The Performance of Identity in Kamila Shamsie’s *Burnt Shadows*

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Relevant events that have shaped or influenced Pakistan’s history or its contemporary social and political life are among the recurring elements that characterise the Pakistani literature written in English. Frequently, Pakistani fiction in English focuses on the effects of events like the Partition of the Indian Subcontinent or the 9/11 terroristic attack and how they have changed lives. When the writers discuss the influence of recent or past political occurrences, they usually reflect on the effects that such events have on the process of identity formation. This article discusses the processes of identity construction enacted by the main character in the novel *Burnt Shadows* by Kamila Shamsie focusing on the performative relationship existing between agency and identity. The aim is to explore the ways the author portrays the relationship between relevant political events and the dynamics of identity formation as they take place in a transnational dimension. The analysis shows how in the novel such events can become a driving force to enact a process of identity construction that questions certain social conventions concerning, for example, race, gender or religion, while developing critical attitudes towards nationalistic ideas of national belonging.

Kamila Shamsie is a Pakistani writer with a cosmopolitan background. Shamsie lives in Karachi but spent part of her life in the West, mainly in the United States and in Great Britain. Consequently, she has established knowledge of different cultures. All of Shamsie’s narratives, including *Burnt Shadows*, her fifth novel, are written in English. This is the language she chooses for her literary works and that allows her to address a global Anglophone audience for whom she also realises a sort of cultural translation usually explaining the culture-specific references that appear in her novels. These choices help her to create a narrative easily accessible to readers outside Pakistan and allow her books to enter the circuits of the market that characterises a globalised world where a book written in one country can be published in another to be marketed to readers all over the world. *Burnt Shadows* narrates a story that develops over the course of more than sixty years and whose main character is a Japanese woman. The tale evolves from the last moments of World War II to the immediate post-9/11, and the story moves about from place to place across the globe, each place seeing the beginning of a new chapter of the book and a new phase in the history of the characters. After the prologue, which refers to what happens in the last pages of the book and connects the beginning and the end of the novel, the story begins in Nagasaki on the 9 of August 1945 and follows the life experiences of Hiroko Tanaka, a survivor of the atomic attack. The story of Hiroko’s life journey moves first to India in 1947, where the girl receives the hospitality of the Anglo-German stepsister of her German fiancé killed in the atomic attack. There she meets Sajjad, the man that she later marries. After that, Hiroko and her husband unexpectedly find themselves in Pakistan after spending time in Istanbul during the most violent months that followed the Partition. Later, the story moves to Karachi in the 1980s, during the years of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The last part of the story is set in the United States, the country that the woman reaches to escape the risks of an atomic conflict in the Subcontinent and where she witnesses the September 2001 terrorist attack on the World Trade Center. Following the trajectory of Hiroko’s life, *Burnt Shadows* narrates the story of two families, the Asian Ashraf–Tanaka family – marked by the Nagasaki bombing and by the British colonisation of India and its subsequent Partition – and the western, colonial
Burton-Weiss family. The personal story of Hiroko, narrated in the third person, therefore intersects those of the other characters who, as a consequence of the political events, more or less intentionally, move through places, languages, and cultures. All of them face experiences such as the loss of their homeland, foreignness, and hybridity, and these shape their identities.

