

ONTOLOGICAL DISPLACEMENT AND THE QUEST FOR BELONGING IN KAMILA SHAMSIE'S BURNT SHADOWS

Amna Noor

BS Scholar, Minhaj University Lahore

Email: amnanoor6437@gmail.com

Samra Hafeez

Lecturer, School of English

Minhaj University Lahore

Email: samrahafeez.eng@mul.edu.pk

Faseeha Munir

BS Scholar, Minhaj University Lahore

Email: faseehamunir99@gmail.com

Abstract

*This article explores the themes of being and belongingness by applying the lens of the ontological struggles on Kamila Shamsie's novel *Burnt Shadows*. Spanning across significant historical and geographical terrains—from Nagasaki to Delhi, Karachi, New York, and Afghanistan. The narrative reveals how individuals grapple with identity, displacement, and a constant quest for rootedness. Drawing upon philosophical notions of ontology, this article examines the protagonist Hiroko Tanaka's journey as a central metaphor for existential dislocation and the human longing to belong. The study also investigates how language, cultural hybridity, inherited trauma, and historical violence shape identity and selfhood. The novel, *Burnt Shadows* follow the cross-culture lives of her characters as they navigate historical catastrophes, from the 1945 atomic explosion of Nagasaki to post-9/11 worldwide politics. The novel raises profound questions about how identities are constructed, transformed, and shattered under the context of historical traumas and geopolitical circumstances. Furthermore, this study investigates the concept of self-identity in the face of nationalism, displacement, war, homelessness, identity crisis and political conflicts. This ontological analysis of *Burnt Shadows* provides an extensive understanding of how identity is shaped, redefined, and challenged through traumatic historical experiences. It highlights Shamsie's contribution to the knowledge of self-identity as a complicated dynamic concept that is significantly impacted by historical and cultural experiences.*

Keywords: Being, Belongingness, Identity, ontological struggle

Introduction:

In the intricate and confusing world of literature, the exploration of trauma and nationalism reveals the deep grounds of identity, the idea of being and belonging, concept of self and human experiences. The ontological study delves into the essence of being and belonging examining how nationalism and trauma shapes one's identity, sense of being and belonging, and the struggles faced by the individuals. Ontology is the philosophical study of being and belongings which serves as the base for understanding the experiences that individuals have gone through in their lives. It helps to throw the light on the ways in which these elements shape and define the life of individuals. Through an ontological lens, insight can be gained into how personal and collective experiences affect one's understanding of identity and how individuals relate to the world around them.

The concept of the self and ontology are interconnected with each other. It includes objectivity and subjective struggles faced by the individuals which shapes the idea existence and ones place within the broader context of reality. The self is a dynamic concept which is a combination of interaction of individuals with their surroundings and their response to these

experiences. According to existential philosophy, Jean-Paul Sartre states that “existence precedes essence” (Sartre, 1946). According to this philosophy, the self is not something that is already set in stone, but rather something that is constantly evolving over time through interactions and experiences to make one's identity. The concept of being is not just about existing, it involves actively engaging with environment and then individuals use those experiences to shape their identity. So, one has the ability to redefine identity by encountering new things in surroundings. Self and identity are the terms that continue to evolve over time through different experiences. The construction of self is based on two concerns, belonging and identity. Belonging refers to one's connection to surroundings such as different communities and places which provide framework to understand self in a better way. Identity is a fluid term which continues to evolve over time. It is not a static concept. The sense of identity and self can change depending on the social situations through which the individual is going through. Memory and past experiences play a very important role in shaping who we are. Belonging is integral to identity formation, offering both stability and adaptability to the place of individual in the world. This actively involves memory and experiences.

In shaping past experiences and identities, it is evident that memory plays a significant and vital role. People remember past events and current experiences, and they link these ideas to concepts such as nationalism, partition, and both psychological and physical trauma. While thinking about memory, it becomes evident that past experiences shape identity, as memory involves recalling events primarily from the past. Partition, historically and metaphorically, has a great impact on our sense of self, belonging, and identity. The division of lands, such as the partition of subcontinent in 1947, not only involved geographical separation but it also has a significant impact on people as it disrupts the communities and their personal lives. The trauma of partition often leads to the lost sense of identity and reevaluating it, as individuals and groups go through the loss and dislocation it entails. In the wake of such events like dislocation and displacement, people must reconstruct their sense of belonging and identity within a new sociopolitical context. This reconstruction of identity, sense of being and belonging, and self is a complex process. It involves integrating the experiences of loss and displacement into a redefined sense of self.

