby, Hiroko's mobility gives her agency. There are few situations where Hiroko's agency seems to be inhibited. Most uncomfortable and alien she feels around the other coloniserswhich James and Elizabeth socialise with, as is seen when she attends an evening gathering:

She didn't know how to behave around these people - the rich and powerful, a number of whom had asked her about the samurai way of life and thought she was being charmingly self-effacing when she said the closest she had come to the warrior world was her days as a worker at the munitions factory. (Shamsie 64)

Here, the British colonists are portrayed as shallow individuals with a worldview similar to the colonialistic binary and othering perspective (Loomba 72). The voice of Hiroko seems to be drenched in the foolishness of the white. However, despite being the only Japanese woman there, the aspects which agency can include as language, eduation and her relationship to the Burtons, help her to not become a silent voice, represented and spoken for by others (Klugman et al. 35). Thereby, it becomes clear how agency and voice are interrelated. Possessing different sociocultural properties strengthens the value in, and the acceptance of, Hiroko's voice. She answers the woman's naïve question about samurais in a way which will either embarrass or silence the questioner, which spares her from further comments.

Related to Hiroko's capacity to choose, is Vitolo's viewpoint that Hiroko's challenging of cultural norms prevents her from fixing her identity (5). As a nuclear bomb survivor, Hiroko has a uniqueness to her. This makes her feel unable to identify with Japanese women who do not have any experience related to the bomb (Shamsie 140-1). Perhaps to protect herself from the global stigma around the bomb and its survivors, or because of shame, Hiroko chooses to keep her experiences to herself (Shamsie 140-1; 49). Either way, this choice results in Hiroko not having a fixed Japanese identity (Shamsie 49). She cannot relate to Japanese without experience of the bomb, and there are few survivors in the world, perhaps none but her in India and Pakistan. The unfixed identity which Vitolo discusses is thereby Hiroko's identity, since she has the opportunity to choose who she wants to be (5). Just as Vitolo concludes, the floating identity is related to Hiroko's agency, both because of the choice itself to not choose an identity, and also because it gives her even more freedom to choose (5-7).

Surviving the bomb contributes thereby to Hiroko's unfixed character, but that in itself does not immediately give her agency. It is rather the fact that she can enact her visions despite the complete destruction which the bomb caused her outer and inner world, which feeds her agency. The physical and mental wounds are a burden to her, and regarding the taboo it is around being a hibakusha, a survivor of the bomb, her voice and agency could have been inhibited through homogenisation of her into a victimised group of survivors (Shamsie 49). Nevertheless, her freedom from family duties, her mobility and her education gives her the opportunity to choose to not fall into this group. As Hiroko herself says, "[t]he bomb did nothing beautiful", but her actions against the destiny it chose for her is a selfreassurement for Hiroko of her possibilities of agency (Shamsie 92).

Elizabeth

Before meeting Hiroko, Elizabeth is living in a traditional Western marriage with James Burton. The latter uses his male privileges to make decisions without Elizabeth's consent, for the sake of his self-representation and his interests and enjoyments in life. For example, James places the couple's son Henry (later Harry) at a boarding school in London even if Elizabeth refuses,and he does not let her take part in everyday decisions such as when to attend picnics or have visitors (Shamsie 72). Elizabeth is torn between the unhappy, self-destructing marriage and her thirst for love and companionship which she so misses from the early years of her marriage (Shamsie 73-4).

