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Cultural Hybridity in Kamila Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows*

Humaira Sarvat

Assistant Professor, Department of English Literature
Govt. College Women University Faisalabad, Pakistan

Abstract:

*This explanatory research analyses the effects of cultural hybridity upon identity within the field of Postcolonialism in Kamila Shamsie's novel *Burnt Shadows*. To highlight the hybrid identity of a postcolonial subject the writer focuses on the different cultures of the world namely the Indian, the Pakistani, the English, and the American. Postcolonialism is a specifically postmodern intellectual discourse that consists of reaction to and analysis of the cultural legacy of colonialism. It aims at combating the legacies of colonialism on culture. The area of the research is 'Cultural Studies'. Postcolonial world is a culturally hybrid world in which hybridization or the process of culture mixed-ness is always on the move. I seek to apply Homi K.Bhabha's theory of 'Cultural Hybridity' on Kamila Shamsie's novel *Burnt Shadows*. Culture, hybridity and identity cannot be separated from one another as there is no concept of the one without the other. By applying the concepts of hybridity, ambivalence and liminality by Homi K.Bhabha it seeks to explore the different factors within different cultures of the world which promote cultural hybridity and consequently exert their influence upon identity.*

Keywords: Postcolonialism; Hybridity; Identity; Liminality; Ambivalence

1. Introduction

The present research explores the effects of cultural hybridity upon identity in Kamila Shamsie's novel *Burnt Shadows* within the theoretical concerns of Postcolonialism. Colonialism brought different cultures of the world closer to one another with the result that there was a large scale culture mixed-ness which continued in the postcolonial period as well. Postcolonial world is essentially polarized world in which many cultures contend, but do not merge into one another to form some higher cultural form. Postcolonial subjects bear the marks of these cultures upon them. They belong to many cultures of the world. My research analyses the influence of these cultures upon identity. I construct my study on the belief that no culture can claim its purity in postcolonial world and no culture loses its identity in the process of hybridization. Bhabha's theory of cultural hybridity supports my proposal. Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* suggests that different cultures cannot be yoked together harmoniously in a pretty mosaic. 'You cannot just solder together different cultural traditions to produce some brave new cultural totality' (Bhabha, 1994, p.82). Cultural differences are always there in the process of culturalization. When two or more cultures come along one another a space is created which he calls the 'Third Space of enunciation' (p.37). According to him cultural identities are formed and boundaries are re-cited in this contradictory, conflictual and ambivalent space. *Burnt Shadows* presents a hybrid cultural world where different cultures of the world contest to exert their influence upon its characters. This contestation of different cultures is the *proper location of culture* (my emphasis). These characters are always on the move within almost five cultures of different countries. Which culture they belong to? This paper investigates the effects of these cultures upon their identities. Cultural mixed-ness is a frequently celebrated idea of the multinationals of the West; 'Everyone can become an American in America' (Shamsie, 2009, p.188). In this way the West is trying to engulf postcolonial cultures into its multiculturalism. My point is that cultures do not merge into one another to form some new cultural forms. Postcolonial cultural identities are essentially fluid and can bear the marks of many cultures on their identities.

2. Cultural Hybridity in Literature

Cultural hybridity means the mixing of different cultures. There are many forms of hybridization e.g linguistic, racial, cultural and political. *Creole* and *pidgin* languages are the examples of linguistic hybridization. In literature cultural hybridity is that moment when a culture begins to give the linguistic consciousness of the traces of the culture of the other. Cultural hybridity has become a recurrent trope in postcolonial cultural studies. Bhabha argues that hybridity subverts the narratives of the colonial powers and dominant cultures. The series of inclusion and exclusion on which a dominant culture is premised are deconstructed by the very entry of the formally excluded subjects into the mainstream discourse. The dominant culture is contaminated by the linguistic and social differences of the native self. So hybridity is a counter narrative. Postcolonial cultural theorists believe that that the culture of

