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The Travelling Embodied Self in Kamila Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows*

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RESUMEN:

El cuerpo físico marcado por experiencias extremas radica en la base de *Burnt Shadows*, de Kamila Shamsie. En una entrevista ofrecida por Picador USA, Shamsie afirmó que el catalizador del libro había sido una imagen que encontró en un libro sobre Hiroshima, una imagen que mostraba la espalda de una mujer marcada por el patrón del kimono que llevaba puesto en el momento en el que se produjo la explosión. En dicha entrevista, Shamsie comentó que, mientras escribía la novela, se interesó especialmente por cómo “people from different places carry with them the history of where they are from” y, a raíz de esto, comenzó a explorar “the interplay of history and personal lives”. *Burnt Shadows* no solo cubre un período significativo de tiempo, desde el bombardeo de Nagasaki hasta los atentados del 11 de septiembre, sino que también explora varios lugares, comenzando en Japón y pasando por India, Pakistán, Afganistán y finalmente Nueva York. A través de la novela, Shamsie explora el nexo entre acontecimientos históricos de gran relevancia y momentos íntimos y privados, trazando una narrativa de cuerpos que viajan y se sitúan en diferentes cronotopos. El cuerpo se convierte así en una constante a través del tiempo y el espacio, reteniendo las huellas de lo que ha sucedido antes, de los espacios que ha ocupado anteriormente y de los significados que ha acumulado a medida que viaja.

Palabras clave: Kamila Shamsie, *Burnt Shadows*, “lived body”, espacio, historia

ABSTRACT:

The physical body marked by radical experience is what lies at the heart of *Burnt Shadows* by Kamila Shamsie. In an interview hosted by Picador USA, she stated that the catalyst for the book was an image she came across in a book on Hiroshima of the back of a woman branded with the pattern of the kimono she was wearing when the blast took place. In her interview, Shamsie said that, while writing the novel, she was interested in how “people from different places carry with them the history of where they are from” and through this wanted to look at the “interplay of history and personal lives”. *Burnt Shadows* does not only cover a significant span of time, from the bombing of Nagasaki to a post-9/11 context, but also explores a number of places as well, beginning in Japan and moving through to India, Pakistan, Afghanistan and finally to New York. Throughout the novel, Shamsie explores the nexus between larger, historical events and private, intimate moments by tracing out the narrative of travelling bodies. The body becomes the constant through time and across different spaces, carrying traces of what has gone before, of the spaces it has occupied as well as accumulating new meanings as it travels.

Keywords: Kamila Shamsie, *Burnt Shadows*, “lived body”, space, history

The physical body marked by radical experience is what lies at the heart of *Burnt Shadows* (2009) by Kamila Shamsie. In an interview hosted by Picador USA, she stated that the catalyst for the book was an image she came across in a book on Hiroshima of the back of a woman branded with the pattern of the kimono she was wearing when the blast took place. In her interview Shamsie said that, while writing the novel, she was interested in how "people from different places carry with them the history of where they are from" and, through this, she wanted to look at the "interplay of history and personal lives" (Picador Books, n. pag.). *Burnt Shadows* does not only cover a significant span of time, from the bombing of Nagasaki to a post-9/11 period, but also explores a number of places as well, beginning in Japan and moving through to India, Pakistan, Afghanistan and finally to New York. Throughout the novel, Shamsie explores the nexus between larger, historical events and private, intimate moments by tracing out the narrative of travelling bodies. The body becomes the constant through time and across different spaces, carrying traces of what has gone before, of the spaces it has occupied as well as accumulating new meanings as it travels. What is the advantage though of this focus on the body, this focus on the physical as opposed to tracking out purely the subjective experiences of the characters in the text?

