

**The Mind as a Demarcated Territory: A Reading of Kamila Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows***

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**Abstract**

*In his work "Decolonizing the Map: Post-Colonialism, Post-Structuralism and the Cartographic Connection", Graham Huggan writes that postcolonial writers are often attracted by the ideas of physical and psychological maps. This kind of mapping in turn indicates the need to re-interpret traditional perceptions of space wherein space is seen as enclosed and hierarchical territory. The process of map-making or cartography has a pivotal role to play in the construction of ideologies that shape the psychological state of an individual. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in their seminal work Anti-Oedipus (1972) have made use of the term deterritorialization to refer to the fluid, dissipated nature of human subjectivity in capitalist cultures. This research paper explores Kamila Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows* (2009) in order to show how ideologies within a nation define the mental cartography of an individual.*

**Keywords:** nationalism, Shamsie, Hiroko

The term "deterritorialization" first occurs in French psychoanalytic theory to refer to the fluid and indeterminate nature of human subjectivity in contemporary capitalist culture. Its most common use, however, has been in relation to the process of cultural globalization. Though there are different interpretations involved, the general implication, in relation to the term, is used to mean that globalization needs to be understood in cultural-spatial terms. By borrowing part of the term, this research paper attempts to represent how territorial demarcations and the consequent cartography results in the creation of cartographies of the minds. The ideas of the people are structured on the basis of the maps and they become attuned to the ideologies imposed upon their lives by the state within the confines of those boundaries. The paper has made an attempt to study the narrative of Kamila Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows* so as to explore how the idea of nation and its cartography works and affects the subjectivity and psychological state of an individual, and at the same time the paper also looks into the challenges posed by territorialization. It has been observed that the purpose of

the narrative has been to do away with the narrow confines of territorial structuring that restrict the growth of an individual.

The concept of nation was created within the belief of a centered structure and Western philosophy has played a constitutive role in the development of the concept during the colonial as well as postcolonial period. During the period of colonial rule, the imperial nation served as a universal model which the subjugated territories was bound to imitate. In the present postcolonial phase, the nation becomes the site for nationalist claims of political independence and cultural specificity. In his seminal text *Nation and Narration*, Homi Bhabha has successfully deconstructed the concept of nation, laying bare the group of strategies that construct the people as nation by situating them within a discourse of cultural identification. According to Bhabha, the idea of nation provides a doubtful axis for postcolonial discursivity in that it is based on the negation or exclusion of the Other. As such, the nation, in its quest for unifying the people within its territory, relies on the process of construction of an ideology that would create a national identity but at the same time exclude definite social categories such as gender, religion, race, class, etc that utilizes different approaches in the formation of national identity.

*Burnt Shadows*, one of the most well known novels by Kamila Shamsie was published in the year 2009 and it provides a broad spectrum for study of the lives of its protagonists belonging to different cultural and national backgrounds. The novel primarily centres around the two families of Ashraf-Tanakas and the Weiss- Burtons, and the turmoil the members of these families encounter. In the novel, we see that the Ashraf-Tanaka family, that is Hiroko, Saajad and Raza stand out in their society, not in terms of differences seen in their physical attributes but because of their approach towards life and people. Although, they find acceptance wherever they move to, they become affected by the demands of the cartography. Saajad's deep love for Delhi leaves an absence in his life as he has to shift to Karachi during the Partition that occurred soon after his marriage to Hiroko. It is also seen that Hiroko has been the most affected of all the characters. Wherever she has resided, she finds herself losing her identity and along with it, the people she has loved. In the novel, one of the issues attached to the concept of territorialization is that of neo-colonialism that equally affects the erstwhile colonizer( as in the case of James Burton and his family) and the erstwhile colonized (the Ashrafs) alike. The individuals in a postcolonial country, apparently, are free, but in spite of this freedom, they fail to be emancipated from the rigorous demands associated with nation and nationhood. Their minds remain in a state of conflict. The erstwhile colonizer too has to evolve him in order to blend with the space that he had earlier left behind. This is the challenge that Harry/ Henry faces when he returns to England. Harry essentially finds himself looking back and returning to the subcontinent he had left behind, even on the pretext of being involved with the CIA. Saajad's affection towards the Dilli of the past and its mohollas remains unshakeable. Years later, when Harry meets an aged Saajad busy watering the plants, the former is surprised to see how marigolds and other flowers bloomed in the garden of Ashrafs, an imitation of the familiar colours and life in Delhi. Saajad's cultural sensitivity is also seen when he brings a Japanese painting of two foxes cuddling together, as a gift to Hiroko. The painting becomes the focal point of their living room and a reminder of Hiroko's origins. It is significant to note that in a society where keeping the imitation of any living form or display of any form of affection is frowned upon, Saajad was willing to change such practices.