Elizabeth has voice, which shows in her possibilities to interact with whoever she wants and in how she is allowed to speak her mind and opinions(Klugman et al. 21). For example, she has a community of friends, she is allowed to talk to men, she is the one to invite Hiroko to stay with the family and she can run arguments with James without any particular consequenses (Shamsie 35; 48-9; 72; 78). Moreover, as a counterpart to the stereotypical "Third World woman" who is seen as sexually restricted, Elizabeth's sexual life with her husband is expressed as free (Mohanty "Under" 337). After Konrad's death, Elizabeth describes to herself how she "reached for James night after night" to achieve "assurance of her own body's existence" and take "refuge" in orgasm "which felt like obliteration" (Shamsie 69). It seems as if Elizabeth is the one taking the initiatve for sex, "reaching" for her husband in the need of "assurance" tha she even is alive, that she has a body. During these occasions, Elizabeth had thereby a sort of agency to follow the urges of her flesh. Again, turning to Klugman et al., she takes action –initating sex – to achieve the desired outcome – orgasm (21).

However, this occasion in Elizabeth's life (which happened as a consequence to Konrad's death) is seemingly rare. As Khan points out, Elizabeth has more voice than agency (60-1). Although she can make herself heard and have opinions, James is the one who makes the final decisions in important matters. Thereby, Elizabeth is limited in taking action.During their summer holidays, Elizabeth tries to convince Hiroko that she and Sajjad are too different to be together. She argues: 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)

Elizabeth is jealous of Sajjad for the attention he gets from Hiroko, wanting someone to care only for her and no other. As Hiroko and Sajjad get closer to each other, Elizabeth experiences Hiroko "drifting away from her towards Sajjad, as James and Henry had already done" (Shamsie 84). Since she still tries to be the good wife of James from time to time, it can be assumed that she wishes that she had a love similar to Hiroko and Sajjad's love in her own marriage, or in any relationship (Shamsie 73).

From a feminist point of view, her descending marriage with James inhibits Elizabeth's trust in

her own abilities to take action. She is the woman who has entered his life, and she needs to adapt to be able to stay married to him. This belief suppresses her possibilities for agency. However, somewhere in her heart she knows that she deserves more than living under James's decisions. Again, stated by Khan, Hiroko is the one to reinforce strength and commitment into Elizabeth (60-1). When Hiroko talks about what she wants in life, Elizabeth realises that her own wants are suppressed. As mentioned, Hiroko thinks that "to know is to want", but Elizabeth did not really know what she wanted until she met Hiroko. She begins reflecting upon how her life mostly is about what she does not want but still must agree to, to not upset James (Shamsie 100). This is followed by Elizabeth taking action to follow her wants.

Elizabeth's newly found agency is revealed in a letter to her brother where she secretively explains to him that she is leaving James (Shamsie 117). As Ahearns writes, this "resistance against patriarchy" is indeed only one form of agency, and more important is as Ahearns also claims, that the motivations that incite human actions are more complex than simply "pure resistance" (115-6). Nevertheless, it is clear that Elizabeth is not leaving James because she has found the strength to resist. More probably she has realised her deepest wants, those motivating her actions rather than resistance in itself.

Kim

Kim is the daughter of Elizabeth's son Henry, or Harry which becomes his American name. Kim's parents are divorced, and her American mother is by Harry described to be a travelling, social woman who rather lets Elizabeth babysit Kim to "earn a break" from the latter's teenage tantrums (Shamsie 184). Indeed, Kim is a load and demanding teenager, but this also shows that she early in life has a voice. For example, she has no shame in arguing with a Pakistani man in a video shop as a fifteen years old girl, and she especially emphasises that no one but her has a deciding role of what is appropriate for her (Shamsie 167). When Kim grows up, she studies to become a structural engineer (Shamsie 265). This can be interpreted as a result of her agency. In line with Klugman et al.'s definition of agency, making decisions and acting upon them, Kim has chosen her studies and her area of work for herself (21). Moreover, she aims for a career within a male-dominated vocation, in other words, a field where patriarchy is tradionally vast. Here, she uses her voice to push forward in the, to refer to Hill, "most enduring and pervasive of all social patterns" (629). Clearly, a woman must be able to make herself heard in a context where she represents a minority (Klugman et al. 21; Danielsen et al. 6-7). Moreover, pursuing one's voice amongst the socioculturally dominant group "men" can be resembled to the feminist agency of resistance towards patriarcy mentioned by Ahearn (115). As Ahearn states, this is one of many agencies, which is why I suggest that it must be read contextually(115). Therefore, in the context of choosing a job traditionally represented by men, Kim has agency.