postcolonial world is impure. It is an essentially hybrid phenomenon. Salman Rushdie e.g supports hybridity through the concept of Palimpsest. In *The Moor's Last Sigh* Rushdie writes 'One universe, one dimension, one country, one dream, bumping into another, or being under or on top of. Call it Palimpsest (Rushdie, 1996, p.226). Commenting on the passage David Hudart says that it is a straight forward expression of history and identity, as forms of palimpsest. Further Hudart says 'Palimpsests are overwritten, heavily annotated manuscripts on which earlier writing is still visible underneath newer writing: they offer a suggestive model of *hybrid identity*' (my emphasis) (*Routledge Critical Thinkers*, 2006, p.107). Hudart's comment implies that history and identity are the hybrid forms. They are not pure. Cultures make layers over other cultures, but the former cultures are also visible under these layers. Layering is not overpainting some culture in the sense of blotting it out with some alternative, 'but laying an alternative, promised-land text or texture over it like a gauze' (my emphasis) (*Palimpsest regained* by J.M.Coetzee, *The New York Review of Books*, retrieved from <http://webcache.googleusercontent.com> on 11/17/2011). Similarly different cultures of the world especially the cultures of the postcolonial countries are multilayered and no culture effaces the identity of other cultures.

3. Bhabha on Hybridity and Liminality

Bhabha's concept of cultural hybridity is more comprehensive, wider and applicable than most of the postcolonial thinkers. He pinpoints the creativity of hybridity.

In *The Location of Culture* Bhabha comments on hybridity as a moment when 'other denied knowledges enter upon the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of its authority- its rule of recognition' (Bhabha, 1994, p.114). In an interview titled '*Third Space*' he says,

'For me the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity to me is the 'third space' which *enables other positions to emerge*' (my emphasis) (Bhabha, 1994, p. 211).

It is not the consequence of one or more cultural forms thrust together rather it informs us how cultures came into existence. Bhabha makes it clear that hybridity is not the consequence of 'dialectal sublation' which implies the synthesis of thesis and antithesis. The 'third space' is not a third form of culture which emerged when two or more than two cultures contended with one another. Interviewed for the journal *Art in America* Bhabha suggests the following

'In my writing I' ve been arguing against the multiculturalist notion that you can put together harmoniously any number of cultures in a pretty mosaic. You cannot just solder together different cultural traditions to produce some brave new cultural totality' (Bhabha, 1994, p. 82).

Bhabha insists more on hybridization i.e the hybridity's ongoing process than on hybridity. Cultures continue their processes of 'becoming'. They stop the flux of cultural hybridities. The 'third space' breaks open the fixity of cultures and allows us to construct and contest identities in an unending process. Bhabha stresses upon constant transformation of cultural identities. He is of the view that cultures and identities are essentially fluid. Processes and transformation define the postcolonial cultural identities. They are the production which is never complete, rather always constituted; always in the process always 'becoming' and that deny any claims to their fixity. Seen through this angle *Burnt Shadows* is a melting pot of cultural hybridity. Its world is always in the process of culturalization. No single culture can claim its authority on any of its characters. Their identities are fluid, temporal, spatial and always related to some specific historical context. They are beyond the limits of cultural authority. 'Beyond' is another term implied by Bhabha in the beginning of '*The Location of Culture*'

'The beyond is neither a new horizon, nor a leaving behind of the past.....we find ourselves in the *moment of transit* (my own emphasis) where space and time cross to produce complex *figures of difference and identity*. (my emphasis). For there is a sense of disorientation, a disturbance of direction in the 'beyond' an exploratory, restless moment.....(Bhabha, 1994, p.1).

Third dimension, third space, moment of transit, and beyond- all indicate the fluidity, non fixity and processual nature (hybridization) of culture. According to him we always find ourselves in the middle of things. There are no beginnings or ends of anything. So it is up to us what we finally make of ourselves.

4. Bhabha on Liminality

Bhabha gives the metaphor of 'stairwell' to describe liminal position of a subject. According to him the stairwell is a liminal space that lies in-between the well defined images of identity. It is the 'connective tissue' that establishes the difference between black and white, upper and lower. The stairwell is the temporary movement between the upper and lower. In this way it stops identities to settle at either end of it. Bhabha says 'This interstitial passage between fixed identification opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy'(Bhabha, 1994, p.2). In *Burnt Shadows* Raza is a permanent liminal character.

