



War and its Effects: Analysing Hiroko's Character in Burnt Shadows (2009)

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Abstract

War changes human lives and the consequences are not just for a short period, but instead, continue to affect people lifelong. Such a group of people are the hibakushas, the bomb survivors of the Second World War in Japan. War is a result of the power politics that continues to exert its force. The biggest global historical happenings are not untouched by political grievances. The impact of the major happenings of the world such as the World Wars, Partition of the Indian subcontinent and the 9/11 attack has not completely vanished, but people are trying to cope with the devastation. This shows the willpower of the people who did not only survive but also have appealed for humanity and peace.

Keywords: *War, Hibakushas, Power Politics, Devastation.*

War celebrates two faces, one of victory and the other of loss. May 8, 1945, was declared the official day of celebration as the day marks the V-E (Victory in Europe), with the end of the conflict with Hitler's Germany. Germany surrendered to the Allied powers on May 7, 1945. Three months later, came V-J (Victory in Japan) Day, which is on August 14, 1945, is marked as the end of the Pacific conflict and with that, it was the end of the Second World War. The celebration of both these days marks the victory of the Allied powers, but these instances also raise pertinent questions such as 'what had war brought to the other parts of the world', the followed by 'can victory be gained without loss'. War has always been a major happening in the world which comes with a two-folded aim of victory as well as loss. However, economic loss can never equate with human loss which results in the most devastating effects of war. However, it is the human loss that both sides witness which can never be reprimanded. The following research work tries to understand how war changes human lives and the consequences are not just for a short period, but instead, continue to affect people lifelong. Such a group of people are the hibakushas, the bomb survivors of the Second World War in Japan. Masao Tomonaga in his article notes the endless suffering of the hibakusha: "the human consequences of the two atomic bombings are the history of the

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struggle by the hibakusha to survive and regenerate their life and families as well as their cities. Based on their experience of these consequences, the hibakusha has long been fighting for the elimination of nuclear weapons...The atomic bombs probably were used in combat to end the Pacific War. Nuclear attacks were carried out without any warning and led to indiscriminate killings in both cities. After the bombings, US leaders explained that the two bombs were used just to accelerate the surrender of Imperial Japan to save the lives of several hundred thousand” (2019). War is a result of the power politics that continues to exert its force. The biggest global historical happenings are not untouched by political grievances. The impact of the major happenings of the world such as the World Wars, Partition of the Indian subcontinent and the 9/11 attack has not completely vanished, but people are trying to cope with the devastation. This shows the willpower of the people who did not only survive but also have appealed for humanity and peace. The traditional viewpoint related to war is that it is concerned only with men. However, the following analysis shows that it was not always men at the forefront. Women on both sides of the War, the Allied as well as the Axis powers had their part to play. Sarah Pruitt writes in her article about the roles performed by women during the Second World War that were beyond the traditional role of nursing, "the Soviet Union, in particular, mobilized its women: Upward of 80,000 would enlist in the Red Army during the war, with more than half of these serving in front-line units. British forces included many women alongside men in vital anti-aircraft units. And Nazi Germany followed suit later in the conflict when its flagging fortunes required the nation's full mobilization" (2021). Dr Anuradha Jaiswal in her article "Women's participation during the Colonial Period in India- a Critique on Women's emancipation during the Period", on the freedom struggle of India writes about the active participation of women in revolting against British policies. Women joined men in protesting against the Bengal partition by boycotting foreign goods and buying only swadeshi goods, that is goods produced within India (11). But did this activism of women in the different parts of the world during the different wars and struggles promote a feminist consciousness, is a debatable question till now. The answer to this is not fixed, but the following analysis tries to see that how the patriarchal setup of the society tries to confine women within the narrow boundaries of domestic life. Even during times of the war, patriarchy restricts the social position of women. In negating a primary role to the women of the society, the Government plays a certain role. In an article entitled “Women and War in Japan, 1937-45’ by Thomas R. Havens it is written that “during the years 1941-1942, women in Japan were handled and manipulated based on the idea that they are the caretakers of the family and in doing so they are working for their nation. The following extract takes into account the position of women:

In February 1942 the minister of welfare, Koizumi Chikahiko, disclosed the cabinet's attitude: "To secure its labour force, the enemy is drafting women, but in Japan, out of consideration for the family system, we will not draft them." Tojo Hideki, the prime minister, spoke somewhat more lyrically on the subject: "That warm fountainhead which protects the household, assumes responsibility for rearing children and causes women, children, brothers, and sisters to act as support for the front lines is based on the family system. This is the natural mission of the women in our empire and must be preserved far into the future" (919-920). The article further notes that “women

could best serve the country, the government thought, by staying home, keeping their families happy, and producing more future citizens (920)

