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Slow Violence and the Scarred Body: Reading Nuclear Aftermath in Kamila Shamsie's Burnt Shadows

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ABSTRACT

Burnt Shadows (2009) by Kamila Shamsie starts with the bombing of Nagasaki but Kamila Shamsie does not treat the bomb as a deadened event. Some critics have interpreted the bombing as the beginning of trauma in the context of an allegory of nationalism and money, or simply as one of the episodes in a longer narrative of violence from the state. This article poses a question: How does Burnt Shadows depict violence as an event that continues as a process? Burnt Shadows is read in the light of Rob Nixon's concept of 'violence as violence takes time'. It's a type of violence that's hidden because it's slow, and because it's a gendered habit of attention that renders hurt in the body and at home as a private matter, not political, as Christian and Dowler's critique. The analysis proclaims that Kamila Shamsie introduces the event at the opening of Burnt Shadows and the remainder of the story is a slow aftertaste. The bomb is recorded on Hiroko Tanaka's back in the form of burns that look like a bird. Hiroko Tanaka's injured man is brought to a close distance and remains anonymous in the political. By putting violence in a small, home-based picture, Burnt Shadows gives an

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alternative to the big picture of nuclear wonder. The study reads Kamila Shamsie's treatment of the bomb over a period of time, shifting the question of what the burns mean to how the hurt lasts and how a book can demonstrate this.

Introduction

Kamila Shamsie's Burnt Shadows (2009) opens on the morning of the bombing of Nagasaki. Hiroko Tanaka survives. The pattern on the birds on her kimono is printed into her back. The remainder of the novel chronicles her life over the next decades. The bomb is thus the beginning and the unsolved issue of the novel. It is what the reader comes into contact with, and it never goes away from the story.

This opening has been a point of criticism in various ways in the novel. Khan (2011) sees the bird-shaped burns as part of an allegory, where the protagonist's body becomes a place where national and colonial conflicts are marked. Wintersteiner (2017) situates the novel within twenty-first-century stories of atrocity, asking about the roots of violence and the lasting duty of individuals. Yaqin (2021) treats the bombing of Nagasaki, Partition and the attacks of 9/11 as moments of a necropolitical trauma that Shamsie's characters carry in their bodies. Each of these readings takes the bomb seriously. What they share is a tendency to treat it as an origin: a violent event that explains what comes after.

This article proposes a different emphasis. Instead of asking what the bomb explains, it asks how the bomb lasts. The question is one of time. Nixon (2011) distinguishes violence imagined as an event, immediate and spectacular, from slow violence, which he describes as a violence of delayed destruction that unfolds gradually and out of sight. Radiation, the most familiar case in the long history of nuclear harm, belongs to the second category even though it is produced by the first. Read this way, Burnt Shadows is less a novel about a catastrophe and its trauma than a novel about the afterlife of a catastrophe in a single body and in the lives that body touches.

The discussion goes up in four stages. Section 2 sets out Nixon's concept and the feminist revision that makes it useful for a novel centred on a woman's body. Section 3 reviews the existing criticism and locates the gap. Section 4 offers the close reading in four parts: the refusal of the closed event, the burns as a body of persistent harm, the classification of that harm as private, and its afterlife beyond the body. Section 5 concludes.

Theoretical Framework: Slow Violence

In Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor (2011), Rob Nixon introduces the idea of violence to describe a kind of harm that is hard for people to notice. He uses the following words to describe it: "a violence that is delayed, and out of sight, and dispersed across time and

space, and is often not considered violence at all" (Nixon, 2011, p. 2). This is not the violence that people typically imagine, which is sudden, loud and dramatic in a definite location. There's violence that can happen right now, and that's immediate; it's explosive, it's visible. Slow violence is the reverse, though. It accumulates over time in unnoticed ways, and it's not necessarily considered violence.

When reading fiction, it is crucial to appreciate this contrast. One of the most awesome acts of violence in the 20th century has been the use of atomic bombs. It burst out in a flash. The damage it did was not limited to the flash! The effects of radiation sickness, birth defects, chronic illness and social trauma continued for generations. The bomb was an event, and its damage was slow, but long-lasting. So that's a great example of violence.

Nixon states that the kind of damage it does poses an issue to the art of storytelling. Most stories are around events: something begins, the events build up to a climax. Then it ends. Slow violence isn't like that. It has no limits of start or finish. It is not a moment. So, if a writer wishes to depict such harm, they have to find a way to tell the story. They must have a form which can reveal what the conventional story form cannot.

