

# **Tradition and modernity in Kamila Shamsie's *Salt and Saffron* (2000)**

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## **Abstract**

This article analyses the changing trends of globalization and modernity that transform the social and individual perceptions. In postcolonial era, globalization proves to be an impetus that precipitates the tension between tradition and modernity. This article studies the competing forces of tradition and modernity as dramatized in Kamila Shamsie's *Salt and Saffron* (2000). The novel is a playful account of past memories revisited and preserved by family lore. It is also an appropriation of those traditional views in the modern scene by the members of new generation. Therefore, the novel becomes a microcosm of traditional versus modern values conceived by the family members of Dard-e-dil family. The novel is an effective display of past Muslim cultural and political glory yet it revisits the current issues of identity, displacement and immigration. The article situates the story of Dard-e-dils within the theoretical context of globalization and postcolonialism, and reads the flux and change that the Pakistani fiction reflects as it enters a new realm of changed national, social and individual perception in the post-partition and postcolonial era.

## **Keywords**

Salt and Saffron, Tradition, Modernity, Postcolonialism, Globalization, Culture, Family Lore

## **1. Introduction**

The cultural and social consciousness of the communities residing the modern world is in the process of readjustment in modern times. They often oscillate between the continuum of traditional affiliation between their communal sensibility and the newly founded national identities and global flux. There are significant and conspicuous representations of transnational shifting paradigms in literatures written in English. English being a global language provides a medium of expression to these ideals. The literatures in English are composed by those residing away from the native land, are part of Diaspora, and are also a connection between the local and international. They are keen observers of changing realities in the native land and are also at a vantage point that facilitates an even-handed narrative representation in

writing. In modern Pakistani English literature that comprises novels, biographies, memoirs, popular forms of narrative such as electronic media and print media, there is a visible surge of inquiry and reassessment of the legitimacy of existing national ideals, representation of the marginalized and privileged, role of tradition and modernity in an individual's life and the impact of social and political shifting realities on an individual's life

## **2. Globalization and Shifting Paradigms**

The emergence of the global culture, marked by constant circulation and exchange of commodities, trade, electronic media, and information technology seems to overwhelm the local and indigenized cultural forms and practices. Therefore, the limitations set by the nation states and their prescribed ideologies are often challenged as the sole

representatives of a given nation or community. The national, political and military establishments still work in strong collaboration with each other, yet there is a strong impetus of globalization that remains imminent (Jay, 2011, p. 105). Culture is no longer subservient to the dictates of national agenda; it is a homogenized entity that facilitates transnational and transcultural influx of values and mirrors the migration of populations, exchange of values, transformation and change. In literatures in English, the issue of new postcolonial cultural identities departs from the essential nationalist historical identities carved out by American and British literatures of fifteenth to twentieth century. Thus from nationalistic aims the English literature departs as it does not remain Anglophonic or Eurocentric but is emblematic of cultures and trends outside imperial centres yet linguistically linked by English. As English literature has become heterogeneous and assorted it combines writing and analysis of cosmopolitanism, Diaspora communities as well as native residents (Jay, 2011, p. 105). The postcolonial, postmodern and post-structural approaches to English literature interpret the world as a decentralized entity, rejecting the Eurocentric and imperial logo-centric cultural constructs.

### **3. New 'Scapes' and 'Spaces'**

The individual in the modern world can be situated within the system of different scapes as devised by Arjun Appadurai. He proposes five dimensions of global cultural flow as ethnoscap, mediascapes, technoscapes, finascapes and ideoscapes (Appadurai, 2011, p. 28). The classification of the changing realities into these scapes, helps in framing the shifting paradigms as immigration, tourism, marketing, advertising, changing philosophies and most importantly the changing economic conditions. Thus forming a model of global cultural flow (Appadurai, 2011, p. 32). The most interesting point in these new scapes is their constant shifting and uncertain state. In the modern global cultural scenario, there are impressions that traditional modes of perception such as nation-state ideologies, logocentric trends, cultural hegemony and colonization are dismantled by more progressive trends that promote difference and hybridity. However, such overarching claims are subject to scepticism and incredibility in the shifting paradigms of fast changing realities.

