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**Between Bloodlines and Boundaries: A Study of Exclusion and Resistance in  
Shamsie's *Salt and Saffron***

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**Abstract**

This research attempts at a close textual analysis of Kamila Shamsie's *Salt and Saffron* through Mary Douglas's lens of 'purity and danger'. Shamsie's narrative is based on an aristocratic family Dard-e-Dil which upholds its tradition, honour and rituals very high as a moral code. The family disowns anyone disregarding these rituals or social orders which creates social exclusion. This study examines how the Dard-e-Dil family protects its social status by managing stories as myths and controlling relationships. It discusses the family's social distancing from "lower" classes to maintain superiority in the system and to explore how silence, selective memory, and class distinctions are used to guard family tradition and reputation. Aliya, the protagonist stands against this concept of so-called purity and nobility, and hence rejects the idea of social exclusion by marrying Khalid, a man of humble background.

**Keywords:** Danger, Nobility, Purity, Rituals, Social order, Social Exclusion

**Introduction**

This research attempts at a close textual reading of Kamila Shamsie's *Salt and Saffron* through Mary Douglas lens of purity and danger. The novel subject to discussion is a story that weaves personal identity, cultural heritage, and family legacy into an engaging narrative. The story is set between Karachi and the US. with Aliya as the protagonist. She belongs to an eccentric family Dard-e-Dil. As she navigates her return to Pakistan after studying abroad, Aliya is drawn into the myths and secret stories of her family. While Aliya explores the family history, the reader examines the impact of partition, diaspora, and intergenerational memory on identity.

The story revolves around the protagonist Aliya, her Dadi, her family heritage and the complexities in her lineage. With a mix of humour, introspection, and cultural critique, Shamsie constructs a narrative that is not only deeply rooted in Pakistani tradition, but also acutely aware of the global and modern experience. Hence, this novel is the story of Aliya's self-discovery, along with an exploration of one's language, history, myths and lineage.

These thematic patterns can be best understood with the theory by Mary Douglas. She in her foundational text, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (1996), explores how different societies construct ideas of purity and pollution. The book reveals the symbolic relevance of these ideas and concepts without aligning these to the physical cleanliness and hygiene. It shows how social order, cultural traditions and social boundaries are polluted by violation of social codes and norms.

Douglas argues that what a society considers "dirty" or "impure" often reflects its need to organize the world into clear categories. When something does not fit neatly into a category—when it is "matter out of place"—it becomes taboo or polluting. Hence, according to Douglas, 'dirt' or 'pollution' are not objective substance, but relative concepts. What is considered dangerous or impure in one culture may be entirely acceptable in another. Thus, she challenges the notion of universality in such concepts and emphasizes the cultural context. By linking symbolic meanings to social structures, Douglas's work laid the groundwork for later developments in structuralism, post-structuralism, and cultural theory.

The current study analyses *Salt and Saffron* through Douglas's lens and explores the symbolic relevance of the important concepts like purity, shame and honour with respect to cultural context of the novel.

## **Research Objectives**

Following are the research objectives;

1. To analyze how Douglas's notions of purity and danger are used to construct social exclusion and class distinction within the Dard-e-Dil family in *Salt and Saffron*
2. To explore how Aliya challenges the traditional notions of purity, family honour and shame, class distinction through her personal choices and relationships

## **Research Questions**

The corresponding questions of this research are as follows;

1. How does the Dard-e-Dil family in *Salt and Saffron* employ the concepts of purity and danger to justify social exclusion and to maintain their hierarchy?
2. In what ways Aliya's personal relationships and preferences challenge the Dard-e-Dil family's ideals of honour, shame, purity, and class distinction?

