
Empowered Voices: Women's Agency in Kamila Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows* and *A God in Every Stone***¹E. Mallikarjun Goud**

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Abstract

Kamila Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows* (2008) and *A God in Every Stone* (2014) depict women's empowerment against backdrops of Partition, World War II, and colonial Peshawar. This paper examines characters like Hiroko Tanaka in *Burnt Shadows*, a Nagasaki survivor who defies trauma through cross-cultural resilience and reinvention, and Vivian Rose Spencer in *A God in Every Stone*, an archaeologist subverting Edwardian patriarchy via intellectual independence and anti-imperial awakening.

These protagonists assert agency amid war and loss; challenging gender norms intersected with imperialism and nationalism. Hiroko's adaptability—from kimono-clad defiance to maternal strength—embodies postcolonial feminist "revolt," while Vivian's Peshawar quest uncovers suppressed histories, mirroring women's buried voices. Shamsie employs fragmented narratives to highlight their resourcefulness, transforming victims into architects of identity. Through close textual analysis, the study reveals empowerment as relational. Bonds across divides foster equality beyond caste or creed. Ultimately, Shamsie critiques global conflicts' gendered toll, affirming women's enduring agency in turbulent eras.

Keywords: Women's empowerment, postcolonial feminism, Kamila Shamsie, agency, partition narratives

Introduction

In the landscape of postcolonial literature, the intersection of personal history and geopolitical trauma serves as a potent site for exploring gender dynamics. Kamila Shamsie, a contemporary Pakistani novelist, has consistently positioned her female protagonists at the epicentre of seismic historical shifts. In *Burnt Shadows* (2008) and *A God in Every Stone* (2014), Shamsie does not merely use history as a backdrop; rather, she interrogates how women navigate, resist, and ultimately reshape the patriarchal and imperial structures that seek to define them. This paper seeks to explore the multifaceted nature of women's agency in these two novels, arguing that Shamsie constructs a form of empowerment that is deeply relational, transnational, and resilient in the face of catastrophic loss.

The concept of "agency" in feminist theory has evolved beyond the simplistic notion of resistance against oppression. As postcolonial scholars like Chandra Talpade Mohanty have argued, agency in the "Third World" context must be understood as a complex negotiation with specific cultural and political histories. Shamsie's characters—Hiroko Tanaka and Vivian Rose Spencer—embody this complexity. They are not archetypal rebellious heroes; rather, they are survivors who utilize their intellect, emotional resilience, and cross-cultural connections to reclaim their identities in worlds fractured by war, colonialism, and partition. Through a close textual analysis, this paper will demonstrate how Shamsie reconfigures the narrative of the victim, transforming her characters into architects of identity who challenge the intersecting hegemonies of gender and empire.

Theoretical Framework: Postcolonial Feminism and the Narrative of Revolt

To understand the trajectory of Hiroko and Vivian, one must situate their struggles within the framework of postcolonial feminism. This theoretical lens rejects the binary opposition between the "oppressed Third World woman" and the "liberated Western woman," instead focusing on how gender intersects with race, class, and nationalism. Central to this framework is Chandra Talpade Mohanty's critique of the homogenized "Third World woman." Mohanty argues against the tendency in Western discourse to view women from the Global South solely as passive victims of their culture or history. Shamsie's work actively dismantles this stereotype. Hiroko Tanaka, though a survivor of catastrophic violence, is never a silent object of pity; she is educated, articulate, and transnational. By giving Hiroko a voice that is complex and resistant to erasure, Shamsie challenges the "Third World difference," asserting that her protagonist is not defined merely by her oppression but by her ability to navigate multiple worlds.

The "revolt" mentioned in the title of this paper is not always a loud or violent upheaval. In the context of Shamsie's novels, it is often a quiet, internal revolution of the self—a refusal to be erased by history. This aligns with the work of scholars who examine how women in postcolonial narratives subvert dominant discourses through storytelling, memory, and the creation of alternative kinship networks. By giving voice to women who have been marginalized by the "grand narratives" of history—such as the Partition of India or the Great War—Shamsie engages in a literary act of excavation, bringing suppressed histories to the foreground.

Fragmented Resilience: Hiroko Tanaka in *Burnt Shadows*

Burnt Shadows is a sprawling epic that moves from Nagasaki in 1945 to Delhi during the Partition, and finally to post-9/11 Afghanistan and Pakistan. At the heart of this narrative is Hiroko Tanaka, a woman whose body becomes a map of the violent history of the 20th century. The novel opens with the atomic bombing of Nagasaki, a moment that irrevocably alters the course of Hiroko's life. The iconic image of the kimono pattern burnt onto her back serves as a visceral reminder of the intersection of personal trauma and global conflict.

