ISSN 1798-4769
Journal of Language Teaching and Research, Vol. 16, No. 6, pp. 2055-2061, November 2025
DOI: https://doi.org/10.17507/jltr.1606.27

Haunted by History: Postcolonial Belonging and the Illusion of Identity in Kamila Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows*

Nawaf Mohammed K. Almutairi*
Department of English, College of Sciences and Humanities, Prince Sattam Bin Abdulaziz University, Al-Kharj, Saudi Arabia

***Abstract*—Kamila Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows* reveals, in concrete terms, the fallacy of solid-core identity—an identity built upon strictly demarcated foundations such as faith, ethnicity, region, nation, or ancestry. Shamsie examines how characters navigate their sense of self amidst historical events and cultural shifts. By analyzing key passages and drawing upon critical interpretations, this study explores the complexities of identity formation and the quest for belonging in a world marked by war and displacement. Even as globalization spreads across the world, true multiculturalism remains elusive, as it primarily facilitates the globalization of material values while enabling the laissez-faire movement of goods, power networks, and economic interests. This paper examines how the novel, as a work of fiction and artistic expression, brings to life the humanistic perspectives of philosophers and cultural scholars such as Amin Maalouf, Jean-François Bayart, Edward Said, and Charles Taylor. It argues that if humanity can transcend the rigid, exclusionary identities imposed by various movements, nations, and ideological groups—embracing instead a broader sense of belonging to the planet and universal human values—wars and widespread suffering may ultimately be mitigated.**

***Index Terms*—identity, illusion, belonging, wars and conflicts, globalization of material values**

I. Introduction

Kamila Shamsie, an acclaimed contemporary writer of Pakistani origin, intricately explores themes of identity and belonging in her novel *Burnt Shadows* (2009). Born in 1973 in Karachi, Pakistan, Shamsie is known for her poignant narratives that interweave personal stories with broader historical contexts. *Burnt Shadows* exemplifies her thematic depth and narrative prowess, delving into the complexities of cultural identity against a backdrop of significant global events.

Set against the historical landscape of World War II and its aftermath, Shamsie's novel unfolds a multigenerational narrative that spans continents, resonating with the struggles and aspirations of characters grappling with self-discovery and belonging. At the heart of this narrative is the exploration of how individuals navigate their identities in a world shaped by war, displacement, and cultural transformation.

In *Burnt Shadows*, Shamsie artfully portrays characters who confront the challenges of cultural identity and the quest for belonging amidst historical upheaval. Through the experiences of Hiroko Tanaka, Sajjad Ashraf, Harry Burton, and others, she underscores the fluidity of identity and the enduring search for a sense of place. The novel begins with the protagonist, Hiroko Tanaka, being forced to leave her teaching job to work in munitions production during the final days of World War II. When an atomic bomb is dropped on her city, Nagasaki, she loses both her father and her fiancé, the German Konrad Weiss. Seeking refuge in Delhi, she meets her soulmate, Sajjad Ashraf, whom she later marries. The couple spends some time in Turkey before attempting to return home. However, due to the Partition of India, they are forced to move to Pakistan rather than India, solely because Sajjad is Muslim—an identity rigidly imposed from above.

Hiroko and Sajjad do not view themselves as bound by stereotypical national, ethnic, or religious identities. They embrace shared histories and cultural shifts, forming connections with like-minded, open-minded individuals who also strive to transcend rigid identity constructs. In exploring such nuanced, multilayered notions of identity and belonging, Shamsie introduces other characters who also navigate shifting landscapes and cultural affiliations.

Furthermore, the novel's thematic richness is deepened by Shamsie's portrayal of characters grappling with the legacies of war and historical trauma. Sajjad Ashraf, haunted by his experiences during the Partition, reflects on the profound impact of history on personal identity and belonging. Unlike his brothers, who rigidly adhere to a singular aspect of their identity and champion Pakistan's creation as an Islamic state, Sajjad remains a faithful Muslim while retaining a strong connection to his Indian heritage, friendships, and familiar landscapes. His perspective reinforces the novel's thematic exploration of how collective memory shapes individual identity.

Through a detailed analysis of *Burnt Shadows*, this paper aims to examine the multifaceted themes of identity and belonging, investigating how characters negotiate their sense of self amidst cultural upheaval and historical dislocation. By analyzing key passages and drawing upon critical perspectives, this study seeks to illuminate the novel's enduring

* Corresponding Author. E-mail: n.almutairi@psau.edu.sa

relevance in understanding the complexities of human experience and the universal quest for a place to call home.

