Magical Realism and Interfaith Dialogue in Kamila Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows*: Reimagining Religious Boundaries through Postcolonial Narrative

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Abstract

This paper explores critically Kamila Shamsie's novel *Burnt Shadows* (2009) as an innovative text that employs magical realism as a textual space to negotiate religious orthodoxy in order to court the possibility of interfaith dialogue. Shamsie's narrative is a spacious dialogic space to contest the religious divide that marked the South Asian scene from the atomic attack on Nagasaki in WWII, through the Indian partition, ending in 9\11 events. Burnt Shadows traverses continents and centuries, staging to the reader multi-religious encounters that interrogates critically religious fundamentalism, orthodoxy, and colonial legacies. The paper seeks to answer the question of how does *Shamsie* incorporate aspects of magical realism in *Burnt Shadows* and how do these magical realist aspects contest textually religious orthodoxy and mediate interfaith dialogue? Being historical narratives, how does the historical and cultural frame of reference of each Burnt Shadows orient its approach to interfaith dialogue via magical realism? By employing the subversive and anti-hegemonic perspectives of magical realism—a form long associated with subverting hegemonic narratives, *Burnt Shadows*, as this paper argues, indicate the crucial role of contemporary global novel to open dialogic spaces for coexistence and empathy across all religious divides and suspicion of the other.

Keywords: (Magical Realism, Interfaith Dialogue).

الواقعية السحرية والحوار بين الأديان في رواية "ظلال محترقة" لكاميلا شمسي: إعادة تصور الحدود الدينية من خلال السرد ما بعد الاستعماري

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الملخص

تستجلي هذه الدراسة البحثية بشكل نقدي رواية "ظلال محترقة" (٢٠٠٩) لكاميلا شمسي كنصٍ مبتكر يستخدم الواقعية السحرية كفضاء نصي لمسائلة الاصولية الدينية، سعياً نحو إمكانية الحوار بين الأديان. تشكل سردية شمسي فضاءً حوارياً واسعاً لتحديد الانقسام الديني الذي مَيّز المشهد في جنوب آسيا، بدءاً من القصف الذري على ناغازاكي في الحرب العالمية الثانية، مروراً بتقسيم الهند، ووصولاً إلى أحداث ١١ سبتمبر. تعبر "ظلال محترقة" القارات والعصور، عارضة أمام القارئ لقاءات متعددة الأديان تنتقد بشكل نقدي الأصولية الدينية، والتقليدية المتشددة، والإرث الاستعماري. تسعى الدراسة للإجابة عن السؤال التالي: كيف دمجت شمسي عناصر الواقعية السحرية في "ظلال محترقة"، وكيف تتحدى هذه العناصر السحرية الواقعية الاصولية الدينية نصياً وتسهل الحوار بين الأديان؟ وباعتبارها سرديات تاريخية، كيف يؤطر الإطار التاريخي والثقافي لكل حدث في "ظلال محترقة" مقاربته للحوار بين الأديان عبر الواقعية السحرية؟ من خلال توظيف المنظورات المقوظة للهيمنة في الواقعية السحرية – وهو شكل ارتبط طويلاً بتقويض السرديات المهيمنة – فإن "ظلال محترقة"، كما تجادل هذه الدراسة، تُظهر الدور المؤثر للرواية العالمية المعاصرة في فتح فضاءات حوارية للتعايش والتعاطف عبر جميع الانقسامات الدينية وشكوك الآخر .

الكلمات المفتاحية: (الواقعية السحرية، الحوار بين الأديان).

1 Introduction

Burnt Shadows (2009) is Kamila Shamsie's debut novel. The novel is a sweeping epic because its narrative spans an epical time line of major events in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. *Burnt Shadows* belongs to the category of novels that explain historical events happened in reality through dramatical context and by using these historical events the novel examines issues of identity, belonging, and the fallout from

international battles so it is complex historical fiction novel The story, which spans multiple countries and decades, starts in World War II Nagasaki and continues through India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the United States. The work is distinguished by its global scope and emphasis on interrelated kinds of oppression. Kamila Shamsie creates a narrative that spans 60 years of actual historical occurrences, demonstrating how international wars influence people's identities. Through the experiences of its protagonist, Hiroko, who was born in Japan, the book explores themes of war, exile, and displacement. Her adventure begins with the bombing of Nagasaki and continues through the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, colonial India, the Partition of India, and the September 11 attacks. Although the work has been positioned within the diasporic tradition by scholars such as Pascal Zinck, *Burnt Shadows* exposes the shortcomings of relocation and cautions against cultural uniformity instead of celebrating hybridity or assimilation. (Quinn 2021).

The work stands out as a commentary on the difficulties of migration and identity in a worldwide world because of this critical viewpoint. The book also challenges conventional ideas of identity by introducing unusual themes like the interaction between humans and nonhuman creatures. *Burnt Shadows* transcends human-centric narratives by tackling problems like speciesism and considering customs like eating meat and depicting animals (like dogs and spiders). These components challenge the idea that humans are unique and promote more in-depth consideration of identity and morality in interspecies relationships. By using this diverse approach, the book not only addresses historical and cultural concerns but also provokes conversations on oppression, identity, and moral obligation in a globalized world (Quinn 2021).

Burnt Shadows is significant because it examines how identity is unstable and changing. According to Kamila Shamsie, history has the capacity to fundamentally change people's lives by cutting off their ties to relationships, locations, and cultural heritage. This theme draws attention to how elusive and fleeting belonging is since people's identities are

continually being altered by outside forces. Through the experiences of the protagonist Hiroko, the book highlights how even situations that appear secure at first, such as America's multicultural society, can gradually feel alienating and unwelcoming. One of the novel's main themes—the erratic and frequently agonizing changes that identification goes through in reaction to both historical and personal upheavals—is highlighted by this depiction of the tenuous nature of belonging (Glover 2009).

