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Jaine Chemmachery

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**“WE’LL BE IN TOUCH ALL THE TIME”: TOUCH AND / AS  
RESISTANCE IN *BURNT SHADOWS* (2009) AND *HOME  
FIRE* (2017) BY KAMILA SHAMSIE**

JAINE CHEMMACHERY  
*Sorbonne Université*

1. Shamsie’s novels *Burnt Shadows* and *Home Fire* centre on touch and skin, be it in the former’s depiction of a heroine who bears on her body the “touchable” traces of the bombing of Nagasaki in 1945 or in the latter’s staging of an unwanted corpse, that of a criminalised terrorist, whose body has literally been construed as impure, and one could say by extension, untouchable. In this article, I wish to analyse the articulation between touch and resistance in the two novels which focus on traumatic historical events, with both personal and collective repercussions. In these historical contexts characterised by enduring coloniality<sup>1</sup> and complex geopolitics,<sup>2</sup> touch sometimes partakes of a form of resistance against hegemonic power and may even consist of a reparative process in the face of oppression and discrimination — a process that is not solely related to memory but that can ultimately lead to a reconfiguration of society.
2. Both novels engage with sites of violence in modern history, be it nuclear violence in 1945 Nagasaki, the violence of the Partition in 1947, the Cold War and the rise of terrorism in Pakistan and Afghanistan in the 1980s and 1990s up to 9/11. Maya Caspari writes about her own corpus of study that the works “engage with touch as part of an investigation of the violent, transnational formations and legacies of modernity”.<sup>3</sup> The same statement could be made about Shamsie’s novels under study. In the wake of such exploration, one can wonder whether touch in Shamsie’s novels participates in a politics of resistance against the said legacies of modernity. In *Politics of Touch*, Erin Manning articulates bodies and resistance:

Our bodies are resistances — to ourselves, to each other, resistances to knowledge, to language, to sensing, as well as to ignorance, to being touched, to being meaningful, to being there. Touching, our bodies gesture toward each other and themselves, each time challenging and perhaps deforming the

- 1 I am here referring to Aníbal Quijano’s concept of the “coloniality of power” (2000) which implies that coloniality continues beyond the historical ending of colonial empires. Neocolonialism and the persistence of power relations between countries with a shared history of colonialism are related to the concept.
- 2 M.M.N. Caspari, *Reading Frictions*, 6: “in the past decades critics have identified a strand of world literature which combines postcolonial concerns with the politics of map-making and migration, and a tradition of late-twentieth century work on the ethics of remembering traumatic histories”. Soukaï evokes “a global map of international traumas” (2016; my translation) when she refers to *Burnt Shadows*.
- 3 *Ibid.* 8. Caspari examines works by Teju Cole, Katja Petrowskaja, Han Kang and Claudia Rankine.

body-politic, questioning the boundaries of what it means to touch and be touched, to live together, to live apart, to belong, to communicate, to exclude.<sup>4</sup>

Yet what about the specific articulation between minoritarian bodies and touch? In *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), anticolonial thinker Frantz Fanon asks: “Why not simply try to touch the other, feel the other, discover each other?”<sup>5</sup> According to Caspari, in the context of Fanon’s reflection, “to touch might represent a connection which destabilises Enlightenment modernity’s structural oppositions between subject and object, self and other, coloniser and colonised”.<sup>6</sup> *Home Fire* is a rewriting of Sophocles’ *Antigone* whose eponymous heroine has long stood for a figure of resistance against hegemonic power embodied by her uncle, Creon, in the myth. As for *Burnt Shadows*, the novel spans three generations while the narrative takes its protagonists through global trajectories which have them face various experiences of discrimination, the origins of which lie in the complex geopolitical relations which have defined the countries they inhabit through history. What characterises both novels is that their main protagonists occupy a “minoritarian identity position in terms of race, religion or gender”,<sup>7</sup> which positions them in contact, if not against, a hegemonic power, hence the possibility to articulate the concepts of “resistance” and “touch” in the novels. After discussing how the two novels complicate the articulation between touch and proximity and distance, I will analyse how resistance through touch may imply healing on various scales and how touch operates as archiving process in the novels. Shamsie’s tactile poetics may favour “empathic reading” (Patoine, 2015), an act through which the readers may let themselves and their bodies be “affected” by the texts.

### **Complicating the articulation between Proximity and Distance**

3. Touch is particularly central in the novels under study when it is thought of in relation to family and affective links. The central nature of touch is linked to how it enabled the British siblings of Muslim Pakistani heritage in *Home Fire* to connect, in the absence of their father, and later of their mother who died of cancer:

4 E. Manning, *Politics of Touch*, 9.

5 F. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 206.

6 M.M.N. Caspari, *Reading Frictions*, 5.

7 A phrase I am borrowing from Caspari’s description of the protagonists of her corpus of study which undoubtedly shares common points with the novels studied in this article.

Touch was where it had started with them — as an infant, Aneeka was bathed and changed and fed and rocked to sleep by her grandmother and nine-year-old sister while Parvaiz, the weaker, sicklier twin, was the one who suckled at their mother's breast (she produced enough milk for one) and cried unless she was the one to tend to him.<sup>8</sup>

The use of polysyndeton emphasises the many ways in which touch was instrumental in the construction of the affective relationships between siblings. The quotation highlights a strong sense of connection through touch between the female members of the family belonging to various generations while Parvaiz, right from his early years, would not connect as easily with his sisters through touch.

