[PAPERBACK: UK]

From Nagasaki to Guantanamo in two generations

Kamila Shamsie's epic new novel will challenge and enlighten its readers

BY **MAYA JAGGI**
THE GUARDIAN, LONDON

Publication Notes

BURNT SHADOWS

BY KAMILA SHAMSIE
370 PAGES
BLOOMSBURY

The huge ambition of Kamila Shamsie's fifth novel is announced in the prologue. As an unnamed captive is unshackled and stripped naked in readiness for the anonymity of an orange jumpsuit, he wonders: "How did it come to this?" The vastness of the question as applied to a prisoner in Guantanamo is a challenge to which this epic yet skilfully controlled novel rises in oblique and unexpected ways.

Unfolding in four sections, the novel traces the shared histories of two families, from the final days of World War II in Japan, and India on the brink of partition in 1947, to Pakistan in the early 1980s, New York in the aftermath of Sept. 11 and Afghanistan in the wake of the ensuing US bombing campaign. At its heart is the beautifully drawn Hiroko Tanaka, first seen in Nagasaki in August 1945 as a young schoolteacher turned munitions factory worker whose artist father is branded a traitor for his outbursts against the emperor and kamikaze militarism. She falls in love with a lanky, russet-haired idealist from Berlin, Konrad Weiss, with whom she shares — along with other key characters — a love of languages. But their romance is curtailed by the flash of light that renders Konrad a shadow on stone and burns the birds on Hiroko's kimono into her back, a fusion of "charred silk, seared flesh."

Hiroko finds refuge in Old Delhi, in the twilight of the raj, with her dead fiance's sister Ilse and her English husband James Burton. Hiroko is drawn to Sajjad Ali Ashraf, a dashing Muslim employee who agrees to teach her Urdu. Her hosts discourage their romance, yet the couple grow closer as partition sunders Sajjad from Delhi as shockingly as Nagasaki was lost to Hiroko.

In Karachi, the saga of the Weiss-Burtons and Tanaka-Ashrafs shifts to Hiroko and Sajjad's son Raza, a linguist given to impersonating Afghan refugees from the Soviet invasion of 1979, and James and Ilse's son Henry, a Kipling-like figure mourning a lost Indian childhood (his daughter is named Kim). As Harry Burton, Henry has transferred his idealistic allegiance to his adoptive US, becoming a covert CIA operative in cold-war Pakistan. Raza's naive bid for a kind of gap year in Afghanistan's training camps with his Afghan friend Abdullah brings adventures with gunrunners and poppy growers, but also sobering loss for the family and enduring guilt for Raza.

