

The Concept of Universal Citizenship in Kamila Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows*

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Abstract

This paper explores the precept of universal citizenship in Kamila Shamsie's debut novel, Burnt Shadows. She uses the notion of cosmopolitanism in her novel and blends together characters from diverse cultural backgrounds, countries and eras. All these characters conform to the idea of cultural diversity and take keen interest in the values of others. Characters from various backgrounds are a kaleidoscope of global culture which binds them into universal citizenship. Shamsie proves that boundary crossing of the immigrants constitutes fluid identities and promotes coexistence with other cultures through assimilation. They celebrate cultural diversity and this is evident from their discourse and interaction. This study may be edifying and handy for common people to extend a bond based on reciprocity as members of the same universal community.

Key Words: Cosmopolitanism, Assimilation, Fluidity, Coexistence, Immigrants

Introduction

In Shamsie's fifth novel, *Burnt Shadows*, Hiroko Tanaka starts her saga from Nagasaki, Japan. Her act of borders crossing is not only physical but it is also emotional, psychological, and cultural. Hiroko's quality of assimilation to other cultures is evident from her profession as a language translator. The protagonist moves to India, travels to Turkey, takes journey to Pakistan and finally crosses borders to the United States. She encounters diverse cultures and molds multiple identities. It is a tale of a person and families who feel at home everywhere despite cultural variations. This research paper tries to answer the question; how are the

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elements of cosmopolitanism being shaped by global cultural production in Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows*?

The protagonist's epic saga accentuates her acceptance of cultural differences. Shamsie emphasizes on two ideas: assimilation of the immigrants, in particular, the protagonist and the most important gender and racial equality. Cosmopolitan ideology prevails throughout the novel, which paves the way to live in perfect harmony as world citizen. She introduces kaleidoscope of universal characters in *Burnt Shadows* who are not restricted by culture, nationality, race, and language.

The current study analyzes Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows* from cosmopolitan backdrop. This study challenges the preconceived notions of discrimination, cultural purity, and fanaticism about culture specific values. The textual analysis technique investigates the content of the novel from cosmopolitan aspect with special allusion to assimilation, fluidity, and coexistence.

Literature Review & Research Methodology

This research hypothesizes that the analysis of assimilation in Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows* produces cultural and social characteristics of cosmopolitan sensibility. In today's technologically advanced world, Living without harmony, mutual respect and peace is impossible. Encyclopedia Britannica delineates cosmopolitanism as the notion that every human deserves veneration and has the right to equality (Brock, 2015, p. 9). Laertius states that cosmopolitan stance starts from the Cynic Diogenes. Somebody asks him, where he is from? He answers, "I am citizen of the world" (Laertius, 1925, pp. 3-109). Fougeret de Montbron visits various lands and claims no devotion to certain

move from place to place according to my whim and all the countries are equal to me (Fougeret, 1970, p. 130). Kant restricts this term to only universal hospitality. The theory of cosmopolitan rights is important because human beings form a universal community and advance towards perpetual peace (Kant, 1991, p. 107).

In the modern day, Appiah defines cosmopolitanism as Universality plus differences. He advocates respect for the differences and assimilation of other cultures not because cultures matters in themselves, but human beings matter, and culture matters to them (Appiah, 2007, p. 2383). Appiah's theory specific points are the lens for this research, including: taking interest in other culture practices. Furthermore, tolerance, celebration of cultural diversity and solidarity are the fundamental features of his theory. Textual analysis technique is used for the analysis of relevant data. The researcher analyzes various characters and their discourse in the perspective of cosmopolitanism.

Textual Analysis

The current research study focuses on the cosmopolitan aspect of the novel. Furthermore, it analyzes the text through the theoretical framework propounded by Appiah.

“...stories of Nagasaki's turn-of-the-century cosmopolitan world, unique in Japan—its English language newspapers, its International Club, its liaisons and intermarriages between European men and Japanese women.” (Shamsie, 2009, p. 12).

