

Myths, Female Identity and Class Structure: Deconstructing the Family History in Kamila Shamsie's *Salt and Saffron*

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Abstract

Salt and Saffron (2000) is a novel that depicts the family stories and histories of three generations. The novel depicts national identity as well as female identity in which traditional beliefs give way to personal identities. The novel is a brilliant example of portraying such transformations and identifications in which young protagonist Aliya rebels against her family customs and traditions. By digging up her family's past history, she deconstructs the myths and customs, by challenging the class divisions and societal hierarchies. This article tries to study about how the female characters in the novel rebel against such conventional beliefs and how they attain selfhood. This article also focuses on the class divisions in the society and also studies of how the dominant class suppress the lower class people. The family history and myths are also discussed briefly.

Key Words: Myths, Tradition, Female Identity, Deconstruction

Pakistani writer Kamila Shamsie's novel *Salt and Saffron* (2000) is a brilliant portrayal of female emancipation which discusses the issues of love, class division and myths in the society. The protagonist Aliya raises her voice against all the traditional beliefs and myths that her family followed for years. The novel centres around the life and

thoughts of Aliya, a student in one of the universities in United States, who returns to her home town Karachi for a vacation. Her family, Darde-dil, is one of the affluent families in Pakistan that has followed the traditional beliefs of myths and class divides. The members in Darde-dil family believed that they are the descendants of Mughal dynasty. So the family members consider themselves as superior to others in the society.

The family believed in the myth of not-quite-twins according to which, if two or more persons introduced to the family at the same

moment, they will be considered as not-quite-twins. Besides, if two or more babies delivered in the family at a time, they will also be considered as not-quite-twins. According to their belief, such not- quites will bring disgrace and destruction to the family. Here Aliya and her aunt Mariam were considered as not-quites because Mariam was introduced to Aliya's family at the time of her birth. The brothers Taimur, Akbar and Sulaiman were also considered as not- quites as they were born at the same moment, which Darde-dil family believed to be. The family's perpetual fear of bringing disgrace to the family by not-quites turned true when Taimur and his daughter Mariam rebelled against the family's existing customs. Taimur, the great Uncle of Aliya, left the family and afterwards wrote a letter to the family describing the cause of his departure. He was a strong nationalist revealed to the readers through his letter. His nationalist stance made him to dislike the family's anglophilic attitude of sending the members to any of the English universities. Instead Taimur likes to learn his traditional language Urdu and he complains in his letter about his loss of ability to write Urdu which was robbed by English schooling. His letter says, "You will not hear from me again for I am repudiating English and, alas! those years of English schooling have robbed me of the ability to write Urdu" (24).

The myth of not-quite twin comes to a destructive turn when Aliya tries to dig up the past history of her family. Despite of her modernist stance, her fear of disgrace by not-quites made her to enquire about the whereabouts of Mariam, Tamur's daughter and Aliya's aunt. The family members believed that Mariam and Aliya are not-quite-twins as Mariam was introduced to the family at the time of Aliya's birth. As Mariam turned rebellious like her father and brought disgrace by marrying their cook Masood, the perpetual fear of

family proved to be true. Aliya, too in the verge of such disgrace because she loved Khaleel, a man of lower class. He is from Liaqatabad which is considered as an ally of lower classes. She wants to escape from her aristocratic family knot but is helpless and admits that, "I've deconstructed it, analysed it, and I have refused to take on the attitude of my relatives with their centuries of inbred snobbery. Why can't my heart be as evolved as my mind? Why did 'Liaquatabad' hit me so bruisingly in the solar plexus?"(32). She was so deeply entangled in her family's aristocratic pride and found difficult to receive a man from Liaqatabad. Aliya, thus begins to delve deep into the Darde-dil family history. She wants to prove her family's royal pride and decorum to be a false notion and tries to deconstruct the myths and beliefs they followed for years and, thereby wants to attain her own identity in the society without being in the legacy of Darde-dils.

Being conscious about traditional values and social orders, Aliya think herself as liberal woman who is caught up in the cares values. She is afraid of her grandmother Abida, an ardent traditional believe and feels fear to reveal about her love for Khaleel. She falls in a dilemma whether to continue her love for Khaleel or drop her love for the sake of family. She thinks, "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?" (4). Despite educated in Western countries, Aliya's real identity is being tied with the identity of her aristocratic family, which she tries to get rid off. But after she hears about Mariam's elopement with their cook Masood and subsequent marriage, she feels free to think about her love.