A. Research Problem

This research investigates how *Burnt Shadows* challenges canonical literary texts within the Anglophone tradition by presenting a postcolonial reimagining of identity. It examines how Shamsie's novel disrupts conventional narratives of cultural identity, offering an alternative perspective that critiques rigid, essentialist conceptions of selfhood.

B. Significance

Current global events and prevailing attitudes toward rigid, ossified identities—whether national, religious, or ethnic—continue to fuel conflicts and large-scale human suffering. A deeper understanding of identity, affiliation, and belonging could contribute to reducing ideological tensions and mitigating the so-called "clash of civilizations". By analyzing *Burnt Shadows*, this study sheds light on how literature can serve as a tool for fostering more fluid and inclusive notions of identity.

C. Objectives

This research aims to explore the thematic structure of *Burnt Shadows* within the broader landscape of postcolonial literature, situating the novel in dialogue with key concerns of historical trauma, displacement, and transnational identity. It further examines how Kamila Shamsie's narrative engages with and responds to canonical English literary texts, challenging their ideological assumptions and reconfiguring inherited literary traditions. Ultimately, the research seeks to clarify philosophical and theoretical perspectives on the illusion of cultural identity, illustrating how these abstract concepts are concretely realized in a literary work of artistic and poetic sensibility.

D. Research Methodology

This research draws upon the revolutionary ideas of philosophers, literary scholars, and cultural theorists to analyze the thematic structure of *Burnt Shadows*. The novel is examined in relation to key concepts of identity, displacement, and belonging, particularly through the lens of thinkers such as Amin Maalouf, Jean-François Bayart, Edward Said, and Charles Taylor.

By analyzing significant passages from the novel, this study situates *Burnt Shadows* within the broader framework of postcolonial and Anglophone literary traditions. When relevant, the novel is also compared to earlier texts, illustrating how it engages in an intertextual dialogue with works from the colonial and postcolonial canon.

II. Literature Review and Theoretical Background

Preconceived ideas and deep-rooted misconceptions lead many to believe that identity is a static, immutable core, determined at birth and shaped by one's geographical and sociocultural environment. This perspective assumes that identity remains unchanged despite education, travel, personal experiences, or even traumatic events.

Amin Maalouf (1996, 2000) critiques this rigid understanding of identity, arguing that it is a primary cause of destructive conflicts, wars, and widespread suffering. In *In the Name of Identity* (2000), he explains why people often commit violence in the name of identity, highlighting how rigid self-definitions create opposition between groups: "Presupposes that 'deep down inside' everyone there is just one affiliation that really matters, a kind of 'fundamental truth' about each individual, an 'essence' determined once and for all at birth, never to change thereafter" (p. 2). Instead, Maalouf proposes a more fluid understanding of identity: "The sum of all our allegiances, and, within it, allegiance to the human community itself would become increasingly important, until one day it would become the chief allegiance, though without destroying our many individual affiliations" (p. 100). This view suggests that identity is not an innate quality but a construct shaped by personal experiences and varying senses of belonging. It also promotes a more inclusive, peaceful coexistence between different cultural and social groups.

Bayart (1996, 2005) extends this idea by describing cultural identity as an illusion *identitaire*. Like Maalouf, he argues that the misconception of a rigid identity has fueled devastating wars and conflicts. Bayart criticizes the assumption that cultural and political identities are inherently linked, asserting that both are merely social constructs. He warns against the tendency to exploit cultural identity for political and material gains, stating: "Their lethal power [wars and conflicts] comes from the assumption that a so-called 'cultural identity' necessarily corresponds to a 'political identity'. But each of these 'identities' is at best a cultural construct" (2005, p. ix). He also challenges simplistic cultural assumptions, such as the belief that Islam inherently prevents the integration of North Africans and Turks into Western Europe: "Is Islam an insurmountable obstacle to integrating North Africans and Turks into Western Europe?" (p. xi). Edward Said (1994) similarly deconstructs essentialist views of identity in *Culture and Imperialism*, arguing that no one is defined by a singular cultural label. He criticizes the imperialist tendency to categorize individuals into fixed identities, stating:

> No one today is purely one thing. Labels like Indian, or woman, or Muslim, or American are not more than starting-points, which if followed into actual experience for only a moment are quickly left behind. Imperialism consolidated the mixture of cultures and identities on a global scale. But its worst and most paradoxical gift was to allow people to believe that they were only, mainly, exclusively, white, or Black, or Western, or Oriental. (p. 336)

Said emphasizes that identity is shaped by historical, social, and economic factors rather than inherent racial or ethnic characteristics. This critique aligns with Mahdi Amel's argument that national identities are "stunted essences", rigid and static constructs that hinder collective politics (qtd in Bou Ali, 2022, p. 515).

