Ecumenical Environmental Ethics In Shamsie’s Burnt Shadows: A Study Of Occidental And Anti-Occidental Patterns

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Abstract
This paper reads Shamsie’s fifth novel, Burnt Shadows (2009) as writing beyond borders and studies its characters as occidentalized beings participating in a moral and cognitive venture against oppression as Ashis Nandy would argue. Examining the storyline of this text, this paper offers a theoretical insight into occidental and anti-occident modes of being in different characters of the novel. It also studies how the writer, intertwining the personal with the political, navigates through the temporality and spatiality of its plot. This paper analysis the importance of this span over half a century and a travel from Nagasaki to Delhi to Guantanamo Bay for an informed environmental ethics exhibited through the occidental and anti-occidental features of different characters of the novel. Consequently, it evaluates how these characters belonging to different backgrounds become a means of an ecumenical environmental ethics representing an important aspect of human coexistence.

Keywords: Burnt Shadows, occidentism, anti-occidentism, ecumenism, environmental ethic

“[E]ither I am nobody, or I’m a nation” (Chambers 2017, 3).

Our soul discovers itself when we
come into contact with a great mind,’
(Iqbal’s dictum with reference to Goethe)(Herzog 1999, 4)

Situating the text: A brief Overview
Burnt Shadows (2009) is Kamila Shamsie’s fifth novel and quite different from any of her earlier novels in terms of the milieu depicted in this novel. The novel begins with the character of Hiroko Tanaka, a young Japanese school teacher of German language, in love with Konrad
Weiss, a German writer in a war-torn Nagasaki. Konrad had come to Nagasaki in 1938 when his brother-in-law, Burton, an official of British Empire in the sub-continent, had offered him to occupy a house of his uncle in Nagasaki instead of coming to Burton’s house in Delhi. The story starts on the bright sunny morning of 9th August 1945, the fateful day of the atomic bombing on Nagasaki. The love of Hiroko and Konrad Weiss is a typical love of war where human beings or lovers come together irrespective of their background. In the first scene of the novel Konrad is just departing from Hiroko after a lovers’ tittle-tattle when suddenly everything blackens out for Hiroko. When she regains consciousness, she comes to realize that her life has come to a dead halt. The shadow of the departing Konrad’s torso is etched against a black stone just as the flying cranes on the back of her kimono are burnt into her back as a permanent disfigurement. She becomes a hibakusha, a surviving victim of atomic bombing. After the closure of this beautiful chapter of her love with Konrad and the complete destruction of her city and her family including her father, who is pictured before his death as a horrifying and painful charred figure of an alligator due to the bomb, her free spirit takes her to Delhi, to Konrad’s half-sister’s home, the Burtons as she has nowhere else to go to.

Konrad’s half-sister, Elizabeth (Ilse) and her husband James Burton take good care of her. It is there in Delhi that Hiroko gets another chance for life when Ilse’s young son, Henry Burton’s favorite personal tutor, Sajjad Ashraf, a sensitive person and a gentleman, shows a genuine interest in Hiroko. Both move to Karachi after they get married and the doors for Sajjad to go back to Delhi are closed forever after the partition of 1947. This was because he, being a Muslim, had opted to go to Pakistan. Thus, he is forced to sever his ties with India after partition. Burtons had already sent their only child Henry (lovingly nicknamed Harry) to England for education and thus the narrative moves into the next segment of the lives of these characters. Hiroko and Sajjad’s only son Raza (who stands for frustrated youth in Pakistan) becomes involved with the Afghans in Karachi. He learns Pashto from the driver of his school van and somehow lands in Kabul with his Afghan friend Abdullah, due to an initially flagrant disregard of his parents’ wishes and by keeping them in complete darkness of his activities.

Harry Burton who enters his life at this point works undercover for an American company. It is Harry who saves him due to the moral obligation he feels he owes to Sajjad Ashraf, Raza’s father and his favorite teacher from his childhood. It was after the death of Sajjad that Harry becomes the guardian angel and God father to Raza by offering to take care of his education. Harry employs Raza with himself as the latter has mastered different languages. Hiroko goes to New York to her old-time friend and benefactor Ilse, after the death of Sajjad. The ensuing swirling events of this well-knit linear plot show that the women of Burton family, Ilse, Harry Burton’s daughter Kim and Hiroko Ashraf are living securely in New York, while their men, i.e. Harry (Ilse’s son and Kim’s father) and Raza (Hiroko’s son) are working undercover in Afghanistan. In the final events of the plot Harry gets killed by some Afghan rebel and Raza is alleged with Harry’s murder. His old time Afghan friends smuggle him out of Afghanistan via Iran and Muscat to New York. Due to a fatal misunderstanding, in an abortive attempt to rescue Abdullah, Raza’s old time Afghan friend, he is handed in to the police by Kim. That is how the plot of the novel confirms the prologue where Raza is shown in orange clothes in Guantanamo Bay. Eleanor Lowenthal calls Burnt Shadows (2009) as “quite a find [which] moves with dizzying but seamless grace from Nagasaki in 1945, through India,
Pakistan and Afghanistan, and culminates in post-9/11 New York [...] combining a rip-roaring plot while asking some of the hardest and most poignant questions of our age” (Lowenthal 2009, 13). This novel thus asks the questions about identity, loyalty, and bigotry (neologized, in one way, as Global War on Terror), which can provoke mindless bombing of Nagasaki, even though the bombers and the world at large had seen the horrors of the same bombing three days prior in Hiroshima.

