



Adaptation and Resilience: A Study of the Survival Strategies of the Diaspora in Kamila Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows*

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ARTICLE INFO

RECEIVED 30 JULY 2026
ACCEPTED 25 AUGUST 2026
PUBLISHED 16 SEPTEMBER 2026

ABSTRACT

Migration is never an easy phenomenon for the Diaspora. It is accompanied by a multitude of challenges, ranging from identity crisis, loss, displacement, alienation, economic disparity, and assimilation into the host culture. Adapting survival strategies helps the Diaspora navigate the challenges faced in the hostland more effectively. *Burnt Shadows* (2009) by Kamila Shamsie provides a realistic account of Hiroko Tanaka's challenges during her stay in the hostland. The present paper aims to study various survival strategies adopted by the Diaspora in Kamila Shamsie's novel *Burnt Shadows*. It will highlight the universal struggles and triumphs of the Diaspora communities in assimilating to the host culture while preserving the culture of their origin.

Keywords:

Diaspora, Migration, Culture, Hybridity, Adaptation.

INTRODUCTION

In the present era, human civilization constantly moves from one place to another for several reasons, such as war, economic instability, political crisis, natural disasters, etc.

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This led to the creation of identities that were fluid and ever-evolving. With the displacement, the Diaspora identities had to undergo several difficulties in assimilating into the culture of the hostland. To survive in such situations, the Diasporas must incorporate some survival strategies into their process of assimilation.

Kamila Shamsie, a Pakistani-born British writer, is one of the notable writers of Diaspora literature. In most of her novels, she discusses global issues which need the utmost attention from global readers. She was awarded with the Women's Prize for Fiction in 2018 for her novel *Home Fire* (2017). *Burnt Shadows*, published in 2009, deals with the concerns of the Diaspora at its finest. Against the backdrop of the novel are the historical events of the Second World War, the Partition of India, and the 9/11 attacks on America, which portray the struggles of the Diaspora at a global level. The novel's characters are transnational identities migrating between five countries: Japan, India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the U.S.A. It highlights the suffering and adjustments that the Diasporas had to undergo because of war and politics.

Hiroko Tanaka, a Japanese woman, is the protagonist of *Burnt Shadows*. She survived the 1945 atomic bombing at Nagasaki. She lost both her father and her fiancé, Konrad Weisse, in the explosion. She had to leave Japan, migrate to Canada, and then to India for survival. She travels to India in 1947 to meet Weisse's half-sister, Ilse, and her husband, James Burton. There, she met Sajjad Ali Ashraf and got engaged in a romantic relationship with him and further got married. However, because of the partition of India, they had to leave India and settle in Karachi, Pakistan, which gave Sajjad a diasporic identity. After the death of Sajjad, Hiroko took her final journey from Pakistan to New York to live with Ilse and Kim Burton. The novel's plot reveals the experiences and struggles of the Diasporas in assimilating to the cultures of the hostland by using different survival tactics while maintaining the culture of their homeland.



OBJECTIVES

1. To analyze the portrayal of the Diaspora in the novel.
2. To explore the theme of adaptation and resilience through the experiences of the diasporic characters in the novel.
3. To discuss the various survival strategies used by the Diaspora in the hostland.

METHODOLOGY

The study is based on a qualitative method, and emphasis is laid on the close reading and analysis of all the primary and secondary sources. The theoretical framework of postcolonialism is considered for the study. The 7th edition of APA style is followed for the citation.

ANALYSIS

Hiroko Tanaka, is a survivor of the atomic bombing on Nagasaki in the year 1945. She lost her father and her fiancé in the explosion. Shamsie (2019) described the horror of the bombing as:

Hiroko runs her fingers along her back as she climbs the stairs down which, minutes earlier, she had followed Konrad. There is feeling, then no feeling, skin and something else. Where there is skin, there is feeling. Where there is something else there is none. Her fingers pluck at shreds embedded in the something else. Shreds of what-skin or silk? She shrugs off the kimono. It falls from her shoulders, but does not touch the ground. Something keeps it attached to her. (p. 26)

Though she survived, she got three permanent bird-shaped burns on her back, which became her identity throughout her life. Hiroko states to Ilse, "I don't want to hide these burns on my back, but I don't want people to judge me by them either. Hibakusha. I hate that word. It reduces you to the bomb. Every atom of you" (Shamsie, 2019, p.100).



