

## INVESTIGATING THE EAST-WEST ENCOUNTERS: A POSTCOLONIAL RE-ORIENTALIST READING OF KAMILA SHAMSIE'S *BURNT SHADOWS*: A NOVEL

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### ABSTRACT

*Kamila Shamsie's (2009) *Burnt Shadows* is based on fictionalizing certain historical events as it narrates the histories of the two families' sufferings during World War II, the atomic bombing of Japanese cities, colonialism in India, the division of the sub-continent into Pakistan and India and the conflicts between Pakistan, Afghanistan, and America in the wake of post-9/11. This study explores the novelist's politicized and partial depiction of the characters belonging to the East and West. Shamsie (2009) treats the characters based on their national affiliations, the characters belonging to the USA/West have been positively represented while those representing the Non-western countries have been negatively portrayed in the novel. Utilizing Lisa Lau and Om Prakash Dwivedi's and Lau and Ana Christina Mendes' insightful commentaries on the ideological role of re-orientalism in South Asian English writings as articulated in their respective seminal works *Re-Orientalism* and *Indian Writing in English* and *Re-Orientalism* and *South Asian Identity Politics*, this study argues that Shamsie's (2009) strategic use of unreliable narration and unfavourable descriptions of the Eastern characters against the Western characters in the novel may underscore her a re-orientalist writer who consciously or unconsciously sustains and celebrates the erstwhile orientalists or colonisers' perceived expectations about the orientals.*

**Keywords:** Orientalism, Re-orientalism, Misrepresentation, Representation, Postcolonial Theory

### INTRODUCTION

Shamsie's (2009) *Burnt Shadows* is a postcolonial novel that deals with British colonialism's political and cultural impacts on the erstwhile colonies. To understand the term Re-Orientalism, it is necessary to understand the phenomenon of Orientalism. The term Orientalism was introduced by Edward Said (1978) in his groundbreaking critical work, *Orientalism*. According to Said (1978), Orientalism is founded on the ontological and epistemological differences between the Orient and the Occident (p. 5). He formulated the term by explaining it as a process in which the Western constructed the image of the East in front of the West. Lau and Mendes (2011) argued that in Re-Orientalism, the Eastern becomes the presenter of the East in front of the West. Re-Orientalism is a theory through which the critics can investigate the role of a re-orientalist who follows Orientalists' footsteps in othering the Eastern (p. 4). They further argue that a few elite-class Orientals consider themselves the representative of the Eastern community in front of the West.

Furthermore, Re-Orientalism is not only associated with the aspects of Orientalism. It has a few issues of partial, skewed and limited representation, which cause problems of authenticity in the representation. In a postcolonial world of globalization, the partial representation of the East in front of the West is the primary purpose of Re-Orientalism. As Lau and Mendes (2011) explain that although the East has gained power and authority about self-representation, the self-representation might be twisted and distorted because of its being Western-centric in formation.

Despite taking responsibility for the self-representation of Eastern people, the Indian diasporic writers are still under the power of deep-rooted colonial legacies. They are continuously victims of

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power imbalance. The diasporic authors produce knowledge that is selected, constructed, authorized, then recognized, and disseminated. Because of the power imbalance, the knowledge remains Western-centric in English discourses. The knowledge which is constructed and published based on power about the powerless and poor nations has surely chances of ambiguity and misrepresentation. David Scott (1999) elaborated on the process of self-representation. He is of the view that self-representation is a vulnerable process because it gives an authentic relationship between reality and representation. It is vulnerable to abuse, misrepresentation, and distortion of reality about the Eastern. It shows that the Eastern self-representation is still directed and controlled by the West. Re-orientalists still portray the picture of the West as the most civilized nation that has the capabilities to civilize the Eastern.

