

# The Struggle of Memory against Forgetting in Kamila Shamsie's *Salt and Saffron*

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## Abstract

This article studies the ethics of remembrance and its transformative potential through the reading of the postmemorial narrative of Kamila Shamsie's *Salt and Saffron*. While it is the story of a particular individual's journey of memory transformation, it speaks to a shared experience of rupture in the wake of Partition violence and what it might mean to confront and transform the powerful impact that this collective memory has on everyday lives. The analysis of the central character's evolution seeks to demonstrate the way in which memories of Partition violence are connected to the continuation of an oppressive class system in Pakistan and how transforming these memories also implies transforming a worldview that maintains class prejudices. In so doing, the article offers broader insights for understanding the nature of intergenerational memory, mourning, and transformation in the wake of historical violence.

**Keywords:** Mourning, Melancholy, Kamila Shamsie, *Salt and Saffron*, Partition, Postmemory

The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting.

— Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (1)

One person's lament can be someone else's elegy.

— Kamila Shamsie, *Salt and Saffron* (37)

## Not-Quite-Twins: Conceptual and Otherwise

The difference between lament and elegy as poetic genres is a blurry one as far as their mood and content are concerned. Both capture a loss and the sorrow and grief emanating from it. However, an elegy is a meditation that takes the poet beyond the immediate loss to the reflection of some permanent principle about the tragic aspects of life. In contrast, a lament, defined as “an expression of deep regret or sorrow” by J A Cuddon and C E Preston (448), is more visceral, cried out in a voice stemming directly from the wound. The difference seems to consist in the emotional immediacy of a lament and the analytical belatedness of an elegy. The latter can only be conceived of when the mind has lamented for a while, contemplated on the absence of the beloved and finally come to terms with it with an acquired knowledge about the ephemerality of life, for instance. The moods and psychological states evoked by lament and elegy seem to parallel the acts of melancholy and mourning



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respectively. “The reflective mind,” which, according to S T Coleridge, is required for writing an elegy (268), is the state a person reaches after proper mourning, after working through the trauma of the loss whereas a lament is the verbal and sonic manifestation of pain that the wounded psyche lets out in the melancholic pull of the past. Used in the second epigraph, the chance remark of the narrator-protagonist of Kamila Shamsie’s magical realist novel *Salt and Saffron* Aliya appears to have commented on the two states a traumatic past may induce in a person, and the novel’s central struggle could be said to consist in the movement from one state to the other. This article will largely focus on Aliya’s being unconsciously defined by the past and her conscious effort at memory transformation as an ethical choice through mourning. It has two major foci: first, the article will explore Aliya’s melancholy as a psychological state induced by class structures and demonstrate the capacity of agency in transcending her prejudices, which allows her to move on from melancholy to mourning. Secondly, by commenting on Aliya’s mourning through the interpretation of silences, it will point out the official silence around partition trauma by the states of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh that, arguably, binds these countries to melancholic loops of re-enacting violence.

Melancholy and mourning are very similar in their impacts on human beings; they both cause intense occupation with grief and have at their core a loss – “of a loved person, or ... some abstraction ... , such as one’s country, liberty, an ideal and so on” (Freud 19). The loss, in the case of melancholy, does not necessarily imply the death of the beloved, but it may very well be the loss of him/her as the “object of love” (Freud 21). Sigmund Freud thus leaves the originary cause of both these states of mind open-ended. However, what distinguishes melancholy from mourning is the absence of one trait in the latter: “an extraordinary diminution in ... self-regard, an impoverishment of ... ego on a grand scale” (Freud 22). Freud describes mourning as a conscious and normal exercise while melancholy is an unconscious pathology. The objective of mourning is, what Jacques Derrida so evocatively says, “to make sure that the dead will not come back ...” (120).

Melancholy implies the impossibility of moving on. The melancholic state traps a person in an obsession with a loss, where s/he keeps acting out the scene of loss. “In post-traumatic acting out,” Dominick LaCapra argues, “...one is haunted or possessed by the past and performatively caught up in the compulsive repetition of traumatic scenes ...” (21). In working through, as opposed to acting out, one is able to “distinguish between past and present” instead of being entangled in the loop of melancholic past (22). Here, one consciously wrenches oneself away from performing the scenes of trauma repetitively, which allows for some resolution. This is where the prospect of a future opens up transcending the moment of trauma to a psychic state of analytical clarity that allows a person to move on to the future while acknowledging the past. It thus has an ethical dimension to it, which LaCapra seems to imply when he says, “Working through can be related to the ethical turn [in discourses around history and trauma] and conceived as a desirable process ...”