Similarly, Charles Taylor (1989) explores how various sources contribute to shaping the modern self in *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity*. He highlights three major aspects of identity:

> First, modern inwardness, the sense of ourselves as beings with inner depths, and the connected notion that we are 'selves'; second, the affirmation of ordinary life which develops from the early modern period; third, the expressivist notion of nature as an inner moral source. (p. x)

For Taylor, identity is not a static core but rather a framework within which individuals make decisions about values and morality: "The horizon within which I am capable of taking a stand" (p. 27). This refutes some postmodernist perspectives that deny individual agency in identity formation.

The concept of identity as plural—or even nonexistent—has also been explored in literature. In *Steppenwolf*, Hesse (1955, 2012) presents an Eastern-influenced vision of selfhood as multilayered rather than fixed:

> A human being is an onion consisting of a hundred skins, a fabric composed of many threads. The Asians of old had exact knowledge of this; Buddhist Yoga invented a precise technique for exposing the personality as a delusion. But then humankind moves in all sorts of comic ways: the delusion that for a thousand years India made such great efforts to expose is the self-same delusion that the West has been at equally great pains to bolster and reinforce. (p. 74)

This idea resonates with contemporary neuroscientific perspectives. Hood (2012) argues in that the sense of an integrated, singular self is deceptive: "The brain science shows that this sense of our self is an illusion" (p. ix). However, he clarifies that this does not mean the self does not exist but rather that it is not what it seems: "illusion is the sense that we exist inside our heads as an integrated, coherent individual or self" (p. 3). A real-world example of this perspective is seen in Arendt's (2007) response to Gershom Scholem, who accused her of renouncing her Jewish identity. Arendt rejected the notion of collective identity in favor of personal relationships:

> You are quite right—I am not moved by any 'love' of this sort, … I have never in my life 'loved' any people or collective—neither the German people, nor the French, nor the American, nor the working class or anything of that sort. I indeed love 'only' my friends and the only kind of love I know of and believe in is the love of persons. (pp. 466-7)

Arendt's view stands in opposition to totalitarian ideologies that impose rigid identities, reducing individuals to a faceless mass. As Baehr (2007) argues that "Our identity as unique individuals sharing the world with others" (p. 15). In other words, we are shaped through interactions with others; however, such formation is continuous.

Hall (1992) traces the historical evolution of identity, distinguishing three conceptions: (a) the Enlightenment subject, (b) the sociological subject, and (c) the postmodern subject. He describes the postmodern subject, which is particularly relevant to Shamsie's novel, as follows: "No fixed, essential or permanent identity. Identity becomes a 'moveable feast': formed and transformed continuously" (p. 277). This postmodern perspective suggests that identity is fragmented and ever-changing, a view that aligns with Maalouf's assertion that identity is the sum of all our allegiances.

Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows* engages with these debates on identity, particularly within a postcolonial and intertextual framework. Scholars have examined how the novel rewrites canonical texts, such as E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924) and Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* (1901). Shafique and Yaqoob (2012) argue that Shamsie recontextualizes Forster's narrative, allowing readers to "understand, question, and re-interpret" the colonial legacy in a new light (p. 485). Similarly, Sarkar and Sarkar (2020) contrast Forster's philosophical symbolism with Shamsie's more realistic representation of identity. Applying insights from Fairclough's concept of interdiscursivity and Bakhtin's dialogism, Zahoor (2021) examines how Shamsie's novel engages with precursor narratives within the contexts of colonialism, postcolonialism, and neocolonialism, demonstrating their intricate interconnections.