However, it could be argued that Kim has more voice than agency,similar to Elizabeth as described in section 3.2. Kim has a fear of thingsfalling apart and coming to an end (Shamsie 265; 267). Her mother believes the divorce between her parents is the reason for that fear, whilst Elizabeth believes Kim simply has a need for control (Shamsie 265-7). Already as agirl,

Kim was interested in engineering, which could indicate that she has an urge for control, and even more so, order (Shamsie 173) Nevertheless, I would argue that neither control needs or her parent's divorce have created Kim's phobia. They might rather exist due to her father Harry's ways of coming and leaving as he likes regardless of his daughter's needs. Harry has always been an absent father, and he is aware of it:[T]o this girl, he'd been a fleeting presence since she was four years old and divorce had ended familial life in DC . . . He was a failed parent, he knew this . . . (Shamsie 168)

Employed by the CIA, Harry travels a lot, and he is more dedicated to his work than to family life (Shamsie 168). Despite this, Kim still loves him more than he deserves, especially as a teenager. When Harry embraces is teenage daughter, it is expressed that "[s]he felt such a rush of warmth and safety to be pulled in against him that it made her step away, scowling"(Shamsie 168). Apparently, the young Kim experiences a need to be humble in the times she meets her father, in the hope that he will not leave again.

From a background of an ambigous relationship with her father, Kim's sincere fears seem to break out in relation to the fall of the Twin Towers, and the attack on the Pentagon on 9/11 (Shamsie 265; 270). Seeing her city fall apart coincides with the life-long fear of losing CIA-employed Harry, makes her want to control anything which in reality is out of her control. Thereby, it can be suggested that Harry has developed Kim's fear of losing things and seeing things fall apart. This proposes also that hecontributes to suppressing Kim's full possibility for agency. Her fear forces her to an almost self-destructive dedication to her work to prevent things from breaking, to make sure everything is stable and safe around her, and thereby she is bound to fear and cannot be entirely free.

Indian, Pakistani and Arab women

Whereas Hiroko, Elizabeth and Kim have voices and agency to various levels, other women in the novel have neither of those. Those womenare also less developed characters, frequently re-presented as oppressed, and also represented by men. The way in which the women are re(-)presented simplifies an assumption that they are all oppressed by men, which thereby can be read through Mohanty's critique of the homogenisation of "Third World women" ("Under" 335 -8). The aim for this section is therefore to examplify how Indian, Pakistani and Arab Muslim women are characterised in the novel, and the point which I hope to make is that contextual, cultural, and historical awareness is required to make any assumptions of the ability for voice and agency of these women. The women in the Afghan areas in Pakistan are hardly present, only described briefly from Hiroko's son Raza's point of view. When Raza searches these areas for his new friend Abdullah, he walks past "covered-up" women who he consider "best to ignore" (Shamsie 196). It is not clear if Raza ignores the women for the risk of upsetting other men, or making the women any harm, but they are are by Raza re-presented as voiceless, faceless objects, in line with the veiled stereotypes of Muslim women which Morey and Yaqin write about

(Morey and Yaqin 2). Further on, fourteen years old Abdullah explains to Raza that he “had to stay here to look after the women” instead of accompanying his elder brother to Peshawar (Shamsie 197). At Abdullah’s home, Raza observes how more than one woman keep themself away from the two young men inside the small house. Only Abdullah’s young sister comes out to quietly serve Raza tea (Shamsie 197). Raza’s rhetorics suggests an oppressive culture where women are intimidated and taken care of by boys. However, this passage must be regarded in its context, timely and socioculturally. Without details of Abdullah’s religious orientation within Islam, and without any knowledge about the women mentioned, or their experiences in theirculture, no conclusions about agency can be made.

