

Mixing Memories with Desire: Women in Kamila Shamsie's *Salt and Saffron*

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Women, all through history, have been held down by patriarchy, tradition and cultural ideologies. To be a woman is to occupy a certain sort of social position – “woman” is juxtaposed with “man” and other social categories and constructed by the society and culture in which one lives. Though, the position of ‘woman’ varies from country to country and region to region and is also dependent on religion, class, caste and social status as well as geographical locations, the novelist, Kamila Shamsie projects female characters that reflect a more western approach in understanding the self and their rights. To some extent, they are different from the traditional women who kept dancing to the tunes of the men. Through her writing, Shamsie pays homage to three generations of women writers in her family:

... while I grew up in the harsh world of a misogynist military government in 1980s Pakistan- where woman's freedom was severely threatened- my familial legacy enabled me to imagine, without pressure or expectation, a life centred around writing (Ahmed 200).

Shamsie is one of those creative female novelists, who have provided a distinct identity to the genre of fiction writing in English. Born in 1973 Karachi, she belongs to the new wave of Britain-based South Asian writers. Her five published novels include: *In the City by the Sea* (1998), *Salt and Saffron* (2000), *Kartography* (2002), *Broken Verses* (2005) and *Burnt Shadows* (2009). Through her narrative she often explores cross-cultural relationships, cultural identity, and the burden of cultural history and family expectations on the shoulders of woman. She portrays woman's struggle for freedom and self-empowerment. Her female characters do not question their country of origin, but they are haunted by bitter memories and look for answers in history and their past. Moreover, they are inquisitive, and therefore, believe in finding out answers rather than posing bare questions.

Salt and Saffron, Shamsie's second novel touches the issues of female emancipation, love, class- divide, womanhood and its relationship to myth and how the ‘woman’ creates a balance out of tradition and modernity. It is an ambitious work projecting the self-conscious, candid and introspective voice of the narrator-protagonist, Aliya. The story is built around Aliya, a young Pakistani girl, a student in her early 20s who returns from her university in the United States to Karachi for the summer vacations.

Basically, the relations of gender in Pakistan rest on two basic perceptions: firstly that a woman is subordinate to man and secondly that a man's honour resides in the actions of women of the family. Therefore, like in other orthodox Muslim societies, women are responsible for maintaining family honour. And to ensure that they do not dishonour their families, society limits women's mobility, puts restrictions on their behaviour and activities, and limits their contacts with the opposite sex. Space is allocated to and used differently by men and women. However, over the years scenario

has changed, and there is an increased awareness among women of their abilities, their rights and their status in the society (Mitra 60).

Aliya belongs to an aristocratic Pakistani family that has always lived with firm notions of class structure. And like all aristocratic families, the members are snobbish, and believe in pomp and show. They take pride in display of cuisine, which only they could provide. Masood, the family cook prepares and serves tempting food with proper blend of 'salt' and 'saffron'. Aliya's going back to her home brings back many memories from the past, especially, those of Mariam, her not-quite-twin. From the day Mariam (daughter of Taimur, the man whom Aliya's 'Dadi' (Abida) once loved, also his husband, Akhbar's brother) joined the family, Masood excelled in the delicacies he produced. Aliya and the whole family enjoyed Mariam-Masood's delicacies. In a sense food becomes metaphor for sexuality and desire, the urge to taste and touch the forbidden fruit. Mariam followed her heart and stepped outside the structure; she eloped with the family cook, Masood a few years ago. The Dard-e-Dil family members after Mariam's departure talked ill about her, all connections were cut-off, they haven't heard about her since she left. The members of Dard-e-Dil family are so concerned with lineage that they'd even disown one of their own in the name of family honour. Aliya was very much attached to Mariam, after this episode Aliya was chopped off from the family as she moved to a college in the U.S. The scandal also created distance between Aliya and her 'Dadi' (Abida):

Mariam eloped with Masood and I was shocked to hear about it, but then Dadi walked in and called her a whore so I slapped Dadi because whoever Mariam might have married she was still Mariam and I would defend her against all those who couldn't see beyond their own class prejudices.

Bravo, Aliya.

But I *had* felt something other than shock. When Aba told me she'd eloped I felt humiliation. Also, anger. Worse, I felt disgust. *She's having sex with a servant.* These words exactly flashed through my mind. Not Masood; just a servant. How could I possibly have acknowledged that reaction as my own? So much easier to remember, instead, that I championed Mariam, seconds later. So much easier to say that in slapping Dadi I proved I did not think like her (Shamsie 112-113).

