

Ordinary Geopolitical Subjectivity and the Politics of Ordinary Life in Kamila Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows*

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Abstract

In Kamila Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows* (2009), most readers have focused on Hiroko Tanaka, seeing her nuclear trauma and movement across countries as the novel's main way of showing global violence. But Sajjad Ali Ashraf's story is just as important, even though it has been less discussed. His life shows how ordinary people, who are not political actors, are still shaped by the power of states and global forces. Sajjad is pushed out of Delhi after Partition and, decades later, killed in Karachi when a chance encounter is fatally misread by a man already primed for suspicion, showing that violence in states works through larger sociopolitical circumstances, postcolonial bureaucratic mismanagement, exclusion, and misrecognition rather than through dramatic events. The novel shifts attention from exceptional figures to everyday lives, revealing how sovereignty and global politics quietly shape domestic routines. Reading Sajjad in this way highlights what can be called ordinary geopolitical subjectivity, a way of understanding how displacement and power affect those who live outside the spotlight of history.

Keywords: *Kamila Shamsie, Burnt Shadows, Partition, ordinary geopolitics, slow violence, misrecognition, precarious life, political violence, Rob Nixon, Judith Butler*

Kamila Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows* (2009) tells the story of twentieth-century violence, beginning with the atomic bombing of Nagasaki in 1945, moving through the Partition of India and the Cold War, and ending with the post-9/11 War on terrorism. Most critics have focused on Hiroko Tanaka, the Japanese woman whose scarred body and travels across Japan, India, Pakistan, and the United States make her the most visible witness to history's disasters. Because she survived the atomic bomb, her trauma is written on her body, making violence easy to see and read. This focus on visible catastrophe has shaped how the novel is understood, but it has left quieter forms of violence less explored.

Shamsie's novel, however, also tells another story. Alongside Hiroko stands her husband, Sajjad Ali Ashraf, a Muslim man from Delhi. His life shows a different kind of harm that comes not from dramatic events but from slow processes like bureaucratic rules, displacement, and everyday pressures of political change. Hiroko's trauma is clear and immediate, but Sajjad's suffering builds slowly, hidden in daily life, so that it rarely looks like "history" while it is happening.

This paper argues that Sajjad's story reveals what can be called ordinary geopolitical subjectivity. This means that people who do not seek political power or take part in state projects still become shaped by politics through displacement, administrative negligence, and global security systems. Instead of being central figures in history, such people experience geopolitics through changes in their everyday routines, relationships, identities, social positions and nationalities due to changes made by forces outside their control. Sajjad is not a martyr or a revolutionary. He is shown as a man of simple pleasures: playing chess in Delhi gardens, cycling through alleys, and later building a domestic life in Karachi with music, family, and familiar habits. His ordinary hopes — marrying Hiroko, the woman he falls in love with, finding renewed hope in her after his mother's death, imagining a future together, buying a home in Delhi, the city of his birth and home of his family for seven generations — make clear that he is a common man with unremarkable ambitions. Yet modern political power does not act only on famous figures; it also intrudes into the lives of those who never imagine themselves part of history. Further, also in his new nation, his death at Karachi harbour while searching for his son Raza, is not just an accident but the result of a lifetime shaped by displacement, exclusion, and

suspicion. It shows how security systems can turn ordinary lives into sites of political consequence.

Sajjad's life proves that people do not need to enter conflicts or violent regimes to become its victim as his story shows how power works by reorganising common lives through decisions made elsewhere or through larger power politics. This perspective changes how we read *Burnt Shadows* as critics have rightly focused on Hiroko's scarred body as a clear sign of trauma, but Sajjad offers no single wound that makes violence easy to recognise. His suffering comes through small exclusions, paternalistic interventions, and bureaucratic rules that slowly reshape his life. Even his death avoids the drama of heroic sacrifice or tragic spectacle. It appears instead as the outcome of systemic suspicion, not personal choice. This contrast does not lessen Hiroko's trauma; rather, it broadens the novel's view of violence, showing that power also works through the slow transformation of ordinary existence. Violence, in this sense, does not need spectacle to have deep historical impact.