The present paper seeks to read *Burnt Shadows* through the nexus of magical realism, as a favourite postcolonial technique, and interfaith dialogue, as a favourite topos in post 9\11 Anglophone-South Asian novel. While there is no shortage in the interfaith interpretations of *Burnt Shadows*, almost nobody ventured to explore its use of magical realism and its relation to the interfaith topos. *Burnt Shadows* has been variously read as a postcolonial critique of national and diasporic identity (Arif), as a postcolonial ecofeminist text (Rahman) , as Representations of the War on Terror: Kamila Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows* Part of Terrorism, Islamization, and Human Rights: How Post 9/11 Pakistani English Literature Speaks to the World (Sadaf), as an instance of postcolonial globality (Cilano), and as a critique of the performativity of faith (Ranasinha). Almost all of these readings base their argument on the interfaith and religious discourse of the novel but fail to see how the technique of magical realism is employed by Shamsie as a textual space for the interfaith topos.

2 Magical Realism in *Burnt Shadows*

Critical literature on the place of magical realism in south-east Asian postcolonial novels is curiously devoid of any reference to *Burnt Shadows* in spite of the obvious elements of this technique in the novel. The major reference works on this topic, notably Christopher Warnes' *Magical Realism and the Postcolonial Novel Between Faith and Irreverence (2009) and Eva Aldea's Magical Realism and Deleuze: The Indiscernibility of Difference in Postcolonial Literature* (2011), contain no single reference to magical realism in *Burnt*

Shadows. Most probably, this is due to the subtle and elusive use of this technique in *Burnt Shadows*. Unlike Salman Rushdie and other Asian postcolonial novelists, Shamsie prefers subtlety over overt employment of the surreal and the fantastic aspects of magical realism, preferring the textual spaces of liminality and fluid metamorphoses to blur boundaries between the real and the fantastic.

Shamsie draws heavily on the techniques of magical realism to create an interfaith dialogue that negotiates and reimagines religion from a unique perspective. Major among these techniques are temporal and spatial fluidity, metamorphosis, and hybridity. These textual strategies are used to blur and destabilize the boundaries between the real and the fantastic as a way to explore the possible and the impossible in a human world of fluid identities.

Magical realist novels frequently feature temporal and spatial fluidity, deliberately obscuring crucial elements to blur the boundaries between reality and the supernatural. Authors often obscure facts about characters' names, timeframes, and settings, creating an atmosphere of suspense that enhances the genre's surreal quality. Mirsadeqi observes that magical realism thrives through the juxtaposition of divergent and competing elements—rural and urban, Western and indigenous, real and fictional, natural and supernatural—merging these opposing facets into a whole, interwoven narrative (Mirsadeqi 1998). The interplay between clarity and obscurity is a basic characteristic of the genre.

In *Burnt Shadows*, Shamsie employs a non-linear narrative framework that traverses pivotal historical events, including the bombing of Nagasaki, the Partition of India, and post-9/11 America, therefore deconstructing traditional boundaries of time and space. The novel's dynamic chronological structure reflects a magical realist viewpoint, emphasizing the connection between global histories and individual lives. Shamsie integrates timeframes and cultures, interweaving historical occurrences with human narratives, so amplifying the genre's intrinsic ambiguity (Komal 2019).

In *Burnt Shadows*, Kamila Shamsie utilizes a cyclical narrative structure to subvert linear

chronology, demonstrating the malleability of time and space inherent in magical realism. The novel commences and finishes with a similar scenario in prison, creating a cyclical framework that blurs the boundaries between past and present, so altering the conventional flow of time: "Once he is in the cell, they unshackle him and instruct him to strip. He takes off the grey winter coat with brisk efficiency and then – as they watch, arms folded – his movements slow, fear turning his fingers clumsy on the belt buckle, shirt buttons. [...] How did it come to this, he wonders." (Shamsie ,2009,p1). Shamsie depicts a complex temporality, in which the character's current situation evokes previous events, creating a present that is interconnected with the past. This temporal ambiguity is a defining feature of magical realism, as past and present converge, emphasizing the unpredictability of time. Shamsie illustrates this unpredictability by allowing temporal overlap, intertwining past memories with the present in a way that undermines linear causality, a trait commonly observed in magical realist literature.

Shamsie utilizes spatial fluidity, shifting the narrative across various locations Nagasaki, India, Pakistan, New York, and Afghanistan—without creating clear or linear connections among them. Hiroko, the protagonist, embodies this fluidity through her cultural transitions as she moves across several regions and navigates diverse identities. Following the bombing of Nagasaki, she journeys through India, Pakistan, and ultimately New York, where her experiences with migration and displacement underscore the novel's theme of spatial instability.

Hiroko's scars from the Nagasaki bombs further symbolise the fragmentation of time and space. The avian-shaped scars on her back function as a mnemonic, recalling the torment of her past with every touch. As said by Shamsie:

> “Some days she could feel the dead on her back, pressing down beneath her shoulder blades with demands she could make no sense of but knew she was failing to meet. She ran her knuckles across the bark of a tree. The faint sound of

skin on bark was oddly comforting. It reminded her of something ... something from Nagasaki, but she couldn't remember what." (Shamsie ,2009 ,p 49)

These scars obscure the distinction between recollection and current experience. They conjure a history so vivid that it appears to encroach upon the present, disturbing the continuum of time. The sensation of the deceased on her back links Hiroko to the events of Nagasaki, rendering the past both immediate and present.

Moreover, the novel's examination of spatial and temporal fluidity corresponds with Homi Bhabha's notion of the "interstitial zone"—a realm between civilizations where identities are perpetually negotiated and altered (Bhabha 1994). Hiroko, via her experiences in other countries and cultures, epitomises this "third space," where borders are perpetually transgressed and reinvented. Ultimately, Shamsie's manipulation of time and space in *Burnt Shadows* reflects the attributes of magical realism, wherein time and place are not static but rather fluid, interrelated, and perpetually evolving. Through these approaches, Shamsie immerses the reader in a realm where memory, identity, and history coexist in the present, obscuring the boundaries between reality and imagination.