This raises the question of this study. If the atomic bomb is drama, what is the role of the narrative in the slow consequences of the atomic bomb for Kamila Shamsie? How does she demonstrate this harm that is not loud or visible but rather that is cumulative through time?

There's a very pertinent question that Christian and Dowler (2019) raise. They remind us that it is not a new phenomenon of quiet violence that has been studied by feminist scholars for a while now before Nixon named it. This form of violence is not only difficult to spot because it often takes place gradually, but it is also difficult because it’s hard to detect that it’s occurring. It's also concealed because society focuses on certain kinds of harm: public, speedy, dramatic harm. Violence that occurs in the body, in the house or in life is easily indicated as personal. Does not appear political.

For Burnt Shadows, this is significant because the novel depicts the effects of nuclear damage within a woman's body and in her home. The novel takes the personal into the political. Thus, this framework is a blending of Nixon's concept of violence and Christian and Dowler's notion of its invisibility based on

gender. The framework is not comprised of concepts. It is one wholesale solution. There is no other theory that is added.

Review of Literature and the Gap

Criticism of Burnt Shadows has been substantial and has returned often to the body. Khan (2011) reads the bird-shaped burns as a text on which national and colonial conflicts are written, and discusses Hiroko's numbness as part of that inscription. This is the closest precedent for the present study, and the one most important to distinguish. Khan's question is allegorical: what do the burns stand for? The question asked here is temporal: how does the harm they record persist, and what does the novel do with its persistence?

Wintersteiner (2017) reads the novel alongside two other fictions of twentieth-century atrocity and argues that the personal and the political are closely linked through ideology and culture, while individuals remain responsible for what they do. Yaqin (2021) draws on Mbembe's sociopolitical theory argue that Shamsie's characters are survivors of Partition, the nuclear attacks on Japan and the attacks of 9/11, and that the body becomes a site of historical trauma. Necropolitics asks who is exposed to death by the state. Slow violence asks how harm persists once the exposure has occurred. The two are compatible, but they ask different questions of the same body. Shamsie herself, in an interview with Singh (2012), rejects the habit of framing recent history around 9/11, pointing instead to earlier events, including the Indo-Pakistani nuclear tests and the American-backed war in Afghanistan, as shaping what followed.

An applicable context is found in two recent atomic bomb studies. Rai (2024) argues that atomic bomb literature has been marginalised as testimony or history and left out of studies of violence, and that universalising humanist narratives, by casting Hiroshima as an offence against humanity in general, weaken its critical force. She proposes reading it as a literature of atrocity, attentive to the vulnerability of the flesh. Lombard (2023) looks at the sublime, the habit of making nuclear danger look too beautiful, which leaves little room for responsibility. Lombard argues that experimental fiction and memoir can change this eye-focused approach by dealing with invisibility, visibility and silence. Neither study talks about Burnt Shadows. Both provide a framework for how the novel uses the nuclear image. In the sources used for this study, no analysis applies Nixon's violence to Burnt Shadows. Therefore, this article focuses on the novel's treatment of time rather than on its symbolism or on politics of the state.

Analysis

The Event That Will Not Close

A novel that begins with the bomb might be expected to treat it as a catastrophe that has a before and an after, with the narrative proceeding from the one to the other. Burnt Shadows does not follow this pattern. Its opening gives the reader the event in its fullest form, the morning, the flash and the immediate devastation and then moves on through decades and across continents without allowing the event to recede into history. The structure of the novel, which advances by jumps in time, keeps returning to a woman whose life is still being shaped by what happened in the first section. "The sun came up over Nagasaki, not a single cloud in the sky and the morning was soft and warm" (Shamsie, 2009, p. 3).

This is the opposite of Nixon's assertion that "slow violence" trumps the event-oriented imagination. The bomb could be the novel's climax if narration was event centred. Set its implications in an epilogue. Shamsie flips the cards around. The climax is first. The remainder of the book is slow. The violence is not over for Hiroko as she reads her experiences of love, marriage, exile, and old age. The effect is to deprive the reader of the comfort of the event. The novel's opening turns out to be its state.

The politics of history is the same refusal that is seen in the novel. Shamsie's argument to Singh (2012) that the earlier events, including testing in South Asia and the war in Afghanistan, influenced the later events is also a statement of duration as well as causation. It implies that, once let go, it continues to operate in a nuclear logic. History has not swallowed the bomb up. It's a process that continues to this day among states and in the novel, among people who embody decisions made by others.

