

Feminist Analysis of Kamila Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows* (2009)

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Abstract:

This paper aims at a textual analysis of Kamila Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows* (2009) from the perspective of Simone de Beauvoir's feminism. The paper looks at how Shamsie's narrative subverts the conventional representations of gender roles within the different cultures of the selected regions, from World War II Japan to post-9/11 America. Discussing the novel's central female characters, specifically Hiroko Tanaka, the research explores the notions of female choice, oriental stereotypes, and race and gender intersectionality. De Beauvoir's opposition between women as 'the Other' and the construction of femininity informs the interpretation of the characters' experiences and choices. Hence, this work shows how Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows* (2009) speaks to contemporary debates on womanhood and the position of women in the modern world. The study also suggests that the analyzed novel depicts women's challenges and their ability to fight for their rights near de Beauvoir's feminism, providing a multicultural vision.

Keywords: Feminism, Representation, *Burnt Shadows* (2009)

Introduction

The epic scale of Kamila Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows* (2009), spanning across continents and decades, provides readers with a stunning array of characters' stories set against significant historical processes. In her novels, Shamsie, a Pakistani-British writer, employs specific issues of culture, origin, and the devastating impacts of political struggles. Because of the plot and chronology of events that intertwine different narratives, women and their parts play a critical role in the story, making it one of the most appropriate books to read from a feminist perspective.

All these discussions, which develop around the concept of the Gothic, revolve around one central issue closest to feminist literary criticism: the representation of women in literature, or, more specifically, the representation of female characters and their voices. It rose to popularity in the middle of the twentieth century with the coming of the second wave of feminism, and it is still growing through the incorporation of diverse views that analyse the role of gender with other factors, including race, class, and nationality.

Research Problem

This research study focuses on the feminist analysis of characters, themes, and other related aspects. Scholars have written extensively on this subject. Despite the existing calls for emphasis on women's roles as authors, there have not been sufficient qualitative analyses of women's novels from the present generation, representing different parts of the world. Hence, the text under analysis, Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows* (2009), with its focus on several countries and powerful female characters, allows discussion of how contemporary literary works

address the matter of feminism in multicultural settings. However, in the case of the women's portrayal, the novel offers a very engaging account of women's roles and treatment. Feminists should analyse the harsh experiences natives endure when confronted with traumatizing histories and demands for social change.

Research Questions

1. How does Kamila Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows* (2009) articulate itself to the conventional and stereotypical female characters and their roles from various cultures and historical periods?
2. To what extent does this novel's picturization of female characters support or reformulate the principles of Simone de Beauvoir's feminism?

Overview of de Beauvoir's Feminist Philosophy

The fundamental tenet of de Beauvoir's feminism is that society and its demands shape women, not the other way around. She also points out that in the scope of history, women exist only as men's counterparts, in opposition to them acting as 'the Other,' while men are generally seen as the norm or the pinnacle of the human being. This othering of women has created women as the Other and thus rendered them inferior and less than humans.

Key Concepts from *The Second Sex* (1949)

1. Women as 'the Other':

De Beauvoir has argued that women are always oriented only towards men, not as subjects. Finally, the othering process of women in literature further subjects them to the lower status of society and denies them leadership and chances to become active subjects of society.

2. The Myth of the 'Eternal Feminine':

De Beauvoir criticizes the retaliatory idea that perpetuates a societal ideal about women. These stereotyping myths limit women's liberty to determine themselves without regard to their gender.

3. Lived Experience:

De Beauvoir also emphasizes women's perspective and their situation in determining how to perceive and think about the problem. The three novels in *A Differentiation Femininity: Women, Body, and Self-Sufficiency* reveal how women accept social norms, corporeal facticity, and psycho-emotional demands in a variety of life cycles.

4. Freedom and Transcendence:

According to existentialist ideas, de Beauvoir believed that a woman, like a man, is a being who strives for existence and transcendence. Still, at the same time, she understands that numerous social factors limit women's possibilities of achieving such a goal.

Despite not using the concept of intersectionality, de Beauvoir's work explores how factors like class, race, and culture shape women's reality, a concept now known as the intersectional approach.

Textual Analysis of *Burnt Shadows* (2009)

Character analysis

1. Hiroko Tanaka

Hiroko Tanaka, the novel's protagonist, successfully captures the struggles, joys, and ironies of the female experience, cutting across culture and time (Shamsie, 2009, p. 56). Her role development takes place in an environment ranging from pre-war Japan to post-9/11 America, giving it a strong theme for a feminist perspective (p. 14).