Identity Quests of Occidentalized Beings

The issues of identity in Burnt Shadows (2009) are dealt with in a different manner than some other contemporary works like The Reluctant Fundamentalist (2007) and Home Boy (2010) because the time period taken into consideration in Burnt Shadows (2009) spans more than half a century. It has been said that “Shamsie [has explored] the meaning of cultural identity through characters who endure sacrifice, betrayal, and human made disaster as they live and work in countries foreign to them” (Vredevoogd 2009, 97). Shamsie has embodied the spirit of identity that transcends all boundaries in the character of Hiroko. She starts from the war-torn Japan, goes to colonized British India, makes Pakistan her home and then starts her life in New York a little prior to 9/11. She may be taken as a true spirit of “the concept of hybridity [which] militates against ‘restrictive notions of cultural identity’ that result in political separatism, as seen in nationalistic movements or in identity politics” (Leitch et al. 2378). Being an embodiment of “concept of hybridity” because of her favoring western (occidental) patterns of life, Hiroko embarks upon the journey to Delhi to explore different aspects of her identity when she appears at the door of James Burton without any qualms of being rejected.

It was earlier though, while she was still in Japan and prior to the bombing of Nagasaki that the writer has used the technique of pathetic fallacy to highlight the first instance which leads to identity issues of characters in later part of the novel. It is when Hiroko first notices that due to the shortage of food during the war, the flower beds of the city of Nagasaki were replaced with the more functional patches of land for growing food. Shamsie phrases this forced conversion by asking a rhetorical question, “How to explain to the earth that it was more functional as a vegetable patch than a flower garden, just as factories were more functional than schools and boys were more functional as weapons than as humans” (Shamsie 2009, 6). The question directed to the earth has implicit references for humanity. The use/ misuse of the earth as merely a means of mechanical production; a capitalist’s avarice rendering factories as more important than the education of human beings and finally human resource being misaligned to become destructors are the changes which will raise questions not only about one’s identity but may also raise questions about one’s purpose of existence.

Harry Burton, Sajjad’s student and Ilse and James’ son undergoes an identity metamorphosis when he is bullied by his fellow students as “Maharaja Fritz” (Shamsie 2009, 127) and because of being half German, when sent to the boarding school in England during the Second World War. It was only Sajjad’s guidance that makes his day and with the skills he had learnt from him he is able to outdo his fellow students. He becomes “something of a school hero” (Shamsie 2009, 127). That accounts for his becoming wistful whenever he even takes Sajjad’s name. His second shift in identity comes at the age of eleven when he is told by his father, James that he needs to join his mother in New York after the two of them had divorced.
each other. It was a great blow for an eleven-year-old because he is uprooted from a place where he had created a niche for himself. Harry however gets a different atmosphere in the school of New York. He comes to realize that he is surrounded by boys of different nationalities with “no whiff of the Old World about them” (Shamsie 2009, 127). His diligence at learning baseball also pays off and he gets comfortably settled in New York. It is quite naturalized a shift in his personality that he experiences in New York with no issue of identity crisis. Shamsie writes:

But Harry watched not only himself but also the other sons of immigrants as they made their way through the school year, and understood that America allowed – no, insisted on – migrants as part of its national fabric in a way no other country had ever done. All you had to do was show yourself willing to be American. (Shamsie 2009, 127)

Shamsie is not alone in acknowledging this openness of the city of New York. Hamid and Naqvi have also talked about the favorable grooves the city provided for them and therefore were regarded as “hard core, home boys” (Naqvi 2010, 73).

The names of characters in Shamsie’s novel allude to different personality traits they exhibit. The character of Harry Burton is an allusion to Harry Truman the American President from 1945-49, if not in character traits then in name only; Truman, who made the decision to use nuclear weapons in Japan in 1945. Kim, Harry Burton’s daughter, is a reference to Rudyard Kipling’s novel Kim (1901), for she too is shown as a person who has willy-nilly accepted the multiplicity of her lineage. Konrad Weiss is depicted as a person of mixed race with German and British roots. There is a distinct allusion in his name to Joseph Conrad, the great novelist of the twentieth century who openly wrote about imperialism in his writings. He was Polish and got acquainted with English literature through the books his father brought to him in translation. It was his fighting and indomitable spirit which made him write in a foreign language which he started learning at the age of twenty-two. Konrad Weiss likewise is allusively shown in Shamsie’s narrative as writing “longingly…about a Nagasaki filled with foreigners, one step away from cheering on an American occupation.” (Shamsie 2009, 7). This was certainly an act of treason in a war-torn Japan of 1945. These reflective nomenclatures of characters allude to the historical identity issues that their referents underwent.

Raza (Hiroko and Sajjad’s son) is shown as extremely wary of his name, Raza Konrad Ashraf, especially his middle name, Konrad. His mother may have had her psychological ties with the name and her, one time, fiancée but Raza thinks it as an anomaly and cannot bear even this name being associated with his name and even “wanted to reach into his own name and rip out the man…” (Shamsie 2009, 143). He has severe identity issues and considers himself a total misfit in his neighborhood. Although only a teenager, he cannot find anything amusing in the silly pranks that his age fellows played. For instance, when his Indian cousin from his father’s side, Altamash, comes to visit him in Karachi, his friend Bilal plays the game of asking any passerby to differentiate between the two cousins as to which one was Indian and which one was a Pakistani. Raza is extremely irritated and, to his chagrin, the dialogue which ensues between Altamash and Bilal is the final blow to throw his identity off balance. In one of such instances Altamash says that “In India when they want to insult Muslims, they call us Pakistani. Bilal laugh[s] out loud [and says,] In Pakistan when they want to insult Muhajirs they call us Indian” (Shamsie 2009, 142). Incidents like these and his constant failure in studies push him
further into an identity crisis. He considers himself a failure and a “bombed marked mongrel” (Shamsie 2009, 143) which has to extricate himself from this shamefaced situation. The shame of belonging to a mixed-race catapult this “unhappy and restless teenager” (Shamsie 2010) into declaring in front of his Afghan friend, Abdullah from the infamous Sohrab Goth in Karachi, that his father was killed by Soviets. He is “living two lives” (Shamsie 2009, 156) (BS 156). He has taken up the task of teaching English to his Afghan friends and wearing the identity of Raza Hazara while for his other friends who are pursuing their educations in universities, he is still Raza Ashraf—the failure. This identity hybridity makes him “flinch[] every time any Pakistani asked him where he was from” (Shamsie 2009, 153-4). There are certainly other factors to fuel this hybrid existence.