Just as Klugman et al. state, agency can express itself from privilegieslike education, properties, and mobility (21; 35). What is known is that boysand girls living in the area probably do not go to school, since Abdullah explains to Raza that he did so “[b]efore this”, meaning Partition, but not anymore (Shamsie 197). Moreover, the women do also seem to have a limited amount of mobility, and in the home, they either choose or are obliged to keep away from the men. However, without hearing the voices of the individual women and girls, we cannot assume that they are uneducated, as the “stereotypical ‘Third World woman’”, or oppressed to the point where they cannot take a single step without the consent of a male (Mohanty “Under” 337). I suggest that this shows how the reader can be fooled into homogenising the women as “all oppressed”, when they have no voice to express themselves in the text (Mohanty “Under” 335-8). Sajjad’s brother Iqbal seems to consider women to be his property. Talking about his “mistress”, he express dislike about her want to leave for Pakistan.‘She is threatening to go to Pakistan,’ Iqbal said. … ‘I told her last night I will do whatever I must to keep her here.’ … ‘Did you forget you have a wife?’ ‘I’m allowed a second wife.’ (Shamsie 103)

Furthermore, Iqbal believes his wife to be less of a wife if she does not allow him to marry the mistress (Shamsie 104). Here, two women, the mistress and the wife, do not have voice, or agency. They are represented by the voice of Iqbal, who on his own characterises the stereotypical view of an oppressive Muslim man. They are thereby re-presented as stereotypical “Third World women”, faimly-oriented and sexually restrained (Mohanty “Under” 337).

After Partition, Sajjad describes how Iqbal left his family to go to Lahore, and that his wife and children died on their ride with a cargo train when they tried to follow him (Shamsie 161). The actions of Iqbal’s wife can be related to Butalia’s discussion of the Sikh women who commited suicide, since it can be questioned why Iqbal’s wife undertook a dangerous journey to follow him (115). It does not seem as if she had death in mind, bringing her children, but the decision must be contextually and culturally bound just as for the Sikh women (Butalia 115). Iqbal’s wife might have been trapped in bad living conditions now her husband did not provide for the familyanymore, and she might not have been able to work, for practical or traditional reasons. Being left alone, she was forced to take action in some way for the sake of her children. Similar to Butalia’s claim, there is not much information about Iqbal’s wife, and the action might have been a reaction to the conditions of the specific context (115-6). Since the voice of the wife is mediated only through Sajjad, she does not have one, and it cannot be concluded why this

assumed agency through mobility drove her towards the husband who had left her. What can be stated is that this is another example of how important context and culture is for interpretation, and how the reader's own cultural experiences affect the reading.

Finally, Sajjad's mother is another woman who is stereotypically characterised. She is portrayed as a faithful, warm person who values the traditional way of living. In the novel, her main function is to take care of her sons and daughter, and arrange their marriages (Shamsie 38). This image corresponds to Mohanty's description of "the average Third World woman" who is for example traditional and devoted to her family (337). Even more clear does Sajjad's mother appear when she dies. This makes her look like a symbol for the tradtional Indian Muslim family, before the Partition of India. To exemplify, Sajjad decides to leave his home in Dilli behind when his mother passes away. Before that, such an action was unthinkable. He could not see himself in the household. Not without his mother. …[S]he had been the certainty that no matter how often he circled Delhi he would always return to the world of Dilli. (Shamsie 106)For Sajjad, his mother was home, and home was his mother. Moreover, his final decision of asking Hiroko to marry him is also dependent of the death of his mother, since he thinks of such a marriage as a "betrayal of his mother" (Shamsie 107). Tradition is thereby embodied within Sajjad's mother, and when she dies, he is brave enough to confront tradition and marry the woman he truly loves. This does give a one-sided picture of Indian Muslim women, and creates a stereotypical and homogenous picture of them as being traditional without any exceptions.