

Language, Identity and Diaspora: Bilingualism and Multilingualism of Characters in *Burnt Shadows*

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Abstract—The paper delves into the themes of diaspora, identity, and language in Kamila Shamsie's novel, *Burnt Shadows*. The characters in the novel are portrayed as being bilingual and multilingual, which is reflective of the intricate and diverse use of language in diasporic communities. This study analyzes how bilingualism and multilingualism are depicted in the novel and how they contribute towards the construction and deconstruction of the characters' identities. By closely reading the text, the paper underscores the significance of language to diasporas in dealing with challenges caused by war, migration, displacement, and belonging. The analysis highlights how language serves as a medium of communication, an arena of conflict, and a source of cultural identity for the characters and shows the relationship between language and trauma to underline the difficulties of expressing oneself in a language that may not fully capture the depth of one's emotions. The research argues that Shamsie's portrayal of bilingual and multilingual characters offers a powerful reflection on the complexities of language and its role in shaping identities in diasporic community, which accentuates the need for a more inclusive approach towards language and identity in diasporic literary studies.

Index Terms—language, identity, diaspora, *Burnt Shadows*

I. INTRODUCTION

Kamila Shamsie, a Pakistani woman transnational writer writing in English, is regarded by Rushdie (2009) as “a writer of immense ambition and strength”. Shamsie’s third novel *Burnt Shadows* (2009) is a tale of love and war, of shared histories of two families across three generations and of earth-shaking historical events. It is an epic in terms of time, location and historical events it has covered. The story spans over fifty years from 1945 to 2002, from the bombing of Nagasaki, the partition in India, the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in South Asia, to the US bombing campaign in Afghanistan after 9/11. Characters in this novel, whether they are willing or not, travel constantly in the world, from Germany to England, Japan, India, Pakistan, Afghanistan and America, during which they are confronted with all kinds of challenges. Given their vastly diasporic experiences, they have to overcome geographical, linguistic and cultural displacements, get along with local people and other diasporas, establish new relationships, build new identities and mediate the tension of settling down and longing for the lost homeland.

How do these characters manage to deal with all those difficulties? One thing in common that helps these diasporic characters tackle those challenges is the shared love of language and their extraordinary language competence. Nearly all the main characters in the novel are effectively bilingual or multilingual and are engaged in teaching or learning languages to and from one another. The protagonist Hiroko Tanaka is a Japanese teacher who speaks German and English and works as a translator for Konrad Weiss, a German writer whom she falls in love with in Japan. In India Hiroko is befriended by Elizabeth Burton, Konrad’s half-sister, who is also a bilingual. Hiroko learns Urdu from Sajjad Ali Ashraf, a bilingual Indian who converts to Islam and whom she meets in India and whom she finally marries to. Their son, Raza Konrad Ashraf born in Pakistan, inherits his mother’s language gift and is capable of speaking nine languages. There are many scenes in which these bilingual and multilingual characters use their language skills and translate back and forth between languages to express themselves and perform their identities.

The bilingualism and multilingualism of these characters in *Burnt Shadows* are not a coincidence but a device Shamsie uses to connect characters, help them cope with challenges caused by moving from one nation to another, and finally redefine and reconstruct the identities of the characters. Therefore, the weight attached to language is deliberately emphasized. Hiroko would not have met Konrad if she had not taught German to Yoshi Watanabe’s nephew. In that case, she would not have gone to India to find the Burtons, the relatives of her fiancé. Likewise, had it not been for language learning, Sajjad and Hiroko would never have overturned the separateness between these two

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characters of different cultural backgrounds and fallen in love with each other. This essay examines the functions of language Shamise demonstrates through the characters in *Burnt Shadows* and how the bilingualism and multilingualism of these characters help them redefine, reconstruct different identities and articulate the struggles of these rootless diasporic characters who deliberately use language to hide or/and express their identities in a globalized social context.

