



THE BODY AS A 'PERFORMATIVE ACT' IN CONSTRUCTING IDENTITY IN KAMILA SHAMSIE'S *BURNT SHADOWS*

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Abstract

*The paper seeks to justify that the body as an agency undergoes a performative act in the identity making process by questioning and resisting certain set of norms and conventions in Kamila Shamsie's novel *Burnt Shadows* (2009). The most possible way that a body performs to construct an identity is by accepting a number of repetitive conventions which put certain features such as gender, race and class into a given social frame. Otherwise the body acts as an agency having the ability to transform external reality – by creating new referential realities or new interpretations of the same reality and causing events to happen that makes it possible to transgress the reiteration of the social norms and rules. The paper tries to analyse how the body acts as an agency to construct identity by refusing the reiteration of certain practices, norms and conventions by trying to resist to a kind of power by acting on people's actions would and thus framing their identities into a given structure. Kamila Shamsie, a British – Pakistani writer having a cosmopolitan attitude sets the plot of her fifth novel *Burnt Shadows* (2009) structured on many border-crossings performed by the body that have a significant role in the process of constructing identity. The paper tries to understand the idea that the characters, primarily the character of the protagonist do not possibly adapt/readapt their lives to the changes caused by certain historical events accepting the role that politics and society have given them, instead, political and historical events such as the Nagasaki bombing and 9/11 are subjected to performative acts in construction of identity. The paper focuses mainly on the protagonist of the novel by analysing the idea that how the 'body' is used to resist the set definitions of a hibakusha by trying to understand the fact that identity is not constructed by any set geographical, linguistic or cultural norms. Rather the body can be situated in a 'third space' where it becomes a 'performative act' by questioning and resisting the dominant narratives to construct identity.*

Keywords

Performative, Agency, Identity, Hibakusha, Third Space, etc.

Full Article

Introduction:

A serious study of Kamila Shamsie's fiction can be best approached by locating it within the wide framework of South Asian Literature. The reason behind such a view is that Shamsie is a contemporary novelist writing within a certain tradition prevalent in South Asian countries such as India, Nepal, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. These writers share many cultural and political concerns. These countries provide some common points as regards the relation between the writer and their reading public, the expectations of readers, and above all the real concerns of those people concerning the dominant political factors. South Asian Literature in English is comparatively a new area in the larger world of English Literature. The writers have not only left



their imprints in the fiction genre but it is also seen that short story, drama, film adaptations, literary theory, autobiography, are other genres that have been explored by many authors. The most apparent characteristics that get reflected in the writings, irrespective of the genre, are focused on the rule of the British Empire, the colonial period; the post-colonial period after the Partition of Indian subcontinent took place, and the freedom movement. The themes that are most common in the texts are identity, hybridity, migration, religion and politics, War and struggle for Independence, diaspora, and Nature. Along with these common issues, the writers extensively write about the issue of patriarchy. The crisis of identity is a common theme written about by writers that become multi-dimensional; they not only write about identity from the perspective of a colonized subject but also as a victim of patriarchy and also as a subject of subjugation by the White women.

Kamia Naheed Shamsie is a Pakistani British novelist. She was born in the year 1973, in Karachi. She is the daughter of Muneeza Shamsie; a journalist and editor. She was brought up in Karachi where she attended Karachi Grammar School. She has a BA in Creative Writing from Hamilton College and an MFA from the MFA program for poets and writers at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, where she was influenced by the Kashmiri poet Agha Shahid Ali. She has to her credit a good number of books that are notable for their themes and issues. *The novel In the City by the Sea* (1998) is her first work, written when she was just 25, her second novel, followed in 2000, *Salt and Saffron* both shortlisted for the John Llewellyn Rhys Prize, and her third novel *Kartography* (2002) after which she was selected as one of Orange's 21 writers of the 21st century. *Kartography* and *Broken Verses* (2005) have won the Patras Bokhari Award from the Academy of Letters in Pakistan. She was chosen by Granta as one of the best young British writers of 2013. In 2010 she won the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award for fiction, for her novel *Burnt Shadows* (2009). She recently contributed to a fiction text *Resist: Stories of Uprising* (2019). More recently, a book entitled *Duckling: A Fairy Tale Revolution* (2020), illustrated by Laura Barrett is to Shamsie's credit (<https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com>).

Writers of South Asian literary canon explore themes such as gender, class, caste, patriarchy, colonial oppression, the trauma of Partition and War, loss of home, identity crisis, and other such issues. The present paper draws the limelight into Kamila Shamsie's novel *Burnt Shadows* (2009). The story revolves around the two families of the East (Tanaka-Ashraf) and the West (Weiss-Burtons). The text bears many layers and instances where it is seen that aspects such as gender, body, class, nationality are used as tools to stereotype and discriminate against women in a patriarchal system.

