ISSN: 2582-5526 www.thevoiceofcreativeresearch.com

The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 8 & Issue 1 (January-March 2026)

OPEN ACCESS

PEER REVIEWED

DOI: https://doi.org/10.53032/tvcr/PP/2026.v8n1.06

'The Yet Unknowing World': The Many Worlds Unveiled by Hiroko Tanaka in Kamila Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows*

Mariam John
Assistant Professor
PG Department of English
St Cyril's College, Adoor

All Faith is false, all Faith is true: Truth is the shattered mirror strown In myriad bits; while each believes His little bit the whole to own." (13)
— ***Kwame Anthony Appiah, Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers***

Abstract

This paper explores how Kamila Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows* (2009) unravels the interwoven legacies of colonialism, environmental degradation, and transnational trauma through the life of its protagonist, Hiroko Tanaka. By tracing the intersections of war ecology, nuclear colonialism, and postcolonial violence, this study argues that environmental destruction constitutes a form of enduring imperial aggression. Shamsie's narrative, spanning Japan, India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the United States, reveals how landscapes of war and displacement shape collective memory and ecological consciousness. The novel situates personal and planetary suffering within a shared moral framework, ultimately calling for a cosmopolitan ethics that unites environmental, social, and postcolonial justice.

Keywords: Environmental justice, Postcolonialism, War ecology, Nuclear colonialism, Historical Continuity, Extractive Economies, Political Ecology, and Disaster Cosmopolitanism

Introduction

The lasting impact of colonialism extends beyond the political and cultural—it is deeply ecological. This paper explores how environmental degradation in postcolonial societies stems from historical systems of exploitation. It highlights the complex connections between environmental damage and the continuing effects of colonial power structures. Specifically, it argues that the destruction caused by war and nuclear weapons represents a distinct and

enduring form of postcolonial violence. The U.S. atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki during World War II exemplify how certain regions were treated as "sacrificial zones." By tracing the intersections of militarism, nuclear colonialism, and ecological harm, the paper suggests that confronting this overlooked form of environmental damage is essential for achieving genuine environmental and postcolonial justice. Kamila Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows* captures these dynamics through its depiction of war-torn Japan, India, and Afghanistan, following the journey of Hiroko Tanaka as she navigates the emotional and physical landscapes left in the wake of global conflict.

Burnt Shadows (2009), the fifth novel by Pakistani-British writer Kamila Shamsie, is a sweeping war narrative that traces the psychological evolution of its protagonist, Hiroko Tanaka, as she journeys from Japan to India, Afghanistan, and eventually the United States. The novel opens in Nagasaki, where Hiroko, a young Japanese teacher of German, is in love with Konrad Weiss, a German writer. Konrad had come to Nagasaki in 1938 after his brother-in-law, James Burton—an official in the British colonial administration—offered him a relative's vacant house there rather than a place in his own home in Delhi.

The novel opens on the bright morning of August 9, 1945—the day the atomic bomb falls on Nagasaki. Hiroko's romance with Konrad reflects the fleeting love born of wartime uncertainty, a love that transcends national and cultural boundaries. But when Konrad leaves after a casual farewell, everything changes in an instant. The bomb's explosion obliterates Hiroko's world. When she regains consciousness, she discovers that her life, as she knew it, is gone. The shadow of Konrad's body is burned into a stone wall, while the cranes on the back of her kimono are seared into her skin—a haunting mark that transforms her into a *hibakusha*, a survivor of the atomic attack.

Having lost her city, family, and the man she loved, Hiroko travels to Delhi, seeking refuge with Konrad's half-sister, Elizabeth (Ilse), and her husband, James Burton. They receive her kindly, and in this new setting she meets Sajjad Ashraf, the young tutor of their son Henry (nicknamed Harry). Sensitive and idealistic, Sajjad falls in love with Hiroko, and the two eventually marry. After the partition of 1947, Sajjad, being Muslim, moves to Karachi, effectively severing ties with Delhi forever. Meanwhile, the Burtons send their son Harry to England for his education, setting the stage for the novel's next generation.

Hiroko and Sajjad's son, Raza, symbolizes the disillusioned youth of Pakistan. He befriends Afghans in Karachi, learns Pashto from his school driver, and—despite his parents' disapproval—ends up in Kabul with his friend Abdullah. There, he crosses paths with Harry Burton, now working covertly for an American organization. Out of loyalty to Sajjad, his former tutor, Harry helps rescue Raza, later becoming a mentor figure to him. After Sajjad's death, Hiroko moves to New York to live with her old friend Ilse, while Raza begins working with Harry due to his multilingual abilities.

