

Body as a Site of Memory: An Analysis of Hiroko Tanaka from Burnt Shadows

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Abstract:

Pierre Nora developed the sites of memory" (lieu de memoire) in his monumental seven-part work *Les Lieux de Memoire*, which refers to any significant entity, whether material or non-material, which by dint of human will or the result of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage. The burnt image of three cranes on the back of Hiroko Tanaka in *Burnt Shadows* by Kamila Shamsie, formed as a result of the atomic bomb explosion in Nagasaki, which she survived, crystallizes the memories of the war and acts as a site of memory that memorializes the dangers of nationalist politics and war.

Keywords: Site of memory, the burnt image of three cranes, Hiroko Tanaka, Second World War, dangers of nationalist politics.

Kamila Shamsie is obsessed with history and politics, as already mentioned. This provides good material for her fiction. In her recent novel *A God in Every Stone*, she states, "That is what I want for my life. I want to go to Peshawar [...] because there is more past than Two and a half thousand years of history beneath its soil. How long a list of reasons do you need?" (*A God in Every Stone* 42)

One of the most influential concepts in "new cultural memory" was developed by French Historian Pierre Nora. In his monumental seven-part work *Les Lieux de Memoire*, he introduced the concept of "the sites of memory" (lieu de memoire) or places of space. It is a concept related to collective memory and refers to places, objects, and people that have special significance related to a group's remembrance. "A lieu de memoire is any significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community (in this case, the French community)" (Nora xvii). On the other hand, the interplay of memory and history, the interaction of both factors, makes them a memory site.

Burnt Shadows by Kamila Shamsie is an epic novel that spans five different countries and traces the journey of the protagonist Hiroko Tanaka. She is a witness and part of many significant events in world history. She was born in Nagasaki and was a survivor of the atomic bomb. She lost her lover Konrad and her father to the bomb, although she survived. She then travels to India to meet Konrad's sister Elizabeth wherein she falls in love with Sajjad, who works for the Burtons. She witnessed the atrocities of Partition in 1947. To escape the dangers of Partition, the newly wedded couples Hiroko and Sajjad move to Turkey. They could not return to India then and were forced to Pakistan and set up their life in Karachi. Her son Raza gets acquainted with Afghan refugee boy Abdulla who takes him to the training camps for the Mujahideen, which he later escapes. A CIA agent murders Sajjad as he searches for Raza. Hiroko later moves to America as India and Pakistan experiment with their nuclear bombs and witnesses the 9/11 attack on the Twin Towers and the "war on terror" that follows.

In the novel, Hiroko, herself or her body becomes a "site of memory," which consolidates and fulfills the function of evoking the memories of the Second World War and symbolically represents the dangers of nationalistic politics and its consequences. "Her physical body serves as a manuscript upon which national and political upheavals are literally and metaphorically transcribed, reflecting the novel's demonstration of women's bodies as sites of conflict between nationalism and colonialism." (Khan 54)

She did not want to hide the scar on her back, but at the same time, she did not want to be identified with it as a hibakusha, a survivor of the bomb, because she felt it then reduced her whole self into just the bomb. "She had become, in fact, a figure out of myth. The character who loses everything and is born anew in blood" (*Burnt Shadows* 50). She never speaks about the birds on her back as she wishes to dismiss them as a not-so-important part of her life. However, the birds will always be involved in her life's most significant turns.

Shamsie describes the moments when the bomb fell, and after the blast with vivid details, her imagination propelled by the various accounts of the survivors she has read. The bomb fell just after the most beautiful moment in Hiroko's life until then – after Konrad proposed to her. She was wearing her mother's white kimono and was in total bliss. "Now there is Konrad. As soon as the war ends, there will be her and Konrad. As soon as the war ends, there will be food and silk. She will never wear grey again" (*Burnt Shadows* 16). And then the bomb fell. "And then the world goes white" (*Burnt Shadows* 23). She saw the bomb as a "Diamond cutting open the earth, falling through to hell" (*Burnt Shadows* 27). What followed were traumatic visions and episodes that no human being would have imagined. Her father's death is one of the most haunting images in the novel.

Hiroko looks down and sees a reptile crawling up the path toward her house. Her neighbor's daughter runs towards the serpent 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. Why does she expect him to help? Hiroko wonders. (BS 27)

This remains one of her haunting memories for the rest of her life. The trauma she would have gone through is evident as she says: " My father, I saw him in the last seconds of his life, and I thought he was something unhuman. He was covered in scales. No skin, no hair, no clothes, just scales. No one should ever have to see their father covered in scales" (BS 99). For Konrad, it was even worse that she could not find anything other than what he thought was his shadow.