If, on the one hand, the author has a cosmopolitan attitude and her novel can have a global reach, on the other hand, the plot of the novel is structured by many border-crossings that have a significant role in the processes of identity formation experienced by the characters. Given these elements, it seems that the work can be read through the lens of the transnational literary studies. It can be regarded, indeed, as a text that ‘transform[s] the scope of the national literatures to which they belong and pushing beyond national boundaries to imagine the global character of modern experience, contemporary culture, and the identities they produce.’¹ The text shows a transnational perspective while developing a story where major international events, such as the bombing of Nagasaki or the war following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, set into motion a mechanism that affects the process through which the characters build their identities reacting to the events in which they are involved. The following analysis focuses on the main character, who can be understood as being an archetype of the migrant as well as of the common person whose life is directly affected by relevant events. Each of the major historical occurrences that directly touch her life are connected to a physical movement from one place to another, which also implies a movement through linguistic and cultural barriers. Placing the question of the character’s identity formation into a transnational dimension and at the same time paying attention to the relationship established between major political events and individual subjectivity allows the author to question the relationship between the ways non-state actors perform their identity and the ideas of national belonging in the globalised world. Indeed, the characters do not passively readapt their lives to the changes caused by events like the Partition of India or the 2001 World Trade Center attack, accepting the role that politics and society have given them. On the contrary, in Shamsie’s novel, such events become a drive to agency and thus to the performative construction of the self. The author conceptualises identity as a performative act, as a dynamic and productive process that determines the creation of hybrid and potentially subversive spaces of identity where during the construction of the self, one inhabits. In such liminal spaces, the discursive processes of self-construction take place because of and in opposition to social, cultural, and political limitations. In *Burnt Shadows*, such processes occur in a context where also the borders separating nation-states are frequently crossed, leading to the production of a liminal space developed through the transgression of the limits separating nations and forming a border zone where identities grounded in difference are shaped. In the novel, international events act upon the individual and local lives of the characters producing a reaction that makes them perform their identity into a transnational dimension. As the characters enact their identities in a hybrid and shifting space, the text invites readers to consider how individual identity is also formed in relation to the role played by nationalistic policies and nationalisms in the era of globalisation.

In a global context in which national boundaries are porous, fiction can become a place where and the medium through which national and individual identities can be discussed and imagined. In such cases, in fact, fiction becomes a place where writers investigate the ‘Who am I?’ question in the mirror of a multicultural and hybrid society shaped by and shaping the equally multicultural, hybrid, and fluid identities that inhabit it. Thus, a key concept becomes that of

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‘performativity’. In its original meaning to perform implies to play a role. The concept of performance, originally only used to refer to the performing arts, is to Schechner ‘an action’, as he states: ‘any action that is framed, enacted, presented, highlighted, or displayed is a performance.’² The concept is also used to denote the different ways a person or a community plays out identity, whether gender, ethnicity, or identity otherwise.³ In the case of social performances, the self is constructed through performance and this can happen in two different ways. One possibility is for a person to build the self through performing a social role that is defined by the compulsive repetition of a number of conventions which put certain features such as gender, race, and class into a given social frame. Otherwise, the self can be defined through a conscious dynamic process, through an act that can affect other people, producing a reaction. It is agency, then, or ‘the ability to transform external reality – by creating new referential realities or new interpretations of the same reality and causing events to happen,’⁴ that makes it possible to transgress the reiteration of the social norms and rules and so to perform what Victor Turner calls ‘liminal acts.’⁵ Performance as ‘acting against’ is the enactment of a liminal practice that produces a hybrid space where multiple subjectivities are questioned, discussed, and interpreted. To Michel Foucault “the exercise of power consists in guiding the possibility of conduct and putting in order the possible outcome”⁶. Agency allows the construction of selves that, refusing to reiterate certain practices, norms and conventions, try to resist to a kind of power that, acting on people’s actions, would frame their identities into a given structure. Agency allows the construction of the self to take place through discursive practices where norms and conventions are questioned and resisted. It is inside the hybrid space generated by agency that identity is shaped through a never completed process in which cultural and social rules are negotiated. This in-between is not simply located between two hegemonic spaces but becomes the interstices where differences are mediated. Negotiating the social and cultural differences in a marginal dimension, which corresponds to what scholars such as Homi Bhabha⁷ and Emma Pérez⁸ have conceptualized as ‘third space’, allows to question the dominant narratives. In Burnt Shadows, the third space produced by the protagonist’s agency, where she negotiates her identity in opposition to certain social rules, can be read as coincidental with the transnational space. It is Hiroko’s agency that makes her cross the limits of the nation-states taking her into an in-between where she negotiates her identity in relation to different languages and diverse cultural and social positions.