The point of celebration is the postcolonial triumph over the hegemonising cultural and linguistic values of English nationalism and imperialism. The emergence of new literatures in English that voice out the concerns of those marginalized by Eurocentric narratives. Thus there is a new body of world literature, common wealth literature and postcolonial literatures that promote the ideals of nationhood, autonomy, local values, local cultures and local languages. This new surge is celebrated as a global culture reflected by the English literature that no longer observes the linguistic and culture hegemony of imperialism and colonialism.

However, as Gikandi points out there is an inherent crisis in the emergence of these new values and the global culture as it dismantles or transcends the very idea of nationhood and local cultural values. These constructs of nationalism and cultural autonomy were the foundations of postcolonial revolt against imperialism. Therefore, the departure from its foundational theories only will result in chaos and confusion not coherence and integration (Gikandi, 2011, p. 110). The major difference between this sense of celebration and crisis is that global culture celebrates this departure yet the nation state or the local set up laments this innovation.

### **4. Literature as a Reflection of Tradition, Modernity and Shifting Paradigms**

The reading of literature in recent times is an activity beyond the limits of time and space. Today, the literatures are read by the audience distanced from immediate native environment and is written by authors living away from the native land. Thus literature is framed by both as the remote local reality as well as the newly emerging heterogeneous global-cultural flow. Franco Moretti explains the liaison between global change and its literary reflection as 'world literature was indeed a system – but a system of variations' (Morreti, 2011, p. 103). To explain this system of variation the changing domains of power, social control and politics which usually literature reflects should be considered before any literary and cultural analysis. The shifting paradigms that literature conceives are indeed the shifting domains of power and control. Historically, English literature followed the imperialistic and Eurocentric notions of culture and civilization that was followed by the emergence of postcolonial cultures and societies depicted in the postcolonial literature. However, the transition from Eurocentric concept of world and its decentralization only resulted in emergence of new centres. Now the new global world that the world literature aims to conceive is a world that changes focus from particular or local to global or universal and vice versa. This constant oscillation between the universality to particularity is the new theoretical space within which the new literatures produced should be framed.

### **5. English Literature and Postcolonial Narratives of Identity**

English literature that was a tool of nation building and cultural constructs, is no longer framed as a system of ideas that only serve the nation state agenda. Although nation state is strong politically and socially still its ideological foundation is under threat by the influx of foreign values. These foreign values are not necessarily infested in the

system through western cultural values only but through ideological and differential influx of values from different parts of the world. In case of English literary studies, the Eurocentric hegemony is dismantled by the renewed interest in difference and decentralization. The poststructuralist, deconstructive, feminist and Marxist theories revolutionized the dominant nationalistic ideologies that govern literary studies. Therefore, new approaches to the literary studies have to be restructured according to the differential modes of thinking ruled by scepticism. The new modes of thinking that are differential as well as innovative are considered both as a point of celebration as well as crisis (Gikandi, 2011, p. 110). The literary studies as a whole have been reoriented by the process of globalization. The postcolonialism and postmodernism are two major models for realigning the literary studies according to the transcultural and transnational dimensions in the globalized world.

## 6. Postcolonialism

Literature and politics converge on the point of constructing a new identity. In the states that acquired independence after 1950 or postcolonial era, the question of identity is interlocked with the national identity. Both language and literature are significant means of constituting the new identity yet reconfiguring it according to the needs of changing circumstances. The exploration of the meaning of national literature reveals the status of nationhood (Gilbert, 1996, p. 19). The literature is also interlocked with the cultural therefore the study of nationalism paves way for cultural understanding. The language, in this context comes as a tool for connecting the local with the global. The writers of English literature who are responsible for constructing a new identity themselves are in a state of displacement as most of them are Diaspora. Thus the conflicting issues of localization and globalization remains at the heart of any study or analysis that is conducted in the field of literary studies produced in the twenty first century.

Postcolonialism also plays its part as it aligns itself with globalization through its hybridity, alterity and notions of Empire and imperialism. Globalization is also a redaction of already existing theoretical discourses that substantially shape the new forms of perception and expression. Postcolonialism is a significant link between traditional or historical globalization and modern globalization. The postcolonial literature as world literature is a 'structure of connection, of modular repetition, that manifests itself as endless difference rooted in local particularity' (Morreti, p. 32).