In the final part of the novel, the women—Hiroko, Ilse, and Harry's daughter Kim—live safely in New York, while the men—Harry and Raza—are caught up in the clandestine operations of Afghanistan. When Harry is killed by a rebel fighter, Raza is wrongly accused of

his murder and must flee. With help from Afghan allies, he escapes to New York, but a tragic misunderstanding leads Kim to hand him over to the authorities. The novel closes by linking back to its opening scene, showing Raza in Guantanamo Bay—an emblem of post-9/11 paranoia.

Through this intergenerational saga, *Burnt Shadows* raises questions of identity, loyalty, and prejudice, reflecting the cyclical violence that began with Hiroshima and continues through the "Global War on Terror."

Political ecology is a critical research field within anthropology, geography, and related disciplines that has become well known for its analyses of how and why structural forces, such as capitalist economic processes and power relations, drive environmental change in an increasingly interconnected world. Political ecology is important as the world increasingly struggles with interrelated issues such as global climate change, industrial pollution, resource degradation, economic dispossession, and changing patterns of environmental health. War ecology deals with the affective resonances of violence that have penetrated and contaminated the environments and ecologies of places where perpetual wars of the US empire, never-ending wars, and peacelessness of political enmity continue. Scientists define that the beginning of the Anthropocene, age of humans, when human impact change the basic physical processes of earth, should be 1945. This is when humans tested the first atomic bomb, and then dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan. The resulting radioactive particles were detected in soil samples globally‖.The testing of the bomb and resultant mushroom cloud created a powerful new symbol of the destructive power of the human species. Political ecology and war ecology deals with the subsequent consequences of war, the protagonist is shown as someone who goes through the power turmoils of various cities and the drastic political phenomena that she witnesses.

> But ever since Germany's surrender shifted his status in Naga-saki from that of 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. It says all there is to say about the paranoia of Imperial Japan: notebooks of research and observation about the cosmopolitan world that had briefly existed within a square mile of where he now lives are evidence of treason (Burnt Shadows, 9).

War created a military material culture , whether it is Japan's invasion by imperial forces and the ensuing atomic bomb destruction. The political ecology of a state is based on its allies and enemies as Konrad, the German too goes through in Japan . Each character in the novel is affected by the political and ecological consequences of war. Raza, Hiroko Tanaka's son is a victim of his father's Pakistani identity and also to his mother as a 'demure Japanese woman'(130). He is unable to procure an identity based on his parents and so he blindly follows the peer group and believes in nationalism, his dual identity of being a Pakistani Muslim.

> For months now, Raza had been living two lives. In one, he was plain Raza Ashraf, getting plainer each day as his friend's lives marched forward into 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, the man for whom an American took off his own shoes, which could only signal that somehow, in some way though Raza would only look mysterious when questioned about it he was of significance to the CIA (every American in Pakistan was CIA, of course).(207)

Environmental Consciousness and Literary Context

A review of *Burnt Shadows* published in *The Guardian* praised the novel for its emotional depth and narrative precision. The reviewer noted that the final section's title, *"The Speed Necessary to Replace Loss,"* is borrowed from *The English Patient*—a fitting choice, as Shamsie's novel begins where Ondaatje's ends, under the looming shadow of a mushroom cloud over Asia. The influence of Anita Desai is also visible in Shamsie's evocative portrayal of pre-Partition Delhi, steeped in the melancholy beauty of Urdu poetry. Yet, despite these literary echoes, Shamsie's voice remains distinct—clear, confident, and refreshingly unadorned.

> Sajjad Ali Ashraf had his eyes fixed on the sky as he cycled parallel to the Yamuna River, trying to locate the exact celestial 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 (he wasn't merely dismissive of opposing views, he was inclined to believe they were only made in est), the place to which his ancestors had come from Turkey over seven centuries earlier to join the armies of the Mamluk King, Qutb-ud-din Aibak.(33)

Environmental discourse in literature, as reflected in *Burnt Shadows*, extends beyond identifying ecological concerns such as pollution or toxic exposure. It also examines moral and cultural questions about human responsibility—how societies confront environmental crises shaped by history, class, and power. Recent Pakistani literature has increasingly explored these themes, expressing dismay at the neglect and abuse of nature (Yaqoob 2016). The novel explores the physical destruction of the environment through global spaces the characters move from Japan, India, Pakistan and New York. The atomic bombing at Japan, the partition effect and the ensuing communal riots in India and Pakistan and the twin tower destruction in New York showcases how colonialism, capitalism, industrialism lead to a War Ecology where the natural world is treated as a mere resource for mechanical production and profit, leading to ecological imbalances.