In Psychology 'liminality' is the consciousness of being in-between or on the threshold of two existential planes. It, like a stairwell does not allow someone to settle upstairs or downstairs. In this sense the 'liminal' state is an ambivalent position of a subject characterized by interminancy and openness. Liminality indicates a transitional period in which a subject's sense of identity disappears to some extent. Such a condition always welcomes disorientation. It is a condition in which normal limits to behaviour, self understanding and thought are overlooked. So liminality can bring new perspectives. It is the borderline of cultures, the 'in-betweenness; 'third space', 'third dimension', 'beyond', or the 'moment of transit' which draws our attention to see what happens in-between cultures. The liminal state is characterized by ambivalence, openness and interminancy. The term stresses the idea what is in-between settled cultural forms is the proper location of culture. Both liminality and hybridity refer to the constant process of creating new cultural identities (their open-endedness and their becoming).

5. Burnt Shadows: a World of Cultural Hybridity

Burnt Shadows presents a world of cultural hybridity. Hiroko Tanaka travels from Japan to India, from India to Turkey, from Turkey to Pakistan, and from Pakistan to America at the wake of 9/11 attacks. She shifts into many identities. She has come to India as a Japanese subject. She leaves Pakistan for America as a Pakistani. In a way the readers come across different cultures of the world. In this way the tour de world of *Burnt Shadows* gives an ample space to introduce cultural hybridity. The frequent mixing of different cultures within their selves speak of their power of resistance against the dominant cultural discourse of the modern day world. They are the embodiment of Bhabha's 'third space', 'liminality' 'hybridity' 'in-betweenness' and 'beyond'. Hiroko may become Indian or Pakistani, but the traces of former cultures cannot be removed from her identity. Other cultures make layers over the former cultures, but do not blot them out. Bhabha is of the view that the mixing of different cultures creates spaces for resistance instead of acceptance. She has not accepted one identity for another. Her ever shifting identity speaks of the fluidity of culture and identity.