Partition of subcontinent in 1947 brings the themes of dislocation and displacement as individuals are forced to navigate the loss of home and identity in the result of national division. Due to the violent nature of division of the subcontinent, millions of people were displaced from their land. This took their sense of self from them by distorting them from their land. The life that was left behind highlights the ontological struggle of reconciling one's past with uncertain present. National conflicts and war are the terms that shape the individuals' ontological realities in their lives. The violent nature of war leads to trauma and loss due to bombing and war leaves physical and emotional marks on individuals. This trauma is not limited to one individual only who is experiencing it but it is inter-generational transmission of trauma, fear and pain. Inter-generational trauma is the trauma that is transmitted from one generation to another. It shows how past events shape the present and future of individuals. The individual struggle to overcome inherited traumas and overcome through their own identity, highlights the importance of struggle for meaning and belonging in the world marked by conflict.

The question of “being” and “belonging” has occupied philosophical, psychological, and literary discourses for centuries. In Kamila Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows*, these concepts are intricately intertwined into the fabric of the narrative. The novel follows Hiroko Tanaka, a survivor of the Nagasaki bombing, as she directs a world marked by shifting geopolitical borders and

cultural identities. Through Hiroko and other characters, Shamsie ideas a site of ontological struggle, where belonging is often disrupted by historical trauma and political change. Shamsie's narrative investigations delve deeply into the metaphysical dimension of displacement, how global struggles alter not only where people live, but also who they are. Hiroko, as both an observer to and a product of history's violent mix, symbolizes how the desire for belonging remains unsatisfied in a fractured world. This paper seeks to delve into these ideas in detail by combining literary analysis with critical theoretical frameworks.

Research Objectives

- To analyze how ontological struggles are manifested through the lived experiences of the characters in the novel *Burnt Shadows* by Kamila Shamsie
- To explore the inter-connection of identity, displacement, and history in the development of selfhood in the novel *Burnt Shadows* by Kamila Shamsie

Literature Review

Burnt Shadows by Kamila Shamsie is analyzed through an ontological lens to examine how trauma and nationalism impact the characters' senses of self and their quest for belonging. Through the characters' experiences of trauma and nationalism, Kamila Shamsie explores deeper questions about identity and existence. The novel demonstrates how personal suffering and national events shape people's identities. Trauma refers to profoundly upsetting encounters that last affect an individual's life. The novel's trauma comes from enduring the nuclear bomb and losing loved ones. This trauma impacts life and decisions, as individuals attempt to discover a feeling of having a place and mending.

Ontology is a part of Philosophy that concentrates on the idea of being, presence, and reality. In straightforward terms, it's tied in with posing inquiries like, what does it mean to be? And how do our experiences shape our character? The ontological investigation glances at what trauma and patriotism mean for individuals' personalities and real factors in the story. It investigates how individuals' trauma shapes and how they might interpret themselves and be spotted in the world. How do national identities and the idea of countries impact individual lives and connections? Critics investigate how the characters' personal and Historical Traumas shape their identity and their comprehension of their reality. The protagonist's encounters with the nuclear bomb and the parcel reflect more extensive inquiries of what trauma means for one's existence.

Belonging and Ontology having the quest for having a place in the novel reflects ontological inquiries concerning personality and spot. Critics look at how characters try to discover a feeling of home and local area amid the verifiable contentions that shape their lives. Ontological examinations in writing frequently look at changed texts and use postcolonial hypotheses to investigate how verifiable and social settings impact characters' personalities and existential inquiries. Aristotle is often considered one of the earliest philosophers to address ontology systematically. He explores the nature of being, substance, and categories of existence in his works. He said "Being is said in many ways; that is, there is no one single definition of 'being.' Instead, being can be understood through different categories and distinctions." (Aristotle, 350 BCE) Ontology helps to understand these experiences by asking what they mean for the characters' existence and identity.

