

**GLOCALIZATION IN POST-9/11 LITERATURE. BURNT SHADOWS  
BY KAMILA SHAMSIE**

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**ABSTRACT.** *Global terrorism is a complex phenomenon, its roots going back to long before the terrorist attacks of 9/11, while its sequels are opening new paths in the fields of both fiction and literary and cultural studies. To better understand some of the global processes, and how they are represented in contemporary literature, I proposed the expression glocalization novels as a theoretical construct that permits the incorporation of the narrative's differential characteristics about terrorism in a globalized society. In *Burnt Shadows* by Kamila Shamsie, the notion of glocalization appears articulating general tendencies with global impact (the Nuclear Bomb, the Cold War, North American neo-colonialism in Southeast Asia, global terrorism, etc.) join with a direct impact on local lives that restructures and transmutes the meanings of individual or social actions. Fictions by intertwining the specific with the global help us to gain a more in-depth understanding of the global and its local complexity.*

*Keywords:* Glocalization, post 9/11 literature, *Burnt Shadows*, Kamila Shamsie, global terrorism.

## GLOCALIZACIÓN EN LA LITERATURA POSTERIOR AL 11 DE SEPTIEMBRE. *BURNT SHADOWS* DE KAMILA SHAMSIE

**RESUMEN.** *El terrorismo global es un fenómeno complejo; sus raíces se remontan mucho más atrás de los ataques terroristas del 11 de septiembre y sus secuelas han abierto nuevas perspectivas en los campos de la ficción y de los estudios literarios y culturales. Para entender mejor fenómenos globales como éste, y cómo se representan en la literatura contemporánea, propongo la expresión novelas de la glocalización como una construcción teórica que permite incorporar las características narrativas del terrorismo en una sociedad globalizada. En *Burnt Shadows* de Kamila Shamsie la noción de glocalización aparece articulando tendencias generales con impacto global (la bomba nuclear, la guerra fría, el neocolonialismo norteamericano en el sudeste asiático, el terrorismo global, etc.) conjuntamente con el impacto local en las vidas individuales que reestructura y transmuta el significado de las acciones individuales o colectivas. Las obras de ficción articulando lo específico con lo global nos ayudan a profundizar en el entendimiento de lo global así como en su complejidad local.*

*Palabras clave:* Glocalización, literatura post-11 de septiembre, *Burnt Shadows*, Kamila Shamsie, terrorismo global.

*Received 14 June 2015*

*Revised version accepted 11 April 2016*

*Burnt Shadows*, by the Pakistani writer Kamila Shamsie, forms part of a large literary production that can be characterized as a new genre: post 9/11 literature. In this novel, Shamsie attempts to understand and explain the phenomenon of global terrorism by searching for the historical roots of the conflict, and by trying to show its consequences in a globalized space where spacial-temporal borders have disappeared. At the same time, she stresses the importance of the geopolitical point from which it is narrated, adding the perspective of *the other* to the work. Global keys, both social and historical, unfold in the novel's plot, emphasizing above all the interrelationship of these aspects with other happenings of a more local or individual nature. The way in which different incidents interrelate and overlap creates a precise orientation, one that emerges from the course of events and which are produced and expanded in the shape of global terrorism, a peculiarly contemporary and generalized phenomenon. As such, we find a literary expression of what has been characterized as a phase of *glocalization*. The definition of the narrative framework in *Burnt Shadows*, as well as the structuring of the characters, is fed from these *glocal* sources. This permits closer access to complex phenomena such as terrorist acts, moving beyond mere reductionist

visions that deal them with some exclusive generic dimension, whether nationalism, poverty, cultural resentment, imperialist oppression, the exploitation of resources or, simply, religious peculiarity and the psychosocial determination of the character of the terrorist agent.

