South American Publishing

SAP Community and Interculturality in Dialogue. 2026; 6:178
doi: 10.62486/cid2026178

REVIEW

War, Migration and Environmental Consequences: A Green Reading of Kamila Shamsie's Burnt Shadows

Guerra, migración y consecuencias ambientales: una lectura ecológica de Burnt Shadows de Kamila Shamsie

Md. Muslim[1] ✉, Prasunjay Kumar Sinha[1]

[1]Department of English, Veer Kunwar Singh University. Arrah-802301, India.

Cite as
Muslim M, Kumar Sinha P. War, Migration and Environmental Consequences: A Green Reading of Kamila Shamsie's Burnt Shadows. SAP Community and Interculturality in Dialogue. 2026; 6:178. https://doi.org/10.56294/cid2026178

Publication History
Submitted: 15-01-2026
Revised: 18-03-2026
Accepted: 02-06-2026
Published: 03-06-2026

Corresponding Author
Md. Muslim ✉

ABSTRACT

Introduction: Kamila Shamsie's Burnt Shadows is a transnational novel that moves across multiple historical moments shaped by war, migration, and political violence. Beyond its exploration of human suffering and displacement, the narrative also reflects profound environmental consequences resulting from global conflicts.
Objective: this study aims to examine the novel through an ecocritical perspective, highlighting how environmental degradation is interconnected with socio-political upheavals and historical trauma.
Method: using the theoretical framework of green criticism, the research analyzes key historical events depicted in the novel—such as the atomic bombing of Nagasaki, the Partition of India, the Afghan war, and the post-9/11 global conflict. The study focuses on the representation of landscapes, environmental imagery, and metaphorical associations between ecological damage and fractured identities.
Results: the analysis reveals that environmental destruction in the novel parallels human trauma and displacement. Landscapes marked by burning, division, and devastation function as symbolic reflections of psychological and cultural fragmentation. Nature emerges not merely as a background setting but as both witness to and victim of violence, emphasizing the interdependence between ecological systems and human history.
Conclusion: the study concludes that ecological trauma is deeply embedded in the thematic structure of Burnt Shadows. The novel ultimately calls for environmental consciousness, historical responsibility, and a more sustainable global future.

Keywords: Kamila Shamsie's; Transnational Novel; War; Trauma; Displacement; Environmental Degradation; Ecocritical Approach; Socio-Political Upheavals.

RESUMEN

Introducción: Burnt Shadows, de Kamila Shamsie, es una novela transnacional que recorre múltiples momentos históricos marcados por la guerra, la migración y la violencia política. Más allá de su exploración del sufrimiento humano y el desplazamiento, la narración refleja también las profundas consecuencias medioambientales derivadas de los conflictos globales.
Objetivo: este estudio tiene como objetivo examinar la novela desde una perspectiva ecocrítica, poniendo de relieve cómo la degradación medioambiental está interrelacionada con las convulsiones sociopolíticas y el trauma histórico.
Método: utilizando el marco teórico de la crítica verde, la investigación analiza acontecimientos históricos clave representados en la novela, como el bombardeo atómico de Nagasaki, la partición de la India, la guerra de Afganistán y el conflicto global posterior al 11 de septiembre. El estudio se centra en la representación de paisajes, las imágenes medioambientales y las asociaciones metafóricas entre el daño ecológico y las identidades fracturadas.
Resultados: el análisis revela que la destrucción medioambiental en la novela es paralela al trauma humano y al desplazamiento. Los paisajes marcados por el fuego, la división y la devastación funcionan como reflejos simbólicos de la fragmentación psicológica y cultural. La naturaleza emerge no solo como un escenario de fondo, sino como testigo y víctima de la violencia, lo que subraya la interdependencia entre los sistemas ecológicos y la historia humana.
Conclusión: el estudio concluye que el trauma ecológico está profundamente arraigado en la estructura temática de Burnt Shadows. La novela, en última instancia, hace un llamamiento a la conciencia medioambiental, la responsabilidad histórica y un futuro global más sostenible.

Palabras clave: Kamila Shamsie; Novela Transnacional; Guerra; Trauma; Desplazamiento; Degradación Medioambiental; Enfoque Ecocrítico; Agitaciones Sociopolíticas.