In addition to fluidity, a fundamental aspect of magical realism is "metamorphosis," wherein a character's transition from a superior position to an inferior one, or from a conventional state to an abnormal or peculiar condition, is portrayed as a commonplace and accepted occurrence. This topic appeals to readers because of its occurrence in ancient stories and religious scriptures, including the Qur'an, which narrates the miracles of prophets. These well-known narratives condition the audience to readily accept supernatural events (Rajabi, Ayyub, et al. 2020).

In *Burnt Shadows*, Kamila Shamsie utilises metamorphosis both literally and symbolically as a fundamental element of magical realism, especially in her portrayal of the Nagasaki bombing. The narrative depicts instances of change in which individuals evolve into unfamiliar beings or vanish completely, obscuring the distinctions between

reality and fantasy. The narrative depicts the bombing event using language inclined towards magical realism:

"The world she knew ended in a flash of light." (Shamsie, 2009 ,p6)

"People evaporated, but their shadows remained. A man pushing a cart, a woman mid-stride… as though the blast's light had borrowed their shapes to mark its passing." (Shamsie ,2009,p7)

This imagery corresponds with the findings of Robert Jay Lifton, who recorded that the bomb's extreme heat caused several victims to evaporate, leaving only their shadows etched on walls and sidewalks as a result of the thermal flash (Lifton 1967). Hiroshi Nakaiyama similarly observed that some survivors experienced keloid scars (thickened scar tissue resulting from burns), alopecia, and radiation-induced illnesses that endured for decades (Nakaiyama 2005). Masao Tsuzuki further elucidated that temperatures in proximity to the hypocenter varied between 3,000 and 4,000 degrees Celsius, resulting in the instantaneous incineration of victims (Tsuzuki 1985).

Other works, including the film *Akira* (1988) and John Wyndham's novel *The Chrysalids*, portray the bodies of nuclear disaster survivors transforming into monstrous shapes, illustrating humanity's profound apprehension regarding the loss of control over technology. This idea is encapsulated in a renowned phrase from *Godzilla*, the legendary nuclear-born creature: "We are no longer human… we are phantoms traversing a realm of phantoms." (Honda, 1954, 1:34:00). These works demonstrate that nuclear bombs not only inflicted physical devastation but also transformed the notion of human identity, rendering metamorphosis an unavoidable outcome of the nuclear experience.

The impact of the Nagasaki bombing transcends generations, resulting in lifelong rejection for even those who survived the atomic blast. "She was marked not only by the scars on her back but also by the intangible burden of her survival." (Shamsie,2009,p89) Hiroko's survival of Nagasaki entails both tangible and symbolic responsibilities, including the apprehension of genetic harm. It bears a form of rejection on her back, not

merely scars; this rejection is transgenerational. Scientifically, it pertains to DNA damage resulting from radiation exposure. Atomic bomb detonations emit ionising radiation capable of infiltrating human cells and causing DNA damage. This damage may manifest in several forms, such as mutations and alterations in the DNA sequence, potentially resulting in genetic abnormalities or heightened susceptibility to diseases like cancer (National Research Council 2006). Chromosomal Aberrations Chromosomal abnormalities, whether fragmented or altered, may impact fertility or result in congenital anomalies (Radiation Effects Research Foundation). Moreover, chemical modifications to DNA that do not modify the sequence can influence gene expression and may transmit trauma-related alterations to subsequent generations (Epigenetic Effects of Radiation 2013).

For survivors such as Hiroko (Raza's mother), these alterations may not always be apparent, yet they bear the stigma of being "genetically contaminated." This apprehension is based on the notion that radioactive damage may be transmitted to progeny, despite the fact that the real risk is frequently overstated (Shamsie,2009,p 214). In this context, Raza is spurned by the girl he loves due to his mother's history as a Nagasaki survivor. "They claimed I was contaminated." My blood bore the imprint of the bomb. (Shamsie 2009,p214) This immediately associates Raza's rejection with the unreasonable apprehension of genetic contamination resulting from his mother's exposure. The girl's family is concerned that Hiroko's radiation exposure may have induced genetic harm, potentially affecting Raza and, thus, their future offspring.

Symbolically, the "Burnt Shadows" in the novel function as a potent metaphor for the metamorphosis of human identity into a foreign and splintered creature. Hiroko no longer identifies with her reflection—her visage obscured, her skin marked by scars that delineate a transformed existence, as if the bomb had transmuted her into a figure of legend: "Hiroko no longer saw herself in the mirror… her skin was a map of scars, as if the bomb had turned her into a creature from legend" (Shamsie, 2009,p15). Her

assertion—“I am a global citizen…” "Or perhaps merely a citizen of scars" illustrates how corporeal metamorphosis reflects psychological and cultural estrangement. The disintegration of national identity obscures the boundaries between the external world and her internal self, rendering her unanchored to any specific location.

Conversely, Rajabi et al. argue that Hiroko's wounds epitomise rebirth, like to a phoenix emerging from ashes. Her bodily transformation serves as a cultural narrative of survival, reminiscent of prophetic challenges seen in religious writings (Rajabi et al. 2020). The burns are not merely injuries but a conservative myth reinterpreted as a narrative of survival. Her avian-shaped wounds, vestiges of Nagasaki’s destruction, serve as emblems of both bereavement and metamorphosis. In this transformation, she represents both the vulnerability of the past and the strength of survival—an existence poised between obliteration and renewal. Her metamorphosis into a "mythical figure, a character that forfeits everything and is reborn in blood" (Shamsie ,2009, p50) resonates with myths of shape-shifters who discard their former identities to endure.