In the context of criticism and heated debates stirred up around globalization, due principally to fears that social and cultural homogenization would result, destroying communities and diverse cultural groups, the term *glocalization* clearly emerged as a critical instrument. It meant trying to understand and specify processes in which the relationships between local and global come from an intertwining of actions and determinations that should not be considered unilaterally or unidimensionally. Ultimately, *glocalization* is presented as a conceptual instrument that tries to address the complexity of contemporary societies and their multidimensionality. The sociologist Roland Robertson (2006: 545-548), suggested that from the perspective of *glocalization* it was possible to refine uni-dimensional approaches on globalization and, at the same time, prioritize or accentuate differences in the diverse aspects related to it. *Glocalization* compels us to introduce nuances in globalization, contrary to those who are only concerned about the generalized extension of a cultural, economic or technological current that ends up covering, blurring or eliminating all the previous aspects by means of a sort of acculturation. There is no globalization if not on the foundation of specific spaces in which it intervenes economically or culturally. Refuge in some supposed immaculate local space is unviable. The expression of radical interdependence is one of the aspects that attempts to come to terms with the concept of *glocalization* and is, in my opinion, interesting when analyzing post-9/11 literature.

The novel by Kamila Shamsie very clearly synthesizes and expresses the hybrid concept of *glocalization* beginning with the plot itself, which interweaves more general events and tendencies or those with greater impact (Nagasaki and the nuclear bomb, the Cold War, North American neo-colonialism in Southeast Asia, etc.) with private and individual spheres, bringing together the two planes and the mutual inter-penetrations without space-time dichotomies.

The novel deals with diverse aspects of daily life that allow varied assessments from different perspectives. The narrative reasoning shows that the configuration, as well as the ideological and cultural problems, in Islamic countries cannot be understood monolithically, nor can they be dealt with in a linear fashion. From this perspective, the sphere of understanding widens, delving more deeply into local processes while showing that these are problems that emerge in complex societies not so remote from *our* societies.

Complexity appears as a global characteristic of all human groupings that can be considered society. The monolithic approach to what is considered civilization often hinders paying attention to multiple details that can be, nevertheless, decisive elements when evaluating human practices. This consideration has been emphasized by many who are concerned with areas related to the notions of local and global justice (*vid. Elster 2004*) and, in my opinion, is quite useful in underlining the characteristics of a good part of the literary production that deals with global terrorism. In addition, it serves to observe the contribution that this literature offers to advance in understanding terrorist activity even, at times, more effectively than certain interpretations made by social scientists or political theorists.

In *Burnt Shadows*, the complex construction of the multiple identities each person presents throughout their life is sharply portrayed, contrary to those who propose a monolithic vision of national identity built around the dominant characteristic of religious or political ideology. Shamsie tries to go beyond the limits of stereotypes that attach a fixed identity which acts hegemonically over individual behaviors and presents, by means of a series of characters clearly depicted with multiple identities, a plot with a large variety of nuances and possible interpretive lines.

The novel has a brief prologue that closes with the phrase “How did it come to this,” spoken by a prisoner dressed in an orange jumpsuit, which unmistakably brings to mind the United States internment camps in Guantánamo. *Burnt Shadows* will attempt to respond to this question by going back to the end of the Second World War. The novel follows the lifetime of two families, unfolding from Nagasaki in Japan, passing through India and the partition of 1947, and continuing with Pakistan during the post-partition period, the war during the 1970s that led to the independence of Bangladesh, the city of Karachi in the 1980s, the border conflict with Afghanistan fostered by the battle between the Soviets and the United States, the New York of 9/11 and its consequences, the invasion of Iraq, the intervention in Afghanistan and, in general, the war on terror. In one way or another, all the characters in the novel are survivors or victims of traumatic events that are intertwined with different political conflicts. The distinctive features of their characteristics emerge bit by bit from these complex, multidimensional global events.