© 2026; The Authors. This Open access article is distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

INTRODUCTION

Kamila Shamsie's Burnt Shadows (2009) begins amidst the catastrophic aftermath of the atomic bombing of Nagasaki in 1945 and concludes in the tense, post-9/11 global atmosphere, spanning continents and decades. The narrative traverses diverse geopolitical terrains—Japan, India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the United States—tracing the lives of characters whose fates are intimately shaped by historical violence, forced migration, and ideological conflict. Much of the scholarly discourse around the novel has focused on its powerful depiction of war, personal trauma, identity, and transnational mobility. However, a crucial and often underexplored dimension of the novel lies in its subtle but profound engagement with environmental consequences. A green or ecocritical reading reveals the underlying ecological consciousness embedded in the narrative—a consciousness that weaves together human suffering and environmental degradation as interdependent outcomes of global conflict.[1]

Ecocriticism, a growing field in literary studies, explores the intricate relationship between literature and the natural environment. It recognizes that texts can function as cultural artifacts that both reflect and interrogate human interactions with the non-human world.[2] Through this lens, Burnt Shadows becomes not just a historical or political novel, but an ecological narrative that chronicles the scars inflicted upon the earth alongside those endured by individuals. Shamsie's portrayal of landscapes—whether devastated by atomic radiation in Japan, reshaped by Partition in India, destabilized by conflict in Afghanistan, or militarized in post-9/11 America—emphasizes that the environment is not a static backdrop but a dynamic and damaged participant in historical processes.[3]

The novel illustrates how war-induced migrations disrupt not only social and cultural continuity but also ecological equilibrium. As characters move across borders in search of safety or belonging, they enter new ecosystems—both natural and urban—that have been altered by human conflict[2]. These shifting environments reflect the instability of the characters' inner worlds, but also the broader damage inflicted upon the planet by imperial ambitions and militaristic agendas. Shamsie's work thus offers a critical exploration of how deeply entangled human and environmental histories are.

This paper seeks to examine Burnt Shadows within the ecocritical framework, arguing that environmental themes, though not overtly foregrounded, are integral to the novel's structure and meaning. By drawing attention to the environmental costs of war and displacement, Shamsie extends the scope of literary testimony to include not just the loss of human life, but the enduring wounds inflicted upon nature and the

earth's ecosystems.

DEVELOPMENT

War and Environmental Violence

The novel's powerful opening in Burnt Shadows situates the reader in Nagasaki during the final moments before and after the atomic bombing in 1945, offering a chilling glimpse into the immense environmental destruction that accompanies modern warfare. Through the lens of Hiroko Tanaka's perspective, Kamila Shamsie presents the bombing not only as a humanitarian tragedy but also as an ecological apocalypse. The detonation of the atomic bomb annihilates human life on a massive scale, but its devastation extends far beyond human casualties. The natural world—its air, soil, water, animals, and vegetation—is irrevocably altered. The radiation emitted poisons the environment, blackens the skies, sterilizes the soil, and sets into motion a long-lasting ecological decay that transcends generations.[4]

Shamsie draws a powerful visual and symbolic connection between the human and the environmental through Hiroko's "burnt shadows"—the bird-shaped imprints permanently scorched onto her back. These markings become emblematic not only of Hiroko's trauma but also of the incinerated landscape of Nagasaki. Her body becomes a living record of environmental destruction, reinforcing the idea that war embeds itself into the very skin of the earth and the flesh of its people.[5] This embodied metaphor aligns with ecocritic Rob Nixon's theory of "slow violence," which describes environmental destruction that is incremental, invisible, and temporally diffused. In the case of Nagasaki, the radioactive aftermath lingers for decades, manifesting as cancers, birth defects, and persistent ecological ruin—what can be described as the ecological inheritance of war.

As Hiroko migrates from Japan to Delhi, then to Karachi, and finally to New York, her journey maps a trail of geopolitical crises, each leaving behind not only psychological scars but ecological imprints. The Partition of India in 1947, often framed solely as a human tragedy, is subtly depicted by Shamsie as an event that fragmented not only nations but also ecosystems. Rivers that once united regions are now divided by borders, forests are split or destroyed, and traditional agricultural systems are disrupted, altering the environmental balance of the subcontinent. These historical events remind us that war and migration are not just human catastrophes; they are deeply ecological crises. Shamsie, with quiet force, reveals the profound interdependence of environmental integrity and human history.