The consequences of partition of India and Pakistan is not merely the mass migration of people, the communal riots and the rape and abduction of women from both sides but it has also affected the basic necessities of life- land, water, agriculture, cotton industry. While Radcliff and Mountbatten divided the borders of India and Pakistan based on land acquisition and dismissal, they forgot the region's most essential resources- its rivers and ecosystems - which need to be managed as bioregions:

> The slicing and dicing of rivers and bioregions by borders is not isolated to India. In March 1991, the provinces of Pakistan signed the Water Apportionment Accord, largely based on the historical use of water by the provinces of Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan. Rather than setting the issue to rest, the provinces continue to tussle over the ownership and distribution of water. The mighty Indus basin, already divided between China, India, Pakistan and Afghanistan, has been divided still further, with nothing and nobody taking responsibility for monitoring – much less maintaining – the health of the basin as a whole. (Ahmad)

Thus the ongoing environmental catastrophes like, drought, flood, storms , agricultural degradation and the vanishing of species is based on the inadequacy of the governments and jurisdiction of the countries to protect these bioregions irrespective of border lines.Partition thus marred temporal and structural hierarchies of nature and politics and the continued to effect the entangled form of geopolitical catastrophe.

> The communal make-up of Delhi he laid out in great detail. His own thoughts on the nature of violence and its effects on the most seemingly rational of human beings. The actions that desperation or rage or self-defence could provoke. He asked Sajjad questions starting with 'What would you do if..., asking the violations personal, religious, communal, familial. And when younger man to consider his possible responses to a range of Sajjad was crouching on the ground, head in his hands, he had bent down, hand on Sajjad's shoulder, and delivered his coup de grace: "And after all Hiroko has had to endure, do you want to add to her suffering?" (121-122)

The forced migration is a traumatic experience to Sajjad who has to confirm his Muslim existence by only becoming a Pakistani. But the persona who suffers the most is Hiroko Tanaka - in her new identity as Hiroko Ashraf . She has been through the atomic bombings in Nagasaki that has forever etched bird-shaped burns on her back and radiation effects in her body which leaves her with the decision of not having a baby. She is the cosmopolitan woman who carries the trauma of distant lands, home, memories and the deep human connection across generations and humanity. While all the nations that she connects herself with- America, German, India, Pakistan - her own homeland Japan had sheer enmity and abomination towards these countries, she lives with them and understands her worth through them.

Poets like Rafat lament Pakistan's decaying cities in works such as *"Karachi, 1955"* and *"Karachi, 1968,"* which depict escalating pollution and urban decline. Similarly, in *City by the Sea*, Kamila Shamsie portrays Karachi's suffocating atmosphere and environmental neglect. Writers like Anis Shivani (*Karachi Raj*) and Mohsin Hamid (*How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*) expose how poor sanitation and inadequate infrastructure deepen inequality (Rubenstein 2017).

In *Cosmopolitanism*, Kwame Anthony Appiah, one of the world's leading philosophers, challenges us to redraw these imaginary boundaries, reminding us of the powerful ties that connect people across religions, culture and nations … and of the deep conflicts within them. Appiah suggests; "I am urging that we should learn about people in other

places, take an interest in their civilizations, their arguments, their errors, their achievements, not because that will bring us to agreement, but because it will help us get used to one another. one another." (Appiah, Cosmopolitanism)

Tanaka, thus becomes a citizen of the world, thereby accepting the people and culture that comes on her way but without staking her own individuality. While her son Raza becomes a scapegoat of Islamic fundamentalism. Shamsie, in order to explain her own cultural uncertainty of being a Pakistani author tries to assert her identity through the global citizenship of Tanaka.

Postcolonial Studies is the practice of navigating the afterlives of colonial catastrophe and the compromised sovereignties that followed. It examines how societies live with, in, and against these twin legacies—the rubble of destroyed worlds and the blueprints of futures unbuilt—while generating new forms of knowledge, culture, and political imagination. Disaster Cosmopolitanism as put forward by Liam O'Loughlin suggests the destruction of colonial worlds through global capitalism and global politics. In her polemical text, A Small Place (1988), Jamaica Kincaid alternately figures "disaster" as a term incapable of holding the weight of empire's brutality. Asserting that the English should be "wearing sackcloth and ashes in token penance of the wrongs committed," she contends that "no natural disaster imaginable could equal the harm [the British Empire] did" (24)

Shamsie's portrayal of Tanaka strongly asserts the delineation of the global womanhood through a Japanese woman instead of a Pakistan woman or home identity. Tanaka underplays the various cultures and systems that has been marred by colonialism and war, as Shamsie tries to put Tanaka in various places around the world she takes up the individuality of that particular culture. An 'hibakusha' a Japanese term that translates literally to- bomb affected people or exposed to radioactivity, in Japan and when she comes over to India to live with Burtons, her dead lover's family, she becomes part of the European coloniality. When she marries Sajjad and moves to Pakistan she becomes a 'Muhajir', descendants of Muslims who migrated from India to Pakistan after the 1947 partition.