With the western (occidental) patterns of his life, Raza is ashamed about his origins and fabricates a lie when he tells his friend Abdullah that he no longer speaks the language of his tribe of Hazara, and he has vowed to do so till “the day the last Soviet leaves Afghanistan.” He is so determined that he vows that he would be “the one to drive out that last Soviet” (Shamsie 2009, 148). Due to his double life patterns, this youth hates even his name while on the one hand, he is a hero in front of his Afghan friends to whom he is teaching English. He becomes quite popular among his Afghan friends especially when they witness on time that Harry Burton returned Raza’s shoes that he had borrowed with a courteous bow. This is proof enough for his friends to show their extreme reverence for Raza seeing his friendship with an American. However, a total turn of events takes place when Harry is killed by someone in Afghanistan. It is at the time when Raza and Harry are in Afghanistan for some security business, of which, Raza and Harry are a part of; they are all resting in their camps after they had played a friendly match of cricket when the blame of his murder is put on Raza by Steve, Harry’s cynical colleague. At this juncture serious questions are raised in Raza’s mind regarding his identity and the balance in his personality that he had gained after getting the trust and friendship of Harry. He is thrown off balance by Steve, when he is not only denied the use of his satellite phone, but denied too, the right to attend Harry’s funeral, who had almost become a father figure for him. Not only that but he is even accused of plotting Harry’s murder.

A little before these turn of events for Raza, it is seen that Hiroko gives Raza in the trusted hands of Harry to work as a translator in his private company and she herself goes to live with her longtime friend Elizabeth (Ilse) in New York after the death of Sajjad. Kim, Harry’s daughter, has also decided to move to New York after 9/11; partly because of patriotism she naturally feels for her country and partly because she is a structural engineer resolved to play her part in rebuilding the city. Raza starts working with Harry as a translator in Afghanistan whom the latter has taken under his wings feeling indebted to his mentor. It is after 9/11 that Ilse dies with Hiroko at her bedside and Harry also comes to New York for his mother’s funeral. It is in New York at this time, that Harry is surprised at the depth of his emotions which he has for the city that was his home since the age of eleven. He is perplexed at his emotional attachment that he feels for the missing or dead people of his city which he never experienced while recording the thousands of deaths when he was in Congo at the same point and time when 9/11 happened.

Shamsie, perhaps wants to convey the depth and extent of one’s feelings that s/he feels for her/his homeland and relates it to Hiroko’s feelings during the bombing of Nagasaki and
stretching the analogy implicitly to all the people around the world belonging to any nationality. Such a comparison between the psychological and emotional states of two people, Hiroko and Harry, who are more than half a century apart and coming from different backgrounds altogether, brings forth the environmental ethical aspects that calls for a justice and equity for all. With this “epic family saga that sweeps us from the atom bomb hell of Nagasaki and Japan via colonial India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan to an angry jittery USA in the aftermath of 9/11, [Shamsie has] spread her wings geographically and otherwise, dramatizing more than half a century of world history through intertwined lives of novel’s characters” (Shamsie 2010). This causes momentarily the realization of the futility of existence, when one is engulfed by sadness over their losses but soon this abjection turns to a positive note, and we see Hiroko representing the citizenship of the world when she urges Harry to use his connections to influence CIA not to start nuclear warfare (Shamsie 2009, 207).

These chain of events get explained further in the following section which throws light on the occidental patterns of life through different characters of Shamsie’s narrative and their trajectory into anti-occidental modes of being.

**Tracing Occidental Patterns and Anti-Occidental Tropes of different Characters**

The occidental patterns of life experienced by different characters in Burnt Shadows (2009) by Kamila Shamsie have a sweet innocent flavor of more than half a century, starting back from around the Second World War, when Hiroko Tanaka as a young girl of twenty-one, is musing over the roughness of her hands because of working long hours in a factory. Initially she had been a translator but due to the war she had to toil in the factory. Shamsie says for Hiroko that “[t]his was not how she imagined twenty-one. Instead, she imagined Tokyo – Hiroko Tanaka in the big city, wearing dresses, leaving lipstick marks on wine glasses in jazz clubs, her hair cut just below the ear – single-handedly resurrecting the lifestyle of the ‘modern girl’ of the twenties whose spirit had lived on in Sutairu through the thirties” (Shamsie 2009, 12). At another point when she flees to India to Elizabeth, her fiancé Konrad’s half sister; she tells her about her life in Japan and she praises some of occidental traits in these words; “I love that about the Americans – the way they see certain kinds of craziness as signs of character” (Shamsie 2009, 43). Hiroko’s musings about “food and silk” (Shamsie 2009, 13) show the impeccable occidental wistfulness of the mid 20th century.