Those nearest the blast's epicentre were eradicated, only the fat from their bodies sticking to the walls and rocks around them like shadows [...] I looked for Konrad's shade. I found it. Alternatively, I found something that I believed was it. On a rock. Such a slight shadow. I sent a message to Yoshi Watanabe, and together we rolled that rock to the International Cemetery [...] ' She pressed a hand against her spine at the memory. 'And buried it. (BS 27)

For Hiroko herself, her body was marked forever by the war.

Hiroko can only think that her clothing is in shreds and must go indoors to change. Hiroko runs her fingers along her back as she climbs the stairs down, which, minutes earlier, she had followed Konrad. There is feeling; there is no feeling, skin, and something else. Where there is skin, there is feeling. Shreds of what- skin or silk? She shrugs off her kimono. It falls from her shoulders but does not touch the ground. Something keeps it attached to her. (BS 26)

The effect of the bomb did not end with the blast and its immediate calamity. The bomb was to haunt the Nagasakians for generations to come. It is ironic that the world still considers the possibility of using atomic bombs whenever two countries engage in war, even after they witnessed what nuclear bombs could do.

In Hiroshima, 90 percent of physicians and nurses were killed or injured; 42 of 45 hospitals were rendered non-functional; and 70 percent of victims had combined injuries, including, in most cases, severe burns. All the dedicated burn beds around the world would be insufficient to care for the survivors of a single nuclear bomb on any city. Some of those who entered the cities after the bombings to assist also died from the radiation. Also, the incidents of Leukemia increased among the survivors in the coming period of five to six years. The incidence of Leukaemia among survivors increased noticeably five to six years after the bombings. About a decade later, survivors began suffering from thyroid, breast, lung, and other cancers at higher-than-average rates. For solid cancers, the added risks related to radiation exposure continue to increase throughout the lifespan of survivors, even to this day, almost seven decades after the bombings. Women exposed to the bombings while pregnant experienced higher rates of miscarriage and deaths among their infants. Children exposed to radiation in their mother's womb were more likely to have intellectual disabilities, impaired growth, and an increased risk of developing cancer. (Sasamori ICAN)

The three cranes on her back devoid of any sensation mark her permanently as a hibakusha. However, she does not want to be defined by the bomb. "I do not want to hide these burns on my back, but I do not want people to judge me by them either. Hibakusha. I would not say I like that word. It reduces you to the bomb. Every atom of you (BS 100). It is one of the

reasons why she moves out of Nagasaki at the earliest opportunity. She was leading a satisfying life in Tokyo as a translator until she faced extreme insensitivity on the part of her American colleague, who justified the bomb by saying it was necessary to save "American lives." However, wherever she went, the three cranes on her back continued to haunt her.

For Daniela Vitolo, her body seems to be a book in which history has been written, and the bomb attack has left a visible burn and an indelible sign on her body (Vitolo 4). The rest of her life takes shape around this sign, and her identity is built upon it. Kiczkowski claims that Shamsie has an interest in the representation of space, and this space is her body. For her, the body of Hiroko after the bombing becomes the map guiding her through the memory of the event (Kiczkowski 130). It can also be noticed that the same space where the birds are present is her back and the image leading to her memory is the seared birds. Readers contemplating why the author has chosen birds instead of any other ideas will probably find out its reason uncomplicatedly. The novel starts with the question of a prisoner in an orange jumpsuit and ends with the same question by the same prisoner. The literary representation of the bird is always identified with freedom and tranquillity. Shamsie contrasts the notions of freedom and imprisonment.

Shamsie describes the moment of bombing within this feeling:

... She is suddenly, shockingly, aware of her own body. Such a mixture of heaviness and lightness – her limbs suffused with pleasure, exhausted by it, and yet it felt as though there were wings attached to her, on the verge of lifting off the ground entirely. [...] Hiroko steps out onto the verandah. Her body, from the neck down to a silk column white, with three black cranes swooping across her back. She looks towards the mountains, and everything is more beautiful than it was early this morning. Nagasaki is more attractive to her than ever before. (Shamsie 22-23)

Shamsie might have chosen the birds for the shadows of her memories on the back due to the importance of birds in Japanese culture. They are considered symbols of freedom, peace, and tranquillity. This can also be connected with the story of Sadako Sasaki, the reason for the popularity of origami birds as symbols all around the world. Sadako was just two when the atomic bomb was dropped, and she survived. Years later, she was identified with cancer. She was convinced that if she could make thousand origami birds, she would escape death according to the local beliefs. She could not complete making the birds before her death, but she and her birds became symbols of world peace. The birds on the back of Hiroko remind one of this. They are placed on the back, which is also significant because it is not an easily accessible place for Hiroko.