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. As Amaya Fernandez-Menicucci puts it, ‘in order to be a subject endowed with an individual and independent identity, one must

⁷ Homi Bhabha, I luoghi della cultura (Roma: Moltemi, 2001).
actively’ engage in a process of self-definition that will ‘create’ a multidimensional self capable of being ‘embodied’ within a specific set of chronospatial coordinates. On the morning of the 9th of August 1945, Hiroko Tanaka, a young teacher and translator, is obliged to work in the local weapons factory. She awaits the end of the war when she dreams she will marry her German fiancé and will travel around the world motivated by pure love for knowledge. At the end of that day, she is a survivor of the American attack. She has lost the people she knew and loved and she has lost her homeland forever. The bomb that has erased her world has not only transformed the space around her generating a sort of terrifying, dystopic environment, but has also scarred her body leaving three bird-shaped burns on her back. History has written on her body as though it were a book. The political event has left a visible burn on her, marking her body with an indelible sign. The relationship between body and self is fundamental through the whole novel because she performs her identity through it. Her scarred body, instead of being a narrow cage, becomes, in some way, what moves her to action. Throughout her life she cannot free herself from the burden of the nuclear explosion that has marked her body. She is a curious medical case for the Americans who, once in Japan, try to study the consequences of the atomic bomb on the survivors. While her miscarriage is believed to be the consequence of the exposure to nuclear radiation, people think that the only son born to her could also be deformed in some way. Nevertheless, she uses her body to free herself from the scheme in which her body has been framed. In the novel, with her somatic traits, her short haircut and trousers, she is an East Asian with a modern westernised look in India, a barelegged woman in Pakistan at the time of the Islamisation policy, and a Japanese with a Pakistani passport in the United States. This makes it impossible to place her within a geographical, cultural, and social frame. ‘James was oddly perturbed by this woman who he couldn’t place. Indians, Germans, the English, even Americans [...] he knew how to look at people and understand the context from which they sprang. But this Japanese woman in trousers. What on earth was she all about?’ Therefore, the Nagasaki event has irretrievably affected her body, but doing so it has also given her a reason to start a process of self-definition.

‘Hibakusha’ is the word that the Japanese use to refer to survivors like Hiroko. ‘It was a fear of reduction rather than any kind of quest that had forced her away from Japan. Already she had started to feel that word ‘hibakusha’ start to consume her life. To the Japanese she was nothing beyond an explosion-affected person; that was her defining feature’ (46). Austin claims that words can be tools through which a person or a whole society can actually do something. ‘Hibakusha’ is a performative word because it does something; it defines a new and very peculiar social group: the well-identified category of those who have witnessed and have been directly touched by that very specific event. Classifying them into such a narrow definition means to reduce them, with all their unique and complex identities, to one event that had tragically acted on their lives without leaving them any chance to react. Defining them as a separate category means to marginalise them into a particular social group. 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. Refusing to be a ‘hibakusha’ for all her life, she transgresses the borders delimiting the position that Japanese society has given her, and at

9 Fernandez-Menicucci 75.
10 Kamila Shamsie, Burnt Shadows (London: Bloomsbury, 2009) 46. Subsequent references to this work will be included in parentheses in the text.
the same time she rebels against the American policy that has treated her, a Japanese and a citizen of Nagasaki, as nothing more than a life worth destroying to save American lives. Her resistance means that through her behaviour she questions both the Japanese and the American hegemonic powers. Other transgressions follow and, as the first transgression, they are connected to movements between different places. In India, she refuses the invitation of the Burton-Weiss to move to England while she marries Sajjad who embodies the colonised Indian who is treated with paternalistic benevolence by the British James Burton. In Pakistan, Hiroko refuses the Islamisation policies: ‘It made no sense to her. “Islamisation” was a word everyone recognised as a political tool of a dictator and yet they still allowed their lives to be changed by it’ (182). In the United States, she helps an undocumented immigrant find a way to cross the border into Canada and start his journey back to Afghanistan as a clandestine. Shamsie’s character moves from an original condition of loss and marginalisation to state of being where she turns the margin into a productive space. It is through her body that she gives the evidence of an identity in constant formation because as her body develops, it acquires new elements at each frontier crossing. Embodiying signs and practices from cultures distant from each other and representing all of them working together, she takes a stand against any attempt at inserting her identity into a specific cultural, social, or ethnic sphere that would make her correspond to a specific set of norms.

