

**PAKISTANI FOOD PRINTS IN KAMILA SHAMSHIE'S *SALT AND SAFFRON***

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**Abstract**

This paper deals with the dynamics of food in Kamila Shamshie's novel *Salt and Saffron*. This research, demonstrates how food is not only linked with eating, but also imbued with a variety of political and social implications. The work aims to expose the cultural connotations connected with food and the act of eating by emphasizing how food is linked to issues of gender, class, history, power, and identity. The author constructs the kitchen space to bring forth the notions of cultural superiority, gender prejudices, and class consciousness. The subtle way in which the writer refers to the pervasive class division in the subcontinent in general in Pakistan is informative and interesting.

**Keywords:** class, food, feast, love, Ramadan.

According to Paul Brains South Asian literature “is a colorful kaleidoscope of fragmented views, colored by the perceptions of its authors, reflecting myriad realities—and fantasies” (6). The Indian Subcontinent consists of Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal, India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. The writers of the Indian Subcontinent contributed to South Asian Literature. South Asian writers began to write in English in order to gain international acclaim. Race, ethnicity, class, gender, and national identity are explored by South Asian writers. South Asian literature is not only about issues, but it is also about cuisine. South Asian cuisine is widely consumed and has been for thousands of years. South Asian cuisine is produced with herbs and spices and prepared in a traditional manner.

Culture of a particular group can be determined by the food and the feast of that nation. The level of honor and pride of a country or ethnicity is determined by their level of hospitality and varied cuisine. South Asian writings on food literature are Sadia Dehlvi's *Jasmine and Jinn*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Mistress of Spices*, Amit Majmudar's *The Abundance*, Ann Mah's *Kitchen Chinese*, Richrad C Morais's *The Hundred-Foot Journey*, Kunzang Choden's *Chilli and Cheese: Food and Society in Bhutan*, Bannan Yoshimoto's *Kitchen*, Khaleed Hossen's *Kite Runner*, Jhumpa Lahiri's *Intrepreters of Maladies*, Kamila Shamshie's *Salt and Saffron*, Uzma Aslam Khan's *The Origin of Sweetness*, Farah Yasmeen's *The Night of Forgiveness*, Mohsin Ahmed's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*.

These South Asian authors bring a diverse range of flavors to the table, including love, joy, grief, regret, and memories. These outstanding authors not only provide excellent food writing, but they also provide a substantial serving of South Asian history and cultures. Gardaphé and Xu, in their book, *Introduction: Food in Multi-ethnic Literature*, state — “Ethnic identity formations have been shaped by experiences of food productions and services, culinary creativities, appetites, desires and hunger” (5).

The practice of gastronomy is the cornerstone of the cultural environment in which humans live. In all human communities, there are numerous cultural meanings and discourses around food behaviors and preferences. As a result, the meanings and sensations associated with food can vary, and they are also influenced by socio-cultural and economic factors. Deborah Lupton points out, “Food consumption habits are not simply tied to biological needs but serve to mark boundaries between social classes,

geographic regions, nations, cultures, genders, life-cycle stages, religions and occupations, to distinguish rituals, traditions, festivals, seasons and times of day” (1).

In many South Asian households, the kitchen is the hub. Kitchens in Muslim South Asia, in particular, are the beating heart of civilization. Nations and economies, politics and history, and, of course, personal relationships are all affected by the alchemy that takes place within the Kitchen space. The novel *Salt and Saffron* by contemporary Pakistani author Kamila Shamsie explores the subtle and complex significance of food and cuisine in Pakistan. Kamila Shamsie’s novel *Salt and Saffron* arouses the sense of taste. Salt and Saffron are affordable and popular ingredients that are used in various meals as it adds taste and aroma.