Another journey, in a certain way similar to the journey Shamsie makes fictionally, which travels through history in search of the precedents that will give rise to what we know today as global terrorism, is what Joseba Zulaika has done in *Terrorism: The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy*. As I have pointed out in a review of this book:

Zulaika harks back to the origins of the CIA, the Cold War and the proliferation of nuclear weapons until ending by reviewing the recent history of Afghanistan and the role played by the United States government, in particular by the CIA, during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. [...] He also offers us a careful chronology of the politics that ended with - and led to - Al Qaeda declaring war on the United States in 1998. [...] Terrorism does not arise in an exterior vacuum, in a type of preparation that is external to our social, political and cultural activity, but rather is the combined result of the interrelationship of actions from multiple focal points and nodes. (Kiczkowski 2012: 311)

In *Burnt Shadows*, this phenomenon of complex interrelationships between collective and individual stories is reflected in the multiple connections that are established over decades between the two families that are the protagonists of the narration: the Ashrafs and the Burtons. Throughout different countries and by means of diverse geopolitical transformations, each of the families ends up being essential for the other, sometimes as support and at other times as a genuine burden and punishment. The structural framework of the local and the global configures the narrative material and emerges as a key element for complete comprehension of the diverse characters. The bonds of solidarity and friendship between the two families constitute a basic structure that allows them to subsist and survive the vicissitudes they have to endure. As such, conflicts stemming from political decisions can only be overcome thanks to the local environment, the small emotional circle that lets them sustain themselves. These emotional bonds, which are going to unite the two families throughout decades and political-military conflicts, are expressed in the novel by means of a spider web metaphor that is interwoven between them over time, and which also refers to a well-known passage from the Koran. On the road between Mecca and Medina, a snake bites Mohammed's friend and companion, which forces them to stop walking to take a rest. They enter a cave, and from the inside watch a spider as it weaves a web at the entrance. The spider helps to deceive their pursuers who, upon seeing the grotto closed in such a way, assume that nobody has entered there for a very long time.

The two families in the story, the Burton-Weiss's and the Ashraf-Tanaka's, are interrelated throughout many trials and tribulations and in all parts of the world, from the beginning of the novel in 1945 until the first years of the twenty-first century. The story begins in Nagasaki and ends in New York, following more than half a century of encounters and disagreements, results of the unfolding of the collective and individual history of the characters. A spider web is built over time between the families that protects them and keeps them safe from what could happen outside the cave, although in the end the spider web breaks apart. Kim,

belonging to the third generation of the Burton family, born and educated in the United States, breaks the fragile fabric and lets one of the members of the circle, Raza Ashraf, be taken prisoner and brought to Guantánamo as a potential terrorist. All of this happens while Kim is in New York with Raza's mother, Hiroko. When Raza realizes that Kim has turned him in, however, he does not morally condemn her, because he believes that the familiar spider web and its shadow are still there.

Hiroko Tanaka, the main character, is a survivor, in more than one sense, of the nuclear bomb dropped on Nagasaki; she carries the memory of the events written on her skin. Permanently seared on her back she carries marks in the form of burnt shadows, which give name to the novel, in the shape of the birds on her mother's kimono, which she was wearing the day of the nuclear explosion. The shadow of their origin and those memories will pursue her throughout her life. It is a strong mark that cannot be easily erased from the memory, and which constantly returns to her present, making her wonder why the massacre happened that left such an indelible scar on her body, on her life, on that of her entire family, on all those who were affected by such an unfathomable disaster provoked by the nuclear explosion of the American *Fat Man*.

The effect of the nuclear bomb on Hiroko, as is described in the novel, indelibly engraves a map of her native island on her body, fusing her with her home and the country of her infancy in a way that will stay with her all her life. Her body is presented as a testimony to local memory, and to the eruption of what is global. The representation of space as a way of narrating the story is a permanent concern for Shamsie, which is clearly reflected in her previous novel *Kartography* (2003), a sufficiently expressive title showing the author's interest in the representation of spaces. In *Burnt Shadows* it is about a lost space whose connection and presence will manifest itself through Hiroko's body. Her body will be the map that will guide her through the memory of the event.

