



Title: Borders and Boundaries: Nationality and Identity Formation In Kamila Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows*

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### Abstract

The concept of nationality forms a very important aspect of the process of identity formation. The cultural and racial traits of a 'nation-state' effect and/or affect not only how one is perceived but how one perceives oneself as well. In a post-globalized world beset with anti-colonial struggles and their success, and frequent displacement of individuals and communities across national borders, complications in adaptability and allegiance get aggravated. Surely, literature as a reflection of life can hardly afford to remain impervious to this phenomenon. The present paper takes up the factor of nationality and analyses Kamila Shamsie's novel *Burnt Shadows* to understand the process of identity formation of characters like Hiroko Tanaka, whose transnational mobility makes her experience more history and trauma than any other character.

Key Words: Identity Formation, Nationality, Diaspora, Transnationalism, History

Borders and Boundaries: Nationality and Identity Formation

The word 'nation' originates from Latin word 'natio' which means 'birth'. 'Nation' defined in the official website of *Oxford Dictionaries* as, "A large body of people united by common descent, history, culture, or language, inhabiting a particular state or territory" ( Nation | Definition Of Nation In English By Oxford Dictionaries). But the idea of nation is not limited to the concept of a common space only. As different from the idea of a nation, 'nation-state' is the mixture of the politically defined territory called 'state' and culturally defined entity called 'nation'. While discussing about Renan's concept of nation, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin argues about the birth and formation of 'Nation-state':

Renan traces the emergence of the nation-state to the break-up of the classic and mediaeval empires, locating its cultural provenance in a specifically European political and social environment ... As thinkers as early as Renan were aware, nations are not 'natural' entities, and the instability of the nation is the inevitable consequence of its nature as a social construction. (*Post-colonial Studies: The Key Concepts* 135)

Nationalism is the sense of belonging to a specific society and allegiance to the nation culturally and politically. Nationality is defined by an individual's sense of his/her origin, language, culture, ethnicity etc. However nationalism has been defined as an abstract idea by many of the theorists. Many of them including Benedict Anderson believed that the idea of nation is based on vague and imaginary notion of sameness of origin and culture. Commenting on the ideas of nation by Anderson, Ross Poole argues:

Benedict Andersen's characterisation of the nation as an 'imagined community' has become unavoidable in recent discussions of nationalism ... In suggesting that the nation is an object of the creative imagination, a cultural product analogous to a work of literature or music, it encouraged more sensitive investigations of the kind of imagination involved in the nation." (*Nation and Identity* 9)

Thus nationality is a political identity which is very much dependent on the belief systems within the culture itself.

Nationality of an individual can be affected by the phenomenon called migration. Migration is generally the movement of people or a group of people from one geographical territory to another, sometimes across the borders of different nations. This migration can be spontaneous or forced in nature. While the spontaneous migration depends on better economic resources in other lands and prospect of a better professional life, the forced migration primarily is caused by major historical events forcing people to leave their homeland in search of a better and safer place. For example the Holocaust during the Second World War led to the forced migration of the Jews in different territories of Europe and outside it. Another example of the forced migration is the Partition between India and Pakistan. In this case a large section of people from both the sides had to leave their homeland and go the other country.

After the Second World War and during the middle portion of the Twentieth century, a large number of people migrated to the previous colonial centers like Britain and other countries of Europe. People from Africa, Caribbean and other previously colonized countries began to move towards Europe and USA in search of better opportunities. These large numbers of immigration from different part of the world started a new problem of citizenship and nationality in the host countries. Forced displacement and spontaneous migration both resulted in amalgamation of different ethnic groups and the diversity of culture in the host countries. Displacement of both the types resulted in the concept of Diaspora across world.

The word 'diaspora' originates from Greek 'dia' meaning 'across' and 'speirein' meaning 'scatter'. Diaspora refers to the people or group of people who displaced from their homeland, get settled in another country or geographical region. In describing the main trait of diaspora, James Clifford in his article name *Diasporas* describes, "These then are the main features of diaspora: a history of dispersal, myths/memories of the homeland, alienation in the host (bad host?) country, desire for eventual return, ongoing support of the homeland, and a collective identity importantly defined by this relationship" (305). The people belonging to the diaspora have their connections intact with the homeland and try to maintain their own culture even in the hot country denying any tendency of assimilating into the culture of the new place. These people have no definite nationality and it affects their identity and creates crisis in them.