After the victory of the Allied powers over the Nazi government and Germany, it was not only the German soldiers who suffered, German women as well were targeted and the most common means to subjugate them was the act of sexual violence. The following extract from an article, by Heidi Matthews, shows the condition of women in post-conflict Germany where women's bodies became a medium to take revenge:

The exact number of rapes is unknown, with estimates ranging from tens of thousands to millions. It is clear, however, that this violence was driven in no small part by a desire to exact revenge on the Germans for atrocities committed in the East, including mass sexual violence perpetrated against “non-Aryan” women (2018)

What is evident from the above paragraph is that women's bodies became a site of sexual violence.

During the Partition episode in the Indian subcontinent, the rivalry between communities was visible and women were the softest targets; rape, abduction, conversion, and killings became the media to exert the power of the patriarchal mindset going on in the name of communal violence. Urvashi Butalia, in her book *The Other Side of Silence* (1998) records a particular narrative of how women were 'martyred' in the name of honour. Women were brutally raped and killed, and if not raped by the men of other communities, they 'offered' themselves to death; which was considered better than rape and abduction, to preserve their pride and honour (193-195). Butalia's account asserts the fact that the position of women has always been secondary to men. Thus women became victims, not only in the name of communal riots but they were made to become 'martyrs' to save the entire community. It is tough to escape the consequences of war. War becomes more problematic when the gender notion comes in along with other aspects. War and concepts such as race, ethnicity, culture and nationalism seem to be patriarchal in nature. They draw women to subjugation who are not allowed the scope to practise any kind of liberty and social transformation. Women are even held back to share their stories. The stereotypical setup of society rarely provides scope and agency to women to share their stories.

The present paper discusses the position of Hiroko Tanaka, an hibakusha, in Kamila Shmasie's *Burnt Shadows* (2009) who are influenced by the War, highlighting the position of both men and women. The text has characters from across the globe, and in some or other way most of them are shown as touched by political and historical events. The text incorporates diverse characters and thus we see how different nations are included in the text to emphasise war and politics. In an interview conducted via e-mail, the interviewer Harleen Singh asks Kamila Shamsie about this particular idea:

Germany, Japan, England, Pakistan, India, Afghanistan, and the United States are all represented variously in this book, as imperialists, victims, anarchies, and diabolical

modern states with all the available machinery of war. It is a rather bleak verdict on contemporary politics. Yet, members of these nations manage to forge lasting relationships (at least in two families) and hold out hope for humanity. Was that the outlook you were hoping for in the novel?

To this, Shamsie answers,

*I don't hope for outlooks. I write a novel to see where it takes me, and I'm almost always surprised. I was very surprised at the way I ended *Burnt Shadows*. I kept thinking it would be a far more upbeat ending until I wrote that final confrontation between Hiroko and Kim and realized that any attempts to "make everything okay" would simply sound false. But as I start to say in my previous answer, I do have a rather bleak view of a particular aspect of nation-states, which has to do with their ability to justify all kinds of horrors in the name of war. I'm glad you noticed that all the states within the book are represented in a less-than kindly fashion. Too many people seem to think I'm making a particular comment on America, but I'm talking about nations in wartime and the particular inhuman logic they start to follow when they decide what is an acceptable price for some other nation's people to pay...(159-160)*

Shamsie talks about war and the brutal consequences that come with it. She does not write about one particular nation and its policies. Shamsie corresponds to the major happenings that came about in the world. She writes about the Second World War, the Partition of the Indian subcontinent, the 9/11 incident and its subsequent War on Terror. Gohar Karim Khan writes in his article about the text concerning the atomic bomb blast at Nagasaki, the first major happening highlighted in the novel, in the following words:

The novel not only presents Hiroko Tanaka's loss but also marks the larger, worldwide tragedies in history but does not provide any detail of such major events. It scarcely provides graphic details of victims, dead bodies, and ruins after the attack... Instead, it provides a view of how these events play out at duality between larger, historical moments and private, intimate memories is played out on the site of the body (2011)

The novel does not use any imagery of corpses or remains of places or provide any factual information brought by the major inhumane happenings of the world. However, the author presents a plethora of emotions of loss and suffering. This loss is familiar to the characters in the novel, however in different forms and contexts. The novel is a study of personal lives and the historical context and how they intertwine with each other. The pertinent play between the personal lives and the historical events that go on the site of the body is best recognized through the bird-shaped burnt image on Hiroko's back. The bird-shaped burnt image acts as a constant reminder of the atomic bomb blast in Nagasaki. The metaphorical depiction of the image is fundamental in tracing the journey of Hiroko Tanaka. The image of the bird-shaped burns persistently reminds Hiroko that the outcomes of the War cannot be erased. The words indicate that however, Hiroko's scars refer to the brutalities of the Second World War, they

cannot become a place to reside. Hiroko's character serves as a microcosm to the larger group of hibakusha and also to the larger picture of the city of Nagasaki. The way hibakusha suffered a lot from physical illness to psychological trauma, from losing their home to facing discrimination, Hiroko undergoes the same situation.

