



Implications of Re-creation of Culinary Memories of Diaspora in Kamila Shamsie's *Salt and Saffron*

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Abstract: The importance of culinary Discourse is underrepresented in fictional and non-fictional works. In such a situation, I feel a dire need to examine food and culinary practices as metaphors, symbols, and cultural markers. The present research seeks to show how transaction around food conveys cultural identity, memories, and human connections. To build up this argument, I draw a nexus between 'Culinary Nostalgia' and 'Culinary Nationalism' to understand how literature uses food to explore human experiences. For analysis, Kamala Shamsie's *Salt and Saffron* has been selected. I aim to explore how food and its preparation bring back memories, both personal and familial. This relationship between food and memory fits in Arjun Appadurai's study of consumption and the commercialization of items, particularly food. Food stores personal and community memories, reflecting identities and associations. Intergenerational relationships show how culinary traditions are carried down through generations, frequently causing conflict or harmony when newer individuals question or embrace them. Structuralism by Claude Lévi-Strauss illuminates the transfer of culinary techniques and rituals. Food traditions build closeness, relationships, and trust. This matches Deborah Lupton's understanding of food, embodiment, and identity. As characters experience foreign cuisines, they mix traditional dishes with international influences. This fits in Arjun Appadurai's globalization thesis, where food and culinary skills migrate across civilizations and adapt to local situations.

Keywords: Culinary discourse, Food, Nostalgia, Culinary Nationalism, Salt and Saffron, memory, globalization, traditions)

1. Introduction

The investigation of culinary discourse is a complex and captivating undertaking that explores the diverse fabric of human culture, identity, and narrative by examining the role of food. The field of culinary discourse comprises a wide range of methods through which food is represented, analyzed, and used as a means of storytelling in many forms of literature, media, and daily experiences. An essential aspect of investigating culinary discourse is analyzing the role of food as a potent medium for cultural representation and safeguarding. The culinary practices of various regions are often influenced by their historical, traditional, and cultural backgrounds, resulting in distinct cuisines, ingredients, and cooking methods.

Kamila Shamsie's *Salt and Saffron* effectively engrosses readers in the intricate fabric of Pakistani culture, familial relationships, and the intricate nature of personal identity. Within the context of Karachi, Shamsie skillfully constructs a captivating storyline that delves into the interwoven existences of her characters, providing insight into the conflicts arising from the coexistence of traditional values and contemporary ideals, as well as the dichotomy between Eastern and Western cultures (Cesiri, 2019, p.74). Eloquent writing style and astute understanding of

human emotions encourage readers to accompany Aliya on her exploration of her family's historical background, uncovering concealed revelations and undisclosed realities. The title of the work, "*Salt and Saffron*," serves as a metaphor that encapsulates the divergent experiences of the protagonists, representing the juxtaposition between traditional values and societal advancement (Szczygłowska, 2021, p.14). This metaphor draws parallels to the harmonious fusion of salt and saffron, which results in a multifaceted and fragrant amalgamation.

Nostalgia, an emotional state characterized by a complex blend of both positive and negative emotions, is a widely experienced human mood that has the ability to mentally transport people to certain events in their personal history that have significant meaning. The experience of nostalgia is a multifaceted emotional response that is often elicited by sensory stimuli, including but not limited to fragrances, tastes, or music, which have the ability to evoke vivid recollections of the past (Markowitz, 2018, p.11). The process of revisiting and thinking upon beloved memories evokes a sense of nostalgia, enabling individuals to experience times characterized by pleasure, love, or even tragedy.

1.1 Background of Study

The examination of culinary discourse in Kamila Shamsie's *Salt and Saffron* reveals a captivating dimension of cultural investigation and narrative enhancement in this esteemed work of literature. Within the context of this literary work, the discourse around culinary practices extends beyond mere depictions of delectable food, assuming a symbolic role as a means of connecting tradition with modernity, as well as heritage with assimilation (Cesiri, 2017, p.143). The culinary landscape of Pakistan is characterized by a rich tapestry of tastes, which are enhanced by the presence of aromatic spices, fragrant saffron, and a delicate balance between sweet and savory components. It serves as a medium for transmitting cultural legacy, family connections, and the progression of temporal dimensions. The characters in the story use the process of preparing and sharing meals as a means to manage their interpersonal connections, establish their individual identities, and navigate their position within the dynamic frameworks of Pakistani society (Hoppe, 2019, p.76).