Another term that found its way into this discussion of nationality is 'transnationalism'. The term gets more prominence with the newly invented ideas of globalization and multiculturalism. Transnationalism also defines the movement of individuals across countries but it is more current and different in nature than diaspora. Thomas Faist in his article entitled *Diaspora and Transnationalism: What Kind of Dance Partners?*, discusses the difference of these two terms:

Although both terms refer to cross-border processes, diaspora has been often used to denote religious or national groups living outside an (imagined) homeland, whereas transnationalism is often used both more narrowly – to refer to migrants' durable ties across countries – and, more widely, to capture not only communities, but all sorts of social formations, such as transnationally active networks, groups and organisations. Moreover,

while diaspora and transnationalism are sometimes used interchangeably, the two terms reflect different intellectual genealogies. (9)

The idea of transnationalism talks about establishing connections between countries socially, culturally, politically and economically. It is different from diaspora in the sense that it does not prefer to establish a collective identity in the host country. The connections between the nations are more liberal and loose. Janine Dahinden in his article *The Dynamics of Migrants' Transnational Formations: Between Mobility and Locality* presents the idea of 'locality' and 'mobility' in the formations of various types of transnational groups. He focuses on the importance of these two terms as he argues regarding the identity of the migrants:

Mobility is to be understood here as the physical movement of people in transnational space. Locality means being rooted or anchored – socially, economically or politically – in the country of immigration and/or in the sending country; it means developing/having a set of social relations at specific places. Looking at transnational formations as the effect of the combination of these two dimensions – mobility and locality – provides interesting insights into the multiplicities of forms of existence. (51)

Nationality is also dependent upon the idea of ethnicity and the ethnic diversity present in a country. The common heritage, language and belief system within a country can lead to the solidarity of the nation-state. Ethnic nationalism is different from civic nationalism which is primarily defined by the common citizenship. Whereas civic nationalism depends on the political and civic solidarity of its citizens, ethnic nationalism goes back to the common traditions of the people of the country. In ethnic nationalism, ethnicity is the parameter for the formation of a nation.

Kamila Shamsie, through her novels, portrays the problem of forming a stable national identity and how it is problematized by the multicultural state of Pakistan that ultimately occasions the identity dilemma in many of her characters. Shamsie's representation of the nation intermingles with its history and culture, and also marks a movement from local to the global. Needless to say, how nation and identity operate on the individual consciousness of the characters in a dialogic relationship is a matter of discussion.

*Burnt Shadows* presents the story of a victim of the Nagasaki bombing during the Second World War and places the character across the countries and continents in different countries at

some of the important critical junctures of the world history. Spanning from the war ridden Japan to the USA after the 9/11, the novel aims to present a panoramic picture of the twentieth century world history. The critical junctures also include India during the time of partition and the ethnic riots in Pakistan. Hiroko's high mobility throughout all the nations in the novel makes her a truly transnational character.

Hiroko's migration across these countries follows a pattern; she is always trying to mix herself with every culture she lives in, but also denies the complete assimilation within the culture of the host and ultimately migrates to another place. This trend of Tanaka keeps her always in move and against any kind of stability to be included in any culture. As a result of this, a stable national identity cannot be obtained by Tanaka and remains in a crisis. Her migration to India was an economic and emotional necessity. But her introduction with the new culture is not simple as she observes the two side of Indian identity. Her experiences with the Burtons give her the opportunity to know the colonizer's perspective of India. But this idea is soon contrasted by the introduction of Sajjad Ashraf whose idea of India is replete with passion and nostalgia. Sajjad dreams of an India which is different and better in comparison with the India of the British. His utterance seems optimistic, "Modern India will start the day the English leave. Or perhaps it started the day we used their language to tell them to go home" (*Burnt Shadows* 52).

Hiroko's acceptance of this culture and a hope of stability are destroyed by the event of Partition. While Sajjad cherishes the idea of a free India, the division on the basis of religion and ethnicity destroys his dreams. Hiroko is a witness to this devastation as he is emotionally in the same ground as Sajjad. Sajjad's feelings about 'Dilli' cannot be understood by Hiroko as he always remains an outsider who never truly assimilates herself into the host culture. History once again causes the forced displacement of Hiroko as she has to leave India as the wife of Sajjad. Her denial to go to London with the Burtons is an expression of her love for Sajjad and he was the most important thing for her more than anything else. Her quest for love and a fixed identity depends not on the nation she is living in, and this is another way of evaluating her as a transnational figure.

