

**PERSUASION AND RESISTANCE: CONTESTING TRADITION IN SALT AND SAFFRON BY  
KAMILA SHAMSIE**

Ali Hussain<sup>1</sup>, Prof. Dr. Mohammad Ayub Jajja<sup>2</sup> (Corresponding author)

**Original Article**

1. Ph.D. Scholar, Department of English, The Islamia University Bahawalpur & Associate Professor Govt. Graduate College for Women, Satellite Town Bahawalpur  
Email: Aliahussain9@gmail.com
2. Professor of English, Chairman Department of English Literature, The Islamia University Bahawalpur. Email: drjajja@yahoo.com

**Abstract**

*This paper attempts to demonstrate, expatriate Pakistani writer Kamila Shamsie's use of narrative in Salt and Saffron (2000) to contest and subvert dominant narratives of past by coming to term with it in a diverse perspective. The author's description of family lore aims to expose resistance which breeds a strong clash of opinion among those who are displaced and divided but spiritually united. This paper investigates how conciliation with the memories of past and present is crucial in forging a place of belonging in diaspora. The narrative reflects in the backdrop of partition, three generations of women confronting racism, patriarchal oppression and rigidity of traditions. Kamila Shamsie epitomizes skilled arbitration between drastically opposite customs, social systems, and traditions, exhibited both through the careful use of memory and history as rhetorical and narrative strategies and through the experience embodied within the text. The representation of national history is a both forward and backward looking ambivalent process in this novel. The layering stories of enduring family traditions and unconventional role of women, protesting against racism, patriarchal oppression and social class are employed as mechanics of persuasion and resistance. By endorsing resistance from diverse subject positions, women from three generations are able to create an alternate image of Pakistani women, to reveal a transformation from tradition to modernity and challenge the impermeability of borders, both in present and past and reality and fiction. The narrative proves to be especially effective in the battle to change strong attitudes. Shamsie has notably reinstated image of her homeland as a land of cultural assimilation, integration and coexistence by reaching to terms with the complexities of past and present.*

**Keywords:** Resistance, persuasion, women, tradition, contest, coexistence

**1. Introduction**

Shamsie's novel *Salt and Saffron* (2000) depicts the globalized and cosmopolitan modern world. It presents a deconstruction of stereotypical femininity through unconventional role of women, protesting against racism, patriarchal oppression and social class, though apparently these women are recognized by the identity which is imposed on them by the society. Due to these forms of impositions, the protagonists from second and third generations resist the given identity and desire for an identity which would elevate their status at individual and collective level regardless of family, home, language and religion. This paper attempts to highlight treatment of the issues of partition, class politics, colonization, history and gender in *Salt and Saffron* (2000). The novel depicts its young protagonist's challenging contest for self-empowerment next to the newly emerged state's assertion of

independence and interdependence of women on social system. The protagonist narrator, of the novel, Aliya, the daughter of elite professionals of Karachi, though does not challenge emergence of Pakistan, traumatic split of family, but, preoccupied by a serious disagreement between her grandparents who migrated to Pakistan and her siblings who opted for India, she revisits history and the princely past of Dard-e-Dils, through family lore. The worth, dignity, and superiority of Dard-e-Dil family is placed in novel alongside with Mughal regime in order to make superiority of tradition convincing, to garner support for longstanding political divide among Muslim community and to generate a more positive view of emergence of Pakistan after partition. The breach of three generations influences Shamsie and her writing.

## 2. Review of Literature

Bruce King in his article Kamila Shamsie's novels of history, exile and desire, suggests that her novels reveal "how history affects several generations of a family, her novels both show the difficulty of leaving the society in which one feels at ease and the need to solve present problems through understanding the past. Besides politics threatening or causing loss of family and friends, there is a love story disturbed by differences of class, culture or ethnicity" (King, 2011, p. 687). Storyline does not give author's outright criticism upon socio political happenings yet it reveals through the course of events identity politics embedded in them. Shamsie tries to convey through her novels the agony and toil of parting from the homeland and the necessity of unravelling resolving problems of present by considering their origin in past. It is a story of love troubled by social class and conventions. National events are treated to recount personal. Shobhana Bhattacharji observes that Shamsie's novels scrutinize contestable impacts of political issues at individual level.