Similarly in the later part of the narrative when Harry (Elizabeth and James Burton’s son) re-enters Sajjad and Hiroko’s life as a long term friend, and is talking to Raza, their son, he says to him, “I don’t know how you and Kim will get along but I’m pretty sure you and America will like each other. Forget like. Love at first sight – that’s how it was for America and me. I was twelve when I went there, and I knew right away that I’d found home” (Shamsie 2009, 138). Harry’s dialogue signifies the fact that New York (for that is where he first landed) was an equally inviting place for people of Harry’s generation; it, likewise, has the capacity to embrace the young people like Raza from the post 9/11 era. It is the same with Hiroko, who comes to New York as a senior citizen later in the story after Sajjad has died and she has given Raza under Harry’s tutelage. She is pleasantly welcomed by a Pakistani cab driver, Omer, whose forthcoming attitude sets all of Hiroko’s apprehensions aside. According to Shamsie, this “mark[s] the start of her love affair with New York. A city in which she could hear Urdu,
English, Japanese, German all in the space of a few minutes. The miracle of it!” (Shamsie 2009, 218). Likewise, at the end of the narrative, when Raza is conversing with his friend Abdullah, who is about to embark upon a homeward journey to Pakistan; Abdullah suddenly bursts out about his association with New York when he says, “‘New York is home... New York is my home. The taxi drivers are my family’” (Shamsie 2009, 267). It’s interesting to note that all the characters of all the narratives discussed so far develop a never dying affinity with New York. But it is seen that for some reasons Raza becomes the victim of the circumstances and ends up in Guantanamo Bay.

The nature of anti-occident overture presented in Burnt Shadows (2009) starts from a time before the end of Second World War. An environmentally ethical anti-occident thought is voiced through the character of Sajjad, a perfect example of Bhabha’s “national comprador classes” (Bhabha 2001, 2380) as he is the dependable link between the masters and the menial staff in the household of Burtons prior to the independence of Pakistan. His remark about the British ruling India at that time speaks for his repressed smoldering of emotions when he says, “they’ve reached the end of their history. They’ll go back to their cold island and spend the next ten generations dreaming of everything they’ve lost” (Shamsie 2009, 36). Here anti-occident thought pattern of Sajjad reflected the emotions of millions of Muslims / Indians who perhaps shared his thoughts of packing off the British to their lands.

Hiroko’s entry into the household of Burtons in Delhi marks the beginning of her slight attraction towards Sajjad, who is giving her Urdu lessons; because learning languages is Hiroko’s forte. During this stay, whenever she attends any parties, she always feels an “undercurrent of [British] condescension” (Hamid 2007, 33). It is the same as Changez felt with Erica’s father’s probing questions about his home country or like Shahzad’s dialogue with Duck when she confronts him by saying, “I don’t get you guys” (Naqvi 2010, 72). Hiroko always feels that she is the object of scrutiny for the British ladies, who hurl all sorts of questions her way in order to remind her of her place at the parties. Though Hiroko is extremely grateful to the Burtons who are taking good care of her and giving her things but she is “all too conscious that they were hers by generosity, not by right” (Shamsie 2009, 45). True that she had no right (being only a betrothed of Elizabeth’s half brother Konrad and from an entirely different nation) but she has a right to live in this world just like anybody else, which she proves by becoming a citizen of the world (Aamir 2016) (Aamir 2020).

Environmentally Informed Anti-Occidentalism and Foucauldian Inference of Faulty Interpretations Due to Modern Power

Sajjad and Hiroko’s environmentally informed anti-occident feelings, related so far, have certain grounds which are voiced by other characters also, throughout the narrative. However, there are a series of events in the plot of the narrative which give room for some faulty interpretations and can be used erroneously as manipulative agents. The first is the grounds for the annulment of marriage of Burtons. The plot of the novel does not provide enough discussion for their divorce and instances like Elizabeth giving away the diamond set to Hiroko (Shamsie 2009, 92), which was earlier given to her by her husband James Burton, seems to be a pointless void of marital fissure. The same was pointed out by a member in the audience during the interview of Shamsie by Harriet Gilbert when a questioner from the
audience pointed out that she was an actress and if she were to play that part she could not get enough matter to make the scenes of their marital affairs more real (Shamsie, Kamila Shamsie-Burnt Shadows 2010). However, since James is British and his wife Ilse German, there can be a possible symbolic inference.

There is another blanket assertion depicted in the plot of Burnt Shadows (2009). It is regarding the issue of waywardness of Raza, Sajjad and Hiroko’s son which results from faulty interpretation of facts. He is shown to fail in the subject of Islamic studies repeatedly in the higher secondary school which results in his inability to eventually secure a position in any university and consequently to become a symbol of frustrated, angry youth of Pakistan. This assertion is supported by thoughts of different characters. For instance when Raza fails this subject, Sajjad, his father is made to say to him by his wife Hiroko that “These things happen” and he can take a chance next time. But on his way out Sajjad curses the government under his breath for imposing religion into everything public. And that the government should have “more shame than to ask all citizens to conduct their love affairs with the Almighty out in the open” (Shamsie 2009, 109). The labeling of religion as a “love affair with Almighty” is an understanding of religion which can certainly be disputed and has a lot of room for argument. This statement tantamount to an open admission for the dislike of the subject of Islamic studies in particular because it is seen that a student may take to a dislike of any subject. It will further lead to uncalled for faulty interpretations. For, strictly speaking, though there may be some questions which can be raised as to the ways of conduction of the subject, but in actual practice it is hardly seen that students get failed in this subject repeatedly as Raza does in the narrative (majority of them make it through no matter how badly they do in the exam).