The question that perhaps one must first answer before trying to understand why Shamsie places the body at the heart of her narrative is what she understands the body to be. In *Burnt Shadows*, the body is quite literally the starting point of the text, the prologue of the text focusing entirely on a body, a body that is stripped and shackled. In the prologue, the reader is introduced to a nameless figure who is made known through a description of the actions of his body. It is in the narration of how the body views itself and how it, in turn, is viewed by others that the subjective experience emerges. This is a body under custody which retains a certain level of dignity despite the subordinate position it occupies. Its initial movements are marked by "efficiency" (Shamsie 2009: 1) and it is only as it gets closer and closer to revealing itself entirely that the movements begin to slow. Despite the coldness and the fear, this is a body that does not bend under pressure and is determined to remain standing. The name of the character at this point in the novel is irrelevant; it is the body that defines the individual. The body here becomes an expression of a

particular subjectivity; the physical actions of the body as it is stripped and shackled reveal the subjective consciousness of the person being incarcerated. It is only near the conclusion of the novel that the character is revealed to be Hiroko's only son, Raza. By focusing solely on the body and not on the character's subjectivity as it emerges in relation to other characters in the novel Shamsie is able to demonstrate how the body is inextricably intertwined with subjectivity. By choosing to render Raza anonymous in this opening scene of the novel, Shamsie highlights what is to be one of the dominant concerns of the novel, the body as the foundation of subjectivity.

The book is marked off by four major points in history but does not provide any detail of the historical events. Instead, it provides a view of how these events play out at the level of the individual. This duality between larger, historical moments and private, intimate memories is played out on the site of the body, the body being an effective bridge between the two. One could argue that the particular subjectivity would also be an effective way of negotiating this duality, but the body provides a certain constancy that the subjectivity cannot. In the introduction to her book, *Memory, Narrative and Identity*, Nicola King writes that points of rupture, radical breaks "make the relationship between the self 'before' and the self 'after' much more problematic" and so narratives by particular subjectivities are often attempts at reconstruction which help to understand the "assumptions about the function and process of memory" but cannot, unlike the body, provide an unbroken narrative. (King, 2000: 2). Though capable of being affected by these moments of rupture, the body is the constant from the moment before, through the event and after it, thus providing the site on which the subjectivity reconstructs itself. It provides a means of understanding in what way these historical moments come into play at the level of the personal, how they effect and change subjectivities and spaces. Shamsie is not entirely discounting subjective experience then. Yet, by privileging the body in her description of events, she reminds the reader that reality cannot be understood purely in terms of the subjective but must also take into account the material – "[t]he subject who constitutes a world is always an embodied subject." (Young, 2005: 7)

How the material, the physical can result in a specific kind of subjective experience is brought to the forefront of the text through the body of Hiroko and the effect of the Nagasaki bombing on her body

and thus her experiences. The section on Nagasaki and the description of the bomb in the text is narrated in the present tense, unlike the rest of the text which is narrated in the past tense, thus giving the event a sense of immediacy. This is the moment that will subsequently underlie every other experience of Hiroko and the use of the present tense by Shamsie in this section underscores this fact. It is in this section that Hiroko awakens to the more sensuous side of herself, sensuality marking the moment of the interplay between physical sensations and emotional experiences. It is immediately in the wake of this realisation that the bombing occurs and the description of the experiences of the bomb in terms of the physical experience flows naturally out of this new understanding of the body. During the bombing, even the light is "physical" (Shamsie 2009: 26), that which is otherwise intangible is capable of throwing Hiroko forward. Instead of describing the burnt image on her back, the text moves through a description of the physical sensations that Hiroko feels in relation to the burning of the kimono pattern on her back- the feel of the hot air on her back, the feel of that which is "neither silk nor flesh but both", fingers plucking at shreds of silk (Shamsie, 2009: 26). The body she inhabits is forever marked by this particular event.

The experience of the bomb quite literally marks her body with the print of the kimono she was wearing at the time and it goes beyond that moment to mark other life experiences. Hiroko attempts to escape her identity as a survivor of the nuclear bombing, as a "hibakusha" while she is in Tokyo, Delhi and then in Karachi, but her disavowal is not enough, her body falsifies any such denial. While Hiroko may want to leave behind the trauma of the Nagasaki bombing, the continuing effects of the bombing on her body results in the very late birth of her son which in turn creates a particular kind of subjective experience. Since she is so much older when her son is born, she lives with a sense of anxiety about what will happen to her son when she can no longer take care of him. The Nagasaki bombing took away from Hiroko the possibility of having a child at all and the birth of her son was not the product of a conscious decision but a matter of chance. However, it does not necessarily follow that Hiroko needed to feel anxious about the future of her son; that is a subjective decision made by her. Subjectivity must live out the materiality of the body it inhabits. Bodies determine experiences in certain ways and thus the body and subjectivity are inseparable.