In *Burnt Shadows* Nagasaki has been presented as a center of cultural mixed-ness. Shamsie draws on the damaging effects of politics on the cultural creativity of people. In the first part of the novel '*The Yet Unknowing World; Nagasaki, 9 August 1945*', Nagasaki has been presented as a center of different cultural activities. Konrad weiss, an enthusiastic young man of twenty nine from Germany had been planning to write a book on the cosmopolitan world of Nagasaki. When he sailed into the harbour of the purple-roofed city of Nagasaki in 1938 'he felt he was entering a world of enchantment' (p.6). The photographs along the walls captured his attention just because he found in them a promise of culture mixed-ness 'Europeans and Japanese mixing uncomplicatedly' (p.6). Yoshi introduced to Konrad the 'stories of Nagasaki's turn-of-the-century cosmopolitan world, unique in Japan—its English language newspapers, its International Club, its liaisons and intermarriages between European men and Japanese women' (p.12). Any young man entering into this world of cultural creativity could have fallen in love with Nagasaki and Konrad was no exception. He saw Nagasaki as a world of cultural mixed-ness—a world, where cultures meet, unite, contend but do not overlap one another. Later, Hiroko recalls Konrad's unflinching desire when she remarks 'Konrad had been right to say barriers were made of metals that could turn fluid when touched simultaneously by people on either side' (p.83). According to Elizabeth, Konrad in Nagasaki was so 'determined to see a pattern of people moving towards each other—that's why he kept researching his book instead of writing it (p.70). Unfortunately war breaks out which fractures everything. Shamsie, like most of the postcolonial writers weds personal life of her characters with the public and political scenario. She believes that global politics of the so-called super powers of the world are responsible for the cultural distortion of the different peoples of the world. With the outbreak of Second World War (W.W), many of the foreigners were forced to leave Nagasaki because they were suspected either as enemies or as allies. War transfers Konrad into a new identity and stops him from celebrating the cultural regeneration of Nagasaki in his books. When Germany's surrender seemed inevitable, Yoshi warned Konrad in these words 'you write about a Nagasaki filled with foreigners. You write about it longingly. That's one step away from cheering on an American occupation' (p.9). The atomic bomb 1945 was dropped on Nagasaki to 'save American lives' (p.63). It was the atomic bomb which curtailed the romance of Hiroko and Konrad. Konrad is killed by the bomb while Hiroko survives. She shifts to Delhi, India to Konrad's half sister Elizabeth Weiss and his brother-in-law, James Burton. Here she meets her future husband Sajjad Ali Ashraf—a lovely Indian Muslim—a descendant of Turkish lineage. It is through Sajjad that the readers get a picture of imperial India. He frequently resorts to Dilli/Delhi dichotomy. Dilli, before English Raj was like Nagasaki in more than one ways. If Konrad was to celebrate the culture mixed-ness of Nagasaki filled with foreigners mixing uncomplicatedly, Sajjad drew his pleasure from the richness of Urdu culture—a 'world which was not closed to outsiders' (p.83), vast, open sky festooned by the tangling strings of kites, and the free flight of pigeons in the pre-colonized Dilli. In chapter 6, Burtons, Hiroko and Sajjad go to visit 'Qutb Minar'. It is here that histories tangle and reshape future relations of the three cultures- English, Urdu and Japanese. Introducing the history of the minerat Sajjad comments that throughout India's history conquerors have come from elsewhere, and all of them—Turk, Arab, Hun, Mongol, Persian—have become Indian—when—this Pakistan happens, the Muslims who leave Delhi and Lucknow and Hyderabad to go there, will be leaving their homes. But when the English leave, they will be going home. Hiroko at this point recalls her discussion with Sajjad in which she told him about Konrad's interest in the foreigners who made their homes in Nagasaki, and now she saw her words filtering into his thoughts and becoming part of the way he saw the world (p.84). In Nagasaki it had been the war and in India it was the British colonization which stopped the cultural regeneration of people. Shamsie implies that in both the cities a cultural regeneration could spring had it not been the political impatience of the super powers. As Sajjad rode his cycle toward James' house, he fixed his eyes on the sky in order to locate the point at which Dilli became Delhi. 'Dilli: his city, warren of by-lanes and alleys, insidious as a game of chess, *the rhythmically beating heart of cultural India*' (my emphasis, p.33). But now everything has been distorted. It is almost a Rushdian lamentation over the lost possibility of a regenerative cross-fertilization of cultures, which might have taken place, but for the British colonization of India. Delhi of British Raj presents a picture of 'separations and demarcations' (p.33). Dilli, in Sajjad's opinion is 'insidious as a game of chess'- a joke which hurts James to his bones. In *Location of Culture* Bhabha says that hybridity is that moment when the other denied knowledge enters upon the dominant discourse and estranges its basis of authority. Sajjad resists James' dominant colonial assumptions by frequently referring to Ahmed Ali's *Twilight in Delhi* published during the war by Hogarth Press. He quotes from this book 'The alleys of Delhi are 'insidious as a game of chess' and James bursts 'that damn book again' (p.39). However, Sajjad loved the novel and 'had taken to peppering his conversation with quotations from it in the hope of revealing to James the beauty of its sentences' (p.40). James is a true imperialist. Feeling the white man's burden, he carefully weighs between Ahmed Ali and E.M.Forster and finds Forster at his 'patronizing best'. But the English could never enjoy complete cultural dominance. *Burnt Shadows* implies that colonial power had never been a complete dominance. There were fissures and gaps which the colonized exploited to a certain degree. When Sajjad says that the British had made little difference to the life of his 'mohalla', James looked confused to understand 'mohalla'. At his 'confusion', Sajjad translated

'neighbourhood barely disguising his impatience at the Englishman's failure after all this time to understand that all-important Urdu word' (p.41).