## **Theoretical Framework**

This research adopts Mary Douglas's concepts of purity, danger, social order and cultural hierarchy in order to explore Shamsie's *Salt and Saffron*. Douglas in her book, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (1996), writes that the ideas concerning purity and pollution are not necessarily about cleanliness and hygiene, but about the social order and cultural boundaries that people follow in a certain society. She says, "Dirt is matter out of place", 'impure' is whatever threatens our social or cultural order (Douglas 2-5). Dirt, according to her is anything that defies the established social norms. It is the context, not the object, that defines purity or pollution. Different societies have established norms, rituals, taboos and social categorization, through which these societies maintain their order and prevent the processes of mixing of classification or violation of social boundaries. According to Douglas, violation of boundaries creates fear and shame, and in different societies, there are rituals to symbolically 'cleanse' what is considered to be polluted (4-5).

Douglas states that "pollution rules are used to express danger to social order (6)", hence pollution is symbolic, not hygienic. She argues that what different cultures consider dirty, is actually symbolic of what these cultures find socially dangerous or taboo, such as, women rights, death rituals, sex outside marriage, inter-caste or inter-class relationships, or love marriage etc. Therefore, societies create rules and laws about purity, such as laws about food, marriage, relationships, gender roles, class system). This is done in order to maintain a sense of a system in the society. When someone attempts to break these rules, or violate these boundaries, they are seen as threat to the peace of the society because they try to unravel the structure. "Ideas about separating, purifying, demarcating and punishing transgressions have as their main function to impose system on an inherently untidy experience (Douglas 17)". For Douglas, "unclean is unclear", ambiguous people and behaviours do not fit into the neat categories. Such objects become objects of fear or ambiguity, such as people with hybrid identity, social rebels, people who defy norms.

Her ideas and concepts are very relevant in studying Shamsie's *Salt and Saffron*. In the novel, Dard-e-Dil family collectively acts as an aristocratic family having high standards and ideals of purity. The family members consider the idea of mixing other families with their bloodline as 'dangerous', and therefore, avoid marriages outside the family. Through this practice of social exclusion, the family avoids the danger of polluting their pure bloodline and cultural heritage. Whereas, Aliya's character in the novel, stands against these norms and challenges the ideas of social exclusion and cultural hierarchy, thus challenging Douglas's ideas.

Hence, Mariam and Aliya are both considered to be threats to the social codes of Dard-e-Dil family because both attempt at defying the norms. Mariam is seen as 'pollution' to the aristocratic family because she marries a cook, Masood, crossing the class boundary. The family sees this as polluting their bloodline. "Dadi walked in and called her a whore (Shamsie 86)". This shows how breaking the class barriers for love, is seen as immoral and impure. Aliya also brings ambiguity to the class system. But she rejects the Douglas style purity system enforced by the Dard-e-Dil family.

## **Text Analysis**

Shamsie's *Salt and Saffron* concerns itself deeply with the themes of family, memory, class and migration. These are the concepts that over the human history, have been linked to creating boundaries. For example, these ideas create boundaries such as who belongs where, and who does not belong. In the novel, protagonist and narrator Aliya continuously resists the differences between 'real' family members and the 'not-quite' real ones. The 'not-quite' relatives are of lower status and are not considered one with her aristocratic family 'Dard-e-Dil'. The following lines spoken by Aliya in the opening chapter of the novel reveal how the family considers "not-quite twins",

All right, don't scoff, mock or disbelieve: we live in mortal fear of not-quite-twins. ... Not-quite-twins are not-quite-twins; no way around that. ... Oh, they may escape undetected for a time, but ultimately, they are incapable of disguise, incapable of escaping the category into which they are born, incapable of causing our family anything but pain. I know. I've read the histories (Shamsie 13).

This sets the tone of the novel about family mythology and social order, and mirrors Douglas's concept of pollution as boundary confusion, as the 'not-quite' relatives are a 'socially ambiguous category'. Their presence and involvement disturb the purity of Dard-e-Dil family legacy, and violates their aristocratic lineage. Aliya's relatives do not treat them as one, and the mere presence of these relatives is a kind of 'social contamination' which pollutes the whole narrative of their nobility. An old aunt in the family reflects the whole family's attitude towards Mariam's elopement by saying, "Well, I think this is as good a time as any to say it ... if anyone mentions Mariam, they're to say she is no relation to them (Shamsie 184)." This also reveals the family's active denial of Mariam's place in the lineage and it is a clear sign of her social exclusion.