Konrad crosses the border to appreciate the cultural diversity of Nagasaki, its art, business, and beauty. Yoshi introduces Konrad to the city which is the crossroad of various cultures. The warm welcome from the Japanese indicates the wholehearted acceptance of others in the form of a German. This is a replica of universal community where relationship is based on respect, harmony, and reciprocity. They not tolerate the difference but celebrate the diversity. Both the Japanese and German cuddle solidarity and form a world community. Fluidity in characters paves the way for cosmopolitanism. People from various cultural backgrounds across the globe have formed a mini harmonic world in Nagasaki, Japan. The Japanese take keen interest in the English newspaper, which is a wholehearted acceptance of cultural and linguistic differences.

Border crossing is easier and smooth with the advent of innovative technologies. In Shamsie's novel, fluidity is a natural phenomenon. Hiroko and other characters encounter diverse cultures and geographical localities make *Burnt Shadows* a global village. They take ardent interest in the practices, beliefs, and customs of one another as cosmopolitan featured by international clubs in Japan. They demonstrate veneration to cultural, political, economic, and racial differences and embrace these variations with peaceful coexistences. They adapt the traits of one another's culture and form a community based on human respect and dignity. "Here was one who would who would squeeze the sun in her fist if she ever got the chance; yes, and tilt her head back to swallow its liquid light" (Shamsie, 2009, p. 46). Hiroko Tanaka has the aptitude to adapt herself to other cultures. The war forces Hiroko to cross borders but she emerges as a brave cosmopolitan character. Shamsie deliberately forces her character to reveal the assimilative qualities of her protagonist and highlight the notion of human community. She embarks to Delhi to visit her deceased fiancé's half sister and brother-in-law. Her inborn skill of adapting cultures and learning languages is appreciable. It is an indication of her interest in the human cultures irrespective of geography and nationality.

She is compared with Kipling's Lalun in his poem entitled *On the City Wall*. She has the aptitude for adaptation to other cultures. Kipling poem is an early prophecy of globalization because his protagonist crosses borders to countries and continents and encounters sundry cultures. Hiroko Tanaka is present day Lalun, adapts various cultures and molds multiple identities as a true universal citizen. Wherever she goes, she finds herself at home and people accept her wholeheartedly. This is a perfect stance of mutual reciprocity because they consider these varieties a part of a single body. Her love and respect for other cultures is palpable from her cherished relationship with a German boy named Konrad. The protagonist's sexual encounter with Konrad illuminates oneness with other religion, culture, and race. They treat each other with care, love, and kindness as true global citizens. These universal characters have unquenched thirst of love for each others.

The glimpse of her dead German fiancé's half sister is enough to rejuvenate her.

Shamsie herself ventures to cross borders, assimilate to host cultures and imbue the values in her cosmopolitan personality. She is successful to make her main character on the move to heighten the concept of universal citizenship. "...I want to look like the people around me. I want people to disapprove when I break the rules and not when to think that I do not know better" (Shamsie, 2009, p. 99). Hiroko overcomes all the hurdles which come in her way of assimilation and mingling with other cultures. She enjoys the taste of other cultures and enjoys its beauty. She creates multiple identities during the process of her border crossing act. She comes closer to her anticipate husband, Sajjad and learns Urdu and its culture despite James Burton restriction. The protagonist has soft corner for Indian culture and she never considers herself a stranger here with Sajjad. They form a true human community where they live like fellow citizens. She is even ready to cross borders with him at the time of aggression.

She adapts and transforms her identity according to the new surrounding, people and their culture. She throws the linguistic, cultural, and geographical constraints to the wind as an integral part of the universal community. Hiroko retains solidarity, harmony and respect in her attitude and feels oneness with people of other cultures. Her epic journey plays a vital role as a mediator between various nations across the world. She possesses intercontinental traits which reflect her critical view of the promotion of commonality and solidarity among nations. Her very urge for learning different languages divulge her peace prevailing personality. Hiroko is imbued in the new culture and she wants to listen to Urdu all the time. Home becomes a psychological phenomenon not a geographical one.

