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Spices of Society: Unveiling the Tapestry of Socio-Cultural Threads in Kamila Shamsie's Salt and Saffron

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Abstract

The title delves into Kamila Shamsie's intricately woven narrative to explore the rich tapestry of socio-cultural dynamics. It is set against the backdrop of Pakistan. The Novel, "Salt and Saffron" (2000) intertwines the personal and societal, presenting a nuanced examination of tradition, identity, and societal expectations. The narrative unfolds through the lens of its protagonist, Aliya unveiling the multifaceted layers of familial heritage and the tensions between modernity and tradition. Shamsie crafts a symbolic exploration of the flavours that define society through the symbolic use of salt and saffron: its traditions, conflicts and aspirations. This article examines how the characters navigate the complex interplay between expectations and personal desires, illustrating the struggle for identity within the framework of societal norms. It embarks on a literary journey beyond the surface narrative, encouraging contemplation on the broader implications of cultural intricacies. She achieved this by acknowledging and reaching terms with the complexities of both its past and present. This analysis uncovers the thematic richness of "Salt and Saffron" revealing a compelling exploration of the spices that flavour the complex dish of socio-cultural existence.

Keywords: Identity, Belonging, Complexity, Society, Culture and Tradition.

Kamila Shamsie, born in 1973, is a Pakistani-British writer whose captivating narratives have garnered international acclaim. She is best known for her award-winning novel, *Home Fire* (2017), a contemporary reimagining of *Antigone* that explores themes of family, loyalty and the complexities of identity in a post-9/11 world. Her novel *Salt and Saffron* (2000), secured her a place among *Orange's* list of "21st Writers for the 21st Century". She has published Seven other novels, each one delving into diverse themes and captivating readers with her nuanced storytelling. She is recognized for her role in reinstating the image of Pakistan as a vibrant land of cultural assimilation, integration and coexistence. She has sparked important conversations about identity, history and challenges faced by contemporary societies.

"Salt and Saffron" by Kamila Shamsie is a novel that explores themes related to tradition through its use of salt and saffron as symbolic motifs. The use of salt and saffron as symbolic motifs in the novel highlights the importance of these spices in Pakistani culture

and cuisine. Salt is often used as a preservative, while saffron is used to add colour and flavour to dishes. These spices represent the need to preserve traditional values while also adding new flavours and experiences to society. Tradition represents the need for continuity in a rapidly changing world. Characters like Nani Ammi pass down stories about their family's history through oral traditions represented by salt which helps connect them to their past providing a sense of continuity in a rapidly changing world represented by salt. This theme highlights the importance of oral traditions in preserving cultural heritage passed down from generation to generation represented by salt while still embracing change represented by saffron.

Salt is a symbol of tradition, history, and heritage. It is associated with the Dard-e-Dil family's past, representing their lineage and legacy. Aliya learns about her family's history through stories that are passed down from generation to generation, much like how salt is passed down from one generation to another. In fact, Aliya's grandmother, Nani Ammi, tells her stories while sprinkling salt on her food. This act of adding salt to food represents how traditions are preserved and passed down from one generation to another. Aliya reflects on this when she says, "Every time Nani Ammi added salt to her food, she was adding a pinch of our history" (Shamsie 16).

On the other hand, saffron represents modernity, change, and individuality. It is a more recent addition to Pakistani cuisine, brought over by the British during their colonial rule. Saffron is associated with Aliya's desire for self-discovery and her quest for independence. Aliya reflects on this when she says, "I wanted to be more than just a wife and a mother. I wanted to have a life of my own" (Shamsie 67). This desire for independence is symbolized by saffron, which represents how individuals are breaking free from traditional roles and expectations.

As Aliya delves into her family's history, she discovers tales of forbidden love, family disputes, and the impact of historical events on individual lives. The narrative shifts between the contemporary world of Aliya in London and the various episodes of her family's past in Pakistan. A key element of the novel is the exploration of cultural identity and the tension between tradition and modernity. Aliya grapples with her sense of self, caught between the values of her Pakistani heritage and the influences of the Western world in which she now resides. Romantic relationships, family expectations, and the role of women in society are also prominent themes.

The novel provides a nuanced portrayal of the challenges faced by women in a traditional Pakistani setting and the choices they make to navigate societal expectations. She comes from a wealthy and aristocratic background, known as the Dard-e-Dil family. She learns the art of storytelling from her family and meets a man named Khaleel, who comes from a less privileged background. This makes Aliya reflect on the values of class consciousness in her family's history. She begins to investigate the history of her family and discovers a myth about not-quite-twins and a curse associated with them. She also learns about a mystery surrounding Maryam Apa.

Through these stories, passed down through generations without recorded evidence, The story opens with a female voice weaving tales for Aliya, a young woman of grace and intellect, fresh off her graduation with a degree in English Literature from the United States. Aliya, daughter of Nasser and Ayesha, belonged to the prestigious Dard-e-Dil family and was enjoying a sojourn in London before returning to her roots in Pakistan. Shamsie crafts a tapestry of Aliya's royal family history through her engaging storytelling, captivating the airport audience with tales of their past.