Aliya considers Mariam as a unique woman who possess feminine sensibility. Mariam selects her own life without considering any of the aristocratic legacy of her family and her bondage with it. She finds happiness in the way she lives without considering the family's royal decorum. Aliya develops a reverence towards Mariam and considers her as a model to follow. When Abida or Dadicalled Mariam 'a whore' Aliya slapped Dadi despite of her bondage with Dadi. This incident made Aliya and Dadi separate for a long while, but later reconciled. The character of Mariam is doubly marginalized in the family because of her birth to a commoner (Mariam's father Taimur married a girl from lower class after he left the house) and also because she is one among the not-quite-twins. The family's fear proved true when she married a cook from the family.

The women characters like Aliya, Mariam and Mehar Dadi is portrayed as assertive as they show courage to choose their own life and find happiness in their own way. When Mariam and Aliya choose men from beneath their standard, Meher, Abidas younger sister, choose her husband from a higher family. At thirteen she announced that one day she would elope, 'and five years later she did just that' (89). The family arranged their marriage without any protest as he is from an aristocratic family. Their marriage was compared to the marriage of Miranda and Ferdinand in Shakespeare's play *The Tempest* as Abida describes, 'My father was Prospero to Meher's Miranda' (89). Despite widowed at an early age, she led her life without any lament and complaint. She led a life which did not follow the conventional methods of life of a widow and find happiness in simple things. She found time to pursue her dreams and avoid unpleasant situations in life. She found a perfect match for her daughter Zainab and after her marriage with Zaheer, Meher plans to visit Greece.

She sold her house and invested wealth in European Stock Market. Unlike other widows she showed extraordinary courage in life and enquired the happiness of life which is rooted in her own self identity. Like Aliya and Mariyam, Meher is also a perfect example who possess a unique female identity and subjectivity.

Like all other aristocratic family, Darde-dil family also believed in the strong division of class structure that marginalized some characters like Taj and Taj's mother. Besides them, Mariam, Taimur and an unnamed fourth cousin were also considered as rebels and the family members suppressed them as outcastes. By digging up the family history, Aliya reclaimed their lost voice, honour and reinstate them in the family tree. The belief that the ancestors of Darde-dils were Nawabs and princess which made the members proud and arrogant. Taj is an example who doubly marginalized in the society because of her lower class origin and gender. Taj's mother had to suffer in the hands of Darde-dil's Nawab who raped her once and made pregnant. But he didn't show any mercy on her and forcefully send her out of the palace. Taj considered to be the illegitimate daughter of the Nawab. Later, Nawab appointed her as a midwife 'For forty-eight years Taj delivered Dard-e-Dils. Delivered her brothers and sisters, her cousins, her nephews and nieces, her great-nephews and great-nieces. Received gold and umbilical cords in return' (145). Taj cleverly uses the position to revenge her mother's rape and sufferings. She positioned the normal twins Akbar, Taimur and Sulaiman as not-quite -twins, which was a fear of the family. Taj left the palace after their birth without revealing the truth.

Mariam and her father Taimur also considered as outcastes because of their rebellious attitudes. Taimur's denial of learning English and his departure from the family made resentments among the members. His marriage with

a girl from lower class further infuriates them. So, they consider Taimur and his daughter as outcasts. Mariam's arrival to the family leads resentments in the family and everybody look at her with a skeptical eye. Mariam keeps silence except when she orders meals to cook Masood. Her silence made the family members reached in a conclusion that "she speaking would mean answering questions which would mean revealing the truth. So she remained quite"(128). With her orders Masood turned a magician in the kitchen. Mariam develops a strong affection towards Masood which ends up in their elopement. Despite Aliya's bond with Mariam, she feels shocked when Mariam briefly hugs Masood, she thinks, "hug across class and gender"(79). Aliya too was caught up in the aristocratic beliefs of class structure, but she easily overtook such notions by attaining self identity.

Thus by revisiting the past family history the protagonist, Aliya, in Kamila Shamsie's novel *Salt and Saffron* deconstructs the myths and traditions and attains herself identity.

Work Cited

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