Masood, the Dard-e-Dil family's cook, prepares and serves delicious meals with just the perfect amount of salt and saffron. During the month of Ramadan, the cook Masood makes varied delicacies like nihari, jalebi, lassi, shami kebab, imli sauce, fried samosas, gulab jamoons, laddoos and burfi where Maraim Apa orders her favorite food. The holy month Ramadan is for fasting as well as for feasting. It is usually a month where they abstain themselves from food and drink from sunrise to sunset. Shamsie has vividly depicted the Ramadan festive with the flavors of food. The Begum’s across the country grumble about fasting and they are supposed to cook in the heat and they are usually in a bad temper. However, Masood even in such circumstances loves and enjoys to cook “abstaining from food and drink from sunrise to sunset has less to do with religious devotion than it did with culinary devotion” (Shamsie, 74). Masood usually sends others from the Kitchen as he says:

‘If you smell my food, you will be so overcome with temptation that you’ll break your fast on the spot. Leave, leave, before you make me into an instrument of Shaitan and I send you to hell.’ The only person he allowed in was Mariam Apa, who would chop and stir and watch, as she never did during any other time of the year” (Shamsie, 75).

Through her work, Shamsie has depicted the various types of food eaten throughout Ramadan, evoking a gluttonous feeling. The Ramadan fast is broken with dates, followed by Jaleebis, which are curly-shaped, hot, and gooey sweets dipped in sweet syrup. Shamsie writes “We started with the requisite date, of course, to symbolize fidelity to the first Muslims in the deserts of Arabia... Curly jalaibees, hot and gooey, that trickled thick sweet syrup down your chin when you bit into them” (Shamsie, 75). Potatoes are drenched in yoghurt and seasoned with herbs and spices. Samosas are triangle-shaped and fried. The smaller ones are packed with mincemeat, while the larger ones are stuffed with potatoes and green chilies. Shami Kebabs come with a sweet imli dipping sauce. Chickpea batter is used to fry spinach leaves. Nihari with a huge gob of marrow floating in a thick gravy and meat melts in your mouth. Lassi is a drink comprised of milk, yoghurt, and sugar that is provided to quench one's thirst at the end of the day. Masood enters with a plate of steaming naan and nihari. His food would be praised by the entire family. These are the numerous delicacies offered at the conclusion of each day on Ramadan eve, while at least ten people assemble for an Iftari feast at dusk. Sarah Sceats in her work, *Food, Consumption and the Body in Contemporary Women’s Fiction* brings the significance of food with social and political meanings.

What people eat, how and with whom, what they feel about food and why— even who they eat—are of crucial significance to an understanding of human society.... Encoded in appetite, taste, ritual and ingestive etiquettes are unwritten rules and meanings, through which people communicate and are categorised within cultural contexts. (1)

Masood's character is built upon his culinary excellence. He is a "cook to be hired but never fired"(Shamshie, 56). Masood uses food as a means of demonstrating his superiority. For him, the narrator employs the epithet Masoodian. We learn about Masood's character through Aliya's description of his cuisine, although Masood's words are hardly heard throughout the story. Through his food, he achieves subjectivity. Aliya recalls watching Masood cook and seeing — "shape and color transformed into texture, witnessed odor becoming aroma, observed vegetables that grew away from each other in the garden wrapping around each other and rolling through spices in his frying pan" (Shamsie, 95). Masood's culinary prowess is further demonstrated by his distinction from the other Dard-e-Dil family cooks. As a result, his absence speaks more about his personality than his presence. Masood engraves his convictions on cooking procedures in order to protect his talent and competence from what Lomaz refers to as "the alchemy of erasure."(104)