Before Partition in 1947 redrew the map of India, Sajjad's identity was deeply bound to Dilli, the old Mughal city with its lanes, neighbourhoods, and centuries of memory. His connection to the city was not abstract or political—it was lived through daily routines, familiar places, and ordinary practices that gave meaning to his life. Yet even before Partition, his everyday world was already shaped by the quiet hierarchies of colonial rule due to his employment in the British household. Working in the Burton household gave him stability but also placed him in a paternalistic relationship that limited his independence under James Burton. Colonial power here did not appear as open domination but as seemingly benevolent structures that quietly decided where Sajjad belonged and what choices he could make. The novel shows that Sajjad's vulnerability to political violence began long before Partition, in the ordinary workings of colonial authority that normalized inequality while appearing as everyday life. When he goes to meet Hiroko with marriage proposal in Mussoorie he accepts his position and wishes for the future with Hiroko in post British Delhi in one of the modern houses he wishes to buy themselves.

Later, when concerns of ordinary geopolitical subjectivity emerge, its foremost proof is Partition and when it happens, it is proven that people do become victims to stronger political apparatus. In case of Sajjad, he lost his home country not through riots or massacres but through bureaucratic rules and administrative decisions. James Burton arranged for Sajjad and Hiroko to travel to Istanbul, presenting it as a honeymoon and believing it would protect them from

unrest and chaos of ongoing partition. Burton's actions were not hostile but paternalistic, assuming he knew what was best for them and, Sajjad accepted because he thought it was temporary, but when he tried to return, officials told him that by leaving he had been classified as one of the Muslims who had chosen to migrate, a kind of label that could not be undone. The violence here lies in its impersonality: no one directly expelled him, no force was used, yet a bureaucratic category turned temporary absence into permanent exile. This shows how ordinary geopolitical subjectivity is created not only by dramatic events but also by administrative systems that quietly redefine lives under the guise of postcolonial bureaucratic order.

Sajjad's experience can be understood through Rob Nixon's idea of slow violence from his book, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011). Nixon defines slow violence as "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (Nixon 2). This slow violence Sajjad suffers is because he is a common man and he was not expelled by Partition's riots, but his loss of national identity came through paperwork, paternalistic interventions, and political classifications whose effects became clear only over time. Because violence is usually recognized through dramatic events, the procedural nature of Sajjad's exclusion hides the scale of his loss, even though it is irreversible. The nature this mismanagement and misrecognition which Sajjad suffers disguises the coercive force of political restructuring, making displacement look like an unfortunate accident rather than deliberate violence. Nixon also notes that temporal displacements "simplify violence and underestimate, in advance and in retrospect, the human and environmental costs" of forced uprooting (Nixon 3). This connects directly to Shamsie's narrative strategy based in Sajjad's exile, as takes up little space in the novel, yet its effects echo throughout his longing for Dilli, the fragile domestic life he builds in Karachi, and the sense of unfinished history that shapes his everyday existence. Slow violence, then, not only describes Sajjad's experience but also explains how ordinary geopolitical subjects are produced and helpless.

It is important to highlight that, even before Partition formally redrew national borders, Sajjad sensed that his world was already divided by colonial geography. The narrator describes his daily ride:

Sajjad Ali Ashraf had his eyes fixed on the sky as he cycled parallel to the Yamuna River, trying to locate the exact celestial point at which Dilli became Delhi. Dilli: his city... And

then... there was Delhi: city of the Raj, where every Englishman's bungalow had lush gardens, lined with red flowerpots (Shamsie 33).

This moment shows more than two names for the same city. It reveals how colonial power created unequal experiences of the same space. Dilli was lived through memory, intimacy, and belonging, while Delhi was organised by imperial authority and privilege. Sajjad's attempt to find the boundary between them shows that political divisions begin as lived experiences long before they become official borders. The Burton household, with its order and paternal authority, kept him close to colonial power but excluded him from it. Colonial paternalism here works as a kind of slow violence: it does not openly dominate but gradually narrows Sajjad's sense of belonging, making later displacement feel like the natural outcome of an already divided geography. This is evident when he voices his anger to James for mistreatment and false accusations:

I understood that the English might acknowledge their mistakes in order to maintain the illusion of their fairness and sense of justice, but they will not actually apologise for those mistakes when they are perpetrated on an Indian (Shamsie 111)

The conditional nature of Sajjad's belonging in the Burton household becomes clear in how quickly it can be withdrawn. In one scene, Hiroko reveals her Nagasaki scars, and Sajjad instinctively reaches out in compassion. Elizabeth Burton sees this moment and mistakes it for assault, expelling Sajjad before any explanation can be given and Hiroko clarifies that Sajjad "was only trying to be kind" (Shamsie 133), and the Burtons admit the mistake. Yet trust is not restored. Sajjad receives severance pay and a promise of a reference, but no equality. Eight years of service collapse in a single misunderstanding because his place in the household was never secure—it depended entirely on the Burtons' confidence. Once that confidence was shaken, his belonging proved conditional all along.