Aliya is aware of her snobbishness that class has conditioned from a tender age. Though, she pretends to be a believer of equality somewhere within her elite status provides her with a sense of power, so that she can look down upon the other section. Later on, she regrets duality in her treatment towards 'Dadi', who at least showed her honest face, whatever it is.

Aliya was brilliant at storytelling; she tells stories which revolve around her life, and of the feudal class into which she is born and bred, and now trapped in. Before coming back to Karachi in a flight to London, She meets a man 'Cal', (originally Khaleel Butt, a westernised Pakistani) who takes keen interest in her stories, and for whom she feels affection.

He knew all my family stories-all, except the most important one-and I didn't even know his name. I moved towards him, then felt absurd and walked away (Shamsie 4).

Attraction of Aliya towards Khaleel, a man whose parents hail from the slums of Karachi, distracts her from family and her relation, and identification with Mariam Apa intensifies. Though she shares a unique relationship with Mariam Apa from the very beginning, who preoccupies her thoughts. Mariam's story gets entwined with Aliya. Both women fall in love with men from unsuitable backgrounds, and it is only through the mystery of Mariam's story that Aliya begins to resolve her own dilemma.

It is easier to live through someone else than to complete yourself. The freedom to lead and plan your own life is frightening if you have never faced it before. It is frightening when a woman finally realizes that there is no answer to the question 'who am I' except the voice inside herself (Freidan 326).

Like other woman in the family Aliya too is caught up in her family's feudal past. The Dard-e-dils obsession with stories and secrets of the past, and belief that the family is cursed by not-quite-twins, throughout their history, the Dard-e-Dil family has had sets of 'not-quite twins' who bring bad luck or shame to the family. This leads Aliya to also believe that she is another "not-quite" twin, linked to her scandalous aunt Mariam. The Dard-e-Dil family is full of such brothers (twins).

All right, don't scoff, mock or disbelieve: we live in mortal fear of not-quite-twins. (*Shamsie* 1)

Aliya and her assumed "twin", Mariam are the only sisters in this combination. The transfer in gender might be interpreted as the next generation of women, except that all of the women in Aliya's family tree were not strong, vocal and poised. But, the difference is that Aliya's might be the only Dard-e-Dil twin story to have a resolution that may crack the family curse and allow the history to have a fortunate closing. The chain of webs, mythologies, extended family on both sides could be solved and one can free himself/ herself only if one has the ability to spin on his/ her own life story.

The said and unsaid stories- she has not yet incorporated the stories of her own generation - partly because she has not come to terms with how she feels about them, or what they say about her. As an adult rejoining her family she is confronted with the complexity of real life, with the complications of her sprawling family split at Partition and with the realities of love. And in her ability to spin out yarns Aliya finds her own voice, her own identity, or multiple identities.

The protagonist is conscious of traditional values and social system, who at one instance thinks herself as a liberal woman, but at the same time she repents and cares for values. She is in claptrap- the one who is trapped between the traditional norms and the liberal thought struggling to create a balance. After making up with her grandmother, Aliya continues to hear stories about her family and the events of the Partition. Unfortunately, Aliya has not forgotten about Cal, and desires to meet him. It is Aliya's consciousness of her class that puts her in dilemma. Aliya does not want to end up with the same fate as Mariam Apa. She is aware that being in a network of relationships with others, her every action has ramifications and consequences. Therefore, she questions her relationship with Khaleel, stops and checks herself. Sub-consciously she was aware of the repercussions of Mariam's act. Also, it's hard to drop one's values and change one's behaviour. Aliya presents a blend of her traditional

consciousness with liberalism of thoughts. This blend is the admixture of 'salt' and 'saffron', resulting in the evolution of new Aliya, a woman.

She constantly checks her behaviour at public places, she prohibits herself from opening to a man. Her elite status restricted her emotions and maybe she felt awkward for Khaleel's free habits:

I walked a few steps away and then turned back. My body had just begun to register the feel of his arms around me. What would my grandmother say if she knew I'd been hugging strange men in airports? (*Shamsie 4*)

Although, she couldn't resist much as Aliya finds her own love in a man of lower background. This becomes clear on her meeting with Khaleel in London; she develops a soft corner for him.

Although, the stay in abroad, had brought a mental gap, and created misunderstandings with family members, but Aliya is aware that a person is known from his cultural values, cultural identity and social norms. This is what happens to her, she is not able to view herself in complete isolation. So, it is not the western culture which dominates her solely, but she tries to bring a balance of the two cultures. She examines both the culture and takes good from the both.

