

## Kamila Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows*

Reviewed by Eileen Geoffroy

*Burnt Shadows*. Kamila Shamsie. London, Berlin and New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2009. 363 pages. ISBN: 978-1-4088-0427-8.

“Everything can disappear in a flash of light” could be used as a sub-title for this novel – Kamila Shamsie’s fifth – which takes us through the atom bomb on Nagasaki, the Partition of India and Pakistan up to 9/11, Afghanistan and beyond. “How did it come to this” is asked in the prologue. Indeed, how did it? **Nagasaki, August 9th 1945**. Hiroko Taraka, “the traitress,” used to be an interpreter and now works in a munitions factory even though by this time there is no work because there is no steel. Hiroko is a double traitor as her father dared to criticize the military and even the Emperor himself, and her fiancé is a German, Konrad Weiss. If the military police discovered his “birds” – purple covered notebooks about the paranoia in imperial Japan hidden in the trees in his garden – he would be sent to prison. Here we see the beginning of cross-cultural problems, or should we say racism, that are explored throughout the novel. Konrad has been ordered out of his sister’s home in India as his brother-in-law is English. He refers to his wife Ilsa as Elizabeth. The next rejection is by his Japanese neighbors. And then it happens. Hiroko has just put on her dead mother’s silk kimono, “white, with three black cranes swooping across her back.” Konrad is on his way to the cathedral. Both are thinking about their marriage “when the war is over.” “The world goes white” and brings darkness. Hiroko’s father has turned into a reptile from hell. All that remains of Konrad is a long shadow.

Delhi / Dilli, 1947, a stroke city like Derry / Londonderry. Delhi is the Raj / Dilli is the people. The Raj is going but what about the people? More strokes: Hindus and Pakistanis. Sajjad Ali Ashraf and James Burton. Elizabeth Burton / Ilsa Weiss. James’s “munitions factory” is the legal work he’s doing for the empire; his employee Sajjad dreams of becoming a lawyer. Konrad had “discovered” Sajjad and they were all about to discover Hiroko. The strokes continue. The spider’s web expands. Elizabeth and James quarrel continually. Elizabeth dislikes Sajjad

but defends Hiroko. James appreciates but mistrusts Hiroko, who has moved in and started to learn Urdu with Saj.

The Three Birds. The charcoal-colored birds on Hiroko's back, the birds that had flown in to land there on the 9th of August. There are, however, other birds, migratory this time. There is growing unrest in India: the English speak about *going* home, the Pakistanis about *leaving* home. Henry, Elizabeth and James's son, wants to *come* home to India from boarding school in England, sent there when Elizabeth realized that her son felt Indian, her son who preferred Sajjad's company to hers, just as Hiroko seems to do. Hiroko is thinking about going *back* to Japan, as marriage to the traditionally-minded Sajjad seems impossible until he breaks free from his cage when he touches the charcoal birds, the ones that hold no feeling for Hiroko but arouse passion in Sajjad when he is forced by Hiroko to touch those broken wings. After his mother's death he feels he can break with the old traditions so they marry and go to Turkey on honeymoon, but also to escape the riots and carnage which have overtaken Dilli / Delhi. His dream of returning to a new life in New Delhi is shattered when he is refused a visa to New India. Meanwhile Elizabeth is returning to her roots: she will become Ilse again, living a new life in a new city – New York.

Pakistan, 1982-83. A new character has appeared to join Hiroko and Sajjad in their new country – their son Raza. By now he is sixteen, a gifted linguist and excellent cricketer, slightly ashamed of his non-Pakistani mother. Raza is a brilliant student and has just one more exam to take before getting his Matric and going to college to become a lawyer. A new country, Kamila Shamsie's, is shown to us. The sights and sounds and smells of Karachi, but where the young people want to force Pakistan to become a Muslim state.

Harry (Henry) Burton has returned to the Indian subcontinent where he contacts his old friend, Sajjad. Raza hero-worships him, especially when Harry helps him overcome his test anxiety which caused him to fail his Islamic studies again. Unfortunately there is a misunderstanding: Harry says he can help Raza with the administrative papers needed to get into an American university, whereas Raza understands that he will get him *into* a university. The Ashrafs again feel betrayed by a Burton. In the immediate aftermath Raza Ashraf becomes, in his mind, Raza Hazara, an Afghan freedom fighter, spending more and more of his time with Abdullah, a young gun-runner for the Mujahideen. Just when Raza Ashraf decides to become a lawyer, having brilliantly succeeded in passing the hated exam, Raza Hazara decides to bow out by going to a training camp in Afghanistan.

The shadows lengthen, the hated birds return. Raza is ordered to leave the camp as he is thought by the ISI to be a CIA informer, but before he gets home his father is murdered. Hiroko goes to live with Ilsa in New York just after 9/11 and

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cannot understand the outpouring of grief. For her, the attacks on the Twin Towers are nothing compared to Nagasaki, where the Americans “created a desolation and called it peace” which is what they are doing in Afghanistan where Harry is now working with Raza for the CIA. Abdullah is on Raza’s mind and he manages to get news of his old friend, who is working illegally as a taxi-driver in New York but wants to get back to Afghanistan as the FBI is looking for him. He contacts Kim Burton, whom he has never met, and asks for help. Suddenly the Weiss-Burtons and Tanaka-Ashrafs web is torn to shreds. Blood and shadows are everywhere. We began with Nagasaki, our final view of the East is Kandehar. Hiroko’s birds become burkas. Death and flight, which have followed us throughout the novel, conclude it. Will the spider return and provide a safe haven or has the final flash of light proved too powerful?

In this story of death and destruction, love and hope, Kamila Shamsie manages to open up our senses. We see, hear, smell and touch as we move from one city to another, one continent to another but at the end we are left with that most poignant of expressions: “if only.” A truly haunting novel.