Fluidity and metamorphosis converge in hybridity. Magical realism often utilizes methods linked to post-colonial discourse, with hybridity as a fundamental component. This style integrates disparate domains, such as urban and rural or Western and indigenous, illustrating their coexistence and tension. The narratives frequently explore issues of boundaries, cultural amalgamation, and metamorphosis. Authors endeavour to reveal a reality that surpasses the confines of traditional realism, offering a more profound and intricate portrayal of human experience (Suma 2018).

Bhabha coined the term "hybridity," asserting that it is more comprehensive, expansive, and relevant than the concepts proposed by other postcolonial thinkers. He recognizes the creativity inherent in hybridity. "In my view, the significance of hybridity lies not in identifying two original sources from which a third arises; instead, hybridity constitutes the 'third space' that facilitates the emergence of alternative positions," he asserts in an interview entitled "Third Space" (Bhabha,1994,p 211). It elucidates the origins of

civilizations rather than their emergence from the amalgamation of multiple cultural forms. Bhabha elucidates that "dialectal sublation," which implies the synthesis of thesis and antithesis, does not result in hybridity. The "third space" lacks a third form. The "third space" does not represent a tertiary cultural form arising from the struggle between two or more civilizations. Bhabha asserts in an interview with Art in America that he opposes the multiculturalist idea of harmoniously assembling various cultures into a cohesive mosaic. To establish a cohesive new cultural entity, one cannot merely amalgamate diverse cultural traditions (Bhabha 1994).

Shamsie depicts Nagasaki as a locale where cultural amalgamation seems almost enchanting, yet is eventually disrupted by historical and political dynamics; hence, in *Burnt Shadows*, hybridity is associated with the concept of magical realism. Prior to the war, Nagasaki is shown as a cosmopolitan metropolis, a “world of enchantment” (Shamsie,2009,p 6), where several civilisations, particularly Japanese and European, coexist harmoniously. A young German man, Konrad Weiss, finds this cultural amalgamation intriguing as he perceives it as a paradigm of harmony: "Europeans and Japanese mixing uncomplicatedly" (Shamsie,2009,p 6). Analogous to the magical realism in literature, where reality and myth intertwine, the city's atmosphere appears enchanting, as cultures "meet, unite, contend but do not overlap," evoking an idealised conception of hybridity characterised by fluid yet distinct cultural boundaries.

Shamsie employs Konrad's perspective to underscore the fluidity of cultural identity. Utilising a magical realist metaphor, his assertion that "barriers were made of metals that could turn fluid when touched simultaneously by people on either side" (Shamsie , 2009,p 83) implies that cultural barriers are not immutable but may be transformed by interaction between individuals from diverse backgrounds. This pertains to Bhabha's notion of hybridity, which posits that identities are malleable and not fixed, residing in a third space that transcends traditional categorisations. This panorama embodies

Nagasaki's enchanting landscape, where cultural amalgamation is a magical experience rather than a simply physical act.

However, when conflict erupts, this harmonious coexistence is disrupted. Culturally flexible boundaries become rigid as a result of the political realities of conflict. The global political dynamics compel Konrad, originally captivated by Nagasaki's cosmopolitan environment, to assume a new identity. The enforcement of rigid cultural identities through politics and conflict undermines his idealised view of cultural hybridity. "You depict a Nagasaki populated by foreigners," Yoshi warns Konrad. You express a deep need for it in your writing. Commending an American occupation is merely a precursor to that (Shamsie,2009, p9). A hallmark of magical realism is the continual disruption of the fantastical or idealised image by stark reality, wherein historical events violently fracture the magical representation of hybridity. The final disruption in this magical realist realm of cultural amalgamation is the 1945 detonation of the atomic bomb on Nagasaki, justified as an action to "save American lives" (Shamsie ,2009,p63). The bomb signifies the ultimate destruction of the hybridity that Nagasaki once embodied. Such tragic events often possess significant symbolic significance in magical realist narratives, and in this instance, the bomb not only obliterates the physical city but also undermines the notion of cultural renewal that Konrad had been investigating. Given that the protagonists are ensnared in a political and historical tumult that disregards the fluidity and amalgamation of cultures, Konrad's demise and Hiroko's survival highlight the tragedy of cultural hybridity. Komal, 30 years old.

Raza's perpetual liminality exemplifies magical realism and interfaith dialogue effectively. The "potential for cultural hybridity that embraces difference without a presumed or enforced hierarchy" is established through liminality, which Bhabha characterises as a "interstitial passage between fixed identifications" (Shamsie,2009,p3). Raza's identity in this region reflects a synthesis of his Indian, Pakistani, and Western

roots. Raza Konrad Ashraf's name indicates his diverse origin, encompassing Indian, German, and Pakistani ancestry. Consequently, he is a "polyglot who disavows affiliation with any singular culture."

In conclusion, the employment of magical realism in *Burnt Shadows* serves not merely as a stylistic choice but as a powerful narrative mechanism that amplifies the exploration of pain, displacement, and history inside the text. Kamila Shamsie constructs a realm where historical and personal catastrophes endure, redefining identities and altering destinies by blurring the boundaries between reality and fantasy.

3. **Interfaith Dialogue in *Burnt Shadows*:**

Kamila Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows* is a complicated look at religious identity and how people of different faiths talk to each other while big events from 1945 to 2001 play in the background. In the book, there are characters from many religions, such as Islam, Sikh, Buddhism, and Christianity. Their relationships show both how hard it can be and how easy it can be to talk to people of different faiths. In this part, we look at how Shamsie shows her religious identity and how she shows her interactions. between different faiths, and how religious thinking has changed over time. *Burnt Shadows* is in many ways a radioscopic picture of various religious identities, that refuse to meet and intersect except in the space of magical realism in *Burnt Shadows*.

