

History in Fiction / Fiction in History

By David Waterman

The research center Spaces/Writings of the University of Paris West Nanterre La Défense (10) organized a study day on Friday 4 November, the first in a series addressing the theme of History in Fiction / Fiction in History.

Kamila Shamsie was the guest of honor, invited to discuss her novel *Burnt Shadows* which was translated and published in French by Buchet-Chastel with the title *Quand blanchit le monde*.

Quoting from the invitation: The Pakistani writer Kamila Shamsie is the recipient of both a rich literary heritage and prestigious awards. Her fifth novel, *Burnt Shadows* (Bloomsbury 2009, *Quand blanchit le monde* 2010) is ambitious in the amplitude of its historical setting (from Hiroshima to 11 September) and in its geographical space (from Japan to North America, India, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Turkey), as well as in its intrigue which links the ‘Kipling’ game with ‘Rushdie’ magic and is remarkable in its sensitivity to sounds and foreign terms. This multigenerational novel plunges us into the postcommunist world by means of two friends whose destinies are connected – the Pakistani Raza Ashraf and the American Harry Burton, and delivers a message of peace thanks to the central character and exceptional woman, Hiroko Tanaka.

Kamila Shamsie was introduced by Geetha Ganapathy-Doré, Associate Professor at the University of Paris 13, accompanied by the French publisher Marc Parent. Following was a discussion animated by Corinne Alexandre-Garner, Associate Professor at the University of Paris 10 and Cécile Oumhani, Associate Professor at the University of Paris 12.

Some of the points highlighted by Ms. Shamsie regarding the development of *Burnt Shadows*: the fact that the bombing of Hiroshima was terrible, but worse yet was the decision to drop a second bomb three days later; the South Asian nuclear tests of 1998; people finding themselves on the wrong side of history; how the details of history become part of the fictional story; doing extensive research on the where and when; the refusal to be voyeuristic or to aestheticize

David Waterman

violence; how she writes to understand rather than contribute something to the world; how the State can be deceived by an act of imagination; and finally, that it takes more than Babel, more than polyglots, to make things work.

Many thanks to the organizers, and especially to Kamila Shamsie for coming to Paris and participating in the seminar.