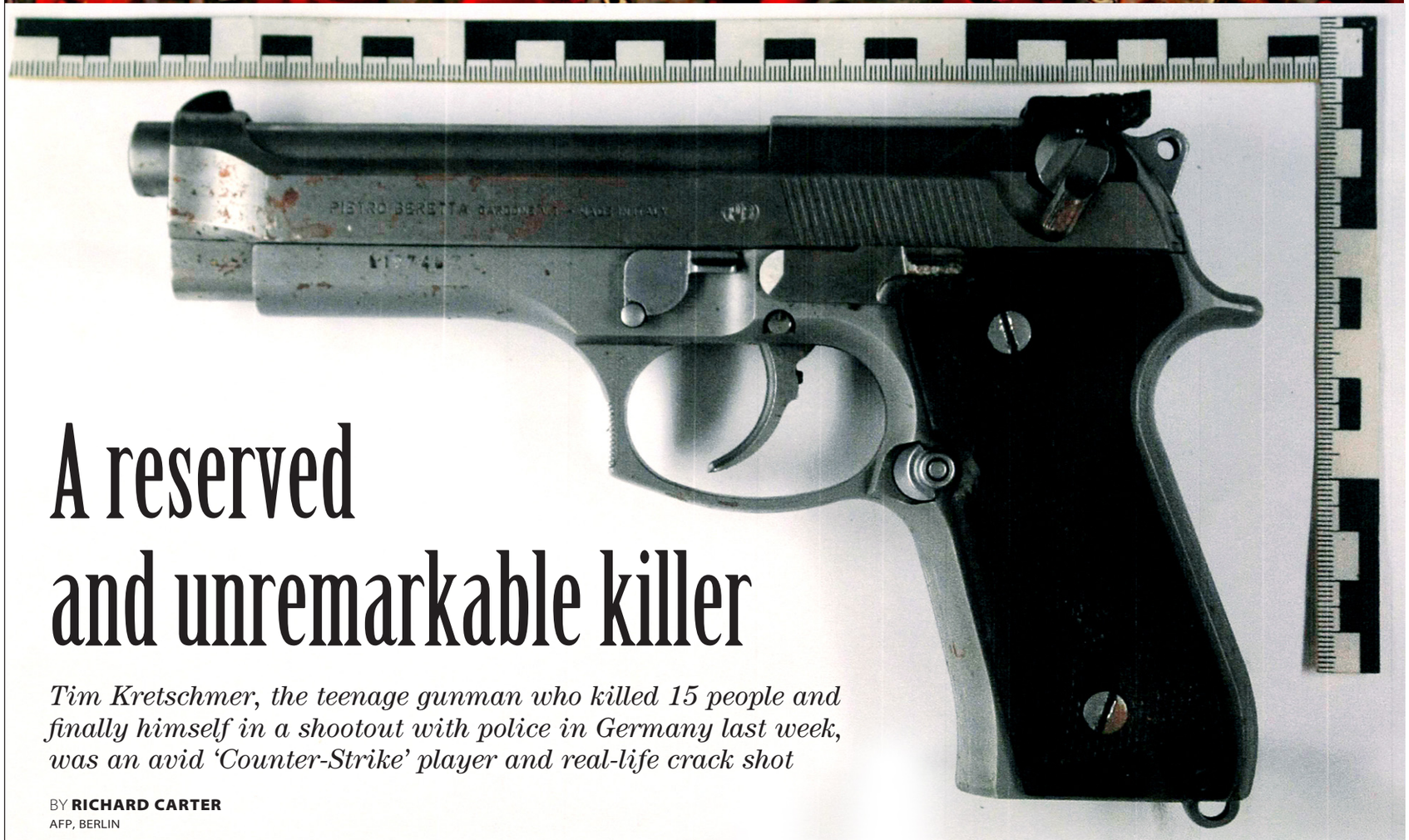
After Hiroko decamps to New York, disgusted by nuclear posturing between India and Pakistan, and encounters Abdullah as a taxi driver, the final section alternates between an apartment she shares with Kim, overlooking the smoldering fires of Ground Zero, and Afghanistan, where Harry and his interpreter Raza have joined forces in a private security firm. CIA backing for the mujahideen's resistance war, and abandonment of them once the Soviet army withdrew, is seen as a grim policy failure whose legacy is being reaped in "Jihadi blowback." But pivotal to the novel's final betrayals, guilt and loss is a conversation fraught with suspicion and misunderstanding between Kim and Abdullah.

Through its succession of seemingly disparate, acutely observed worlds, *Burnt Shadows* reveals the impact of shared histories, hinting at larger tragedies through individual loss. There are minor flaws in plotting, and occasional excesses, but the subtlety lies in repeated patterns of allegiance and estrangement, betrayal and atonement, in the echoes between kamikaze pilots and suicide bombers, or between Ilse's alacrity in branding Sajjad as a rapist in the novel's Forsterian vignette and Kim's suspicion of Muslims after 9/11.

The historical threads between Nagasaki and Guantanamo are implicit, though crucial. In Hiroko's view, all it takes to wipe people out without scruple is to "put them in a little corner of the big picture" — whatever the "war" in the frame. A similar logic informs a chilling conversation about interrogation techniques. "What wouldn't I do if I thought it was effective?" Harry muses. "Almost nothing. Children are out of bounds. Rape is out of bounds. But otherwise ... what works, works." Tellingly, he asks not to be quoted to his daughter.

The identity of the Guantanamo captive remains unclear till the powerful denouement, as events unfold with a malign logic whereby even a man's stooping for a cricket ball can be fatally misconstrued. Any reader anticipating a predictable yarn about the radicalization of Islamist youth may feel cheated. Far more, I suspect, will feel challenged and enlightened, possibly provoked, and undoubtedly enriched.

SUNDAY PROFILE



A reserved and unremarkable killer

Tim Kretschmer, the teenage gunman who killed 15 people and finally himself in a shootout with police in Germany last week, was an avid 'Counter-Strike' player and real-life crack shot

BY **RICHARD CARTER**
AFP, BERLIN

On the surface, there was little to indicate that Tim Kretschmer was a mass killer, capable of slaughtering 15 people with his father's 9mm Beretta pistol he then turned on himself.

Like many other teenagers, the 17-year-old trainee salesman — described as "unremarkable" and "reserved" — enjoyed working out at the gym and was a keen table-tennis player.

With the benefit of hindsight, however, there were some clues: he had been suffering from depression, enjoyed grisly horror movies and violent "shoot-em-up" computer games.

And in addition to his other sporting activities, he would often train at the shooting range of which his father Joerg, a successful local businessman employing over 150 people at a packaging firm, is a member.

