

Food Culture in Shamsie's Salt & Saffron

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Abstract

Kamila Shamsie's narrative *Salt and Saffron* (2000) primarily unfolds the history, culture, cultural swings of Dard-e-Dil family for four generations. The novel narrates experiences of a young Pakistani girl, Aliya who is an instance of reverse Diaspora from her university in the United States to Karachi for her summer vacations. The entire argument in the novel is an articulation of pain of the heart in every generation of the family clan. The novel exhibits elaborate descriptions of food preparations, culinary practices, food habits, feasting and fasting of Muslim family- Dard-e-Dil with minute observations of cuisine and delicacies ceremoniously prepared by Masood, the chef of the family. Salt and saffron are essential ingredients that add taste and meaning, spice and sweet, sexuality, desire, enrichment in taste, culture and ultimately history. The present paper attempts to find how Shamsie spices up her story with tasty food items which serves forth various cultures and thus become inseparable ingredients of Pakistani culture and history.

KEYWORDS: Food, culture, culinary practices

Kamila Shamsie traces food as a core element which reveals Pakistani culture. She minutely presents not only food but also the manner, place and time of the day it is served, the culinary practices, the food items, occasions and the matters which are discussed while in taking it. It amalgamates all these as food culture independent from culture. In her novel, *Salt and Saffron* food culture refers to the practices, attitudes, and beliefs as well as the networks and institutions surrounding the production, distribution, and consumption of food.

The title, *Salt and Saffron* conveys the significant role of food in understanding the culture, familial relations and history of Dard-e-Dil family. On the very first page, deliberately Shamsie avoids the use of capitalization in the title of the novel to traces the equal importance of salt and saffron in food. Salt and Saffron create alliteration. The first word, 'salt' is commonly found in kitchen indicates commonality and at the same time, cultural uniqueness in culinary practices. Salt is a product of seas. It adds taste, taste to tongue and taste to the discussions and cultural interactions across dining table. On the other hand, saffron is a product of the Himalayas. It is a marker of sweetness, richness, upper class and sophistication. Saffron is generally added in delicacies and sweet dishes generally prepared during festivals, parties, social gatherings and cultural celebrations. Saffron is used rarely whereas salt is used regularly. Salt enhances the food taste of regular dishes whereas saffron enriches the food taste of occasional celebrations. In other words, both ingredients represent the family of spices – one is produced at the seashores and the other is produced at the height of the Himalayas. Kamila Shamsie through the

title, Salt and Saffron encompasses the entire humanity, culture, history and food habits of the commons and uncommons right from the seashore to the height of the Himalayas.

Similarly, the author presents the two social and cultural paradigms - the royal and the common. The royal upper class is symbolized by Dard-e-Dil family whereas their servants like Taj, Masood and Wasim are marked as common class. The common class adds salt to the luxury of royal class. They are easily available but they leave the permanent mark on the lives of aristocrats. The novel records not only the history and culture of Dard-e-Dils but also the list of employees who serve them. These servants are like salt which is very common to be mentioned but whose absence mars the taste of any food item. As Masood, Dard-e-Dil family's chef who cooks the delicious food that it becomes difficult for them to enjoy any other taste than the Masoodian food. Shamsie presents him as a salt in Dard-e-Dil family which is very common, but without his presence everything becomes tasteless. Through Masood Kamila explains the necessity of salt in food:

‘Why is it that when people exchange recipes they so often forget to mention salt? . . . ‘I believe in God because all of sciences can never explain the miracle of salt.’ (Shamsie 178-179)

Shamsie highlights when Masood leaves Dard-e-Dil family, their palates become restless to taste the food cooked by him. Even after years, their sensory organs recognize the aroma and the taste of food cooked by Masood.