4. Yet, whenever touch is explicitly carried out through a medium operating as filter, it does not provide the type of comfort which may be expected: “We’ll be in touch all the time, she and Aneeka had said to each other in the weeks before she had left. But ‘touch’ was the one thing modern technology didn’t allow” (*HF* 13). The sisters use Skype to keep in touch but technology, instead of making up for the loss of physical touch, brings them further apart. This can be related to Richard Kearney’s concept of “excarnation” by which he considers that with our increasing use of technology, we may have entered an age “where we obsess about the body in increasingly disembodied ways” with “excarnation” meaning “flesh becom[ing] image”.<sup>9</sup> Touch, here, has moved from being a physical act to being embedded into discourse as an unkept promise (“we’ll be in touch”).

5. Both Shamsie’s quotations highlight the dichotomy between proximity and distance which is at the heart of the experience of “touch” as analysed by Nancy and later, Derrida. In *Corpus*, Nancy associates touch with distance (“touching is the thought of the limit”<sup>10</sup>) and therefore regards it with slight suspicion: “we must not give ‘touch’ credit too easily, and we must especially not believe that we could touch the sense of what it means to touch”.<sup>11</sup>

6. What Shamsie’s second quotation also highlights is that saying “we’ll be in touch” does not provide the same similar comfort as physiological touch. And even when the latter is implied, the only form of touch Isma may rely on is her own which proves to be insufficient in the absence of her relatives: “she touched her shoulder, muscles knotted beneath the skin. Pressed down, and knew what it was to be without family; no one’s hands but your own to minister to your suffering” (*HF*

8 S. Shamsie, *Home Fire*, 13. The abbreviation *HF* will later be used in the article.

9 R. Kearney, “Losing Our Touch”, online.

10 J.-L. Nancy, *Corpus*, 206.

11 *Ibid.*, 13.

13). The insufficient nature of touch challenges Didier Anzieu's concept of "symbolic touching"<sup>12</sup> which he considers as a substitute for physical touch: "What you said touched me.' One can in fact touch the psyche otherwise than by touching the body"<sup>13</sup>. In *Home Fire* though, words of touch do not even begin to work as "symbolic touch experiences"<sup>14</sup>.

7. The narrative voice, with Isma as main focaliser in the first section of the novel, elaborates on technology and touch: "without [touch] she and her sister had lost something vital to their way of being together" (*HF* 13). Touch has therefore turned from an experience of proximity drawn on physicality to one generating distance throughout time.

8. This evolution is also visible in *Burnt Shadows*. Raza, the son of Hiroko, a Japanese woman, and of Sajjad, an Indian man who becomes Pakistani through Partition, grows estranged from his parents as time goes by. In opposition to several instances where touch between Raza and other characters generated comfort, the ending of the novel highlights how touch becomes potentially harmful: "Then she was reaching a hand out to him, and Raza's body jerked away from her touch"<sup>15</sup>. Kim, the granddaughter of Hiroko's best friend, tries to touch Raza, which triggers a recoiling gesture on his part. In *Home Fire*, the harmful nature of touch is exemplified by the final scene where Aneeka and her lover's final embrace leads to the explosion of a bomb, despite it being presented as an intimate gesture between the two lovers in the narrative: "for a moment they are two lovers in a park, under an ancient tree, sun-dappled, beautiful and at peace" (*HF* 260). Time in the novel makes touch grow into an experience of alienation, if not a lethal act, rather than one of proximity.

9. The reflection on the articulation between touch, distance and proximity leads us to discuss the idea of untouchability.<sup>16</sup> Parvaiz, who had left for Syria under pressure by his fellow companions who wanted him to be proud of his father, a "freedom fighter" in their eyes, is finally remorseful and contacts Aneeka so that she may help him go back to London and face the consequences of his behaviour at home. But Parvaiz is shot by Farooq in Istanbul as the latter could not bear what he saw as his recruit's ultimate act of treason. Once the fact that an infamous terrorist's son had been to Syria—regardless of the fact that he had expressed remorse and had not taken part in any terrorist

12 D. Anzieu, *A Skin for Thought*, 78.

13 *Ibid.*, 74.

14 S. Jackson, *Tactile Poetics: Touch and Contemporary Writing*, 65.

15 S. Shamsie, *Burnt Shadows*, 354. The abbreviation *BS* will later be used in the article.

16 Caste is not present in Shamsie's novels as the frame that structures social relations in India; the Muslim characters being of Pakistani heritage in *Home Fire*.

attack — becomes public news, Parvaiz's body becomes public property. A modern chorus voices people's diverging opinions as to what should become of Parvaiz's body. In his speech, British Home Secretary Karamat Lone construes Parvaiz's body as impure, transforming it into a somewhat untouchable body: "We will not let those who turn against the soil of Britain in their lifetime sully that very soil in death" (HF 188). Parvaiz's body, thereby criminalised, is turned into an impure, abject body which may contaminate the other bodies of the "English nation", and which therefore needs to be kept at bay. Shamsie's novel underlines the performative nature of Lone's speech: saying Parvaiz's corpse is impure makes it somehow untouchable, i.e. a body that *should* not be touched, unless it might contaminate other English bodies, among which the imagined body of the English nation. In *Home Fire*, as a belt with explosives has been strapped around Eamonn (who happens to be Lone's son and Aneeka's lover), his body should not be touched either as mere physical contact will cause a lethal detonation.

10. While Eamonn's body is one that should not be touched, in *Burnt Shadows*, Hiroko's body is a palpable body, which therefore can be touched, but the haptic gesture is not always accompanied by sensation for the character.<sup>17</sup> Hiroko's body was affected by the bombing in Nagasaki in 1945. It literally bears the touchable traces of the event. As she was wearing a silk kimono with three cranes on it, the explosion *impressed* the patterns of the animals upon her body, leaving her with an everlasting trace of the event in the shape of bird designs carved upon her skin.