1.2 Objectives

To highlight intricate relationships between personalities and their culinary activities.

To investigate the nostalgic connotations of food with a specific emphasis on how food elicits feelings of nostalgia by exploring the characters' encounters with renowned cuisines and its link with the characters' emotional bonds.

To highlight the importance of food in establishing a connection between people and their cultural history, as well as in resolving the difficulties of assimilation and fostering a feeling of continuity and inclusion among diasporic groups.

2. Literature Review

The use of food as a metaphor in literature often serves as a means for writers to effectively communicate profound significances and evoke emotions by means of depictions of meals, components, and culinary customs. In the novel the central character Aliya engages in introspection over the metaphorical implications of food, asserting that sustenance has a deeper meaning beyond its mere physicality. Furthermore, this approach serves as a means to delve into a deeper understanding of our identity, our historical context, and our aspirations for the future (Ranta & Monterescu, 2022b). This concept is in accordance with the theories put out by Roland Barthes, who extensively examined the semiotics of food. Barthes posited that food has several levels of significance that extend beyond its mere sustenance, serving as a platform for the manifestation of cultural, societal, and individual identities. Culinary offerings such as biryani and haleem assume the role of emblematic artifacts of cultural history and evoke sentiments of nostalgia, serving as tangible manifestations of the characters' deep-rooted connections to their origins. The concept presented aligns with the theoretical framework put out by Mary Douglas, whereby she emphasized the significance of symbolic systems in the formation of individual and communal identities. Douglas's idea is in accordance with the notion that food in the book has a purpose beyond ordinary subsistence, instead functioning as a means for the preservation of culture and self-expression (Avieli, 2017, p.11).

The anthropologist Mary Douglas's Grid-Group Theory provides vital insights into the dynamics of culinary traditions shown in Kamila Shamsie's book *Salt and Saffron*. This theoretical framework examines the complex relationship between cultural norms, individual actions, and group dynamics in the context of society (Alemneh & IGI Global, 2020). The use of Grid-Group Theory in analyzing the culinary traditions portrayed in the book provides valuable insights into the manner in which people navigate their connections with food, tradition, and

society.

The critical review of the relevant troupes (key issues) helps me to locate the argument and illuminate the prevalent niche. It makes obvious that there is superabundance of the fictions about cuisine, nostalgia and nationalism but there is scarcity, in some case, or absence of critical material on these fiction. It also depicts that no significant work has been done in connection to the simultaneous study of such fictional polemics. Furthermore, the review of relevant literature facilitates me to pursue the research rigorously through theoretical scaffolding of the study in the prevalent critical material. It guides and encourages me to be properly equipped and appropriately focused.

My research is unique because it will analyze culinary practices in Kamila Shamsie's *Salt and Saffron* as a medium to express nostalgia and nationalism, thereby filling the research gap. My stance is that transactions around food convey messages such as to assert cultural identity, recall memories resulting in nostalgia, and reflect human connections. The characters' ethnic origins are explored via traditional cuisines, cooking techniques and meal customs. Drawing on Anita Mannur, I intend to examine how distinct cultural groups, while their transaction around food, express themselves via autonomy and adherence giving rise to Culinary Nostalgia and Culinary Nationalism. This fits in Arjun Appadurai's globalization thesis, where food and culinary skills migrate across the civilizations and adapt to local situations. This study is the nexus of both Culinary Nostalgia and Culinary Nationalism which will help the readers to understand how literature uses food to explore larger themes and human experiences.

3. Methodology

The methodological approach used in this study is centered on a rigorous examination of the text, with a particular focus on identifying and analyzing reoccurring themes, motifs, and linguistic subtleties pertaining to food and culinary activities. This methodology is in accordance with Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis, facilitating the dissection of the signifiers and signified present in the text (O'bryhim, 2017). The research also incorporates Claude Lévi-Strauss' structuralism as a theoretical framework, using binary oppositions such as tradition vs. modernity and local versus global to explicate the intricate dynamics between culinary traditions and the pervasive influences of globalization. Through an analysis of the characters' culinary preferences and attitudes, this study seeks to uncover the fundamental conflicts and compromises that shape their cultural identities (Palmieri & Forleo, 2020, p.7).