From Victim to Survivor: The Nagasaki Trauma Initially, Hiroko appears to be a passive victim of circumstance—a woman caught in the blast that kills her father and her German lover, Konrad Weiss. However, her agency manifests almost immediately through her decision to leave Japan. Despite her grief and physical disfigurement, she travels to India to find Konrad's sister, Ilse. This journey is an act of profound courage; it is a refusal to let the bomb define her existence entirely. By stepping into the unknown, Hiroko initiates a process of reinvention. As the abstract suggests, her journey is one of "cross-cultural resilience." She does not cling to the ruins of her past in Nagasaki; instead, she seeks a future in the house of her lover's family.

Subverting Partition Narratives Hiroko's arrival in Delhi places her in the midst of another cataclysmic event: the Partition of India in 1947. Here, Shamsie positions a Japanese woman as an observer of the religious violence tearing the subcontinent apart. Because Hiroko is an outsider—neither Hindu nor Muslim—she offers a unique perspective on the absurdity of the conflict. Her decision to marry Sajjad Ashraf, a Muslim Indian, is a radical act of defiance against the communal logic of the time. In an era where identity was being rigidly defined along religious lines, Hiroko chooses love and shared humanity.

Her agency during this period is characterized by adaptability. She learns Urdu, adopts local customs, and eventually moves with Sajjad to Pakistan. This is not an erasure of her Japanese identity but an expansion of it. Hiroko embodies a "postcolonial feminist revolt" by refusing to be confined by national borders or cultural expectations. She creates a hybrid identity that encompasses her Japanese heritage and her adopted South Asian reality.

Maternal Strength and Intergenerational Trauma As the novel progresses, Hiroko's role shifts to that of a mother to Raza and a grandmother. Her agency evolves from personal survival to the preservation of her family unit. However, Shamsie does not portray Hiroko as a sacrificial mother figure in the traditional patriarchal sense. Instead, she is a woman who demands loyalty and truth from the men in her life. Her confrontation with her son Raza regarding his involvement with the American military in the 1980s is a pivotal moment where she asserts her moral autonomy. She refuses to let her son become an instrument of the very imperial violence that disfigured her in Nagasaki. In this way, Hiroko's body—the burnt shadow—becomes a site of memory that actively resists the repetition of historical cycles of violence.

Excavating the Self: Vivian Rose Spencer in *A God in Every Stone*

While *Burnt Shadows* deals with the immediate aftermath of war, *A God in Every Stone* reaches back to the early 20th century and the twilight of the British Empire. The protagonist, Vivian Rose Spencer, is an Englishwoman whose passion for archaeology leads her to Peshawar. Unlike Hiroko, whose agency is born of survival, Vivian's agency is driven by intellectual curiosity and a desire to escape the stifling gender roles of Edwardian England.

Archaeology as Metaphor Vivian's chosen field of study is deeply symbolic. Archaeology is about digging beneath the surface to uncover hidden truths—a perfect metaphor for the feminist project. In the novel, Vivian is mentored by Tahsin Bey, a Turkish archaeologist who recognizes her talent. Their relationship is based on intellectual equality, standing in stark contrast to the condescending attitude of the male British establishment in Peshawar.

Vivian's quest to find the "Circling of Scylax" represents her desire to make a mark on history. In Edwardian England, women were largely expected to be passive observers of history, not its chroniclers. By venturing into the field, Vivian subverts these expectations. Her determination to finish Tahsin's work after his death is an assertion of her professional independence. She refuses to be just a "daughter" or a "wife"; she demands to be recognized as a scholar.

The Anti-Imperial Awakening Vivian's journey is not only one of gender politics but also of political awakening. Upon arriving in Peshawar, she is initially complicit in the colonial project, viewing the region through the lens of the empire. However, her interactions with the local population and her exposure to the brutality of British rule—specifically the brutalization of Indian soldiers seeking freedom—force her to confront her privilege.

The turning point in Vivian's agency is her realization that the "civilizing mission" of the British is a sham. This "anti-imperial awakening" is solidified through her relationship with Najeeb Gul, a young Pashtun soldier. The bond they form transcends the colonial divide. Vivian's agency is fully realized when she chooses to side with the oppressed rather than the oppressor. She uses her position of privilege to aid the revolutionary cause, risking her own safety and reputation. This shift marks her transition from a subject of the empire to a critic of it.

