

Globalized Mobility through Fluid Dynamics of Pakistani Fiction

Mahrukh Bokhari

Abstract

Pakistani fiction written by the Anglophone diaspora has lately been revolving around themes pertaining to borders, bordering practices, migration, citizenship, security, and sovereignty. However, it has conspicuously succeeded in transcending its boundaries: both ideological and geographical. By embracing the contemporary art current, Pakistani fiction has also procured its legitimization and circulation at international level. It is no longer representing our national issues parochially. Rather its focus is zooming in on how international politics and catastrophes post 9/11 are influencing and shaping the history of our nation in today's globalized world. A paradigm shift vis-à-vis the scope and structure of novels written by Kamila Shamsie and her contemporary diaspora Anglophone has assigned a unique, fluid dynamics to Pakistani fiction. It has become global in terms of its spatiotemporal zones, chronoscope, cultural diversity, and the range of characters hailing from across the continents.

The paper in hand attempts to examine factors that have contributed to the global structure and scope of Pakistani fiction with reference to Shamsie's work. Taking her novel: *Burnt Shadows* (2009) as primary text, I shall examine the devices that have given this novel its fluid dynamism, and subsequent globalized mobility. The paper is divided into two sections. The first section deals with the structural devices used by Shamsie to enhance the scope and circulation of her fiction at international level whereas the second section analyzes her thematic concerns.

Keywords: Pakistani fiction, Anglophone diaspora, spatiotemporal zones, fluid dynamics, globalized mobility, legitimization, chronoscope, international circulation, borders and contemporary art current.

Structure and Scope of Pakistani Fiction

Tariq Rahman states that the best art transcends national boundaries, both geographical and ideological (1). Pakistani diaspora fiction writers such as Nadeem Aslam, Mohsin Hamid and Kamila Shamsie have written fiction that has crossed both such boundaries. They have, undoubtedly, done the nation proud in terms of the international acclaim that their works have received in the last decade from far and wide. They have carved a niche not only for themselves but for Karachi, Lahore, Murree and Peshawar etc. on the international literary map by writing novels about these indigenous places from abroad. While inhabiting multicultural spaces in their diaspora capacity, these Anglophone writers, with Muslim heritage, are fearlessly grappling with the task of representing the Muslims beyond their reductive stigmatization at the hands of the western media. Their novels have attempted to project the plurality and complexity of the Muslim faith characterized by the cultural, linguistic and racial diversity of the global Muslim community or 'Uma'. During the SALA Conference held in 2016, Dr. Waseem Anwar strongly emphasized the "transnational interconnectivity" that, according to him, is mainly responsible for the native and diasporic reconfigurations in Pakistani literature in English by diaspora writers. He also appreciated Pakistani fiction's dynamism in terms of its globalized spatiotemporal scope.

Shamsie has structured her novels on a global scale in order to challenge the reductive western approach of stigmatizing all Muslims as "barbarians", "fundamentalists" and "terrorists" by ghettoizing them to specific places. *Burnt Shadows* (2009) is immensely ambitious in this regard because of its epic scale and

scope. It juxtaposes incommensurable and incompatible spatiotemporal zones across the globe such as Berlin, Nagasaki, Delhi, Missouri, Abbottabad, Karachi, Afghanistan and Canada. The plot as a chronoscope measures almost three quarters of a century of the world history ranging from World War II, to the partition of the Sub Continent to the Cold War to the 9/11 attacks in 2001 within one narrative. It is the:

tale of generations, Harry thought. James Burton watched with dismay the collapse of Empire; Harry was working for the collapse of Communism; and Kim Burton only wanted to know how to build, one edifice at a time, the construction process being all that mattered, not whether the outcome was mosque or art gallery or prison. (*Shadows* 177)

The whole history of a century is wrapped up in two sentences uttered by Elizabeth in the novel thus: “I’ve lived through Hitler, Stalin, the Cold War, the British Empire, Segregation, apartheid, God knows what. The world will survive this, and with just a tiny bit of luck so will everyone you love” (*Shadow* 271). The interplay amongst characters hailing from different origins, belonging to diverse ethnicities and following different faiths creates a global space. Here borders, both geographical and ideological, either do not exist or become visible only when one tries to slip past them.