Hiroko runs her fingers along her back as she climbs the stairs down which, minutes earlier, she had followed Konrad.<sup>18</sup> There is feeling, then no feeling, skin and something else. Where there is skin, there is feeling. Where there is something else there is none. Her fingers pluck at shreds embedded in the something else. Shreds of what — skin or silk? She shrugs off the kimono. It falls from her shoulders, but does not touch the ground. Something keeps it attached to her. (BS 27)

The parallels invite us to associate feeling and contact with skin and the absence of feeling with the "something else". This is further emphasised by the following sentences, which make the equation explicit: "where there is skin, there is feeling"; "where there is something else there is none". The disorientation produced by the event is highlighted by the use of the indefinite pronoun "something" and the question "skin or silk?", while paronomasia enhances the blurred boundaries between the corporeal texture and the fabric. Many verbs of action ("runs her fingers along her

17 Garrington defines "haptic" as one or more of the following: "touch (the active or passive experience of the human skin, subcutaneous flesh, viscera and related nerve-endings); kinaesthesia (the body's sense of its own movement); proprioception (the body's sense of its orientation in space); and the vestibular sense (that of balance, reliant on the inner ear)" (2013, 16).

18 Konrad happens to be Hiroko's German lover. He died in 1945 in Nagasaki.

back”, “pluck at”, “shrugs off”, “falls from her shoulders”) refer to ways of touching or being touched — by human and/or non-human agents, with an intent or not — before the verb “touch” is finally mentioned. The kimono and Hiroko’s skin are in contact with each other since the former is said to be “attached” to her. But the passage blurs expectations around touch and the sensations connected with the latter: while the character touches her back with an intent to experience feeling, an unexpected sensation occurs. Conversely, where the kimono would be expected to fall from her shoulders, “something keeps it attached to her”. The polysemy of the word “attach” literalises the idea that touch does not necessarily trigger the “feeling of great affection” — the *Cambridge Dictionary*’s definition of attachment — that could be associated with it. The two novels complicate the articulation between touch, proximity and distance, but they also distinguish between touch and contact and hint at the potentially harmful effects of touch. As touch resists easy categorisation in the novels, I now wish to analyse how it partakes of a resisting stance against various forms of hegemony, be it in terms of power or representation.

## Resisting through touch

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11. In relation to the image of the kimono which remains attached to Hiroko’s body despite the law of gravity, which implies the presence of two opposite forces, I will ponder how touch partakes of a stance of resistance in Shamsie’s two novels. Firstly, physical touch between people is often pitted against other normative representations of touch. In *Home Fire*, while the relation between father and son is jeopardised, Karamat Lone remembers a memory that implied touch between his son and himself:

Once, on an afternoon when rain beat on the windows, he’d sat here with his arm around his son’s shoulder, comforting him through his first heartbreak. Eamonn all of thirteen, just the age at which he’d stopped allowing a father’s embrace, except in this moment of pain. The elements raging fierce outside, and Karamat helpless with love for the boy weeping into his shirt. He knew he should tell him to be a man, to take it on the chin, but instead he pulled him closer. (*HF* 254)

This passage constructs touch as a double alternative: firstly, an alternative to touch between lovers — a normative cultural paradigm of intimate touch — as here touch occurs between father and son; secondly, an alternative to a performance of “virile, masculine solidarity”. Instead of “tell[ing] him to be a man, to take it on the chin” — a reminder of Kipling’s “If” poem and of the British stiff upper lip, he is inclined to take his son in his arms to offer him haptic comfort.

12. In *Burnt Shadows*, as Harry Burton, the son of Hiroko's best friend, who is an American born of British parents, and Raza — the son of Hiroko and Sajjad — are in Afghanistan, touch becomes a way for the characters to find comfort in the midst of a distressing context:

Harry sat down, a hand on the younger man's shoulder. Raza unwound the blanket and offered its warmth to Harry, who moved closer, his shoulder pressed against Raza's, and pulled one half of the blanket tight around himself. It had been a long time since he had felt awkward around the Pakistani's casualness with physical intimacy. (*BS* 283)

The final mention is to be opposed to what Burton sees as a more usual, one could add western, way for male friends to interact — one devoid of “physical intimacy” and of touch. Feminine versions can be found in the many instances where Hiroko and her best friend, Ilse Burton — Harry's mother — exchange haptic gestures or in passages centred on sisterly touch between Isma and Aneeka:

Parvaiz was the person Aneeka talked to about all her griefs and worries, but it was Isma she came to for an embrace, or a hand to rub her back, or a body to curl up against on the sofa. And when the burden of the universe seemed too great for Isma to bear — particularly in those early days after their grandmother and mother had died within the space of a year [...] it was Aneeka who would place her hands on her sister's shoulders and massage away the ache. (*HF* 13)

The passage is fraught with bodily references as words such as “back”, “body”, “hands” pepper the narrative. The image of Aneeka placing her hands on Isma's shoulders is reminiscent of healing, both religious and medical, except that the cure occurs through sisterly touch. As Chambers recalls about Muslim fiction in English:

Writing the senses, and the body more broadly, is often, for authors of Muslim heritage in Britain, an act of protest. This resistance is double-edged, pointing at the marginalization or cover-up of non-heteronormative sexualities and women's rights that sometimes occurs in Muslim communities, but also, and more pervasively, at successive British governments' attempts to surveil, control, and suppress Muslim bodies [...] The interest in touch, smell, taste, and hearing in these texts may be read as a challenge to the state's gaze of surveillance. (2019, xxxii)

Shamsie's focus on Muslim bodies in her novel certainly counters the government's attempt to invisibilise them by objecting to the repatriation of Parvaiz's body as it offers alternatives to normative representations of touch.