(xxiii). In the discussion above, we have found a number of pairs: lament and elegy; melancholy and mourning; acting out and working through that closely correspond to each other. They help us for a nuanced understanding of the responses to loss, their processes, and ethical aspects. They are somewhat symptomatically similar yet critically different like the not-quite-twins that plague the house of Dard-e-Dil through history.

*Salt and Saffron* is a tale of the fictional royal family of Dard-e-Dil, one that has carried the curse of not-quite-twins for centuries. That Aliya is totally aware of the ridiculousness of the idea is evidenced in the very opening of the novel: “All right, don’t scoff, mock or disbelieve: we live in mortal fear of not-quite-twins” (1). The trope of not-quite-twins running through the novel is suggestive of the not-quentes born on 14 and 15 August of 1947 respectively: the nations of Pakistan and India and the tremendous human disaster that took place around that event. With this curse, Shamsie exploits the archetype of Leda and the Swan of Greek mythology, where Zeus rapes Leda in the guise of a swan on the same day she has had sex with her husband Tyndareus. As a result, she lays twin eggs – one containing Zeus’ offspring Helen and Pollux, and the other containing Tyndareus’ children Castor and Clytemnestra. The catastrophes these not-quentes bring about – Helen for the immortal city of Troy and Clytemnestra for the victorious Commander-in-Chief Agamemnon – are detailed in the Greek classics of *Iliad* by Homer and *Agamemnon* by Aeschylus. At the heart of this myth is a trauma, the rape of Leda, that has disastrous repercussions for generations to come. This archetypal story encapsulates and allegorizes many of the issues arising out of the India-Pakistan partition and its post-generations. The immensely complicated family tree of Dard-e-Dils, recorded by Babuji, bears witness to the many appearances of not-quentes through generations. This curse operates through a simple principle: There will be only one set of not-quentes at any moment of history, who will bring disaster to the family and diminish its pride. At the time in which the story is set, there is a strange set of not-quentes as they have not been given birth by the same mother. The narrator-protagonist Aliya’s name is starred together with her aunt Mariam as not-quentes in the family tree. No one knows how that has come about although Aliya guesses it is Mariam’s doing. The only way she and her aunt may be twins is because they have entered “a world” on the same day: “Mariam Apa and I entered a world, not *the* world I’ll admit, but a world – one inhabited by my parents and Dadi and Masood and Samia and Sameer and all the rest of them – on the same day” (57). Aliya’s parents never heard of Mariam before the day her mother went to labor. Mariam is the daughter of a lost brother of Aliya’s grandfather, who severed all connections with the family immediately after turning eighteen. However, as Mariam’s father passes away many years later and as she does not have any other kin around where they used to live, she comes to live with Aliya’s family. She would not speak to anybody except for ordering food to the family cook Masood, so it is impossible to know about the place where her father went after his self-exile. Nevertheless, Aliya and Mariam could communicate almost

telepathically like sometimes twins are believed to be capable of doing, and Aliya was exceptionally perceptive of Mariam's gestures as well: "I was so accustomed to translating her gestures into sentence that I sometimes wondered why people looked so perplexed when I claimed to be quoting her words exactly" (192). While in their house, Mariam falls in love with Masood, and they have to elope to get married as the extremely class-conscious society of Pakistan will never allow such a union to happen. Her elopement becomes a huge scandal in the high society of Karachi since people's coming together across class boundaries is unthinkable there. This is how Mariam brings shame to the family by fulfilling the curse of not-quite-twins. Aliya, as the other half of the pair, is supposed to further degrade the family, so when she shows the least bit of interest in Khaleel, a boy originating from the poor part of Karachi, Aliya's cousins – Samia and Sameer – become very concerned. It is not so much Mariam's elopement with Masood or Aliya's interest in Khaleel that causes the scandal or holds scandalous possibilities as the class prejudices that keeps them apart. Love draws people together across all boundaries: those of class, gender, religion, and so on, but, within a particular society, only certain kinds of relationships are socially approved. The relationship between Mariam and Masood falls outside the range of socially-approved relationships in a context that is acutely stratified on the basis of class. In order for them to be together, they have had to remove themselves from their own society. It is obvious, therefore, that the configuration of the society is responsible for the scandal around their elopement.