In the novel *Burnt Shadows*, Shamsie (2009) demonstrates the historical and political background of the countries. When she was a university student, she was interested in writing about the history of Hiroshima. While reading John Hersey's book, *Hiroshima*, she found a passage about the burned skin of some women who had the shape of birds and flowers on their backs. The white portion of their dresses could not absorb the heat and did not leave any scars on their backs and the shapes of birds and flowers were imprinted on their bodies because the black colour absorbed the heat. Entitling the novel as *Burnt Shadows* is enough to showcase this historical background and its formative impact on the plot of the novel. The novel is rooted in the history of Pakistan, India, Japan, and Afghanistan. After a fatal flash in Nagasaki, Hiroko Tanaka moved to Delhi, where she met an Indian, Sajjad Ali Ashraf and they develop a romantic relationship. After the partition of India, Hiroko started living in Karachi with her son. Shamsie (2009) treats Burton's family as a tool to represent the positive image of the West. But Hiroko's son, Raza, being a Pakistani, has been misrepresented and labelled as a Jihadist. She uses Pakistani characters as a tool to represent the negative image of the East against the West. Accordingly, this study explores and investigates how the East-West encounters as articulated in the novel, result in the unfavourable descriptions of the Eastern characters against the Western characters and this underscores Shamsie (2009) a re-orientalist writer who consciously or unconsciously sustains and celebrates the erstwhile orientalists/colonisers' perceived expectations about the orientals.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Shaukat Ahmed Tilwani (2021) has claimed in his article, "Rewriting *A Passage to India*: A Study of *Burnt Shadows*" that Shamsie's (2009) novel is intertextual in its very formation. Tilwani's (2021) study argues that postcolonial writers employ the technique of intertextuality in their texts as they cite several themes, characters, allusions, references, and phrases from Western texts to question the supremacy and hegemony of Western writers by modifying or subverting the cited texts. Tilwani (2021) compared *Burnt Shadows* with *A Passage to India* by employing the technique of intertextuality. Likewise, Daniel Vitolo's (2016) "The Performance of Identity in Kamila Shamsie's (2009) *Burnt Shadows*" states that Pakistani literature consists of themes and contents related to Pakistan's history. For example, the partition of India in 1947 and the terroristic event of 9/11, have a significant impact on the lives and identity formation of the characters described in the novel. The study's primary aim is to discuss the process of identity formation in *Burnt Shadows* by taking various elements like race, gender, religion, and nationality into account. The analysis is based on tracing the identity construction strategies in transnational settings and questioning the rigid social boundaries erected to maintain division among the masses. From Vitolo's (2016) perspective, Shamsie's (2009) novel has a global reach because she structured the novel by crossing the borders of languages, cultures, and places. In addition, Vitolo (2016) discussed the novel through the lens of transnational literary theory and elaborated how it consists of various international events like the atomic bombing at Nagasaki, the partition of India in 1947, the situation of Pakistan in the 1980s, the condition of New York after 9/11 and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

In "*Burnt Shadows*: Home, Cosmopolitanism and Hybridization" Shazia Babar (2016) shed light on the themes of multicultural societies and hybrid identities as reflected in *Burnt Shadows*. She employed Bhabha's concepts of hybridization and third space to do an effective analysis of the novel. The main character of the novel, Hiroko was in constant adaptation and transformation and her hybrid identity developed when she was in Nagasaki. Babar (2016) also says that as she was living in a cosmopolitan city and fell in love with a German guy, she experienced a foreign culture in her love relationship. After the death of Konrad, Hiroko moved to Delhi which is also a foreign place with a new culture and language. While living in multiple foreign places, Hiroko's identity became a hybrid one.

Similarly, Sajjad was a true portrayal of hybrid identity because he adopted the new culture of Karachi after returning from Delhi. According to Babar (2016), the partition of the sub-continent was a painful process of evolution for the characters like Sajjad because they lost their true identities after migrating and merging into a new separated homeland, Pakistan. The overview of the previous studies on the novel is enough to showcase that it has not been investigated using the theory of re-orientalism as a theoretical framework and this study contributes to this aspect of the novel by bringing into the limelight the politicized representation of the East-West encounters in the novel.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

In postcolonial theory, the political and historical accounts play a significant role to shape the discourse because the nature of political and historical conflicts show the powerful position of the West and the imbalance of power between East and West. This study is qualitative and it analyses a literary text through an interpretive method adopted to explore the facts relating to Re-Orientalism. The interpretive method is a research paradigm based upon assumptions that reality is shaped by humans and it, therefore, helps to find out the interrelated, complex, and multifaceted realities of a text. The socio-historic perspectives are important factors that contribute to this kind of study and the researchers have applied the interpretive method as a technique to discover how the novelist as a representative of the East and Pakistani community makes othering of the non-western characters in the novel. It will be shown how the Eastern characters have been misrepresented in the novel.