The imaginary zone that *Burnt Shadows* (2009) projects has porous borders where sovereignty of countries is constantly violated by the Imperialist and/or Neo Imperialist powers to fulfil their hegemonic plans. The novel begins “on the morning of 9 August” with “the man from Berlin; Konrad Weiss, and the School teacher; Hiroko Tanaka from Nagasaki “stepping out of their houses to notice the perfect blue (color)

of the sky in 1945 when suddenly “a gap open between the clouds...And the world goes white” (*Shadows* 5, 23). The nuclear holocaust has razed Nagasaki, filled with Germans like Konrad to the ground. The novel ends with discussions revolving around 9/11 attack on the US and its global impact.

Hiroko Tanaka’s worlds; both public and private, have been destroyed in the bomb blast. “She’s lost everyone” (*Shadows* 56) and is forced to migrate to the Sub Continent of India, under the British Colonial rule operating from Delhi, in 1947. Delhi of the late 40s is projected as city of the Raj; “the rhythmically beating heart of cultural India” where “every English-man’s bungalow had lush gardens, lined with red flowerpots” signifying “separations and demarcations” (33). Sajjad Ali Ashraf cycles daily from Dilli to Delhi to play chess with James Burton. The game of chess with its black and white chess board introduces the discourse of power politics in the narrative, concretizing the same through James Burton. Such characters are representatives of the Imperialist, cosmopolitan world, constantly crossing geographical and ideological borders and shifting spaces, rendering the dynamics of reality fluid. Burton lives in a world where “Indians, Germans, the English, even Americans...he knew how to look at people and understand the contexts from which they sprang” (*Shadow* 48).

Shamsie’s paradigm shift in the narrative through discourse about the world reflects its inherent multiplicity. Sense making is managed through “a dialogical activity in which managers create organizational reality through the conversations they engage in with others” (“Postmodernism” 113). Sense making is not a solitary activity. It requires a social environment which entails interaction and building of relationships. The novel’s

appeal for the politically progressive scholars lies in its ability to function as a site of political value, the type of value that is unique to the postcolonial texts. It also functions as representative minority literature projecting minority's cultural formations as a site of resistance:

Stuart Hall has observed that the emergence of minoritarian cultural formations is a direct consequence of transnational cultural systems that have come into being during the era of decolonization. The contemporary world order in arts and letters has been marked by a 'profound cultural revolution [...] as a consequence of the margins coming into representation – in art, in painting, in film, in music, in literature, in the modern arts everywhere, in politics, and in social life generally. (Kalliney 298)

Embracing the contemporary art current and the aforementioned "profound cultural revolution" has enabled Pakistani fiction to procure its legitimization and circulation at international level. It has also made the globalized mobility of Pakistani fiction possible. While reviewing Clements' *Writing Islam from a South Asian Perspective* Rachel Fox writes that Clements mentions novels written post 9/11 that build a counter discourse to the monolithic categorizations of Muslims as fundamentalists and terrorists by the western media. Muslim identities, in the works of Mohsin Hamid, Kamila Shamsie and Uzma Aslam Khan, are often decentered to "find ways to connect and cohabit without needing either to deny or to justify the religious and cultural affiliations and affinities which international entities may seek to render suspect" (*Interventions*).

Creation of a hyperspace through decentering characters geographically or

ideologically results in a difficulty of mapping or locating individuals. It opens up debates about notions involving personal and/or national identities, diaspora, hybridity, citizenship and human rights. “The difficulty of mapping individual positions in a set of extremely complex global networks also confronts environmentalist discourses of place...allegorical visions of the global that over the course of time have shifted from utopian to a more dystopian emphasis” (Heise 157). *Burnt Shadows* (2009) encompasses all these issues within its plot ranging over a span of three generations which gives it its fluid dynamism and chronoscopic charisma.