II. LANGUAGE AS INTIMACY

The importance of language in communication and in the creation of cultural identity has constantly been highlighted. Anne Brisset (2000), a researcher on translation, highlights the importance of language, believing “Language is an indispensable in the realization of the verbal act. It is a necessary precondition for communication” (p. 343). Traditionally, linguists and philosophers have identified the two primary purposes of language as “communication and representation” widely recognized in the twentieth century: “the phatic function” (in which ties of union are created by a mere exchange of words) and “the performative function” (in which language performs the action it states) (Joseph, 2004, pp. 15-19). Despite the differences of the terms, there is a parallel between these two types of functions, that is, language as communication with others and representation of the world in one’s mind and performance of one’s identity. James Clifford (1991) in his essay “travelling cultures” examines the discursive practices of travelers, including dwelling in terms of adopting and learning the culture and the language in the displaced homeland. As Clifford (1994) says, “dwelling implies a kind of communicative competence. One no longer relies on translators, but speaks and listens for oneself” (p. 99). Diasporas who usually are permanent travelers, as they stay in a foreign land for a long time, are in a greater need to gain language competence for communication and dwelling. As a result, diasporas are often bilingual and even multilingual. The bilingualism and multilingualism, Susan Stanford Friedman (2007) argues, “are key markers of transit; of the refusal to assimilate completely; and of the insistence on retention of the past, other homes and other cultural identities” (p. 280). Therefore, in *Burnt Shadows*, Shamsie deliberately creates bilingual and multilingual diasporic characters with such communicative competence to enable them to communicate with each other, perform their identities, and travel and dwell in a transnational and foreign context.

Given the necessity and importance of language for diasporas, Shamsie uses language as a romantic connection, linking characters of various relationships. At the very beginning of the novel, set in Nagasaki during the Second World War, readers are introduced to a Japanese girl, Hiroko Tanaka, a multilingual character who is capable of speaking two foreign languages, German and English. Her language competence enables her to work as a translator for Konrad, a German writer who lives in Japan. As language enables communication, people mastering multiple languages have more access to their communication with many other people. To Hiroko and Konrad, being multilingual means they are capable to switch their conversations between German, English and Japanese, and language works as a silk of romance linking them, as “[i]t feels to them like a secret language which no one else they know can fully decipher” (Shamsie, p. 19).

The function of language as an intimate tie for characters also works in the relationship between Hiroko and Elizabeth Burton, Konrad’s half-sister, who is bilingual in English and German. If Konrad is a tie drawing these two women characters physically, the German language has a similar intimate function in building up the friendship between them. There are several instances in the novel, in which whenever they talk about Konrad, they switch to German. Doing so, as admitted by these characters, makes them feel like “sharing the most intimate of secrets” (Shamsie, p. 70). Even James, the husband of Elizabeth, observing these two women talking in German, does not want to intrude this intimacy and even feels “rude to force their conversation back to English just by the fact of his presence” (Shamsie, p. 109).

Besides, language facilitates the intimacy of the relationship between Hiroko and Sajjad. It is through learning and teaching Urdu, the language of Sajjad’s India, that Hiroko and Sajjad fall in love with each other. For Hiroko, she gets to know Sajjad and India by knowing the language he speaks, although as Elizabeth warns Hiroko that she does not know, and will never belong to his world. Yet, language paves the way for them to know each other. What’s more, learning a new language means having a new access to communication. The beauty of being multilingual lies in the diverse choices of code for them to communicate with each other. Whatever cannot be expressed in one language can still be spoken in another. During one of the Urdu lessons, Hiroko thinks of Konrad and talks about the day of bombing when she finds his shadow and murmurs why he does not stay with her. Sajjad stands up quietly and walks over to Hiroko, comforting her:

There is a phrase I have heard in English: to have someone alone with their grief. Urdu has no equivalent phrase. It only understands the concept of gathering around and becoming ‘ghum-khaur’-grief-eaters-who take in the mourner’s sorrow. Would you like me to be in English or Urdu right now? (Shamsie, p. 77).