Shamsie has drawn parallels amid a family divided by partition and a city divided by class and addressed the elision of the matriarchal narratives in traditional interpretations of history. The novelist uses family lore shared in the form of memories as metaphor of past and epitomizes in the family the history of nation metaphorically. History as a linear and fixed entity reveals national history through family stories, personal history articulates national history and a sense of belonging, characters resist and sustain nationalist discourse which is subject to controversy. The dominant nationalist discourse is intertwined with politics of Dard-i-Dil family. Homeland explores as an ambivalent site impacts of national history and mutability upon individual's identity. Shamsie in her fiction tackles with the challenging encounter of reconciling progressive values of present culture with values of allegiance to family and tradition of past. Lara Zuberi in her review of the book praises Shamsie for being a powerful contemporary voice. Surya Kiran in her article, Politics of identity in Kamila Shamsie's novels (Indian Scholar, 2017) wrote "Kamila Shamsie adopts a cautious strategy in her novels. She tries to deal with questions regarding the issues of politics, history, nationhood, etc. with utmost care and with a kind of neutral stand, bringing in different perspectives". (Kiran, 2017) Muneeza Shamsie in her article Sunlight and salt: The literary landscapes of a divided family (2009) has found that by revisiting past through myth and memory the novel depicts the extent to which the social traditions of a community binds, in what way religion and culture alter, proceed and make way as people migrate, socialize and intersperse to recreate their lives in new found sites of globalized world, what elements of their identity they succeed in preserving, and what are their losses and gains, and the impact of all this on their identification with their motherland and new found homes in the backdrop of subcontinent's agonizing transition to liberation and modernity.

Kamila Shamsie's work, however, stood somewhat apart, not just quite what constituted mainstream thinking on these issues. What Shamsie wrote about would have been immediately

familiar to reader, brought up in Pakistani milieu. In that sense, she was an anachronism, and succeeds in reminding of things collective and yet lost somewhere in the recesses of past.

### 3. Analysis

Bell Hooks has claimed in *Yearning: Race, gender and cultural politics* (2014), "Memory need not be a passive reflection, a nostalgic longing for things to be as they once were; it can function as a way of knowing and learning from the past (Hook, 2014, p. 75). For this purpose, Shamsie focuses more on collective memory as substantial and reliable source to the lost recesses of past. Maurice Halbwachs in *La Memoire collective* (1950) insists while illustrating the concept of collective memory that history is reconnected with living memory for the reason that collective memory can transform past into a parallel present and connect it up with the living memory. He establishes the proposition that a society may be able to retain a collective memory which is reliant on the "cadre" or background contained by which a community is set in a culture. Consequently, beside an individual memory, there exists a collective memory beyond the access of individual and out of their lives. Therefore, individual's perception of the historical past is strongly connected to the collective communal consciousness.

Shamsie's this compelling novel leads us on an uncanny voyage, in the context of political history of partition which is not the least bit simply linked to the past and the problematic history of a family, the guilt and complexes that resonate through generations, *Salt and Saffron* claims in its opening lines, "Reduce all stories to their basic elements and you'll see all families are possessed of prejudices – that alternative name for 'fear' (Shamsie, 2000, p. 1). Their tragic past which is fostered by them turn out to be intergenerational and collective, subsequently Mariam's inability to speak for instance, in this story- is in fact a communal concern not an individual issue because family here is fundamental unit of collectivity so Freud's symptom of hysteria aphasia can be easily traced. The past/present division move toward mounting pressure. The intersection of family orbits in time and space bring in fore front the tragic bleeding past into the present and challenges real familial ties, their pretentious representation, claims of guilt and innocence.