In Orientalism, the writers reinforce a Western perspective and construct a Western image of the Orient and Occident so the representation is controlled by Western values and norms. However, in Re-Orientalism, the representation is in the hands of those diasporic authors who have personal experience and connection with the East and they utilize their Eastern identities and personal experiences for getting the best place in the global literary market. Therefore, diasporic authors who follow western demands and expectations in their writings to project a positive picture of the West and a negative picture of the East may achieve a higher rank in the global market. Re-Orientalism is not only confined to the premises and perceptions of Orientalism but it also deals with issues of misrepresentation, and limited, partial or skewed representation, which may even amount to distortions and in-authenticities in a variety of guises (Lau and Mendes, 2011, p. 8). It also reveals new patterns and radical strategies on the horizon of the Eastern identity construction. The diasporas take advantage of the English language and present their perspective on the world by using an international language to describe their respective homelands. Within the framework of re-orientalism theory, the works of a diaspora can be taken as a source of entertainment but they might not be considered the true representation of their homeland. Accordingly, as Shamsie (2009) is also a diaspora writer so the theory of Postcolonial Re-Orientalism delineated in *Re-Orientalism and Indian Writing in English* and *Re-Orientalism and South Asian Identity Politics*, provides a theoretical framework for her novel and the technique of interpretive method is employed to critically interpret it as a re-orientalist text.

## **DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS:**

### **Investigating the Re-Orientalized East-West Encounters in *Burnt Shadows***

Lau and Mendes (2011) have argued that the Re-Orientalists are the writers who are the presenters of the East in front of the West. The authors use contrasting images while explaining the West and East in their postcolonial discourse. On the one hand, Westerners are portrayed with positive adjectives like civilised and rational people. And on the other, Easterners are labelled with negative adjectives like uncivilized, barbaric, and ruthless. The re-Orientalist authors prepare the ground for defining the positive image of the West while providing a contrastive and negative image of the East. In Re-Orientalism, the diasporic writers or a few cultural producers like South Asian writers present a biased picture of the East for fulfilling the demands of the western readers' perceived expectations about the East. They use their Eastern roots and attachments for their glory and consumption in the global market. Because the western gatekeepers of the publication market admire those texts which elaborate the glorious picture of Europeans' past instead of narrating the disastrous results of colonialism and imperialism. According to Lau (2014), re-orientalism "draws its inspiration from Orientalism theory" and looks at "a particular angle of these colonial inheritances of paradigms of power" (p. 2). In what follows, we will provide a comparative study of the Eastern and Western characters belonging to the metropolitan and non-metropolitan centres to find out the partial and unequal treatment of re-Orientalist

authors towards the non-Western characters in the novel. Shamsie (2009) writes, “Her fingers can feel her back but her back cannot feel her fingers. Charred silk, seared flesh. How is this possible? Urakami Valley has become her flesh. Her flesh has become Urakami Valley. She runs her thumb over what was once skin. It is bumped and raw, lifeless” (p. 27). In these lines, Shamsie (2009) portrayed the sufferings of Hiroko, a non-Western character, in the novel in a very sarcastic manner.