Kamila narrates Masood's use of specific ingredients and spices to evoke unique flavor profiles that define Masoodian food culture for Dard-e-Dil family. She unfolds the mouth-watering aroma and procedure of Masoodian chicken karhai. She provides the details how his food enables Aliya to wake up and follow the aroma of it. She relates Masood and Marriam's elopement with the blending of the spices. She explains how they both belong to the different cultures and social status and these boundaries dissolve and they become one. Food is the only topic about which Marriam used to talk with Masood not only that she only ate his cooked food. Hence, Aliya's cousin, Usman describes her as “Maybe she doesn't know any words that aren't about food.” (Shamsie 131) In Salt and Saffron, the food is a common element which holds all characters together.

I watched the clock for the two minutes to be up. (‘How much time ?’ I heard Masood's voice, incredulous. ‘How can I tell you how much time it'll take? When the spices and the meat dissolve the boundaries between them and flavours seep, one into the other, then it is time.’) (Shamsie 59)

Shamsie explicates a popular saying, “The heart of the home beats in the kitchen.” (Bangambiki Habyarimana, The Great Pearl of Wisdom) Masood does not appear in the present but his cooked food always now and then appears in the discussions of Dard-e-Dil family. Shamsie tells how food gives Masood and Marriam, Taimur's daughter who “only spoke to order meals”. (Shamsie 48) a chance to fall in love with each other. Masood is a great cook and Marriam is skilled to magically understand the favourite food of any person. Hence, she always decides the menu Dard-e-Dil family's lunch, dinner and

breakfast. Through stomachs they both touch the lives of Dard-e-Dils. Masood's disappearance affects all the family members. Aliya reacts nervously when she comes to know about his elopement. The first question she asks, "But how will we . . ." I looked around the kitchen, cavernous and strange." (Shamsie 78) This instance proves the bond created by food between Dard-e-Dil family and Masood.

Kamila Shamsie pinpoints various beverages like tea, coffee, coke, lemonade, etc. which mark culture. She traces all discussions of Dard-e-Dil family are impossible without a mug of tea. The taste of energetic beverage boosts discussions about familial, social and national issues. The royal family requires the large quantity of tea. Hence, instead of a cup; they prefer a mug of tea. It underlines their liking for tea.

Shamsie comments upon cultural transgression wherein people prefer drinks of other nations to express their connectivity with the places. For instance, Samia, cousin of Aliya drinks Pepsi in Pakistan and lassi in London. This instance indicates her effort of connecting home culture in host nation and the vice versa through food. In London, Aliya misses the culture of Karachi. She mentions "golgappas, nihariand naans,"(Shamsie 14)

Kamila Shamsie showcases how food becomes one of the major cultural tenets of a person or a community. The young generation that switches over to the West, assimilates with the culture of the host nation. They embrace the food culture of America. Samia, for instance, shows cultural assimilation. Aliya observes:

I opened the fridge and crouched down beside it. My cousin Samia had become a sandwich eater. Bread, mayonnaise, mustard, salami, sliced roast beef, lettuce, tomatoes, gherkins, tuna salad. Good God, how dreary. (Shamsie 20-21)

Food becomes one of the major tenets of ethnicity of a community and place. The familial bond between the characters facilitates to trigger their curiosity about varieties of foods and cultural set ups of Karachi and Liaquatabad. For instance, Samia talks about food, multilingual and multiethnic vector of Pakistan:

Samia puts her arm around my neck in a gesture that was both affectionate and immobilizing. 'Have you ever, in all your days, in all your meanderings when Sameer first learnt to drive and you chukermarodthe city for the best bun kebabs, have you ever been to Liaquatabad? If I asked you how to get there would you have the faintest?' (Shamsie 31)

Kamila Shamsie portrays Muslim culture more effectively in Salt and Saffron. The title itself conveys salt and sweet relating to food culture of Asian countries. Food, therefore, becomes a major vector of cultural nuances. For instance, Mariam is always connected with kitchen, food items and food culture. The food items that she orders to be cooked highlight the culture of Dard-e-Dil family. Mariam says, "Alookabhurta, achaargosht, pulao, masoorkidaal, kachoomar." (Shamsie 56) Further, the descriptions about food continue in the narrative underlining the culture and culinary practices in the novel. Salt adds taste to the food without which food becomes tasteless. Similarly, saffron enriches the taste of sweet Pakistani dishes. Indian, Pakistani and native dishes with their original names used by the writer projects the food culture of Dard-e-Dil family in

particular, and South Asia in general. The author minutely illustrates cooking practices as a part of cultural chromatology. She says:

. . .but in their place was a still-hot haandi of chicken karhaion the stove and a note instructing me to ‘add whole green chillis and pudina– or is it dhaniya? That green thing, you know what I mean – and cook on medium heat for two minutes’. A spoon covered in spices and the juice of cooked chicken lay next to haandi, but I ignored it and reached for a clean spoon to stir in the chillis and coriander. Masood always used to say that two hands on one spoon spoilt the flavour of a dish. (Shamsie 58)

Shamsie showcases the tight binding of food, culture, tradition, religion and beliefs. She mentions one such food item, chicken. She narrates how it is labeled as not spiritual. Further, she compares chicken with Karachi to describe the luxury of the city. She says, “‘What’s Karachi like?’ . . . I could answer that question with a single, simple analogy, My stock answer was, ‘Like a chicken.’” (Shamsie 61)

According to Eat-ology, human beings are a product of when they eat, how they eat, how much we eat as well as social and cultural factors that influence our eating attitudes and behaviors. The author traces Eat-ology to reveal class, social and economic status of the person. She highlights depicts Aliya’s reaction to Khalee’s common class manners. Shamsie tells how the simple act of drinking tea reveals class, economical status and the familial information. Aliya states:

Khaleel poured his tea into saucer, blew on it and tipped it into his mouth. My eyes swivelled around to check that no one I knew was watching. I knew right then everything my family would need to know about Khaleel’s parents. They were hardworking, decent people. Not professors, though... you wouldn’t even know how humble his parents’ origins were, except in moments when he revealed little habits he’d picked up at home, like slurping tea out of saucer. (Shamsie 63-64)

Salt and Saffron documents culture and the chromatology of Muslim culture. During journeys and fasting of people, especially men have strong desire for smoking which they cannot resist. Men become restless during their flights whereas the same persons remain quite during Ramzan. This instance shows how religion as a cultural practice dominates the psyche of Muslim men. Aliya states, “The man in the seat next to me said to his companion, ‘Why is it that the desire for a cigarette is even stronger on a flight during take-off than it is just before Iftari, even when Ramzan falls in summer and you’re without a smoke for over fourteen hours?’” (Shamsie 74) Gradually, Kamila Shamsie comments upon Ramzan not as the month of fasting but a month of feasting. She projects how people are busy in culinary practices from sunset to sunrise. She comments on her own culture:

Officially the month of fasting, Ramzan has always seemed to me synonymous with feasting. Through the first eighteen years of my life, abstaining from food and drink from sunrise to sunset had less to do with religious devotion than it did with culinary devotion. (Shamsie 74)

Further, the author talks about cultural beliefs that Dard-e-Dil family has regarding foods. It is Masood, the family chef, who does not allow any member of the family to enter the kitchen and taste the food. His cultural belief is evident in his expression. Aliya observes, “He liked nothing so much as to shoo us out of the kitchen with the warning, ‘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. ’” (Shamsie 75)

Kamila throws light upon the salt and saffron through the history of cooking practices followed by the Dard-e-Dil family. In past, this royal family had a number of cooks for different dishes. The kitchen projects not only history of the royal family but also it exhibits the culture of the Dard-e-Dil kitchen. Kamila vocalizes, “. . .the Dard-e-Dil palace where legions of cooks plied their trade, each one specializing in a different kind of food. So, for instance, there was one cook for the rice dishes and one for parathas, one for the sweetmeats and for the kebabs.”(Shamsie 76)

Kamila chronicles the elopement of Mariam Apa, the daughter of Taimur, with Masood, the cook of the Dard-e-Dil family. This incident encompasses history, migration and a new trend in culture wherein the royal blood blends with the blood of the common. This instance is an indicator of globalization and modernization, and at the same time a revolt by the royal blood. Further, Kamila does not comment upon the marriage of Mariam and Masood. She maintains this mystery till the end of the novel.