Mirgation and the ecology of displacement

Migration in Kamila Shamsie's Burnt Shadows is intricately connected to the larger geopolitical forces of war, colonization, and their enduring aftermath. The central characters—Hiroko, Sajjad, Raza, and Kim—are not merely individuals displaced by conflict but symbolic figures whose migratory journeys reflect the fragmentation and reconfiguration of both human communities and the ecological landscapes they inhabit. Their transnational movements, set against a backdrop of war and political unrest, underscore how migration becomes a response to systemic rupture—one that reverberates through bodies, homes, and the environment.[6] A broadened ecocritical framework that includes cultural and social ecologies allows for a deeper understanding of how such dislocations unsettle not only lives but entire environmental contexts.

For Hiroko, the act of moving from one place to another is accompanied by an acute sense of ecological dissonance. Her transition from the cool, serene, mountainous terrain of Nagasaki to the intense, dry heat and dense urbanity of Partition-era Delhi

signifies a profound shift not only in climate and geography but in cultural rhythm and identity. These transitions reflect what environmental critic Lawrence Buell refers to as the "environmental imagination"—how individuals perceive, internalize, and adapt to their changing environments. Hiroko's journey is therefore not only political and emotional but deeply ecological, embodying the shift from one environmental sensibility to another.

The various urban settings in the novel—Delhi, Karachi, Kabul, and New York—are depicted as ecological palimpsests, each layered with the scars and residues of historical violence. These cities are not static backgrounds but dynamic terrains where environmental degradation mirrors political instability. In particular, Shamsie's depiction of Karachi is steeped in sensory overload—dust, smog, relentless construction noise—signaling the collapse of ecological order under the weight of postcolonial urban chaos. Overpopulation, infrastructure decay, and the exhaustion of natural resources mark the city as a site of ecological exhaustion.

Migration, then, in Burnt Shadows, is more than a narrative of loss and relocation; it is an ecological event that transforms both people and their surroundings. The reshaping of identity is mirrored by the reshaping of landscapes. Through her nuanced portrayal of migratory experience, Shamsie reveals how displaced individuals, in adapting to new environments, carry with them ecological memories of their pasts while confronting the environmental anxieties of their present.

Landscapes of conflict: from Afghanistan to America

The sections of Burnt Shadows set in Afghanistan represent a significant shift in both narrative tone and thematic focus, where the environment emerges not just as a backdrop but as an active and contested space in the machinery of war. The Afghan landscape—its rugged mountains, arid deserts, and porous borderlands—is portrayed by Shamsie with stark realism and political clarity. These terrains are not romanticized or reduced to orientalist images; instead, they are depicted as scarred and strategic zones, shaped by decades of invasion, resistance, and geopolitical maneuvering. The land itself becomes a silent witness to suffering, rebellion, and the relentless cycle of occupation and destruction.

Shamsie's portrayal emphasizes that warfare in Afghanistan is not limited to human casualties; it extends deeply into the ecological realm. The bombing campaigns led by foreign forces do not only target insurgents—they raze forests, contaminate water bodies, displace nomadic and pastoral communities, and obliterate the fragile ecosystems that sustain life in this already challenging terrain. This ecological destruction resonates with the term "ecocide," a concept used to describe the systematic annihilation of the natural environment during times of war. Afghanistan, in the novel, stands as a harrowing example of how militarization transforms geography into a victim of imperial ambitions.

In stark contrast to the ravaged natural landscapes of Afghanistan, New York City is presented as a sanitized, industrial, and hyper-controlled capitalist metropolis. Yet, following the events of 9/11, the city is also enveloped in a different kind of environmental unease—an ecology of fear. Shamsie presents a psychological landscape defined by surveillance, suspicion, and the looming threat of biological warfare. The environment in this urban setting is manipulated not through physical destruction but through securitization and the manufacturing of paranoia. Airspace is monitored, borders are fortified, and cities become zones of invisible warfare.

Through these contrasting spaces—Afghanistan and New York—Shamsie critiques the global reach of militarism and its ecological consequences. Modern war, she suggests, is no longer confined to traditional battlefields; it infiltrates the most intimate of spaces—natural habitats, cities, and the human psyche—altering how people live, breathe, and exist within their environments.