13. What characterises all three passages is the strong emphasis on touch between characters, the fact that these scenes imply Muslim, Pakistani characters and that the former happen in the wake of adverse events, ranging from the personal level (break-up) to the more collective one (the deaths of relatives in a family) up to an even larger scale (war implicating several countries). But the relation



between touch and resistance in Shamsie's novels does not only work as an alternative to more normative and widespread representations of touch. Touch in the novels is implied in acts of resistance against hegemonic power.

14. The example of Aneeka, a modern-day Antigone, immediately comes to mind. Touch in *Home Fire* is foundational to Aneeka's resistance. It is the gesture which precedes the utterance of her protest speech. Aneeka is shown licking her thumb and running it over her mouth, "painting lips onto the dust mask" (HF 224) before addressing her emotional, televised plea to Lone:

In the stories of wicked tyrants men and women are punished with exile, bodies are kept from their families — their heads impaled on spikes, their corpses thrown into unmarked graves. All these things happen according to the law, but not according to justice. I am here to ask for justice. I appeal to the Prime Minister: let me take my brother home. (HF 224-5)

Aneeka/Antigone's plea occurs as she makes her lips reappear under the mask of dust that covered her face through an act of touch. Amina Yaqin recalls that "the Pakistani public and media connect emotionally with Aneeka's love for family, appropriating her as a figure of resistance against Western hegemony" (2021, 247). This stance of resistance also draws on other acts of touch which give shape to the possibility of collective resistance against the state's power. Such acts consist in the motif of Muslim characters touching ice. In a passage where Isma discusses Parvaiz's fate at Lone's house, the mention of ice cubes coming out of the politician's fridge reminds the readers of an earlier episode where Isma reminisces about her brother's love for sound recording — an episode which involves ice:

Isma held up a hand, lay back in the snow, and allowed the pain to roll through her while the hail and icicles continued their synthetic-edged symphony. Parvaiz, a boy never to be seen without his headphones and a mic, would have lain out here for as long as the song continued, the wet of snow seeping through his clothes, the thud of hail beating down on him, uncaring of anything except capturing something previously unheard, eyes hazy with pleasure. (HF 12)

The image of Isma taking an ice cube in her hands ("with an ice cube melting between her fingers", HF 235) also recalls the "coffin made of slabs of ice" (HF 228) in which Parvaiz lies as Aneeka is waiting for the Home Secretary to respond to her plea to have the corpse repatriated from Pakistan back to England. The motif of ice reunites the siblings together against, or despite, the state's power while Parvaiz's departure had led to family dis-union.

15. More strikingly, in the passage about the vigil, touching ice partakes of a process of community-making, resisting hegemonic power and potentially of healing. In a study of Ondaatje's

novel *Anil's Ghost*, Dae-Joong Kim explains that touch is intrinsically linked to healing: “tactile interaction is tantamount to healing because healing happens through bodily touches among people. Thus, tactile experience is ethical”.<sup>19</sup> Aneeka’s gestures of touch are recurrently mentioned in the passage where she is shown standing by her brother’s corpse. First, she is the one that reveals Parvaiz’s body to the community through touch: “she knelt beside the casket, placed the palms of her hands, one on top of the other, against the lid, near the corner, and pressed down with all her weight” (*HF* 222). The phrase “placed the palms of her hands” is similar to that which referred to her massaging her sister’s ache away, bringing the image of the healing act back to the fore, except that the object of the healing process induced by touch is here the very community:

He was in a coffin made of slabs of ice, a prince in a fairy tale. The owner of the city’s largest ice factory said he would supply his product free of charge; a truck driver said he would transport it as religious duty. Everyone who had gathered in the park took turns unloading the ice slabs and passing them along a conveyor belt of humans to the white sheet, now soaked through with melted ice. When the ice left their hands they all touched their red palms to their faces, the burn of cold against the burn of heat. Those nearest the corpse all wrapped their faces in cloth. (*HF* 228-229)

Aneeka’s claim for a proper burial spot for her brother leads to a whole chain of people bonding together through ice-touching, initially to maintain the corpse in hygienic conditions, but later finding themselves part of a common experience of bearing witness to the unacknowledged death of Parvaiz since no proper funeral is to be granted to him in England, his native country. Aneeka’s act generates other acts of kindness such as those carried out by the owner of the city’s ice factory or by the truck driver. The shared dimension of the experience is exemplified by the fact that the members of the crowd all make the same gestures, among which haptic ones: “[t]aking turns” to unload the ice, “*all touch[ing] their red palms to their faces*” and those near the corpse “*all wrap[ping] their faces in cloth*” (emphases mine). In *Writing Islam from a South Asian Muslim Perspective*, Clements argues that “literature produced by South Asian Muslim authors today reflects [...] the complicated nature of contemporary global Muslim experiences of connection”.<sup>20</sup> In *Home Fire*, the repeated acts consisting in touching ice to build the coffin collectively responds to Manning’s contention that “this urge to touch an other” — a non-human other (ice) in the case in point which reunites humans in the novel — “potentially creates a community of resistance, a complex, disorderly, incommensurable community of those who cannot keep themselves from reaching out toward the world”.<sup>21</sup>

19 D.J. Kim, “Politico-aesthetics”, 78.

20 M. Clements, *Writing Islam*, 14.

21 E. Manning, *Politics of Touch*, 10.

16. Alongside resistance, touch in Shamsie's novels participates in collective reparation by fostering connection, both on the diegetic and narrative levels. Bonding through touch occurs even despite the filters constituted by borders and screens. Several passages highlight how Karamat Lone, albeit aware of the artificial nature of the performance — is physically affected by what he sees on screen as he is in his office in London while the vigil takes place in Pakistan. Aneeka touches her face to make her lips reappear under the dust and this is followed by Lone "tasting dust" (*HF* 228) in his mouth as he is watching the screen. Later, the text describes Aneeka touching the ice coffin during her vigil and Karamat Lone is immediately depicted, experiencing coolness in his finger ends: "A flutter of silk and she was gone. Now there was only him and the girl who reached out to touch the ice. He bunched his hands together, blew on his cold fingertips" (*HF* 254). The bonding between Aneeka's body and Parvaiz's corpse through touch, and that between Aneeka and the rest of the community, in Pakistan and in London, may therefore be read along the lines of reanimation.