Contestation, within the narrative, between different religions such as Christianity and Islam serves to challenge all grand narrative concerning faith, existence and death. The social construct projected in the fictional zone titled: *Burnt Shadows* (2009) questions the age-old “beliefs about the world...the perception that knowledge about the world is acquired through observation... it argues that experience is the result of active interchange between people engaged in reciprocal relationship” (“Postmodernism” 112). For instance Khadija Ashraf challenges the “God of the Ascetics who wants to be reached through deprivation” (*Shadows* 102). She disapproved of the thinking according to which the path to spirituality was through overcoming suffering by enduring it. She clarifies that: “It’s the Christians who believe we were put on earth to suffer. But Muslims know that Allah---the beneficent, the Merciful---forgave Adam and Eve their temptation” (ibid 102).

Burnt Shadows (2009) represents the *human* and *social* reality as something that is experienced through human discourse. Shamsie’s representation of the humanly experienced reality is in all its polyphonic complexity in Bakhtin’s style. “Behind each

discourse in the novel, as indeed behind each discourse in social life, we can...discern the ideological position or world-view which animates it" (McHale 165). Through the juxtaposition of a variety of languages, styles and intertextual citations, Shamsie creates a complex social reality in a globalized spatiotemporal zone. Raza; the hybrid polyglot is a unique site of heteroglossia. Whereas "acquiring language was a talent" with Hiroko (Raza's mother of Japanese origin), it was a "passion" with her son, Raza. "Raza's mind found itself instantly translating the words into Japanese, German, English, Pashto---a reflexive response to any piece of writing he glimpsed as he drove through the city's streets" (*Shadows* 148). It is through the creation of characters like Raza Konrad Ashraf, and Hiroko Sajjad Ashraf that Shamsie has successfully engaged with the notion of "global circulation" which is responsible for:

the breaking down of oppressive barriers among cultures, races, languages, and nations, including immigration restrictions and segregation policies. Diasporas circulate; bringing the wealth of their cultural heritage to new locations....Circulation is...tapped for the endorsement of multicultural enrichment, freedom, mobility, communication, and creative hybridity. (Tsing 54)

Themes in *Burnt Shadows* (2009)

Shamsie's concern in *Burnt Shadows* (2009) is as much with borders and migration as it is with bordering practices. Humans are all the time indulging in bordering practices, bordering others in or out on the basis of race, religion, language, ethnicities and/or ideological differences. Territories and human bodies are bordered, geographically

and politically through multiple devices and technologies. The Burtons' acceptance of Hiroko; "an ally of Hitler" in their house "two years after the war" can be analyzed from this perspective. The acceptance for Hiroko has come "sooner than they could accept someone of a different class" (*Shadow* 66). Earlier we are told that the status of Konrad, a German in Nagasaki (Japan) changes with "Germany's surrender... from that of an ally into some more ambiguous state which requires the military police to watch him closely...the lifeless words have become potent enough to send him to prison" (ibid 9).

Problems pertaining to the diaspora existence, deracination and hybridity are introduced in the narrative through Sajjad Ashraf's decision to migrate to Pakistan and marry a "modern" woman who can sit in council with men and be strong like the Rani of Jhansi and Razia of the Mamluk dynasty. "Sajjad had no political allegiances, but many narrative preferences---in the stories of history" and the two mentioned earlier were his favorite characters (*Shadows* 53). The modern woman that he finally marries is the Japanese Hiroko who volunteers to "learn the language they speak here" despite James' pronounced disapproval: "It's not necessary. English serves you fine. The natives you'll meet are either the Oxbridge set and their wives or the household staff like Lala Buksh, who can understand simple English if you just know a clutch of Urdu words to throw into the mix" (ibid 58).