The reasons for Raza’s frustration, if at all traced to failing in exam, can hardly be made to trace back to the subject of Islamic studies. It is perhaps the vicarious understanding of religion symbolized in Raza that has pushed young people of our nation into this mode of interpretation or it may be the political scene throughout our national history that is the cause of this distancing. One of the other repercussions of his failing in this particular subject is, perhaps, the faulty interpretations that other nations buildup for a nation like Pakistan, which may lead to further voids.

Another episode which adds to such interpretations is Raza’s trip to Peshawar. While he is there, Raza finds “the sight of women shrouded as though they were walking dead as [something unacceptable and which makes] him want to scream” (Shamsie 2009, 196). On the other hand his promiscuous behavior is perceived as perfectly normal. And, while making his escape via Iran, Raza’s pickup comes along a car full of women; Raza’s driver friend Ahmed, asks the women in a frolicking manner as to who would marry him and who would marry his friend Raza. The women are shown not only to reply in the same wantonly manner but are shown to wave and hurl “air kisses” (Shamsie 2009, 253) at the two boys. Instances like these give somewhat colored inference, and lead to faulty interpretations due to fallacious narration of facts. It leads one to question the role of modern power because it accepts promiscuity as something most natural where as “shrouded” (Shamsie 2009, 196) women are taken as something unacceptable. The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism (2001) cites Foucault’s argument, “that modern power produces the very categories, desires, and actions it strives to regulate” (Leitch 2001, 1619). This implies that modern power espouses two-
facedness. Such faulty interpretations can only be taken as passing jabs and invite an array of unwanted and unwarranted criticism which further leads to the use of such reprobated information for manipulative agendas that may be employed to suit one’s advantage. Resultantly, it may generate unfounded anti-occident thought terrains.

There is also the issue of the nuclear testing of Pakistan. The character of Yoshi Watanabe, an old time Japanese acquaintance of Hiroko comes to Pakistan in a group of Hibakusha’s (nuclear bomb affected people) “determined to say what he could to turn Pakistan away from the idea of nuclear tests” (Shamsie 2009, 219). One is compelled to ask as to what may be the point of making such a big deal about a completely safe nuclear test. It may provide certain grounds for faulty interpretations because it was only to bring home one’s strength and nothing more; a counter balancing effect that needed to be created for maintaining peace and stability in the region. It may raise questions at the judicial prerogative employed to avoid any untoward happening in the region; for the initiator of these tests was never sent any delegations of hibakushas, i.e. the eastern neighbor of Pakistan and in this case as Hamid says “the larger and—at the moment in history—the more belligerent of them” (Hamid 2007, 86). This leads the discussion unnecessarily to an invidious understanding of the state of affairs.

Harry Burton’s character projects, to a great extent, the rationality of the American nation. He starts his professional trajectory in the Cold War period, “64” with the belief “that communism had to be crushed so that the US could be the world’s only Super power” (Shamsie 2009, 128). But he had believed that this power will be “concentrated in a nation of migrants. .. a single democratic country in power, whose citizens were connected to every nation in the world;” a nation whose “most abiding characteristic [would be] justice.” He wanted to be a part of this democratic world which the “Dreamers and poets” had dreamt about. Around 9/11 he “cared just as passionately …., but it had been a long time since he’d thought about it in relation to justice, let alone dreamers and poets” (Shamsie 2009, 129). Thus his belief in the cause that he started off with, seems to be shaken as he sees its remoteness to the factor of justice.

His initial conviction about his adopted nation to be the first in the world is a reflection of Bertrand Russell’s essay, The Future of Mankind (1950). In this essay Russell favored that America should be the “unitary government of mankind” (Russell 1950, 1972, 37) because it gives “freedom of thought, freedom of inquiry, freedom of discussion and humane feeling” (Russell 1950, 1972, 39). Russell favored America against Russia because according to him Russia tends to fix up a person and make him disappear mysteriously if he happens to disagree with the authorities (Russell 1950, 1972, 40). One wonders if Russell’s ideas would have changed like Harry if he were alive today and were to see his apprehended phenomena associated with Russia prevalent in his favored Super Power itself. Perhaps it will confound this great 20th century rationalist thinker in the same way at it has done the different characters of these narratives, even the rationalist Americans symbolized as Harry Burton.

This is the point in the narrative when the life of the Burtons and Ashrafs do overlap because Harry is often in Pakistan for his work and on his last visit to Karachi when Sajjad asks Harry to leave because of some difference of opinion between them, Hiroko had walked him to the front door as a gesture of goodwill and to tell him that Sajjad’s fury was temporary and as for Raza, she says that he still has to mature. Harry does not nurse any grudge against
Sajjad. However, his talk after 9/11 with his colleague, Steve, marks the beginning of the breach for creating bad blood between the two nations. In one of these conversations with Harry, Steve says, “What do you think? Does the ISI do a better job of spying on us than we do on them? You think they know yet they might soon have Israel to thank for supplying arms to their Holy Warriors” (Shamsie 2009, 152)? These are bold comments which manifest the manipulative agents in the stance of American government personified in the character of Steve. Harry, on the other hand has mixed feelings of “satisfaction, irony and despair [for] now [he thought] the war was truly international” (Shamsie 2009, 153). Harry muses over the fact that all along:

> It had been a three-way affair: Egypt provided the Soviet-made arms, America provided financing, training and technological assistance, and Pakistan provided the base for training camps. But now, the war was truly international. Arms from Egypt, China and—soon—Israel. Recruits from all over the Muslim world. Training camps in Scotland! There was even a rumour that India might be willing to sell on some of the arms they had bought from their Russian friends – even though it might prove to be little more than a rumour. Harry couldn’t help enjoying the idea of Pakistan, India and Israel working together in America’s war. Here was internationalism, powered by capitalism. (Shamsie 2009, 153)

These manipulative agents and circumstances trigger a disillusionment experienced by the character of Raza in the narrative. All the manipulative devices seem to have joined hands as an unseen force to bring forth a change to something exactly opposite of their goal. Foucault believes that “Modern power requires increasingly narrow categories through which it analyzes, differentiates, identifies and administers individuals” (Leitch et al. 1620). Foucault had argued it in terms of sexual desires but applying the same argument to anti-occident vicissitudes it is witnessed that the modern power of 9/11 has produced the same anti-occident elements that it had wanted to restrict.