However, Hiroko makes an appeal for peace which is very important to preserve humanity. The way Hiroko reciprocates to the Second World War and becomes a global character, not confining her character to any geographical, cultural, or linguistic boundary is an ironic response to the War. Hiroko's character evolves after the War, when she visits India and realizes the sense of belongingness, what it is to be treated as a hibakusha, and how the bomb blast affects the way people look at her and her son. However, despite all the turmoil, she evolves as a sensible character who accepts the reality of life that no War or any such historical event can suppress the will to live. As noted in the text, "So the story of Hiroko Ashraf's youth is not a story of the bomb but of the voyage after it" (Shamsie 223).

Maya Todeschini in her essay "The Bomb's Womb? Women and the Atom Bomb" contends that "everybody who was in Hiroshima and Nagasaki on the day of the explosion, in contact with corpses afterwards, or associated with 'atom bomb disease' in any form was polluted" (108)...emphasized by the severe effects of radiation on human reproduction, resulting in frequent cases of miscarriage and premature birth, as well as "major congenital abnormalities (especially microcephaly)" (107). Todeschini cited the example of Hayashi Kyōko, who described her body as a "shrunken, worm-eaten apple" that reflected Nagasaki's "barren landscape" (107). Todeschini further argues that women combine "the impurities of death (radiation) and blood (reproduction)" and thus represent "a great danger to the community – they could pass on pollution not only through bodily contact but also through their children" (108). In an article "How Radiation Affects Pregnant Women and Children", the author James N. Yamazaki writes about an initial atomic bomb casualty study conducted at Nagasaki in 1950 which showed how pregnant women within a distance of 2000 meters from the hypocentre during the blast gave birth to such babies who had abnormally shaped small head, which is termed as 'microcephaly', accompanied by mental retardation (2007). In *Burnt Shadows* (2009) Hiroko though not pregnant during the bomb blast at Nagasaki, suffered the pain of miscarriage in 1948, and feared "in imagining what her radiation-exposed body would do to any children she tried to bear,..." (Shamsie 133). Hiroko fears that her body carries the negative effects of the bomb blast. Though so many years have passed after the Nagasaki blast, Hiroko who lives in post-independence Pakistan could not overcome the fear of being a hibakusha. She is a bomb survivor and her scarred body does not allow her to come out of the dreadful consequences of the blast. The miscarriage of her first child might be a matter of fate. The fact that Hiroko is a hibakusha not only traumatizes her physically but also has a psychological effect on her. The association of personal loss with the blast has been an underlying theme of the novel. Shamsie presents the incident of miscarriage to highlight the idea that War never sets anyone free from its threat. The fear of being a hibakusha is familiar to Hiroko. During her stay in colonial India, she recalls how being a hibakusha is like becoming an object of social neglect. She says to Elizabeth:

I don't want to hide these burns on my back, but I don't want people to judge me by them either. Hibakusha. I hate that word. It reduces you to the bomb. Every atom of you (100)

The effects of being a hibakusha not only disturb Hiroko, but the effects also pass on to her son, Raza. He becomes the 'deformed' for his love interest Salma while they are in Karachi. Salma denies getting married to him not because she is two years older than him but because he is the son of his mother – a hibakusha, a survivor of the 1942 bomb blast. Salma says:

‘It’s not about age. It’s about 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’re desperate, Raza. You could be deformed. How do we know you’re not?’ (189)

The above lines are evident that how the identity of being a War survivor not only has adverse effects on one particular generation but is also passed on to their children. Salma and her parents don’t have any first-hand account of the atomic blast but they see Raza's body as if having the same effects that a hibakusha might have. This thought regarding the next generation of the hibakushas shows that even after several years, hibakushas are still abandoned. The effects of the bomb blast continue to affect not only the first generation of hibakushas, but it passes on to the next generations, thus the suffering never ends.