Hiroko's identity crisis in terms of nationality is, at the moment, parallel with Sajjad's nostalgia for the homeland. His shattered hope of returning to it leads to his own identity crisis. Their escape from India to Turkey to be safe from the communal and bloody riots of Delhi

ultimately made them homeless as Sajjad is not allowed to enter India once again. Leaving the country at this moment of crisis seems to be a betrayal for Sajjad as he argues:

‘It’s not that I want to be there ...What would I do? Join the men with machine guns guarding every entrance to my old neighbourhood? Refuse to join them, and cower inside my family home instead? That’s where we’d be, you know –Muslim homes in New Delhi are being destroyed. Women pulled out of their beds at night . . . Everything James Burton said about violence is true. It is the most contagious of all the madnesses. I don’t want to know which of my childhood friends have become murderers in the time we’ve been away. I don’t want to know what Iqbal might have done in all his frustrated passion. No, I don’t want to be there. But it feels like a betrayal, all the same.’ He had not then, or at any time, told her he’d left for her sake. (*Burnt Shadows* 125)

This sense of guilt comes from his escape from the crisis and the reason for this escape may be Hiroko herself. It was the safety of Hiroko that mattered most to Sajjad. Sajjad’s hope for going back to India is shattered as he himself describes, “They said I’m one of the Muslims who chose to leave India. It can’t be unchosen. They said, Hiroko, they said I can’t go back to Dilli. I can’t go back home” (*Burnt Shadows* 125). This nostalgia for the homeland remains within Sajjad even after many years of living in Pakistan as he explains Harry about his love for ‘home’, “Dilli is Dilli ... My first love. I would never have left it willingly. But those bastards didn’t let me go home” (*Burnt Shadows* 161).

The pangs of partition left the family of Sajjad Ashraf scattered. With the change in the history their destiny also changed and none of the brother could live in their home in Delhi. The tragedy of this displacement is still fresh in the mind of Sajjad as he remembers the past. The trauma of partition never left him and the memory is the only medium which makes the pain resurface repeatedly. Altamash, the eldest brother of Sajjad was killed in the riot and another brother Iqbal left for Lahore as he could not bear to live in the city. Iqbal’s family could not follow him and he left them there. Another brother Sikandar also left the country. These rhetorics of pain and displacement have become a part of Sajjad’s experience and he cannot recover from this situation.

Hiroko and Sajjad's life in Pakistan seems to be static and unaffected by any kind of disturbance but history follows them anywhere they go. Their newly formed identity as Muhajirs places them in a strange position. Muhajirs were not pleasant accepted into the Pakistani society. Hiroko herself talks about those early days in Pakistan and the refugee camps where the people who came from outside used to live. Muhajirs did not belong to any of the existing ethnic groups in Pakistan. The ethnic differences became the cause of their segregation from the main society and culture. This kind of discrimination was common in those days until the Muhajirs fought for their rights and achieved success.

Hiroko in the beginning years of her stay in Karachi found a 'home' far away from Japan. During those times, one day Sajjad organized a meeting with a Japanese woman, wife of a member of the embassy. This meeting fulfilled Hiroko's own longing for her home country as she could meet other Japanese women who lived in the place. Hiroko presents her feelings:

Hiroko met the other Japanese wives in Karachi, and entered their weekly gatherings at Jimmy's – it had meant a lot, more than she would have guessed, to have the promise of an evening every week to sit and laugh in Japanese. She never told any of them about the birds on her back, though. Considering it now, she decided the day she knew her life had tilted into feeling 'at home' in Karachi was when she found she was able to tell her neighbourhood friends that she had lived through the bombing of Nagasaki, while still insisting to the Japanese women that, although she grew up there, she was in Tokyo when the bomb fell. (*Burnt Shadows* 140)

Though Hiroko feels at 'home' amongst people her own ethnicity, own nation having a common culture, but there is a discomfort always in the mind of Hiroko about her identity as a 'Hibakusha'. The memory of the violent incident never leaves her alone and her quest for identity is in escaping her identity as a survivor of the nuclear blast. The demolition of Jimmy's makes her alone once again as all her friends go to Islamabad which is the new capital of the country. The 'home' feeling and the nostalgia becomes less important as she is very much engaged with the upbringing of her son Raza. But the memory of her past and her own nation never leaves her.