Shamsie unlike Sidhwa avoids writing directly about dreads of partition, of narrating history as bygone, her traumatic experience of history is distinctly identified by its lack of assimilation and integration:

That whole generation of my relatives mystified me. How had they sustained, for so long, the bitterness brought on by the events of 1947? I could believe it of one person or two, but good God! Our family was huge and yet there was never any word of reconciliation across the borders of India and Pakistan... How do you stop missing the people you loved before you could say love? (Shamsie, 2000, p. 33)

Marginalization of the women is depicted in *Salt and Saffron* as a story within story, historical facts are mingled with myth of family tradition, and consequently explicitly and implicitly associating them with notions of memory and history in modern times, Shamsie through myth of not-quite-twins explores ages old stories of lust, greed and female objectification in the name of tradition. As an outsider from inside, 'the Other', she duly described domesticated and incarcerated women in subject positions, and examines as mover, the seer, and the knower, helps to create independent women defying stereotypes. She offers a renewed stance and an unconventional view of female realities. Negotiating about diversity of their affiliations- her female characters are facing the world as women

of color in diaspora, as wives and mothers- Shamsie articulates experiences through the emerging new collective consciousness in an attempt to balance the honoring or breaking of traditions. Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak (1994) questioned south Asian feminine voice as gender subaltern (p. 93), but Shamsie's Taj the illicit child of Nawab and a maid not only continue to confront the whole family but succeeds in preserving her name in family lore.

Shamsie's depiction is that of transitioning her woman from the oppressed to a more independent, free and spirited one, juxtaposes her identity in the process. Pooja Swami (2019) has stated in an article, negotiating feminine identities in Kamila Shamsie's salt and saffron that the protagonist Aliya attempts to testify the values with which she has been raised. The author explicates numerous interrogations about Aliya, her family's past and their class consciousness and foremostly the status of women. Like any sensible educated girl, she is conscious of the richness and vitality of the family myths and the significance of the ability of storytelling itself, but likewise this storytelling culture has facilitated to form a web of family identity and a sense of belonging which she now aspires to loosen for the sake of her own emotional stability. *Salt and Saffron* provides a moving investigation of the quest for a sense of equilibrium between individual identity and family tradition. Aliya's coming to term with her national history is woven across continents, time periods and three generations of the royal household. Shamsie's work is predominantly striking for its feminine sensibility. Being an insider, conscious of the mind of women in Pakistani society, she has given a tableau of the characters in the modern times with their passionate, traditional and contemporary ins and outs. Beside meticulous perception of situation of women in contemporary world, novel illuminates their angst and distress about their own status quo, their mounting sensitivity of themselves as independent, accomplished, resolute individuals. The story offers a panorama of the history of the Dard-e-Dils from Nuruljahan to modern times, presenting the social setting shifting progressively from sternly conventional one to that of progressive as well as liberal.

In *Salt and Saffron* women contesting at domestic level, in the social order, in relations and in cultural concepts are depicted striving for existence, for honor and for freedom with the finer distinction of class among the third world woman in general. When confronted by the dilemma of class Aliya is amazed to recognize the way she has internalized the traditions which limits freedom of choice in her life, her apparent independence is just deception; she is severely strangled by the family traditions and conventional ideology. Her internal conflict from this realization is agonizing, leaving her to ponder on her status in a conformist social order at personal and social level that leads to anguish and her attempts to overcome this clash and attainment of a final settlement are the locus of story. Despite her international education and independent status, she is incapable of freeing herself from the age old strangulation of traditions. Her confession "I knew exactly which memories crippled me, crippled into running away from him" (*Salt and Saffron* p. 32) exposes impermeability of traditions. The fear of castigation confronted by her who is at the center, being elite yet dare not to indulge in following her heart.