The Symbolism of Nature in Burnt Shadows

In Burnt Shadows, nature functions not only as a physical presence but as a rich symbolic layer interwoven with memory, trauma, and survival. Kamila Shamsie uses elements of the natural world—gardens, birds, trees, seasons—not as passive scenery but as active conveyors of emotional depth and political commentary. These natural symbols, often quiet and subtle, emerge as fragile pockets of peace amidst the chaos of war and displacement, offering moments of beauty and resistance in an otherwise violent and unstable world.

One of the earliest examples of this symbolic use of nature is the garden in Delhi, where Hiroko finds temporary solace after fleeing the devastation of Nagasaki. The garden becomes a space of healing and connection, representing the possibility of regeneration and continuity, even in the aftermath of destruction. Similarly, the birds in Nagasaki and later in Karachi hold profound metaphorical significance. In Nagasaki, the birds fall from the sky, victims of the atomic blast, a tragic image that parallels the sudden collapse of innocence and natural order. In Karachi, birds return as motifs of hope and continuity—migratory creatures that mirror Hiroko's own journey across borders and traumas. Their capacity for flight symbolizes both freedom and vulnerability, making them ecological indicators of a world disrupted by human violence.

Shamsie also uses weather and seasonal imagery to mirror emotional and political climates. The stifling heat of Delhi during the Partition years underscores the tension, fear, and unrest of the time. The cold desolation of post-bombing Nagasaki mirrors Hiroko's grief and isolation. In Afghanistan, the dusty, suffocating winds evoke both the literal aridness of the land and the metaphorical barrenness caused by war. These environmental cues align with the emotional states of the characters, enhancing the narrative's sensory and psychological depth.[7]

By weaving emotional experiences with environmental symbols, Shamsie emphasizes the affective power of ecology. The natural world in Burnt Shadows becomes a space where memory resides, where identity is negotiated, and where resistance quietly takes root. Through this symbolic ecology, Shamsie deepens the reader's understanding of the intertwined destinies of people and their environments, reinforcing the notion that ecological and emotional survival are often inseparable.[8]

https://doi.org/10.62486/cid2026178

Globalization, Empire, And Environmental Exploration

A green reading of Burnt Shadows necessitates an in-depth engagement with the novel's powerful critique of imperialism, colonial legacies, and the environmental consequences of globalization. Kamila Shamsie does not present ecological issues in isolation but situates them within the broader context of political domination and systemic exploitation. The wars and displacements that define the lives of the characters—from Nagasaki to Delhi, from Karachi to New York and Afghanistan—are not random historical accidents. Rather, they are rooted in deliberate imperial agendas and Cold War interventions, which shape both human and ecological destinies.

These conflicts are driven by global power structures that rely on resource extraction and militarized geopolitics. The atomic bombing of Nagasaki, the U.S.-backed militarization of Pakistan, and the invasion of Afghanistan are all emblematic of empire-building strategies that disregard both human life and environmental stability. Shamsie subtly but powerfully draws attention to how these geopolitical actions degrade landscapes, pollute environments, and disrupt traditional ecologies. The barren mountains of Afghanistan, the radioactive ruins of Nagasaki, and the urban decay in post-Partition cities like Delhi and Karachi serve as haunting reminders of ecological trauma. In this context, nature is not just a passive backdrop but an active casualty in the machinery of war and empire[9].

By intertwining the personal experiences of characters with these destructive global processes, Shamsie aligns herself with the principles of postcolonial ecocriticism—a field that recognizes the intersection between environmental degradation and colonial exploitation. Scholars such as Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin emphasize that ecological justice cannot be separated from the historical and political injustices of empire. Burnt Shadows brings this philosophy to life by showing how people in the Global South bear the brunt of environmental devastation caused by the ambitions of powerful nations.

Through this lens, the novel critiques not only the devastation of war and displacement but also the underlying systems that commodify both land and lives. Shamsie's narrative underscores that environmental destruction is often inseparable from the global politics of control, consumption, and conquest. In doing so, she calls for an ecological consciousness that is also historically and ethically aware.

Hope, Healing, And Ecological Futures

Despite the devastation and trauma that permeate Burnt Shadows, Kamila Shamsie skillfully infuses the narrative with glimmers of hope and resilience. The novel does not leave readers mired in despair; instead, it points toward the possibility of healing—personal, cultural, and ecological. Even within its bleak and war-torn landscapes, moments of profound human connection and the endurance of nature suggest an ecological ethic rooted in care, regeneration, and mutual dependence.