This nexus between physical experience and consciousness of the self is further complicated by the space which the body occupies. In the case of Hiroko, for instance, the fact of being the Tanaka's daughter within the space of Nagasaki limits her movement and interaction with others as her father is an iconoclastic artist. Her particular subjectivity though, as shaped by her mother, results in her adopting a defiant manner. While the fundamental fact of her being the Tanaka's daughter in itself has no implications and cannot be changed, it results in a particular form of embodied self that is the consequence of her own subjectivity and the socio-cultural space she occupies.

What Shamsie does by narrativizing how the body, subjectivity and space all come together to create a certain kind of self is to demonstrate that the self ought not to be seen as being pure consciousness and consequently as being entirely fluid or as a fixed and thus a transcendental element. The self is instead understood as a "lived body", a concept that Iris Marion Young develops drawing on Toril Moi's rereading of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. The "concrete material relations of a person's bodily existence", the "physical and social environment" in conjunction with the "ontological freedom" of the individual all come together to create a "body-in-situation" (Young, 2005: 16). Shamsie's text does not deal with a body in a single, socio-cultural circumstance however, but is a narrative of a travelling body. It becomes then a narrative of the encounters between the socio-cultural circumstances of the point of origin of the body and the socio-cultural circumstances of the spatiotemporal location it occupies.

As Hiroko travels what becomes evident is how a constant – the fact of her having survived the bomb – seems to become a variable, changing significance according not only to the space she inhabits but also to the people she is interacting and the passing of time. While there is no going away from the fact that, as a woman, the bombing affects Hiroko in a way that is entirely particular to her sex, the fact of her being a "hibakusha" has different implications in different contexts. This marked body that results in a particular kind of subjectivity, a certain set of experiences, travels through the text from Nagasaki to Tokyo to Delhi to Karachi and then finally to New York. What her body signifies is contingent to the space, social sphere and time she occupies even while it encapsulates within itself a very specific place and time. While in Tokyo her being

a "hibakusha" has particularly negative connotations resulting in her being socially rejected, in Delhi it is a reason for sympathy. The changing significance of the body though does not take away from what the body fundamentally is; so while the implications of being a "hibakusha" change with the space she occupies and with the people she interacts with, nothing can change the fact that she is a survivor of the Nagasaki bombing and it is this fact that requires her and those around her to ascribe a certain significance to it. This travelling embodied subject makes evident how it is that the body is both a constant as well as shifting signifier.

Meaning can be ascribed to body and that meaning can change but the material reality of the body on the basis of which that meaning is determined cannot be overwritten by the subjective consciousness that ascribes meaning to it. The material reality of the body as it were provides a limit as to what kind of meaning can be ascribed to it, while simultaneously laying open the possibility of multiple meanings being ascribed to it. Toril Moi points out that "bodies are an outline or sketch of the kind of projects it is possible for us to have, but it doesn't follow from this that individual choices or social and ethical norms can be deduced from the structure of the body" (Moi, 1991: 40) and that is what allows for the altering significance ascribed to Hiroko's body as she travels across space and time.