Language as intimacy proves itself when later at Sajjad’s death, Hiroko “whispered endearments in Japanese-the only words of Japanese she ever taught him were words of love” (Shamsie, p. 240).

Moreover, language as an intimacy works obviously in the mother-and-son relationship between Hiroko and Raza. While the father-and-son relationship looks quite awkward between Sajjad and Raza, as the father sometimes feels timid to express his love for the son, and there is little daily communication between them, Raza seems more intimate with Hiroko, which is attributed to their common love of language. Raza, who has already known Japanese, Urdu and English since young, is thankful for his multilingualism, which allows him to share the secrets with her mother “without

lowering their voices” and enables him to “express to each other in words particular to specific languages” (Shamsie, p. 200). Similarly, Raza’s intimacy with his mother is reflected on the note written in Japanese he leaves for Hiroko before his departure to Afghanistan.

In *Burnt Shadows*, Shamise uses language to build up the intimacy between characters, and within characters they are interconnected with each other with a shared language, thus developing and deepening romantic relationship, friendship or mother-and-son relationship. Here, Shamise conveys a message: speaking a language does not merely mean performing the same linguistic operations. The same language also implies the shared ethos, feelings and belonging.

III. LANGUAGE AS IDENTITY

Mastering another language does not only help an individual gain one more way to communicate, but also enables one to reconstruct his identity. In *Burnt Shadows*, multilingual characters hide or deny their competence in speaking certain language to bury the identity that language indicates.

For the first time Elizabeth and Hiroko meet each other, Elizabeth corrects Hiroko when the latter addresses her Isle, “with an apologetic smile that she was at fault for having discarded her childhood nickname” (Shamsie, p. 44). In fact, what she is correcting is not just her childhood name “Isle Weiss” but rather, her German identity the name suggests and her childhood altogether, when she was forced to leave Germany at an early age. By insisting on being called “Elizabeth Burton”, she wants to show her Englishness and her role as the wife of Mr. Burton. Furthermore, the only two occasions when she speaks German are when Konrad is brought into her conversation with Hiroko and when she writes letters to her cousin using “liebving” Willie, the German word for “darling”. On those occasions, German is her language of intimacy, although she hides her identity as half-German in the rest of her life. Nevertheless, although her daily communication with others, including with her husband James is all conducted in English and even though she insists on being called Mrs. Burton, her English identity as well as her identity as the wife of Mr. Burton is neither what she is proud of nor what she desires. This could be seen in an instance when Hiroko asks her opinion about the British’s withdrawal from India. Elizabeth’s response indicates how she despises the British colonization, revealing “[t]he British Empire makes me feel so...German” (Shamsie, p. 68).

In Elizabeth’s letter to her cousin Willie, who has invited her to join him in New York, she confides to him about her decision of leaving her husband and going to America to “see if there’s anything of your cousin Ilse left to be salvaged from the lonely, bitter wreck that is Mrs. Burton” (Shamsie, p. 117). It seems that Elizabeth is hiding her German identity by hiding her German name and refusing to speak German. Instead, she reconstructs a new identity as a British wife by using a British name and speaking English. Elizabeth’s efforts of hiding and reconstructing her identity are the result of her diasporic experience and reality. Having been displaced from German to England and from England to India, Elizabeth has become a diaspora twice, and her diasporic experience is much a result of historical expansion of the German Empire and British Empire. Therefore, Elizabeth’s denial of her German identity and uneasiness about her Englishness is also a reflection of the historical influence on the individual. As Nadezda Stojkovic (2005) writes, “the individual search for individuality is a process of self-discovery, always performed in relation to one’s inner life and to the community, to its collective, yet multifarious identity” (p. 185), and “language is the picture of the state of the consciousness of oneself and of the society in which we live” (p. 192). Therefore, Elizabeth’s choice of language is a strategy that Shamsie uses to show the struggles of diasporic characters like Elizabeth with their different identities and their attachment to each place, where they cannot find home. In *Burnt Shadows*, Elizabeth ends up in New York, a place where she is eventually able to get rid of the shackles of the identity as Mrs. Burton and to be herself, as Isle.