Islam occupies a significant thematic space in *Burnt Shadows*, reflecting its historical importance in the periods Kamila Shamsie explores. However, the novel does not present Islam as a monolithic identity; instead, it highlights the diversity within Muslim experiences and expressions. Shamsie deliberately challenges Western constructions of Islam and Muslim identity by weaving a narrative that draws on transnational literary traditions. Through the character of Sajjad Ashraf, a Muslim man living in imperial Delhi, Shamsie disrupts orientalist stereotypes that often depict Muslim men as either threatening or submissive. Sajjad's relationship with Hiroko, a Japanese woman, unfolds with subtlety and emotional depth, subverting conventional tropes of East–West

encounters (Shamsie 2009). He embodies a form of Islam rooted in the linguistic and cultural richness of Urdu and Delhi's pre-colonial heritage. His faith is portrayed as deeply personal and compassionate, echoing his mother's "most intimate relationship with Allah" (Shamsie,2009,p 127), in contrast to the more politicized versions of Islam depicted later in the novel, particularly in the context of Afghanistan (Tilwani 2020).

Shamsie also resists the post-9/11 literary tendency to reduce Muslim characters to caricatures of extremism or passivity. Instead, she offers a nuanced portrayal of Muslim life embedded in both political consciousness and personal connection. Sajjad, for example, is introduced as a confident and dignified Indian man, cycling through "his city," Dilli, which he claims with pride as both a familial and cultural inheritance. Delhi is rendered not as a colonial outpost but as "the rhythmically beating heart of India," alive with meaning and memory. His ability to move from the intimacy of his home to the imperial center reflects his agency and self-awareness: "At home in Dilli, but breaking away from the rest of my flock to check out the air in Delhi" (Shamsie ,2009,p21), he muses, positioning himself as both insider and observer. His interactions with his colonial employer, James Burton, are similarly layered. Rather than being subjugated, Sajjad is respected, even cherished. He dons a Savile Row jacket with sensual pride, a symbol of his youthful confidence and elegance (Shamsie,2009,p22). James's response—smiling at the sight of Sajjad—further illustrates a relationship marked not by rigid hierarchy, but by mutual recognition and shared intellectual engagement. (Tilwani 2020).The complexity of their bond is most evident when James tells Sajjad:

> Don't believe me?' James said. When Sajjad merely smiled and shrugged, James put a hand on his arm. 'I don't know any man more capable'" (Shamsie,2009,p26). The significance of this moment lies not in the compliment itself—"Sajjad had no need of those from anyone"—but in James's "way of compressing a complicated matrix of emotion, one that encompassed the

relationship of ruler–subject, employer–employee, father–son, chess-player–chess-player, into the word ‘capable(Shamsie,2009,p 26).

In this subtle yet powerful exchange, Shamsie reconfigures colonial dynamics, offering a vision of Muslim identity that is self-possessed, intellectually respected, and emotionally complex. Through characters like Sajjad, she not only breaks with reductive literary traditions but also affirms Muslim subjectivity in a global, post-imperial world. As Tilwani notes, Sajjad ultimately becomes “priceless” and “invaluable” to his employer, not because of subservience but due to his intellectual depth and humanity .

By means of her characters, Shamsie offers a nuanced picture of Muslim identities, therefore highlighting how they exist in diverse, multifarious forms instead of falling into rigid binaries of "good" or "bad." Moreover, the book emphasizes the displacement and alienation its characters go through in several geopolitical settings—from Nagasaki to Delhi, from Karachi to New York. Shamsie questions oversimplified, monolithic depictions of Muslim identities by tying these stories together, therefore highlighting the interdependence of world history (Clements 2016).

The novel also explores how religious identity intersects with national and cultural identity. During the partition of India and Pakistan, religion becomes a defining factor in national belonging, forcing characters to confront how their religious identities position them within newly drawn national boundaries. Sajjad's reluctance to leave Delhi for Pakistan reveals the tension between religious and cultural belonging: his Muslim identity aligns him with Pakistan, but his deep cultural attachment to Delhi pulls him in the opposite direction.

Furthermore, Shamsie explores secularism in the contemporary world. Secular perspectives are represented primarily through Hiroko, whose relationship to religion remains ambiguous throughout the novel. While her Japanese background might suggest Shinto or Buddhist influences, she is portrayed as largely secular in her outlook, approaching religious differences with curiosity rather than commitment to any particular

tradition. This secular position allows her character to move between religious contexts with a flexibility that other characters lack. The character Hiroko serves primarily as a catalyst for the demystification, differentiation, and humanization of ordinary, peaceful South Asian Muslims in a world dominated by Western view (Ahmed 2012)

Moreover, Christianity also secure a prominent place in *Burnt Shadows* since it is the religion of the colonizers and the Eurocentric world. Christianity is represented primarily through the Burton family, whose faith appears more as a cultural marker of colonial identity than a deeply held spiritual conviction. Their nominal adherence to Christianity reflects its historical role in British India—less as a sincere religious practice than as an ideological justification for imperial rule ("civilization and Christianity") and a social boundary reinforcing colonial hierarchies.(kwame 1987)

Elizabeth Burton embodies this contradiction: her German-Christian heritage is destabilized by her concealed Jewish ancestry, rendering her religious identity fractured and performative. This duality critiques the hypocrisy of colonial Christianity, which preached universal morality while enforcing exclusion. The novel suggests that while formal colonialism ended with Partition, Christianity's ideological function persisted in new forms. As Sen et al. argue, the rhetoric of empire merely shifted from overt religious missionizing to secularized justifications like "democracy and free trade" (Sen ,2017,p90)—yet maintained the same civilizational hierarchies, now reinforced through Islamophobia. Thus, the Burtons' hollow Christianity mirrors the false promise of decolonization: power changes hands, but oppressive structures endure.