Scholarly interest in the novel has also emphasized the themes of identity and belonging. In *Burnt Shadows*, the process of identity construction is deeply tied to the performative relationship between agency and identity. This construction challenges certain social norms related to race, gender, and religion (Vitolo, 2016). The 1947 partition of the Indian subcontinent along religious lines created the illusion of distinct Pakistani and Indian national identities. However, Shamsie, along with other postcolonial scholars, critiques this rigid national imagining. She negotiates what Soukaï (2018) describes as the "hybrid texture that shapes their multicultural understanding of national identity" (p. 69). Identity, Shamsie suggests, cannot be confined solely to religion or national borders; rather, cultural belonging—understood in a broader sense—must be considered. Moreover, cultural belonging often does not align neatly with national identity, as it encompasses a hybrid cultural heritage (Hajiyeva, 2015).

Shamsie explores the evolution of her characters' identities across time and place, shaping the novel's engagement with diaspora and the dislocation of traditional societies. This dynamic, as Zinck (2010) describes, serves as a locus of fracture, trauma, and division, which underscores the novel's central concern with identity and belonging. Additionally, Kiziltaş (2021) examines how the narrative traces the characters' trajectories across time and space, elevating memory to a dominant role. Both space and memory play a crucial part in the search for identity, emphasizing the significance of life experiences in shaping one's sense of self.

III. Discussion

A. Cultural Identity in a Global Context

Kamila Shamsie's portrayal of characters like Hiroko Tanaka in *Burnt Shadows* highlights the complexities of cultural identity in a globalized world. Hiroko, a Japanese woman who finds herself in India, later Pakistan, and eventually the USA, embodies the fluidity of identity in a postcolonial world. However, the novel also reveals how rigid identities—whether national, ethnic, or religious—can be a primary cause of wars and devastation. Political conflicts often overshadow even cultural and religious identities, as highlighted by the narrator's reflection on why the predominantly Christian Americans chose Nagasaki—a cosmopolitan city with a history of cultural integration—as the target of the atomic bomb: "A cosmopolitan world, unique in Japan—its English-language newspapers, its International Club, its liaisons and intermarriages between European men and Japanese women" (Shamsie, 2009, p. 12). The novel suggests that the bombing was driven not by religious or cultural animosity but by geopolitical power and hegemonic interests.

Hiroko embodies a rejection of narrow nationalistic zeal. As a teacher, she cared deeply for her students, but her shock was evident when she learned that a student of hers had become a kamikaze pilot—a member of Japanese air attack corps in WWII who is assigned to make a suicidal crash on a military target. Her father, an artist who detested the use of children as weapons, was considered a traitor by his fellow Japanese for opposing the celebration of kamikaze pilots—teenagers who were effectively precursors to modern-day suicide bombers, albeit under a different cultural and ideological guise.

Despite the trauma of the atomic bomb, Hiroko did not harbor hatred toward all Americans. She even worked for them as a translator in Tokyo, driven by her humanistic and multi-layered sense of identity:

> Working for the Americans! After the bomb, you might wonder how I could agree to such a thing. But the man who asked me—he had such a gentle face. It was impossible to hold him responsible for what had been done. (p. 63)

Her decision to work with the Americans was based on her individual assessment of people, not on national stereotypes. However, her disillusionment grew when the "gentle-faced" American justified the atomic bombings by stating: "It had to be done to save American lives" (p. 63). Hiroko's narrative arc connects all four sections of the novel. While the story is told from a third-person omniscient perspective, Hiroko's voice dominates, embodying a humanistic identity that transcends rigid categories. Her deep connection to place, people, and memory reflects a dynamic sense of belonging that adapts to different contexts.

Hiroko, a Japanese woman deeply attached to her hometown of Nagasaki and its everyday details, was in love with Konrad Weiss, a German who had left his homeland—along with its "laws for the protection of German blood and German honour" (p. 70)—to escape its constraints. He also chose not to live with his British half-sister and her colonialist husband, James Burton.

Their love story, unaffected by religious or national boundaries, is exemplified in a conversation about their wedding when she asks whether the ceremony would be held in the Urakami Cathedral. Konrad says, "Of course not. You're not even Catholic." Her response is: "That's not the problem. I want to get married on a mountain, looking down at the sea" (p. 22). Their identities are not defined by religion but by a shared love of nature and life. The novel's poetic prose aligns with the mystic tradition of Gibran Khalil Gibran, who writes in *The Prophet* (1923): "And forget not that the earth delights to feel your bare feet and the winds long to play with your hair" (p. 21). However, their love story is incomplete because Konrad dies.

