

Burnt Shadow by Kamila Shamsie

Kamila Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows* as a work of historical fiction. It consists of four parts, each of which tackles a particular period of time. Section one treats 1945, the year of the bombing of Nagasaki ; section two handles 1947, on the brink of Partition scheme; the third tackles 1982 Pakistan, while the fourth is devoted to the 2001-2 , the post 9/11 event period.

OVERVIEW

Burnt Shadows, first published in 2009, is the fifth novel by Pakistani-British author Kamila Shamsie. A political-historical novel, it was nominated for the Orange Prize for Fiction, one of the UK's most prestigious literary awards, and won an Anisfield-Wolf Book Award, which celebrates books that contribute to a greater understanding of racism and diversity. Shamsie has been shortlisted several times for a John Llewellyn Rhys Prize; she also received the Prime Minister's Award for Literature in Pakistan in 1999, and her seventh novel, *Home Fire* (2017), was shortlisted for the renowned Booker Prize and won the Women's Prize for Fiction.

Burnt Shadows follows two families, the Pakistani-Japanese Tanaka-Ashrafs and the German-English-American Weiss-Burtons, as they intersect across generations and world historical events. Unfolding in a present-tense, third-person omniscient narration, *Burnt Shadows* explores the motivations of each of its main characters to reveal the complicated overlap of the personal and the political, using expressive prose and frequent symbolism to center the emotional stakes of the events it represents.

Plot Summary

In the Prologue, an unnamed prisoner waits alone in a cell at Guantanamo Bay.

Part 1 then opens on August 9, 1945 in Nagasaki, Japan, with Hiroko Tanaka, a former schoolteacher turned factory worker, and her lover, an idealistic German expatriate named Konrad Weiss. Konrad seeks out Hiroko after hearing about the nuclear bomb dropped in Hiroshima and asks her to marry him. Hiroko accepts. Just after Konrad leaves, Nagasaki is bombed. The nuclear explosion burns the birds on Hiroko's kimono into her back, permanently scarring her. Afterwards, all that Hiroko can find of Konrad is his shadow, the result of body fat burned into stone due to radiation.

Part 2 begins two years later when Hiroko travels to the Delhi, India home of Konrad's half-sister Ilse, who uses the name Elizabeth to hide her German ancestry, and who strikes up an immediate friendship with Hiroko. Elizabeth is unhappily married to James Burton. James's clerk, Sajjad Ali Ashraf, agrees to teach Urdu to Hiroko, and a romance develops between them. The Burtons disapprove of the relationship because Sajjad is Muslim and poor, and Elizabeth misinterprets an intimate moment in which Hiroko shows Sajjad her burn scars as assault. Hiroko is able to correct the error, but Sajjad is fired. After his mother dies, Sajjad proposes marriage to Hiroko, who accepts. Meanwhile, Elizabeth decides to leave James and go live in New York City as Ilse Weiss. James suggests that Sajjad and Hiroko leave the country to avoid political violence, and so they travel to Istanbul. However, because Sajjad leaves India during Partition, his Indian citizenship is revoked, and so Hiroko and Sajjad go to Karachi, Pakistan as refugees.

Part 3 takes place 15 years later in Karachi in 1982 at the height of the Cold War. Hiroko and Sajjad's teenage son, Raza, struggles to fit in as a half-Japanese Pakistani boy. Harry Burton, James and Ilse's son, works for the CIA, arming Islamic extremist fighters to support the US proxy war in Afghanistan against the USSR. Harry reconnects with the Tanaka-Ashrafs while on assignment in Pakistan. Raza meets Abdullah, a young Afghan refugee, and assumes the Afghan alias "Raza Hazara." Wanting one last adventure before college, Raza convinces Abdullah to join the Islamic guerilla forces and promises to go with him, planning to desert and let Abdullah think that "Raza Hazara" simply vanished. Once at the camp, Raza realizes he is in danger but is saved by the Commander, who knows Raza is a friend of CIA operative Harry Burton. Raza arrives home to find that Sajjad was murdered while looking for him.