The flexibility in terms of the way Hiroko's body can be read is made evident in the different kind of interactions she has with other characters in the text. When James Burton is confronted by the figure of Hiroko, who as an "Oriental" figure is a subordinate but as Konrad's fiancé is a relative, he has no available meaning he can ascribe to her and must invent one. He cannot ignore her physical presence in her house as a guest and must come up with some explanation that justifies him treating her as a guest. Hiroko's body thus opens up the meanings available by introducing new meanings. She does not fit into the conventional social codes that James Burton is familiar with and he must negotiate with this unknown element using these conventional social codes, thus creating an alternative way of interacting with Hiroko which hitherto might not have occurred to him to adopt. Sara Ahmed writes in her essay "The Feminist Killjoy" that "between the affective value of an object and how we experience an object can involve a range of affects, which are directed by the modes of explanation we offer to fill this gap"

(Ahmed 2010: n. pag). The introduction of the unfamiliar makes possible then certain actions that were otherwise unthinkable as when Elizabeth Burton interacts with Sajjad, her husband's employee, as an equal for the first time. The foreign body here is a destabilising force that breaks social conventions. The new modes of interaction that are introduced result in a particular form of inclusion that was not possible earlier, though this inclusion does not sustain itself.

In other cases, attempts to negotiate with that which is foreign to one's own experience can result in complete alienation as occurs in the final section of the novel, when Hiroko confronts Kim after she has Hiroko's son arrested on the grounds of him being a possible terrorist: "The silence that followed was the silence of intimates who find themselves strangers. The dark birds were between them, their burnt feathers everywhere" (Shamsie, 2009: 362).

Kim and Hiroko are both at an impasse, unable to understand how the other is able to justify their actions to themselves. Once again, this section makes it apparent that Shamsie does see a very close connection between the body and subjectivity. It is at this point in the interaction between two subjectivities, that of Kim and Hiroko, she makes a deliberate mention of the scars on Hiroko's body and does not use a description of Hiroko's subjective experience. Her foreignness, her experience is embedded in her body and is inescapable whatever the context, even though this moment is fifty-seven years after Nagasaki and takes place in New York. It is precisely Hiroko's foreignness that enables her to see the parallels between America's bombing of Nagasaki and the terrorist attacks of September 11.

The alienation that comes with foreignness in this case would be seen as being particularly empowering by Ahmed as according to her alienation allows one to see what is consciously omitted in the codes we adhere to in our interaction with other, what is not allowed to be part of the process of interaction. The position one occupies becomes that of the dissident, voicing that which is unsaid and in being unsaid is disagreed with. Hiroko, unlike Kim, is able to see how "nations can applaud when their governments drop a second nuclear bomb" (Shamsie, 2009: 362).

Through this essay what has been largely explored is how the particularities of the body, the subjectivity that emerges from

the social spaces it engages with and the historical time it inhabits play out in interpersonal relationships. In addition, I have looked at how it is that individuals must contend with this nexus of body, subjectivity and place while interacting with others. Individuals have a responsibility when interacting with others to realise that, while the other does possess agency and is responsible for his or her own actions, that agency is limited. The agency of the self is always a qualified agency, one that is limited by the material reality it exists within and by the way it is read by others. Young writes,

The idea of the lived body recognizes that a person's subjectivity is conditioned by sociocultural facts and the behavior and expectations of others in ways that she has not chosen. At the same time, the theory of the lived body says that each person takes up and acts in relation to these unchosen facts in her own way. (Young, 2005:18)

The playing out of the concept of the lived body through the text allows Shamsie to demonstrate how it is that, while there are limitations on the actions our embodied selves can carry out, we do have a choice in the matter of our interaction with others. Just as in the interplay between history and personal life there is that moment where we have no control over what happens to us but only over how we choose to respond to that moment, so too in our interactions with others we have little control over how we are read, but one can still choose to either accept or alienate the other.

Joseph Ratzinger writes that the body can be a disassociating principle in that it makes it impossible to completely know the other; as embodied consciousness, its experiences are particular to it and therefore it is only entirely knowable to itself. Yet, at the same time, the corporality of the body implies biological descent from one another, indicating the very real way in which humans are dependent on each other for their very existence (Ratzinger, 2004: 245-246). This duality between the unknowability as well as knowability of the 'other' is what forces us choose. We can either engage with the other in a meaningful fashion, recognising the other as an individual constituted by body, subjectivity and place or we could alienate the other by reducing him or her to only one of these constituents. The challenge that lies before us is to engage with the other in this meaningful fashion, while

simultaneously acknowledging that we can never fully know this other.

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