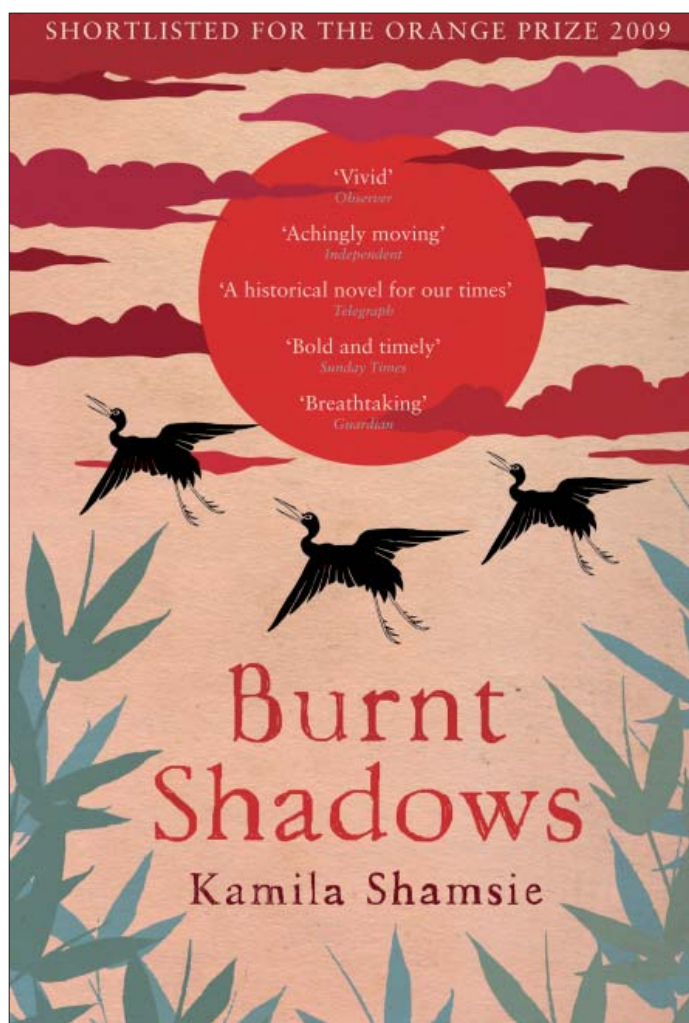


ALLEN & UNWIN



READING GROUP NOTES

Contents: About the book (2) About the author (2) Suggested points for discussion (2)
Further reading (3) Other books by Kamila Shamsie (3)

About the book

August 9th, 1945, Nagasaki. Hiroko Tanaka steps out onto her veranda, taking in the view of the terraced slopes leading up to the sky. Wrapped in a kimono with three black cranes swooping across the back, she is twenty-one, in love with the man she is to marry, Konrad Weiss.

In a split second, the world turns white. In the next, it explodes with the sound of fire and the horror of realisation. In the numbing aftermath of a bomb that obliterates everything she has known, all that remains are the bird-shaped burns on her back, an indelible reminder of the world she has lost.

In search of new beginnings, Hiroko travels to Delhi two years later. There she walks into the lives of Konrad's half-sister, Elizabeth, her husband James Burton, and their employee Sajjad Ashraf, from whom she starts to learn Urdu.

As the years unravel, new homes replace those left behind and old wars are seamlessly usurped by new conflicts. But the shadows of history – personal, political – are cast over the entwined worlds of the Burtons, Ashrafs and the Tanakas as they are transported from Pakistan to New York, and in the novel's astonishing climax, to Afghanistan in the immediate wake of 9/11. The ties that have bound them together over decades and generations are tested to the extreme, with unforeseeable consequences.

About Author

Kamila Shamsie was born in 1973 in Pakistan. She is the author of four previous novels: *In the City by the Sea*, *Kartography* (both shortlisted for the John Llewellyn Rhys Prize), *Salt and Saffron* and *Broken Verses*. In 1999 she received the Prime Minister's Award for Literature and in 2004 the Patras Bokhari Award – both awarded by the Pakistan Academy of Letters.

Discussion

☞ Early in the novel, Hiroko observes that during World War II everything has been 'distilled or distorted into its most functional form', including a vegetable patch where once Azaleas grew. What are the small, subtle ways that war changes our world, and how do those changes crop up in the story of *Burnt Shadows*?

☞ How does Hiroko resist being simply Hibakusha, a victim of the bomb, and in what ways is she powerless to change this perception of her? Consider also how it affects her son, Raza. Is it impossible to escape certain legacies?

☞ Discuss the different reasons that Konrad, Elizabeth, Sajjad and Harry leave their home in India, and why Hiroko leaves Japan, and then Pakistan. What does it mean to have a home, and to be displaced? How is it different when you don't have a choice to stay? Ultimately, do the characters ever have a country to call their own?

☞ Hiroko is immovable in her opinion about the atomic bomb. What does it mean to have a direct and highly personal connection to an earth-changing event like the bombing of Nagasaki, or 9/11? Is it possible for anyone so directly affected by the violence of these events to regard them with historic perspective? How are Kim and Hiroko different from one another in this regard? Consider their conversation about Nagasaki on pages 294 to 295.

☞ The characters in *Burnt Shadows* sometimes find that their ideological beliefs can be vanquished by basic human feelings of love and hate. And sometimes the reverse happens as well. Why are individuals so often in conflict with their ideals, and how does the novel illustrate this conflict?

☞ Hiroko, Sajjad, and Raza each have a love of languages. What does it mean to learn another language, and why are languages (and their translation back and forth) important to these characters?

☞ Discuss the reasons that Abdullah joins a mujahideen training camp. Why is it tempting to Raza as well?

☞ Who, if anyone, is to blame for the death of Sajjad?

☞ What would you have done if you were her?

Further Reading

☞ *The Selected Writings* by Eqbal Ahmad

☞ *Ghost Wars* by Steve Coll

☞ *Hiroshima* by John Hersey

☞ *TAXI* by Biju Mathew

☞ *The Bells of Nagasaki* by Takashi Nagai

☞ *Barefoot Gen* by Keiji Nakazawa

☞ *The Gun Tree* by B.K. Zahrah Nasir

☞ *Corporate Warriors* by P.W. Singer

☞ *Afghanistan – The Bear Trap* by Mohammad Youssaf and Mark Adkin

Other Books

☞ *In the City by the Sea*

☞ *Kartography*

☞ *Salt and Saffron*

☞ *Broken Verses*