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Construction of Cultural Identity through Language: *A Study of 'Salt and Saffron'*

Abstract:

Most representations of culture are done through literature which tells the readers about the lives of the people of a given culture. This article explores how the English novel Salt and Saffron, written by Kamla Shamsie, a writer of Pakistani origin, constructs the cultural identity of Pakistani characters in the novel. As the novel revolves around a Pakistani family, the culture-related words, as well as themes, are inevitably present, and the article, through content analysis, highlights how these cultural themes have been discussed by the writer with the effective use of code-switching and how this discussion has led to the presentation of a unique Pakistani cultural identity.

Key Words:

Language, Culture, Representation

Introduction

The literature identifies culture, ethnicity and social milieu. Works of literature not only reveal a culture but also exhibit an essential link between language and culture. This article explores how *Salt and Saffron*, a novel by Kamila Shamsie, who is an English writer of Pakistani origin, represents Pakistani culture and constructs Pakistani cultural identity by mirroring the life of its characters as it unveils their beliefs, customs and ways of living.

Language operates in a society with all its colours and shades depicting a particular ethnicity. Lion (1981) cites Bloch & Trager (1942), who term language as “a system of arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which a social group co-operates” (p. 04). In the words of Hall (1974), language is “the institution whereby humans communicate and interact with each other by means of habitually used oral or auditory symbols” (p. 158). Both these definitions lay a particular emphasis on language being a way for interaction in a society. Language provides humans a chance to communicate, interact, co-operate, and mix up with the members of the society and they use it as a tool to perform all these social functions effectively and form a strong

relationship. In the social context, man uses language as discourse and establishes a set of values, lifestyle, beliefs and so on, which form a particular culture of that society.

Humans are social entities due to their nature of forming close social ties with other members, and this nature of theirs is unlike other beings around. Different cultures emerge due to that fact that social realities vary from one society to the other. Although some realities are same for all societies, such as progression of life and inevitability of death, yet there are so many other realities that vary, depending on the resources available to people, their habits, the area they live in, whether they have around them, race, religion, the colour of skin and so on. Expression of these different realities causes the emergence of unique varieties of language that have the ability to stand alone as varieties due to their peculiarities in terms of lexemes or vocabulary, syntax and so on, and the different sets of moral values, social and religious beliefs, superstitions etc. are some of the major factors causing this variation in languages. Man is able to form a set of social, racial and religious values which become the ‘culture’ of the society, and on the basis of these values, one can distinguish culture from other

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cultures. Merriam Webster Collegiate Dictionary defines culture as “the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious or social group”. This discussion shows how language plays a vital role in the formation of a culture of a particular society and how that culture is reflected through language, and this is evidence of one affecting the other.

Shades of language emancipation from various shades of social life assign an identity to speakers of that language. Pakistani English has been established as a variety due to its unique taste, different vocabulary and overall expression, and all this change is a result of the fact that, like each culture, Pakistani society has its unique way of living, set of social values, beliefs, and the language that expresses this unique lifestyle is bound to be different from other varieties of language. This uniqueness of the English language spoken by Pakistanis is what assigns them a distinct identity.

Salt and Saffron is an engaging narrative of a Pakistani family living in the United States of America which is conscious of their cultural identity and reflects as well as represent their identity through their use of the English language, which is full of local references. Despite being out of the country of their origin, the characters of the story are strongly connected to their cultural roots. The cultural identity of the family is reflected in their use of language which makes use of cultural references, and these references make the text unique.

Objective

The objectives of the present study are:

1. To highlight that language and culture are naturally and intrinsically intertwined
2. To demonstrate cultural representations in Kamila Shamsie’s novel ‘Salt and Saffron’

Research Questions

The questions this study aims to explore are:

1. How far does Pakistani English used in Salt and Saffron contribute to portraying true Pakistani culture?
2. Is Kamila’s Shamsie’s novel Salt and Saffron a good representation of Pakistani culture?