The story of the novel revolves around two homes: the Burtons and Ashraf. This scene is taken from the first part of the novel which is located in Nagasaki. Shamsie (2009) shared the pathetic situation of the Japanese during the atomic bombing in 1945 through the sufferings of Hiroko in the novel. She is the protagonist of *Burnt Shadows* and changes her identity throughout the novel. She moved to Delhi in India after the nuclear atomic bombing in 1945 and then migrated to Pakistan and New York respectively. In the lines quoted above from the novel, Shamsie (2009) has pointed out the sufferings of the protagonist of the novel. Shamsie (2009) has shown Hiroko as a coward who does not dare to show resilience but prefers migrating from one place to another for escaping from the worse conditions of her life. She is also dressed in a white Kimono with something like a decoration of three black cranes over her back. The process of burning is utilized so ruthlessly, inhumanely, and insensitively by the author in the first part of the novel. The use of third person narration for the victim like ‘her fingers’, ‘her back’, ‘her flesh’, and ‘her thumb’ shows a disconnection between the victim’s pain and the narrator of the story because whatever happened is elaborated at an individual level for sanitizing the Western cold-blooded atomic bombing in Nagasaki. However, hundreds and thousands of Japanese died in the merciless burning of atomic bombs in 1945. Instead of showing sympathy for Hiroko, the author has given her scars which become a symbol of disgrace for the non-Western characters throughout the novel. The shadows of nuclear burning make Hiroko’s life aimless and lifeless because she is introduced as “hibakusha” in the novel (49). Shamsie (2009) writes:

Hiroko looks down and sees a reptile crawling up the path toward her house. She understands now. The earth has already opened up, disgorged hell. Her neighbour’s daughter is running towards the reptile with a bamboo spear in hand – her grip is incorrect. The reptile raises its head and the girl drops the spear and, calls out Hiroko’s father’s name. (p. 27)

In the above-mentioned lines, Shamsie (2009) used sarcastic language for Hiroko's father. These lines show a sense of indifference and hostility the narrator has toward the people of Nagasaki. The sufferings of non-Western people are not valued enough that Shamsie (2009) can compare them with humans' emotions and wounds as she compared the people of Nagasaki with animals by calling them reptiles. Instead of showing some empathy with the Japanese, Shamsie (2009) called them reptiles. This is the peak of marginalization because the victims are treated worse than animals. As they have a non-Western identity, they do not deserve respect at all to be called humans after being burnt in the atomic bombing at Nagasaki. Indeed, it is heartbreaking for the daughter, Hiroko, to see her father's burnt body but the narrator does not show any respect for her father's moving body and calls it “a reptile crawling up” (p. 27). In addition, Hiroko is a symbol of the past and present of an Eastern character and she migrated to India and married an Indian man. But Shamsie (2009) always secures her in the arms of the Western characters. After the explosion in Nagasaki, she is required to flee to Delhi for living with her lover's sister. Similarly, after the murder of Sajjad, Hiroko was not secure in Pakistan and shifted to New York. Hence, the projection of these global settings like Nagasaki, India, Pakistan, and New York, may substantiate our claim that Shamsie (2009) weaves the misguided and partial history of the East for Western readers. Therefore, Hiroko's past and present life is negatively presented by Shamsie (2009) which contains the heart-wrenching memories of her father and fiancée. While sharing her memories with Sajjad, Hiroko says,

Those nearest the epicentre of the blast were eradicated, only the fat from their bodies sticking to the walls and rocks around them like shadows. I dreamt one night, soon after the blast, that I was with a parade of mourners walking through Urakami Valley, each of us trying to identify the shadows of our loved ones. (Shamsie, 2009, p. 76)

These lines highlight that Hiroko's life is full of shadows because she has lost her fiancée and father. She could not arrange a proper burial for her father and fiancée. Even she called Yoshi to drag the rock to the cemetery without any religious or cultural burial ceremony. Her heart is filled with shadows and then she went to India for meeting Elizabeth who is Konrad's half-living sister. This is highly ironic, Hiroko, an Eastern victim of the Western bombing attack, goes to the Western people for enlightening her soul and defying the memories of burnt shadows at Nagasaki. Being a re-

Orientalist, Shamsie (2009) projected a global setting for Hiroko, who spends her whole life miserably and ceaselessly seeking help from the Westerners in the novel. Shamsie (2009) presents the Western characters in a centric position where Hiroko, being Oriental needs their assistance for her well-being. Furthermore, Shamsie's (2009) representation is partially skewed and unauthentic while representing Indian and Pakistani characters. In fact, in the twenty-first century, Eastern writers have the power of self-representation but the use of self-representation is still based on Orientalist style because Re-Orientalism theory takes as its starting point the salient fact that by the 21st century, "the East has increasingly seized the power of representation; however, this representation is not exempt from being partial and skewed, and it is still Western-centric and postcolonial" (Lau, 2014, p. 2).