### **Touch as animation**

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17. Before the passage about Karamat Lone and his son, one reads: "she placed her hand over his eyes, and her touch made something in him stop, something else in him start. He bent his head forward, resting the too-great weight of it against his wife's palm" (*HF* 254). Touch is shown as intrinsically relational in the way Lone responds to his wife's touch by "bend[ing] his head forward". Moreover, the thought of his son comes to Lone's mind after his wife has touched his face. The passage links diegetic moments of touch together as well as it invites readers to draw connections between various passages of the novel. This passage also sheds light on how touch triggers further actions in the novel. Touch is the grammatical subject of the verb "made" while both "stop" and "start" are also action verbs. This emphasises the narrative agency of touch, which is likely to *generate* further actions in the diegesis. In terms of agency, Manning notes that "there is no touch that can last beyond the first moment of contact. To touch longer, I must touch again" and connects touch with politics and ethics as it demands "a continual re-articulation rather than a subsuming into the same".<sup>22</sup> As a consequence, touch is a drive for action in the diegesis but is also agentic as its repetition reanimates human and non-human beings.
18. In the passage depicting the vigil, the image of the "conveyor belt" reminds us of a physical

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

movement, of bare vitality,<sup>23</sup> at the same time as it is a metaphor for the bonding occurring within the community. Aneeka's repeated acts of touch re-animate the community by reunifying its members around the corpse of Parvaiz awaiting burial and against political power.

19. Aneeka's gestures also somehow re-animate Parvaiz's corpse: "the candles threw their reflections onto the ice coffin. Flames trembled along its length, creating the impression of something *stirring* inside" (*HF* 230; my emphasis). The emphasis on life and movement can be linked to Eva Kundtová Klocová's conception of rituals, in particular their capacity to animate dead people and matter: "the dead are neither situated as illegible ghosts nor absorbed into state narratives: they are animated in the provisional yet affective space of the ritual".<sup>24</sup> Klocová adds: "the ritual act performs established social gestures, yet also re-presents them in new material and embodied contexts; it initiates an interplay between determination of existing social structure and the potentially open possibilities of re-interpretation, re-viewing and affecting others in the present".<sup>25</sup> Aneeka invents a new ritual based on past gestures and renewed ones, since the situation is itself new as Parvaiz is not to be buried in a traditional way.<sup>26</sup> Aneeka is neither Parvaiz's wife nor a male member of the family which makes this an unusual Muslim funeral but the fact that she manages to gather people around Parvaiz's body reconnects with the meaning of mourning in Urdu, as Sajjad explains to Hiroko in *Burnt Shadows*: "There is a phrase I have heard in English: to leave someone alone with their grief. Urdu has no equivalent phrase. It only understands the concept of gathering around and becoming "ghum-khaur" — grief-eaters — who take in the mourner's sorrow" (*BS* 77).

20. The connection between part and whole, each member of the community and the larger common body may also be linked with Chambers's description of the Ummah: "The Ummah, or global community of believing Muslims, is often imagined as one body, even if this is equally often challenged".<sup>27</sup> Can this passage in *Home Fire* not be seen as a reimagining of Ummah as a whole revitalised body in a concrete, embodied context of mourning? It is indeed as if Aneeka's act has

23 The phrase echoes Jane Bennett's work on "vibrant matter".

24 E. Kundtová Klocová, "Body in Ritual Space", 156.

25 *Ibid.*, 166. The fact that the ritual act may "affect others in the present" makes it possible to see Aneeka's performance through touch, generating other haptic gestures within the community, as one of healing.

26 B. Sarkar, *Mourning the Nation*, 7-8: "In most parts of India, white is the color of mourning, not black. The most common form of mourning, related to death, is imbricated with concerns about public hygiene, spiritual well-being, and rehabilitation of the mourners: local climate requires the quick disposal of the body; a period of ascetic restraint (dietary restrictions, sexual abstinence, meditation) is followed by rituals (religious offerings, charitable dispensations) aimed at the expiation of departed souls, and a feast marking the mourners' return to the normal flow of life". The list shows how the televised mourning in *Home Fire* both abides by and reinvents South Asian traditions of public mourning.

27 C. Chambers, xiv.

reimbued the whole community of mourners with life which then circulates through the image of the belt. But the passage could also evidence, alongside Manning, that instead of there being a single body, “there are corpuses, many of them, reaching out, touching, being touched, corpuses that are recitations of multiplicities, of pluralities evoked by touching bodies”.<sup>28</sup>

21. In *Burnt Shadows*, animation by touch draws on a conception of community at large, more visibly involving human and non-human agents. The first occurrence of the word “touch” in the novel is explicitly paired with the notion of animation, suggesting an intrinsic link between touching and giving life:

It is Hiroko who first referred to his purple notebooks as birds — the day they met; the only time she has been inside his house. She lifted a notebook off his desk, splayed, and glided it around his room. The animation of her touch made him acutely conscious of the lifelessness of his words: sentences thrown down on paper year after year simply so he could pretend there was some purpose to his being here. (BS 9)