Another example of Shamise’s use of language to hide or reconstruct a character’s identity is Raza, a language genius. Raza, the son of Hiroko and Sajjad, has inherited Hiroko’s gift of learning language and is capable of speaking Japanese, German, Urdu and English. However, the language he chooses to use is a self-conscious choice. For instance, although Japanese is a bonding language between him and his mother, he “only spoke Japanese within the privacy of his home, not even breaking that rule when his friends delighted in showing off to his mother the one or two Japanese words they’d found in some book, some movie” (Shamsie, p. 139). It seems that he is trying to hide his Japanese-ness in public by avoiding speaking that language. His self-consciousness, “[w]hy allow the world to know his mind contained words from a country he’d never visited?” (Shamsie, p. 139) indicates Raza’s puzzle over his identity and his efforts to fit himself into the local environment, where he has awareness of “how to downplay his manifest difference” (Shamsie, p. 139).

If hiding a language is hiding the identity that language is related to, does acquiring a language mean gaining an identity it represents? Why is Raza so keen on learning language? As Ana Castillo (1995) argues, “language is not something we adopt and that remains apart from us. Explicitly or implicitly, language is the vehicle by which we perceive ourselves in relation to the world” (p. 178). Raza’s passion towards acquiring language is a result of his confusion of his identity and rootlessness, and his need for belonging which he desires to gain through language acquisition. When he sees words in one language, he can instantly translate them into other languages, such as Japanese, German, English and Pashto. He exclaims that “I want words in every language. I think I would be happy living in a cold, bare room if I could just spend my days burrowing into new languages” (Shamsie, p. 146). Later, in his decade in Dubai, Raza seeks out “as may nationalities as possible, acquiring language with the zeal of a collector” (Shamsie, p. 258).

The linguistic diversity exhibited by the main characters in *Burnt Shadows* and their conscious decision-making of certain language they speak on specific occasions point to multiculturalism and multicultural identities. Identity, as Hall (1996) argues, is not merely about “who we are” or “where we come from”, but instead it is more about the use of historical, linguistic, and cultural resources to figure out what we might become, and how we are represented and how this affects how we represent ourselves. With the help of the linguistic gift, the characters manage to build new identities and to be represented with a different cultural identity. However, the linguistic consciousness of these characters also indicates their anxiety of belonging as diasporas and their confusion about their identities in the distant world. As Rushdie (1991) speaking for diasporic writers, “our identity is at once plural and partial. Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times, that we fall between two stools” (p. 15). In a sense, the linguistic competence of diasporic characters enables them to adapt to any culture in the world more easily, as if they belong to everywhere. However, they constantly find themselves in a position which denies any access to a single culture or a single identity, so to a certain extent, they belong to nowhere.

IV. LANGUAGE AND TRAUMA

Roland Barthes (1990) argues in *A Lover's Discourse* that ‘Language is a skin’, which is used to signify the relation of desire. Ann Scott (2003) in her essay “Language as a Skin,” proposes that Barthes’ idea can be applied to the relation between bodily trauma and language to understand the specificity of the trauma the body has experienced and its representation in memory (p. 71). It works for Hiroko in *Burnt Shadows*, too. To Hiroko, the word “hibakusha” (referring to the survivors of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki) is the most hated word in her vocabulary, and the most powerful word, which is always reminding her of the trauma on her body. In the rest of her life after the bombing, she has to constantly confront the consequence of the bombing and has to retell her trauma, which often ends up with silence. In order to escape the word “hibakusha”, Hiroko boards a ship to India “to enter the home of a couple she’d never met, a world of which she knew nothing” (Shamsie, p. 222), since “to the Japanese she was nothing beyond an explosion-affected person; that was her defining feature” (Shamsie, p. 49).