Nagasaki is home to the youthful Hiroko (p. 9), who intends on education and is in a relationship with Konrad Weiss (p. 21), who is from Germany. This early characterization can correlate with de Beauvoir's concept of

women striving beyond the label of femininity. The atomic bombing of Hiroko can thus be said to physically and emotionally brand her, bearing as it does the stamp of historical trauma on women's bodies (p. 157).

Hiroko's journey from Japan to India and Pakistan, and ultimately to New York, exemplifies her unwavering determination and resistance against the societal norms that aim to limit women or 'invert'. This makes her a symbol of a woman who can transform from one culture to another while still being different. Her ability to speak several languages serves as a source of independence and provides her with the opportunity to influence the world, particularly when considering social and political scenarios (p. 50).

Hiroko also overturns conventional power relations in her other relationships, especially her marriage to Sajjad Ashraf (p. 79). As a result, they do not confront one another and rely on patriarchal or feminine gender roles because they understand each other's circumstances. Such a portrayal is in harmony with de Beauvoir's concept of how males and females should relate to each other.

Given that Hiroko is also Raza's mother, this aspect enhances the presentation of female identity, even though the nature of their relationship remains undeveloped. She is a caring mother who, at the same time, fights for her right to be independent, not just a mother figure. Focusing on the novel's representation of motherhood, these examples dispel simplistic notions of female happiness and self-fulfilment inherent to maternity.

For the entire novel, Hiroko avoids being positioned in the otherization process despite living in different cultures as a hibakusha, an immigrant woman, and the object of patriarchal societies' domination, showcasing the endurance of women.

2. Elizabeth Burton

Occasionally, in a play, the authors introduce a buffer character that contrasts sharply with the heroine yet plays a part in her development; such is the case with Elizabeth Burton (p. 21), played by Elizabeth McGovern, who symbolises a 'quake Jirou' housewife turned emotionally charged (p. 112), vengeful ex-spouse of a cheater who turns to alcohol and divorce in the latter part of the novel. In her youth, Elizabeth was a British colonial officer's wife in India, whose prime duties included loyalty, obedience to her husband, and other requirements expected of a woman of her class.

Still, in the same show, Elizabeth's character portrays the limitations and discontentment of the role prescribed by society. The unknown future in the Netherlands, her worthlessness in India, and her confusion regarding her destiny after being a wife and a mother showcase de Beauvoir's evaluation of how society does not allow women to actualize themselves (p. 12).

One aspect of the novel most notable that can be analysed from a feminist angle is Elizabeth's friendship with Hiroko (p. 39). Cultural and class differences rarely compromise their relationship, a concept that expresses the possibility of unity among women. This friendship is also the engine of Elizabeth's character development; comparing herself to Shaftesbury, she starts reflecting on colonial and gender roles in society, as well as her prejudices.

The comparison of Elizabeth and Hiroko demonstrates the potential routes for the female characters in the given society (p. 48). In contrast, Hiroko's postmodern process is more aggressive: she fights and overcomes boundaries, whereas Elizabeth's postmodern process is more psychological; she gradually becomes more conscious of the boundaries and gently pushes at them. Her ultimate return to England may be viewed as an attempt to flee the reduced role assigned to her and her defiance of it (p. 86).

Within the narrative, Elizabeth's character arc demonstrates how a woman endures the confines of the prescribed feminine role by de Beauvoir, symbolically representing "the Other."

3. Raza Konrad Ashraf

Although Raza is not a female character, his perspective sheds light on the novel's portrayal of gender roles and feminism (p. 114). As the son of Hiroko and Sajjad, Raza observes the cultural shifts from an early age and escapes the typical patriarchal society's gender relations.

The role of a mother stands out most prominently in Raza's case, as does the character of Hiroko. He sees her as strong, independent, and capable of functioning in different cultures (p. 222). This influence shapes his perception of women's abilities and their roles in society, with a perspective on how feminists strive to transmit this perception from one generation to the next.

The female characters in the novel closely mirror Raza's struggle with issues of race and ethnicity, stemming from his mixed-blood origin and the history of genocides and wars (p. 231). This has enriched the novel's intersectionality themes because of Skibsrød's personal experiences of marginalization, which have affected his sense of belonging based on his sex. Furthermore, the attitude towards gender relations is neither oppressive nor positive in Raza's interactions with female characters like Kim Burton depicted in the novel. This portrayal thus resonates with the idea of enlightenment, specifically about the possibility of change, especially in the area of gender roles.

Thus, Shamsie expresses the potential for men to be inclusive and actively combat patriarchy through the narrator, Raza. His point of view enriches the novel's feminist discourse, indicating that the fight for female and sexual equality also entails and impacts males.

