

Analysis of Kamila Shamsie's *Salt and Saffron*: A Postcolonial Discourse of Displacement

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Abstract

Shamsie's novel, Salt and Saffron, is a Postcolonial fictional discourse that revolves around the changes brought in the lives of people as a result of colonization of India. This study explores displacements created as a consequence of colonialism in the light of postcolonial theory of place and displacement by Ashcroft et al. (1990). Textual analysis has been used as a research method to explore how the writer has portrayed the impacts of colonialism on her fictional characters. The study takes into account the psychological and social influence of English education and English ways of living and their impact on identity of the colonized subjects.

Keywords: Post colonialism, displacement, and identity

1. Introduction

The Indian Sub-continent had the British colonial presence from 1700s till 1947 (Butalia, 2003). This subjugation has left lasting impacts on the lives of the people of the sub-continent. These remainders have their traces in the literature created by the native writers in postcolonial era before and after the withdrawal of the colonizers.

Postcolonial Studies has a special interest in dealing with the association of colonialism and its aftermath which has become the central theme of postcolonial literature (Mishrah, 2007). In many cases literature that stems from colonial/postcolonial experience reflects both social and psychological effects (Ashcroft et al, 1995). This paper aims to explore the social and psychological impact of place and displacement created by colonization of India and Pakistan on Shamsie's fictional characters, their experiences of displacement and identity issues like belonging, assimilation, and alienation. Decolonization was a political move that led to social and psychological repercussions.

Ashcroft et al.(2000) refers to Maxwell(1965) model of place and displacement which is suitable for examining literatures of postcolonial people questioning the 'appropriateness' of an imported language to describe the experience of place in postcolonial societies. There are similarities in the use of non-indigenous language among the postcolonial societies. Such language has to 'bear the burden of' the experiences of the indigenous people (Ahmad, 1997) which results in appropriation and abrogation of the language (Ashcroft et al., 1995). This abrogation and appropriation of English can be seen in the discourse of almost all postcolonial writers who opted for writing in English. Kamila Shamsie is also one such writer.

I employed textual analysis as a research method using the conceptual framework of Ashcroft et al. postcolonial theory of place and displacement to explore *Salt and Saffron* as a postcolonial discourse of displacement.

2. Literature Review

The concept of displacement revolves around the identity issues of the displaced people (Cuniah, 2006). According to Vocabulary.com online dictionary *identity* refers to a name or persona. Primarily it goes with the individual characteristics by which a person is recognized or known. It can also be taken as distinct personality of an individual regarded as a persisting entity. Here the personality refers to the complex of all attributes—behavioral, temperamental, emotional and mental—that characterize a unique individual. There is a direct relationship between place and self-identification (Brubaker, 2005). Ashcroft et al. are of the view that the dialectic of place and displacement has always been a feature of post-colonial societies whether these have been created by a process of settlement, intervention, or a mixture of the two (Ashcroft et al., 1995).

2.1. Postcolonial Fiction and Identity Issue

Even as a child, when Shamsie was much intrigued and obsessed by English novels, she noted that none of the stories ever took place in Karachi (Shamsie, 2014), the place she belonged to. Her imagined world, as introduced by the English education, was the world of foreigners. Hence, she figured out that when she grew older, she would write a novel which would be set in her own country (Banerjee, et al., 2012). And Karachi, her own city has been presented in all her novels.

Among the contemporary fiction Khalid Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* and A Thousand Splendid Suns, Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and Kamila Shamsie's *Kartography*, *Burnt Shadows* and *God in Every Stone* can be taken as examples of postcolonial writings. These writers highlighted the issues of place and displacement of the postcolonial, neocolonial, globalized world (Spivak, 1992). Ashcroft et al. (1990) emphasize the fact that the term place is not merely synonymous with landscape rather it goes with familiarity, identity and belonging. Shamsie refers to the alienation of Sajjad in *Burnt Shadows* (Shamsie, 2009) who primarily believed that "... over the next century Dilli will continue to do what it's been" (Shamsie, 2009, p. 40) while talking about the British departure from India with James. But later on the communal riots during the struggle for freedom of India made the same place unfamiliar for him and created a sense of alienation because of the disappearance of familiar faces "This place, this moholla, was past already. Soon the ghosts would outnumber the corporeal presences among his intimates" (Shamsie, 2009, p.107). She also presents the lingering impacts of place and displacement of the colonized people long after the end of colonization. She portrays those who opted for migration at the partition to be Pakistanis and called Muhajir with positive religious connotation. But the change in the political scenario compelled them to rise up for separated political identity and lead to social and psychological repercussions (Shamsie, 2002).