Here, Sajjad's personal anger points to a larger truth of the coercive and violent political circumstances of the British Raj. The colonial administration maintained a façade of fairness and benevolence, yet beneath this surface lay systemic inequality. By pretending goodness while refusing genuine accountability, the Raj legitimised its authority and concealed the structures of domination that continually subordinated Indian subjects. What makes Sajjad's exile especially troubling is the language used to carry it out. He is never formally expelled; instead, he is "helped" away by a colonial employer who believes he is protecting him.

Violence here operates through the state's ignorance, as Sajjad is forced into the category of "choosing" Pakistan. Burton's intervention, framed as protection, exemplifies colonial paternalism: the practice of concealing unequal power by presenting coercive decisions as acts of compassion. This is violence disguised as kindness, a mode of domination that legitimises authority precisely by masking its coercive force beneath the language of care. Although Burton's decision is ostensibly meant to protect Hiroko from another man-made disaster—the violence of Partition—it simultaneously strips Sajjad of agency, transforming his temporary departure into permanent exile.

Even when Sajjad builds a domestic life in Karachi—running a soap factory, raising a family, and recreating familiar routines—his belonging remains incomplete. Karachi is a place to live, but never truly a place to return. The absence of Dilli continues to shape his everyday life. Rob Nixon's description of the "inhabited impact of corrosive transnational forces" (Nixon 4) captures this condition: Sajjad does not just remember exile, he lives inside it. His ordinary geopolitical subjectivity is defined not only by the moment of displacement but by the ongoing need to live with its unfinished consequences. He accepts the aftermath of his lost home and accepts his life in Pakistan years later when he is talking to Harry Burton, son of James Burton when he reminisces:

'Dilli is Dilli...My first love. I would never have left it willingly. But those bastards didn't let me go home...I was in Istanbul...'You know, for a long time I blamed your father.'

'For what?'

'Everything.' Sajjad smiled.

'Yeah. I do that myself. Something about him makes it so easy.

You don't blame him any more?'

'Now I say this is my life, I must live it.'

'Muslim fatalism?'

'No, no. Pakistani resignation. It's a completely different thing.'(Shamsie 161)

This is the sense of resignation to violent histories that rendered Sajjad helpless and homeless and also points to postcolonial circumstances of Pakistan that include constant militarised and terror instability. For Sajjad, the fragility he experienced in the Burton

household continues to shape his life even after he settles in Karachi. Although he builds what looks like a stable domestic world—running a soap factory, raising a family, and filling his home with music, conversation, and routine—this stability never erases the insecurity beneath it, as he reveals when talking of Karachi during their walk at the fish harbour:

What I'm saying is, this is a city of comings and goings – even before Partition. These days it's the Afghans. Why sit in refugee camps when you can come to Karachi? (Shamsie 160)

His building a life and home in Karachi does not mean that his displacement has ended but he takes it as a way of life and living and sympathises with Afghans because he understands his own circumstances of choosing Karachi as he had nowhere else to go. Judith Butler's reflections on vulnerability in *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2004) help explain this condition when we discuss displaced people like Sajjad and other forced migrants. Butler argues that vulnerability is not unusual but part of human existence, rooted in our social and political dependence on others. Yet vulnerability is never shared equally. Political systems distribute security unevenly, leaving some lives more exposed to arbitrary violence and less likely to be recognised as worthy of protection or mourning. Sajjad's experience shows this inequality clearly. His loss of Dilli receives no public recognition, no institutional acknowledgement, and no political language through which it could be mourned. His grief survives only in the private routines of domestic life, where memory quietly replaces the recognition the state refuses to give. Butler's point clarifies not only Sajjad's vulnerability but also the political conditions that make ordinary lives perpetually insecure, exposed to invisible forms of violence precisely because they never appear extraordinary.

Butler further notes that vulnerability is unevenly distributed within political communities, so that some lives receive recognition and protection while others remain exposed and denied full public grievability (Butler XV). Sajjad's displacement illustrates this clearly. His exile from Dilli is never acknowledged as a political loss, nor is his continuing attachment to the city given collective recognition. Instead, exile is absorbed into private life, where longing persists without any institutional language to express it. Even after building a settled life in Karachi, Sajjad's condition remains precarious because the nation cannot restore what bureaucratic history has already taken away. Partition, therefore, persists not as a finished event but as an ongoing condition shaping his everyday existence.