Similarly, Dard-e-Dil family is obsessed with their noble bloodline, their concept of honour and shame, and arrangement of their marriages. Dadi in a very charged moment, while recalling meeting her daughter, says, "Blood is thicker than time, blood is thicker (Shamsie 40)." This sentence from the novel vividly reveals the family's fixation on nobility, pure bloodlines and arranged marriages to preserve their hierarchy. This also reflects Douglas's ideas of 'ritual purity' which means marrying outside one's class is not allowed. This act is considered as shameful and is supposed to bring dishonour to the aristocratic family, and pollute their pure bloodline. In the novel, Aliya's aunt Mariam marries the cook of the family (Shamsie 71), and this is considered as a shameful act, "her suitcase was gone, and a photostat of a wedding license was on her bed (Shamsie 109)." This is parallel to the concept of fear and shame, which a family faces through boundary-violation. Mariam's marriage becomes a scandal for the whole family; however, her husband is not a bad man, but he is considered as the wrong one by her family. Hence, he, being the 'wrong kind' becomes the "pollutant" who brings disgrace ("dirt") to the family's social order.

Moreover, the distinction of the aristocratic family is restricted not only to bloodlines and rituals, but also, is seen in their food preferences. The family's culinary preferences are marked by picking dishes like *korma*, *pulao*, and *achaar gosht* etc. It reflects their cultural heritage on one hand, but on the other, it shows their rigid social hierarchies that define their world. In this regard, the title of the novel, *Salt and Saffron* reveals the distinct tastes, flavours that represent culture and tradition, along with difference and hybridity. Saffron is a symbol of elite food item

and a reflection of refined taste, hence a refined identity. In the title of the novel, it is set against Salt, an everyday food item/ spice, a universally used object without any distinctive nature. The choice of the title by Shamsie also highlights Douglas's ideas of binary opposition such as purity/impurity, elite/common, and sacred/profane. The Dard-e-Dil family attempts to maintain its aristocratic identity just like saffron, but the commonality and hybridity attempt to ruin their purity just like salt. Salt symbolically represents Khaleel who is studying in America but he belongs from middle class area of Karachi. Saffron, however, symbolically represents Aliya, because she belongs to elite class.

Moreover, the elder family members in the novel, like Dadi are very much against hybridity because they consider it dangerous and manipulative. Aliya, however, is a hybrid, a Pakistani born, raised abroad. She represents the juxtaposition between tradition and modernity, and East and West. Her hybrid identity places her in the liminal space, the 'in-betweenness', which is termed by Douglas as ambiguous and therefore, 'dangerous'. Aliya's tilted attitude towards West, her relationship with a man from a non-aristocratic family threatens her family's traditional boundaries of culture, class, honour and shame.

Consequently, this concept of shame is linked to the concept of violation of social order. When any character in the novel violates the social norms and class distinction, by eloping or marrying out of the family, the family's response is social exclusion. Dard-e-Dil family avoids open conflict, but prefers silent exclusion. Douglas calls this 'ritual exclusion', and refers to removing the element that pollutes in order to restore purity. Here honour and shame functions as a manner of purification. By excluding the corrupt family member and severing all ties with him/ her, the family preserves its honour, reputation and social order. The same is seen in the novel under discussion.

Aliya is the only character in the novel, who moves from upholding the family's traditions to breaking the chain. She is seen in the beginning of the novel as the character who upholds and validates her family's myths and stories of their nobility, grandiosity, pure ancestral history, and the scandal of "not-quite twins". In Douglas's idea, Aliya adopts the family's beliefs about social constructions, rituals, boundaries, and honour. Slowly and gradually, with the course of the novel, she starts questioning these very ideas and soon she realizes that the ideal family narrative of Dard-e-Dil is based on pride, vanity, social exclusion and dishonesty. She understands with the passage of time that Dard-e-Dil is as noble as any other family in the town, and that her family upholds its traditions only to shame and marginalize others. Aliya shows her critical stance towards her family's rigid values by saying, "I've deconstructed it, analysed it, and I have refused to take on the attitude of my relatives with their centuries of in-bred snobbery (Shamsie 70)."