After his death, Hiroko marries Sajjad Ashraf, an Indian Muslim later forced to identify as Pakistani. Sajjad, like Hiroko, does not see identity as a singular, static core. Instead, he embodies a layered identity, blending faith, nationality, friendships, and landscapes. He has "no political allegiances, but many narrative preferences" about his ancestors who came to India a century ago from Turkey (p. 53). He becomes her soul mate because they share many beliefs, and despite their different trajectories in time and place, they seem to have the same belonging to friends, places, memories. Hiroko and Sajjad's identities reflect Amin Maalouf and Hannah Arendt's philosophy of valuing personal relationships over collective identities. When their son Raza questions Hiroko's lack of traditional Pakistani attire, his parents react with both humor and sadness: "'Why can't you be more Pakistani?' Afterwards, she and Sajjad hadn't known whether to howl with laughter or with tears to think that their son's teenage rebellion was asserting itself through nationalism" (p. 132). Sajjad's identity is multifaceted—he is a faithful Muslim, but also an Indian at heart, cherishing his memories of old Dilli (now Delhi) with its earth, trees, people, and memory of his mother and resisting the narrow nationalism of his relatives.

At one point, Sajjad announced to his brothers and brothers-in-law that he was leaving the large household and extended family to build a home for himself and his future wife, a Japanese woman. His decision was a form of rebellion against inherited Oriental traditions, symbolizing a move toward freedom and a more Western way of life. However, he found himself torn between the two traditions, wondering what if "they moved to a house constructed without brothers and sisters-in-law and nephews and nieces in mind, and then what happened to the Burtons happened to them?" (pp. 108–109). Since Elizabeth and James Burton's marriage had ultimately dissolved into estrangement and silence, Sajjad's contemplation of this issue is legitimate. However, his contemplation does not reflect a stark cultural clash but rather the natural process of change and development—one that does not require severing ties with the past or fully embracing the new. This fluid and evolving sense of identity, neither fixed nor a simple shift from one extreme to another, mirrors Hiroko's own experience.

B. Generational Trauma and Memory

The novel delves into the intergenerational impact of trauma and memory, particularly in the aftermath of the atomic bomb and the Partition of India. Characters like Sajjad and Raza struggle with their pasts, illustrating how historical events shape personal identity and belonging. Shamsie's narrative underscores how memory serves as both a burden and a source of resilience, influencing characters' perceptions of self and belonging. For Hiroko, memory is a double-edged sword—it ties her to her lost home in Nagasaki while simultaneously reminding her of the horrors of war. In Delhi, she reflects on her displacement: "Delhi must seem so strange and unfamiliar, but nothing in the world could ever be more unfamiliar than my home that day" (p. 100).

Despite this, she learns to move forward, adapting to new places and relationships. Her resilience contrasts with her son Raza, who, despite being raised by parents with flexible identities, struggles to navigate his sense of belonging. Hiroko and Sajjad are "forward-movers", while Raza remains "mired" in his cultural heritage, caught between multiple influences (p. 149).

Kim, the granddaughter of James Burton, also inherits conflicting legacies. While she appears to embrace modern, postcolonial ideals, she ultimately acts on her inherited biases when she reports Raza's friend, Abdullah, to the authorities. Her father, Harry Burton, embodies similar contradictions. Although he expresses disdain for Islamabad, he admits: "I do hate the place […] But I love the people. Not the ones in officialdom—the real people" (p. 172). This reflects his internal struggle between his inherited colonialist perspective and the more complex reality he experiences. Unlike his father, James, Harry is shaped by his experiences outside Britain, making him more aware of cultural nuance. However, like Kim, he cannot entirely escape the structures of power he was raised within.

Hiroko and Sajjad's ability to adapt contrasts sharply with the rigid nationalism of their peers. Sajjad's brothers embrace Pakistan's creation as an Islamic state, while he remains attached to his Indian past. Unlike them, he does not reduce his identity to a single religious or national category. His layered identity includes faith, culture, and personal relationships, all of which shape his understanding of belonging. The trauma of displacement is most visible in the younger generation. Raza, raised in Pakistan, experiences an identity crisis when he is questioned about his heritage. Unlike his parents, who have learned to reconcile their multiple identities, Raza feels pressure to conform to a singular national identity. His struggles exemplify how second-generation individuals often experience more difficulty reconciling their past with their present.