However, different from Elizabeth as discussed in previous section, Hiroko does not deliberately hide her Japanese identity. Instead, she keeps her Japanese identity by teaching and speaking Japanese with her son Raza at home. Living in a distant world, she deals with her longing for homeland by using the native language. Hiroko feels excited when she meets the other Japanese wives in Karachi and enters their weekly gatherings at Jimmy’s house. This gathering is the maintenance of her Japanese identity in a foreign land, for “it had meant a lot, more than she would have guessed, to have the promise of an evening every week to sit and laugh in Japanese” (Shamsie, p. 140). The foreign language that Hiroko hears in a foreign land seems to remind her, as Rushdie (1991) realizes in *Imaginary Homelands*, that “it’s my present that is foreign, and that the past is home, albeit a lost home in a lost city in the mists of lost time” (p. 9). Therefore, Hiroko craves familiarity with the home through her native language: “I want to hear Japanese. I want tea that tastes the way tea should taste in my understanding of tea. I want to look like the people around me...” (Shamsie, p. 99). Nevertheless, her desire of familiarity and of home as “a mythic place of desire” in Avtar Brah’s (1996) concept (p. 182) is not able to be obliterated by her multilingualism, but can be only gained by speaking her mother tongue, because as Gottlieb (2007) claims, “no language functions in a vacuum; it comes with its own freight of wider cultural implications for its native speakers” (p. 52). By restoring the affective linguistic identity, she is seeking cultural recognition for her language concomitant with the country she has already left.

Unfortunately, even among the people who speak Japanese, feeling “at home at the idea of foreignness”, Hiroko is still silent about what the bomb has done to her and she “never told any of them about the birds on her back” (Shamsie, p. 140). She insists, “although she grew up there [Nagasaki], she was in Tokyo when the bomb fell” (Shamsie, p. 141), trying to deny the effect of the war on her life. Here, Hiroko’s silence about the bodily trauma bears some resemblance with the Holocaust survivors interviewed by Nadine Fresco in a sense of an “unspeakable” dimension, of something too difficult to be put in actual words. As Fresco (1985) puts that “one doesn’t know whether it is the memory or the forgetting of death that is the more intolerable...the images don’t stay, the words don’t stay, the dead don’t stay” (p. 422). Being multilingual, she still finds no word in any language to describe the trauma.

Meanwhile, the trauma makes Hiroko constantly question her sense of belonging. She confesses to Elizabeth that she neither belongs to Sajjad’s world nor Elizabeth’s world, or even her own world. Her Nagasaki is even stranger and more unfamiliar than Delhi is to her, for “nothing in the world could ever be more unfamiliar than my home that day. That unspeakable day. Literally unspeakable. I don’t know the words in any language...” (Shamsie, p. 99). When it comes to trauma, there is no language in the world that can express it. Likewise, speechlessness occurs when Sajjad first sees Hiroko’s back and those birds, “[w]hatever he had been about to say remained forever unsaid” (Shamsie, p. 90). The aftermath of the trauma even passes on to the second generation. At the first year of Hiroko and Sajjad’s marriage, she has a miscarriage of a baby girl in her fifth-month’s pregnancy, a miscarriage which Hiroko believes is caused by the bomb as the doctor does not give any detailed reasons for it. “As the years went on the deaths of Konrad and her father had receded from her heart, but the child who she had known only as a stirring within, a series of hiccups and kicks-her loss still remained, occasionally rising up in great wave of anger which Hiroko never knew how to express, where to place” (Shamsie, p. 205). Here, to Hiroko, words cannot express the trauma and silence might be the best and the only choice.

