

THE NOVEL AS A FORM OF DEVELOPMENT EDUCATION

Douglas Hamilton

Shamsie, K (2009) *Burnt Shadows* (London: Bloomsbury) and (2017) *Home Fire* (London: Bloomsbury).

It's often argued that you can learn more about world politics, society and history through novels than you can through any number of academic textbooks, news stories or documentaries. Never has this been truer than with two novels by the Pakistani writer Kamila Shamsie – *Burnt Shadows* (2009) and *Home Fire* (2017). *Burnt Shadows* is an emotional and intensely written epic set against key events in modern world history - from the United States (US) nuclear attack in Nagasaki, and the immense human suffering and continuing political consequences it created, to the post 9/11 world of US hegemony and arrogance. The story concerns two families whose multi-national members - Japanese, German, Indian, English, Pakistani and north American – live through the personal consequences of nuclear atrocity, the violent British partition of Pakistan from India, the development of the new Islamic Pakistan, imperial US and Soviet involvement in Afghanistan, and the post-Iraqi war and Osama Bin Laden years of today.

The novel is a human and highly personal story that looks deeply into what racial, religious and national identity mean within the complex and unequal cultural relationships that have been produced between the 'developing' and 'developed' worlds, the 'backward' and the 'advanced'. It's also a moving story of ordinary lives and emotions caught up in the savage *realpolitik* of the modern day. With a number of the characters being multilingual - Japanese, English, German, Urdu and Pashto are spoken - Kamila Shamsie offers fascinating insights into the beauty of languages, and how words conjure up different meanings and nuance depending on the tongue being spoken. Place, identity and language are given centrality. At one point a character tellingly says: 'but I'm at home in the idea of foreignness' (2009: 143); a sentiment so common, but little understood in the 'developed' world today.

Perhaps Kamila Shamsie's greatest strength is how she shows the deep humanity, most often ignored, which somehow survives behind the great and

typically bloody events of the contemporary world. Through her enthralling stories she manages to inform, illuminate and provide understanding. Another great novelist, the Indian writer Arundhati Roy, comes to mind, especially her magnificent novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017), set against Indian history in the 20th century. However, *Burnt Shadows* is arguably more accessible, more of a page-turner and more of a thriller, but no less worthy as a result.

Kamila Shamsie's most recent novel, *Home Fire*, already the winner of the Women's Prize for Fiction in 2018 and longlisted for the Man Booker Prize in 2017, as well as the recipient of a number of other awards, is shorter, less epic, but equally compelling. Each section of the novel is written from the individual perspective of the main characters – the members of two Pakistani families living in present day London. Each tells their own story and that of their interweaving lives – the elder sister Isme finally being able to go to the US to do a PhD, her sister and brother, the twins Aneeka and Parvaiz, going their own distinctive ways, and Eamonn, the son of a reactionary Pakistani-born British Home Secretary. The novel subtly explores the personal conflicts and contradictions of four quite different young people living with the burden of their respective overbearing fathers, and how each one deals with that in their own and quite singular manner. As in *Home Fire*, it deals with themes of love, passion, secrecy, commitment, betrayal and familial bonding.

Kamila Shamsie offers a humane and necessary understanding of how Muslim families live and survive under constant suspicion of being terrorists during a time of ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) atrocities and the paranoid national and global state security response. As a recurring theme in her work, she highlights well the conflicting and painful relationship between the personal, the cultural and the political. In so doing, she provides not just sympathy but, more importantly, empathy for what it is to be Muslim today in a 'foreign' country. With her well-defined characters, especially women, and fluent prose and story-telling, she shows the continuing iniquitous relationship between East and West, rich and poor, male and female, and black and white. Kamila Shamsie is a writer to cherish.

References

Roy, A (2017) *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, London: Penguin.

Douglas Hamilton has worked as a political economist in a number of research bodies in Scotland, England and Ireland. He has a PhD in Economic and Political Geography and has written extensively in academic and other journals. He has lived in Spain for over fifteen years.