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Gendered Cartography of Trauma in *Madras on Rainy Days* and *Burnt Shadows*

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the gendered cartography of trauma in *Madras on Rainy Days* by Samina Ali and *Burnt Shadows* by Kamila Shamsie, arguing that female bodies in both novels become contested sites where political borders, religious ideologies, and patriarchal structures intersect. Drawing on postcolonial feminist thought and trauma theory, the study explores how geopolitical violence and intimate forms of control are inscribed onto women's embodied experiences. In *Burnt Shadows*, transnational histories of war, Partition, and displacement fracture personal identity, situating the female protagonist within shifting political landscapes that reshape belonging and survival. Similarly, *Madras on Rainy Days* foregrounds the psychological dislocation of a diasporic Muslim woman whose body becomes a terrain of cultural negotiation, marital control, and spiritual anxiety. The paper argues that borders in these texts operate not only as territorial demarcations but also as psychic boundaries that regulate female agency. Through memory, resistance, and acts of narrative self-articulation, the protagonists reconstruct subjectivity within and against these constraints. By mapping the intersection of nation, gender, and interiority, this study demonstrates how contemporary South Asian fiction reimagines the wounded female body as a space of both vulnerability and feminist survival.

Keywords: Trauma theory; Feminine subjectivity; Border consciousness; Diasporic identity; Geopolitics and gender

FULL PAPER

Introduction

The history of South Asia is marked by borders drawn in violence, migrations shaped by fear, and identities negotiated across fractured landscapes. From the Partition of India to the global reverberations of nuclear war and post-9/11 geopolitics, political boundaries have repeatedly reshaped private lives. However, these borders are not only territorial. They are inscribed onto bodies, regulated through religion, and internalised within the psyche. In contemporary South Asian fiction, the female body often emerges as a site where national history and intimate power structures intersect. This paper argues that in *Madras on Rainy Days* by Samina Ali and *Burnt Shadows* by Kamila Shamsie, political borders function as psychological cartographies that map trauma, displacement, and survival onto women's embodied experiences. Both novels situate their female protagonists within transnational histories shaped by war, migration, and religious identity. Burnt Shadows traces the afterlives of Nagasaki, Partition, and the War on Terror, revealing how global conflict produces intimate wounds that exceed national frameworks. The movement across Japan, India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the United States unsettles fixed notions of belonging, rendering identity unstable. In contrast, Madras on Rainy Days foregrounds the domestic sphere, where marriage, faith, and diasporic expectations discipline the female body. While the scale of violence differs, both texts demonstrate that borders operate not only as geopolitical lines but as regulatory mechanisms that shape desire, mobility, and self-perception. This study introduces the concept of "cartographies of pain" to describe how trauma is spatialized in these novels. Cartography here does not refer merely to physical geography but to the mapping of emotional and psychological landscapes structured by power. Female bodies become terrains upon which nationalism, patriarchy, and religious norms are inscribed. In Shamsie's work, large-scale historical violence fractures temporal continuity, creating identities marked by displacement and memory. In Ali's narrative, intimate forms of control generate internal borders that divide the self from its aspirations. In both cases, trauma is not only endured but negotiated. The protagonists' journeys reveal psychological survival processes that resist total erasure. Existing scholarship has explored themes of transnationalism, memory, and gender in these authors' works, yet has paid limited attention to the intersection of border politics and embodied subjectivity within a sustained comparative framework. By placing these two novels in dialogue, this paper bridges that gap and highlights how contemporary South Asian Muslim women's writing

reconfigures the relationship between nation and selfhood. The comparative approach allows for a nuanced understanding of how public histories of war intersect with private experiences of gendered constraint. The central argument of this study is that Ali and Shamsie reimagine the wounded female body not solely as a symbol of victimhood but as a site of endurance and narrative reclamation. Borders in these texts are both external and internal, territorial and psychic. Through memory, movement, and acts of self-articulation, the protagonists reconstruct agency within structures designed to confine them. In doing so, the novels challenge reductive portrayals of Muslim women and foreground culturally specific modes of resistance. By mapping the convergence of geopolitical conflict and intimate regulation, this article demonstrates that contemporary South Asian fiction offers a powerful rethinking of trauma and feminist survival. The body, far from being a passive surface of inscription, becomes a space where pain is transformed into testimony and vulnerability into resilience.