Literature Review

Language, Society and Culture

Franz Boas in [Stockings \(1966: p. 868\)](#) has noted, there is a direct and very intimate link between language and culture, and if one wants to study a culture, it may not be possible without access to the language of that culture. Similarly, the study of language also requires that culture is studied alongside, too, in order to know the ecology that that language operates in, as the same ecology changes the very contour of the language. Before we plunged deeper into the discussion, it would not be inappropriate to discuss what we actually mean by the term ‘culture’. It normally includes our way of life, thought patterns, language, religion, social values, and patterns of interaction. Let’s have a look at definitions of the term “culture”.

The word culture has been defined by [Williams \(1976\)](#) as (i) “a general process of intellectual, spiritual, and aesthetic development, (ii) “a particular way of life of either a people, a period, or a group” (iii) or “the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity” (p. 27). Next, we need to understand why there is a need to take language as a part of the culture. This point can be understood better by the fact that man being a social animal, needs to have social interaction with other members of the society and needs to cooperate in order to facilitate his own survival and the survival of other members of his human community. For mutual cooperation, he needs to communicate with them through language. And since language is used in society, it is essentially influenced by the way people live in that society. As [Tannen \(1994: 343\)](#) suggests, “Language and culture are intertwined in complex ways”, and this is so much true that some anthropologists call language and culture one and the same thing. Tannen further suggests that the meaning of utterances come

not only from the words spoken but also from the culturally-agreed-upon conventions for how those words are used and interpreted, as well as from how they have been used in the past within the given culture (p. 343).

Culture and Cognition

The social learning skills are clearly distinctive features of humans, and they separate them from their relative primates. Man is not only more adaptable to culture but also takes most of his learning from cultural institutions considering himself a part of it and recognizing other members of the society as the agent of cultural identity. About human cognition, mainly two theories have emerged. The nativists, the theorists who are in favour of the biological side of cognitive development, state that organic evolution has blessed the human mind with certain domains of knowledge such as language, mathematics, biology and psychology. They characterize these domains of knowledge as “innate”. The second group believes that human cognitive development is more due to culture than innate knowledge. According to the [Tomesollo \(2000\)](#):

human children grow into cognitively competent adults in the context of a structured social world full of material and symbolic artefacts such as tools and language, structured social interactions such as rituals and games, and cultural institutions such as families and religions. (p. 37)

This is to say that culture does not only facilitate or motivate learning; it is a unique “ontogenetic niche (i.e., a unique context for development) that actually structures human cognition in fundamental ways” ([Tomesollo \(2000: 37\)](#)). This means that the role of culture in the formation and development of language is of very basic importance, and it not only provides the atmosphere in which to use the language but also affects the way it is to be used. The cultural and social institutions such as families, religion, ethnicity and various other groups have a significant effect on the learning of language if language is to be taken as a tool. Humans learn the strategies of how to use the tools of communication by copying other fellow beings. Human learning is imitative, as they are able to learn the precise technique of using the tool as demonstrated to them. This is clear enough proof of their being social and cultural beings.

Cultural Differences and their Impact on Language

Since language is essentially a cultural practice, every culture provides specific conventions of use of language to its users, and hence there are likely to be as many differences in the conventions of use of language as there are among cultures. When speakers of different languages come across each other and try to communicate in a foreign language, it is very natural that they may also be unaware of the conventions of use of that language, how the language is to be used to give a specific meaning. It is the culturally influenced aspects of communication that “can cause miscommunication or misjudgment of intentions and abilities” (Tennan, 1994: 343). It is not only the members of different countries and speakers of different languages that have different concepts regarding the way a language is to be used, but even the members of the same country may also have “different assumption about what to say and how to say it, depending upon their ethnic and class background, geographic region, gender and other influences” (p. 345). Tennan (1994) further elaborates the issue of why cultural understanding or the lack of it plays a role in successful communication or otherwise and opines that when we try to communicate to others, we make certain linguistic choices. These linguistic choices differ from culture to culture, society to society and country to country. In cross-cultural communication, one must make appropriate linguistic choices that do not come into clash with the culture of the person with whom we intend to interact. In other words, since the linguistic choices with regard to the use of intonation, turn-taking and selection of topic etc. are different from one culture to the other, one must understand how to make appropriate

linguistic choices if successful communication is to be achieved.