I have chosen Kamila Shamsie's novel based on the following points: the author is from a privileged background and has received education outside her native place. It helps to formulate my argument that her literary work is not only confined to her roots or highlights Western ideologies, rather her protagonist is a Japanese woman. She is a hibakusha, a person affected by the 1945 atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. This fortifies the underlying idea that a woman's position cannot be placed within a fixed identity. Thus she becomes a transnational figure. Transnational feminism is a response to the global feminist frameworks; it seeks to examine gendered experiences both within and across Northern and Southern regions. The experiences are based on shared goals. The concept tries to look at where gender fits in multiple contexts, where curious interrelationships of culture, race, geography, and history intersect with the political, social, and economic factors of influence (Enns et.al 6). Secondly, the novel explores various layers of oppression of women and how the layers are homogenized mainly concerning the notions of gender, body and nationality in patriarchy. Further the novel also facilitates an understanding of how women from the Indian subcontinent are stereotyped as traditional, vulnerable and ignorable and the differences among them is not given due importance.



Methodology:

The discussion applies analytical method and has been made on primary data. The discussion takes help from the selected text, the novel *Burnt Shadows* (2009) and secondary sources such as essays and articles.

Discussion:

At the core of the novel, there is a Japanese woman as the protagonist who is presented by the author as a transfigure. A woman who encounters major historical events in the narrative starting right from Nagasaki bombing of 1945 to the 9/11 attack in New York. As such she becomes a transnational, transhistorical and transcultural figure who surpasses national boundaries. As a survivor of the bombing of Nagasaki, she is termed as a hibakusha, “as reduced to a bomb” (Shamsie 101). The character of Hiroko Tanaka, a Japanese character, is always in a process of creating her identity : she cannot run away from the idea that she is a hibakusha, at the same time she tries to establish her selfhood by negating the very conventional idea of being a hibakusha. The paper tries to see, understand and justify that how the body tries to meet the quest for identity which becomes personal- an ongoing process of creating the self and ultimately becomes a globalized character which more than anything else is humane.

In his book *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), Merleau Ponty argues that body is the primordial existence of natural life. According to Ponty, body is fundamental for communication and understanding others. He further writes that the living process of interacting with the world and others, but also a process of establishing one’s selfhood (Merleau, 35). In the text, *Burnt Shadows* (2009), it is seen how the author Kamila Shamsie has depicted Hiroko as a progressive and adaptive character who believes in moving ahead. She does not completely accept her very identity of a hibakusha and instead transgresses boundaries to manifest the very idea of selfhood. The bombing at Nagasaki had left its traumatic effects on Hiroko physically and mentally which is described by Shamsie as: “Diamond cutting open the earth, falling through to hell” (Shamsie, 27). The novel not only presents Hiroko Tanaka’s personal loss but also marks the larger, worldwide tragedies in history. However, the text does not provide any detail of such major events. Instead, it provides a view of how these events play out at duality between larger, historical moments and private, intimate memories is played out on the site of the body. In brief, Shamsie privileges the body in the description of events. The scene of the devastating bomb attack of Nagasaki is crucial. Before the dropping of the bomb, Hiroko is on the verge of an age where she experiences the sensuousness of love. She feels the glimpses of her physical intimacy with her lover, Konrad. She clothes herself in her mother’s cherished silk kimono embroidered with two large and magnificent birds on its back. Everything around her seems more beautiful to her but all of a sudden everything turns white while leaving permanent numbness on her body as well as her life. The novel describes it as “Hiroko steps out on to the verandah. Her body from neck down a silk column, with three black cranes swooping across her back... Sunlight streams through, pushing the clouds apart even further. And then the world goes white” (Shamsie, 23). Instead of describing the burnt image on her back, the text moves through a description of the physical sensations that Hiroko feels in relation to the burning of the kimono pattern on her back- the feel of the hot air on her back, the feel of that which is neither silk nor flesh but both” (Shamsie, 23). The body she inhabits is forever marked by this particular event. One important feature of Merleau Ponty’s philosophy is that the body is dialectical, dynamic and a becoming process (Merleau, 236). The body comes together in different space and time which further gives us an idea of the self as a transcendental element. Shamsie’s text does not deal with a body in a single, socio-cultural circumstance; however, the body in the narrative is of a ‘travelling’ body’. It becomes a narrative of the episodes and encounters between the socio-cultural circumstances of the point of the origin