Review of Critical Studies

Postcolonial feminist scholarship has persistently challenged the homogenising representation of non-Western women within dominant feminist discourse. In "Under Western Eyes," Chandra Talpade Mohanty critiques the construction of the "Third World woman" as a singular and monolithic subject defined primarily by victimhood, arguing instead for analyses grounded in specific historical and cultural contexts (Mohanty 63). Mohanty's intervention is foundational to examining South Asian Muslim women's fiction, in which female subjectivity emerges at the intersection of colonial histories, religion, class, and nationalism. Similarly, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's influential essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" interrogates the structural silencing of marginalised women within both imperial and nationalist discourses (Spivak 287). Spivak demonstrates that the subaltern woman occupies a position doubly effaced by patriarchal and colonial systems of representation. Her theoretical formulation is particularly significant for literary texts that seek to render the voices historically confined to silence audible. Leela Gandhi further emphasises that postcolonial critique must remain attentive to internal hierarchies within formerly colonised societies, including the persistence of gendered power structures beyond the moment of political independence (Gandhi 83). Together, these scholars establish a framework for situating gendered identity within historically specific relations of power rather than within abstract or universal feminist categories.

Trauma theory provides an additional critical lens for examining literary representations of violence, memory, and fractured subjectivity. Cathy Caruth

defines trauma as an overwhelming event that is not fully assimilated at the moment of its occurrence but returns belatedly through repetition and narrative disruption (Caruth 4). Her formulation has significantly shaped literary studies by foregrounding the relationship between psychic rupture and fragmented narration. Dominick LaCapra refines this discussion by distinguishing between "acting out" and "working through," suggesting that narrative may either compulsively repeat traumatic experience or facilitate processes of critical engagement and partial recovery (LaCapra 70). In postcolonial contexts, trauma frequently assumes collective dimensions, linked to Partition, war, forced migration, and ideological conflict. South Asian literature often collapses the boundary between national history and private suffering, demonstrating how geopolitical violence is internalised within intimate emotional life.

The relationship between nation and gender has also received sustained scholarly attention. Nira Yuval-Davis argues that women function as symbolic and biological reproducers of the nation, thereby becoming central to the maintenance of cultural boundaries and communal identity (Yuval-Davis 45). This insight illuminates how female bodies are regulated in the name of national purity and continuity. Judith Butler's Precarious Life extends this analysis by theorising bodily vulnerability within political frameworks that determine which lives are recognised as grievable and which remain unacknowledged (Butler 25). Butler's concept of precarity is especially relevant to postcolonial fiction, where women's bodies are exposed to intersecting forms of state violence, religious discipline, and patriarchal control. Borders, therefore, operate not only as territorial demarcations but also as mechanisms of embodied regulation that shape desire, mobility, and selfhood.

Critical engagement with *Burnt Shadows* by Kamila Shamsie has largely emphasised its transnational scope and its layered portrayal of interconnected global histories, tracing continuities from Nagasaki to Partition and the War on Terror. Scholars frequently interpret the novel as an exploration of mobility, fractured belonging, and the instability of national identity in a globalised world. Likewise, studies of *Madras on Rainy Days* by Samina Ali foreground themes of faith, diaspora, marriage, and the negotiation of Muslim female identity within patriarchal domestic structures. Critics note Ali's attention to spiritual doubt, bodily autonomy, and emotional isolation within culturally specific frameworks of expectation. However, while issues of transnationalism, religion, and gender have been widely examined, comparatively limited attention has been paid to the shared metaphorical mapping of geopolitical borders onto female embodiment in these two novels. A sustained comparative analysis that integrates postcolonial feminism with trauma

theory and border studies remains underdeveloped. By addressing this gap, the present study situates Ali and Shamsie within a broader critical conversation about gender, nation, and psychological survival in contemporary South Asian fiction.

Theoretical Framework

This study is situated at the intersection of postcolonial feminist theory, trauma studies, and border discourse to examine how female subjectivity is shaped through the convergence of geopolitical violence and intimate structures of control. Rather than treating gender, nation, and psychology as separate analytical categories, the framework understands them as mutually constitutive forces that structure embodied experience in contemporary South Asian fiction.

Postcolonial feminist theory provides the primary lens through which the novels are read. Chandra Talpade Mohanty's critique of Western feminist universalism underscores the necessity of historically specific analysis when examining representations of Muslim women (Mohanty 63). Her insistence on contextualised feminist solidarity resists reductive narratives that frame non-Western women as uniformly oppressed. In a similar vein, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's articulation of subalternity foregrounds the epistemic violence that renders marginalised women unheard within dominant ideological structures (Spivak 287). These theoretical interventions enable a reading of female protagonists not as passive victims of culture or religion, but as agents negotiating layered systems of colonial aftermath, nationalism, and patriarchy. The framework thus rejects binary oppositions between tradition and modernity and instead emphasises the complexity of situated agency.