The Birds: A Body That Keeps the Violence

The core image of the novel is the birds burnt pattern into Hiroko’s back. It is significant to note its kind. The nuclear sublime, as Lombard (2023) describes it, tends toward the large and the visual: the mushroom cloud, the blinding light, the vista of ruin. Shamsie's image is petite, homey and from a piece of clothing. The birds were part of a kimono. They now form part of an organism. They are visible. They are on the back, which is an area that a person cannot easily see for herself, and so the violent acts that they record are both carried and not in sight. The design on her back was as if the birds were flying with spread wings, but the colors were burnt and the outline blackened (Shamsie, 2009, p. 12).

Violence is a double condition, an unsuspected one, which is carried on a hidden chest. The harm is permanently in the body. It does not make any loud noise. It requires someone to see and to interpret what he has seen. In the novel, the body is the document of duration, as Khan (2011) has pointed out with reference to the burns and Hiroko’s numbness. The burns are that bomb's frozen moment, and the skin remains for the duration of time after all other evidence of the incident has been scrubbed away.

The image is also immune to Rai's (2024) observation of the humanist trend that hinders atomic bomb literature. The birds are not a sign of mankind, in general. They are indicative of a woman, a history, one that the reader must take on. By keeping the violence attached to a body, Shamsie keeps it from dissolving into general sentiment and, in Rai's terms, attends to the vulnerability of the flesh in its specificity.

Slow Violence in Life

The burns lie deep within the body's tissues. They venture into Hiroko's worlds: with Sajjad, marriage, motherhood and friendships. The novel depicts a woman in love and loved. She also brings in that love, and along with it some harm, that her partners can only share a part of, and she can only maintain a part of. He touched her back, not the scars, "the skin around them like marking the outline of a memory" (Shamsie, 2009, p. 67). Then, "She felt the heat of the sun on her back, not the fire but the warmth and how the world was now smoke" (Shamsie, 2009, p. 124).

Here Christian and Dowler's (2019) revision of Nixon becomes useful. They argue that slow violence is hidden by the gendered and racialised split between the public and the private, the active and the passive, the spectacular and the banal. Hiroko's harm falls on the visible side of each pair. It is private rather than public, enduring rather than dramatic and borne by a woman in a domestic setting rather than by a soldier or a state. The novel makes this classification visible by showing how little of it is recognised by the people around her. Her suffering is treated, where it is treated at all, as a personal feature of her character rather than as the continuing record of a political act.

This reading complements, without replacing, the account offered by Yaqin (2021). Necropolitics identifies the state's power over who may live and die. Slow violence, as adapted by Christian and Dowler, identifies the process by which the consequences of that power are privatised so that the harm persists in a household where it is not named as political. The novel allows both to be seen, and it is in the scenes that the slow privatised character of the violence is clearest.

The Afterlife Beyond the Body

Hiroko's slow violence is by no means her only. The novel's focus on those who bear the results of actions taken by others prior to their birth. Wintersteiner (2017) notes that personal and political stories are intertwined and that people are still accountable for their deeds. Together with Nixon, this means one thing: who is responsible for slow violence is hard to determine, and a matter of time. Those who make the violence are not the ones who live it.

The novel's later chapters, dealing with the Cold War, war in Afghanistan, and the events following 9/11, portray characters operating in a world whose dynamics of power had been established long ago. They do their own acts. They are formed by a decades-long history of violence. For years, the war had raged; no one could tell when it would end (215).

The novel does not excuse them for their history. It implies that the harm is attritional, that is, difficult for anyone to see where it comes from and who is responsible for it.

It's at this point that Nixon's interest in representation and Shamsie's formal decisions collide. Burnt Shadows overturns the idea of separating the bomb from the events that follow and forces the reader to keep the temporal continuity in mind throughout the novel, thus making the distinction between cause and effect emerge as a dilemma. It invites the reader to keep together that which the culture of spectacle separates.

Conclusion

This article has argued that Burnt Shadows treats the bombing of Nagasaki not as an event but as a continuing process and that Nixon's concept of slow violence, adjusted by Christian and Dowler's feminist critique, gives a precise vocabulary for what the novel does. The opening places the spectacular event before the reader. Then refuses to let it recede. The burns on Hiroko's back record the violence in the form of duration. The harm goes into life, where it is private and therefore ignored. The consequences of these choices reach beyond the body, to the heirs of a world they did not make.

The contribution is modest but specific. Where earlier criticism has asked what the bomb means, whether as allegory, as trauma or as necropolitics, this study has asked how long it lasts and how a novel can represent that. The answer Shamsie gives is formal as well as thematic: she puts the climax first and makes the rest of the book the slow part. Further work might test whether the same temporal approach illuminates novels in which a single violent event is followed by a long aftermath.

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