And the occupant of the aisle seat across from me was so grateful for my high-volume chatter—which replaced the usual boredom and non-recycled air of the transatlantic economy-class cabin with murder, war, jealousy, and rapidly reversing fortune—that he pulled my luggage off the conveyor belt at Heathrow... two girls had even sat cross-legged in the aisle, listening to my stories until the flight attendant shooed them away ... At college I was famous for my storytelling abilities. (Shamsie, 17)

The tales Baji tells, the lineage map, the pictures she keeps as well as the places and national symbols she has mentioned throughout her account like Taj Mahal, “Think of an image that captures and preserves the glory of the Mughals, and if you have any sense of anything you’ll say the Taj Mahal.” (p.35) and leaders, as well as languages, are all methods to sustain their history and heritage. It is not only Baji, Aliya, and Dadi who follow the same procedures; those women are depicted to be barriers and carriers of their history, resisting the demise of their culture, so they are keeping their roots alive. Shamsie dissents from the Westerners’ insights of third-world women as being encompassed by stiff patriarchal codes with fragmented experiences. Acknowledging how those women nourished and kept their legacy and pride, Shamsie locates those third-world women in an authoritative role in saving the nation and building the country. Aliya and the rest of those women used the aforementioned methods to provide a constitution for their unity:

Therefore, resistance is also situated in relation to previous resistance. Especially when resistance is innovative, experimental and creative, it needs to build on the material left by other rebels—stories, myths, symbols, structures and tools available in that special situation. New forms of resistance connect to old forms by using them as stepping stones, translating existing hegemonic elements, dislodging and recombining that which is available to them” (Johansson6).

Aliya’s upbringing involved hearing tales about her ancestry, which allowed her to delve into the past and uncover the legends surrounding her near-identical siblings. Her foremother gave birth to three sons, Akbar, Sulaiman, and Taimur, who were categorized as not-quite-twins and believed that their existence would bring about the family’s downfall and disgrace. Through these narratives, Aliya demonstrates a strong connection to her family’s history, particularly in regards to the classification of not-quite-twins, her lineage, and its members.

Aliya gains insight into how her ancestors lived in a society divided by social class. The novel touches on the impact of the partition between Pakistan and India on Muslim families, but this is not the main focus of the story. Aliya and Marium, who are not actual twins, are referred to as such because Aliya was born on the same day that Marium joined their family. She finds herself desperately missing Mariam Apa who she was very close to, “Something happened to her my sleep pattern after Mariam left; my old ability to fall asleep at the slightest opportunity didn’t change but I’d wake up feeling exhausted” (SHAMSIE 159). Aliya frequently thinks about Marium, talks about her with others, and imagines what she might look like as an older person. Marium’s absence has left a significant impact on Aliya’s life, when I least expected it, everyday objects would become doorways to memory. A shoe buckle, a key ring, a mango seed bleached by the sun; running water, railway tracks, cobblestones and cochineal; cacti, cat’s eye’s Cocteau and kites; chipped plates, race tracks, swimming pools, diving boards, bluebottles, jellyfish, bougainvillea, stones; crickets and bats and cricket bats. (Shamsie,189)

The title of the novel, “Salt and Saffron,” holds significance in Pakistani culture as these ingredients are commonly used to enhance the taste of food. The narrative commences with a reference to “dadi,” a term commonly employed for grandmother in traditional Pakistani households. This title not only signifies respect for age but also represents wisdom, affection, love, and authority, sometimes accompanied by conservatism. In contrast, the English term “grandmother” does not typically evoke these symbolic connotations due to cultural differences between the East and the West. In Western societies, the notion of old homes has gained prominence over time, and grandparents have limited roles in family affairs. In contrast, Pakistani culture upholds the joint family system, which ensures respect and authority for elders, and younger generations must adhere to their decisions and opinions in most aspects of daily life.

The Dard-e-dil family stands as a microcosm of this struggle. The elder generation, represented by Nani Ammi, clings to the values and customs of their past. Nani Ammi’s anecdotes, filled with

“old-fashioned ideals and prejudices,” reveal a strong adherence to tradition. For instance, she recounts how women in her generation were expected to be obedient and submissive, and how they were discouraged from pursuing higher education or careers outside the home. In contrast, the younger generation, embodied by Aliya, is more open to embracing modernity. Aliya’s scepticism towards patriarchal norms and her desire for self-discovery represent a shift towards individual agency. She questions the traditional gender roles that Nani Ammi adheres to and asserts her right to make choices for herself.

Aliya’s decision to pursue higher education in England and her subsequent marriage to a British man are examples of her willingness to break free from traditional expectations.