The gender hierarchy of the social order and drawbacks it brings about are evident here. Shamsie's protagonist Aliya's stress and confusion to follow norms sanctioned by the society makes her feel trapped once again in the shackles of conventions. She has a deep desire to stay unbound of the restrictions of traditions, of the prejudices and class differences, this is revealed through her desire for Cal, whom she is incapable to lose. He is 'the other' for her, her challenging new vision of the world. This kind of othering, creating binaries on the basis of sexuality or social class is prevalent profusely in the patriarchal society which recognizes identity in conventional terms only for women.

Mariam, with her unorthodox approach in life implies a social change which Shamsie wants to incorporate in this scenario. Mariam is an emblem of courage in the tradition ridden order, she is trying to restore her status as a woman for making an establishment which allows her a respectable status in the society. She performs a pivotal role in changing perception of the society apropos the other- the women, to an independent being. Her wedding to a man of her own choice, from a lower class, makes her truly liberated self, evident. This exertion of her free will, a woman's will in a hegemonic male society subverts the age old customs daringly. She appears to be a woman who could see beyond the confines of identity imposed on her in patriarchal set up. The novelist intended to create character of a women who transforms herself from an objected third world women into an independent one. Shamsie's portrayal of stereotypical purveyor of gossip Starched Aunts acts as a foil to her representation of major characters.

The private sphere of family is blemished with social too as political changes dominate the world of Dil palace, anglicized Percy decided to move to turkey in the backdrop of Caliphate Movement. Personal, social and national sufferings, fear of rejection in love, stressed silence of triplets and to the previous generation's inability to cope with its responsibility for the younger one are some of the tragedies which made past unfolsdable. Taimoor tries to justify his act by an apology in a letter after his self-imposed exile, addressed to his family, insisting on his patriotism. Past preserved in the forms of memories provides access to the psychic world of collective conscious in the novel, the scars of partition, the breakup of the family all that took place, so dismissal of past becomes hard for the sake of reclamation as well as for 'Naz' and 'Fakher' the family pride as Abida Begum describe. Homi K. Bhaba(1990) states, "Traditional histories do not take the nation at its own word, but, for the most part, they do assume that the problem lies with the interpretation of events that have a certain transparency or privileged visibility" (p.3)

Jopi Nayman (2009) contends "Salt and Saffron articulates the nation and its dissolution within the notion of family, the deconstruction of national identity is connected with the dissolution genre of family saga" (p.110). As the home becomes a metaphor for self, family and nation in the novel, Shamsie talks about nostalgia for home and a place of belonging. Question of identity and belonging to both family and nation runs parallel in the novel. Q. Shirazi describes family lore as a tool to reveal history of nation. This historical account is reviewed as a firm linear entity, where personal sphere of family history endures and battles with dominant nationalist discourse. Personal issuesintertwinewith politics of nation, family myth becomes a sight where political changes, history and partition and an ever-changing tendency of modernity explores the shifting trends of globalization and clearly shifts the collectives and individual perceptions of present generation about past.

Bhabha recommends broad and open narration of nationalism and nationhood while pointing out the persistence in the nationalist discourse. In Nation and Narration (1990), he in "Introduction: Narrating the nation" claims:

Nations, like narrative, lose their origins in the myths of time and only fully realize their horizons in the mind's eye. Such an image of the nation--or narration--might seem impossibly romantic and excessively metaphorical, but it is from those traditions of political thought and literary language that the nation emerges as a powerful historical idea in the west. An idea whose cultural compulsion lies in the impossible unity of the nation as a symbolic force. This is not to deny the attempt by nationalist discourses persistently to produce the idea of the nation as a continuous narrative of nation progress, the narcissism of self-generation, the

primeval present of the Volk... What I want to emphasize in that large and liminal image of the nation with which I began is a particular ambivalence that haunts the idea of the nation, the language of those who write of it and the lives of those who live it. It is an ambivalence that emerges from a growing awareness that, despite the certainty with which historians speak of the 'origins' of nation as a sign of the 'modernity' of society, the cultural temporality of the nation inscribes a much more transitional social reality. (Bhabha, 1990, p. 1)