But none of this made him stand out as anything unusual, let alone a crazed killer.

Kretschmer "grew up in a happy family and had a sister — five years younger — with whom he had a good relationship," Heribert Rech, interior minister of Baden-Wuerttemberg state, which includes Winnenden, told reporters.

Kretschmer "did not have many friends but did have a few … and was interested in one particular girl," Rech said.

Other teenagers described him as "reserved," "unremarkable" and even "friendly" but he was nonetheless somewhat of a loner, with few friends.

"He was simply not accepted by anyone and just sat all day in front of his computer," one schoolmate, Mario, told German television station N24.

Police who seized his computer after the massacre said he was particularly keen on shooting games — especially the violent *Counter-Strike* — and had become a real-life crack shot.

Der Spiegel magazine quoted Michael, one of his table-tennis partners, as saying Kretschmer had "thousands of horror videos at home" and was "rather unique."

> *I have had enough … always the same. People are laughing at me, no one recognizes my potential.*
>
> — Tim Kretschmer

Above: The gun Tim Kretschmer, 17, used to kill 15 people in a shooting spree on Wednesday. Left: The house where Kretschmer lived with his parents in Leutenbach, Germany. PHOTOS: REUTERS AND AFP

Academically, he was described as "average," graduating from the Albertville school with mediocre grades.

From April until September 2008 he received psychiatric treatment that was meant to resume — at the very clinic outside which he shot one person during the rampage.

In his own words, he had simply "had enough of this crummy life."

Seven hours before the carnage, he told a friend on an Internet chat room: "Shit, Bernd. I have had enough … always the same. People are laughing at me, no one recognizes my potential."

Then he issued his chilling warning: "I have weapons here and tomorrow morning I will go to my old school. You will hear about me tomorrow. Make note of the name of the place: Winnenden."

Party?

CONTINUED FROM P13

PHOTO COURTESY OF AKI GALLERY

"Looking at my works, it's hard to see a Taiwanese flavor. But in the background, it's there."

— Hsieh Mu-chi

When Hsieh was a teen, his father started listening to underground radio and took part in anti-KMT political activities held by groups like the Taiwan Independence Party (建國黨). Curious about his father's interest in politics and influenced by Taiwanese writer Wu Cho-liu's (吳濁流) *The Asian Orphan* (亞細亞的孤兒), in which the main character goes insane trying to come to grips with the Japanese, Chinese and Taiwanese aspects of his identity, Hsieh says he later started thinking: "Who am I?"

"I wanted my work *Good to Have You Here* [2007, 有你眞好] to come from a Taiwanese angle," he says. "The country is sandwiched between China and Japan and the geographical and cultural connections have influenced Taiwan's appearance today."

Hsieh's painting includes stylized versions of Chinese and Japanese flags with what appears to be an empty flagpole between. Still, the work seems more about color and space than politics, and it didn't stir controversy when shown in Shanghai in 2007.

While interviewing Hsieh in his Bali Township (八里鄉), Taipei County studio, he came off understandably confused about cross-strait politics and complained that Taiwanese media coverage was often too one-sided.

Hsieh talked about attending a demonstration against Chinese envoy Chen Yunlin's (陳雲林) visit in November, saying that he mostly went for the spectacle and that he was turned off by what he felt was the Democratic Progressive Party trying to take advantage of the event.

When I tried to corner him on whether he would show in China as a "Chinese artist" or an artist from "Taiwan, China," he skirted the question, mentioning a story the *Liberty Times* (the *Taipei Times'* sister paper) covered last year about an advertisement by Taipei's Asia Art Center (亞洲藝術中心) that listed 19 Taiwanese artists as being from "Taiwan, China." The gallery caught hell for it, with one artist writing on his blog: "Here's my middle finger: Fuck this show and fuck this gallery."

Hsieh said that when he heard about the Asia Art Center story, he thought about making a work and labeling it with his name and a series of politically charged descriptions of his country like "Taiwan, China," "Taiwan, Republic of China," and the most controversial of them all: "The Republic of Taiwan" (台灣共和國). He never made the work.

One of the most interesting remarks from the interview came from a staff member of Aki Gallery (也趣畫廊), which represents Hsieh.

"The position of artists and galleries is different," said Jocelyn Li (李悅芝), who accompanied me to Hsieh's studio. "For galleries, we want to do business and make our commission, so we really want to get into the Chinese market. But for artists, the work is more important ... They can say, 'OK, I'm not going to show.'"

But can they? Making a living as an artist can be challenging and as with galleries, there's a strong temptation to go where the money is.