The impact of culture in *Pakistanized* English is visible in the use of linguistic features as cultural representations in the writings of Pakistani writers such as Kamila Shamsie. These representations are, in their

essence, different in the sense that they highlight Pakistani cultural themes such as status consciousness of the feudal elite, social norms that must be adhered to, norms of decency and civilization, which are essential of a certain class that consider itself better, or superior to the other social classes in society. These cultural underpinnings help us recognize a variety of languages as different from other varieties of the same language, and it is the special linguistic features of that variety that make it stand out and establish its identity among the other varieties.

Research Methodology

This article is qualitative research that deals with identity construction through the use of culture-specific words as well as themes. It does not count the words but discusses the cultural contexts of the representative words and their related cultural themes.

Method

The study carries out a qualitative content analysis of the novel *Salt and Saffron*. It focuses on words related to culture and the cultural themes discussed in the novel by the writer, or the ones that come up as a result of the discussion of various characters in the novel. The analysis aims to highlight features of Pakistani English as a variety that leads to the construction of Pakistani identity. The theoretical support to establishing Pakistani identity is provided by the models, which highlight features of South Asian English which include Indian and Pakistani Englishes. These characteristic features of South Asian English have been highlighted by Kachru (1983), [Baumgardener, Kennedy, and Shamim \(1993\)](#), [Chelliah \(2006\)](#), Muthia (2009), and so on. It is pertinent to highlight here that a full-scale study of the distinctive features of South African English or Pakistani English might require a full-fledged doctoral thesis or more; therefore, the present study has focused only on the discussion of cultural themes in the novel, borrowing of Urdu terms to convey cultural meanings, which may also be explained as ‘transfer of lexical items of Urdu into English’.

Content

The content for this research is English novels written by English writers of Pakistani origins. These writers mostly live in western countries such as the USA, UK etc., and they write for Pakistani and foreign audiences and highlight various social and cultural issues of Pakistani society in their writings. The sample selected for this research is the novel “*Salt and Saffron*” by Kamila [Shamsie \(1973\)](#), a renowned Pakistani English novel writer. It has been selected as it is one of the best novels reflecting on Pakistani society, its unique features, interesting cultural themes, and makes use of culture-specific terms which would not be considered a part of the English language.

It consists of instances of the use of special lexical features, i.e. culture-specific vocabulary in the selected text, i.e. *Salt and Saffron*. The instances of the use of cultural words in the text have been explained with reference to the cultural context of each item.

Theoretical Framework: Sapir-Whorf hypothesis

According to the Behaviourist view, our view of the world or ‘thought’ is fully determined by the language we speak. This contention is best explained by Sapir and Whorf, who presented a hypothesis about the relation between language and thought. This hypothesis is primarily based on two associated principles: i. linguistic determinism, the view that language determines our thoughts of the world, and ii, linguistic relativity, which means that “people who speak different languages perceive and think about the world quite differently” ([Chandler, 2010](#)). They contended that our view of the world does not come from any other source than language and that language is formed by the society we live in. So our perspective of the world is dependent upon the spectacles of the language that we use. In the word of Sapir (1929):

the 'real world is, to a large extent, unconsciously built upon the language habits of the group. No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality (p. 69).