*Burnt Shadows* explicitly incorporates nuclear war as a basic element of its plot. The horror the civil population was subjected to is made obvious throughout the entire novel as a manifesto for peace and non-proliferation of nuclear weapons. The character of Hiroko is modulated by this terrible chapter in world history, and the novel shows the effects it has on people, on people's lives, while at the same time breathing life into the political and geostrategic acts, showing the ferocious consequences of political-military decisions. Shamsie shows the powerful impact of the nuclear threat in the formulation of what is authentically *glocal*. The devastating effects of nuclear bombs are profoundly local; they level, destroy, eliminate all that is adjacent, everything that is close by, dissolve all ties to local

life, while at the same time expand their effects to the whole world, to all geopolitics, and put the existence of the global village itself at risk.

In much of the analysis on the possible origins of what is characterized as contemporary Islamic terrorism, nuclear war is used as a powerful argument. The balance of force between different national and supranational powers, which as of World War II was shaped around the possession, or lack thereof, of nuclear weapons, appears in the background of different forms of terrorist action quite often linked to movements in this same scenario. In *Burnt Shadows*, Harry Burton Weiss, the English child who spent his infancy in India and, after living many years in the United States, ends up working first for the CIA and later, after September 11, in Afghanistan for a private security company, on various occasions is very explicit about the connection between nuclear balance/challenge and terrorist action. A type of dual consideration comes out of the mouth of this character, using the predominant American discourse that excuses itself based on the remorse shown by Eisenhower, whose “I believe we should not have done that” serves to justify the Pakistani situation, and causes the CIA to look the other way when faced with the threat from the Pakistani nuclear program.

The relativization of 9/11 in the face of panic over a nuclear eruption between Pakistan and India leads Hiroko to minimize the importance of the consequences of the attacks in New York. Her reference of horror is attached, embedded on her skin, to the nuclear bomb. She perceives any other type of event linked to terror as being of lesser import than what could happen if, in fact, a nuclear war broke out, even a lower intensity one. “Don’t tell her about fires burning out as though that’s the world’s most significant event. She thinks Pakistan and India are about to launch themselves into nuclear war” (Shamsie 2009: 251). Disaster and nuclear threat, as such, form one of the axes of the novel, which goes from Nagasaki to New York sixty years later. In fact, Hiroko will move from Pakistan to New York because of her fear of nuclear confrontation in Southeast Asia. This is precisely how the paradox is expressed that Hiroko picked the United States, the country responsible for her tragedy, as a place of refuge when faced with a possible nuclear attack between Pakistan and India.

However, in spite of the enormity of the tragedy caused by the nuclear explosions, the victims are victims not for the massiveness of their dimension, but rather for their individuality. Perhaps, because of this, Hiroko will later be overcome with guilt for having felt that her tragedy was the only one and, in this sense, will find a level of empathy with the victims of the 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York.

The radicalness of nuclear destruction leads to a deep lack of understanding of the reasons why a government is capable of ordering massive destruction, the authentic dissolution and erasure of a place, its physical spaces, its inhabitants and all civilizing traces. In the case of Hiroko, the question that permanently circles in her mind is why they dropped the second bomb: "Wasn't Hiroshima enough?" In the novel, nothing is the inevitable product of some fateful destiny, everything could have been avoided, everything that happened was the work of intentional human actions with terribly devastating consequences, such as those from the nuclear bomb.

*Burnt Shadows* is structured around six main characters. All of them are forced to leave their "natural" places of reference. Their national identity is not tied to any specific place. In some cases, this space has even disappeared, has been erased physically and politically, as happens in the case of Hiroko when she leaves Nagasaki, or in the case of Sajjad, her husband, when he is forced to leave Delhi after the Partition. This loss of territory, the forced lack of location, appears as a constant that interweaves the political with the personal in all of Shamsie's work. Loss, as an imposition that occurs suddenly, acquires a central character in her work, just as Bruce King has accurately noted in his article "Kamila Shamsie's Novels of History, Exile and Desire".