Aliya's father is irritated when Masood, the Dard-e-Dils' family cook, serves the family unsalted food, "What is this? Aba had said, staring down in horror at his plate, after just one morsel. What is this?" (Shamshie, 179). The word "salt" comes before "saffron" in the title, as salt is a very important ingredient though used a very little it adds taste to the food whereas saffron is used as an add-on to the food. The novel emphasizes marginalization and an overlooked narrative. Shamshie's exposition of the history and myth of the not-quite-twins in the Dard-e-Dil family from the family's and Taj's perspectives is to understand the discourse of the family and the relationship between the cook and Mariam who are overlooked owing to class and gender disparities. Food has come to be associated with love and a healthy relationship. It enables the love of Masood and Mariam Apa and makes their bond stronger and deeper. Food is love for them and love is food. As these two characters are marginalized, they take up the kitchen space to undermine the power hierarchy that gives them the privilege of having kitchen discourse. Mariam and Masood's love are opposed at home, which leads to elopement and marriage in Turkey, where they open a restaurant, and their connection to the culinary space continues even abroad. Later in life, Mariam and Masood reconnect with the Dard-e-Dil family through cuisine. In Karachi, the Dard-e-Dils receive mystery Masoodian-flavored cuisine from Turkey. Mariam's silent communication comes in the form of food delivered from Turkey. In Aliya's house in Karachi, Mariam Apa continues to be silent. It's another instance of her employing culinary jargon. Mariam's cooking is so delicious that Aliya finds words inadequate to describe it. Aliya claims the food sent by Mariam "was to eat centuries of artistry, refined in kitchens across the subcontinent" (Shamsie, 241). Food delivered from Turkey also emphasises the importance of food and eating above abstract concepts like class and gender.

In *Food as a Transcultural Metaphor*, Hinnerova identifies food as :

Food functions as communication. It transmits messages about identities and social relationships, and it develops and transforms over time due to social shifts. It can also facilitate transcultural communication through food sharing across cultural boundaries, and through altering and re-creating food habits according to contexts (36).

After falling in love with Khaeel, Aliya finds the caste structure in her community. She discovers that the caste system runs deep and becomes obvious as she digs further. Khaeel or Cal is from Karachi's Liquatabad which is on the other side of the rails. Samia, Aliya's cousin, sums up the issue succinctly as "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" (Shamshie, 31). She theorizes with her cousin Sameer about why her family is so judgmental, concluding that it is due to elitism based on a fear of losing their social ranks. The classes collide once

more, and Aliya wonders whether she is not-quite-twins with her aunt Maraim, doomed to marry a lower-class spouse. Aliya not only uncovers Maraim's love story, but she also discovers her own, forcing her to confront her own innate Karachiite social elitism, falling in love with a man whose parents happen to come from an impoverished neighborhood. Furthermore, discoveries about previous occurrences force Aliya to confront her own class prejudices, leading her to embrace Khaeel despite his family's history. Khaeel returns to Aliya a few days later. His arrival was facilitated by her cousin, Sameer. Aliya, Khaeel, her parents, and Sameer have supper together later that evening. Aliya's parents try to identify Khaeel with the cook, Masood when Khaeel delivers the meal to the location which looked just like that of their previous chef. The family tales are churned together as a result, and both Mariam-Masood and Aliya-Khaeel get linked. The class differences are also interwoven in the story. There is an attempt to tie up the loose ends at the conclusion, which is represented in Aliya's disclosure: "I looked out at Mariam's hibiscus branch. The glass between it and me was both a window and a mirror" (Shamshie, 244). She could see herself in Mariam through the looking glass, but she knew it wasn't the same.

Love is essentially the "salt" of life, with the "saffron" serving as an extra garnish. Salt symbolizes love, enthusiasm, vigor, and vitality in life, and a life salt less is dull. "When our hearts live, we live more than ourselves" (Shamshie, 243) and "Hurt? What's hurt? Do any of us live without it?" (Shamshie, 217). Saffron symbolizes sacrifice and courage which is an add-on to life. Salt alone will not suffice in Aliya's life; a combination of salt and saffron is required. She has her own unique identity, but she values and seeks approval from her family. She is always conscious of her tradition, history, culture, familial lineage, and mannerisms, despite having lived abroad.

To conclude, through food, the writer tries to portray the cultural backdrop of Karachi. The writer has used a cook in the kitchen to break the class division and this class divide is shattered by the essentiality of food and love for food. Food plays a vital role in the novel to conjoin all the knotted plots of class, gender, history, tradition, and culture, and the author also describes food as an essential element of the relationship. While the meal fills the belly and awakens the senses, this novel fills the soul and awakens the conscience.

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