The lifeless words put on paper were anti-state pamphlets and could have had Konrad arrested for treason. It is Hiroko’s touch which makes them meaningful. By referring to the notebooks as birds, Hiroko also endows them with new life. This is reminiscent of Jane Bennett’s concept of “*Thing-Power*”, “the curious ability of inanimate things to animate”,<sup>29</sup> about which she adds: “an actant never really acts alone. Its efficacy or agency always depends on the collaboration, cooperation, or interactive interference of many bodies and forces”.<sup>30</sup> This paves the way for a prolonged destabilisation of the boundary between the human and the non-human in the novel. Konrad later transforms them into a decorative mobile by having the notebooks hang down from wire, assuming “no one will think to enter the deserted garden to search for treachery amidst the *leaves*” (BS 9; my emphasis) — the leaves referring both to the pages of the notebooks and to plants. The blurring of boundaries is also underlined in a passage where the border separating Hiroko’s body from the whole of the valley disappears when the bombing occurs:

So much to learn. The touch of dead flesh. The smell — she has just located where the acrid smell comes from — of dead flesh. The sound of fire — who knew fire roared so angrily, ran so quickly? It is running up the slopes now; soon it will catch her. Not just her back, all of her will be Urakami Valley. Diamond from carbon — she briefly imagines herself a diamond, all of Nagasaki a diamond cutting open the earth, falling through to hell. (BS 27)

28 E. Manning, *Politics of Touch*, 11.

29 J. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 6.

30 *Ibid.*, 21.

The passage exemplifies how touch in Shamsie's novels leads to an erasure of boundaries as is shown by the phrase "all of her will be Urakami Valley", as if she and the valley were part of one single ecosystem. From a narrative point of view, the mention of "touch" leads to the following "sensual" images — "smell", sound (with fire which is personified as an animal, "roar[ing]", running) — and the striking image of the character "visualising" herself as diamond. Touch in Shamsie's novels allows for the re-construction of past relationships, the re-imagination of new ones, and possibly the reunification of the community after it has been affected by destruction or at least, disunion. Such an operation is made possible as touch, as in reality, operates through "intersensoriality"<sup>31</sup> — something which is made particularly visible in Shamsie's sensual writing, i.e. her writing's focus on the senses.

### **Bodies as archives, touch as archiving process**

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22. In line with the previous discussion on touch and resistance, bodies may counter official, historical archives and the narratives they convey by becoming themselves alternative archives. In *Burnt Shadows*, Hiroko's body bears the traces of the nuclear explosion as her back is covered in bird-shaped burns. They are the visible traces of the traumatic event. The novel therefore literalises the first meaning of trauma being that of the wound. As Soukaï recalls, trauma in *Burnt Shadows* is not only psychological. Its corporeality is made visible by the fact that the marks have been *impressed* upon the heroine's back, upon her skin. This is where Anzieu's conception of the multi-faceted nature of skin is relevant to the demonstration. In *Skin-Ego*, Anzieu argues that:

The primary function of the skin is as the sac which contains and retains [. . .] Its second function is as the interface which marks the boundary with the outside and keeps that outside out [...] Finally, the third function [...] is as a site and a primary means of communicating with others, of establishing signifying relations; it is, moreover, an "inscribing surface" for the marks left by those others.<sup>32</sup>

He later characterises the skin as a "sensitive surface, capable of registering traces and inscriptions".<sup>33</sup> Hiroko's skin has therefore "contain[ed] and retain[ed]", "register[ed]" the memory

31 Ann Gagné recalls that many of the five senses which are taken into consideration in the West work in combination with touch, from a physiological point of view: "The sense of taste occurs through the touching upon the tongue. Hearing occurs through sound waves and touch through vibration. As well, we recognize smell when scent molecules stimulate our olfactory receptors and neurons. Thus, a complete sensory and bodily experience can be described through the complexity of touch and various tactile interactions" (*Embodying the Tactile in Victorian Literature* 2).

32 D. Anzieu, *The Skin-Ego*, 40.

33 *Ibid.*, 211.

of the historical, traumatic event. This corporeal memory<sup>34</sup> is one that is transgenerational since her son, Raza, even without directly experiencing the event, is also assumed to have been “marked” by the bomb. The character is regularly referred to as “marked” (“a bomb-marked mongrel”, *BS* 191; 195 or the “boy marked by the bomb”, *BS* 207), which suggests he has indeed affectively invested his mother’s trauma; his psyche bearing the marks of the event, as his mother’s skin literally does, through the process of “postmemory”.<sup>35</sup>

23. Corporeal memory operates through touch, particularly in *Burnt Shadows*. Bodily touch is precisely where the registering of historical events occurs. Sajjad’s touch of Hiroko’s skin mentally brings her back to a former haptic moment, one in which Konrad — her former lover — was the initiator of touch:

Her pain shattered every defence he’d unknowingly constructed since that moment he’d looked at the mole beneath her eye and wanted to touch it. In a few quick steps he was next to her, his hands touching the space between the two lower burns, then pulling away as she shuddered. Seconds passed as she allowed herself the luxury of his touch, knowing this memory would join Konrad’s kisses to form the entirety of her experience of physical intimacy. (*BS* 44)

The passage consists in another occurrence where touch leads to more touch, both in the diegesis and in the narrative, as Sajjad’s desire to touch the mole beneath Hiroko’s eye is immediately followed by a sentence evoking “his hands touching the space between the two lower burns”. As far as the narrative is concerned, it is as if the verb “touch” secreted more words related to it as is shown by the polyptoton, with “touch” textually generating “touching” and the noun “touch”. While Sajjad’s touch reconfigures Hiroko’s memory by creating relationality between various haptic experiences she was the object of, the verb “join” echoes the narrative chain which connects words related to touch in the novel. Touch in the novels operates as connector between lived, embodied experiences, but also as archive since it registers layers of haptic moments and “keeps a memory” of them.