About a week after my interview with Hsieh I sent him an e-mail, hoping to get solid answers to some of the questions I felt he'd avoided. He responded straightforwardly, but what struck me was the honesty shown in an aside.

"To tell the truth," Hsieh wrote, "I'm still trying to figure out things for myself ... That's why my answers were unsure and hesitant."

Hsieh Mu-chi, *Good to Have You Here* (2007).

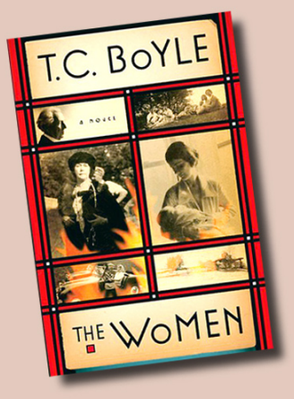
PHOTO COURTESY OF HSIEH MU-CHI

[HARDCOVER: US]

The novel life of America's greatest architect

Frank Lloyd Wright's notorious philandering tips into melodrama in this fictionalized account of his relationships with three women

Publication Notes



THE WOMEN

BY T.C. BOYLE
451 PAGES
BLOOMSBURY

BY **SEAN O'HAGAN**
THE OBSERVER, LONDON

Frank Lloyd Wright, creator of the Guggenheim Museum in New York and pioneer of "organic" buildings, is now regarded as America's greatest architect. During his lifetime, though, his notoriety as a philanderer surpassed even his fame as an artist. "Early in life," he once proclaimed, "I had to choose between honest arrogance and hypocritical humility. I chose arrogance."

T.C. Boyle has chosen this typically self-aggrandizing quote as the epigraph to *The Women*, his big, meandering novel about Wright's often tempestuous love life. Boyle has explored similar terrain before in both *The Road to Wellville* and *The Inner Circle*, where he fictionalized the lives of two other eccentric and obsessive American visionaries, John Harvey Kellogg, inventor of the cornflake, and Alfred Kinsey, pioneer of sexual freedom. Here, though, he loses his footing, diminishing both Wright's "honest arrogance" and his achievement.

The problems start with the novel's confusing structure, which chronicles the trajectory of Wright's relationships in reverse. In the process, the drama of that extraordinary life is severely diminished. Part 1 is given over to Olgivanna, Wright's third and final wife, a Serbian dancer who, against the odds, provided him with some much-needed domestic stability as he entered old age. Part 2 concerns Maude "Miriam" Noel, his second wife, a morphine addict whose devotion to Wright mutated into destructive obsession when he rejected her within a year of their marriage. The last section relates his affair with Mamah Cheney; they eloped to Europe in 1909, both leaving behind aggrieved spouses.

The tabloid headlines that ensued threatened to destroy Wright's career but he returned to America, unrepentant, a year later, and set about building his dream home, Taliesin, in Wisconsin. Wright's life tipped from the scandalous into the tragic when Taliesin was partially destroyed in an arson attack by one of his servants, an unhinged young man who rampaged though the flames with an axe, killing seven people. The dead included Mamah and her two children.

There is much, then, in Frank Lloyd Wright's tumultuous life that almost defies fictionalization. Nevertheless, he exerts a strange hold over novelists. He is said to have been the model for Howard Roark, the Nietzschean hero of Ayn Rand's monumentally silly *Fountainhead*. In 1987 Nancy Horan's novel, *Loving Frank*, explored similar themes to Boyle's but in a more straightforward way. Neither book cast as much light on the enigma as *Many Masks*, Brendan Gill's thorough biography, in which the architect is portrayed as an obsessively driven man in constant conflict with the forces of bourgeois respectability, as well as a chancer, consummate manipulator and visionary genius.

In *The Women*, though, that genius is taken as a given. The Wright who emerges here is vague and unsympathetic, and there are times when the casual reader might be forgiven for thinking he was a great Lothario who did a bit of architecture on the side. The high seriousness of Boyle's approach frequently tips into the realm of romantic melodrama. By far the most intriguing character here is Miriam but her emotional extremism becomes exhausting. One of the most baffling things about *The Women* is why Boyle, a writer not known for suffering fools gladly, seems so in thrall to her limitless self-obsession. My guess is that, had he created her, he would have had a lot more fun at her expense. That same problem dogs the book as a whole: the real existence of these characters dilutes Boyle's considerable satirical skill, impairing the caustic voice that could make his previous novels so scabrously entertaining.

Then again, this is a writer who lives in a house Frank Lloyd Wright built. Given that Wright was an artist who never celebrated complexity as an end in itself, perhaps Boyle should have studied its structure more closely before writing this confused and confusing book.