Sapir (1929) here indicates how two social groups are different and cannot share one language. Since the social reality differs from one place to the other, so does language. And since the language habits of different social groups are different, so is their view of the world. Hence, the members of one society are bound to have a language that is not similar to the language spoken by the members of another society, mainly due to cultural differences. The sub-varieties of English, such as Indian and Pakistani varieties of English, are proof of the fact that the language of each people is different due to the uniqueness of its linguistic features, which make it distinct from other varieties of the same language.

To elaborate the above point, Sapir further suggests that:

The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached... We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation. (Sapir, 1958 [1929]. p. 69)

Thus, the idea can be drawn that different societies are "distinct worlds" mainly because of the different choices of interpretation. Within the limits and boundaries of these choices, we form our perspective of the world, and the use of different forms of language brings about the difference in thoughts.

Analysis

Salt and Saffron: An Introduction

Salt and Saffron is the story of the *Dard-e-Dil* family or aristocratic *nawab* background. Aliya narrates the story. She has learned the art of storytelling from her family. She meets a young man named Khaleel, who comes from a poorer background. Here she thinks of the family values of class-consciousness and then starts investigating the history of her family. In doing so, she becomes aware of the myth of the not-quite-twins and of a certain curse associated with them and knows of a mystery that was associated with Maryam *apa*. In the stories that pass on from generation to generation without a credible recorded evidence but do have an impact on the life of these generations, Aliya finds a way to look into how the lives of her ancestors were spent in the web of social division and later in the light of the same, decided what story her own life is going to be. The story talks about various family concepts that are built on mostly the unreal basis, and in defiance of which some of the family members took some extreme steps. The novel gives a hint of the split caused in Muslim families by the partition between Pakistan and India, though this is not the main subject of the novel.

Culture in "Salt and Saffron"

The very title of the novel is a reference to the tasty foods made tastier by the addition of salt and saffron in Pakistani culture. The novel starts with the mention of *dadi*, a word that is used for grandmother in traditional Pakistani families. Apart from the respect, it invokes in the mind of Pakistani readers for someone older in age, it stands as a symbol of wisdom, affection and love as well as authority, and sometimes of cynicism and conservativeness as well. Hardly ever would these symbolic characteristics be associated with the English word 'grandmother' due to nothing else than the cultural differences between the East and the West. Whereas in the West, the concept of old homes has prevailed over the years and the grandparents have hardly a role to play in family affairs, what to talk of enjoying authority. In Pakistani culture, on the other hand, the joint-family system ensures respect and authority of the elders where the younger ones dare not go against their decisions and must respect their opinion in almost all matters of day to day life. In the very first chapter, where Aaliya mentions her hugging the person who was travelling with her, she says: "what would my grandmother say if she knew I'd been hugging strange men in airports?" (p. 5). This hints at the cultural taboo of hugging strange men and suggests that her grandma would never approve of the idea of hugging strange men at the airport if she happened to learn about it. The readers of a foreign culture may find it difficult to decipher the meaning

of this sentence if they do not know the background of the sentence or the cultural implication of ‘hugging strange men’. The use of culture-specific terms in the novel not only makes reading unique but is also a way of exporting local culture to the foreign reader who would be interested to understand these culture-specific terms and the themes hidden behind them.

The mention of a Rajput princess when talking about Samia’s beauty in that she was abducted by one of her ancestors and thrown in the battlefields in order to seduce the enemy soldiers who, at catching her first glance, would drop their swords and start writing ghazals in her devotion, is a historical reference to the *Dard-e-dil* royal family’s beauty that was exemplary. These examples highlight how cultural themes are embedded in the text and make it unique for the foreign reader as well as interesting for the local reader who would relish the chance of tasting local gravy presented in the bowl of a foreign language.