Benedict Anderson in *Imagined communities* (1983) states the nation's ambivalent advent with profound lucidity when he suggests:

If nation states are widely considered to be 'new' and 'historical', the nation states to which they give political expression always loom out of an immemorial past and... glide into a limitless future. What I am proposing is that Nationalism has to be understood, by aligning it not with self-consciously held political ideologies, but with large cultural systems that preceded it, out of which--as well as against which--it came into being (Anderson, 1983, p. 19).

The nation's 'coming into being' as a system of cultural signification, and the representation of society rather than an identifiable political entity, emphasizes this uncertainty of knowledge.

Following Hannah Arendt's Bhabha observes:

society of the nation in the modern world is 'that curiously hybrid realm where private interests assume public significance' and the two realms flows unceasingly and uncertainly into each other 'like waves in the never ending stream of the life-process itself (Bhabha, 1990, p. 19)

Nation has been outlined in Shamsie's novel within intergenerational negotiation, resolving of personal issues, resolution of alienation between two parts of family 'here and there'. The past associated with split of the Dard-e-Dil household during partition. Within these tales, Triplets, Taimur, Akber and Sulaiman, as siblings who differed doctrinally on the issue of Muslim League and Congress. Their separation is taken as politically inspired choice. Though, Aliya comprehends the fact that their parting was not exclusively on doctrinal disagreement, in her meeting with Baji, Aliya thinks, absence of conviction and lack of dialogue among family across borders as the cause of breach.

Two generations of family appeared to be ripped apart in the novel on account of personal and political clash on Partition. Shamsie rewrites history in order to make this interrelation between two generations clear. Family lore is used here to depict both the ambivalent individual and ambivalent nation as sites of persuasion and resistance. The novel rewrites pre-partition history as stories of nabobs, their subjects and Mughal dynasty and describes the lost tales of past as a part of glorious history of acme by chronicling political and social account. The generations who were ruled and whose stories were silenced in the years preceding partition are dissected to provide the world a fair look at colonialist brutality:

From the roof of the Dard-e-Dil palace you could see tree in neighboring states from which the Rebels were hanged. And not just the Rebels. What was the name of that Englishman who, in the wake of 1857 said he wanted to see a Muslim hanging from every tree in India? Better he remains nameless, too (Shamsie, 2000, p. 144).

The gendered nationalist discourse of domestication, deviating from the unrestricted public domain of modernism and growth is employed in transnational feminist perspective to review the repressive practices of nationalism, Family and Dil palace as the ambivalent sites of coercion and resistance in postcolonial milieu are engaged by the author as authentic site.

Prof. C. N. Cilano in the Contemporary Pakistani English fiction in English: Idea, nation and state (2009) has attempted to discover the traditions in which these fictional writings convey a future, define the present, and examine the past to expedite a sense of collective belonging.

History in this family lore is touched at different levels by Shamsie, the pre-Partition, Partition and post-Partition to demonstrate struggle against state controlled narrative which grant acceptance to socially acceptable nationalist framework. In Salt and Saffron, the interpretation of past as family lore attempts to break this stereotype and depict both the marginal and central subjects. Consequently, family past initiates an open and comprehensive picture of partition and the nation. It restructures renewed form of identity which comprises the stories of privilege as well as subaltern classes alike, men, who were silenced in patriarchal-controlled colonial, anti-imperial and post-partition nationalist histories. The very title Dard-e-Dil signifies the ache in the heart and expresses a sense of belonging towards past. The nonlinear, irregular story of Salt and Saffron (2000) helps to retrieve the intergenerational transmission of past. Victimization of subaltern in pre-partition times on account of perversion, moral laxity and indolence of the Nawabs and Patriarchs, symbolizes pre-partition past, is employed by author as a symbol of exploration and understanding of the complexities of contemporary concept of national identity.