Arjun Appadurai's research explores the ways in which people and societies use consuming behaviors as a means of constructing and conveying their identities. Within the realm of culinary discourse, this particular viewpoint facilitates our comprehension of how the characters in "*Salt and Saffron*" navigate their identities by means of their selections of food and their actions related to eating. The culinary tastes of the characters serve as indicators of their cultural origins and individual identities, illustrating their endeavors to negotiate the intricate network of remembrance and affiliation.

The notion of globalization has considerable importance in Appadurai's body of work, and this issue is well reflected in the novel *Salt and Saffron*. The culinary choices and adjustments made by characters as they navigate the borders of modern society and interact with other cultures reflect the influence of globalization on their identities. The phenomenon of food products, recipes, and culinary abilities migrating across borders and cultures leads to their subsequent modification and incorporation within local contexts (Straczuk, 2022, p. 582-603).

4. Analysis

4.1 Food, Fusion and Evolving Self

Aliya, the protagonist's openness to new experiences is symbolized by her inclination, as well as her aspiration, to reconcile the disparity between her South Asian heritage and the Western influences she meets, "during a game of hide-and-seek, where curiosity taught me the taste of beer and my father, on finding me, taught me the meaning of backwash" (Shamsie, 2000, p.7)

Aliya's cousins, Samia and Sameer can also be cited as an example here, who have evolved themselves to adjust in the Western culture. Samia has adopted some traits in her personality but yet she has her roots back to her native culture. Sometimes she behaves in a way that misfit the situation, but even then, she has molded herself into Western style. Such fusion can be seen through her culinary practices, "Samia, it appeared, had become one of those desis who drink Pepsi in Pakistan and lassi in London" (Shamsie, 2000, p.9).

4.2 Gastropolitics – Food as a Cultural System

Arjun Appadurai opines that food has the capacity to mobilize strong emotions, therefore it plays vital role in social organization because food is a cultural system; a system of symbols, categories and meaning. The semiotic properties of food can homogenize the actors who transact in it or it can serve to heterogenize them. The gastropolitics is the conflict or competition over cultural or economic resources as it emerges in social transactions around food.(Appadurai, 1981, p. 494-495) The novel *Salt and Saffron* is rich regarding such references where food homogenizes characters as well as heterogenizes them on the basis of cultural similarity or conflict. In chapter twelve of the novel, Aliya is having meal with the family sitting with her parents and unconsciously she dips her sleeves into haleem. This act is quite symbolic, with reference to South Asian diasporic fiction, as this denotes that Aliya owns her native culture and civilization since haleem is the native food of subcontinent. Aliya receives that culture from her mother who is very happy for her to own it and she expresses it in the following way, “and don't dip your sleeve in the haleem.’ ‘It's my sleeve,’ was all I could say. ‘No, Aliya, it's mine. But it looks a lot better on you so you can have it.’” (Shamsie, 2000, p.129).

4.3 Culinary Nostalgia

Culinary habits in diaspora are linked with persons or events in the past. Such activities take the characters back to past which results in nostalgia. Such commemorative acts are constant source of emotional pain and suffering which results in constant battling while adjusting in the community. There are various references to culinary activities in the novel which are linked with nostalgic feelings. The protagonist Aliya is in her flat with her cousin Samia talking to each other regarding their past. Meanwhile Samia rests her head against Aliya's back, the contemporary Indian cultural act, she remembers the past using food as a medium, “Samia lay down and rested her head against my back. More than anything else, more than mangoes, gol guppas, nihari and naans” (Shamsie, 2000, p.17)