Moreover, she had to suffer discrimination for being the other because of her identity as a survivor of a nuclear explosion. She expressed how “she had started to feel that the word ‘hibakusha’ had started to consume her life. To the Japanese she was nothing beyond an explosion-affected person that was her defining feature” (Shamsie, 2019, p. 49).

After the bombing, she constantly migrated from one place to another for survival. Hiroko started her journey from Japan to Canada, Canada to India, India to Pakistan, and finally from Pakistan to New York. Her movement from one place to another gave her the identity of a Diaspora throughout her life. Hiroko Tanaka can adapt to the values and practices of host cultures. Hiroko had shown keen interest in learning the culture of the hostland. She states, “I’d like to see your Delhi, Sajjad. Would you take me there some day?” (Shamsie, 2019, p. 79). Shamsie, throughout her novel, has highlighted the assimilative qualities of Hiroko, from learning the language, changing the dressing style, converting the religion, etc.

Learning the Language of the Hostland

Culture plays a pivotal role in creating a person’s identity. Culture is ever-evolving in nature. When two cultures come into contact with each other, it gives rise to a hybrid culture. When a person migrates to a new place, they are bound to assimilate into the new culture as a survival strategy. However, they always keep the culture of their origin. Language is intricately connected to culture and it plays a significant role in creating the identity of the Diaspora. Language is the means of communication that helps pass on a place’s cultural values, beliefs, and traditions from one person to another. Thus, the Diaspora must learn the language of the hostland as an essential survival strategy.

While living in Delhi, Hiroko felt the need to learn the Urdu language. Moving to Delhi was a cultural shock for Hiroko, with new languages and cultures around her. She cannot connect with the local people because of her inability to speak Urdu. So, she



decides to learn Urdu from Sajjad Ashraf as a strategy to adapt herself to the culture of her new hostland. Hiroko states, "I'd like to learn the language they speak here" (Shamsie, 2019, p. 57). Assimilation with the culture of the hostland gives the Diasporas a sense of home in the alien land. Thus, it is through learning the language of the hostland that the Diasporas assimilate into the new culture.

Apart from learning Urdu to assimilate with the new culture, she also used it to find a suitable job for herself. Hiroko was a polyglot who could fluently speak Japanese, English, and German. So, she knew that learning the Urdu language would make her suitable for the job of a translator in Delhi, as there would be many people in need of a translator who is well-versed in all three languages. Even after her move to Pakistan, she used her knowledge of Urdu to get a job as a teacher at a school. Through her job as a teacher, she was able to win over the trust of the students and, consequently, the trust of their mothers, who were her neighbors. Thus, through acquiring the Urdu language, she was able to secure herself financially and gain acceptance in the society around her.

Converting Religion to Assimilate to the Host Culture

Hiroko and Sajjad belonged to different religions. Hiroko was Japanese, and because of her religion, Sajjad's mother was not ready to accept her as his wife. Sajjad told Hiroko that Muslims are not allowed to marry outside of their religion unless the other person is a Jew or a Christian. Due to this reason, Hiroko converted herself to Islam and got married to Sajjad.

Sajjad's world completely differed from Hiroko's, leading to a cultural shock. Nevertheless, Hiroko was brave enough to adapt to the new culture and become a part of Sajjad's community. She assimilates with Islamic society's cultural values and traditions while preserving her homeland's culture. Though she does not know the original meaning of the verses from the Quran, she still recites them regularly as a part of her newly converted religion. Even after reciting the Kalma three times during their



marriage, when Sajjad asked her if she wanted to know what it meant, Hiroko replied “No. I’m not saying it because I believe it. I’m saying it because I see no reason to make things more difficult for you with your family than is necessary” (Shamsie, 2019, p. 118). Shamsie (2019) further highlights, “The morning of Raza’s departure from Karachi, Hiroko woke with the dawn azan as was her practice. She loves to hear the echoes of Arabic dropping gently into the courtyard...equal to his” (p. 217). This conversion of Hiroko to Islam can be counted as the tactic she adopted to become a part of the host culture. Furthermore, her practice of Islam is an example of hybridity, where she mingles the elements of Islam with the culture of her homeland. This helped Hiroko create a new identity, which would help her in the struggle for survival in the hostland.