### **Class, Metanarratives, and Postmemories**

In exploring the great class divide of Pakistan, *Salt and Saffron* unravels how social stratification determines the personal choices of human beings. Contrary to the fundamental principle of existentialism, "existence precedes essence" (Sartre 26-27), a principle that characterizes humans as self-defining and free-willed animals, the characters of *Salt and Saffron* are seen to be trapped within the prejudices of the class they are born into. The establishment of the fictional royal family of Dard-e-Dil dates even further back than the Mughal rule in India. Whosoever is born in the family is brought up on the elaborate Dard-e-Dil lore and is expected to behave as their aristocratic lineage demands. Handed down from one generation to the next, the family stories undergo occasional alterations and modifications whenever expediency dictates, ultimately forming a familial metanarrative. This ensures a semblance of uniformity of conduct by the Dard-e-Dils, who attempt to live up to the standards set by their predecessors. The rigidity of class-boundaries necessitated and perpetuated by an aristocratic past makes Mariam's decision to marry the family cook so unacceptable. Even though having a royal lineage might have many enabling consequences, such as pride and dignity, it also determines the limits of knowledge, imagination, even language for its members. Attempts are always made to replace unpleasant memories with more convenient stories, and people turned rogues by the aristocratic standards of Dard-e-Dils are often pushed out of the range of visibility. This gives an extremely prejudiced view of the family's

past, exaggerating some events while subverting others or replacing facts with fictions. These prejudices seep into the members' personalities, determining their actions and behaviors. For instance, even for a Western educated girl like Aliya, who is otherwise imbued with progressive literary and theoretical ideas, the prospect of a life with a boy from Liaquatabad, the poor part of Karachi, is unthinkable until a certain point. Contemplating the limiting aspect of her memories as a member of the royal family, she concludes: "Our lives ... are crippled by memories" (31).

These crippling memories are passed on to the new generations of Dard-e-Dils from the old in a postmemorial way. Coined by Marianne Hirsch to describe the intergenerational transmission of traumatic memories of the Holocaust, "postmemory" has been used by Partition Studies scholars like Tarun Saint (2010), Sukeshi Kamra (2015) and Ananya Jahanara Kabir (2014) to delineate the structure of the transmission in the context of the Indian subcontinent, especially the Partition. In the absence of any official memorialization of Partition trauma by the divided nations of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, a repressive tendency that will be discussed later in this article, memorialization of the Partition has taken very informal forms. Family had long been the only channel through which memories could be directed and passed on until oral historians took initiatives to record stories in the mid- to late-1990s. As a result, family as a unit of memory transmission is considered vital in the Partition context as Tarun Saint contends, "Due to long absence/suppression of an archive of first generation survivor testimony, family memory in South Asia became the primary vehicle for the inscription and transmission of memory..." (46-47). Memories transmitted within family environments most often take the routes that Hirsch describes as postmemorial. Intergenerational transmission occurs, according to her, through the stories, photographs, paintings, behaviors, etc. of the older survivor generation that post-trauma generations assimilate during their collective existence in a family and/or community. Even though these memories are not one's own as they have not been acquired through experience, they are "transmitted ... so deeply and affectively as to *seem* to constitute memories in their own right" (Hirsch 5; emphasis original). Partition novels often demonstrate a consciousness of these channels of memory transmission, which the novelists use to connect characters, especially protagonists, with their pasts. Accounting for these postmemorial transmissions often noticed in Partition novels, Saint argues that the repressed stories of the people on both sides of the Radcliffe Line are "reconstituted and reinterpreted through literary modes of remembrance" (47). For example, Salman Rushdie, as pointed out by Israk Zahan Papia, invests his narrator Saleem Sinai with the gift of telepathy in *Midnight's Children*, which he uses to acquire and store other people's stories very much like the work of postmemory (1). Also, in *The Shadow Lines*, Amitav Ghosh's unnamed narrator's archive of experiences consist of "that which is lived and that which is narrated and heard" (Kaul 307), which is also a postmemorial process. Likewise, Aliya's "troubled relationship with her parental past," Quratulain Shirazi observes, is forged through postmemorial structures in the

narrative of *Salt and Saffron* (14). Herself a second (or third?) generation witness of the Partition, Shamsie's personal investment in the novel is evident in an article written by her scholarly mother Muneeza Shamsie entitled "Sunlight and Salt: The Literary Landscapes of a Divided Family," where she outlines the rupture of her family into three in the wake of the Partition (137). Not only has Kamila Shamsie drawn from the stories she was told by her parents and other family members, but another novel, *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961), written on the Partition by her mother's aunt Attia Hosain, deeply informs her own novel as well. Muneeza Shamsie details how her daughter read *Sunlight* as a teenager and later during the writing of *Salt and Saffron* (139). *Sunlight* thus is one of the textual postmemories Kamila Shamsie draws on in her novel. In fact, Muneeza Shamsie's article gives a rare insight into the postmemorial transmission of the memories of the Partition within a family and their artistic expressions through novels.