## 7. Kamila Shamsie as a Postcolonial Writer

Kamila Shamsie as a postcolonial writer represents a new generation of Pakistani writers in English. Pakistani

English literature reflects the dissolution and neutralization of values and cultural perceptions amidst changing geo-political and geographical realities. The emergence of Pakistan as an Islamic republic marks the beginning of a new geo-political era whose dimensions are distinct from the pre-partition era. This geo-political shifting and reshaping of spaces in South Asia triggers a reconfiguration of thought patterns. Thus the literature in English represents a sharp change in social consciousness and individual sensibility.

In the English literary scene in Pakistan, there is a diverse display of values that are intrinsically traditional yet are potentially modern. The cultural and social perceptions are fastly changing due to the surge of capitalism and economic determinism. The social and cultural scenario is appropriated by the economic dimension. Thus any narrative of individual or social concern is over brimming with the themes of displacement, migration, Diaspora, identity crisis and deterritorialization, where all these are a result of rapid urbanization and globalization. Pakistani society is a fast changing society that revisits its Islamic past of united India and the repercussions of British Imperialism.

## 8. Central Theme of *Salt and Saffron*

*Salt and Saffron* is a story of family lore and family traditions revisited by the young family member named Aliya. The story revolves around the tension between the traditional fears and prejudices guarded and cherished by the old generation and the skepticism rampant among the new generation. Aliya, the protagonist and the narrator of the story relates the stories and anecdotes about the family. Her chief sources are the oral traditions transmitted through the bedtime stories of her grandmother and their unchecked recognition by her parents. However, Aliya as a member of new generation, born and bred outside local settings in Karachi, skeptically reconsiders the claims of royal lineage and aristocratic sophistication. The story revolves around the royal family of Dard-e Dils. Dard-e Dil, is a title in Urdu that signifies the ache in heart. The writer meticulously chooses the title as it effectively conveys a sense of belonging to past in the local linguistic and cultural idiom, thus appropriating the use of Urdu words according to the needs of an English narrative. Dard in Urdu literary tradition signifies pain or ache that is primarily a result of a long standing and enduring struggle in love that remains unrequited and unfulfilled. The ache in heart that springs out of this love is related to the downfall of a grand family tradition that suffered disintegration at the onset of British colonial rule. Therefore, a feeling of pain and faded glory lingered in the hearts of the family members. The stories and anecdotes that are narrated by the old family members are an effort to keep alive the memories of that lost tradition. The lost tradition is

meticulously embroidered by the novelist by the use of Urdu words in an English narrative. These words are appropriated according to the emotional set up of the story and a non native speaker of Urdu language can easily gauge the meaning and depth of the indigenous customs and traditions in a foreign language narrative.

## 9. Deconstructing the Claims of Family Superiority

The whole novel is an intricate display of tradition and change where the old values are replaced by the new ones. The characters in the novel can be divided into two groups one group comprises grandmothers, mothers, fathers and great grand fathers, the other includes grand children and their friends. The older group continuously reinstate their family pride by referring back to past through family trees and maps of lineage, souvenirs, photographs and orally transmitted stories. However, the members of new generation actively questions the authenticity of past and draws new conclusions by reinterpreting the transmitters' veracity and repercussions of past events. The novel abounds in anecdotes of past follies as well as achievements that area source of inspiration as well as are targets of relentless inquiry and scepticism.