Yet Shamsie does not reduce Sajjad to a passive victim. One of the novel's most striking achievements is its preservation of his rich inner life despite the structures that constrain it. His pleasures, friendships, rituals, music, and devotion to family form a kind of everyday agency that resists the totalising logic of geopolitical violence. This is not political sovereignty in the usual sense but an interior sovereignty grounded in ordinary human attachments. The novel insists that such ordinary forms of life have dignity even when they remain politically unrecognised. Sajjad's tragedy is not that vulnerability defeats vitality, but that geopolitical power eventually penetrates and destroys a world that has tried to remain outside its reach.

The culmination of Sajjad's story comes decades later at Karachi harbour, where the geopolitical forces that have quietly shaped his life finally turn deadly. He arrives not as a political actor but as a father searching for his son, Raza, whose involvement with militant networks has drawn him into the shadow world of Cold War and post-Cold War intelligence. Sajjad himself remains outside these struggles, never imagining that his paternal concern will place him under suspicion and lead to his death. At the harbour, overwhelmed with relief at recognising a familiar rickshaw driver from an earlier encounter with Raza, Sajjad calls out to him by name, convinced that this chance recognition is providential. Yet the driver, Sher Mohammed, is a CIA asset already unsettled by ISI interrogation over missing weapons and primed to interpret any approach as threat.

The fatal misunderstanding turns on a single fragment of memory: Harry Burton had once introduced Sajjad as his "first teacher," and Sher Mohammed, hearing his own name called in a place where he had never revealed it, mistakes the approaching stranger for proof that "the unassuming Muhajir in Nazimabad was involved in training CIA agents" (Shamsie 238). The misreading becomes deadly because it occurs within a security system designed to convert uncertainty into suspicion and suspicion into immediate action. Sajjad dies not because he chose to enter history as a political figure, but because geopolitical systems erase the line between ordinary lives and political threats. A father searching for his son is shot by a man convinced he is defending himself against a spy. The ordinariness that defined Sajjad's existence proves powerless against institutions that recognise people only as categories of security or danger.

Sajjad's death is neither revolutionary sacrifice nor martyrdom in the service of a political cause. Instead, it marks the final collapse of the boundary between ordinary domestic life and

geopolitical conflict that the novel has traced from its opening chapters. Throughout *Burnt Shadows*, Sajjad is defined by chess games, cycle rides through Dilli, family conversations, music, and the quiet routines of everyday existence. His death therefore signifies not simply the loss of an individual life but the destruction of the interior sovereignty that sustained him against decades of displacement. Within the security order that finally closes around him at Karachi harbour, Sajjad ceases to appear as a father, husband, neighbour, or teacher; he is reduced instead to a suspected security category. His death bears no meaningful relationship to his actions, beliefs, or intentions — he is a man whose only offense is a fragment of conversation, misremembered by a frightened informant. It results instead from a geopolitical order that substitutes administrative suspicion for human recognition, rendering ordinary lives vulnerable precisely because they can be reclassified without warning.

The notion of an administrative accident describes something more precise than chance misfortune or individual error. Shamsie shows that geopolitical violence increasingly operates through the routine functioning of bureaucratic and security institutions rather than through exceptional acts of coercion. An administrative accident therefore refers to harm produced not by the failure of these systems but by their ordinary operation. Sher Mohammed's fatal misrecognition of Sajjad is not an aberration within the intelligence apparatus surrounding Karachi harbour; it is the predictable outcome of a security regime organised to privilege suspicion over verification and categorisation over human recognition. The tragedy lies in the fact that no participant believes himself to be acting outside legitimate procedure — Sher Mohammed shoots not out of malice but out of the reflexive logic his role has trained into him. Violence emerges through the normal logic of administration itself. Sajjad's death therefore completes the trajectory that has shaped his life from the beginning of the novel: colonial paternalism displaced him through the language of care; bureaucratic classification transformed temporary absence into permanent exile; slow violence normalised the consequences of that exclusion across decades; and finally, the security state converted an ordinary father into a geopolitical threat. His death is not the interruption of an otherwise ordinary life but the final expression of the geopolitical processes that have progressively reorganised that life since he first crossed the invisible boundary between Dilli and Delhi.