Language is often the major barrier that can help one border people in or out of a social circle. Hiroko; a translator by profession, understands that she would need to bridge this gap between the local population of Delhi and herself. She decides to learn Urdu to facilitate two way communications. Sajjad tutors Hiroko in learning Urdu

and she learns very fast, being naturally good at learning languages. The natives are discriminated against by the Colonizers on the basis of language. Even Kamran Ali who is an “Indian Oxbridge set” denounces Urdu as the “language of mercenaries and marauders...the word ‘Urdu’ has the same root as horde” (*Shadows* 66). Shamsie, through characters like Ashraf Ali, demonstrates how in a society characterized by heterogeneity of all sorts, complex connectivity renders the ties of culture to place extremely weak. Continuous penetration of the local world by distant forces dislodges everyday reality and de-territorializes the site of culture. On the other hand the same de-territorializing opens up vistas.

Having migrated from Nagasaki after the bomb blast and coming to live in Delhi, Hiroko realizes that human beings crave for “familiarity...I want to hear Japanese. I want tea that tastes the way tea should taste in my understanding of tea. I want to look like the people around me. I want people to disapprove when I break the rules” (*Shadows* 101). Likewise Elizabeth, a German by birth, is married to James, an English man, whose country fought against the Germans in World War II. She realizes that:

She didn’t want to be married to a man she no longer knew how to talk to. She didn’t want to keep hidden the fact that at times during the war--especially when Berlin was firebombed---she had felt entirely German. She didn’t want to agree that the British had come to the end of a good innings. (*Shadows* 101)

Bordering practices involve and affect geographical and ideological boundaries. As regards ideology, it is: “a particular organization of signifying practices which goes to

constitute human beings as social subjects, and which produces the lived relations by which such subjects are connected to the dominant relations of production in a society” (Eagleton 18). The social fabric of society in the Sub Continent underwent a sea change during processes of colonization and decolonization in terms of the authenticity of its world view and the remapping of its geography on ideological/political lines. The devastation wrought by World War II further aggravated the situation by yielding a greater mobility of the population from the region in search of opportunity, security and a better livelihood. Immigration and population exodus are painful realities of Pakistani existence. The trauma of diasporic life is marked by nostalgia for the lost homeland and a feeling of constant displacement and rootlessness. *Burnt Shadows* (2009) is about “fear, prejudice and inhumanity” that “threaten even the most liberal societies.” It mentions the “horrors of Japanese nationalism” and alludes to “Nazi Germany’s mistreatment of the Jews...” Shamsie incorporates the “murderous hatreds that accompanied the Partition of India” as a central theme of her novel. The effect of World War II on America, and the 9/11 attacks on the US in 2001 have also been “structured into the plot” through “various conversations” by the characters which are “otherwise about loss, expatriation, and home” (Bruce 157).

The announcement of the British withdrawal from the Sub Continent and partition of the same into India and Pakistan disintegrated the Indians who had cohabited peacefully for centuries. Overnight “relationships that had seemed to be cast in steel disintegrated under the acid questions: Are you for India or Pakistan?” (*Shadows* 107). Partition led to riots, violence, and the destruction of “Muslim homes in New Delhi...

Women pulled out of their beds at night” (*Shadows* 126). Sajjad Ashraf chose to leave India. The novel is replete with the “muhajir” discourse. “Muhajir” is the Urdu word for “migrant” and many characters in the novel, including Harry identify with it. While in America Harry realizes, he is “surrounded by a group of immigrants. Germans, Polish, Russians. They were all, like him, bound by class in this exclusive public...school... their parents wanted no more to do with Europe after the war” (ibid 174).

Raza Hazara is a hybrid polyglot who speaks English, Japanese, German, Urdu and Pashto. “He only spoke Japanese in the privacy of his home...his mind contained words from a country he had never visited.” He had learnt to fit in everywhere with the help of a “studied awareness---one he’d had from a very young age---of how to downplay his manifest difference” (*Shadows* 141). Raza had heard about his mother’s journey “from Tokyo to Bombay” and from Bombay to Delhi, slipping “from skin to skin, city to city.” But his mother did not tell him anything about “the momentum of a bomb blast that threw her into a world in which everything was unfamiliar” (ibid 227). Raza’s entanglement with Abdullah and his subsequent disappearance into Afghanistan through a mud track that naturally bridged Pakistan and Afghanistan, introduce the theme of Afghan Civil War and terrorism into the novel. The war in Afghanistan is said to have been funded by Saudi Arabia and the US because of the economic interests that these countries had in the region. These economic interests ranged from the mining of gems to the production of opium and heroin through the cultivation of poppies. Afghanistan’s geographically strategic location amidst oil-rich states was an added attraction to the western agenda. The country, with its rich ancient traditions is still perceived as a