24. In a different passage, Hiroko, holding a green berry, remembers how after the bombing, “she had lain down on Konrad’s shadow, within Konrad’s shadow, her mouth pressed against the darkness of his chest” (*BS* 77), before pressing the fruit against her skin. The text then reads: ““Why didn’t you stay?” she had whispered against the unyielding stone. *Why didn’t you stay?* She pressed

34 The phrase is borrowed from Lee, 2009.

35 I am drawing here on Marianne Hirsch’s concept of “postmemory” by which she refers to: “the relationship that the “generation after” bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before to experiences they “remember” only by means of the stories, images, and behaviours among which they grew up”. See “An Interview with Marianne Hirsch”.

the berry against her lips” (BS 77). As the text signals the connection between these distinct moments through the two occurrences of the question “why didn’t you stay?”, the repetition of the verb “press” presents this act of touch as a moment of memorial connection and reconfiguration.

These passages may be read in the light of Sara Ahmed’s reflection on the term “contact” in the context of her work on phenomenology:

I’ve always liked this word “contact” anyway. And obviously it has an etymological relation to “contingency”, to touch, to come into contact. And to think about that coming into contact, one body with another, or a body with an object, how in that encounter there’s already at stake other encounters that are part of the horizon which allows that encounter to happen in the first place.<sup>36</sup>

The repetition of these gestures — Sajjad’s kisses conjuring up Konrad’s touch, pressing the berry conjuring up the moment when Hiroko pressed the stone on which Konrad’s shadow had been impressed — echoes the layering process occurring in and through touch. As Caspari drawing on Ahmed’s work asserts, “each instance of touch is archival, adding new layers to a ‘sedimented history’ of ‘other encounters’ that shapes the present”.<sup>37</sup> *Burnt Shadows*, with its spanning of three generations, its evocation of numerous countries and their histories, and its characters’ intermingled trajectories, foregrounds the archival nature of touch. It draws on “encounters”, and on how the characters’ respective worlds rearranged themselves through their “coming in contact” with each other:

Then he and Harry placed *side by side* the stories each knew of their families. Stories of opportunities received (Sajjad found, through Konrad, a way out of the constraining world of his family business), loyalty offered (Hiroko refused to back away from Konrad when her world turned him into an enemy), shelter provided (three times Ilse gave Hiroko a home: in Delhi, Karachi, New York), strength transferred (Ilse would never have left the life she hated if not for Hiroko), disaster elided (James and Ilse ensured Sajjad and Hiroko were well away from Partition’s bloodletting). And [...] second chances (at being a better father, a better son). Now Kim, too, was part of the stories. Whatever happened to him, Raza knew she would watch over his ageing mother. (BS 350; my emphasis)

This rather long quotation epitomises the articulation between contact and the archiving process. As Raza and Harry remember the intermingled stories of their ancestors, the text gives shape to the many contingent events which have made this chain of encounters and contacts possible. By resorting to juxtaposition in terms of images (“side by side”) and as a writing principle, illustrated by the parallels, brackets and enumeration, Shamsie shows how touch registers (hi)stories of contact

36 Antwi et al., “NOT WITHOUT AMBIVALENCE”, 120.

37 M.M.N. Caspari, *Reading Frictions*, 53. The phrase “sedimented history” is quoted by Caspari from Ahmed, “Race as Sedimented History” (2015).



sedimenting in the characters' bodies and the latter's interactions with other bodies. Ahmed's notion of a 'sedimented history' is also perceptible through the various tenses used in the quotation — from the past participle to the conditional — which exemplify how past, present and future are articulated around the repeated encounters which have occurred between and around the bodies as they have come in contact with each other. The process of juxtaposition is epitomised in the phrase “Weiss-Burtons and Tanaka-Ashrafs” (BS 350), which appears in several instances in the novel. The dashes, both separating and bringing together these names, exemplify the ambivalent nature of touch, which produces both distance and proximity, but also its propensity to make bodies, and (hi)stories, come in contact with each other.

25. In “Necropolitical Trauma”, Yaqin argues that in Shamsie's fiction, “the body becomes a site of historical trauma” (2021, 237). But the Japanese heroine of *Burnt Shadows*, Hiroko, will not be reduced to her wounded body: “already she had started to feel that word ‘hibakusha’ start to consume her life. To the Japanese she was nothing beyond an explosion-affected person; that was her defining feature” (BS 49). She does not want the story of the nuclear explosion to be made more important because she has been personally affected by it either: as she shouts at Kim, Harry's daughter: “That's why Nagasaki was such a monstrous crime? Because it had happened to me?” (BS 294). Hiroko stands against both the transformation of the survivors of Nagasaki into mere types and against the individualisation of trauma. Hiroko resists the tendency to have “bodies become stabilized within national imaginaries in preordained categories, such as citizen, refugee, man, woman, homed, homeless”.<sup>38</sup>
26. Anzieu refers to the skin's second function by arguing “its second function is as the interface which marks the boundary with the outside and keeps that outside out”. This is precisely what is challenged by Shamsie's novels. Instead of simply being a body forever marked by the traumatic event, Hiroko's body is not only a body “collect[ing] the sediment of the past” but one also “open to new instances of touch in the present”.<sup>39</sup> As Caspari notes: “the skin is both internal and external: the overdetermined site of racist schemas, and the permeable site at which the body not only absorbs but also translates and forms potential new relations to others”.<sup>40</sup> Several nascent relations are born out of Sajjad's touch, first the relation between Hiroko and himself, but also a newly reconfigured relation between Hiroko and the birds on her back.