C. Displacement and Assimilation

Through characters like Konrad Weiss and Elizabeth Burton, Shamsie explores themes of displacement and assimilation. Konrad, a German living in Nagasaki, and Elizabeth, a British woman in India, navigate their identities within unfamiliar cultural landscapes. Shamsie highlights the complexities of assimilation and belonging, depicting characters who straddle multiple worlds yet yearn for a sense of rootedness. Elizabeth, despite being half-German, insists on identifying as British, distancing herself from Germany due to her resentment toward its nationalist ideology. However, when Berlin is bombed, she finds herself feeling entirely German: "She didn't want to keep hidden the fact that at times during the war—and especially when Berlin was firebombed—she had felt entirely German" (p. 101). Despite this, she refuses to return to either Germany or Britain, ultimately finding her sense of belonging in India.

Hiroko, on the other hand, experiences constant displacement, moving from Japan to India, then to Pakistan, and later to the United States. However, unlike Elizabeth, Hiroko does not seek to assimilate into any one identity. Instead, she maintains a fluid sense of self, refusing to be confined by nationality:

> It didn't bother her in the least to know she would always be a foreigner in Pakistan—she had no interest in belonging to anything as contradictorily insubstantial and damaging as a nation, but this didn't stop her from recognizing how Raza flinched every time a Pakistani asked him where he was from. (p. 207)

This highlights the generational divide in how identity is perceived. While Hiroko embraces a more fluid, transnational identity, her son Raza struggles with the pressures of national and cultural affiliation.

In contrast to Hiroko's flexible identity, Raza feels the weight of national expectations. His desire to fit in leads him to rebel against his mother's foreignness, even as he inherits her outsider status. This conflict underscores how children of displaced individuals often struggle more with questions of identity than their parents, who have already reconciled their displacement.

Experiences of the displaced people in their diaspora are different. Some forget about their past mutual animosity, and bind together to face new difficulties in different environment. Their past rigid identities loosen a little to allow for assimilation with each other and with others in the new communities. When Hiroko arrived in New York, the large majority of the yellow cab drivers were on a strike. She expressed her amazement that the Pakistani and Indian cab drivers were united in this. Her cab driver, a Pakistani explained, "We're protesting unjust new rules. Why should we let those governments who long ago let us down stop us from successfully doing that?" (p. 294). This moment emphasizes how shared struggles can transcend national divisions, illustrating a shift from rigid identity politics to collective solidarity.

D. The Empire Writes Back to the Center

Since works of literature emerge from existing literary traditions, *Burnt Shadows* engages in an intertextual dialogue with canonical colonial texts, particularly E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924) and Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* (1901). Meaning, thus, "becomes something which exists between a text and all the other texts to which it refers and relates"

(Allen, 2022, p. 1). Shamsie's novel, as a postcolonial text, uses the colonial language to question and dismantle colonial discourses and represent a vision that transcends both. However, hers is not an Eastern, colonized, subaltern or hybrid discourse; it is instead a humanistic one which dismantles solid core identities of any geographic, ethnic, religious or nationalistic base; it reimagines identity beyond national and cultural binaries.

Burnt Shadows makes direct reference to *A Passage to India* as it enters in a Bakhtinian dialogue with this novel and its imperial undertones. James Burton falsely claims he has no imperial attitudes towards the colonized Indians:

> I just read *A Passage to India*," James said. "Ridiculous book. What a disgrace of an ending. The Englishman and the Indian want to embrace, but the earth and the sky and the horses don't want it, so they are kept apart. (p. 112)

Burton's critique of the novel's conclusion reveals his colonial arrogance. While he superficially rejects imperialist attitudes, his actions betray his entrenched prejudices. Sajjad, aware of Burton's hypocrisy, observes:

> I understood that the English might acknowledge their mistakes in order to maintain the illusion of their fairness and sense of justice, but they will not actually apologise for those mistakes when they are perpetrated on an Indian. (p. 112)

The wide gap that sets British and Indians apart is not only colonial, but also one of social class structure. Sajjad adds, "It's not a question of nation. It's one of class. You would have apologised if I'd been to Oxford" (p. 112).

Setting the novel against such backdrop of E. M. Forster's novel opens up new threads of meaning and proves that there is no closure of meaning since literary texts are in continuous dialogue. Therefore, scholars such as Shafique and Yaqoob (2012) argue that *Burnt Shadows* functions as a rewriting of Forster's novel, enabling readers to reinterpret colonial narratives from a new perspective. Tilwani (2020) similarly views Shamsie's novel as an intertextual response that challenges the misrepresentation of indigenous characters.