It is with women that women experience varied shades of human relationships. The depiction of familial relationship between women is particularly striking in this novel. Aliya's relationship with her grandmother and her absent aunt Mariam shows a strong bonding. As Aliya frequently relates and situates herself in the position of 'Dadi' and Mariam and through them mirrors at her own life. She could see a reflection of herself in 'Dadi' as well as Mariam, yet she is neither 'Dadi' (the 'saffron') nor Mariam (the 'salt'). Love is basically the 'salt' of life and 'saffron' is an added embellishment. A life devoid of 'salt' is dull, 'salt' is symbolic of love, spirit, vigour, and vitality in life, 'When our hearts live we live more than ourselves' (*Shamsie 243*) and 'Hurt? What's hurt? Do any of us live without it?' (*Shamsie 217*) In Aliya's life salt will alone not do, there has to be a blend of both 'salt' and 'saffron'. She has her individual identity; she cherishes values and looks for approval from the family members. Though she has stayed abroad, she is more given, every time conscious of the history culture, familial lineage, mannerisms.

The similarity which binds the women in this novel is the desire for happiness and contentment in life. They are assertive enough to choose their own suitors and in their respective ways "desire to subvert hierarchies" (*Shamsie 243*). The women characters have strength of passion and the courage of one's conviction. Aliya is filled with rage against hypocrisy and bigotry that allows women to suffer (especially women from the lower class). Also she is against forced decision, oppressive laws and social views that restricted women of the family. But the problem is she is not clear about herself. It is the liberal education that shapes Aliya's mind to understand, experience and view her

... culture from a slightly different perspective. Aliya's family is an aristocratic nawab family, and she begins to question the values with which she has been raised, particularly when she meets a man from a poor background (he is the 'salt' to Aliya's 'saffron'). This is a culture in which the social hierarchy is rigid, and Aliya begins to

feel the burden of the family heritage she is carrying. As she explores the stories and secrets of her ancestry, Salt and Saffron both celebrates and questions the culture of oral storytelling - Aliya is aware of the richness and vibrancy of the family stories and the craft of storytelling itself, but equally this storytelling culture has helped to create a web of 'family identity' which she now wishes to loosen. Salt and Saffron is thus a poignant exploration of the search for a balance between individual identity and ancestral and cultural heritage (Reilly).

Aliya sees herself as inhabiting two worlds at once- the traditional and the modern, the inner and the outer, the world of imagination and the real world. She from the very beginning disliked the Nawab of whom they were descendants, more for his sexual double standards.

Though there was that time I got frightened by a squirrel and Dadi just looked at me in such disgust and said something like, "And to think you are descended from the Nawab who killed a tiger with his bare hands... And I said to Dadi, "That paragon of bravery you just mentioned-isn't he the same guy who raped Taj's mother?" (Shamsie 15)

It is Aliya's life experiences which shape her as a polished and mature woman. There's a lot of introspection and comparison in her mind with the 'woman' of her family, "... like her, I should step away from those attitudes of my grandmother which badly needed stepping away from." (Shamsie 243) As a strong and practical 'woman', Aliya chooses to be at the centre and have a name in the family rather than moving away from family, like Mariam and being centre-less.

Aliya discovers the caste system prevalent in the roots of her society after her love with Khaleel. She is able to notice the difference working through conflicts:

I hadn't really thought about it before, but affluence and lack sat cheek by jowl in Karachi. Between the large old houses near Mohatta Palace and the smaller, modern houses on Khayaban-e-Shujaat, which displayed their wealth in accessories rather than size, was a shortcut that took you past streets where shiny cars and designer shalwaar-kameezes and English-speaking voices all but disappeared, replaced by tiny storefronts, narrow streets crowded with people and cycles and the occasional goat, children selling vegetables or fixing tires or chasing each other along roads without pavements. (Shamsie 63)

She learns on further exploration that the caste system penetrates deeper than it is exactly visible. Khaleel 'Cal' is from the "wrong side of the tracks", hailing from Liquatabad in Karachi. Aliya's cousin Samia summarizes the situation clearly:

... the poor live in Liquatabad. The poor, the lower classes, the not us. How else do you want me to put this? There's no one we know who would have exchanged Karachi phone number with him, Aloo. (Shamsie 31)

In a conversation with her cousin Sameer she theorises about why her family should be so disapproving, she concludes that it is because of snobbery based on a fear of losing their social status. Aliya says:

Let's get back to my theory. I think our family's attitude towards the nouveau riche is another symptom of fear. We're uncomfortable around them because they remind us that class is fluid; the Mushtaq parents may be considered nouveau riche,

but their kids are being sent to finishing school to acquire polish and within a generation they'll marry into respectable but no-longer-rich families, and they'll start turning up their own noses at the nouveau riche. This reminds us that status is not permanent; as the Mushtaq's rise, someone else will fall, and that someone might be us.' (*Shamsie*, 184)

The classes clash once again and Aliya is left wondering if she is "not-quite-twins" with her aunt Mariam, destined to elope with a lower class partner. Not only does Aliya uncover her cousin's love story, she also discovers her own and is forced to confront her own inherent Karachiite social snobbery for falling for a boy whose parents happen to come from the "poor" part of town. Moreover, revelations surrounding the past events lead Aliya to confront her own class prejudices, finally accepting Khaleel despite his family background. Betty Freidan discusses, "the conflicts that some women may face in this journey to self-actualization, including their own fears and resistance from others" (Web Source).

The personal turmoil gets all the more intense because it is worked out against the background of the class-divide in the Pakistani society. However, what binds and underlies all these issues, is primarily Shamsie's concern with an assertion of female values. *Salt and Saffron* traces how the protagonist, after some initial confusions grows into accepting those values which she seems to have cherished from the beginning, but was timid to uphold in action. It is an assertion of the primal feeling of love and how it acts as a catalyst in turning thoughts into action. Shamsie castigates all kinds of authoritarianism, hypocrisy, and tolerance, irrespective of their source in the old traditional aristocratic system or the new superficial western values.

The novel is not just a journey within but of externals too – of love and loss, the discovery (sometimes decades later) of the former, the continual presence of the latter, exemplified by the absence of Mariam Appa who appears mysteriously and disappears (Web Source).

Aliya was spending time with her Dadi (her grandmother) whose real name is Abida. Aliya's late grandfather, Akbar, who fell in love with Abida ever since they were just children. Akbar, Taimur and Suliaman are three not quite brothers. Apparently, they all fell in love with Abida when they were just teens. One day, Suliaman paid Abida a visit and Aliya was next to her when he came. There, he revealed the reason why Taimur left. Actually, Abida loved Taimur but Taimur thought Abida loved Suliaman so Taimur left. A few years later, Abida married Akbar. Aliya sat there listening to their conversation and saw wonderful moments of bonding between Abida and Suliaman. She was deeply moved especially when Abida took Suliman out to the balcony when it was raining heavily. Abida was surprised by what Suliman said and is grateful to meet Suliaman whom she hasn't seen for at least 20 years. In that moment it seemed to Abida that she has lived her whole life. She could not get the person whom she loved because of some constraints and now is relieved from the pain that kept biting her soul, on finding that there was reciprocation from the other side also. This enlightenment is symbolic of victory and pride of 'Dadi', a 'woman'. And Aliya was mesmerised to witness her 'Dadi's' joy and felt like she herself has achieved something from this revelation.

In course of time Aliya learns that she has been too judgemental about her family's, tangled history, her grandmother's complex life, and the three men Sulaiman, Akhbar and Taimur at the centre, brothers separated by the division of India and Pakistan. 'Dadi', loved by "not-quite" triplet brothers and their past serves as the climax of the novel. Aliya in course of time finds her family to be more passionate and complex than she has known.

Moreover, a few days later, Cal came to visit Aliya. It was Aliya's cousin, Sameer who brought him over. That night, Aliya, Cal, Aliya's parents and Sameer had dinner at their place together. Cal brought dinner to their place, and to their shock, the food was just like their old chef's food (the one that eloped with Mariam Apa). At first, when Aliya's parents heard where Cal's from, the poorer part of town, they were very displeased with their daughter for falling in love with a man who is not in the same class as them. But after that dinner, they were impressed by the food he brought along. The food reminds Aliya of Mariam Apa and Masood. Though, the ending does not tie up all the loose ends, although it does resolve a couple of on-going mysteries. Aliya has begun to open her mind and heart but she still has to do lot of thinking. The journey towards self-definition continues.

Most contemporary South Asian women writers have written emphasising the individuality of women, attempting to give their women protagonists the power to define even redefine their self. Shamsie like many other South Asian women writers consistently highlights the struggles of woman to define herself and achieve greater degrees of autonomy, while continuing to hold fast to family ties, traditional codes of ethics, and even to myths of womanhood.

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