2.2. Displacement and Alienation

Displacement can be in time and space. Both these types lead to: 1) social, 2) cultural and 3) emotional alienation. Our personal image is based on our association with the people amidst whom we spend our lives, our experiences, our beliefs, and our training/education. Colonization of India brought about changes in the social life of the natives. They were subjugated. Their status was changed from the free nation to a colonized people. The colonizers brought their system of government, the policy of divide and rule and brought changes in the Indian education system. These changes influenced the social and cultural life of the natives. Exposure to the Western culture, language and education lead to identity issues. So with the change of their placement from

a free nation to a colonized nation displaced them in time. All this problematized their previous identity.

Similarly displacement in terms of space or change in social and cultural settings also lead to identity issues. These differences create linguistic, social, cultural, racial or religious alienation. Said (1999) refers to this alienation in his autobiographical discourse *Out of Place: A Memoir* which highlights the dilemma of most of the colonized and displaced people. He highlights his sense of alienation by telling where ever he went despite of being one of the most distinguished scholars of world fame he could never escape the sense of social, psychological and political alienation.

Ahmad Ali (1984) refers to the physical and cultural impacts of colonization in *Twilight in Delhi* where he highlights the diminishing Muslim culture in Delhi and the fall of the last Mughal Emperor Bahdur Shah Zafar. He refers to the changes in the physical landscape of Delhi's famous Chandni Chowk. He also mentions the changes that crept into the social fabric of the Indian civilization. Shah Nawaz (1990) highlights the agony of migration which people of India had to suffer in her novel *The Heart Divided*. Chinua Achebe depicted displacement in time and space both in *Things Fall Apart* and the sense of alienation it lead to which finally compelled the protagonist to commit suicide. Shamsie also refers to social, political and cultural impacts of colonization and the agony of migration of the displaced people at the partition which was a part of the process of postcolonialism.

3. Methodology

I used textual analysis as a research method to explore *Salt and Saffron* as a postcolonial discourse of displacement. I delimited my analysis to the content words only as the structural analysis was beyond the scope of this study.

Textual analysis is an important research method used in the disciplines where the focus is on the text (Griffon, 2005). According to Fairclough (2003) textual analysis is an important part of discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2003) as it focuses on the use of language in a particular text with reference to the particular context in which the language has been used. The main focus of this inquiry was to analyse the content of the novel related to the theme of displacement and resultant identity issues in the postcolonial world depicted by Shamsie in her fictional discourse for which I found textual analysis as a useful tool.

I explored the data by using theoretical framework of Ashcroft et al. model of place and displacement. I looked for the relevant details in the text and appraised them in my analysis. I substantiated my interpretation by quoting from the original text to avoid misrepresentation.

Regarding the research ethics I followed the principal of honesty and transparency (Bryman and Bell 2007) while interpreting *Salt and Saffron* as a discourse of postcolonial displacement. I took due care to analyse the content of the text in the particular context of colonization and decolonization of the Indian sub-content as mentioned by Shamsie(2000) herself in the acknowledgements of *Salt and Saffron* that her grandmother, Begum Jahanara Habibullah's memoir was a wonderful source of information for her in this regard.

4. Analysis

As a postcolonial fiction writer, Shamsie portrays the place and displacement of her fictional characters in the postcolonial world. D.E.X Maxwell (1965) regards the relationship between self and place as a defining model of postcolonialism. Shamsie begins her fictional discourse by portraying a conflict in her protagonist's mind between her love for another Pakistani diaspora subject Khalil and family pride and the class consciousness with which she has been brought up. Her exposure to Western education and their value systems created this conflict.

Western system of education has been regarded as superior system and people from the ex-colonies opt for going to Western universities for higher education as a status symbol. Shamsie's protagonist, Aliya, also goes abroad for her graduation as per elite class tradition. Her exposure to the Western education and Western culture brings a change in her outlook towards her family values system and thus problematizes her personal identity.