During Aliya's discussion with Samia in her flat in UK, there comes the name of Friday nights and Aliya remembers the past events, cooking of their cook Masood and becomes nostalgic, “Friday used to be Masood's day off. He'd cycle out at sunrise and be gone all day, leaving Ami, Aba, Mariam Apa and me to lay tables, was dishes, heat up frozen food. More often than not, at lunchtime, Mariam Apa would end up eating last night's leftovers and Ana would drive me to the bazaar where we'd buy aloo puri with carrot pickles and halva on the side to sweeten our mouths” (Shamsie,2000, p.26. In chapter six of the novel, Aliya has an interaction with Rehana Apa who takes her out in England where Aliya expresses her nostalgic condition first by telling about college days in America which has been empty spaces for her and then she talks vaguely about England. Both of the cultures are far apart from her native one so she misses her days back to society to which she belonged. She is misfit in the diasporic culture and while talking about doughnut shop she expresses nostalgia, “I don't really want a doughnut, I said. I put on best academic voice. The word “doughnut” is a sign, the visual image of the doughnut is the signifier and a nostalgia for another life is the signified” (Shamsie, 2000, p.56).

4.4 Culinary Nationalism

By using Anita Mannur's theoretical framework, this analysis delves into semiotics of food as a link to what she calls Culinary Nationalism. This portion of analysis links culinary symbols with race and ethnicity. The protagonist of the novel, Aliya, is called by the nick-name of 'Aloo' the Indian name of potato which is mainly a vegetable of the native place of her. This shows that the character is being linked with the local food item and it is connected to nationalism. Symbolically the character's national identity is being shown and its roots to the cultural heritage. The association of the character with the local food item illustrates that character is linked with the native culture, norms and traditions. Not only the protagonist, Aliya but other characters of the novel are also linked with the local food items. By using such names the writer portrays the concept of culinary nationalism. In chapter one of the novel, when Samia and Aliya are sitting in a flat in England where Samia calls her Aloo, “because Samia said, ‘Look, Aloo, I know this has always been your home away from,’” (Shamsie, 2000, p.10). In chapter three of the, putting the edibles together to make sandwich, there is discussion between Samia and Aliya about imli, the Tamarind. Aliya then remembers the past event of her grandfather Taimoor of asserting Nationalistic approach and calls himself Taimoor Hind. Aliya correlates Tamarind with Taimoor Hind and recalls a letter written by him, “imli was tamarind. It was several days later that I thought, Sounds a little like Taimoor Hind” (Shamsie, 2000, p.27).

4.5 'Salt' and 'Saffron' as Motifs

'Salt' and 'Saffron' has been used as motifs in the novel *Salt and Saffron*. The salt represents native culture;

Pakistani culture, norms and tradition while the saffron denotes English culture; the culture which they refer to as civilized and prospering. The culinary discourse within the text of the novel suggests that some characters assert their identity in term of 'saffron' and remain progressive and self-assertive. Some characters show the characteristics of salt by sticking to native culture, social norms and traditions. Yet the other are the mixture of both i.e. showing their affinity toward origin along with their progressive behavior.

Mariam Apa displays progressive attitude by asserting herself against the contemporary laws and principles of Dard-e-Dil nawab family. Despite of being part of nawab family, she is associated with Masood who is the family cook. Mariam Apa is affiliated to him because of meals and the way he cooks them, '*hath mein maza hai*'. Her character is associated with a hibiscus tree, in front of family kitchen with its branches extended toward the window of dining room. Hibiscus in Asia serves as the symbol of beauty, femininity and young love and since the love knows no boundary so we can see in the novel that Mariam has set herself free from the ties of contemporary laws and principles of the Dard-e-Dil family. Similarly 'saffron' is the motif used in the novel for progressiveness and self-assertion. Therefore, she has been doing transactions around saffron, showing her progressive behavior, asserting herself and showing the characteristics of 'saffron', "If Mariam Apa were ever to send me a message it would be wordless. A strain of music pushing open my window and creeping through; a fistful of saffron sprinkling over my eyelids while I slept" (Shamsie, 2000, p.138).

Like Mariam, Masood exhibits progressive behaviour. He stresses the importance of accepting change but not at the cost of losing originality. His personality is the mixture of both salt and saffron. He asserts that one must prosper but this prosperity should not be at the cost of originality, "Masood loved saffron, but when he spoke about food in terms of devotion he referred back to that déclassé seasoning. 'I believe in God because all of science can never explain the miracle of salt'" (Shamsie, 2000, p.188).