Part 4 opens in 2001, three months after the September 11 attacks. Hiroko lives with Ilse and Kim Burton, Harry's daughter, in New York City. Harry and Raza work for a private military company, contracted by the

United States to search for Al-Qaeda insurgents in Afghanistan. Raza searches for Abdullah and learns that he is an undocumented taxi driver in New York. Abdullah, fearful of being profiled, wants to leave the United States, so Raza asks Kim to help, but she refuses. Harry is killed, and the CIA assumes Raza is responsible due to his teenage encounter with Islamic extremists. Raza, now a fugitive, travels to Canada hoping to see Hiroko. Hiroko convinces Kim to drive Abdullah across the border to Canada, but Kim argues with Abdullah about Islam on the way. Kim drops off Abdullah at a fast-food restaurant as planned, then reports Abdullah to the Canadian police. Raza, also at the restaurant, covers for Abdullah, who escapes. When Kim tries to tell the police that they have the wrong man, Raza stops her, allowing himself to be arrested. Kim returns to New York to find a furious Hiroko, who compares Kim to the Americans who justified the use of nuclear bombs in Japan. Kim calls the Canadian police to exonerate Raza but discovers that he has been handed over to the United States. Raza is implied to be the prisoner at Guantanamo Bay from the Prologue.

Summary

Burnt Shadows was written in the year 2009 by renowned Pakistani-British author, Kamila Shamsie. The novel is a historical epic, documenting the most tragic events of recent global history through the lens of two families, the fate of whom seem to be intertwined throughout the story. The story has no particular protagonist or antagonist.

The hero in the novel is the life of the people affected by the major occidental blunders presented in the book – World War II, the partition of India in 1947, the Afghan-Soviet War, 9/11 WTC Attacks, and the subsequent invasion of Afghanistan. However, Shamsie dives deeply into none of these events, giving a broader, yet exotically powerful perspective on each of them.

Political Events Presented in *Burnt Shadows*

Kamila Shamsie was born in Karachi, Pakistan, in 1973, just a couple of years after the creation of Bangladesh. The country was in the midst of a prolonged political turmoil during that period, which resulted in a number of Pakistanis seeking a stable and dignified life to move to the west. Each of these families had stories of the turbulent years that followed the partition in 1947, which is amply reflected in Shamsie's works.

In *Burnt Shadows*, Shamsie presents some of the most tragic events of recent history, beginning with the horrific nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by the United States in August 1945. While the depiction of the tragedy is quite limited, it is powerful enough to leave a resounding effect till the very end of the novel. The story begins with a young Japanese woman, Hiroko Tanaka, and a German national Konrad Weiss falling in love. Suddenly one hears bomb sirens, and in a flash, Konrad is turned into a smudge on the stones.

The novel then moves to Delhi during the last days of the British Raj, where Hiroko, now an atomic bomb survivor and a PTSD patient, arrives to meet and live with her evaporated lover's half-sister, Ilse aka Elizabeth. The latter's husband, James Burton, a British, is half-hearted about having a Japanese woman in his house but agrees. Subsequently, Hiroko starts learning Urdu from Sajjad Ashraf, a clerk in the Burton house, and soon, the two fall in love.

Hiroko and Sajjad elope to Istanbul to escape his conservative Muslim family, when the second tragic event, the partition of India takes place. When the couple tries to move back to Delhi, they find that they are no longer welcome, and hence, they are forced to settle down in Karachi. Elizabeth, on the other hand, ends her marriage with James Burton and moves to New York City. The story takes a jump to 1982, 35 years after the marriage of Hiroko and Sajjad, who now have a boy, Raza.

Raza, having performance anxiety on exam day, is a young boy who ends up in a Mujahideen Camp in Afghanistan. This is the era of the Afghan-Soviet War, one of the most important geopolitical events of the 20th century. Afghan War was also the beginning of the end for the United States of Soviet Russia (USSR), commonly known as the Soviet Union. Yet again, Shamsie refrains from going too much into the event, though detailing enough to give the readers a chilling account.