Cultural Themes and the Issue of their Untranslatability

Salt and Saffron, a novel by Kamila [Shamsie \(1973\)](#), a writer of Pakistani origin, is a good example of traces of culture in language. As has been discussed earlier, language is nothing but a means of communication of a culture, and there are likely to be as many languages or types as there are among different cultures. This novel is unique in its portrayal of Pakistani culture as it talks about various social customs and conventions, and through the effective use of code-switching as a tool for cross-cultural communication, the writer successfully uses language as a vehicle of expression of a culture. Code-switching has been defined as “functionally motivated behavior” (Adendorff, 1996: p. 389). The function performs in this novel is that of communicating cultural aspects of a society in which the novel has been set. The writer finds it difficult to convey the purely culture-specific terms to the other language, that is, English, and uses them as such, in order to convey the untranslatable cultural terms to the English readers, who are the audience of this English novel. The culture-bound meanings and concepts are hard to translate across cultures, and so the writer such as [Shamsie \(1973\)](#), who is writing for the audience of a foreign language and trying to convey his culture to them, has to take help from communicative devices such as code-switching in order to get the message across to the reader effectively. The precise meanings of words or the concepts are not to be carried by the linguistic items or words alone. It is the cultural context that provides meaning to the words. Thus the meaning associated by one culture to a particular word cannot be translated to the language of another culture since its users do not share the cultural conventions and beliefs of the culture where it comes from. In such a situation, if the translation is tried, words may lose their meanings as they are originally meant to mean. They lose their precision and may be confused with other words or maybe taken to mean something else than their real meanings in the native culture.

Code-Switching as a tool for communication

In cross-cultural communication in a bilingual context, code-switching has been used as an effective tool of communication since it tries to bridge the communication gap that is likely to emerge when talking to the speakers who can use both languages, but due to cultural restraints, it may not be possible for them to convey the meaning of certain words or concepts in a foreign language. In such a case, they resort to switching between one language and another, both of which may be understood by the users, but it is likely that they understand one of them better than the other. [Arrifin \(2010\)](#), in his essay “Code-Switching as a Communication device in Conversation,” cites Tay, 1989; Myers-Scotton, 1995, and Adendorff, 1996, who opine that Code Switching “is actually used as a communicative device depending on the switcher’s communicative intents (p. 36).

Code-Switching in *Salt and Saffron*

Intra-sentential and inter-sentential code-switching are evident in the text of the novel at various places. Some of the examples have been discussed in the following lines that explain how culture is to be depicted through the use of various linguistic tools. When talking about her cousin Samia and the **(desi)** type of décor she saw

at her place, she says: “Samia it appeared, had become one of those **desis** who drink Pepsi in Pakistan and **lassi** in London” (p. 7). This refers to the dual nature of the Pakistanis who pretend to love their land when abroad and somehow find themselves obliged to pretend to be modern when in their own country. According to the definition of culture quoted above, it is a way of life of either a people, a group or a period, and this is exactly what has been presented in the above-cited example in which a particular habit of a particular group of a particular people has been presented beautifully through the use of code-mixing. The class presented here has its root in their homeland but live abroad, and they are rather confused about their identity as they keep switching their lifestyles as they switch countries. On page 10, Aliya tells Samia: “**Uff toba**, You’re a historian, not a psychologist, Samo” one can see that the culture-related expression of bizarre feelings “**uff toba**” is used by Shamsie in order to give a sense that Aliya does not quite like the way Samia is asking about her telling the stories. This is a good example of inter-sentential code-switching, which is a tool for effective communication in cross-cultural context.

One instance of code-switching in which terms such as Phuphi and pultan are used is found at page 27 where Shamsie switches between the two languages in the following way:

‘One of the Zaheer’s relatives was over for tea.’ Zainab Phuphi explained to my mother later. ‘And as luck would have it a whole pultan of my relatives landed up as well.....’ (p. 27)

The use of the term *Phuphi* is unique to Pakistani context. It is an equivalent of ‘aunt’ used for one’s father’s sister only. Also, the word carries a special association of affectionate feelings a sister has towards the sons and daughter of her brother (the word ‘nephew’ here would be misleading because it is common for the brother and sister’s children, which is not the case in Urdu, which has ‘bhanja/bhanji’ and ‘bhatija/bhatiji’ for sister and brother’s sons and daughters, respectively). Similarly, in the eastern cultures, the concept of a *pultan* coming to someone’s house is very common as the near relatives feel no hesitation in visiting their close one’s houses and staying there for some days. Also it refers to the large families in which there is no concept of family-planning etc.