As far as concerned Nationalism, it can both join together and partition. Many writers and critics wrote on this phenomenon George Orwell in his essay "Notes on Nationalism" (1945)

analyzes nationalism critically and sets it apart from patriotism. According to him, nationalism is the idea that one's country or ideology is superior and ought to rule, frequently resulting in disdain for the unalterable truth. Frantz Fanon in his work "The Wretched of the Earth" (1961) in his landmark work, Fanon addresses the significance nationalism plays in the fight against colonialism, especially in Africa. Although he acknowledges nationalism as a crucial component of the decolonization process, he cautions against its potential when independence is attained. He supports nationalism that uplifts the downtrodden while highlighting the necessity of more extensive social and economic change than just changing one's national identity.

Tom Nairn in his book *Break-Up of Britain*, examined nationalism's involvement in the collapse of the British Empire. He emphasized the rise of the emergence of nationalist movements in Scotland & Ireland and condemned Marxism for not doing enough to counter the emotional attraction of nationalism. His work explored the dual roles that nationalism can play in the lives of oppressed peoples as a force for liberation are underscored in his work.

Homi K. Bhabha in his work *Nation and Narration* (1990) argues that nations are not fixed but are constantly reshaped by tales, myths, and symbols. He demonstrates how literature and narrative shape national identities and contends. He introduces the concept of "cultural hybridity" to illustrate how national identities are flexible and often constructed through a blending of different cultures the idea of a homogeneous national identity.

The impact of traumatization is been depicted by many Critics and Psychologists. Freud, a pioneering figure in psychoanalysis, defined trauma as a psychological wound caused by overwhelming and distressing experiences. Freud, S. (1920). *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. In this seminal text, Freud introduces the concept of the "repetition compulsion" and explores how traumatic experiences are re-enacted in the psyche. According to Sigmund Freud "Trauma is an experience that is too intense to be processed properly at the time it occurs, and so it becomes repressed, only to resurface later in various forms of psychological distress" (Freud, 1920).

Judith Herman, a contemporary trauma researcher, expands the understanding of trauma by examining its effects on the individual's psychological well-being and social functioning. She emphasizes the role of trauma in the development of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and complex PTSD. In her book she says that "Trauma is an emotional response to an event that is intensely frightening, threatening, or harmful, and it disrupts an individual's sense of self and safety." (Herman, 1992). Cathy Caruth in his work *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996) focuses on the ways that trauma resists comprehension and memory. According to her, writing is essential in giving voice to painful experiences because they are by nature unfathomable. Studying how trauma is portrayed in literature in particular, and how it defies resolution and distorts conventional narrative forms requires a thorough study of his work.

Moreover, trauma is reflected as an event that overwhelms and disrupts normal life (Caruth, 1995). Trauma can alter a person's identity and worldview. In the bombing, the victims lose their families and homes. Defines a profound loss that becomes a source of personal trauma, all that was left of her family was the memory of their absence, a void that the city's new architecture could never fill which explains that the memories of her family can never be replaced by anything. The relocation to India and the subsequent violence of the Partition is another significant traumatic event. the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, exploring themes of Islamophobia and the trauma experienced by Muslim identity in a post-terrorist world "relates it with "The events of September 11th cast a long shadow, bringing with them a new form of trauma rooted in fear and suspicion (Shamsie, p.272).

Methodology & Framework:

This research uses a qualitative method for analysis. By exploring texts *Burnt Shadows* by Kamila Shamsie, this study will focus on an ontological lens to investigate the human psyche, which further deals with exploration of self-identity, nationalism, displacement, trauma, being, and belongingness.

Ontology is the branch of philosophical study that explores and questions existence, being, and reality. The word ontology comes from the stem of the Greek word *on* or "*ontos*", meaning "being," and attempts to understand the nature of existence, reality, being, and becoming. Heidegger posits that the concept of Being is the most universal based on the principle that everything falls under the category of "Being" (Heidegger, 1927, p.22). It universally applies to all entities, whether they are physical, abstract ideas, or even human beings themselves. However, despite being universal, the concept of being is not a general or abstract category.