In her first four novels the central character faces loss of family or friends; such loss is either the result of public events or the indirect influence of the political on the personal. In her fifth novel the main characters attempt to move on and go beyond the past. While most of the novels concern the relationship of national events to the personal there is also the politics of social hierarchies such as class, language, culture and origins. The richness of Shamsie's fiction is the ways in which varied themes and stories within a novel are multilayered, interact, and are part of each other, so that the narrative about a person or couple is viewed within a larger, more socially dense, context. (King 2011: 147)

The pattern of an absence of place, of disorientation, is repeated in many of the characters. Like what happens to Burton, for example, when he lives in Delhi, as well as when he must return to England after India's independence; this also happens with Ilse, Burton's wife, who is of German origin but refuses to return to Germany when she decides to leave her husband: she cannot stop feeling that it is a country from which the Nazis had expelled her. After a very difficult decision, she chooses to go to New York as a neutral space in her personal history.

*Burnt Shadows* shows how very different aspects of daily life, narrated from different perspectives, can focus on and be reconfigured toward the internal physical and social space. This simple movement encourages us to comprehend



that the matter of the cultural and ideological structuring of Islamic countries should not be treated in a linear manner. Often we apply an inappropriate linearity and uniqueness of focus to what is distant from us, or to what we consider distant, while at the same time claiming variety and specialness for what is close, what is our own. What we perceive with great precision of what is local, with its nuances and multiple details, we seek to erase by supposing that what is distant happens or can be described by a single motivation. Articulating the local and the global, *Burnt Shadows* achieves a narrative tension that makes it easier to draw closer to processes that can only be understood in this same interconnection.

At the end of the novel, Kim Burton, the American daughter of Harry, ends up betraying the emotional safety net that had been woven by the two families over decades and strengthened in very different parts of the world. Kim, even knowing that her father was a mercenary who worked for the CIA, and with the ethical conflict this means for her, ends up acting under the emotional effects of 9/11. The relativity of a conflict for those who are obligated to live within it, even though it is a global conflict, appears clearly in the novel. Hiroko tries to show Kim that what appears to be the centre of their universe should not be considered as such, given that it is only a small part of their life. One should not lose perspective, neither globally nor personally; what is happening in the world, the global dangers we are facing and how they are affecting our lives, must be taken into account.

Clearly influenced by the propaganda and ideological position of the United States government, with the insistent criminalization of the "other" and the characterization of terrorism as something distant and radically different, Kim adopts a position that makes no distinction between Muslim and terrorist. In spite of having been educated in contact with different social groups with diverse ideological and cultural influences – daughter of Harry, granddaughter of Ilse and Burton, niece of Konrad (a victim of Nagasaki) – in the last part of the novel she chooses betrayal, which makes it appear that what prevails is the central element of her national identity as American and the immediate response against global terrorism. In the end, it is the *others* who are potential terrorists in an explicit war, directly or indirectly, against our civilization.

The symbolic character of *national* stands out as a dominant element that contributes to a schematic, reductionist and dichotomous characterization of the other as an enemy to fight by any measures. The principal objective of the other in this civilizing conflict is to exterminate us. There is no room for complicity or a truce, we are radically different and the survival of one depends on the elimination

of the other. As such, Kim appears as the negation of the possibility of a multiple, critical and conflictive construction of identity based on reasons and practices.

Kim will be marked by the 9/11 attacks, but also by a state of global uncertainty that, in some way, marked her professional choice to be an architect. Her work consists in "constructing" security at a time when its foundations are cracking. But she is, above all, a symbolic representation of the failure of a civilizing dialog, of an exchange that goes further than simple tolerance and which tries to incorporate some characteristics for understanding the other. The same (im)possibility of coming closer, and even of the need for this dialog, is embodied in the character of Hiroko. Hiroko did not only lose her family and boyfriend at Nagasaki and her husband in Pakistan, victim of the Taliban and a CIA plot, but also will have to face her son's imprisonment in Guantánamo as a consequence of a series of misunderstandings, product of the ideological weight of the War on Terror.