crossroad between east and west. Afghan Civil War is shown to have global dimensions and an international agenda and Raza Hazara is the converging point for almost all the strands within this complex plot involving global mobility. Harry envisions a map of the world in which countries appear as:

mere outlines, waiting to be shaded in with stripes of red, white and blue as they were drawn into the strictly territorial battle of the Afghans versus the Soviets...it had been a three-way affair: Egypt provided the Soviet-made arms, America provided financing, training and technological assistance, and Pakistan provided the base for training camps...the war was truly international. Arms from Egypt, China and ---soon---Israel. Recruits from all over the Muslim world...India might be willing to sell...the arms they had bought from their Russian friends...Harry couldn't help enjoying the idea of Pakistan, India and Israel working together in America's war. (206-7)

Global projects like the Afghanistan War had capitalist agenda which wedged open a gateway for the Neo Imperialist colonizer: the US of A. Capitalist economy of the US went global in the wake of Afghanistan War at a surprisingly fast pace and made America the only Super Power of the world. Globalization appeals to advocates of hybridity [...] because it seems to harmonize the universal and the particular and, in the process, it seems to open up to a multiplicity of cultural relationships unheard of in the age of empire: for Bhabha, the globalization of social spaces reflects a state of dissatisfaction that, nevertheless, enables the articulation and enunciation of a 'global or transnational

imaginary and its “cosmopolitan subjectivities” (Gikandi 110).

Globalism is opposed to homogenization, standardization, cultural imperialism, westernization and Americanization. Rather globalism achieves its goals through hybridity of race, cultures, and economy. It is “an endorsement of international free trade and the outlawing of protected or public domestic economies” (Tsing 51). Globalization of the capitalist economy renders geographical and/or ideological boundaries irrelevant. It disperses the authority of sovereign nation states to accommodate the transnational scope of contemporary finance, marketing, and production. Global financial projects have to be replicated at various new places for maximum output. Hence border crossing, travelling, and connectivity through multiple advanced technological devices are unavoidable. All this has contributed to the strange heterogeneity and open-endedness of the world. Look at the extract that follows from *Burnt Shadows* (2009) to see what existence is like for Raza Hazara in a globalized space:

In his decade in Dubai, prior to Harry re-entering his life, he sought out as many nationalities as possible, acquiring language with the zeal of a collector---Bengali and Tamil from the hotel staff; Arabic from the receptionists; Swahili from the in-house jazz band; French from Claudia--the most consistent of his many lovers; Farsi from the couple who ran the restaurant at the corner of his street; Russian from the two hookers who lived in the apartment next door...and beyond this a smattering of words from all over the globe. The more languages you learned, he discovered, the more you found overlap: “Qahweh” in Arabic, “gehve”

in Farsi, “café” in French, “coffee” in English, “kofi” in Japanese... .

(*Shadows* 262)

Shamsie projects a world that is in “transition from Solid modernity to a more liquid form of social life” (Bauman). In such a world construction of a resilient identity that is constricted within the geographical or ideological borders is becoming increasingly impossible. Human beings have come a long way from a period where they understood themselves as ‘pilgrims’ who crossed boundaries in pursuit of truth and profundity to a stage where they are mere ‘tourists’ in search of entertainment, security, and better means of livelihood and/or fleeting social experiences.