It is seen that the title of the novel in itself has been used with suggestive connotations wherein the characters are associated with pain caused by the differences and the demarcations made on the basis on physical as well as psychological territorialization. The three burnt scars on the back of the protagonist Hiroko, a nuclear explosion survivor of Nagasaki becomes a symbol of this territorialization. She becomes a living embodiment of the pain and loss caused by the territorial fissures. The novel begins with a description of the Hiroko Tanaka, the school teacher and Konrad Weiss, the German translator, whose dreams are shattered on the day they were meant to be betrothed. Hiroko is left with nothing but the smell of Urakami Valley resembling dead flesh and the sight of her dying father covered in scales resembling a reptile. The narrative then shifts to pre-Independence India, when Hiroko travels to Delhi in search of Elizabeth, the half-sister of Konrad, and the only person she could think of as family after her father and fiancé were killed during the explosion in Nagasaki. In spite of the dark reminder of her past life, Hiroko is cosmopolitan in her approach and decides to move ahead. As Hiroko confesses to Elizabeth about the term *hibakusha*<sup>i</sup> that has loomed over her present life like an abomination and has become equivalent to her identity:

Hibakusha. I hate that word. It reduces you to the bomb. Every atom of you. So now I have to find something different to want. (Shamsie, p. 100)

Unlike Hiroko, Elizabeth's life was filled with things and an identity she didn't want. One of the things that Elizabeth Weiss Burton didn't want was the identity of being a colonizer's wife. As she confesses, "The British Empire make me feel so...German." (Shamsie, p.68)

The narrative also reveals the effects caused by the fissures that are created on account of the demarcation of the physical geography that consequently affects the mental cartography of the person. The modern man apparently seems free from the bondage caused by colonialism but there are other strategies at work that seeks to eliminate the concept of difference. Perhaps the greatest threat posed to the structured ideologies of the state is difference and the claim of having a distinctive identity. The forces of hegemony, in a state, which are at work straitjackets the individual within the territory that is claimed as his/her nation. The process of mapping and cartography could simultaneously also develop the ideologies of the individuals residing within those abstract lines called borders. The hybridity of Raza makes it unfeasible for him to confine himself to ideologies created by the demands of the state. Raza never seems to fit in properly although he made constant attempts to do so. His difference made him a wrinkle in the fabric of the state. This is best exemplified when he is taunted by a group of children for his unconventional appearance. Harry in the manner of Hiroko, wonders what an asset the young Raza would be in some other nation/ location, with his mastery in acquiring languages. The distinctive identity of Raza as a polygot fails to attract attention within the boundaries of his state but nevertheless his fervent passion to master new languages remain constant. His discomfort in reading or attempting to clear a subject related to religious studies, during his Intermediate exam, essentially reflects that he is not meant to be bound by the restrictions posed by his nationality. It becomes difficult for Raza because:

Society is not exchangist, the socius<sup>ii</sup> is inscriptive: not exchanging but marking bodies which are part of the earth. (Delleuze and Guettari, p. 185)

The ability of Raza to merge and to attain new knowledge is subjected to tests. When he unwittingly embarks upon the journey to the borders near Afghanistan with Abdullah seeking

some form of adventure in the training camps, he notices the “ancient rock carvings” but chooses to remain silent lest he is chided for showing interest in the “work of infidels” (Shamsie, p.212). The world into which he was diving with Abdullah is a bleak territory marked by barren mountains. It is also a space in which Raza Hazara, and not Raza Konrad, would be readily accepted.

Further, it is also seen that the author poses questions regarding the challenges caused by psychological demarcations between individuals dwelling in spaces marked by borders. These borders are conflicting constructs that isolates one part of the humanity from the other. In *Burnt Shadows*, the characters, especially Hiroko, are in a constant state of mobility, wherein they witness and experience a series of traumatic events in four different territories. Both Hiroko and Saajad succeeds in remaining the “world’s greatest forward-movers” (Shamsie, p. 146). When the novel commences, the narrative provides the reader with the description of the nuclear attacks on Japan in 1945 and how it affects Hiroko at a personal level since it was the day she was to marry Konrad who is killed during the disaster. The narrative, then shifts to Saajad’s Dilli, the memories of which continues to haunt Hiroko and Saajad, even after they shift to Karachi after the Partition of India in 1947. The Karachi of 1982-83 is depicted as a space wherein the people are hovering around the tussle of religious, sectarian and geographical territories. The last section of the novel takes us to an intricate series of episodes that leads to the September 11<sup>th</sup> attack in New York, where Hiroko and Saajad’s son Raza gets entangled in the events leading to his consequent imprisonment. The narrative also represents how the rage and anger was seeping through the crevices of history that finally leads to the war in Afghanistan. The uncanny resemblance of the episode to the Nagasaki event leaves Hiroko troubled.