Aliya, while considering her relationship with Khaleel, recognizes the pressure of the family tradition, but starts to consider a different path;

...with a choice far less shocking than hers, yet also more significant for its refusal to walk a path far removed? Or were we, was I, in a position to show the others that not-quites were not necessarily harbingers of doom?... This, then, was Mariam's farewell gift to me: the courage to take Khaleel's hand in mine and say to my parents, say to Dadi, say

to Sameer and Samia ... Just because a thing has always been so, it does not always have to be so (Shamsie 17).

This clearly shows how Aliya moves from accepting the tradition towards rejecting it. She even confronts Dadi, while defending Mariam's actions. When Mariam is excluded from the family, Aliya feels isolated, and decides to go back to her college in the US, instead of staying with her family. This decision also demonstrates her refusal to stay within the family's suffocating traditions.

A very good example here is served by Mariam's character. She represents a very good symbol of resistance and rebellion against the strict social codes of her family. She is married to her love and is in a pure bond, but is still considered as one who brought shame and disgrace to the family just because she is married to someone from lower strata of society and outside the family. Masood is a cook of Dard-e-Dil family, and Mariam's marriage to him is viewed as scandalous. "Mariam ran away with Masood, the cook", this sentence is repeated on many occasions in the story with disgust, especially when Aliya returns to Karachi and starts to know about her family. Mariam, in Douglas's words has disrupted the illusion of purity of her family by marrying someone 'dirty'. This shows Douglas's concept that purity systems are not based on facts but are symbolic in nature. People maintain their power by creating a binary, "dirty" other. Mariam's actions deeply impact Aliya and play a significant role in Aliya's later rejection of her family's rituals of honour and shame.

As soon as Aliya understands this, she starts to deconstruct her family's narrative of purity, considering it as a social norm created only to protect their so-called honour at any cost. Aliya's relationship with Khalid (a person from humble background and mixed identity) is the key to Aliya's growth. In the initial days of her relationship, she feels ashamed of Khalid's background, even his accent (a reflection of Douglas's 'internalized classism' and 'fear of social pollution'). Towards the end of the novel, she realizes her mistake and chooses love over aristocratic lineage. This represents a direct refusal and reversal of the honour-shame logic, where it is believed that crossing boundaries will pollute. Aliya reframes her hybridity as her strength, not as her weakness or disgrace. Aliya says later in the novel; "this, then, was Mariam's farewell gift to me: the courage to take Khaleel's hand in mine... just because a thing has always been so, it does not always have to be so (Shamsie 17)."

Thus, Aliya's character challenges Douglas's idea that societies need strict categories. Aliya rejects her family's obsession with categorization and classification of society. She even attempts at re connecting with her relatives who are excluded from the family. She breaks the silence and realizes that this silence has kept those relatives marginalized. According to her, it is a moral act to resolve the issues with relatives, instead of shaming them or avoiding them. She restores humanity by reframing the idea of taboo in her family.

## Conclusion

After analyzing the text of *Salt and Saffron*, it is concluded that according to Douglas's theory, societies maintain order through taboos and purity system, and the novel under discussion represents one such family Dard-e-Dil. The family members believe in noble bloodlines, class

status, and sharply defined boundaries defined by myths and exclusivity. While Mariam suffers due to the strict social order of the family, Shamsie presents Aliya, the protagonist of the novel, who sees the cost of such systems. She makes the readers understand that Douglas's 'dirt' is merely the concept of misused power.

Hence, Marriam's marriage to Masood is not just a personal decision out of love, but a break in the generational hierarchy and classist thinking of the family. Her decision empowers Aliya to choose Khaleel for herself. Khaleel does not come from the same upper class and noble background as hers and does not meet the family's expectations, but represents Aliya's happiness and love. This is how Aliya redraws her boundaries and makes space for love, hybridity and truth. She challenges social hierarchy of her family through her innate decency and redefines honour through empathy and inclusion.

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