In opposition to this narrative line, which is profound, radically dichotomous and of an irreconcilable antagonism, Shamsie weaves a fabric of interpersonal and family relationships that construct a defensive wall, a safety net of solidarity that protects them from external factors and which, at times, tries to penetrate in the individual differential that remains beyond the overarching principles of homeland or civilization itself. But at the end of the novel the ties break because for Kim, a member of the family, national identity comes first, taking this to its most horrible end: informing on Raza, Hiroko's son. Although initially she is not sure it was him, she reports him and causes his imprisonment in Guantánamo simply because he was a *suspicious Muslim*. The process by which Kim justifies this is a synthesis of the hegemonic configuration of national identity that does not see more reasons than those deriving from the internal logic of the group to which they supposedly belong. So, although Hiroko tries to argue from a position of values such as humanity, individuality, and even from the affinity or loyalty to the small family group, Kim succumbs to the reasoning of a policeman who tells her she has done the right thing: "your father would be proud of you" (Shamsie 2009: 363).

Undoubtedly, the hegemonic interpretation postulates as one of its basic premises the condition of the terrorist as an "other" for whom there is no room for interpretative processes, based on intentional conduct that serves to support the causal chains that form the basis for the interpretation. In some way, Hiroko finds a deep parallelism between the American attitude that supports the War on Terror, and the approach which, at the time, was used to justify the second bomb dropped on Nagasaki. Considering the others as something different, who deserve to be exterminated even if only to avoid them possibly reproducing, appears as

a common element that unites the beginning and the end of the novel's story, Nagasaki and Guantánamo. In the words of Hiroko:

In the big picture of the Second World War, what was seventy-five thousand more Japanese dead? Acceptable, that's what it was. In the big picture of threats to America, what is one Afghan? Expendable. Maybe he's guilty, maybe not. Why risk it? Kim, you are the kindest, most generous woman I know. But right now, because of you, I understand for the first time how nations can applaud when their governments drop a second nuclear bomb. (Shamsie 2009: 362)

*Burnt Shadows* shows us a world that is globalized and polarized, but one in which personal relationships and the ways in which individuals resolve their conflicts in order to survive give it a personal and local meaning. It is clear the impact that the global has on the local, but the local also changes the destiny of what is global. This comprehension of the global and the local, together with the transformation of an event into a reference point, has been made abundantly clear by the social theorist Victor Jeleniewski in his book *Urban Fears and Global Terrors* (2007). Jeleniewski points out the way that globalization currently produces a new type of assimilation of changes, as we know what is happening in any part of the world almost in real time: as such an enormous tension is created between anxiety and the banalization of terror.

*Burnt Shadows* by Kamila Shamsie represents, in narrative practice, the concept of *glocalization* that I propose. The novel reflects what happens politically and historically by means of intertwining the most representative milestones of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries with the life of a family that is deeply affected by different historical changes throughout diverse moments and varied cultural experiences. In the novel, the reflection and impact from political conflicts in the individual sphere is overcome only thanks to the warmth and solidarity that makes up the framework of the closest environment. Nevertheless, this spider web that interweaves the life of the characters can, over time, also trigger political conflicts of universal dimensions. With this I wish to say that the global should not be demonized when faced with the local, nor vice versa. Although it may seem obvious, we live in societies where reaching a balance between these two poles appears to be, in many cases, a pending task.

In *Burnt Shadows*, the effects of dangers and threats that become profoundly dramatic realities are presented as a product of intentional political acts (the nuclear bomb, the Partition of India, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, September 11, the War on Terror), but the victims are, in large part, hit by surprise or by mistake without being able to avoid succumbing to a type of predetermined destiny. Shamsie's novel confronts global terrorism by attempting to find its

endogenous causes in a global social system. In addition to the historic tensions she describes, she constructs characters shaped from fragmented identities who, because of different political changes, have stitched together the storylines of their lives out of loss and from constant confrontation with other cultures, as such shaping individuals for whom it is possible to claim plural identities. In any case, the different characters in this work are relating experiences that contribute to enriching our collective memory, giving it multiple nuances and reinterpretations which are indispensable for crossing territories of violence and terror.

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