

# READING GROUP GUIDE

## *Burnt Shadows*

*A Novel*

*by Kamila Shamsie*

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### About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *Burnt Shadows* are intended as resources to aid individual readers and book groups who would like to learn more about the author and this book. We hope that this guide will provide you a starting place for discussion, and suggest a variety of perspectives from which you might approach *Burnt Shadows*.

### About the Book

*Burnt Shadows* begins in Nagasaki at the end of World War II, and ends shortly after the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center. In between, the characters are tossed upon the swells of a turbulent half-century, their lives touched by the partition of India, the nuclear arms race, the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in South Asia, and the suppression of liberties in America after 9/11. But the novel does not merely present these events as a backdrop, rather it shows that human beings must reckon with them in highly personal ways; that an historic gesture may move a country's border (as with partition) or devastate a population (as with the atomic bomb), but, in the end, history is also a story about individual people and relationships.

A novel of uncommon ambition and scope, *Burnt Shadows* offers much to discuss.

## About the Author

**Kamila Shamsie** is the author of four novels, including *Kartography* and *Broken Verses*. She writes for *The Guardian*, *Index on Censorship*, *Prospect* and *the New Statesman* (UK), *Newsline and DAWN* (Pakistan) and *The Daily Star* (Bangladesh). She grew up in Karachi, and now lives in London.

## Discussion Questions

1. Early in the novel, Hiroko observes that during the World War II everything has been “distilled or distorted into its most functional form,” including a vegetable patch where once Azaleas grew, and she asks, “What prompted this falling-off of love?” Can you find other places in the novel where this idea is expressed? Is there a similarity between the garden and a suicide bomber?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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 pgs 294 to 295.
5. 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?
6. What does Sajjad mean when he says on pg 52 that he wants a “modern wife”? How do the women in *Burnt Shadows* each express their independence? And in what ways are they still captive to tradition?
7. Why does Elizabeth at first resist Sajjad and Hiroko’s affection for one another? Is she just trying to be practical? What is the nature of her resentment and concern?

8. 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?
9. Discuss the reasons that Abdullah joins a mujahideen training camp. Why is it tempting to Raza as well? What social pressures and conditions do you think could inspire you to take up arms in a similar fashion, or to become radicalized?
10. Shortly after Sajjad tells Hiroko that “everything about you is beautiful,” Elizabeth Burton, reflecting upon the Himalayas, thinks “what a pity beauty could be so meaningless.” What does this novel, which begins with the scarring of a woman’s back, have to say about beauty and truth?
11. Who, if anyone, is to blame for the death of Sajjad?
12. Is it irresponsible for Harry to send Raza to Afghanistan, given that he had promised Hiroko to keep him safe? Discuss his reasons for sending him, and Raza’s reasons for going.
13. Steve is highly suspicious of Raza’s past, in particular his early brush with the mujahideen. While Raza is, in truth, largely motivated by personal loyalties, is Steve nonetheless right to be suspicious of him? Is Steve’s paranoia a widespread phenomenon in the United States? Globally?
14. The forces of oppression and liberation course through this novel – from the Raj, to the partition of India, to fundamentalist Islam’s control of women in Pakistan, to the Patriot Act. Is *Burnt Shadows* asking what it means to liberate one’s self, to be free both personally and politically? Is there a difference? Consider, as well, Elizabeth’s flight from her husband, and her life in New York.
15. Discuss Kim Burton’s actions at the Canadian border. Would you have done the same thing? How does this act illustrate the larger themes of the novel?

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