Just as the birds on Hiroko's back which are always there, Nagasaki and the trauma are always there in her mind, too. While Hiroko feels it necessary to talk to her son about what she has been through, but the bomb is too monstrous to tell. Therefore, she comes up with another way of storytelling, through fairy tales or adventurous stories. The unspeakable trauma is transformed into the "mother's great adventure—from Tokyo to Bombay! Bombay to Delhi" (Shamsie, p. 223), but she never tells Raza these fairy tales. Apparently, Hiroko has always wanted Raza to know as little of all the terror of the bomb as possible, as she doubts, "[w]hy should I ever let my child imagine all that?" (Shamsie, p. 178) or "Why tell him of the momentum of a bomb blast that threw her into a world in which everything was unfamiliar, Nagasaki itself become more unknown than Delhi? Nothing in the world more unrecognizable than her father as he died" (Shamsie, p. 223). What's more, even in the fearless adventures and fairy tales she tells Henry, the son of the Burtons, there is something suppressed: the terror, the fear and desperation she has experienced during the voyage. It seems to Hiroko, by repackaging the telling of trauma into fairy tales or adventurous stories or denying her presence in Nagasaki during the bombing, she is able to be detached from the actual disaster. And language, from this point of view, provides her with a way to be newly in contact with her own experience, and an emotional outlet to name the horrible experience, and then an opportunity for her to move on. Here, identification with a bodily trauma can be countermanded by narrative.

V. LANGUAGE AND BORDERS

Diasporas are always featured with border-crossing movements. The diasporic characters in *Burnt Shadows*, such as Hiroko, Konrad, the Burtons, Henry or Raza, constantly travel from one place to another and transit borders, as Friedman (2007) notes, which "separate but also connect, demarcate but also blend differences" and which "promise safety, security, a sense of being at home", but also "enforce exclusions, the state of being alien, foreign, and homeless" (p. 273). Just as Brah (1996) states, "all diasporic journeys are composites", during which "they are embarked upon, lived or relived through multiple modalities," such as "modalities of gender, class, racial, religion, language and generation" (p. 179), these diasporic characters are also confronted with all these issues and try to make their modalities. According to Friedman (2007), border theory across the range of identity studies goes far beyond geographical scope. Borders, as lines of division and connection, play a figurative role as points of "connection and disconnection between differences" (p. 275). In *Burnt Shadows*, the geographical lines have never been the obstacles for main characters in the process of crossing borders, which is probably attributed to the linguistic ability and even contributes to their language learning. For instance, foreign language to Hiroko, be it English or Urdu facilitates her movement from Japan to India, later to Pakistan and finally to America. It is the same with Elizabeth's travel from Germany to England, to India and to New York, and Henry's journey from India to England and to America. Likewise, Raza's multilingualism is partially a result of his border-crossing movements to Afghanistan or Dubai.

As diasporic characters, they have to face the challenge of what Sheffer (2006) argues "dealing with the actual and virtual boundaries" (p. 136). The linguistic competence, either being bilingual or multilingual, does help these characters to cross geographical borders. As Clifford (1994) observes, the boundary which defines nations as common territories "is traversed" and "subverted by diasporic attachments" (p. 307), but they are still contained by nationalism which is shown by conflicts among themselves, and their sense of identity is defined by displacements and losses which "cannot be cured by merging into a new national community" (p. 307). In *Burnt Shadows*, Hiroko quickly picks up Urdu, which blurs the linguistic difference between her and the local Indians, but her physical difference and her dress style by wearing trousers and showing her legs give herself away and even embarrasses her son Raza, who blames her for not being "more Pakistani" (Shamsie, p. 130). However, Hiroko knows well that "she would always be a foreigner in Pakistan" (Shamsie, p. 204). As a result, although Sajjad and Raza cross the border to visit the family that remained in Delhi, Hiroko has never accompanied them. What she cannot cross is not the geographical border that divides Pakistan and India, but rather the nationalism that defines her as a Japanese and Sajjad as an Indian. In Sajjad's family, Hiroko would always be an outsider and her presence would be a discomfort on every side. Nationalism, or rather, class which is rather difficult to leave behind with border-crossing movement. It is the same reason that results in the deterioration of the relationship between James and Sajjad when these two individuals of different nationalities judge each other by their national identity as the Englishman and the Indian, instead of their personal identity as James and Sajjad (Shamsie, p. 111), even though they speak the same language. Besides, borders, by confining individuals within a specific line, impose on individuals the identities which they may not desire. For example, Sajjad, who leaves India for a honeymoon during the partition finds himself no longer a citizen of India and is forced into an identity that he never desires. Reluctantly, he and Hiroko move to Karachi, where Sajjad continues to long for his home and life back in his beloved Dilli, and where Sajjad becomes a mohajir, the not endearing term for refugees from India for the rest of his life, even though he speaks the same language in the new place.