Trauma theory further informs the analysis by illuminating how historical violence is internalised within individual consciousness. Cathy Caruth's formulation of trauma as a belated experience that disrupts narrative continuity provides a method for understanding fragmented memory and psychological rupture within the novels (Caruth 4). Trauma in postcolonial contexts frequently exceeds individual pathology and becomes intertwined with collective histories of Partition, war, displacement, and ideological conflict. Dominick LaCapra's distinction between "acting out" and "working through" offers a useful conceptual tool for examining how literary characters oscillate between repetition of pain and attempts at reconstruction (LaCapra 70). In both texts, the protagonists inhabit temporal and spatial dislocations that reflect the persistence of unresolved historical wounds.

The theoretical framework is further strengthened by Judith Butler's conception of bodily precarity and the politics of recognition. Butler argues that

vulnerability is not merely a private condition but a politically mediated state shaped by norms that determine whose suffering is publicly acknowledged (Butler 25). This perspective clarifies how female bodies in the novels become sites where power is enacted and contested. Borders, therefore, are not confined to cartographic lines; they operate as regulatory structures inscribed onto bodies, desires, and forms of mobility. The convergence of nationalism, religion, and patriarchy produces what may be understood as embodied borders, shaping the protagonists' psychic landscapes. By integrating postcolonial feminism, trauma studies, and theories of embodied precarity, this framework enables a multidimensional reading of Madras on *Rainy Days by Samina Ali* and *Burnt Shadows* by Kamila Shamsie. It positions female embodiment as the central site where political history and private survival intersect. Through this lens, the novels are read not merely as narratives of suffering but as complex cartographies in which pain, memory, and resistance reshape the contours of feminine subjectivity.

Mapping Geopolitical Trauma and Embodied Memory in *Burnt Shadows*

In *Burnt Shadows*, Kamila Shamsie constructs a transnational narrative that traces the afterlives of global violence across multiple historical moments, from Nagasaki in 1945 to post-9/11 America. The novel opens with the atomic bombing of Nagasaki, an event that marks not only geopolitical rupture but also bodily inscription. Hiroko Tanaka's body bears literal scars in the shape of birds imprinted by the kimono she wore at the moment of explosion. These "burnt shadows" function as more than physical marks; they symbolise the inescapable entanglement of history and embodiment (Shamsie 3). The body becomes an archive of violence, carrying within it the memory of catastrophic power.

The migration from Japan to India, and later to Pakistan and beyond, situates Hiroko within shifting political landscapes shaped by Partition and Cold War anxieties. Borders in the novel are repeatedly redrawn, yet their impact remains constant in the fragmentation of belonging. The Partition of India, in particular, exposes the arbitrary yet devastating nature of national demarcations. As communal tensions intensify, the promise of independence is overshadowed by displacement and fear. The novel suggests that political borders are not merely lines on a map but mechanisms that reorganise emotional and relational geographies. Hiroko's transnational movement does not grant freedom; rather, it underscores what may be described as border consciousness, a perpetual awareness of conditional belonging.

Trauma in the novel is not confined to a single historical event. Instead, it accumulates across generations. The scars on Hiroko's back are mirrored by the psychological dislocations experienced by subsequent characters navigating Afghanistan and the United States in the aftermath of 9/11. This layering of violence exemplifies Cathy Caruth's notion that trauma is characterised by belatedness and repetition (Caruth 4). Each geopolitical crisis reactivates prior wounds, suggesting that history persists within the present as unresolved memory. The narrative structure itself, moving across decades and continents, reflects this temporal instability.

At the same time, Hiroko's body resists complete reduction to victimhood. When she observes that her scars are "part of me" rather than external disfigurements (Shamsie 99), she reframes trauma as incorporated memory rather than pure annihilation. This moment signals a shift from passive suffering to self-recognition. The scars become a testament to survival rather than solely a sign of destruction. In this sense, the novel stages what Dominick LaCapra terms a movement toward "working through," as the protagonist negotiates rather than represses her past (LaCapra 70).

Furthermore, *Burnt Shadows* interrogates the moral absolutism often attached to national identity. By placing Hiroko, a Japanese woman, within the context of South Asian Partition and later global conflict, Shamsie destabilises rigid categories of victim and perpetrator. The novel suggests that violence transcends singular national narratives and instead produces interconnected histories of loss. Within this framework, the female body emerges as a site where global politics materialise in intimate form. The atomic blast, communal riots, and surveillance regimes are all refracted through embodied experience.