Borrowing of Culture related terms

When Samia is having “dance steps” on Aliya’s back, and then when she puts her head on her back, she says: “More than anything else, more than mangoes, *gol gappas, nihari and naans*.....what I missed about Karachi was the intimacy of bodies” (p. 14). Here the readers get to have the glimpse of life of a certain culture and gets to know about common interest of the people of a specific group. In the Asian culture, *gol gappas, nihari and naans* (apparently, the English inflection ‘s’ has been used for the convenience of foreign readers because the plural form of the word ‘naan’ in Urdu is same as singular) are relished for their unique taste, but the narrator says that more than all these fascinating things, what she missed the most was affectionate touch of the family members that is to be found in this particular culture only. This instance of the use of indigenous words in a foreign language is to be taken more as borrowing rather than switching of language since they are the words that are culture-specific, and the foods of such type may not be found in any culture other than the sub-continent’s. The text reads: “Before Ammi could answer, Maryam Apa said, “*Aaaloo ka bhurrtta, achar gosht, pulao, masoor ki daal, kachoomer*”. As one might notice, all these are the terms that are specific for the dishes famous for their unique taste in the Indo-Pak culture. The addition of such words adds flavour to the text because they carry cultural context, which could not have been transported to the foreign reader without the former’s use in the text.

Discussion of themes related to Culture

Members of a society share beliefs and conventions with other members which are considered standard practices. Anyone deviating from these standard practices may be blamed to be a ‘violator’. On page 15, the discussion between Aliya and her dadi (grandmother) is a very interesting example of the way a language carries cultural concepts across to the foreign readers. When Aliya is afraid of the squirrel, her **dadi** rebukes

her and reminds her of the exemplary bravery of her forefathers by saying that: “And to think that you are descended from the Nawab who killed a tiger with his bare hands” (p.15). Here comes the cultural concept of bravery in which the *nawab*s were supposed to be brave enough to face all kinds of odds when they ventured on hunting etc. They were supposed to master all kinds of war-arts, and exhibiting them publicly was considered a sign of bravery and pride. A descendent from such a brave family is not supposed to be afraid of a squirrel.

There is a mention of the wedding where people have been invited to the wedding celebrations. These celebrations of singing on the drum are a specific occasion especially on the girls’ weddings where all girls of close relatives go to the bride’s home at night and sing wedding-songs. These singing competitions start a week or so before the wedding day. Aliya is told that: “Aliya, you should come with us to all the functions, we have been invited to everything____even the small *dholkis*”.

These instances highlight how the novel paints a unique picture of a culture that is entirely different from English culture. The highlighted features make the language of the novel stand out as a different version of English, as it carries so many cultural marks such as unique words and culture-specific themes.

Conclusion

Culture and language are intertwined in very complex ways; each and every word carries certain associations with the culture in which it is being used. The same phenomenon has been observed by this researcher in the “Salt and Saffron” by Kamila Shamsie, in which the writer has tried to portray the Pakistani culture of a certain *nawab* family with the skilful use of language in a way that it is difficult to ignore cultural touch which distinguishes that specific language from the language being used in another part of the country or the world, exhibiting another different culture. The kind of language used in the novel not only portrays Pakistani culture to the foreign audience but also constructs the cultural identity of Pakistanis, who are traditional in their approach to family relations, are loyal to their traditions and customs. Although the new generation may not be as loyal to superstitions and rigid religious beliefs, they are still mindful of what people around them are going to think if they try to breach cultural barriers, and hence seem to be respecting the boundaries set up by their culture.

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