The ambivalent character of Dil family during golden Mughal regime suggest a new dimension of the pre-colonial and colonial past that shapes integrated sense of belonging, beside exploring the fictional aristocracy and family honors of family, the narrator protagonist discerns clear indications of perversity and laxity. She interferes into these permanent ancestral as well as national narratives to identify the apprehensions counter to the past convictions. She argues to challenge both the ideal and ideas which were part of social hierarchy and by doing so she exhibits a creative behavior which permits her to portray her own life and resolve her own dilemma by re-assessing the bygone glory of past and by shaking fixities of patriarchal dominance. By employing a new mythical perspective of Taimur and Mariam's storyline, Kamila Shamsie attempts to establish that surrounded by the shared family memorial past there are forgotten, unpleasant tales of discrimination and marginalization of Taimur as rebel of nationalism, nurturing dreams against the tide. Pakistani highbrows need to reconsider the history annals to reclaim such hidden and silenced stories from their history and get a more up-to-date view of their progressive modernity without any appropriations of the pre-partition past.

#### 4. Conclusion

While commenting on ambivalent interrelation between generations Q. Shirazi suggests trauma of Partition was taken differently by two generations, this association between generations can be explained through the notion of post-memory or parental past. Post in this phrase suggests a belatedness, a precarious detachment and an intense interrelation with memory. Marianne Hirsch describes that individual who nurtures 'overwhelming inherited memories,' might be preoccupied with ideology that even preceded his birth and his personal practices, are in peril of evacuation and elimination by parental generation. Shamsie in Salt and Saffron presents younger generation facing

such type of strained connection with parental past. Aliya is found to be upset on account of this intensely internalized but oddly mysterious ancestral past. Aliya's meeting Indian part of family in London suggests her desire for neutralization, "I suppose there are increasing opportunities for meeting on neutral soil" (Shamsie, 2000, p. 91). These attempts of resolution at micro level reflect new found depiction of partition, she declares that her interpretation of Partition is not one of lament and regret. Her interpretation profoundly focuses on 'moving on', where Partition is synonymous with 'Fruition, Revision, Condition' (p. 37). The older generation in India could remember partition as a huge mistake as it is called 'division' in post-partition state narrative of newly emerged state. Aliya's attempts of reconciliation with Indian siblings of her grandparent's is a form of arrangement of reversing the past and tracing connections across the impermeable boundaries of psyche among divided family. In narrating two completely contradictory reactions to Partition, one of dividing and the other of 'Fulfillment and culmination, Shamsie speaks clearly about indecisive nature of national identity. Through her attempt of revisiting national history, Aliya attempts to reconstruct a new identity and redefine her sense of belonging at many levels. At first level, Shamsie's female protagonist cross-examines history as symbolizing her nation. She explains that nation and its margins stand always ever-changing and on account of being unstable are in constant need of redefining. Her own individuality is based upon the socio-political reality of her homeland which in its prolonged distant past comprises of complex South Asian historical phases like Mughal, colonial, and pre and post partition times. On secondary level, this national identity further explicates in terms of a feminist position, when protagonist deconstructs the nation as a male-dominated sphere and rewrites it in terms of more balanced male and female identities. In the end at tertiary level, she rethinks nation in terms of her own multiple identities as Karachi elite, British immigrant and American international student. In this case, she is articulating the Pakistani nation in terms of a transnational feminist perspective, Aliya and Mariam voiced the marginalized, excluded, dispossessed and silenced by bringing myth of family traditions to light and place them within an undefined feminist space. Shamsie subverts the fixed predefined regional and cultural nationalist discourse with multiple tiers of narration, while imagining new ways of belonging and a cultural change of variability of Pakistani identity.

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