Themes and Motifs

1. Female Agency and Independence

One of the primary motifs of the novel *Burnt Shadows* (2009) is the concept of the female characters' independence and self-assertiveness against various limitations. De Beauvoir's emphasis on transcendence and women's autonomy can also inform this theme.

Before laying down her argument, it is imperative to understand Hiroko's migration from Nagasaki to New York as a symbol of female strength and emancipation (p. 20). In this case, her decision to leave Japan, to marry Sajjad despite the cultural differences, and later on to be a translator indicates her decision-making capacity to chart her destiny (p. 33). These choices also testify to de Beauvoir's appeal for women to take necessary steps towards the formation of themselves beyond the roles of a wife or a mother.

As the novel unfolds, the theme of women's freedom regarding personal decisions adjusted to cultural and historical traditions becomes evident. Elizabeth's simple acts of defiance against her position as a colonial wife and Kim's desire to succeed in a man's world serve as examples of the novel's critical theme of rebellion against social roles expected of women. To that end, Shamsie's vision of female agency does not fall into the geographical or physical sense—a well-defined career path—but rather into the spectrum of many choices and the spectacular act of carrying out acts that resist societal expectations and norms in a passive-aggressive manner.

In addition, the novel discusses the relationship between female actions and other historical and political forces. Such issues include Hiroko's ability to survive the atomic bombing and the choices she made in her life to demonstrate to the world that women, too, possess the capability to come out of dreadful circumstances and stand on their own.

The Cultural and Social Aspects of a Woman's Life Need to be Taken into Consideration

The novel *Burnt Shadows* (2009) reimagines the essence of various cultural and social profiles that restrict women's freedom in diverse societies. From post-war Japan to the cultures of Pakistan and post-9/11 Americans, the female characters in the stories are constantly constructing, deconstructing, and reconstructing themselves in opposition to sexual politics. This theme comments directly on the debate over how society creates gender and how it polices women in particular. By examining these restrictions, the novel enhances de Beauvoir's ideas by demonstrating their dynamic nature and their formation within specific cultural and historical contexts, thereby adding another dimension to de Beauvoir's primarily Western-centric viewpoint.

Shamsie analyses how women's bodies are the terrain where cultural and political struggles occur. Additionally, the scar on Hiroko's back, a representation of the atomic bombing, signifies both the confinement of women and their ability to overcome pain and give birth. The novel also explores the issues of veiling and women's clothing, as the oppression of women based on their appearance is a universal theme.

The characters' depiction of marriage and family relations highlights cultural restraints. The portrayal of love and relationships perfectly captures how women in a colony resist conformity by depicting Elizabeth as an awkward colonial wife who fails to fit into the conventional mould of wife and mother, Hiroko and her copious marriages, which are not recognised by American society, and Kim, who is also reluctant to conform to the dictates of society on marriage and familyhood.

Intersectionality of Gender, Race, and Nationality

Burnt Shadows (2009) also provides quite a deep insight into such notions as gender in other categories, including race, nationality, and culture. This structural analysis of intersectionality, although not directly outlined in de Beauvoir's work, is consistent with her acknowledgement of the various factors that define women.

The following social and cultural contexts—Japanese, Indian, Pakistani, and American—define the impact of gender through fiction and reality, as demonstrated by Hiroko's experience. As a hibakusha, immigrant, and woman of color in various societies, the multiple forms of oppression shaped by gender further make themselves known in complex ways.

The novel also explores the question of how women's lives reflect geopolitics and national identity. Thus, the process of the Indian division, the Cold War, and the September 11 events provide the basis for the female characters' developments and serve as a reminder of how individual lives intertwine with history.

Shamsie also never loses sight of intersectionality, although it is not as prominent as in Home Socialist Realism; Elizabeth and Kim, in particular, unmask how white women's understanding of sexism is enriched by their race and nationality.

Plot and Point of View

The chosen narrative structure is also one of the ways through which Shamsie could express the novel's feminism. The time setting depicts the different decades of women's lives, and the geographical locations also play a part in portraying the distinct statuses of women. The time-shift and location switches correspond well to women's progress towards gaining rights, and they endorse the non-linear plot structure. This structure rejects any singular or collective understanding of a woman's experience, a point de Beauvoir acknowledged due to the unique nature of each woman's experience.

Involving various and different characters, it is possible to discuss that the show presents complex and not only negative attitudes towards women's relations. This narrative technique aligns with a crucial aspect of de Beauvoir's text: the notion that analyzing women's role in society necessitates examining their interactions with and perceptions of men.

Shamsie illustrates how individuals, and women in particular, both receive and shape historical narratives through narratives of personal biography. This approach thus captures the tenets of the feminism category that separate the personal from the political, as it describes social-political aspects through a woman's personal experience.