Hiroko's son, Raza, comments on the name of Harry Burton's daughter, Kim, saying, "It's a good name" (p. 188). This is either a perfunctory compliment creating "a bond between them" (p. 188), or a covert reference to the conservative colonial attitudes of Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* (1901) and its eponymous character Kim. Harry's comment acknowledges the relation to the fictitious character. However, seen from Harry's perspective, the character Kim is "astride" the two cultures, Indian and British, just like Harry himself and his daughter Kim. Harry comments:

> 'Yeah,' said Harry. Long before the CIA there had been Kipling and a boy astride a cannon. 'I don't know how you and Kim will get along but I'm pretty sure you and America will like each other. Forget like. Love at first sight - that's how it was for America and me. I was twelve when I went there, and I knew right away that I'd found home. […] In America, everyone can be American. That's the beauty of the place'. (p. 188)

It is in America that all the ambiguities and ambivalences will be resolved. This is the America of the founding fathers, of secularism, freedom, and equality, but not the America of the bomb, the inherited British imperial passions, and only "American lives" matter. Shamsie portrays the optimism and the conflicting ideas developing in the minds of her well-rounded almost real characters, such as Harry Burton and his daughter Kim. This is also clear in different ways in almost all the other characters of the novel with perhaps the exception of Hiroko, and to a lesser degree Sajjad, a round character, and Konrad Weiss that is almost a mere symbol.

Shamsie's engagement with *A Passage to India* and *Kim* situates *Burnt Shadows* within the broader tradition of postcolonial literature, particularly the "Empire Writes Back" movement, which seeks to challenge and rewrite colonial narratives. Unlike earlier texts that portray Eastern and Western identities as fundamentally separate, *Burnt Shadows* presents a more nuanced vision of identity—one that is shaped by historical forces but not confined to them.

IV. Conclusion

Kamila Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows* offers a literary exploration of identity as a multi-layered and dynamic sociocultural construct. Through its intricate storytelling and richly developed characters, the novel examines how individuals negotiate belonging amidst historical upheavals, displacement, and cultural shifts. It highlights the dangers of rigid, ossified identities—whether national, ethnic, or religious—while advocating for a broader, more humanistic understanding of selfhood that transcends artificial boundaries. By weaving together the perspectives of diverse characters, the novel underscores the impact of history on personal identity. The struggles of Hiroko, Sajjad, Raza, and others illustrate how identity is shaped not by fixed categories but by experiences, relationships, and cultural intersections. At the same time, the novel critiques the political and ideological forces that impose rigid identity constructs, often leading to conflict and suffering.

Burnt Shadows also engages in an intertextual dialogue with canonical English literature, particularly *A Passage to India* and *Kim*. While these earlier works often portray Eastern and Western identities as fundamentally opposed, Shamsie's novel challenges this binary, instead presenting identity as fluid, layered, and evolving. By doing so, the novel offers a revisionist perspective that critiques colonial narratives while advocating for a more inclusive and interconnected worldview.

Despite its profound themes of suffering, displacement, and loss, the novel is ultimately a celebration of human resilience. Hiroko Tanaka, the novel's central figure, embodies a vision of identity that is not bound by nation, religion, or ethnicity but rather by personal connections, shared histories, and an appreciation for the world's complexity. Her journey, from the ruins of Nagasaki to the shifting landscapes of India, Pakistan, and the United States, reflects the novel's

core message: that identity is not a fixed essence but a continuous process of adaptation and transformation. As a literary work, *Burnt Shadows* seamlessly integrates philosophical and cultural critiques within a compelling narrative, allowing its ideas to emerge naturally through character interactions and poetic language. By examining identity through a humanistic lens, Shamsie challenges rigid classifications and presents a vision of belonging that is both deeply personal and universally relevant.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This study is supported via funding from Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz University project number (PSAU/2025/R/1446).