Suppressed Histories and Buried Voices The abstract notes that Vivian's quest "uncovers suppressed histories, mirroring women's buried voices." The Circling of Scylax is not just an artifact; it represents a history of the region that predates colonialism, a history that the British are attempting to overwrite. Similarly, Vivian's own story is one of a woman whose voice has been silenced by a patriarchal society. Her success in finding the circling (and the emotional closure it brings) symbolizes the reclamation of her own narrative. Shamsie parallels the physical act of digging with the psychological act of self-discovery. Vivian returns to England a changed woman, no longer willing to conform to the restrictive role assigned to her by Edwardian society.

Comparative Analysis: Relational Empowerment and Narrative Technique

Having examined the individual trajectories of Hiroko and Vivian, it is essential to consider the structural and thematic commonalities that link their stories. Shamsie employs specific narrative strategies and thematic constructs to highlight the nature of female agency in her work.

Agency as Relational A central argument of this paper is that in Shamsie's novels, empowerment is not a solitary pursuit; it is deeply relational. Both Hiroko and Vivian find strength in their connections with men who respect their autonomy—Sajjad and Konrad for Hiroko, and Tahsin and Najeeb for Vivian. These relationships are not based on dominance or submission but on mutual support and shared intellectual or emotional goals.

Furthermore, the bonds these women form across cultural divides are crucial to their agency. Hiroko's marriage to Sajjad and her integration into a Muslim family challenge rigid notion of identity. Vivian's solidarity with the people of Peshawar challenges the ideology of Empire. In both cases, the protagonists transcend the boundaries of caste, creed, and nationality. Shamsie suggests that true empowerment comes from recognizing our shared humanity and building bridges across divides.

Fragmented Narratives as a Reflection of Resilience Shamsie's narrative style—characterized by non-linear timelines and shifting perspectives—mirrors the fragmented lives of her protagonists. History, in Shamsie's world, is not a straight line; it is a series of ruptures and displacements. Hiroko's life is literally fragmented by the bomb, and the narrative reflects this, jumping across decades and continents. Similarly, *A God in Every Stone* weaves together ancient history with the personal histories of its characters.

This fragmentation serves a literary purpose: it highlights the resourcefulness of the protagonists. They must constantly piece their lives back together after traumatic events. The non-linear structure demands that the reader engage actively with the text, much as the characters must engage actively with their changing circumstances. By refusing to provide a neat, linear progression, Shamsie emphasizes the complexity of survival and the ongoing nature of the struggle for agency.

Challenging the Gendered Toll of Conflict Both novels offer a sharp critique of the gendered impact of global conflict. In *Burnt Shadows*, the nuclear bomb and the Partition violence disproportionately affect women's bodies and lives. In *A God in Every Stone*, the Great War and the colonial struggle in Peshawar create a space where traditional gender roles are both enforced and violently disrupted. Shamsie does not shy away from depicting the suffering of women. However, she refuses to reduce them to mere symbols of victimhood. Instead, she shows how they navigate the wreckage of war to create spaces of meaning and connection.

Conclusion

In *Burnt Shadows* and *A God in Every Stone*, Kamila Shamsie presents a powerful vision of women's agency that is inextricably linked to the turbulent histories of the 20th century. Through the characters of Hiroko Tanaka and Vivian Rose Spencer, Shamsie explores the capacity of women to reinvent themselves in the face of overwhelming trauma.

Hiroko's journey is one of cross-cultural resilience, a "revolt" against the erasure of identity by war. She transforms from a victim of the atomic bomb into a matriarch who bridges the divide between Japan and Pakistan. Vivian's journey is one of intellectual and political awakening, a subversion of Edwardian patriarchy through her passion for

archaeology and her anti-imperial conscience. She digs up the past to understand her present, ultimately finding her voice by aligning herself with the colonized.

Both characters assert their agency not by isolating themselves, but by forming deep, transgressive bonds across cultural and national divides. Shamsie's fragmented narrative style reinforces the idea that identity is not fixed, but is constantly being shaped and reshaped by history. Ultimately, these novels affirm that even in the darkest of times, women possess an enduring agency—a capacity not just to survive, but to architect their own identities and challenge the intersecting oppressions of gender, imperialism, and nationalism. Through their empowered voices, Hiroko and Vivian stand as testament to the resilience of the human spirit amidst the debris of global conflict.

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