38 E. Manning, *Politics of Touch*, xv.

39 M.M.N. Caspari, *Reading Frictions*, 177. These statements made by Caspari about the works in her corpus apply particularly well to the novels under study.

40 *Ibid.*, 61.

She had stepped out of the shadow of the roof's overhang and into the harsh sunlight so there could be no mistaking the three charcoal-coloured bird-shaped burns on her back [...]. "You can read this diagonal script, can't you? Any man could. It says, 'Stay away. This isn't what you want.'" [...]. He touched the grotesque darkness below her shoulder blade — tentatively, fearfully — as though it was a relic of hell [...]. "Birdback", he said [...]. "Don't you know everything about you is beautiful?" (BS, 90-91)

While Hiroko has considered them as symbols of death since the nuclear explosion and therefore orders Sajjad to "stay away" — a revisitation of Christ's *noli me tangere* — the bird-shaped burns become animated under Sajjad's touch and turn into birds engraved on her back, echoing Bennett's aforementioned statement that "an actant never acts alone". Moreover, Hiroko's body, under Sajjad's touch, is turned into something radically new as the neologism "birdback" suggests. This shows how the touched, and simultaneously touching, body, since touching is always relational, turns into a place of radical possibility.<sup>41</sup> This is how what Caspari calls the "body in touch" emerges as "an ambivalent site of resistance": "It holds the collective and archival memory of physical and psychic wounds [...] Yet, it is also the site of potential future tactile and affective relations and encounters that move and resist the stasis of the biopolitical".<sup>42</sup> *Burnt Shadows* rethinks the lives of the people who have been affected by the bombing in Nagasaki, the Partition or 9/11 outside the dyad survivor/individual. Both novels shed light upon what national narratives try to erase or overlook, be it the violence of historical events, their enduring mental and physical consequences over generations, or the fact that terrorists-to-be can be Western nationals and that discussions about them (their futures, their deaths) must be tackled in the countries they have lived in. Sandrine Soukaï adds to the discussion about *Burnt Shadows* that corporeal memory allows for an "empathic sharing of the Other's trauma".<sup>43</sup> The next section will offer final remarks on how Shamsie's tactile poetics may make readers empathetically involved in other people's or countries' traumatic experiences.

27. As Pierre-Louis Patoine shows, it is a particularly difficult task to theorise what "empathetic reading" is since reading implies a variety of elements, from the readers' intellectual knowledge to their bodies and the way they may let themselves be affected by stylistic devices and the power of

41 In Manning's terms: "the potential of the animated body as it moves from here to there, from the now to the not-yet, from the after to the before to the will-have-come" (*Politics of Touch*, xviii-xix).

42 M.M.N. Caspari, *Reading Frictions*, 203.

43 S. Soukaï, *Les Ombres de la Partition*, 274.

literature, among many other factors.<sup>44</sup> In *Home Fire*, can the description of Karamat Lone's experiencing cold fingertips after watching Aneeka touch the ice coffin be, to some extent, transferred to readers? In *Burnt Shadows*, can the passage where Sajjad touches Hiroko's burnt skin generate sensations among readers of the novel? One is here reminded of Ahmed's two definitions of "being touched" — one implying physical contact, the other referring to one's propensity to be affected by something: "Being touched' points to both being affected or moved by the presence of another (as in the phrase, 'I was touched by her concern'), and coming into physical contact with another ('I touched her arm in gratitude')".<sup>45</sup> Shamsie's writing is likely to generate "empathic" feelings in her readers, to touch them, through her tactile poetics: "In a few quick steps he was next to her, his hands touching the space between the two lower burns, then pulling away as she shuddered" (*BS* 91). As the scene depicted is not devoid of sensuality, the use of "shudder" is imbued with sensory power ("puissance sensorielle") (Patoine 2015) and may produce "empathic reading", alongside Shamsie's focus on touch in her novels and the readers' ability to let themselves be affected by her writing. Soukaï writes about how the shadows "shape a body memory which involves the reader in an empathic and reflexive semiotics of the gaze"<sup>46</sup> and how readers are invited to use their senses to interpret the texts, the historical events, think about traumatic experiences and share "an affective memory of trauma".<sup>47</sup> Shamsie's tactile poetics, one through which touch operates lightly and erringly<sup>48</sup> — "tentatively, fearfully" are the adverbs used in the passage describing Sajjad's touch on Hiroko's back — echoes Ahmed's contention that "touching, as a temporary encounter with another, involves a movement closer [...] which does not grasp that other [...]".<sup>49</sup> In other words, touch may work as healing and archive when it remains light and open to the other, not when it attempts mastery.

28. Touch provides comfort when instead of appropriating other bodies, it implies reciprocity and partakes of an ethics of care. Such tactile poet(h)ics makes it possible for the touched body or subject, in contact with other bodies, to be open to present and future acts of touch that can be radically transformative. They may invent new relations or transform preexisting ones, and even the community at large by redrawing lines of relationality within it, inside and outside the diegesis. They can also particularly "touch" the reading community by making readers likely to rethink their

44 P.-L. Patoine, *Corps / Texte*, 27: "empathic resonance is determined by top-down mechanisms such as habits, affection, and attention and by stylistic strategies such as focalization (point of view) and onomatopoeia".

45 S. Ahmed, *Intimate Touches*, 27.

46 S. Soukaï, *Les ombres de la Partition* (summary).

47 *Ibid.*, 288 (my translation).

48 The term is borrowed from Manning who states that "touch errs" (*Politics of Touch*, 70).

49 S. Ahmed, *Intimate Touches*, 28.

ideas of identity and nation in a more fluid manner and to participate empathetically in a collective process of sharing traumatic experiences.

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