Shamsie links the identity issue of the protagonist, Aliya, as a Pakistani diaspora subject with the place and displacement of her grandfather and his brothers' identity issues as colonized subjects. Which in Ashcroft et al.'s (1990) terms can be called cultural denigration. Taimur's letter to his brother can be quoted as an example:

"My brothers ,we were born the year after the Jalianwalla massacre .Think of this when you are strolling down paths in Oxford ,studying how to be Englishmen and do well in the world .I lack your gift of erasing, nay! Evading history .The writing of this letter is the last thing I do before entering into the employ of an English army officer, as a valet. I have accepted my historical role, and when you return from Oxford and take your positions in ICS or English-run companies the only real difference between us will be that I am required to wear a grander uniform. 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 .From the time of our births we have been curses waiting to happen, but now the suspense is over .This is our curse: Akbar, Sulaiman, we are kites that have had their strings snipped We went to school in a place without sun, and believed this meant we had no need for our shadows .I am not an Englishman, not are you. Nor can we ever be, regardless of our foxtrots, our straight bats, our Jolly Goods and I says.

No more the Anglicized Percy, I.

I am now Taimur Hind."(Shamsie, 2000, p.24)

Here Shamsie refers to the acceptance of the cultural superiority of the English by the Indians which in Fanon (2008) terms is a mimicry on the part of "black man". Taimur and his brothers were Indian Muslims belonging to the elite class. Their parents employed English governance for them who changed their names, the very basic identity, which is a mimicry. Shah Nawaz (1990) also reflects the impact of the imperial culture on the Indians in detail through her fictional character Jamaluddin, who comes back from England with the resolve to live like an "English gentleman", as mentioned by Lord Macaulay (1835) in his "Minute on Indian Education". Ayub Jajja (2012) regards it as the internalization and assimilation of the colonialist culture that results in hybridity in postcolonial terms. This hybridity is apparent in different members of Dard-e-Dil family despite all their family pride.

Taimur defies this rule, though apparently in a self-mocking tone, telling his brother that he would shun his hybrid identity, use no more English and would be Taimur Hind, but to play his historical role as a colonized subject he would become a personal attendant –a valet of an Englishman. This decision speaks volumes of the scars inflicted on the psyche of the colonized people. The presence of English governance, the change of their original names, linguistic and social alienation caused by English education throw light on the conscious and unconscious oppression of the indigenous personality. This change in the outlook of the colonized subjects lead to the identity issues found in almost all postcolonial literatures (Ashcroft et al., 2000).

Shamsie also refers to the East India Company under the cover of which the colonizers came as traders and returned as rulers. She hints at the details, how cleverly they consolidated their rule in India by applying divide and rule policy and then making the divided Indian rulers their “de facto vassal” (Shamsie, 2000, p. 119). This is how “Fraser that man of common birth” (Shamsie, 2000, p. 119) became a lord. Jean-Paul Sartre refers to “the multiplication of divisions of opposing groups and classes in the colonized societies” in preface to *The Wretched of the Earth* by Fanon (Sartre, 2001, p. 10), the same “multiplication of divisions” echoes in *Salt and Saffron* through the history of Dard-e-Dil family.

Shamsie links the historical event of the creation of India and Pakistan to Dard-e-Dil’s myth of ‘not-quite-twins’. India and Pakistan were created at different side of the night like the birth of Akbar, Sulaiman and Taimur. Withdrawal of the colonizers from India resulted in unprecedented displacements which divided the hearts in Shah Nawaz’s (1990) terms and the conflict between Akbar and Sulaiman divided Dard-e-Dil family resulting in Akbar’s permanent displacement from India. Most of the family preferred to stay in India, but Akbar and his family became permanent Dard-e-Dil diaspora. Later the succession of East Pakistan in 1971, another multiplication of the division, was such a fatal blow for Akbar, who had already left so much that he could not survive. The political divide in the wake of the division of India lead to Akbar’s migration. He refused to stay and see “... The crumbling decay of what was once grand” (Shamsie, 2000, p. 169). So he left for Karachi, never to return listening to the “weeping ghosts” (Shamsie, 2000, p. 173). What Shamsie wants to portray is, no matter how much we are convinced of the righteousness of our decision, displacement has never been an easy experience both, psychologically and emotionally. Shamsie links this alienation through her protagonist’s sense of belonging to Karachi—her native city:

“Karachi’s nights remind you that you can love a place, and for me that’s always been a reason to rejoice. But that night I thought of Akbar flying into Karachi for the first time. How alien it must have been for him. How lost he must have been in that first moment when he disembarked and thought, “My children will call this home. They will know sunsets over the ocean and the taste of crab so fresh it’s barely dead and they will hear blessings in the breeze from the sea. But they will not know Sulaiman and they will not know Taimur. And in not knowing those two, they will not know me.” (Shamsie, 2000, p. 172-173)

While referring to the displacement and sense of estrangement caused by Partition Shamsie’s spokesperson regards her family members “walking wounded” with no “word of reconciliation across the borders of India and Pakistan” (Shamsie, 2000, p. 33) even after fifty years. What the

writer wants to highlight is that despite all the sacredness and religious connotation attached with migration, it had its speakable and unspeakable sorrows that this whole generation of the Indian had to bear.

Bapsi Sidhwa (1991) in *Ice Candy Man* portrays the negative aspects of Partition while Shah Nawaz (1990) in *The Heart Divided* convey through Kemal, the protagonist that freedom demands price. "I told you freedom is never attained without sacrifice" (Shah Nawaz, 1990, p.363). So the opinions are divided. Shamsie portrays the same division of opinion by the members of Dard-e-Dil family, those who opted for migration and those who preferred to live in India. Aliya talked about the 'walking wounded memories' of Dard-e-Dil people and wondered how did they as a family retained the bitterness associated with taking side during Partition and how this major historical event impacted their psyche never to seek reconciliation even afterwards though people on the both side of the divide kept identifying themselves with Dard-e-Dil. There is a whole series of new and old placement and displacement associated with colonization and its lingering after effects even after decolonization of India (Ashcroft et al., 1995).

In Nyman's (2009) words, Shamsie weaves stories of the once famous house of Dard-e-Dil into the descriptions of their contemporary descendants haunted by the events of 1947 in particular. It also constructs post-colonial histories of class and politics. Shamsie's protagonist refers to it in the beginning of the novel, "One of my earliest memories is of Dadi cackling down when she heard the news of Hussain Asif's marriage to Natasha Shah, 'Shia Muhajir marries Sunni Sindhi!'" (Shamsie, 2000, p.1-2). It highlights the shifting boundaries of identity and shows their impact on Aliya's life, who returns to Karachi after studying at a college in the USA. Nyman (2009) observes that "The story of Aliya appears to be a prime example of contemporary migrants of a particular kind, involving study in a foreign country, dispersed family members, and diasporic experiences of varying kinds, which at least problematizes if not challenges the values of home" (Nyman, 2009, p.109).

5. Conclusion

The objective of this study was to explore displacement created as a consequence of colonialism in the light of postcolonial theory of place and displacement of Ashcroft, et al. (1990). Textual analysis was used as a research method to explore how the writer has portrayed the impacts of colonialism on her fictional characters. Colonization of India and Pakistan created displacement in time and space both. The political changes in terms of the change of the Indians' status from a free nation to colonized people brought about changes in their social life as well. Most of the changes presented in the novel were on two accounts: 1) exposure to English system of education, 2) displacement created by partition.

The division among the brothers Akbar, Sulaiman and Taimur was on the issue of going to Oxford for higher education. Through Taimur's letter to his brothers Shamsie highlights the impact of the cultural and linguistic changes that came into the lives of an established Indian Muslim family. The induction of an English governess to learn how to acquire the mannerism of the English resulted in the change of their original names. This is an example of cultural alienation. Taimur's letter also refers to the negative impact of English education on his proficiency of his native language Urdu that caused linguistic alienation. The further division of Dard-e-Dil family was on

account of partition. Akbar and his family were displaced from their native land as a result of political divide on the issue of partition.

Shamsie also highlights the shifting boundaries of identity and shows their impacts on Aliya's life, who returns to Karachi after studying at a college in the USA. The impact of the exposure to the Western university and the cultural values system associated with this exposure on the outlook of her protagonist, Aliya. Her encounter with another Pakistani diaspora belonging to the other side of the class divide created a conflict in her mind between the values system with which she was brought up and the Western values she was exposed to. Aliya's Dadi believes in settled identity, "What we are, we are (Shamsie, 2000, p.112)" while Aliya challenges this fixity "it does not always have to be so (Shamsie, 2000, p.193)". Rather, it is ever evolving.

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