Given this panoramic exploration of religious faith in a turbulent world, the novel's central relationships cross religious and cultural boundaries, creating opportunities for interfaith dialogue at an intimate level. This is founded in the work through Hiroko because 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. The

parts that reflect this idea is Hiroko's relationships and Raza's .Hiroko's relationships represents an early example of cross-cultural connection, bringing together Japanese and German perspectives in the context of wartime Nagasaki. Though their religious differences are not explicitly foregrounded, their relationship establishes a pattern of boundary-crossing that continues throughout the novel.

Hiroko's relationship with Konrad and her later marriage to Sajjad represent *Burnt Shadows*' most sustained exploration of interfaith and intercultural relationships. At the beginning of the novel, she is engaged to Konrad Weiss, a German man who stands out as a lover of global culture and a self-declared citizen of the world. As Ullah, Zia, et al. explain in their work *"The Concept of Universal Citizenship in Kamila Shamsie's Burnt Shadows,"* Konrad's cosmopolitan sensibility drives him to Nagasaki, where he "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… so he decided to engage to a Japanese girl" (Ullah et al.,2019,p263). His relationship with Hiroko, therefore, symbolizes more than romantic attachment; it reflects a commitment to transcending national and cultural boundaries.

Her union with Sajjad also symbolizes the merging of Hiroko's secular Japanese background with Sajjad's Muslim Indian identity, establishing a space where cultural and religious differences are not erased but rather negotiated daily. Significantly, their relationship is portrayed not as a resolution of difference but as the creation of a shared life that respectfully accommodates it. Sajjad does not expect Hiroko to convert to Islam, nor does Hiroko pressure him to abandon his faith. Instead, they cultivate what might be described as a form of "domestic interfaith dialogue," wherein their religious and cultural distinctiveness becomes an integral part of their everyday existence. As diasporic characters, they are continually confronted with what Sheffer describes as the challenge of "dealing with the actual and virtual boundaries" that define identity and belonging in diaspora (Sheffer,2006,p136). Their ability to communicate across languages—both

being multilingual—facilitates not only their interpersonal understanding but also their navigation through shifting cultural landscapes. As Clifford notes, although diasporic individuals often "traverse" and "subvert" the boundaries that define nations through their transnational attachments, they remain constrained by the very forces of nationalism that produce exclusion and conflict (Clifford,1994,p307). Their identities, shaped by displacement and loss, are marked by a longing that "cannot be cured by merging into a new national community" (Clifford,1994,p307). In *Burnt Shadows*, this is vividly reflected in Hiroko and Sajjad's journey across countries and cultures—together forming a life that resists fixed definitions, even as they remain affected by the residual weight of history and geography.

The interfaith relationship is embodied in their son, Raza Konrad Ashraf, whose very name reflects his hybrid heritage, Raza's name represents a synthesis of religions and ethnicities, rendering him a manifestation of interconnection within the narrative. Raza's endeavor to reconcile the disparate facets of his identity—to establish a cohesive personality that respects both his father's Muslim ancestry and his mother's Japanese lineage—embodies the complexities and potentialities of interfaith identity on a personal scale. (Clements 2016).

However, the novel's most important addition to understanding dialogue between different faiths is that it looks at how religious identities and relationships change as times change. The book is split into four parts, and each one focuses on a different time in history. During different times in history, each part looks at how violent and military actions by legitimate governments to keep and increase their power have affected the lives of regular people. The main thing that ties all four parts together is Hiroko's trip through time and space. It is through her that we learn about the pain and loss that many people have gone through because of these accepted and routine acts of violence and crimes. The book makes the point that the past of the whole world is similar, with the same cycles of destruction. The novel covers many time periods, from World War II to

partition, the Cold War, and now, after 9/11. It shows how historical events shape religious identities and how interfaith discussion needs to change to meet new challenges in each time period (Saleem)

The partition of India and Pakistan is one of the most important events in the book when it comes to faith identity. As religious lines become political lines, the characters are forced to think again about how their religious and national identities relate to each other. Sajjad's initial resistance to leaving Delhi for Pakistan shows how artificial this split is: he has always been both a Muslim and a Delhiite, and the partition forces them apart in a way that feels painful and unnatural (Hassan 2021).

The way Pakistan is shown in the book in the 1980s looks at another aspect of religious identity in a historical context. Sajjad has a negative view of how the military is making Pakistani society more Islamic: "He cursed under his breath the government that kept trying to force religion into everything public." His mother had a very close relationship with Allah. She would have personally knocked on the door of Army House and told the President that he should be ashamed to tell everyone to have their relationships with Allah in public "(Shamsie,2009,p127). This text shows the conflict between personal faith and religion that is used for political purposes. It suggests that for real interfaith dialogue to happen, the private and sensitive nature of religious experience must be respected.

The part of the book that takes place after 9/11 might be the most difficult for interfaith discussion. This is the time when characters are no longer just concerned with nationalities, but with ethnicities, religion, the divergence of groups within groups and individuals whose choices can affect everyone around them When religious identity is used as a reason for mistrust and profiling, it makes it harder for people of different faiths to understand each other and talk to each other.

Hiroko is always there, even as things change around her. She adjusts to new faith and cultural settings while keeping her own sense of who she is. She is a great example of the

openness and flexibility that is needed for interfaith conversation because she can learn languages, understand subtleties of other cultures, and make deep connections with people from different backgrounds. But the book doesn't make her seem like she can't deal with the problems that come up when people from different cultures talk to each other. She too has times of misunderstanding, anger, and loss.

Consequently, in *Burnt Shadows*, talks, arguments, explanations, and stories between characters are the main way that people of different religions and cultures can understand each other. The book puts a lot of stress on learning a language as a way to talk to people of other faiths. Hiroko can step into different religious and cultural worlds because she is good at languages. Just the fact that she wants to learn new languages shows how peaceful she is. Hiroko is part of the new culture and wants to listen to Urdu all the time. On the other hand, Raza's ability to speak more than one language is both a source of identity confusion and a way to connect with others (Ullah, Zia, et al. 2019).