of the body and the socio-cultural circumstances of the spatio-temporal location that it occupies. As Hiroko travels, what becomes evident is how a constant- the fact of her having survived the bomb- seems to become a variable, changing significance according not only to the space she inhabits but also to the people she is interacting and the passing of time. The reading audience cannot deny the fact that Hiroko is a survivor of the bomb, a hibakusha, yet the term has different implications in different contexts. The 'travelling' body is both a constant and a shifting signifier. As such in these shifting implications of the identity of a hibakusha in different contexts, the body tries to assert selfhood through 'performance'. To quote Merleau Ponty, the body like an embryo, keeps developing during the process of interaction with other bodies and society. During this process one's own selfhood or personhood is gradually constructed. The body in this respect is naming itself, through self-construction, and this process never ends. Since a fixed identity can never be completely achieved, this body is in a dialectic process of naming (Merleau, 236-237). Everyone has the potentiality and ability to become a unique individual through the process of interaction with the world and other bodies. This does not imply that the development of the body will be limited and regulated by a particular substantial condition. This implies that the body performs or acts as an agency having the ability to transform external reality- by creating new referential realities or new interpretations of the same reality, and causing events to happen, that makes it possible to transgress the reiteration of the social norms and rules. The process of identity construction undergoes a set of dynamic performative acts by the body (Merleau, 236). As the body of Hiroko Tanaka develops, she also undergoes physical, linguistic and cultural movements. She simply does not readapt her life to the changes caused by certain historical events accepting the role that politics and society has given her. However she uses her burnt body to free herself from the set definition of a hibakusha. Herein comes the idea of the 'travelling body' again. Performance as a practice and as an event that takes place implies the existence of a body acting inside a space. A subject experiences the world from within the body and through it while producing actions that affect the world that surrounds it. The scarred body of Hiroko Tanaka, instead of being a narrow cage, becomes in some way, what moves her to action. For her own people, the Japanese, she is a piece of social neglect, a 'hibakusha'. She says to Elizabeth in the novel, "I don't want to hide these burns on my back, but I don't want people to judge me by them either. Hibakusha. I hate that word. It reduces you to the bomb. Every atom bomb of you..." (Shamsie, 100).

To the Americans, who once in Japan tried to study the consequences of the atomic bomb on the survivors treated Hiroko as a curious medical case. Even it was believed that her miscarriage was a result of the harmful effects of the bomb attack.

The body then moves forward when there is a physical shift from Japan to Delhi. Hiroko tells the Burton family that she had come a long way from Nagasaki to Tokyo (where she worked as a translator for some time) and to Delhi via Mumbai. The fact that she is a 'hibakusha' is not focussed as much as that she is a woman. James Burton gets shocked when he hears about her long journey all alone; it does not suit to his patriarchal thoughts where a woman is not allowed to do so. Hiroko questions, "Yes. Why? Can't women travel alone in India?" (Shamsie, 46). Hiroko's body is also used by her to resist certain set cultural norms, in the narrative. The fact that her body keeps on shifting is evident by the way she dresses herself and the kind of reactions other characters show. She is an Oriental, an East Asian for the colonizer Burton in colonized India. Her wearing of trousers, flared below the knee and short haircut gives her a Western look, which is disturbing for James. He said, "Good Lord", as he found himself looking at a Japanese woman" (Shamsie. 41).

James find it hard to digest her presence at his home and he feels perturbed, "James was oddly perturbed by this woman who he could not place. Indians, Germans, the English, even



Americans... he knew how to look at people and understand the contexts from which they sprang. But this Japanese woman in trousers. What on earth she was all about?" (Shamsie, 46).

Even when there is a spatial change from Delhi to Pakistan post Independence of India, we are introduced to Hiroko and Sajjad's only son Raza, who supposes that his mother's body should be subjected to the norms of being a Pakistani woman by covering the whole body. The body here is not framed within the set cultural norm. Individual choices cannot be deduced from the structure of the body. Her wearing of dresses that are barelegged makes her son yell at her, "I can't ask any of my friends home, with you walking around, showing your legs. Why can't you be more Pakistani?" (Shamsie, 130). In this episode, the body's performance calls for a national identity: the body needs to be covered in order to be Pakistani. The above mention instances tries to justify that the central character does not want to be defined by any fixed definition that historical and political events have chosen for her. The body keeps on performing as it shifts from one space to the other. There is no fixed idea. "To the Japanese she was an explosion-affected person; that was her defining feature" (Shamsie, 49). But that is not her only fixed defining feature. The bird-shaped burns never allow her to overcome the traumatic memory of the attack, yet it is the same body which in different contexts constructs her identity. Constructing identity becomes important by knowing and identifying the self. The relationship between body and self is fundamental through the whole novel because Hiroko performs her identity through it.