> It didn't bother her in the least to know she would always be a foreigner in Pakistan she had no interest in belonging to anything as contradictorily insubstantial and damaging as a nation but this didn't stop her from recognising how Raza flinched every time a Pakistani asked him where he was from. (204)

Within this context, *Burnt Shadows* situates itself as an exploration of "war ecology"—the destruction of both human and natural worlds. The atomic bombings exemplify what Liam O'Loughlin calls "disaster cosmopolitanism" (91). Pakistani environmental writing thus becomes a broader meditation on human–nature relationships shaped by violence and survival. Hiroko Tanaka: A Cosmopolitan and Ethical Lens

Through Hiroko Tanaka, Shamsie creates a cosmopolitan and gendered perspective on war, displacement, and belonging. Hiroko becomes a symbol of endurance and empathy, her journey tracing the scars of both personal and planetary trauma. From Nagasaki's nuclear ruins to Delhi's fractured landscape, Karachi's postcolonial tensions, and New York's post-9/11

anxieties, Hiroko embodies the global citizen who carries history's wounds yet seeks reconciliation.

Her experiences blur the boundaries of nationality and identity, suggesting that the emotional aftermath of war is universal. Parallels between Hiroko and Harry Burton—two characters from vastly different backgrounds—highlight Shamsie's ethical vision of shared responsibility and transnational empathy.

This sweeping family saga spans over half a century, chronicling the transformation of global consciousness from the atomic age to the war on terror. When Hiroko pleads with Harry to use his influence to prevent nuclear warfare, she becomes a voice of conscience—a reminder of humanity's duty to seek peace and justice beyond borders (Shamsie 207).

The American characters in *Burnt Shadows* reflect the contradictions of Western power and empathy. Abdullah's metaphor—"War is like disease… countries like yours always fight wars, but always somewhere else" (Shamsie 260)—captures the moral blindness of nations that externalize conflict while remaining untouched by its devastation. His words resonate with a long history of wars fought in the name of civilization: Hiroshima, Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan, and beyond.

Kim, torn between guilt and inherited privilege, personifies this moral dissonance. Her ironic awareness—"cluster bomb the Afghans, but for God's sake don't drive over the pink rabbits"—reveals the superficial empathy that often masks complicity (Shamsie 260).

Ultimately, Shamsie envisions the possibility of renewal through ecumenism—a global ethics that embraces environmental, social, and economic justice for all. The post-9/11 works of Pakistani diasporic writers such as Mohsin Hamid, H. M. Naqvi, and Shamsie herself continue Frantz Fanon's call for humanity to "begin a new history of man" (Fanon 315). In doing so, they remind us that healing—of both the earth and the human spirit—requires empathy, equity, and remembrance.

Works Cited

Ahmad, Omair. "Opinion: Deep Scars to South Asia's Ecosystems Are a Legacy of Partition." *Dialogue Earth*, 12 Apr. 2024, dialogue.earth/en/nature/opinion-deep-scar-to-south-asia-ecosystems-legacy-of-partition.

Appiah, Kwame Anthony. *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*. W. W. Norton and Company, 2010.

Desai, Anita. *Clear Light of Day.* HarperCollins, 1980.

Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth.* Translated by Constance Farrington, Grove Press, 1963.

Hamid, Mohsin. *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia.* Riverhead Books, 2013.

O'Loughlin, Liam. "Disaster Cosmopolitanism." *Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2015, pp. 85–98.

Roberts, Jason. "Political Ecology." *Open Encyclopedia of Anthropology*, Sept. 2020, https://doi.org/10.29164/20polieco.

Rubenstein, Roberta. "Environmental Imaginaries in Postcolonial Literature." *Postcolonial Text*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2017, pp. 1–17.

Shamsie, Kamila. *Burnt Shadows.* Bloomsbury, 2009.

—. *City by the Sea.* Oxford University Press, 1998.

Shivani, Anis. *Karachi Raj.* HarperCollins, 2015.

Yaqoob, Muhammad. "A review of Burnt Shadows in the U.K. newspaper The Guardian." *The Guardian*, 2016.

Yaqoob, Nida. "Ecological Consciousness in Pakistani Fiction." *Pakistani Journal of Literature and Society*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2016, pp. 44–57.