Through its expansive geography and intimate focus on corporeal memory, Burnt Shadows maps a cartography of pain that links territorial borders to psychological survival. The novel ultimately proposes that while political boundaries fracture nations and identities, the embodied memory of trauma also generates resilience. Hiroko's continued movement across borders reflects not only rootlessness but also an insistence on life beyond imposed divisions. In doing so, Shamsie reimagines the wounded female body as both witness to history and agent of endurance.

Domestic Borders and the Psychology of Containment in Madras on Rainy Days

While *Burnt Shadows* maps trauma across global geographies, *Madras on Rainy Days* by Samina Ali shifts the terrain of violence inward, locating borders within

the intimate structures of marriage, religion, and domestic expectation. The novel traces the journey of Layla, a young Indian Muslim woman raised in the United States, who travels to Hyderabad for an arranged marriage. What initially appears as a negotiation between cultures gradually reveals itself as a process of psychological containment. The political border between nation-states gives way to domestic borders that regulate movement, desire, and bodily autonomy.

Layla's displacement is not marked by war but by cultural dislocation and emotional isolation. Her arrival in India exposes the fragility of diasporic identity; she finds herself suspended between American individualism and the expectations of her husband's conservative household. The home, traditionally imagined as a site of stability, becomes a space of surveillance and restriction instead. Everyday practices—dress, prayer, comportment—become mechanisms through which her body is disciplined. In this context, patriarchy functions as a border regime, defining permissible forms of femininity and circumscribing mobility.

Ali's narrative foregrounds the internalisation of these constraints. Layla's growing anxiety and confusion illustrate how psychological fragmentation accompanies social control. Her struggle is not only external but deeply interior, reflecting what Judith Butler describes as the regulatory force of norms that shape bodily comportment and recognition (Butler 25). Layla's body becomes a contested site where faith, marital authority, and personal aspiration collide. Unlike Hiroko's visible scars in Burnt Shadows, Layla's wounds are largely invisible, manifesting as emotional distress and spiritual doubt.

The novel also complicates reductive portrayals of Muslim women by presenting Layla's relationship with religion as evolving rather than static. Her engagement with Islamic spirituality becomes a space of introspection rather than mere submission. At moments of crisis, she turns inward, seeking meaning beyond the rigid expectations imposed upon her. This inward turn suggests that psychological survival may emerge through reinterpretation rather than rejection of tradition. Such complexity aligns with postcolonial feminist critiques that resist framing religious identity solely in terms of oppression (Mohanty 63).

Memory functions differently in Ali's text than in Shamsie's. Whereas *Burnt Shadows* stages trauma as historically catastrophic and collectively inherited, Madras on Rainy Days presents trauma as gradual and intimate. The pain accumulates through everyday interactions, silences, and disappointments. Layla's sense of betrayal following her husband's deception destabilises her perception of trust and belonging. The revelation fractures her imagined future, producing what

Cathy Caruth identifies as a rupture in temporal continuity (Caruth 4). The life she anticipated no longer aligns with the reality she inhabits, generating a crisis of self-recognition.

However, the novel does not conclude with total subjugation. Layla's return to the United States marks a reclaiming of mobility and choice. Her departure does not signify cultural rejection but an assertion of selfhood beyond constraining structures. This movement can be read through Dominick LaCapra's notion of "working through," as Layla begins to reconstruct identity outside the immediate site of trauma (LaCapra 70). The border she crosses at the novel's end is both geographical and psychological, symbolising the possibility of reconstituted agency.

Through its focus on marriage, diaspora, and faith, *Madras on Rainy Days* maps a cartography of pain rooted in domestic containment rather than global warfare. The female body is regulated not by bombs or national partition but by intimate power relations that shape emotional life. Ali demonstrates that borders need not be militarised to be restrictive; they can exist within households, within expectations, and within the community's internalised gaze. In tracing Layla's journey from compliance to self-assertion, the novel redefines survival as the capacity to redraw one's own boundaries.

Cartographies of Pain: Borders, Bodies, and Psychological Survival

When read together, *Burnt Shadows* by Kamila Shamsie and *Madras on Rainy Days* by Samina Ali reveal how political and domestic borders operate through different scales yet converge upon the female body as a site of inscription. Shamsie situates her protagonist within vast geopolitical upheavals—Nagasaki, Partition, the War on Terror—while Ali confines her narrative largely to the intimate sphere of marriage and diaspora. Despite this difference in scope, both novels demonstrate that borders are not merely cartographic divisions but embodied experiences that shape subjectivity and psychological survival.