Food, cooking and culinary practices hold prime space in the cultural set up and impression of a community. It is the food along with language, religion, dress and rituals that carves a separate entity in the culture of people and place. Aliya observes the cooking practices maintained in Dard-e-Dil family by Masood, the chef. These cooking activities showcase the food culture and importance in Dard-e-Dil family.

I’d watched Masood cook, seen shape and colour transformed into texture, witnessed odour 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)

Salt and Saffron portrays cultural hybridity as members of two different cultures come together. The younger generation represents cultural hybridity as they embrace Western food practices of snacks, beverages and fast food. For instance, Sameer and Khaleel enjoy chilli chips and Coke. Kamila observes:

Sameer came through the door, holding two glasses of Coke in his hands and packets of chilli chips between his teeth. . .He tipped a handful of chips into his mouth and followed it with a sip of Coke to accentuate the taste of the masala.(Shamsie 182-183)

Further, she says, Kamila mentions Clifton beach where the rich and common culture assimilate to enjoy the beach culture with the various types of food items which provide earning opportunities to the commoners like – bhutawallah, chaatwallah, etc. She utters the cultural hybridity when Samia orders the food which complements to ethnic origins

of the German movie. Shamsie showcases how food can enrich the taste of the movie by adding the taste of that screened culture.

As Anthelme Brillat-Savarin says in his book, *The Physiology of Taste* “Tale me what you eat and I will tell you what you are.” Whatever we eat is reflected in our body, thoughts and behavior. In other words, food shapes our body, thoughts, ideas and behavior. The same is reflected in as person’s personality, a family’s culture, history and the interactions of the people among groups and societies.

As mentioned by Lindlahr, ‘Food is medicine’. Shamsie uses food to define the relations and the health of the person. When Dadi is ill, Marriam shows her love for Dadi by taking care of her food. She suggests Masood to prepare the world’s lightest soup which can be easily digested by weak Dadi. Kamila traces how Masood’s food is only cure to their fractured lives. Aliya searches him and taste of his cooked food as through she can free her family and herself from the nostalgia of Masood’s food. Finally, she gets the Masoodian taste and Masood’s information by tasting food from Istanbul restaurant.

Similarly, Dard-e-Dils arrange lemonade parties to foster the bond of love among the family members. Dadi supports Aliya against marriage. She says, “My granddaughter is not a confectionary.” Even to express her opinion and view, she uses food. (Shamsie 125) The royal family takes it as insult or serious crime, if any servant’s hands shake while serving. It shows the strict and suppressive nature of the aristocrats.

Kamila showcases the influence of the topics of discussion on the food. Aliya does not like her relatives’ declaration Marriam as an ‘imposter’ as she elopes with Masood. It changes the taste of lemon tarts like ashes which the others taste as refreshing. She states, “I had been about to pick up the lemon tart on my plate but drew my hand back when I heard the word ‘imposter’. Anything I ate now would taste like ashes.” (Shamsie 126) This instance underlines how the topics of discussion at the time of meal influence the food and mood.

Further, Shamsie reveals how the food can form the relations and reactions of the person. She traces how after Marriam’s elopement, Nasser recalls food cooked by Masood and feels the taste with great peace. She writes:

When Aba told the story we all, of us who’d ever eaten a meal prepared by Masood, put aside our reaction to th elopement to imagine, just for a moment, how it would feel to be in the presence of Massod’s food again. Aba, too closed his eyes and inhaled deeply, said, ‘Chicken vindaloo, and we all sighed. (Shamsie 153)

This instance proves how food can quite literally push to another time, another country, another culture without even leaving your dinner table, which is why food culture is very important to connect and relate to one another.

Finally, the Dard-e-Dil family accepts Mariam and Masood, Taimur and the unknown woman. Aliya decides to marry Khaleel and prepares to state it to the entire family. The novel ends with everybody retreating to their bedrooms after the meals,

keeping the dining table to be cleaned by Wasim, the chef of the family. In other words, the narrative portrays Dard-e-Dil family history, culture, their relationships and food practices.

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