On one hand, Aliya narrates the story of Dard-e dil's royalty and court affiliation with the Mughals yet on the other hand she reveals their liaison with the imperial forces that sabotaged Mughal ruling establishment. The connection between the Mughal ruling establishment (1526-1707 C.E.) and the Dard-e Dils is established in a story related by the novelist. Despite the tall family claims that the Kingdom of Dard-e Dil was a significant ally of Mughal kingdom, Aliya skeptically reveals that this kingdom was completely non-existent, instead the head of Dard-e Dil clan only owned a small piece of land that could not be mistaken as a territory or a kingdom. Although like Mughals, the descendents of Dard-e Dil traced their lineage back to the Timurid line however, they were not pride enough to establish a kingdom like Timur or Babur. Therefore, what remains behind are the stories and claims of superiority transferred by family lore. A post-humous title of 'Sultan' was conferred upon Nurul Jahan as Sultan Nurul Jahan (Shamsie, 2000, p. 141). The novelist deconstructs the claims of family superiority in another anecdote where she describes a skirmish between Zahir uddin Babur, the founder of Mughal dynasty in India and a head of Dard-e Dil family named Zain. Zain was the favoured son of Nawab Asadullah whose ascension was a result of favoritism. Out of sheer incompetence, Zain made an offer to Babur that if he feels homesick in India, he can make Zain his vicegerent in India and should travel back to Bukhara to enjoy the bounties of his homeland. The offer resulted in the assassination of Zain and the replacement of Ibrahim, his younger brother as the head of Dard-e Dil. The story is narrated in the novel in a playful tone that has

undercurrents of irony and satire.

The writer scrupulously appropriates some of the family truths and conceptions according to the new idiom. For example, the story of Mariam in the novel is a strong criticism of prejudice and class consciousness prevailing in the collective consciousness of the family. Mariam, becomes a symbol of shame and humiliation as she married the family cook. This rebellious act against the royal protocol is believed to be the result of an impure birth and impurity in the blue blood. The arrival of Mariam in the family is shrouded in ambiguity as she has been sent to the house of Dard-e Dils, due to the death of her parents. The writer brings in the repercussions of displacement and mistaken identities in the novel through the story of Mariam. The feminine aspect of Mariam's character remains unique in the novel as the narrator of the story continuously looks upon Mariam as a role model and a source of inspiration. However, within the family lore Mariam is a permanent blot on the family pride and the untarnished ancestral purity. Through the condemnation of Mariam, the writer also displays an effective opposition between feminism and patriarchal authority where both remain perpetually antithetical and are a source of tension and drama throughout the course of family history. The novel is a critique of class divide and claims of superiority as the novelist continuously constructs as well as deconstructs these claims. The final episode in the novel culminates in Aliya's marriage to a not-so royal Khaleel, thus breaking the pretentious and faulty assumptions of family superiority and neutralizing the class distinction.

## 10. Conclusion

The irony of the modern English literary scene is that the writers of literatures in English are residing the lands distant from their homelands. Thus while professing the need for global cultures they are undermining the role of native / localized trends. Yet they are also referring to the universalist-particular connection by dramatising the situations and crisis from their native lands. Thus the writers of literatures in English are torn out between the absolute loyalty to the global culture and the transgression of the postcolonial nation centric ideals of native culture and values. By subscribing to the ideals of globalization they are endorsing the homo-hegemonization of linguistic cultures yet they use these linguistic mediums to reinforce their local traditions and cultures. The question arises as to what extent they are successful in revitalizing their native traditions and cultures that they are simultaneously undermining by using the homo-hegemonising linguistic and power cultural values. The problem persists as the linguistic structures used by the writers of English literature renders them subservient to the models of power knowledge and techno-scientific modes of control, therefore they are ill equipped to revive their local linguistic and traditional models of connectedness with their land. This dependence upon models of linguistic and

hegemonic cultural constructs occasionally obstruct their way to analyse and resolve the problems of local and indigenized origin.

The novel *Salt and Saffron* is, however, an effective endeavour to reconcile the competing forces of globalization and localization, tradition and modernity and past and present. The novel is innovative and fresh in its approach and treatment as it playfully revisits the past traditions and conceptions and rejects them as irrelevant in the modern idiom. The claims of superiority and royalty are rendered pointless in the modern context as the modes of power and control in the modern world are entirely different from those in the pre-partition India. The novelist conceives a swift transition from old values to the new ones. The story of new and old generation implies that the younger generation has abandoned the endless lamentation of past glory which the old generation still strongly holds. The new generation embraces the challenges of new times and has adapted to move on with the time. *Salt and Saffron* effectively constructs a new national and cultural identity of Pakistani society with its diverse colours and conflicting

values. It boldly laughs at its weaknesses and celebrates its competence with pride. The novel, overall, is a playful and optimistic attempt to learn from past and to move on with time towards a new beginning.

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