Hiroko's first impression about imperial India is menacing. Delhi did not offer the regenerative cultural hybridity which pre-war Nagasaki provided. In Delhi she felt as if she was entering 'into another world. Everything was colour, and the twittering of birds.....So beautiful, and yet so bounded in' (p.46). There is a marked difference between Nagasaki where European and Japanese mixed uncomplacably and British India where foreigners brought only separations and demarcations. She, according to Bhabha has moved away from the 'singularities of class or gender' which 'result in an awareness of the subject position—of race, gender, generation, institutional location, geopolitical locale, sexual orientation—that inhabit any claim to identity in the modern world' (LC, p.1). Hiroko has left behind these 'organizational categories' which her Japanese culture provided her. She has migrated to India where she can exist on the borderline of the native culture. Now she cannot claim any identity. For a moment she feels light 'wheeling through the world with the awful freedom of someone with no one to answer to. She had become, in fact, a figure out of myth, a 'character that loses everything and is born anew in blood' (p.50). For a moment she feels Rushdian delight in the denial of roots 'Roots, I sometimes think are a conservative myth, designed to keep us in our places' ('Rushdie on Roots, Rootlessness, Migration, on Being Between', retrieved from <http://www.postcolonialweb.org/pakistan/literature/rushdie/sroots.html> on 12/16/2011). She has come unstuck from her native land and culture. She is floating upward from history, from memory, from time. Her subject position highlights Bhabha's term 'beyond' which according to him, 'is neither a new horizon, nor a leaving behind of the past', but 'the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside' (LC,p.1). She is now, beyond all the scales that measure identity. Hiroko enters into another culture through an already marginalized Muslim subject- Sajjad Ali Ashraf who works with James Burton. If Nagasaki has been presented as a center of cultural hybridity, then Hiroko is the true spokesperson of the creative power of this hybridity. According to Bhabha when two or more cultures contend one another a space is created which he calls 'third space'. The third space is not necessarily oppositional rather a productive place where identities are formed and boundaries are re-cited. Hiroko is the valorization of the 'third space'. The ease and skill with which she masters different languages help her dwell successfully in different cultures. She has already thrust herself forward to experience the new possibilities of cultural hybridity.

Almost all the characters of the novel bear signs of different cultures which give new dimensions to their identities. Some of them possess a linguistic consciousness of belonging to different cultures of the world e.g Raza Konrad Ashraf, a polyglot combines the traces of almost five cultural forms in his identity. He is in a position which denies any access to a single cultural identity. Such characters being conscious of their permanent 'liminal' position offer a good study for hybrid cultural identities.

Of all the characters of *Burnt Shadows* Raza is a permanent liminal character. He always lives on the 'threshold' of the well defined tropes of identity. In *The Location of Culture* (p.3) Bhabha gives the example of 'the stairwell as a liminal space, in-between the designations of identity'. According to him 'This interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy' (p.3) and Raza fits marvellously into Bhabha's concept of liminality. He belongs to everywhere or nowhere. The very name Raza Konrad Ashraf has been drawn from three cultures: Raza from Pakistani, Konrad from German (Konrad was his Japanese mother's fiance) and Ashraf from Indian. Apart from inheriting these cultures from his parents Raza has been roaming in other cultures of the world with the result that he becomes a polyglot that denies his association with any single culture. Raza's dilemma is that he lives in a culture and language whose inhabitants suspect his foreign features. So he frequently shifts into different identities. Hiroko guesses correctly that there are two types of people- 'those who could step out from loss' (p.149) as she and Sajjad had come out from the crisis of Nagasaki and Partition respectively, 'and those who would remain mired in it, Raza was the *miring sort*' (my emphasis, p.148) As the story moves on Raza's subject position becomes more and more liminal. He lived in Pakistan but 'He didn't fit this neighbourhood' (p.194).' He spat the words out, over and over: Raza Konrad Ashraf. Konrad. His lips drew back from his teeth as he said it. *He wanted to reach his own name* and rip out the man whose death was a foreign body *wedged beneath the two Pakistani wings of his name* (my emphasis, p.194). However, Raza's features can go unnoticed among the Afghans, Hazaras, and many of the Middle East natives. He tells his name to a fourteen years old Afghan boy, Abdullah as Raza Hazara. He finds a balance to this new name. 'More balance certainly than in Raza Konrad Ashraf' (p.202). And thus Raza shifts into another identity. Chapter 22 is replete with the discussion of Raza's multiple identities.