On the other side, He wishes to argue that being is more fundamental. While it is the ground or the condition of possibility for any understanding or categorization of entities, it is not itself a category. His thought is the distinction between Being and belonging. The question of being has to do with what it means to be at all, not what a particular being is. The universality of being refers just ontological difference: it is supposed to underline that, being is not reducible to any particular entity or class of entities. He also describes Being as the horizon within which any understanding of entities takes place. His project in *Being and Time* is to reawaken a question concerning the meaning of Being, which he feels has been forgotten or overlooked in Western philosophy. It is just this universality of Being that underlies this fundamental question, making it so very hard to raise, in as much as it is not about any particular entity but about the most basic and universal aspect of existence itself.

Heidegger argues that being is primordial. It is what makes anything exist and the possibility of understanding concepts itself. Since it is the ground of every understanding, it cannot be fully captured or defined by any particular concept without presupposing it. He introduces the notion whereby a pre-conceptual understanding of being is called "pre-ontological" (Heidegger, 1927, p.32). This is meant to say that we always have an understanding of being. Every definition of something occurs on the horizon of our understanding of being. Yet being itself is not an entity, not something, within this horizon. It has been maintained, that the concept of 'Being' is indefinable. This has been deduced from its transcendent universality, and with justice, Being cannot properly be conceived of as an entity, nor can it assume such a character as would permit the expression 'entity' to be applied to it. Being cannot be derived from concepts of a more concrete character by definition, or can. It is articulated less concretely. One can infer only that 'Being' cannot have the character of an entity.

Exploring the concept of 'Being', the focus is made on the examples from Kamila Shamsie's book *Burnt Shadows* and the major historical events that the characters had to face which significantly changed their perception of themselves and the world around them. The time scale of the strategies carries on for several decades and geographical locations with the story beginning in Nagasaki at the end of the Second World War, and shifting towards India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the United States after the 9/11 attacks. Because of this long story, Shamsie has an opportunity to explore how major historical, cultural, and political processes affect a single 'Being'. The story issues with the concepts of displacement and the search for a place for being at the heart of so-called 'Being'. The constant moving from one country to the other from Japan to India, then Pakistan, Afghanistan, and finally the United States leaves Hiroko with no fixed

identity. All this to state that for all the characters who must reconcile themselves with the past and reconcile themselves to the present, the question of where the home is becomes an integral part of the topic of 'Being'. Shamsie examines relationships of a person's 'Being' with others within its vicinity and across the world.

Analysis

The novel *Burnt Shadows* by Kamila Shamsie discovers identity and self, displacement, traumas, and social disorder, providing a basis for considering ontological worries. In the context of *Burnt Shadows*, the ontological study reproduces on how past actions affect discrete and cooperative selves by following the lives of its types across many periods and topographical places. The story discovers the characters' empirical issues, and their pursuit of the networks between people's lives and histories, which bring into line with ontological questions of being and reality. The story begins in 1945 with a nuclear detonation in Nagasaki, Japan, it incomes through India and Pakistan during divider and ends post-9/11 in Afghanistan and New York. Shamsie discovers how separate and societal connections of fierceness and grief impact people's identities and how they deal with other people and places through the characters. The characters struggle with the loss of their memories and create a new identity clear by trauma and displacement, these proceedings embody an important ontological move.

The novel opens with the atomic bombing of Nagasaki, a pivotal event that shapes Hiroko Tanaka's life. The scars on her back, burnt into her skin in the form of bird shapes from her kimono, become symbolic of her enduring trauma and metaphysical transformation. Shamsie writes, "She would never stop seeing the black cranes rising out of her back" (*Burnt Shadows*, p. 4). This metaphor encapsulates how deeply trauma intertwines with Hiroko's very sense of being. The birds are not just scars; they are permanent reminders of a loss that cannot be reconciled, haunting her identity as both a survivor and a displaced individual.

As she relocates to Delhi, then Karachi, and later to New York and Afghanistan, Hiroko undergoes multiple cultural assimilations and alienations. Her journey illustrates the ontological crisis of "being" in a world constantly in flux. Belonging becomes not a state, but a question—one she keeps asking without ever receiving a complete answer. In Delhi, Hiroko meets the Burton family. The racial and colonial tensions subtly depicted here reflect her struggle to belong in a society marked by imperialistic hierarchies. Her romantic relationship with Sajjad Ashraf transcends these boundaries, yet also emphasizes the friction between personal desire and socio-political realities. Hiroko's marriage to Sajjad and her move to Karachi represent attempts to rebuild a sense of home and identity, yet her continued feelings of foreignness underscore the limitations of geographical stability in resolving ontological dislocation.