One very important part of interfaith conversation is when Sajjad tells Hiroko why he doesn't want to leave Delhi: "It seemed to Sajjad that these were the kinds of things that were said so that repetition made fact out of conjecture." He would know what to do with an Englishman's great work written in Urdu. He had read it. "Why make it look like it was more complicated than it was?" (Sharmie 2009,p132). This text shows how open Sajjad was to interacting with people from other cultures—he was ready to talk to an English author who was writing in Urdu—and how frustrated he was with the way people made up artificial barriers between religions and cultures.

The book also looks at the boundaries of dialogue, especially when there are imbalances of power or past traumas that make it hard to understand. As an example Shamsie's version of the story says that Sajjad quits his job after the Burtons falsely accuse him of molesting Hiroko. This makes James Burton feel a strange sense of loss. Burton is thrilled to see Sajjad again after a long break and calls his name. He walks up to Sajjad, calls him "dear fellow," and asks him in a relaxed way why he didn't bring a chessboard.

Sajjad, who is still mad about the false charges and unfair treatment, makes it clear that he has not returned to do his job (Tilwani 2020). Burton tries to explain how he feels by saying, "I just read A Passage to India..." He can tell that Sajjad is angry. Not a good book. That's a terrible finish. The Englishman and the Indian want to kiss, but the horses, the ground, and the sky don't want them to. This keeps them apart (Shamsie,2009,p111). Burton's words show that he feels guilty and that he doesn't agree with Forster's portrayal of the huge gap between the British and the Indians. But Burton quickly says sorry for his part in the false charges and admits that he and his wife Elizabeth were both wrong. Also For example, the past of Western interference in Muslim-majority countries makes it harder for Harry Burton and Raza to get along. This past shapes the way they talk to each other, which makes it hard to have a real conversation, even when both people mean well. In the part that takes place after 9/11, the book looks at how fear and suspicion can make it impossible for people of different faiths to talk to each other. As Muslim characters are looked at more closely, it gets harder to keep up the conditions for real dialogue, like mutual respect, a desire to listen, and an openness to differences. But even in this tough setting, the book shows that human connections can sometimes go beyond larger social and political barriers. (Tilwani 2020)

For the most part, *Burnt Shadows* shows interfaith dialogue not as an ideal but as a real thing that is shaped by history, power, and personal connections. The novel shows characters dealing with religious differences across time and place. It gives a complex look at the difficulties and opportunities of talking to people of different faiths. Through a story that spans generations and countries, Shamsie shows that interfaith dialogue is not a one-time talk but an ongoing process that needs to change with the times while staying rooted in respect for human dignity and difference.

4. Magical Realism Negotiation of Interfaith Dialogue in *Burnt Shadows*

Read allegorically, Burnt Shadow becomes a metaphor for interfaith negotiations. The bird-shaped scars on Hiroko's back, which are at the heart of the magical realism of the

book, are a powerful metaphor for religious growth and touch between different faiths. Even though they were made at a time of complete destruction, these scars become a way for people to connect and understand each other again. They call Hiroko someone who has been through the worst of human suffering but is still open to new people and events. These things so accurately show the process of faith change, which often happens after a time of deep loss or doubt. (Zaib 2016)

"He wanted to touch the burns, press his fingers against them, and find out if they still retained the heat of the bomb," Sajjad says when he first sees Hiroko's scars (Shamsie,2009,p107). This scene shows a meeting between people of different faiths, as Muslim Indian Sajjad tries to understand Hiroko's pain. In addition to their different views and pasts, the scars, especially those that look like birds, bring them together. In the book, birds represent freedom, being open to harm, and moving from one place to another. These are all things that are similar to faith identity in a globalized world. Shamsie says that communicating across religious lines needs both the openness to deal with differences (zaib 2016) and the adaptability to go beyond one's own religion.

Hiroko's scars on her back also show the sadness of her past and how her identity has changed over time. The scars "typify this difference between Hiroko's and Raza's attitudes toward the idea of home," as the story says (Shamsie,2006,p222). The birds stand for both Hiroko's freedom and the destruction of her home by the bomb. Traumatic events in Hiroko's past have changed her identity in many ways. Her bad dreams about birds inside her, "their beaks dripping with venom," show this. This flexibility is connected to the magical realism used in the book, since the scars take on symbolic, almost supernatural qualities that make it hard to tell the difference between the person and the group. According to the story, Raza's strong national identity based on stereotypes makes her feel alone and makes her question herself, even as Hiroko tries to change who she is. So, the cuts don't just show grief; they also show how hard it is to find faith, identity, and a place to belong in a society that is falling apart (zaib 2016).

Also, the fact that the scars last for a long time suggests that communicating across religious lines is more about carrying the marks of encounters throughout life than getting rid of differences. People can change without giving up their own views or customs when they experience religious diversity. In the same way, Hiroko's wounds become a part of her personality without defining her completely.

Moreover, there is a strong reciprocal connection between temporal fluidity and religious experience in *Burnt Shadows*.The magical realist way the book handles time makes connections between religious experiences from different groups and times in history. Shamsie breaks up the linear flow of time and suggests cyclical patterns, which makes it possible to understand religious traditions in more complex ways. This is because religious traditions often question linear views of time.

Scholars who study religion have noticed that holy time and secular time often work in different ways. A common goal of religious practices is to blur the lines between the past, present, and future so that people can feel like events from sacred history are happening right now and are important to them (Eliade 1957). The magical realist parts of *Burnt Shadows* have a similar effect, making it seem like historical events like the bombing of Nagasaki, the partition of India, and 9/11 are not just separate events but are linked in ways that go beyond normal timeline.

This shifting of time is especially important for interfaith dialogue, which has to deal with how different religions see events and time. Hiroko thinks, "It seemed the most extraordinary privilege—to have forewarning of a swerve in history, to prepare for how your life would curve around that bend" (Shamsie,2009,p 204). This shows that she is aware of patterns in history in a way that is similar to how religious people understand prophecy or providence. Because she knows this, she can deal with changing religious situations from a point of view that goes beyond any one religion.