Hiroko finds peace in her new place and she gradually gets used to the daily life of Karachi. But there was a growing discomfort that affected her peace with this new culture:

There was one world at street-level – frenzied, jostling, entirely in the now: pavement vendors, large glass display windows, neon signs, gaping manholes, rapid-fire bargaining, brakes and horns and throaty engine sounds, the rush, the thrum of urban life – and then, overhead, if you stood still, shoulders squared against the passers-by, and looked at the arched windows, the cupolas, the intricate carvings, there was another world of buildings constructed in the belief that life moved at a different pace, more elegant, more pompous. She was entirely happy for the pomposity to be displaced, but there was something else seeping into the atmosphere, worse than electronic shops, which made her uneasy. (*Burnt Shadows* 141-142)

The uneasiness is created by the changing social picture of the time. The war with the Russians created a stir in the daily life of Karachi and this led to an unrest that also took a religious turn. Religion as one of the primary sources of ideology has governed Pakistan for many decades. Pakistan's multiple ethnic groups with their own explanations of religion create a diversity and difference which is very dangerous to the concept of a nation-state. The ethnonationalism practiced in the country are creating political and religious riots in Pakistan. In describing the process of formation of the nation-state in Pakistan, Adeel Khan argues:

Ideological engineering is one of the main concerns of the nation-state, because it has to justify its individuality, its separateness and its nation-ness. For Pakistan this has been a daunting task for many reasons, and the rulers' ineptitude has been as pronounced here as it has been in the area of state formation. A country that was created in the name of religion has not, even after over 50 years of its existence, been able to determine what role religion should have in the affairs of the state. (*Politics Of Identity: Ethnic Nationalism and the State in Pakistan* 68)

This confusion regarding the role of religion leads to the true formation of a civic nationality in the state. The differences and segregation within the nation is created by the differing attitude towards religion and ethnicity in general. Hiroko's sense of unrest is the result of this kind of attitude to religion and confusion about the role of religion in the society. Religion as a growing ideology can be discerned from Hiroko's own experience in the bookstall when she picked a copy of *War and Peace*:

A man standing beside her –the air of ordinariness about him – said, ‘You mustn’t read their books. They are the enemies of Islam.’

After the man left, the bookseller apologised.

‘Strange times we’re in,’ he said. ‘The other day a group of young men with fresh beards came in and started to pull all the books off their shelves, looking at the covers for which were unIslamic.’

‘What makes a cover unIslamic?’ Hiroko asked.

‘Portraiture,’ the man replied. (*Burnt Shadows* 142)

Hiroko’s confrontation with such ideologies led by misguided religious feeling, makes her more uncomfortable during her stay in the state of Pakistan. Raza’s failure in the Islamic Studies paper instigates her more to think negatively on the concept of religion and its role in making the nation. The mandatory paper is a way of ideological repression according to her and does not have any sense at all. Her reaction is expressive of her disgust, “Devotion as public event, as national requirement. It made her think of Japan and the Emperor, during the war. ‘And why do you need that to study the law? Ridiculous” (*Burnt Shadows* 145)! All these ideas are more repulsive to the formation of the concept of national belonging.

Hiroko seems to be changed a lot when we see her ultimately in the apartment of New York, but the nostalgia for the home doesn’t disappear. The only difference this time is that the ‘home’ seems to have changed. Mussoorie is the place she had primarily lived at after the death of Ashraf. Abbottabad seemed a peaceful place until the possibility of another nuclear affair which made Hiroko to go away from Pakistan. Her fear regarding the war makes her conscious about her identity as a ‘hibakusha’. Her friendship with Ilse and companionship of Kim gives her some respite from the fear. But her only discomfort arises from the fact of Raza’s job as a translator though she does not know his whereabouts.

The story shifts from the multi ethnicity and the riots to the modern day terrorism and the power politics behind it. The events revolve around the event of 9/11 which created havoc in the American lifestyle and thought process as well. The American became more protective about their national security and Raza is a part of that system. This confuses Raza’s position and the national identity as his power of speaking many languages, and looks and ethnicity is used to mark and

destroy the enemies of America. However a certain prejudice works in the mind of Steve and it may be a collective prejudice as well. While commenting on the recruitment of Third Country Nationals, Steve criticizes Harry and the danger of the overt nostalgia that Harry carries for these people:

You're an idiot to hire all these Third Country Nationals. Economically, sure, I see the sense. But stop recruiting them from Pakistan and Bangladesh. You're acting like this is a territorial war and they're neutral parties. Go with guys from Sri Lanka, Nepal, the Philippines. Indians are OK, so long as they're not Muslim ... Wake up and smell the burning buildings. You think I don't know you well enough after all that time in Islamabad? There's too much nostalgia in you. You look at those men and you see your childhood. The cook, the gardener, the driver. The Urdu teacher. (*Burnt Shadows* 280-281)

These statements are also a commentary on the character of Harry who also felt 'home' while living in India and Pakistan and the nostalgia for these places does not leave his memory. The death of Harry and the accusation of the death on Raza, makes him escape the land with a hope to meet Abdullah once again. Raza's journey through the countries and experiencing the new cultures and the immediacy of the situation change him forever.