Adapting the Dressing Code of the Host Culture

The cultures and traditions of Japan are very different from those of India and Pakistan. Being a modern girl from Japan, she wears jeans, deep-cut necklines, and smokes. However, after marrying Sajjad and settling in Pakistan, she adjusted her dressing style to Pakistan’s culture. She chose to wear salwar kameez and pajamas instead of jeans and quit smoking. “She had packed away her dresses and taken to wearing salwar kameezes at home, though previously they were garments she reserved for funerals and other ceremonies with a religious component” (Shamsie, 2019, p. 130). By adjusting according to the host culture, she got the opportunity to integrate herself into the local community and create relationships with the people around her. It also signifies her willingness to become a part of the new society, which brought her closer to the new nation’s culture. Furthermore, this strategy also helped her reduce the chances of facing discrimination for being a foreigner, as it helped her avoid standing out as an outsider.

Preservation of the Homeland Culture

With the assimilation and cultural hybridity, preserving the culture and traditions of the homeland is also equally crucial for the Diasporas. It helps the Diaspora maintain their



identity and sense of belonging. Though Hiroko is assimilating and adapting the culture of the hostland by learning its language, changing the dress code, and converting herself to the new religion as a survival strategy, she always reminisces about the culture of her homeland, Japan. Hiroko states, “Do you see those flowers on that hillside, Ilse? I want to know their names in Japanese. I want to hear Japanese. I want tea that tastes the way tea should taste in my understanding of tea” (Shamsie, 2019, p. 99). This statement by Hiroko proves her love for and nostalgic feeling for Japan. Though, for her survival, she adapted herself to the host culture, she still wants to preserve the Japanese culture throughout her life. She had passed her knowledge of the Japanese language to her son, Raza, to preserve her Japanese roots, eventually giving her a sense of continuity.

Staying Connected to the People From the Homeland

Diasporas often long for a sense of belonging in the hostland. Staying connected to the Diasporas from the same origin can help somewhat negotiate cultural alienation. In *Burnt Shadows*, Shamsie (2019) presents how Hiroko tried to stay connected to Japanese Diasporas that gave her a sense of home in Karachi:

Those monthly meetings had started in early '48...he'd met a Japanese woman, her husband worked at the Embassy, she was sitting in one of the cafes waiting for Sajjad to bring Hiroko to meet her. Through her, Hiroko met the other Japanese wives in Karachi and entered their weekly gatherings at Jimmy's – 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. (p. 140)

Resilience

Hiroko showcases enormous resilience throughout her journey from one place to another. She had adjusted to the new environment in Delhi, Karachi, and New York.



Undoubtedly, she faced many problems in assimilating to the host culture, but she negotiated every challenge with courage. Shamsie rightfully remarks, "She has become, in fact, a figure out of myth. The character who loses everything and is born a new in blood" (Shamsie, 2019, pp. 48-49).

Despite many hurdles, Hiroko never loses hope. She is confident enough to create a new identity for herself in all situations. She endured all her difficulties with courage, and through her survival strategies, she can feel at home even in the hostlands. She did everything possible to create an identity for herself in the hostland by assimilation into the host culture. Though she is nostalgic for her homeland, she wholeheartedly mingles with other cultures and traditions, which help her create multiple identities. Hiroko states, "I want to look like the people around me. I want people to disapprove when I break the rules and not simply to think that I don't know better" (Shamsie, 2019, p. 99). Hiroko's resilience helped her learn a new language and adjust herself to the host country's culture. Moreover, it helped her cope with the discrimination she faced in Karachi because she was an outsider and a survivor of the atomic bombing.

She was always open to evolution. From her first migration to Delhi till her last, to New York, she always had the "continued willingness to enter into new experiences without too much concern for whether anyone else might consider it either foolishness or frivolity" (Shamsie, 2019, p. 249). Thus, Sajjad rightfully commented, "She was a woman who had learnt that she could leave everything behind, and survive" (Shamsie, 2019, p. 135).

CONCLUSION

Through the character of Hiroko, Shamsie highlights how it is essential for the Diasporas to adopt a survival strategy to achieve inclusivity in the hostland. Hiroko Tanaka, who crosses several borders, proves that following some survival tactics could help the Diaspora create an identity of their own in the hostland. Learning the language of the



hostland comes first, as it acts as a tool that helps adapt to the new culture. Apart from this, it also helps create interpersonal relationships with society and achieve financial stability in the hostland. Other than language, adapting the dress code and converting oneself to the religion of the host nation helps the Diasporas prevent themselves from facing discrimination and hostilities based on racism and other contexts. Moreover, Diasporas should preserve the cultures of the homeland and should stay connected to Diaspora communities belonging to the same origin to get a sense of security in the hostland. In the end, resilience is the key strategy for the Diasporas to cope with the crisis of displacement, identity, and loss in the hostland. Thus, by adopting the rightful survival strategies, the Diaspora could create new identities while preserving the culture of their origin.

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