This generational divide highlights the tension between preserving cultural heritage and adapting to a changing world, “The past, she realized, was not a fixed point, but a living, breathing entity that had the power to shape the future.” (Shamsie, 200). Nani Ammi’s traditional values have served as a source of strength and stability for her family, and Aliya’s modern outlook offers new opportunities for personal growth and self-discovery. This tension is further highlighted by the fact that Aliya’s decision to marry a British man is met with disapproval from Nani Ammi, who sees it as a betrayal of cultural heritage. While the elder generation clings tightly to traditional values, the younger generation is more open to embracing modernity. This generational divide highlights the tension between preserving cultural heritage and adapting to a changing world and underscores the importance of finding a balance between these opposing forces. It masterfully portrays the long-lasting effects of colonialism on Pakistani identity. Through characters like Mama-ji, whose speech carries a “colonial hangover,” the novel delves into the complex emotions of cultural erosion and the internalization of Western values, to a changing world. Thus, even at the outset, Shamsie introduces into the narrative the acute class divide that exists in Pakistan and which also forms the core of the novel. One of the most striking examples is Mama-ji’s unwavering faith in the British way of life. He speaks with an Oxbridge accent, clings to British manners, and constantly compares Pakistan to the “civilized” West. This unwavering attachment highlights the deep-seated inferiority complex instilled by colonialism, leading to the devaluation of Pakistani culture and traditions.

However, the novel doesn’t paint a simplistic picture. Characters like Aliya represent a generation grappling with the legacy of colonialism while forging their own identities. Torn between Western ideals of individual freedom and Pakistani traditions, they question their place within the post-colonial world. This internal conflict reflects the ongoing process of self-discovery and the search for a truly authentic Pakistani identity, one that is neither blindly imitative of the West nor solely defined by pre-colonial traditions.

It portrays the complex and multifaceted impact of colonialism. It transcends the simplistic narrative of victimhood and instead highlights the ongoing struggle to reclaim cultural pride while navigating the complexities of a modern, globalized world. Through the characters’ internal conflicts and journeys of self-discovery, Shamsie invites us to contemplate the enduring legacy of colonialism and the search for a truly independent Pakistani identity.

Through this novel, it delves into the complex and evolving landscape of gender roles within Pakistani society. Through the contrasting figures of Nani Ammi and Aliya, the novel explores the clash between tradition and modern aspirations, highlighting the ongoing struggle for gender equality. Nani Ammi embodies the traditional ideal of a submissive wife and mother. Her life is defined by serving her husband and raising her children, adhering to strict social codes that prioritize domesticity and female obedience. She speaks with pride of her “limited wants” and her unwavering dedication to her family, epitomizing the expectations placed upon women within her generation. For instance, she declares, “I was born to be a wife and a mother, and I have done my duty to the full.” (Shamsie, 34). This statement reflects the deeply ingrained societal norms that

defined women's roles for generations. Contrasting Nani Ammi's traditionalism is the character of Aliya, who represents a generation yearning for change. Unlike her grandmother, Aliya values education and professional success. Having graduated from an American university, she challenges the societal expectations placed upon her by pursuing a writing career. This defiance is evident in her statement, "I want to be more than just a wife and a mother. I want to have a life of my own"(Shamie, 67) Aliya's aspirations and her unwavering pursuit of them defy traditional gender roles, sparking a dialogue about the evolving definition of womanhood in Pakistani society.

Furthermore, the novel explores the internal conflicts experienced by characters caught between tradition and modernity. While Aliya desires independence and self-fulfilment, she also grapples with the guilt of defying her family's expectations. This tension is reflected in her internal monologue, "I felt the weight of centuries of tradition pressing down on me, and I knew that I was expected to conform"(Shamie, 55), This struggle highlights the complex challenges faced by women who seek to forge their paths while navigating the expectations of their families and communities.

It offers a nuanced portrayal of gender roles in Pakistan. It avoids simplistic narratives and instead sheds light on the multifaceted experiences of women navigating tradition, modernity, and their aspirations. By exploring the contrasting characters of Nani Ammi and Aliya, Shamsie invites us to contemplate the ongoing evolution of gender roles and the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead in the pursuit of true gender equality within Pakistani society.

The novel captures the complexities of the protagonist Aliya's struggle to reconcile her personal desires with societal expectations. Shamsie weaves a tapestry of cultural richness, highlighting the significance of family, rituals, and the ever-present tension between tradition and modern values. Through Aliya's introspection, the novel offers insights into the challenges faced by individuals navigating the intricate web of societal norms. As Aliya grapples with her identity, she reflects on the cultural mosaic around her, symbolized by the titular "salt and saffron," which serves as metaphors for the blend of tradition and change. Shamsie's prose is evocative, and the following quote encapsulates the essence of these socio-cultural themes: "We're all made up of stories. They're the stitches that hold us together. And the ways we take these stories and tell them to ourselves is what makes us who we are." This statement encapsulates the profound connection between personal narratives and cultural identity, underscoring the socio-cultural richness embedded in the novel.

In conclusion, "Salt and Saffron" by Kamila Shamsie is a powerful exploration of identity, tradition, and modernity through the use of salt and saffron as symbolic motifs. These spices serve to highlight the complex socio-cultural threads that bind together society and how they contribute to shaping individual identities. These spices serve to highlight the complex socio-cultural threads that bind together society while also exploring themes such as religion. The novel also explores the role of women in society and how they navigate between tradition and modernity. Through her use of these spices, Shamsie creates a rich tapestry that unravels the complexities of society while also highlighting its beauty and complexity.

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