Another important issue in *Burnt Shadows* is displacement, which is intimately related to trauma. The characters in the novel are constantly looking for a place to belong because historical events have displaced them on different occasions. Hiroko's journey from Japan to India, Turkey, Pakistan, and finally the United States is a flawless instance of endless shift. Shamsie demonstrates how identity can be reshaped by displacement, which can be observed in many cultural and historical settings of each place.

In the prologue of *Burnt Shadows*, Shamsie portrays a Guantanamo Bay prisoner to illustrate the height of the traumatic displacement of individuals stripped of humanity. The prologue is following as: Once he is in the cell they unshackle him and instruct him to strip They wait until he is completely naked before they gather up his clothes and leave. When he is dressed again, he suspects, he will wear an orange jumpsuit (Shamsie, p.1).

The prologue vividly depicts the end of Raza's story and the real history of the terrible traumatic displacement of his mother Hiroko Tanaka, a Japanese schoolteacher from Nagasaki who was directly harmed by an atomic explosion on August 9, 1945, during World War II, is where the story of displacement begins. According to Shamsie, The most dramatic change occurs in the first section "The Yet Unknown World" because this section takes approximately four hours to complete, from the sound of an air-raid siren until the bomb is dropped on 9th August.

Shamsie writes, "She had thought the language of birdsong would be universal, but here it was incomprehensible" (*Shamsie*, p. 105). This textual reference encapsulates Hiroko's existential isolation despite geographical belonging. The recurring motif of language and its limits further echoes the ontological disjunction between being and expressing one's being. Later, this struggle is reinforced by the line, "Words were failing her. Again. Always" (p. 142), underscoring the inadequacy of language as a bridge between inner and outer worlds.

The Karachi phase of Hiroko's life offers a critical view of the cultural negotiations required to survive in a place both foreign and familiar. Despite her efforts to assimilate, she remains an outsider. Shamsie emphasizes this when she notes, "Even in Karachi, where people had grown used to strangers arriving, she remained always the outsider with the foreign name and the foreign past" (*Burnt Shadows*, p. 127). Here, we see the paradox of identity: even integration into a new space cannot erase the sense of being alien.

Her friendship with Elizabeth Burton, who herself embodies the colonial legacy, adds a layer of complexity to Hiroko's identity, caught between loyalty, memory, and the historical weight of nationalism. Hiroko's role becomes emblematic of what Bhabha terms "unhomeliness," where the familiar becomes strange and the strange becomes a place of reluctant dwelling. Raza, Hiroko, and Sajjad's son, embodies the inherited struggle for identity. His recruitment into jihadist networks, albeit through manipulation, reveals the dangerous extremes to which a lack of belonging can drive individuals. Raza's complex identity—a Pakistani by nationality, Japanese by heritage, and a global citizen by experience—mirrors the dislocation that globalization can impose. His identity is not only hybrid but fragmented, shaped by forces beyond his comprehension and control. "He was Japanese, Pakistani, German, and American. Or none of these" (*Burnt Shadows*, p. 256), Shamsie writes, portraying the dissolution of concrete identity into abstraction. Raza's journey also reflects the ontological dissonance caused by ideological instability. His transition from a young boy curious about the world to a man embroiled in geopolitical violence marks the erosion of innocence and the internalization of conflict. In one scene, Shamsie describes Raza's disillusionment: "He knew now what it meant to carry multiple selves—none of which fully belonged anywhere" (*Burnt Shadows*, p. 248). This highlights the novel's central concern with fragmented being. The psychological toll of this fragmentation is profound, aligning with Fanon's observation that the colonized subject is often split within himself.

The novel also investigates how trauma disrupts the continuity of self. Hiroko's return to New York after the September 11 attacks draws a parallel between past and present traumas. The bombings of Nagasaki and 9/11 serve as twin pillars of historical violence that frame her life. Her ability to comprehend suffering on a transnational scale gives her a unique ontological perspective, one that blends empathy with detachment.