In *Burnt Shadows* (2009), the protagonist's agency produces a 'third space' where she negotiates her identity in opposition to certain rules, and in relation to different languages and diverse cultural and social positions. The body easily transgresses national boundaries as well as acquaints itself with different languages. Hiroko Tanaka is a school teacher and a translator who teaches German and she can even speak English very well. When she arrived in British India, she showed her will to learn Urdu and she easily did so. The urge to acquire the knowledge of a new language shows that language has never been a barrier for her. Hiroko does not allow barriers or cultural differences to stand in the way of her relationship with nations or their people. She speaks with Sajjad in Urdu, in English to James and in German to Elizabeth.

The fact that the bird shaped burns is a constant reminder of the nuclear explosion, which seems to be a burden on her body. Nevertheless, she uses her body to free herself from the scheme in which her body has been framed. The body performs "against" the set norms and conventions and questions and resists the cultural and social rules. She is hardly concerned with the Islamisation process in Pakistan and so she wears such dresses that are barelegged. She does not understand how being barelegged does not make her Pakistani.

Classifying Hiroko Tanaka as merely a hibakusha does not take into consideration her unique and complex identity. Nevertheless, Hiroko's journey starts exactly when her body is marked with burns, and she understands that when people identify her as a hibakusha they are exercising a power on her that reduces her subjectivity to a specific set of social conventions. She is a hibakusha but she refuses this fixed identity that the Japanese society as well as the entire world has given her. She transgresses this fixed identity, resists and questions different hegemonic powers. The transgression of the body is connected to the movements of the body between different places. Defining Hiroko Tanaka as a hibakusha marginalises her position. The Nagasaki event has affected her body, but the event has also given her a reason to start a process of self-definition. The character moves from loss to a productive space. It is through her body that she gives the evidence of an identity in constant formation because her body develops; it acquires new elements at each frontier crossing. The body embodies different cultural and linguistic practices which are distant from each other, yet representing all of them working together. Her identity cannot be inserted into a specific cultural, social or geographical sphere that would make her correspond to a specific set of norms. Her body along with linguistic ability serves as the recurring



elements in the evolution of Hiroko Tanaka's character, in understanding and defining her own self. As such, the way she is presented in the narrative as a hibakusha i.e. a survivor of the bomb attack yet the body performs/acts 'against' the set norms and conventions which reduces her subjectivity, her character can be defined as a 'hybrid character' which can be situated in a Third Space and the body's performance as 'acting against' is the enactment of a liminal practice.

It is also interesting to note that the body in the narrative also serves as the starting point of the text. In the prologue the readers are introduced to a nameless figure, a body that is stripped and shackled and is made known to us through the actions of the body. The very use of the word 'it' to describe the body gives us the idea that the individual is defined by the body and the name becomes irrelevant. The body here expresses subjectivity through the physical actions of stripping and shackling. A probable reason that why Shamsie places the idea of the body in the prologue itself can be that she tries to show the body as the foundation of subjectivity. The body's initial movements are marked by 'efficiency' and it is only as it gets closer to revealing itself entirely that the movement begins to slow. Despite the coldness and the fear, the body does not bend under pressure and is determined to remain standing.

Conclusion:

To conclude, it can be said that Hiroko acknowledges the fact that she is a hibakusha. She never totally denies the fact. This is evident in her understanding of the pain of the people involved in the 9/11 attack of New York. She herself is a survivor and so is able to understand the pain and grief of the homeless people. She associates the concept of 'Hibakusha' with the people who are in pain and is empathetic towards them. She is able to see how "nations can applaud when their governments drop a second nuclear bomb" (Shamsie, 362). Her experience and capacity to draw parallel between the bombing of Nagasaki in 1945 and fifty-seven years after in New York is embedded in her body which has witnessed both the events in different context. She herself is a grief-stricken person, a hibakusha and so she has enough humanity to feel the pain of others. Thus, this makes her stance global and humane. Also the fact that her character is progressive in nature is evident when she acknowledges the fact that "outside the world went on" (Shamsie, 363). This is the reality of life that the world continues to go on. Hiroko thus serves as the microcosm of the bigger picture of war and how it is necessary to rebuild oneself in spite of all the hardships and sufferings.

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Article Received: 15/09/2025

Article Accepted: 26/09/2025

Published Online: 30/09/2025

To Cite the Article: *Hussain, Anjumara.* “The Body as a ‘Performative Act’ in Constructing Identity in Kamila Shamsie’s *Burnt Shadows*.” *Literary Cognizance: An International Refereed/Peer Reviewed e-Journal of English Language, Literature and Criticism*, Vol.-VI, Issue-2, September, 2025, 177-183. www.literarycognizance.com