These anti-occident feelings are strengthened for Raza, on the death of his father, Sajjad. It so happens that after the departure of his angry young son, Sajjad goes off to inquire about him from a local rickshaw driver, Sher Muhammad, who is Harry’s local driver too. Sher Muhammad is basically a dealer in arms trafficking from the Karachi harbor to the mujahedeen. At the precise moment when Sajjad calls out his name from behind he is deeply immersed in an argument about his supply of arms. When Sher Muhammad turns around he does not see Sajjad as an acquaintance but a person whom Harry had called as his “first teacher.” Before he pulls the trigger Sher Muhammad had automatically presumed this “unassuming muhajir in Nazimabad [as somebody] involved in training CIA agents” (Shamsie 2009, 180). This whole episode is the cause for Raza’s frustration and feelings of remorse. Where, Harry’s genuine grief at Sajjad’s death is something imperceptible by Steve, his colleague. Steve rebukes him saying, “How exactly is it your fault that an irresponsible kid ran off and a thieving son of a bitch panicked and pulled a trigger” (Shamsie 2009, 182)? Although it is not Harry’s fault yet his conscientious self is constantly nagged by a liberal guilt. Raza on the other hand first blames Harry for his father’s death but then realizes that his father died because he had gone to look for him. This guilt of Raza and liberal guilt of Harry is perhaps the ecumenical factor which makes Harry to leave CIA and both he and Raza start work together in “the administrative side
of private security” (Shamsie 2009, 189). Hiroko moves into Elizabeth’s apartment after finally securing Raza’s waivered pursuits involving Afghans into a career with Harry. Little did she know that their line of work will eventually take them to Afghanistan! These apparently smooth sets of affairs precipitate another series of anti-occident elements triggered by manipulative devices of Steve.

In the course of events Raza, like his father, becomes the perfect example of Bhabha’s “comprador classes” (Bhabha 2001, 2380) for though he belongs to “Third Country Nationals [but was always exempted] by virtue of pay scale rather than passport” (Shamsie 2009, 192).

It is the same thing which Changez experienced in Manila when the locals did not extend the same respect the way they were to the American members of the company of Underwood Samson. Likewise Raza’s working with Harry earns him a great deal of respect which he is enjoying thoroughly. He displays a life pattern which is completely occident in nature. It is only after 9/11 that a great change takes place in the state of affairs. At this time both Harry and Raza are working in “United States Military” (Shamsie 2009, 195). Due to the nature of his job whenever Harry visits his mother Ilse and Hiroko living with her in New York, he is gripped with a sharp sense of foreboding. He knows that his mother will think that he has gone “paranoid” (Shamsie 2009, 208) because he is constantly grappling with fear in Afghanistan.

It is quite a shaken state of mind that he is in, which according to him, tantamount to anti-occident insurgence in thought patterns—which are going to hold sway for some time to come.

Gwen Vredevoogd, in the Picador reviews for Burnt Shadows (2009), likewise, has used almost the same words when she says, “paranoid New York following 9/11” (Vredevoogd 2009, 97).

Harry is a character that is shown to have the temerity to, if not call, then, at least, think a spade a spade. He feels that manipulative devices only broaden the divides, never conciliate them. That is why “He had always been uneasy about the introduction of ‘foreign fighters’ into the Afghans’ war against the Soviets” (Shamsie 2009, 210). America’s stance in the Afghan Soviet war of the 80s was only, that down trodden people should be helped in order to find nobility and salvation from a super power. This seems to be a kind of naive approach if we take their word on its face value and something which coincides with Harry’s thought. “Foucault argues, [], that ‘truth’ is always a part of a ‘regime’” (qtd. in Leitch 1620). Harry seems to Know this fact in the depth of his heart, and therefore, it was only a kind of “lingering idealism” (Shamsie 2009, 210) on his part that stops him from openly declaring that “he could find no corresponding nobility in the men who arrived to fight infidels who had overtaken a Muslim land. [To him] it seemed so medieval… [He says.] We make a desolation and call it peace” (Shamsie 2009, 210). It seems that almost like a seer Harry can discern that this desolation will take its toll. He knows that around the nineties “people around [him] got stupid [and] it made [him] cranky.” This is the precise reason for his quitting CIA because he had feared a “Jehadi blowback.” He thinks “CIA’s decision to turn its back on Afghanistan after the Soviet withdrawal” (Shamsie 2009, 211) as an extremely grievous mistake.