On the other hand, Hiroko is not the only character suffering from the fury of birds.

All Hiroko could think of was: the bomb. In the first years after Nagasaki, she had dreams in which she awoke to find the tattoos gone from her skin and knew the birds were inside her now, their beaks dripping venom into her bloodstream, their charred wings

engulfing her organs. However, then her daughter died, and the dreams stopped. The birds had their prey.

They had returned when she was pregnant with Raza – dreams angrier, more frightening than ever before, and she would wake from them to feel a fluttering in her womb. (Shamsie, 2009, s. 222)

Even born twenty years after Nagasaki and has never been there, her son Raza cannot escape the birds' wrath either. Raza loves a girl whose name is Salma and wants to get married to her. When Salma tells this conversation to Hiroko, she – in an instant – finds the guilty: the veiled birds on her back: "She had not imagined the birds could fly outwards and enter the mind of this girl, and from her mind enter Raza's heart." (Shamsie, 2009, s. 222)

It is not about age. It is your mother. Everyone knows about your mother.'

'What about her?'

'Nagasaki. The bomb. No one will give their daughter to you in marriage unless they are desperate, Raza. You could be deformed. How do you know you are not? Raza sat forward, gripping the phone tightly. 'Deformed? I am not. Salma, your father is my doctor. I am not deformed.'

'Maybe not in any way we can see. However, there is no guarantee. You might have something you can pass on to your children. I have seen the pictures. Of babies born in Nagasaki after the bomb.'

'I have never been to Nagasaki. I was born twenty years after the bomb. Please. You do not want to talk to me anymore. OK, say that. However, do not say this. Do not say you think I am deformed.' (Shamsie 189)

Raza realized that he had been waiting for this confirmation long and was not an outsider but a 'branded outcast.' He reasoned with himself; he had lived in this mohalla his whole life and had scraped and scabbed his knees on every street within one- a mile radius. He was not an outsider but a digression in contact with the world of his mohalla but not intersecting it like a tangent. He thought, after all, intersections were created from shared stories and standard histories, from marriages and the possibility of marriages between neighboring families—from the intersecting world, Raza Konrad Ashraf was cast out because of his mother's origin and because she had fallen victim to the atomic bomb. The past that he could never erase or undo. When this identity takes a toll on young adolescent Raza, he chooses to get closer to Abdulla, the Afghan boy, which leads to a series of events culminating in his father's death.

.he realized he had been waiting a long time for confirmation that he was... not an outsider, not quite that. Not when he had lived in this mohalla his whole life and had scraped and scabbed his knees on every street within one- a mile radius. Not an outsider, just a tangent. In contact with the world of his mohalla but not intersecting it. After all, intersections were created from shared stories and standard histories, from marriages and the possibility of marriages between neighboring families—from the intersecting world, Raza Konrad Ashraf was cast out. (BS 189)

Whenever she touches her back, she feels the loss of cutaneous sensation and remembers that scary and tragic day in Nagasaki. Her past then becomes present. She seems to carry her memories on her skin:

She pushed herself up from the chair, her arms wrapped across her chest, and walked down into the garden. Some days she could feel the dead on her back, pressing down beneath her shoulder blades with demands she could make no sense of but knew she was failing to meet. She ran her knuckles across the bark of a tree. The faint sound of skin on bark was oddly comforting. It reminded her of something ... something from Nagasaki, but she could not remember what. (Shamsie 49)

At this time, she forgets the present, the present with its pleasures or its pains. She seems to have lost her consciousness and feelings. She enshrouds her fingers across the bark of a tree, and her fingers bleed, but she does not know what she is doing and is unaware of her bleeding finger and its pain. The present disappears when she remembers something in the past.

Towards the end of the novel, when Kim asks whether she has shown the birds to Raza, she replies that she has not but feels guilty that she should have shown it to him and many others to make them aware of the dangers of nationalistic politics and violence. The burnt shadows of the birds thus crystallize the memories of the Second World war and the atomic bomb, constantly reminding her of the insignificance of any national identity and the dangers of nationalistic politics.

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