The way the book is put together also makes religious experiences that would normally be separate linked. Shamsie connects Konrad's death in Nagasaki to religious violence

during partition and then to Islamophobia after 9/11. She does this to show that these events, even though they happened in different religious and cultural settings, have common patterns that can only be seen from a different point of view than chronological order. This method encourages readers to see religious conflicts not as one-off events but as part of bigger history patterns that need to be dealt with by people of different faiths working together.

It should be noted here that Shamsie employs liminal spaces as sites for interfaith encounter. Magical realism's creation of liminal spaces—thresholds between different realms of experience—parallels the "third spaces" that emerge in interfaith dialogue, where participants step outside the boundaries of their own traditions to engage with religious difference. In *Burnt Shadows*, these in-between places become places where religiously different characters can meet and interact in ways that go beyond normal social and cultural limits.

This liminality is shown by Hiroko herself. People have said that she might "slip away in fluid form" and that "everything about her is precarious" (Shamsie,2009,p83). She lives in a place between cultures and traditions, which makes it easy for her to switch between religious settings. Because she is on the edge, she is a great person to help religious groups talk to each other because she can see things from different religions' points of view without being fully committed to one (Rebahi 2020).

The places in the book also serve as "liminal spaces" where people of different faiths can meet. People have shown that places like Delhi during partition, Karachi in the 1980s, and New York after 9/11 are places where people of different religions and cultures mix and the lines between them become less clear. These places aren't just backgrounds; they're also active players in the conversations between different religions that happen there. They change how the characters understand and deal with religious difference.

In these liminal areas, Raza struggles to figure out who she is. Because his name is a mix of religious and cultural words, he has to find his own way between different customs in

order to figure out who he is. In his book *The Location of Culture* (2003), Bhabha uses the stairs as an example of a space that is not quite what it seems to be. His ideas say that this space between set identities creates the chance for a mix of cultures that accepts differences without assuming or imposing a hierarchy ,Raza is a great example of Bhabha's idea of liminality. He fits in either everywhere or nowhere. The name Raza Konrad Ashraf comes from three different cultures: the Pakistani word "Raza," the German word "Konrad," and the Indian word "Ashraf." Raza's parents taught him these cultures, but he has also been exposed to other cultures around the world. As a result, he is now a polyglot who doesn't identify with any one culture. So In today's globalized world, where people are more likely to be a mix of different religious and cultural traditions, his fight shows the difficulties and opportunities of interfaith identity (Rebahi 2020).

The magical realism parts of the book add to this liminality by implying that reality is less solid and more fluid than it seems at first. If the lines between what is normal and what is supernatural, what is possible and what is impossible, can be crossed, then maybe the lines between religious traditions can be crossed too. This doesn't mean getting rid of religious differences; it just means realizing that different traditions aren't completely separate from each other and are connected in a dynamic way.

Raza’s identity formation is a good case study of this tendency in the novel to mobilize magical realism to negotiate religious experience in an historical perspective. Raza Konrad Ashraf's journey of figuring out who she is a great example of how magical realism can help a novel explore interfaith conversation. Although Razza's name is a mix of Muslim, Christian, and secular elements, she is a character who represents the possibilities and difficulties of interfaith identity in a globalized world.

The magical realist parts of Raza's story come out mostly in the strange links and coincidences that happen in his life.Shamsie paints a picture of him as a skilled linguist who changes his part or identity depending on the situation by using the languages he

knows. Harry, an FBI agent from the United States, first sees Raza. The boy talks Urdu. "Your Urdu is very good," Harry says (Shamsie, 2009, p. 88). As an English learner, Harry worries about how someone who speaks Urdu could understand his English. It was then that Raza says, "I speak English, Japanese, and German." Along with Urdu, of course.Also in Pashto. What language do you speak? (p. 90). His ability to look like an Afghan, his skill with languages, and his complicated relationship with his mixed background all point to a person who doesn't fit neatly into normal identity categories. This blurring of lines gives his story a magical quality that fits with the novel's larger themes of crossing lines and changing(Zaib 2016).

It was hard for Raza to find a way to combine the different parts of his identity so that he could respect both his Muslim father and his Japanese mother. This shows the difficulties of interfaith identity on an individual level. His temporary adoption of an Afghan identity could be seen as an attempt to end this conflict by embracing a single custom, but the book shows that this kind of resolution costs him connection and authenticity.

The ending of Raza's story shows that if you want to have a meaningful interfaith identity, you need to accept conflict and complexity instead of trying to find false simplicity. Raza hasn't fixed the problems in his identity by the end of the book, but he has learned to live with them better and see his mixed heritage as something that makes him strong instead of confused. This approach is similar to magical realism's acceptance of paradox and contradiction and refusal to settle disagreements in favor of a single reality.

5 Conclusion

This paper has investigated the manner in which Kamila Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows* utilizes magical realism to enhance and embellish depictions of interfaith communication. Shamsie dissolves rigid religious boundaries and encourages readers to consider faith as relational, fluid, and influenced by historical trauma by employing motifs such as bird-shaped wounds, blurred timelines, and liminal identities.

Shamsie is able to emphasize the legitimacy of multiple theological perspectives without reducing them to a single truth through magical realism, which provides a viable alternative to both relativism and exclusivism. This dynamic is embodied by characters such as Raza and Hiroko, who challenge fixed religious identities and reflect the permeability of tradition through interaction and enduring suffering. Shamsie's novel also envisions novel opportunities for ecumenical tolerance, implying that meaningful connections can be formed despite profound cultural and religious divisions. *Burnt Shadows* demonstrates the capacity of literature to cultivate empathy and foresee transformative encounters across differences in a world characterized by conflict and misunderstanding.

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