As Hiroko reflects, "Why must we be defined by the worst thing that ever happened to us?" (*Burnt Shadows*, p. 321), Shamsie emphasizes the necessity of resisting victimhood as identity. This line invites the reader to question the permanence of suffering as a marker of being and calls for an ontology grounded in resilience rather than ruin. Another moment of clarity comes when Hiroko realizes, "All her life she had been travelling from one place to another in search of a home

that would not eject her” (*Burnt Shadows*, p. 312), and directly links mobility with the existential desire for stable being.

Moreover, the novel critiques essentialist notions of national belonging. Characters frequently cross borders physically, emotionally, ideologically. Hiroko’s multilingualism, her shifting names (from Tanaka to Ashraf), and her transnational lifestyle signify fluid identities that challenge fixed cultural labels. The instability of place and the permeability of identity are central to the characters’ ontological crises. Even seemingly minor characters mirror this theme—Harry Burton, for example, is constantly shifting political and personal allegiances, suggesting that the postcolonial subject is not only hybrid but also deeply unstable.

Shamsie’s use of historical events as a narrative backdrop also underlines how external forces shape internal identities. From the Partition of India to the Cold War, from 9/11 to the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, each geopolitical rupture becomes a site of personal transformation. The personal becomes political, and the political becomes ontological. This is particularly visible in the final chapters, where Hiroko’s decision to follow Raza into Afghanistan reflects a maternal yet existential act: a reaching out not just for her son, but for the meaning of everything she has endured.

The ontological study delves into the essence of being and belonging, examining how nationalism and trauma shape one’s identity, sense of being, and belonging, and the struggles faced by individuals. Ontology is the philosophical study of being and belongings, which serves as the base for understanding the experiences that individuals have gone through in their lives. It helps to shed light on how these elements shape and define the lives of individuals. Through an ontological lens, insight can be gained into how personal and collective experiences affect

Understanding of identity and how individuals relate to the world around them. An ontological study of Kamila Shamsie *Burnt Shadows* explores how the novel addresses fundamental and significant questions of existence and identity through its intricate narrative and diverse characters. By examining and focusing on the impact of historical events such as the atomic bombing of Nagasaki, the partition of India, and contemporary political conflicts, this study will reveal how personal and collective traumas shape and challenge the characters’ senses of self, identity, and reality. Ontology is a part of Philosophy that concentrates on the idea of being, presence, and reality. In straightforward terms, tied in with posing inquiries like, what does it mean to be? And how do our experiences shape our character? The ontological investigation glances at what

Trauma and patriotism mean for individuals and personalities and real factors in the story. It investigates how individuals and trauma shapes them and how they might interpret themselves and be seen in the world. Belonging and Ontology, having the quest for having a place in the novel, reflects ontological inquiries concerning personality and place. In the context of *Burnt Shadows*, the ontological study explores how past actions influence individual and collective selves by tracing the lives of its characters across different periods and locations. The story examines the characters’ issues and their pursuit of connections between people’s lives and histories, which align with ontological questions of being and reality.

Conclusion

This study shed light on the intense ways in which the novel *Burnt Shadows* by Kamila Shamsie deals with the questions related to identity, existence, and historical consequence. This study has presented an in-depth examination of the structure and character development, thus it has reviewed how the novel struggles with the existential questions, and rigid, personal, and collective identities in response to historical misinterpretations. Through the lens of characters

navigating trauma and nationalism, one might access deeper questions about identity and existence. The novel explores the mechanisms through which individual and collective identities are built up and uncertain down, insisting on the fluid interrelation between individual beings and national identity. Shamsie's exploration of such themes offers deep insights into the nature of selfhood and identity in the context of historical trauma and nationalism.

These ontological characteristics, as symbolized in the novel contribute to a broader discussion related to how political and historical contexts affect individual and collective identities. This ontological investigation implies larger conversations about identity and memory in a globalized world, going beyond literary analysis. Therefore, this ontological study suggests a broader discussion on identity and memory within the globalized circumstance that goes elsewhere the limited context of literary analysis. While previous research has emphasized the political and historical dimensions of identity by previous researchers, this ontological approach highlights disclosed existential and personal aspects of identity from the perspective of postcolonial trauma and resilience.

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