The mistrust and a prejudice regarding the people of certain countries can well be found in the other characters in the USA. Hiroko's encounter with the immigration officer is an example of this prejudice regarding a country:

When Hiroko Ashraf had arrived in New York three summers ago, the immigration official – a man with a peace sign tattooed on his forearm – looked quizzically from her face to her Pakistani passport, then heaved a great sigh as he opened the passport and saw her place of birth scrawled beneath her husband's name. 'It's OK,' he said, stamping her passport without asking a single question. 'You'll be safe here.' (*Burnt Shadows* 287)

Hiroko immigrates because of a potential danger of nuclear clash in Pakistan and she is in search of a safe place which happens to be USA. Hiroko also is reminded of the irony of the situation because of the Americans she got her identity of a survivor. The contrast of Pakistan and USA as nations is prominent. Pakistan, led by the religious and ethnic ideologies of the people becomes a nation filled with communal riots and unrest. On the other hand American nationalism is more

liberal, giving opportunities and freedom to its citizens but remaining within the law of the country. Here individuals as well as the nation are given the highest priorities. But there is also a growing fear and prejudice in the mind of the people of USA regarding Islam and Islamic countries.

The immigration problem is another thing that affects the national security of USA and they have become overly cautious and suspicious about the immigrants. The ‘Islamophobia’ after the 9/11 attacks has increased and it igniting feelings of hatred for the particular group of people. Jim Burton’s encounter with Abdullah is a perfect example of this relationship which is mainly based on disbelief and suspicion for one another. Dilemma within Kim is pretty clear regarding the real intention of his co-passenger:

What reason was there to believe the story his brother told Raza? How did they know the FBI knocked on his door for no reason except that he was an Afghan? How did they know he had run for no reason except panic about his migration status? That he was an Afghan didn’t make him a liar or a terrorist, of course not; but wasn’t it just as absurd – condescending almost – to assume that because an Afghan he couldn’t be a liar or a terrorist?( *Burnt Shadows* 344-345)

Abdullah’s beliefs in Islam are contrasted by Kim’s anger as she repeatedly questions Abdullah’s belief system and the efficacy of it. Her mind is filled in with the memories of her dead father as she decides not to communicate with Abdullah. Kim’s reaction to him is interpreted as the hatred of the whole nation against Islam and the people belonging to that religion. He explains his own feeling regarding this as he argues:

‘I spoke to her. As I have never spoken to an American woman before. I wanted her to understand something, I don’t know what, about being an Afghan here. About war. Again and again war, Raza. And then. Then, I don’t know. She started attacking Islam. They’re all, everyone, everywhere you go now – television, radio, passengers in your cab, everywhere – everyone just wants to tell you what they know about Islam, how they know so much more than you do, what do you know, you’ve just been a Muslim your whole life, how does that make you know anything?’ (*Burnt Shadows* 352)

The condition of the migrants specially the Muslim migrants in USA gets worse after the attack of 9/11. Hiroko’s experience with a Pakistani cab driver makes the national identity of a migrant

individual more complex. His newly gained citizenship makes him an American but Hiroko, the transnational figure never gained any stable national identity. He falls in love with the places she is displaced to, becomes nostalgic about them but does not have a permanent tie with the place.

Language is another medium through which Hiroko becomes a transnational figure. Her ability to speak in multiple languages makes all the culture amalgamate within her. With her ventures in new lands, she learns the culture, the language and the way of living and carries with her forever. Talking about the role of language in the formation of her national identity, Daniela Vitolo argues, "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." (3) English, German, Japanese and later Urdu- all the languages become a part of her experience and her son Raza also have same kind of knack for learning new languages. Language expands her and Raza's boundary's of national belonging and takes them to the sphere of globalization. This movement from local to global is also a proof of the transnational nature of Hiroko's character.

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