What Shamsie achieves through Sajjad's trajectory is a reconfiguration of how geopolitical violence is imagined in contemporary postcolonial fiction. Violence appears not only as spectacular catastrophe but also as a chronic administrative condition that infiltrates the

ordinary structures of everyday life. Sajjad never seeks to become a historical actor. He desires only the modest fulfilments of ordinary existence: family, work, friendship, music, memory, and the familiar rhythms of home. Yet the novel demonstrates that no ordinary life remains permanently outside geopolitical power. Through colonial paternalism, bureaucratic classification, slow violence, and modern security regimes, the ordinary subject is progressively transformed into a geopolitical subject without ever consciously entering political history. Sajjad's death therefore completes rather than interrupts his trajectory. It reveals that the greatest violence of the modern geopolitical order lies not simply in spectacular destruction but in its capacity to convert the ordinary conditions of human life into sites of political vulnerability.

Conclusion

This article has argued that Sajjad Ali Ashraf's trajectory in *Burnt Shadows* offers a distinctive lens for understanding how postcolonial fiction represents the relationship between ordinary life and geopolitical power. Rather than positioning Sajjad as secondary to Hiroko Tanaka's narrative, the novel foregrounds him as the embodiment of what this article terms ordinary geopolitical subjectivity: the condition in which individuals who neither seek political agency nor consciously participate in state projects nonetheless become progressively constituted as geopolitical subjects through colonial paternalism, bureaucratic classification, displacement, and modern security regimes. His life demonstrates that geopolitical violence does not operate solely through spectacular events such as war, Partition, or terrorism, but equally through the ordinary administrative processes that quietly reorganise everyday existence.

Reading Sajjad through Rob Nixon's concept of slow violence and Judith Butler's reflections on precarity reveals that these frameworks illuminate different stages of the same historical process rather than separate concerns. Slow violence explains the temporal accumulation of displacement; precarity exposes the unequal distribution of vulnerability and the state's refusal to recognise Sajjad's loss as grievable. Together, these perspectives show that Sajjad's death at Karachi harbour is not an accidental interruption of ordinary existence but the culmination of an administrative logic that has shaped his life since the colonial divisions of Dilli and Delhi.

What this reading insists upon is a reckoning that the novel stages but history has largely withheld: Partition inflicted a violence for which no perpetrator has ever been held accountable. There was no tribunal for the bureaucratic reclassification that turned Sajjad's temporary absence into permanent exile, no accounting for the millions of ordinary lives redrawn overnight by decisions made in rooms they never entered. Sajjad stands in for this uncountable multitude—the displaced of 1947, and those displaced in every subsequent decade by the same logics of border, category, and suspicion. His acceptance of these circumstances should not be mistaken for weakness or passivity. It is, rather, an assertion of the most basic human insistence: to live, to love, to keep a family whole, to find a plot of unfamiliar ground and slowly make it home. This is what makes the vulnerability of the ordinary person in the postcolonial global South so persistent—the same structures that deny food, shelter, and education are those that leave people exposed, again and again, to violence they neither sought nor could prevent. That a single frightened informant could take Sajjad's life at a harbour is not merely an individual tragedy; it is evidence of systemic failure, of a security architecture designed to produce precisely this kind of death. This is not a violence that ended with Partition. It is a violence that continues to be visited upon South Asian subjects—a slow, administrative, uncompensated harm carried forward, generation after generation, largely unseen and rarely named.

Shamsie's achievement lies not only in exposing these structures of power but also in preserving the dignity of the ordinary life they seek to erase. Sajjad's attachments to family, friendship, music, neighbourhood, memory, and domestic routine constitute a form of interior sovereignty that persists despite repeated dislocations. His tragedy resides not simply in his death but in the gradual destruction of a world organised around ordinary human relationships rather than geopolitical conflict. By foregrounding this overlooked trajectory, *Burnt Shadows* expands the literary imagination of geopolitical violence beyond the spectacle of catastrophe to include the slow administrative transformation of everyday life itself.

Ultimately, Sajjad's story invites a broader reconsideration of how postcolonial literature represents history. It suggests that the most consequential effects of empire, Partition, and global security regimes may be found not only in moments of spectacular crisis but in the ordinary lives quietly reorganised by their bureaucratic and political afterlives. Attending to these ordinary geopolitical subjects allows us to recognise forms of violence that remain historically pervasive precisely because they so often appear unexceptional.

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