Heterogeneity of the fictional construct namely: *Burnt Shadows* (2009) in terms of its socio-cultural institutions builds a counter discourse to the stigmatization of all Muslims as “terrorists” or “fundamentalists” by the mainstream media. Shamsie’s novel projects the plurality and inclusivity of Islam as a faith and Muslim marriage as social institution. The openness with which Sajjad Ashraf accommodates the practicality of Hiroko’s conversion (to Islam) is worth mentioning here. Sajjad volunteers to have a court marriage because Hiroko is neither a Jew, nor Christian. Hiroko, however, wants to repeat “the Kalma---la ilalahilallah Muhammadurrasool Allah---three times” without even knowing what it means because she sees “no reason to make things more difficult for you with your family than is necessary” (*Shadows* 120). At a later stage in her married life Hiroko retrospectively thinks about her decision to start covering her legs by wearing Shalwar kameezes to “be more Pakistani” by giving in to her teenaged son’s rebellion which was “asserting itself through nationalism”. Her husband, Sajjad

says nothing. He only gives her a “slightly wounded look of a man who realizes his wife is willing to make concessions for her son... she would never have made for him” (ibid132). Sajjad Ashraf is portrayed as a devoted husband who genuinely loves his Japanese wife. The loss of home has taught Hiroko how to survive, leaving everything behind. As for her husband; Sajjad, he believes that he only survived... because he had her” (*Shadows* 137-138). The historical experiences shared by Hiroko Tanaka and Sajjad Ashraf such as the bomb and the partition produce a collectivity between both through reciprocity of exchange and shared oppression and weld them for life.

Conclusion

Through a discussion of the global structure and scope of *Burnt Shadows* (2009), the paper in hand has explained how Shamsie juxtaposes geographically distanced, incompatible places to bring out the cultural diversity of the Muslim community. Spatially separated and racially different characters are brought together to concretize the plurality of world views. The diversity of discourses is projected through heteroglossia by correlating different characters, situations and stylistic features of language. The discursive heterotopia inhabited by the fictional community gets transformed into an ontological heterotopia. The novel challenges the Western reductive approach of stigmatizing Muslims as “fundamentalists” and/or “terrorists” by constricting them to distinct geographical spaces. The cosmopolitan nature of Islamic culture in which various national languages are mutually aware of one another, results in a radical heteroglossia. The multiplicity of races, cultures, and ethnicities add complexity and plurality to Muslim community. *Burnt Shadows* (2009) constructs a polyphonic world

view celebrating dialogism which is fundamentally irreducible to essentialism and an exclusionist world view. Muslims emerge as well integrated citizens of a cosmopolitan world on a global scale.

Works Cited

Primary Text:

Shamsie, Kamila. *Burnt Shadows*. Picador. New York, 2009. Print.

Secondary Sources:

Eagleton, Terry. *Ideology: An Introduction*. Verso, 1991. Print.

Fox, Rachel. *Writing Islam from a South Asian Perspective*. *rew. Interventions*. Routledge. Web.P. downloaded at 23:26, 07 August 2016.

Gikandi, Simon. "The Globalizing of Modernity" from *Literature and Globalization*. Eds. Connel, Liam and Marsh, Nicky Abingdon Routledge, 2011.

Heise, K. Ursula. "The Globalizing of Modernity" from *Literature and Globalization*. Eds. Connel, Liam and Marsh, Nicky Abingdon Routledge, 2011.

Kalliney, Peter J. "The Globalizing of Modernity" from *Literature and Globalization*. Eds. Connel, Liam and Marsh, Nicky Abingdon Routledge, 2011.

King, Bruce. *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*. Routledge. Web. P. downloaded at: 23:36, 07 August 2016.

McHale, Brian. *Postmodernist Fiction*. Routledge, London and New York, 1989.

"Postmodernism". *The Routledge Companion*. Ed. Stuart Sim. Routledge, London & New York, 1991.

Rahman, Tariq. *A History of Pakistani Literature in English: 1947-1988*. 1991 & 2015. Print.

Tsing, Anna. “The Globalizing of Modernity” from *Literature and Globalization* Eds. Connel, Liam and Marsh, Nicky Abingdon Routledge, 2011.