During the evolution of Hiroko’s character, her body is not the only recurring element: the languages she speaks also have a significant role in the process she enacts. In the beginning of Burnt Shadows, Hiroko speaks Japanese, English, and German and works as a translator. Later on, she learns Urdu and teaches all the languages she knows to her son Raza while working as a language teacher in Pakistan. Given the recurrent references to various kinds of language translation, the relationship existing between this kind of translation and the physical translation across borders appears evident – ‘to translate’ means to transfer something across a line. It could be said, to quote Salman Rushdie, that Hiroko is a ‘translated woman.’ Linguistic translation is a productive process where a negotiation between the languages involved, and the result is that ‘something always gets lost in translation’ but ‘something can also be gained’ producing new meanings and thus contributing to the enactment of identity.12 Bhabha, acquiring through Derrida a notion conceptualised by Benjamin, suggests the idea of translation as survival, in the sense of living at margins.13 Bhabha also reminds us that the notion of translation as survival is for Salman Rushdie the migrant’s dream of survival. To the Indian scholar the migrant is someone who has physically crossed the borders separating different countries and who, in order to start a new life, needs to adapt to the new environment in which he finds himself. For Hiroko, translation is survival in the sense that it allows her to survive her loss by living on the borders of several distant worlds. Using translation in her process of identity construction, Hiroko herself becomes a cultural hybrid and shows her cosmopolitan attitude by performing translation as she uses the languages she speaks to cross the cultural borders she comes across. Linguistic translation is thus one of the mediums the character uses to actively build her subjectivity. Just as for Hiroko the drive to enact her identity comes from an original loss, her ability to master many languages is also related to the awareness that a person is never completely at home in a language, even when that language is the mother tongue. To her, the Derridean14 consciousness of the fact that a dimension of inexpressibility exists and is faced by speakers in any language is

13 Homi Bhabha, I luoghi della cultura (Roma: Molteni, 2001).
14 Jacques Derrida, Il monolinguismo dell’altro (Milano: Raffaello Cortina, 2004).
related to her experience of the atomic bombing: ‘nothing in the world could ever be more unfamiliar than my home that day. That unspeakable day. Literally unspeakable’ (99). Hiroko is unable to find words that could accurately describe what she has faced in Nagasaki. Even if she feels comfortable in many languages and is continuously engaged in processes of linguistic translation, she knows that there are circumstances when a person can feel a stranger even in her/his own mother tongue. She enacts her translation processes moving from the awareness of a ‘linguistic loss’ that she has known after the atomic attack.

Reading the novel in the mirror of transnational studies allows readers to see that through the processes that lead Hiroko to develop her subjectivity, Shamsie creates a character who expresses a position that is strongly critical towards nationalistic policies while promoting an idea of transnational solidarities: ‘It didn’t bother her in the least to know she would always be a foreigner in Pakistan – she had no interest in belonging to anything as contradictorily unsubstantial and damaging as a nation’ (204). Through the critical attitude of the character in a story that centres around events shaping the history of the second half of the twentieth century, the author shares a vision, supported by critics like Peter Hitchcock and Paul Jay among others, of globalisation as a non-recent phenomenon which can be traced back to the colonial period. Shamsie not only highlights how the colonial period determined the subsequent history of the Indian subcontinent, but she also seems to suggest that this area is still under the influence of the West as the Americans fought their Cold War there and are conducting part of their War on Terror in that area. The novel also invites the reader to make a comparison between the reasons which, from the American perspective, yesterday justified the Nagasaki bombing and today justify the US policies in the name of the so-called War on Terror. With the comparisons that Hiroko makes, correlating distant events that have affected her life, what makes both actions understandable in the eyes of the nationalists is the fact that both are presented as acts necessary for national security:

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? […] I understand for the first time how nations can applaud when their governments drop a second nuclear bomb. (326)

Because of her direct experiences, Hiroko knows that in our contemporary world nationalistic policies are as relevant as they were in the last century. Yet, the character promotes a position that overcomes nationalistic perspectives. Hence, at the core of the novel are the political events and the cultural and social relationships that have shaped the relations between nations across the globe from the late colonial period to our days. Maintaining the focus on the effects that the events have on the protagonist’s personal path, Burnt Shadows reflects on issues such as the British colonial rule in India, the relationship between the colonisers and the colonised, the end of the British Empire in South Asia, and the consequences it has brought to that region. At the same time, the novel highlights the possible risks connected to a policy that takes nationalistic feelings to the extreme in post-9/11 America, and the literature focuses on the policies applied in the East by the United States. ‘One day’ says Hiroko talking about the American soldiers who

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were helping the Japanese survivors to recover, ‘the American with gentle face said the bomb was a terrible thing, but it had to be done to save American lives’ (62). The protagonist’s perspective is both transnational and highly critical of the policies and feelings generated by nationalisms. Her identity is shaped also in relation to actions that allow her to define her position towards this issue. For example, she chooses to move away from the risk of a new atomic attack, and she decides to help Abdullah, an undocumented Afghan migrant, find his way to reach home. Hiroko recognises the limits of a vision that prefers nationalistic ideas of belonging to cosmopolitan solidarities – ‘she had no interest in belonging in anything as contradictorily insubstantial and damaging as a nation’ (62). To Hiroko, nationalistic feelings are potentially dangerous because they can lead people to support blind political choices in the name of national security. This is the case of other characters in the novel who act in the name of national security. For example, Kim, one of the characters belonging to the Burton-Weiss family, does not hesitate to notify the Canadian police of the clandestine Abdullah because he is a Muslim, an Afghan, and he has been a mujahideen. Nevertheless, for Hiroko, to stand against the risks implicit in nationalism does not mean criticising or opposing ideas of cultural belonging as she herself experiences the feeling of losing the social and cultural environment she is part of:

Until you see what you have known your whole life reduced to ash you don’t realise how much you crave for familiarity. Do you see those flowers on the hillside, Ilse? I want to know their names in Japanese. I want to hear Japanese. […] I want to look like the people around me. I want people to disapprove when I break the rules and not simply to think that I don’t know better. (99)

In *Burnt Shadows*, the performative relationship existing between identity and agency takes shape through the actions of one character, actions against and resisting different kinds of limits that are supposed to frame the protagonist’s identity. Hiroko does not passively accept the various kinds of limitations that have been imposed on her by events that are part of a nationalistic view, events that might have caged her into a specific set of social as well as cultural, linguistic, and maybe geographical limitations. On the contrary, she reacts to the occurrences that profoundly affect her life, challenging the roles that social and political powers seem to have chosen for her. She enacts a process of autonomous identity construction by crossing social and cultural boundaries as well as frontiers among nation-states. As a consequence, she inhabits a hybrid space where the never-completed process of identity construction develops through the negotiation of several differences. Through such a discursive practice, the protagonist questions both social norms and nationalistic ideas. Through the development of the story, questioning nationalisms appears to be the *trait d’union* connecting the parts of the novel. Nationalistic feelings and policies are indeed the reason that justify each of Hiroko’s movements from one place to another, not only making her develop a transnational identity, but also prompting her to sustain ideas of transnational solidarities.

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