The idea that Shamsie is trying to convey is that even though language facilitates the border-crossing movement, "borders" as a geographical line are easier to get across than the barriers of nationalism which border lines have confined. The pain of abandoning their nationalism in a foreign land, whether it is Hiroko's uneasiness in Pakistan or Raza's insistence on Pakistan-ness or Sajjad's forced Pakistani is rather difficult to be expressed by any language, no matter how many languages they are capable of speaking. An effective way to break down those barriers might be through interpersonal communication across borders, as Konrad suggests that "barriers were made of metal that could

turn fluid when touched simultaneously by people on either side” (Shamsie, p. 82). This works for Harry, too, the CIA officer who serves as “the gatekeeper between one nation and the next,” and has “swung the gate open, wide” (Shamsie, p. 181), trying to communicate and understand people on either side.

VI. CONCLUSION

Burnt Shadows is a novel that explores the themes of bilingualism and multilingualism through its diverse cast of characters. The novel shows how language is not only a means of communication, but also a source of intimacy and connection between individuals to help them navigate their relationships with one another, creating a sense of belonging and community despite their diverse backgrounds. Language serves as an intimate connection, linking characters of various relationships, such as lovers like Hiroko and Konrad, Hiroko and Sajjad, friends like Hiroko and Elizabeth, James and Sajjad, and the mother-son relationship like Hiroko and Raza. The characters in the novel use language to navigate their relationships with one another, creating a sense of belonging and community despite their diverse backgrounds and overcoming the separateness as a result of different cultural backgrounds between them.

In addition to enacting intimacy, Shamsie also uses language as a device to represent and reconstruct identities of her characters who are constantly confronted with challenges and struggles resulting from the geographic, linguistic and cultural displacements. The use of multiple languages and dialects highlights the fluidity of identity and the ways in which language can shape one's understanding of oneself and others.

Furthermore, although the bilingualism and multilingualism enable characters to communicate with each other and to gain or hide certain identity, language is not almighty. Language is not able to fully express or obliterate the trauma these characters have been suffering from as a result of war and violence, no matter how many languages they are capable of speaking. The use of multiple languages and dialects highlights the difficulties of expressing oneself in a language that may not fully capture the depth of one's emotions. However, by retelling trauma in other forms, language provides a way to identify, name and narrate trauma.

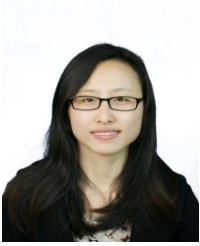
Finally, the novel also touches on the idea of language and borders, as the characters move across different countries and cultures. The linguistic competence helps characters in this novel who have been forced out of their own homeland in transiting the boundaries of the nation-state, but the barriers of nationalism within the boundaries are rather difficult to cross, making these bilingual and multilingual characters dwell between alienation and loss. Therefore, Shamsie suggests an effective way to break down those barriers, that is, through exchange and communication between people on either side of borders, so as to swing the gate of misunderstanding open and wide.

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