Moreover, it seems as if the fact that Hiroko is a Japanese by birth, a nation that witnessed the terrific bomb blast, does not make Raza feel comfortable. The fact that his mother is a Japanese, an atomic bomb survivor, and a hibakusha makes him feel different in his native place, Pakistan. He does not like to talk in Japanese in front of the world because he feels that in doing so, he may distance himself from the other people around him. Raza thinks his physical body makes all the difference with which he does not seem to be familiar. The following lines describe Raza's position:

‘Sayonara’, they all called out to Hiroko as the bus picked up speed again. Or at least, all of them except Raza called it out. He only spoke again. Or at least, all of them except Raza called it out. He only spoke Japanese within the privacy of his home, not even breaking that rule when his friends delighted in showing off to his mother the one or two Japanese words they’d found in some book, some movie. Why allow the world to know his mind contained words from a country he’d never visited? Weren’t his eyes and his bone structure and his bare-legged mother distancing factors enough? (139)

Raza understands that a certain amount of difference has come to his identity for being a son of a hibakusha. However, he does not acknowledge the difference and very deliberately tries to distance himself from the aspects associated with Hiroko's Japanese identity. He is

unwilling to identify himself with the Japanese language in front of the world. For him, his physical appearance is enough to let people know about his mother's origins.

War and loss, home and memory are sentiments that bind the characters in the text. The dropping of the atomic bombing on Hiroshima and Nagasaki is justified as an act to save the Americans. Hiroko could not accept the justification that such an inhumane act was done to save American lives, as if the Japanese people's death had no significance and only the American lives mattered. Hiroko's words from the text emphasize the point:

And then one day- near the end of '46 – the American with the gentle face said the bomb was a terrible thing, but it had to be done to save American lives. I knew straight away I couldn't keep working for them (62)

For Hiroko, the supremacy of certain nations over others during the Second World War is not acceptable. War brings in every kind of loss and makes people displaced from their nations and cultures. The body just becomes a 'shadow' in the face of the Second World War. Hiroko's description of Konrad's shadow justifies how human beings turn into shadows due to the death caused by War. Sharing her pain with Sajjad about the aftermath situation caused due to the bombing she says:

Days-no weeks-after the bomb and everything still smelt of burning. I walked through it-those strangely angled trees above the melted stone somehow that's what struck me the most-and I looked for Konrad's shadow. I found it. Or I found something that I believed was it. On a rock. Such a lanky shadow (77)

The Second World War did not spare even a corpse. There were no remains of Konrad's body after the blast. The shadow that was formed on a rock was believed to be Konrad's by Hiroko. The bombs that were dropped in Nagasaki touched upon every individual and the destruction that they caused is beyond our imagination. The last part of the text is very crucial to understand the author's viewpoint on incidents such as the Second World War, the Partition of the Indian subcontinent and the 9/11 episode. It seems as if Shamsie is speaking her mind through the character of Hiroko Tanaka. Through the character of Hiroko, Shamsie puts forward some pertinent questions related to War. Hiroko's conversation with Kim is noteworthy in this aspect. Hiroko says:

'...My stories seemed so small, so tiny a fragment in the big picture. Even Nagasaki – seventy-five thousand dead; it's just a fraction of the seventy-two million who died in the war. A tiny fraction. Just over. 1 per cent. Why all this fuss about. 1 per cent? (293)

Hiroko's questions are crucial to understand the loss of the nations that took part in the Second World War. The loss of the Japanese people by two nuclear attacks seemed to be of minimum value. She however justifies that the actual loss caused due to the War is a bigger picture, in which the destruction of Nagasaki seemed very small. However, the loss that is

suffered by the nations should be acknowledged by the triumphant nations. The novel teaches us to be empathetic towards our fellow human beings. Shamsie's tone can be said as ironic while criticising nations who justify their victory and fail to realise others' loss. The following paragraph justifies the point:

You just have to put them in a little corner of the big picture. In the big picture of the Second World War, what was seventy-five more Japanese dead? Acceptable that's what it was. In the big picture of threats to America, what is one Afghan? Expendable. Maybe he's guilty, maybe not. Why risk it? Kim, you are the kindest, most generous woman I know. But right now, because of you, I understand for the first time how nations can applaud when their governments drop a second nuclear bomb (362)

The last line criticises the nations that are in power. The victory that is brought in the name of War is celebrated, whereas the loss that the opposing nation undergoes is never realised. The loss seems to be small in front of the grandeur of the victory encountered. However, the reality is that the losses once happened took a long time to be gathered. The novel calls for humanity in a global world where people are more connected by pain and suffering. Despite all the political upheavals, losses and suffering, the world has to go on. We just need to acknowledge the role of every individual and community in this world. We should accept that one's victory cannot be at the cost of another's loss. The world will become a better place to live in when there will be no differences among fellow human beings and people will consider things and situations not on an individual level, rather on a global level.

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