Language and Symbolism

As a writer, Shamsie's language and symbolism help to portray the novel as having a solid feminist outlook. The novel's central leitmotif is the concept of the burnt shadow—the remnants of the atomic bombing manifest in scorches on Hiroko's back. These marks may be understood as an imprint of the potential, not of a woman's soul, but the imprint of a biography that defines women's existence and can be read along the lines of bodily experience, which de Beauvoir identifies as a determinant of women's subjectivity.

One might interpret the descriptions of the landscapes and cities that emerge as the novel progresses through its diverse settings as symbols of the immense possibilities of women's lives, in contrast to the limited roles and opportunities that dominated the sample society. The bird, particularly the crane (p. 209), which appears several times throughout the novel as a symbol, reflects the concepts of freedom, migration, and the ability to rise above the bars. This is also the essence of the feminist discourse, which focuses on women and their liberation from oppression.

Discussion

The feminist analysis of *Burnt Shadows* (2009) through the lens of Simone de Beauvoir's philosophy reveals a narrative that both engages with and expands upon vital feminist concepts: De Beauvoir's work describes the women in the novel as multi-layered characters who defy male expectations, perverted patriarchy, and gender pigeonholing, demonstrating their ongoing transcendence. Shamsie's work clearly reflects the role of women in de Beauvoir's account of 'the Other', yet the book portrays Hiroko as a symbol of women's ability to resist this role. Along with that, the novel illustrates the day-to-day struggles of women of different cultures and time contingents, akin to what de Beauvoir emphasised when she stressed the examination of women's factual, historical, and concrete situations to analyse their subjugation and freedom adequately.

Burnt Shadows (2009) demonstrates the further development of the intersectionality concept beyond what de Beauvoir suggested regarding gender and its intersections with race, nationality, and trauma. The embodiment of the feminine in the novel and the general presentation of the main female characters, coupled with the non-linear narrative structure and the symbolism, also play into this idea and the general anti-feminist undertones of the novel.

This paper illustrates that de Beauvoir's perception of feminism continued to be a significant discourse in contemporary multicultural society, while at the same time indicating the need for the elaboration and enhancement of this perception in the current multicultural world. This has numerous implications for feminist literary criticism. This carries several implications for feminist literary criticism.

It agrees with cultural relativism, suggesting that the social analysis of women's liberation should move beyond Western influence. Thus, by examining female characters' agency in historical trauma and cultural relocation, the novel opens up new discursive perspectives in discussions of gender and more general sociopolitical questions. Shamsie's illustration highlights the strength of employing the gender intersectional technique in the analysis of women's literature. Male characters' negative stereotyping and attitudes towards women raises the question for female critics and researchers about how it is possible to construct the male gender as constructive in literature.

Burnt Shadows (2009) exemplifies a typical postcolonial classic in contemporary literature; it shows how incorporating feminist theory into modern texts allows for its expansion, development, and avoidance of rigid analysis.

The Narrative Technique and Analysis from a Feminist Perspective

A. Polyphonic Narration

Shamsi's use of multiple perspectives contributes to the novel's feminist approach:

1. **Diverse Female Voices:** The primary novel's major strength is how the author narrates the female characters from differing cultures and ages, thus illustrating the social complexity of women and objecting to the stereotypical portrayal of women.
2. **Male Perspectives:** The inclusion of masculine viewpoints allows for an examination of how males perceive Lessing's female characters, and vice versa, which enhances the novel's exploration of gender studies.
3. **Destabilizing Dominant Narratives:** The polyphonic nature of the novel disrupts the singularity of knowledge, which also corresponds to the woman's point of view from the male-dominated historical and cultural narratives.

Conclusion

Consequently, reshaping the grand tradition of Western feminism, it is possible to consider *Burnt Shadows* (2009) by Kamila Shamsie as a significant novel to be studied thoroughly, considering the advice of de Beauvoir. The vital roles of the female characters, the attitudes towards male domination and women's subjugation, and the novel's structure create a picture of women's world and their position throughout histories and different cultures. Interacting with and developing on de Beauvoir's insights, *Burnt Shadows* (2009) demonstrates how feminist analyses remain relevant in present-day literary creations as long as they present more layers and possibilities of a woman's fight and victory within the context of a modern globalised society.

Using the Beauvoirian feminist approach, the researcher can analyze Kamila Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows* (2009) and find that the plot and characters explore and develop many significant topics that reflect the condition and experience of women in the current world. The following is a breakdown of several vital findings from this examination relating to the novel's portrayal of women and its place in the discourse on feminism.

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