In the narrative, we see that the physical cartography not only delimits the characters of *Burnt Shadows* in their boundaries but they are also affecting and defining the behaviour of the characters of a particular location with one another, and with other people as well. The three members of the Ashraf-Tanaka family: Hiroko Tanaka Ashraf, Saajad Ashraf and Raza Konrad Ashraf. Hiroko Tanaka, a Japanese woman marries Saajad Ashraf, an Indian Muslim man who later is forced to shift to Karachi after the Independence. Their son, Raza Konrad Ashraf is an embodiment of diversity which is seen not only in his name and origins, but also in his approach towards life. In spite of his unique position as a hybrid, Raza becomes an outsider for the society he lives in. He, however, learns to use his uniqueness for gaining access to new knowledge about the world around him. In that, the geographical boundaries fail to confine him. A talented polygot, Raza easily blends himself with people of different origins due to his unconventional appearance that sets him apart from the rest. Ironically it is this difference that leads to his connection with the Afghans as Raza Hazara, culminating in his imprisonment on the accusation that he is a deceptive person and a criminal engaged in terror activities. Raza’s difference becomes an anomaly for a state that heavily emphasizes on religious studies. As a hybrid, he remains unsure about his territorial loyalties. The Japanese background of his mother leaves him in a state of unease as he struggles hard to confront the differences. As an adolescent, he demands that his mother covers her legs in order to be “more Pakistani”. It is also depicted that similar anxiety is faced by Harry/Henry Burton. Burton successfully blends to become an American citizen in a society that never questions his part German and part British origins. Henry learnt the lesson very early, in England, when his family shifted to London after India’s independence. He was often mocked by his school

mates for his “Indian expressions” and sensibility. It was only after he showed his skills as a bowler, which was (ironically) taught by an Indian, that he earned the respect of his peers. Consequently, when he came to know that he had to shift to New York with his mother after the separation of his parents, he decided to be ready with everything necessary to blend in the American society. America apparently seemed kind to him. In the later part of the novel, we see that Hiroko too is welcomed into America after the officials in the airport, in spite of the initial suspicion caused by her Pakistani citizen passport, realize that she is Japanese by birth and originally hails from Nagasaki. However, the same amount of generosity or sympathy is not shown in their dealings with Raza or Abdullah. It is the territorial demarcations and the cultural connotations related to these divided spaces that leaves deep impact in the minds of the people of a state. The same kind of anxiety is felt by Kim Burton, Harry’s daughter when she realizes that informing the policemen and implicating Raza for the murder of her father was wrong on her part. Initially, she believes that she has done the right thing to inform the authorities about the enemy of the state but later when Hiroko questions her whether she had any proof, it leaves her doubtful. Although, Kim attempts to rectify her mistake, the authorities claim that she has done the right thing as an American citizen, by informing them about a possible suspect. Despite the disclosure made by Kim, Raza still remains under imprisonment due to his affinity to Abdullah and the other Afghans and he is headed towards an uncertain fate. This is a reflection of the division and conflict created by the concept of nationalism. The idea of nationalism demands loyalty towards the territory on the part of the individual, but at the same time it also generates disloyalty to other territories of the world. Shamsie’s *Burnt Shadows*, thus poses challenging questions regarding the concept of nationality, demarcations of states, etc and their undeniable relationship with conflict in a world which is otherwise seen as globalized.

In *Beginning Postcolonialism*, Mcleod has asserted that the concepts of nation and nationality and their association with the territory becomes problematic as they fail to recognize individuals of diverse origins and treats them on equal parity, denying differences that exist in a society. The idea of nationalism was urgent during the colonial period as it necessitates the unification of the people for the expulsion of the colonizers. In a modern, globalized world, the idea of nationalism should be used in relation to humanity in general.

The protagonist recalls that during the Second World War, anything that had to do with the West, especially America was banned. The relationship between Hiroko and Konrad antagonized the people around them in Japan due to Konrad’s American citizenship. Both Hiroko and Konrad believed that they can leave the turmoil and antagonism behind, soon after the war. But it was never meant to be, as Konrad was killed during the explosion. Hiroko was left with nothing but an identity that became her feature. As a hibakusha, her freedom was governed by the laws of the territory, and it affected the social relationships around her. Hiroko had to finally seek refuge in a society that knew nothing of her past. The visit to Konrad’s sister, Elizabeth Weiss Burton seemed a sensible decision as it allowed her to make own choices. It is in India, away from the territorial confines of her own country, that she finally gathered courage to “step out from the loss” rather than remain “mired in it”. (p. 146) However, she found that one could never really escape from the challenges of territorialization for long. She finds herself in the midst of turmoil created by the territorial tussle between nations, each time she sought refuge in the spaces of different countries- the Partition of India, the changing political scenario in Pakistan, and later, the Post 9/11 New

York city. The “three charcoal-coloured bird-shaped burns”(Shamsie, p. 92) on her back symbolizes that her body has now become an embodiment of territorial distinction. As she tells to Saajad, “The bomb did nothing beautiful” (p. 93). The birds on her back instead became a constant reminder of her past and a marker of the consequences of territorial differences.

### **Endnotes**

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<sup>i</sup> The term *hibakusha* refers to a person who has survived bomb explosion. It is particularly used to mean a survivor of the nuclear bomb explosion in Japan

<sup>ii</sup> The term *socius* refers to an individual unit in the society

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