It was because of grievous mistakes of yesterday that after 9/11 “Things shifted. The island seemed tiny, people views shrunken” (Shamsie 2009, 218). It is in lieu of this diminution of views in New York that manipulative devices like Steve force Raza on an unwarranted anti-occident trajectory. While in Afghanistan after a congenial match played between the locals and Americans, Raza gets a call on his satellite phone. His long time Afghan friend Abdullah’s
brother Ismail asks for Raza’s help. Raza promises to pull strings to help Abdullah out of America, who was now a cab driver in New York. Raza is on such intimate terms with Harry that he calls Harry’s daughter, Kim, from Harry’s phone while Harry is resting for a while (since Raza himself doesn’t have her number). Although it is their first mutual conversation but both Raza and Kim talk with such a familiarity as if they have known each other for a long time. Raza asks for her help to take Abdullah across the border into Canada. Though she never promises anything but the perfectly benign conversations, one with Abdullah’s brother and the other with Kim, are later used against Raza by Steve; because, unfortunately Harry gets gunned down immediately after the phone calls. Unwittingly Raza is thrown into the bracket of anti-occidental stance by Steve who accuses Raza of being responsible for Harry’s murder. Although Raza has nothing to do with his murder; he suffers doubly so, one for being alleged of plotting Harry’s murder and the other to bear the death of the only friend i.e. Harry in the hostile company of Steve. Earlier while talking to Kim his dialogue bore his ethical anti-occidental stance because his friend Abdullah, was being harassed baselessly. Raza’s words may be taken as the voice of any rational and objective person who is the citizen of this world when he says, “He’s terrified. He’s an Afghan who ran from the FBI. These days that’s the kind of thing your paranoid nation thinks is evidence of terrorism” (Shamsie 2009, 226). It is ironical though that it is not only Raza but Harry himself who seem to have been voicing anti-occidental thoughts.

Harry had thought that the grievous mistakes of America are responsible for the “blowback” (Shamsie 2009, 211); and Raza, who initially belonged to Pakistan but was now the citizen of Miami and America, a thoroughly occidental character, to be saying almost the same thing that his mentor, Harry, a true American, had said earlier. There is a lot of allegorical text in this part of the narrative, for instance, the whole story of Raza and Harry's friendship is symbolic and Steve represents all the factions bent on bringing a scapegoat onto the altar, or in other words calling a dog by a bad name and hanging him too. All these episodes are a quaint and befitting example of all that has gone wrong or made to go wrong in the name of patriotism. Shifting loyalties of nations and “truth[s of] regime[s]” (qtd. in Leitch 1620) do pose threat to the ongoing peaceful or harmonious coexistence in the world.

In order to counter the manipulating agents of propaganda and the media personified as Steve, characters like Kim are depicted as all those “Americans suffering from liberal guilt” (Shamsie 2009, 258). It is this liberal guilt that compels her to talk to Raza after she hears about her father’s death, even though he is being alleged with Harry’s murder. She wants to inquire directly from Raza about the last moments of Harry’s life. Though she is denied that right when Harry’s phone is received not by Raza but by Steve, who refuses to put him through. Her guilt urges her to comply with Raza’s earlier request of taking Abdullah across the border. It seems that the feelings of liberal guilt and the ideas take turns in Kim’s thoughts. Sometimes she recalls that the phrase “God bless America” written on the small flags jutting out of the back windows of cars and bumpers etc as more of an “advertisement rather than imperative” (Shamsie 2009, 159). At other times she finds the image of a car driven by a non-American person right across the stuffed toys, placed in the centre of road, in remembrance of the world trade centre, as “grotesque.” Kim is shown as a character, who like her father, knows her reaction only to be as “misguided American empathy – [i.e.] cluster bomb the Afghans but for
God’s sake don’t drive over the pink rabbits” (Shamsie 2009, 260). Kim, is therefore torn between her loyalties and guilt.

Apart from being written in third person, the narrative of Burnt Shadows (2009) is different from its peer narratives of The Reluctant Fundamentalist (2007) and Home Boy (2010) because it employs not only Pakistani characters but also the American characters themselves to have realized the reasons for anti-occident factors displayed in these narratives. The American characters seem to know that environmentally ethical anti-occident feelings surge when a discrepancy is exhibited towards certain nations or certain factions of humanity. It is this discrepancy and a manipulative twist of events that lead characters like Abdullah to say metaphorically (while he is on his way to Canada with Kim):

War is like disease… countries like yours they always fight wars, but always somewhere else. The disease always happens somewhere else. It’s why you fight more wars than anyone else; because you understand war least of all. You need to understand it better. (Shamsie 2009, 260)

It is quite a stark comment which has an implicit reference to the point in history which resulted in the bombing of Nagasaki (the contention of the whole narrative of Burnt Shadows). The reference continues to this day to all the wars fought in Vietnam, Korea, Gulf war, Afghanistan, Iraq, Yemen, Syria, and so on. War in Iraq and drone attacks in Pakistan, also fall into the same category.

It is in the end of the narrative of Burnt Shadows (2009) the most balanced character and the metaphorical citizen of not one place but the whole world, Hiroko, is forced to make certain remarks. It is after Kim had gone through all the trouble of taking Abdullah across the border that she tries to hand him in, over to the authorities. It is only an unfortunate twist of events—a reversal of fortune for Raza; as he rises to the occasion, and in order to honor his word of rescuing Abdullah from America sends him through the backdoor of the café, then impersonating him allows himself to be taken by the authorities. It is too late by the time Kim realizes that it is not Abdullah, but Raza whom the authorities have handcuffed and therefore Raza ends up in Guantanamo Bay. It seems that his misfortune makes him fall into the lap of America. After all the hardships he bore in coming out of the clutches of Steve, he is only to find that he is out of the frying pan but has landed straight into the fire. It is at Kim’s return to the apartment after this episode of Raza’s incarceration that Hiroko speaks out these environmentally ethical anti-occident remarks to Kim because Kim had started to justify her act. Hiroko states:

I think you’re too scared and too angry to be allowed to make a judgment… Ilse once accused Sajjad of being a rapist. For all of two minutes she thought he was a rapist. She told me afterwards, those were two minutes in which she was lost. And look at you now, Ilse’s granddaughter. You don’t even know you’re lost. (Shamsie 2009, 274)