Regarding the self-representation of the characters, Sajjad is another Eastern character who is partially represented by Shamsie (2009). The portrayal of Sajjad, being an Indian man, is also Western-centric. Shamsie (2009) introduces him as:

He paid little attention to those aspects of his appearance that made his mother blow prayers over him to cast off the Evil Eye - the fine yet abundant hair, the perfectly proportioned features (except, at certain angles, the nose), the neat moustache, the fair skin of his Turkish ancestors, the confident air of a man of twenty-four who has never known failure - and instead fixed his attention on the beige cashmere jacket from Savile Row, running his hands along its length with sensuous pleasure. (p. 34)

Sajjad is presented as an Indian who strongly follows the culture and traditions of India. His attire and physical appearance reflect his strong roots in Indian culture. Shamsie (2009) provides a dual image of Sajjad's personality because, during duty time, he has to wear Western attire. Shamsie (2009) attached the image of Indians with sensuous pleasure. Elizabeth has attached these embarrassing traits and characteristics to Sajjad. Here, Elizabeth is a spokesperson for the Westerners and being an Occident, she uses harsh words for Sajjad as she says, "I wish you wouldn't give him your clothes," Elizabeth said without turning towards James. "He's started looking at everything you wear as if it's his property; did you see how upset he was yesterday when you split ink on your shirt?" (p. 35). These lines show the use of a sarcastic tone and verbal irony for representing the Eastern character in the novel. Shamsie's (2009) narrative is Western-centric because Eastern characters like Sajjad are presented as dependent and poor Indian men. In contrast, Western characters like Elizabeth and James are presented as providing dresses, jobs, and food to the Orient in the novel.

Furthermore, Sajjad desperately wanted to become a lawyer. James promised Sajjad to offer a job in his law firm. However, Sajjad's dream never comes true because James never helps him to become a lawyer or complete his law qualification. In contrast, James orders him to play chess with him for the whole day and it shows a politicized representation of an Eastern character that the Orientals are highly irrational because Sajjad cannot figure out in his life that James is not sincere with him. Shamsie (2009) tries to repeat the historical accounts of colonialization and imperialism through Sajjad's character where the colonizers can easily occupy the Indian lands and control its people by taking the so-called burden of civilization. In a re-orientalist fashion, Shamsie (2009) snatches the power of countering and rebellion from the Eastern characters even after the Independence of India and Pakistan. It is mentioned in the novel that Hiroko believed Sajjad because Konrad, a Western character, shared with her that he is a reliable Indian. Shamsie (2009) says, "Frankly the only person worth meeting at Bungle Oh! is Sajjad - if he's still there. Lovely Muslim boy who works for James" (p. 20). It shows that an Eastern man needs verification from Westerners for his credibility. But James and Elizabeth also advised Hiroko to remain reserved with the Indians and she stopped learning Urdu from Sajjad. This provides strength to our claim that Shamsie (2009) politicized the characters based on their national affiliations.

Furthermore, the partial representation of historical events of the sub-continent like the conflict between the British and Indians and the independence of the sub-continent from the British raj supports our claim that Shamsie's (2009) narrative is Western-centric and colonial in nature. Although in the background of colonial encounters, it is difficult "to maintain strict frontiers between cultures" (Iqbal & Rehan, 2020, p. 40), Shamsie's (2009) novel seems to be drawing clear-cut borderlands between western and non-western cultures. She does not only politicize the Eastern characters but also subverts the history of India in a re-orientalist style. As, she has used the medium of the English language which is only comprehensible for a few elites of Eastern countries, but easily understandable for Western

readers. Shamsie (2009) penned down those historical accounts where the Westerners were in the position of conquerors and the Eastern nations were in subjugated, marginalized, and colonized positions. She uses Eastern characters like Hiroko, Sajjad, and Raza for representing the glorious past of the Western nations and she follows a strategy of marketing in which repackaging the Orient and its history can grab the attention of Western readers. Lau and Mendes (cited in Lau, 2014) have positively stated that “Re-Orientalism sets up alternative metanarratives of its own to articulate eastern identities, simultaneously deconstructing and reinforcing Orientalism” (p. 3). They further elaborate on how while remaining eastern in voice, postcolonial diasporic writers project colonial legacies in their writings in an orientalist fashion:

While remaining eastern in voice, the discourse of “re-Orientalism” is a discourse which is an “orientally”-generated discourse coming out of postcolonial and diasporic legacies, of which it is acutely aware. Unlike Orientalism, re-Orientalism does not rely on the binaries of “India” and the “West”; it is based on a nuanced reading of both, accommodating the vital role of diasporic reception and production in countries such as post-liberalization India. (p. 3)

Ironically, the theme of identity crisis is only attached to the Oriental characters but the western characters like James, Elizabeth, Harry, and Kim remain least influenced by Indian social customs. When Hiroko, Sajjad, Raza, and Abdullah change their place of living and migrate to another country, their identity becomes hybrid and cosmopolitan and Shamsie (2009) introduced these characters with multiple identities in the novel as Japanese, Indian, Pakistani, and Afghan respectively. In contrast, Western characters are presented with their solo permanent English identity (Shamsie, 2009, p. 82). Shamsie (2009) never raises objections against the lifestyle of her Western characters like James, Elizabeth, Harry, and Kim. They can travel to any country and are treated with respect. But the Indians suffer with unhomeliness and nostalgia for Delhi their whole lives. Like Sajjad shared his nostalgic feelings with Harry, “My first love. I would never have left it willingly. But those bastards didn't let me go home” (Shamsie, 2009, p. 161). Being a British-Pakistani diaspora, Shamsie (2009) failed to maintain a balance in her characters’ representation. Derek Gregory (2004) contends that we live in a colonial present, but the colonial presence of the 21st century differs significantly from that of the 19th and 20th centuries. Lau (2014) has enunciated that these power patterns are the result of colonial legacies and therefore one finds the self-representation of the East in an exotic fashion in such writings:

Despite having far more access to self-representation than previously, deep-rooted postcolonial legacies continue re-enforcing the significant power imbalance, particularly in the way knowledge is selected, constructed, authorised, then recognized, legitimized, and disseminated. (p. 3)

David Scott (1999) notes that “the task of decolonization consisted in the demand for self-representation, a process of restoring an authentic relationship between representation and reality” (p. 11). As “the self-justified edifice of European civilization aimed at bringing the distant land into the fold of history” (Iqbal & Abbas, 2022, p. 207), we argue that now the diasporas invoke a similar positive image of the West in their writings. Therefore, under the framework of post-colonial studies, the representation of the East still demands closer attention to figure out the power dynamics involving knowledge production and its distribution among the erstwhile colonies. There is no simple and easy way to secure an authentic relationship between representation and reality. Representation, even if it will be a form of self-representation done by diaspora writers or South Asian writers, has the possibility of misrepresentation (Lau, 2014, p. 3). Hence, under the framework of Re-Orientalism theory, *Burnt Shadows* may also be read as a narrative that has problematized the representation of its characters based on their national and geographic connections. In contemporary postcolonial settings, the Orient and the Occident are explained as contrastive images. Shamsie (2009), presented a migrating sufferer woman as having a hybrid identity and moving from one country to another to find security and peace and at last, she finds them in New York, where she assumes to have a peaceful life with Elizabeth. This underscores that the privilege is again given to the Occidental place, New York and the character, Elizabeth and this fits the demands of the global political narrative to relegate havoc and destruction to the East.

## CONCLUSION

To conclude, by employing Lau and Dwivedi’s (2014) and Lau and Mendes’ (2011) respective astute commentaries on the ideological role of re-orientalism in South Asian English writings, it has been

found that Shamsie's (2009) diasporic meditations on the East and the West enunciated in her *Burnt Shadows* may be termed as re-orientalist constructions as they problematize self-representation of the orient and oriental against the west and westerns in postcolonial settings. Equally, this study has shown how a diasporic writer consciously or unconsciously acting as a representative of orientalist may negatively portray the image of their country of birth, reinforcing the Western-centric discourse about the Orient. Being a diaspora Shamsie (2009) has strategically exploited the use of unreliable narration to provide a privilege to the metropolitan centre and present the East as a contrastive image of the West.

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