Characters like Hiroko and Raza embody the strength to persevere amidst overwhelming loss. Hiroko's journey, from the ashes of Nagasaki to the turbulent terrains of Delhi, Karachi, and Afghanistan, is not only one of survival but of quiet resistance and moral introspection. Her ability to form deep, cross-cultural relationships—despite being repeatedly uprooted by forces beyond her control—reveals a commitment to empathy and understanding. This human resilience is mirrored by the natural world itself, which, though scarred by radiation, bombs, and displacement, continues to assert its presence. Shamsie does not frame nature merely as a passive victim of human violence; rather, she underscores its capacity for regeneration. Birds, gardens, and landscapes reappear throughout the novel as symbols of persistence, reminding readers of the earth's potential to recover, given care and time.

Ecocriticism often poses the difficult question of what remains after ecological catastrophe and cultural fragmentation. In Burnt Shadows, the answer emerges through memory, storytelling, and the forging of new solidarities. Hiroko's memories, her letters, and her evolving relationships become vehicles through which fragmented histories are preserved and reconciled. Storytelling becomes an act of ecological and cultural restoration—a way of acknowledging trauma while also imagining alternative futures.

The final sections of the novel, set against the backdrop of post-9/11 global tension, push readers to reflect on the full spectrum of warfare's cost—not only in terms of human casualties but also ecological consequences. Shamsie invites a broader ecological imagination, one that is not confined by borders or national interests. She insists on the interconnectedness of all life and calls for a recognition of our shared vulnerability on this planet. In doing so, Burnt Shadows affirms the urgent need for ecological ethics rooted in empathy, memory, and global responsibility.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine the ecological dimensions of Burnt Shadows through an ecocritical framework, arguing that environmental degradation is inseparable from the socio-political conflicts represented in the novel. The analysis confirms that Shamsie integrates ecological trauma into the very structure of her narrative. The atomic bombing of Nagasaki, the Partition of India, the Afghan war, and the post-9/11 conflicts are shown to produce not only human displacement and psychological suffering but also lasting environmental damage. The research demonstrates that nature in the novel functions as an active presence—scarred, resilient, and symbolically intertwined with fractured identities and historical memory. Thus, the objective of highlighting the interconnectedness between ecological harm and geopolitical violence is clearly fulfilled.

The findings establish three key points: first, environmental destruction parallels human trauma; second, landscapes operate as metaphors for historical rupture; and third, ecological consciousness in the novel challenges anthropocentric readings of war narratives. Ultimately, Burnt Shadows advances a vision of environmental justice grounded in memory, responsibility, and global interdependence.

Future research may further explore how transnational war literature contributes to contemporary climate discourse—can comparative ecocritical studies of postcolonial novels deepen our understanding of literature's role in shaping planetary ethics?

https://doi.org/10.62486/cid2026178

FINANCING

The authors did not receive financing for the development of this research.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

AUTHORSHIP CONTRIBUTION

Conceptualization: Md Muslim, Prasunjay Kumar Sinha.
Formal analysis: Md Muslim, Prasunjay Kumar Sinha.
Research: Md Muslim, Prasunjay Kumar Sinha.
Methodology: Md Muslim, Prasunjay Kumar Sinha.
Supervision: Prasunjay Kumar Sinha.
Writing – original draft: Md Muslim, Prasunjay Kumar Sinha.
Writing –review and editing: Md Muslim, Prasunjay Kumar Sinha.

REFERENCES

1. Buell L. The environmental imagination: Thoreau, nature writing, and the formation of American culture. Harvard University Press; 1995.

2. Huggan G, Tiffin H. Postcolonial ecocriticism: Literature, animals, environment. Routledge; 2015.

3. Nixon R. Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor. Harvard University Press; 2011.

4. Zinck P. Eyeless in Guantanamo: Vanishing Horizons in Kamila Shamsie's Burnt Shadows. Commonw Essays Stud. 2010;33(33.1):45–54.

5. Garrard G. 11 Ecocriticism. Year's Work Crit Cult Theory. 2012;20(1):200–43.

6. DeLoughrey E, Handley GB. Postcolonial ecologies: Literatures of the environment. OUP USA; 2011.

7. Ghosh A. The great derangement: Climate change and the unthinkable. Penguin UK; 2018.

8. Heise UK. Sense of place and sense of planet: The environmental imagination of the global. Oxford University Press; 2008.

9. Estok SC. Ecocriticism and shakespeare: reading ecophobia. Springer; 2011.