Hiroko seems to have recapitulated the justification of all anti-occident elements of the whole narrative when she continues to comment about all that had happened so far in the narrative with these words:

You just have to put them in a little corner of the big picture. In the big picture of the Second World War, what was seventy-five thousand more Japanese dead? Acceptable, that’s what it was. In the big picture of threats to America, what is one Afghan?
Expendable. Maybe he’s guilty, maybe not. Why risk it? Kim, you are the kindest, most generous woman I know. But right now, because of you, I understand for the first time how nations can applaud when their governments drop a second nuclear bomb. (Shamsie 2009, 275)

The bitterness and dejection in Hiroko’s words are a manifestation of the views expressed in the article written by Nick Cohen, How the Left was Lost (2006). This article is a review of two books, one of them written by Ian Buruma. Cohen declares that “Buruma is uncomfortable with brown-skinned people who take ideas of human freedom too literally” (Cohen 1996, 2006, 58). Hiroko’s words and the bechance of Raza’s fate bespeak of the “prejudice and persecution” (Gorrara 2003, 590-601) which people like them have over looked in their naiveté. This negated humanism is severely criticized by Frantz Fanon’s The Wretched of the Earth (1967) in these words: “For centuries they have stifled almost the whole of humanity in the name of a so-called spiritual experience. Look at them swaying between atomic and spiritual disintegration” (Gagnier 2002, 179). Where the denouement of this narrative is sad, it is equally eye opening. Eyes that need to capture the terrain of events in historical perspective. The narrative of this novel endorses that when the pattern gets repeated after almost every decade then it is not chance it is almost a habit. This habit is checked ethically in this narrative of Burnt Shadows (2009). Its narrative work implicitly as well as explicitly to achieve the ecumenical dimension through its plot.

Burnt Shadows (2009) employs a number of modes to express ecumenical features throughout the novel. After the bombing of Nagasaki Hiroko’s free spirit makes her take an unprecedented course. She throws caution to the wind and comes to the Burtons house in Delhi. The only justification for Hiroko’s coming to the Burtons is that Elizabeth Burton is the half sister of Hiroko’s dead fiancé, Konrad. Being good in learning languages Hiroko starts taking Urdu lessons from Sajjad, Burton’s employee. During one of these lessons, when Hiroko becomes sad on account of thinking about Konrad, Sajjad asks her, “There is a phrase I have heard in English: to leave someone alone with their grief. Urdu has no equivalent phrase. It only understands the concept of gathering around and becoming ‘ghum-khaur’ – grief-eaters – who take in the mourner’s sorrow. Would you like me to be in English or Urdu right now” (Shamsie 2009, 55)? This rhetorical question carries an implicit suggestion that language is just a medium to express human feelings, because emotions are universal in nature. Similarly moral obligation in a civilized world is something which transcends human made boundaries of place and culture; therefore at one point in the narrative the same is expressed by the author while narrating a minor incident. It is when Kim, Harry Burton’s daughter, goes to buy a movie which the shopkeeper deems as inappropriate for a “fifteen-years-old” (Shamsie 2009, 125); Kim takes it ill in the natural stride peculiar to her age bracket and says to him, “If there’s a law against me taking that other movie, fine. But “appropriateness” is not something you get to decide about.” This makes the shopkeeper muse over the outburst of the teenager expressed in these words; “He almost laughed at this strange hierarchy which placed the law above advice by an elder…” (Shamsie 2009, 125). This minor incident has certainly an ecumenical dimension.

In her article Confrontational Sites: cultural conflicts, social inequality and sexual politics in the work of Rukhsana Ahmad (2004), the writer Christiane Schlote has explained
Shamsie “[a]s a writer whose routes led her to England but whose roots remain firmly anchored in the socio-political realities of a postcolonial country” (Schlote 2004, 85). Therefore the whole plot has several referrals to the presumably religious story of a spider weaving a web on the cave’s opening where the Prophet of Islam had taken refuge during his journey from Mecca to Medina. Shamsie has used this parable to allude to the situations of most of the characters in the novel. Konrad Weiss, a German sought refuge with a Japanese girl, Hiroko Tanaka. She, in turn, took refuge with the Burtons, British and German, in Delhi. She later gets married to an Indian, Sajjad Ashraf, who becomes a Pakistani and then their lives get entwined with each other through their next generation, Harry and his daughter Kim, Americans, and Raza, a Pakistani. At one point therefore, Shamsie refers to the story of the spider and says, “This story had passed hands between their two families for three generations. In Afghanistan, Harry had pointed this out and said, ‘You need to tell it to Kim. Weiss-Burtons and Tanaka-Ashrafs – we are each other’s spiders’” (Shamsie 2009, 265). The way the lives of all these characters show interdependency is a clear indication of the writer’s attempt at bringing out ecumenical dimensions in the narrative.

This politicized culture can be taken as the house of a spider in metaphorical terms, but "وان اوھن البیوت لبیت العنکبوت لو کا تعلمون (trans.) Behold, the frailest of all houses is the house of a spider. Could they but understand this” (Quran 29: 41)! The frailty of this politicized culture can only be improved by seeking ecumenism or syncretism that works for an environmentally ethical world with environmental, social, and economical justice for all people living in this world. Therefore, the works of post 9/11 Pakistani diasporic fictional writers like Hamid, Naqvi, and Shamsie seem to be carrying forward Fanon’s prognostication that the Third World must start over “a new history of man” (Fanon 1963, 315).

Works Cited


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