Khan remarks that she is in perfect conformity with any culture and language because of her talent in languages. Hiroko is

Gliding from language to language with no
difficulty and with spontaneity of a native speaker,

she is endowed with an extraordinarily powerful gift for learning languages and engrossing herself into them. What is significant is that her interest in languages exceeds the practical features of linguistic acquisition, expanding into a much more deeply seated appreciation for the relevant nation's traditions, history, and literature. (Khan, 2011, p. 63)

She does not give space to the cultural difference which could mar her sturdy bond with other characters in the novel. She keeps an unflinching affinity with Harry, James, Abdullah, Elizabeth, Sajjad and Konrad, and is based on mutual respect. She admits the cultural differences unconditionally and does not question its validity. Some of the characters sticks to the idea of agree to disagree if they are hesitant to accept some of values of other cultures. The process of Language learning leads to warm and emotional relationship between Hiroko and Sajjad. "...determined to see a pattern of people moving towards each other—that's why he kept researching his book instead of writing it" (Shamsie, 2009, p. 70). Konrad shows a sense of responsibility and obligation to human beings in the form of his research project in Japan. The purpose of his project is to fuse people of diverse cultural backgrounds into a single human community. He himself is desirous in other cultures and he gets engaged to a Japanese girl. They go beyond cultural differences and consider humans as world society where each one is worthy of respect. He is the first character who is lover of world culture and ensures himself a member of global society. His cosmopolitan character drags him to Nagasaki and enjoys the beauty of various cultures because he wants to confine this diversity in the form of a book. He receives immense respect and a warm welcome but also extends veneration to the cultural diversity. Konrad's observation explicates the idea of coexistence where people of various backgrounds interact like a single community. This shows a harmonious relationship among various nations of the world and an emphasis on the idea of inclusion as members of the same universal community.

Cosmopolitan Konrad finds Nagasaki is an elegant abode where the principle of equality, harmony, exogamy, and mutual respect prevail. Peace and humanity gush forth from his expressions and ideas because he is interested in the unity of humanity. Konrad is compelled by his fellow feelings to leave Germany and be one with rest of humanity. He enjoys the exquisiteness of the world community and rejoices in it as a true cosmopolitan.

“She [Hiroko] would not have gone to India to find the Burtons if not for Konrad Weiss. In India, it was language lessons that brought Sajjad and Hiroko to the same table, overtaking the separateness that would otherwise have defined their relationship.” (Shamsie, 2009, p. 203)

The acceptance of one another, leads to their blood bonds. Language plays an important role in the acculturation. Language pulls Hiroko, Sajjad, and Konrad and this consummation is the ultimate outcome of their tolerance and reciprocity.

Language acquisition in *Burnt Shadows* authenticates the integral membership of universal community. The protagonist is exemplary cosmopolitan who audaciously crosses boundaries, learns new languages, blends with its cultures, and assimilates to the new setting. Hirok’s son, Raza, exchanges languages with Abdullah from Afghanistan. All these form a human community where they live in conformity with one another. Other characters are also inclined to learn new languages and cultures e.g. Henry and Konrad learn Urdu in their childhood, Hiroko and Konrad extend the process of language learning. They all have respect for one another’s cultural practices, norms, values, and beliefs. Shamsie tactfully and artistically intermingle cultural diversity in the form of a single family.

Conclusion

This research paper highlights the need of tolerance, assimilation, harmony, coexistence, and mutual respect in this technologically advanced world. This research advocates the idea of mutual reciprocity, coexistence, and openness to acculturation. Hence, it contributes to harmonious human relationships and world peace. Moreover, this study poses a strong challenge to the stereotypical concept of cultural fanaticism, closed borders, and xenophobia. Global culture production shapes the elements of cosmopolitanism.

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