'For months now, Raza had been living *two lives* (my emphasis). In one, he was plain Raza Ashraf, getting plainer each day as his friends' lives marched forward in university and he remained the failed student, the former factory worker, the boy marked by the bomb. In the other he was Raza Hazara, the man who would not speak his language—or speak of his family or past, not even to other Hazaras—until he had driven the last Soviet out of Afghanistan' (p.210). Finally Raza Hazara dominates Raza Konrad Ashraf as he decides to join Afghan Mujahdeen's camp.

The very name of Henry Burton as Harry has deliberately been chosen to draw a link between Harry and Harry Truman, (American President in 1945). He is James' and Elizabeth's son. In India he had been exceptionally fond of Sajjad Ali Ashraf (Indian Muslim) who was working as an apprentice under James Burton in the hope to become his legal adviser in future. At the advent of Partition between India and Pakistan Sajjad shifted to Karachi, Nazimabad whereas Henry at eleven left for England alongwith his family. Later on he settled in America. Already bearing the marks of three cultures upon his identity he, in 1978 when Russia attacked Afghanistan felt an urge to visit Sajjad in Pakistan to renew his former cultural traditions. After Partition, when he comes to Pakistan as a CIA operative, he is named as Harry by the writer. He comes to Pakistan 'equipped with imperial eye' to use Mary Pratt's words. Flying into Karachi at night Harry surveys the landscape of the city as the '*monarch of all I survey gesture*'. He 'looked down on the brightly lit *sprawl* (my emphasis) of one of the fastest growing cities in the world' (p.151). Later both Raza and Harry begin to work

together in Afghanistan. Raza here takes his dinner every night with the Third Country Nationals translating among them from language to language. Hiroko, Sajjad, Konrad, Ilse, Harry : history had blown all of them off course, no one ending—or even middling—where they had begun, but it was only in Raza that Harry saw reshaping as a reflexive act rather than an adaptive response’ (p.287). In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha says that we always find ourselves in the middle of things, in the moment of transit, in the interstices which, according to him describe the proper location of culture. Seen through this lens Raza’s subject position is the right location of postcolonial culture. His does not adopt the foreign ways rather the reshaping of his identity is just ‘reflexive’.

6. Conclusion and Findings

After an intensive study of *Burnt Shadows* it is concluded that postcolonial world is essentially polarized in which many cultures meet, contend, and contrast, but do not overlap one another. Shamsie has portrayed different postcolonial subjects from all over the globe. She longingly writes about the culture mixed-ness that can result into fruitful cultural regeneration in different parts of the world. She deliberately has chosen those areas of the world e.g Nagasaki, Delhi, Afghanistan, Pakistan where a cross-fertilization of cultural regeneration could have sprung had world politics not been involved in these areas. But *Burnt Shadows* is as much about the character’s resilience to survive in the fiercest combat zones of the world as it is about super powers’ political policies to merge the cultures of the world into their multiculturalism. It is a tale that unfolds itself through multinational families; the Weiss Burtons (German, British and American) and the Ashraf Tanaka (Indian, Pakistani and Japanese). Their tragedies and victories span five countries and some of the major world changing events. Multinational characters of *Burnt Shadows* could not adjust into multiculturalism supported by the western multinationals. Multiculturalism tries to sublimate the cultures of the world. My research has analysed *Burnt Shadows*’ characters under Bhabha’s theory and found that they do not mix with other cultures to form some new cultural form out of their existing cultures. On this assumption I conclude that cultures do not lose their identities when they meet with other cultures. The characters of the novel move through different cultures which necessitate for them to shift into different identities. This shifting should not be confused with some new cultural form. It is like Rushdie’s Palimpsest, a gauze-like layer under which the former cultural traits can easily be seen. Different cultures exert their influence upon them with the result that their identities are reflexive rather than adaptive.

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