Aliya's grandmother, Abida Dadi has the characteristics of salt. She is confined to the set norms and tradition of the contemporary society. Taimoor and Abida Dadi loved each other but their parents engaged her with Akbar, Taimoor's brother.

Khaleel adheres himself to Pakistani norms and tradition and is symbolic of salt. In Western setting, in the novel, his actions are very simple and traditional. At Dard-e-Dil house, he behaves traditionally and his conduct grabs everyone's attention. His roots are deep into his own culture. Aliya, who is progressive but also tradition lover, has affinity toward Khaleel just because of his traditional behavior, "I imagined Khaleel before me, laughing. 'Salt?' How déclassé. I'd have thought you'd season your metaphors with nothing less than saffron." (Shamsie, 2000, p.188).

Aliya supports the idea that there should be harmony between ancestry and progressiveness. In the last chapter of the novel she elegantly describes her point of view in term of food served when Khaleel comes to visit Dard-e-Dil family. The meal served there was perfectly cooked just like it was a perfect idea to present Khaleel to entire family to be judged before marriage. Aliya proclaims that if she is in love with Khaleel, she should pursue, but some norms and traditions must be followed. This harmony not only brings happiness to everyone but also it helps to avoid chaos in person's own state of mind. This synchronization of thinking balances the affairs and brings coherence, "What can I say about the food? That nothing had ever tasted better. That words reveal their inadequacy every time I try to describe it... but also the flavours the food reminded us of and the flavours the food remembered" (Shamsie, 2000, p. 249-250).

5. Conclusion

Keeping in view the textual analysis of the novel *Salt and Saffron* by Kamila Shamsie in chapter-4 of the article, I conclude that the food has capability to mobilize strong emotions in South Asian diasporic fiction. It is not mere a cuisine to use but a system of symbols, categories and meaning creating a nuance in its interpretation. Our selection of particular food is connected to our inclination toward the past events or the persons linked with that particular food or with the activity of creating it. In diverse location of diaspora, the process of recreating such culinary activity is linked with emotions and routing memories linked with that foodstuff or the process of making it which gives rise to Culinary Nostalgia. '*The desire to remember home by fondly recreating culinary activity*' must be read as a commentary on persons' state when they are living in diverse location and constantly battling with the routing memories and nostalgia through that culinary activity. Characters opt the particular food with inclination toward their cultural heritage, norms and traditions in diasporic location with a sense of pride over it. Therefore, their preferences regarding food are linked with attachment to native land which is Culinary Nationalism. I conclude that in South Asian diasporic fiction, food is linked with the concept of Culinary Nostalgia and Culinary Nationalism

with a diverse set of symbols, meaning and interpretation.

The research questions have been resolved through the textual analysis of Kamila Shamsie's *Salt and Saffron*. The first question aims at the exploration of the insights that food offer to represent nostalgia in the selected text. Shamsie has depicted nostalgia through food at various occasions in her discourse. In diasporic setting, the obvious result of culinary activity is nostalgia as the characters feel home sickness while the process of recreating food they like and which is linked with native land. Therefore, food and its preparation bring back memories, both personal and familial as Arjun Appadurai suggests that food stores personal and community memories, reflecting identities and associations. Anita Mannur also suggests that distinct cultural groups, while their transaction around food, express themselves via autonomy and adherence giving rise to Culinary Nostalgia.

The second question focuses Shamsie's depiction of characters' inhibition of different diasporic locations while constantly battling the implications of routing memory and nostalgia through one's relationship to culinary practice. I have found in the analysis of the novel that characters are living in the diaspora but they are constantly battling with the routing memories and nostalgia. Although they try hard to adjust in western setting but through their culinary actions characters provide symbols and markers linked with past memories. Food and culinary skills migrate across the civilizations and adapt to local situations. *Salt and Saffron* offers culinary discourse where food expresses ethnic identity, preserves memories, navigates intergenerational relationship, fosters social ties, and responds to globalization. In western setting the characters assert their national identities by opting native food and the traditional way to cook it.

To sum up, in *Salt and Saffron*, Kamila Shamsie has depicted characters in the way that the characters' culinary practices become a way to bridge the gap between the idealized homeland of memory and the reality of their diasporic existence.

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