In *Burnt Shadows,* the violence of the atomic bomb and the drawing of national boundaries leave visible and invisible marks on Hiroko's body. Her scars literalize the idea that history imprints itself upon flesh (Shamsie 3). The repeated crossings between Japan, India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the United States generate a form of border consciousness in which belonging remains unstable. Trauma emerges as collective and transhistorical, echoing Cathy Caruth's argument that catastrophic experience resists containment within a single moment and instead returns across time (Caruth 4). The female body thus becomes an archive of global conflict.

In contrast, *Madras on Rainy Days* locates trauma within the regulated domestic sphere. Layla's body is not marked by war but disciplined through marital expectations, religious norms, and cultural surveillance. The home functions as a bordered space that polices behaviour and circumscribes mobility. Here, borders are internalised rather than externally imposed. Layla's psychological fragmentation reflects the pressure of normative frameworks that, as Judith Butler suggests, determine the conditions under which subjects are recognised and constrained (Butler 25). The violence is subtle yet persistent, operating through emotional manipulation and spiritual doubt rather than physical devastation.

The novels diverge in their representations of scale but converge in their treatment of survival. Hiroko's mobility across continents reflects endurance within a world structured by shifting national loyalties. Layla's departure from her marriage signifies a reclamation of autonomy within a structure designed to contain her. In both cases, survival involves movement—geographical in Shamsie's narrative and psychological in Ali's. Dominick LaCapra's distinction between "acting out" and "working through" illuminates this process, as both protagonists move toward forms of reconstruction rather than remaining trapped in repetitive trauma (LaCapra 70).

The metaphor of cartography acquires layered significance across the two texts. Maps traditionally signify control, demarcation, and political authority. However, in these novels, mapping becomes an act of narrative reclamation. By telling their stories, the protagonists redraw the borders imposed upon them. The female body, initially positioned as a passive surface upon which nation and patriarchy inscribe meaning, emerges instead as a speaking subject that resists total containment. This shift challenges reductive portrayals of Muslim women as either silent victims of tradition or symbols of national honour.

Both novels reveal that borders are sustained not only through territorial lines but through ideologies that regulate bodies and memories. Whether through the catastrophic violence of nuclear warfare or the quiet discipline of domestic patriarchy, the female self is shaped within structures of power that attempt to define belonging. However, the persistence of memory, mobility, and narrative articulation enables a reconfiguration of these imposed geographies. The cartographies of pain traced in these texts do not end in erasure. Instead, they chart pathways of endurance that complicate conventional understandings of victimhood and agency in contemporary South Asian fiction.

Conclusion

This study has examined how *Burnt Shadows* by Kamila Shamsie and *Madras on Rainy Days* by Samina Ali construct what may be termed cartographies of pain, mapping geopolitical conflict and domestic containment onto female embodiment. Although the novels differ in scale—one spanning continents and global wars, the other rooted in the intimate space of marriage and diaspora—they converge in portraying the female body as a site where political borders and patriarchal ideologies materialise. In both texts, borders exceed territorial demarcation, becoming psychic and corporeal realities that shape identity, memory, and belonging. Through the lens of postcolonial feminism and trauma theory, this article has argued that female subjectivity in these novels is neither passively determined by history nor entirely liberated from structural constraint. Instead, it is forged within conditions of vulnerability that demand negotiation and reinterpretation. Hiroko's scars in *Burnt Shadows* testify to the enduring imprint of global violence, yet they also signify survival and mobility across fractured landscapes. Layla's emotional and spiritual crisis in *Madras on Rainy Days* reveals the internalised borders of domestic patriarchy. However, her eventual departure marks an assertion of agency within and against those confines. In both cases, psychological survival emerges not through erasure of trauma but through its incorporation into a redefined sense of self. By placing these novels in dialogue, the study contributes to existing scholarship by foregrounding the embodied dimension of border politics. While much critical work has emphasised transnational mobility, religious identity, or historical memory in isolation, this analysis demonstrates how these forces intersect within the lived experience of gendered bodies. The metaphor of cartography underscores that pain, like territory, is structured and regulated, yet also capable of being remapped. Narrative becomes a means of redrawing-imposed boundaries and reclaiming subjectivity from reductive representations. Ultimately, contemporary South Asian fiction, as exemplified by Ali and Shamsie, challenges simplistic binaries of victimhood and empowerment. The wounded female body does not remain a silent emblem of national trauma or domestic submission. Instead, it becomes a space of testimony, endurance, and ethical witness. By tracing the convergence of nation, memory, and embodiment, this study reaffirms the importance of reading border narratives through a gendered and psychological lens, revealing how survival itself becomes a form of resistance in postcolonial literary imagination.

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