REFERENCES

[1] Allen, G. (2022). *Intertextuality* (3rd ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203829455
[2] Arendt, H. (2007). *The Jewish Writings*. Edited by Jerome Kohn and Ron Feldman. New York: Schocken Books.
[3] Baehr, P. (2007). The "Masses" in Hannah Arendt's Theory of Totalitarianism. *The Good Society*, *16*(2), 12-18. http://www.jstor.org/stable/20711261.
[4] Bayart, J. F. (2005). *The Illusion of Cultural Identity* (Steven Rendall et al., Trans.). University of Chicago Press. (*L'Illusion identitaire*, 1996)
[5] Bou Ali, N. (2021). Edward said, Michel Foucault, and the Prison-House of Ideology. *Critical Times*, *4*(3), 509–516. https://doi.org/10.1215/26410478-9355249
[6] Forster, E. M. (1924). *A Passage to India*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, Inc.
[7] Gibran, G. K. (1923). *The Prophet*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
[8] Hajiyeva, M. (2015). Redefining the notion of National Belonging: A New approach to the identity Problem in Pakistani English fiction. *English Language and Literature Studies*, *5*(3), 51-56. https://doi.org/10.5539/ells.v5n3p51
[9] Hall, S. (1992). The Question of Cultural Identity. In Hall, S., Held, D., & McGrew, A. G. (Eds.), *Modernity and its futures* (pp. 273-326). Cambridge. http://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BA18576960
[10] Hesse, H. (2012). *Steppenwolf* (D. Horrocks, Trans.). Penguin Classics. (*Steppenwolf*, 1955)
[11] Hood, B. (2012). *The Self Illusion: How the Social Brain Creates Identity*. Oxford University Press.
[12] Kipling, R. (1901). *Kim*. New York: Doubleday, Page & Company.
[13] Kiziltaş, Ş. (2021). Symbolisation of memory and space in Kamila Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows*. *RumeliDE Dil ve Edebiyat Araştırmaları Dergisi*, *(25)*, 1151-1160. DOI: 10.29000/rumelide.1038663.
[14] Maalouf, A. (2000). *In the Name of Identity: Violence and the Need to Belong* (B. Bray, Trans.). New York: Penguin Books. (*Les Identité Meurtrières*, 1996)
[15] Said, Edward. (1994). *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Vintage.
[16] Sarkar, N., & Sarkar, S. (2020). Kamila Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows* and E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India:* A Study of Intertextuality. *International Journal of Research and Analytical Reviews*, *Vol. 7*, (1). March 2020, 272-282.
[17] Shafique, S. & Yaqoob, M. (2012). Kamila Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows* as an Intertextual Re-writing of Forster's *A Passage to India*. *Academic Research International. Vol. 2*, No. 1, Jan. 2012, 477-486.
[18] Shamsie, K. (2009). *Burnt Shadows*. New York. Picador.
[19] Soukaï, S. (2018). Hybridity of Partition Novels in English Reshaping National Identities in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* and Kamila Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows*. *Commonwealth: Essays and Studies*, *40*(2), 69-79. https://doi.org/10.4000/ces.291
[20] Taylor, C. (1989). *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*. Harvard University Press.
[21] Tilwani, S. A. (2020). Rewriting "*A Passage to India:"* A Study of "*Burnt Shadows*." *The Asian ESP Journal*, 2020, Available at SSRN: https://ssrn.com/abstract=3621236. 15/01/2025.
[22] Vitolo, D. (2016). The Performance of Identity in Kamila Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows*. *Transnational Literature*, *Vol. 8*, no. 2, May 2016, 1-7.
[23] Zahoor, A. (2021). A Critical Discourse Analysis of Intertextuality and Interdiscursivity. *Millennium Journal of English Literature, Linguistics and Translation*, *2*(3), 1-13.
[24] Zinck, P. (2010). Eyeless in Guantanamo: Vanishing Horizons in Kamila Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows*. *Commonwealth Essays and Studies*, *(33)*1, 45-54.

Nawaf Mohammed K. Almutairi was born in Saudi Arabia. He received the M.A. degree in English Language and Literature from DePaul University, Chicago, IL, USA, in 2016, and the Ph.D. degree in English Language and Literature from Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, LA, USA, in 2021.

He previously served as Chair of the English Department at the College of Science and Humanities, Prince Sattam Bin Abdulaziz University, Saudi Arabia, for nearly three years. He is currently an Assistant Professor of English Literature at the same institution. He has been actively involved in various academic and administrative committees and was a member of the College Council. He has published one paper titled "Exploring Global Identities in Mohsin Hamid's Exit West." His current research interests include English literature, stylistics, translation, ecocriticism, and memory studies. He may be contacted at n.almutairi@psau.edu.sa and via ORCID iD: https://orcid.org/0009-0003-0480-9560.