Aliya's connections with the past are made in the narrative through the acts of listening to others' stories, looking at and discussing photographs and paintings or adopting behavioral traits of ancestors. Storytelling is of great significance in the collective existence of the Dard-e-Dil family as Aliya says, "Oh, they are a talking people, my relatives, and I have breathed in that chatter, storing [or storying?] it in ... my lungs .... And yes, when need arises I can exhale those words ..." (18). This clearly illustrates how stories sustain and perpetuate the connection between generations and why Aliya has become a great storyteller herself. Most stories told to her by others are ones of traumatic events in the past involving the not-quite-twins. Meher Dadi's telling Aliya the story of the Partition when the family got divided due to the fight between not-quite-twins is just one example of how the act of recounting memories serves as a foundation for subsequent generations' knowledge of the past. Indeed, Shamsie seems to have stressed this function of storytelling through the narrative of the novel itself, which is entirely written in a manner akin to storytelling with an imaginary audience in mind with whom the narrator is in dialogue as when she says, "Cast *your* mind back to Baji's crowded flat and the unrolling of the family tree" (67; emphasis mine), or "Let me take *you* to the day of Masood's disappearance ..." (78; emphasis mine). The use of the silent audience suggests the transmission of memory further from the storyteller to the listener, so the novel acts as an instrument for the formation of affiliative postmemories too that extend family stories to "a larger collective in an organic web of transmission" (Hirsch 36). Photographs and paintings serve a similar purpose in memory-formation in *Salt and Saffron*. Aliya's thoughts about a picture on the wall of Baji's flat captures this:

The setting [of the picture] was the grounds of the Dard-e-Dil palace. I recognized it instantly from the photographs and paintings that adorned the walls of Dadi's house in Karachi, recognized it well enough to know that to have snapped that particular vista the photographer must have been backed up against the marble statue of Nur-ul-Jahan, founder of the house

of Dard-e-Dil. Behind the figures who posed in the foreground was the arched entryway to the verandah that led to the part of the palace where Dadi's immediate family lived. ... If the photographer had angled his camera up, say, thirty degrees he would have captured the spot on the palace roof where you could stand and look through a gap in the trees to see the house where the yak-man [one of Aliya's great-grandfathers] and his wife raised the triplets, just outside the palace walls.... (40)

Aliya's ability to detail everything surrounding the Dard-e-Dil estate minutely, even to the "spot on the palace roof" that could be seen if the angle was moved just "thirty degrees" (40) without ever being there physically, evidences how connected she is with the place where her ancestors lived. This connection with the past is forged by the other photographs and paintings she saw in her grandmother's house in Karachi. Like stories, photographs and paintings, conscious or unconscious behavioral traits get transmitted across generations too as when Aliya overtips a taxi driver to make him feel lower on the way from the London airport to Samia's flat – a trick she has adopted from her Dadi. It is through these processes that Shamsie explores the intergenerational transmission of memory and connects Aliya with her past in the narrative, a past that is not "remembered" in the traditional sense of the term as Hirsch says, "Postmemory's connection to the past is thus actually mediated not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection and creation" (5). Aliya's reconstruction of the past of the Dard-e-Dil house in her quest for Mariam is an elaborate example of such "investment, projection and creation" (5).

Aliya's postmemorial connection with the past is not without a serious underside. In fact, Hirsch has warned that "to grow up with overwhelming inherited memories, to be dominated by narratives that preceded one's birth or one's consciousness, is to risk having one's own life stories displaced, even evacuated, by our ancestors" (5). Considering the impact other people's memories have on Aliya, it feels like the present has not so much been "displaced" or "evacuated" (5) as it is appropriated by the past. She is a representative of modern Pakistan with a familiarity with Western critical and activist traditions like feminism and Marxism, yet she is unable to shed the deep-seated class prejudices inculcated in her by others' stories. The stories, handed down through generations, have trapped her in the rut of class prejudices, and she finds it exceedingly difficult "to be freed of remembered biases" (32). This, of course, has grave consequences for her personality. The remembered biases in the Dard-e-Dil royal house are sustained and perpetuated through the structures of postmemory, which is the reason behind Mariam's having to run away with Masood from the known social environment and, ultimately, Aliya's deep sense of loss at her elopement. Therefore, her loss of Mariam is in effect caused by the the social stratification and its rigidity. Aliya's melancholy, which has Mariam's disappearance at its core, by extension, is also caused by the class structure of contemporary Pakistan. As we will see later, the difficulty in moving from melancholy to mourning

arises mainly because she struggles to transcend the class consciousness that her royal lineage has instilled in her. While melancholy is in itself a psychological state, in Aliya's case, it is made worse by the fact that her surroundings uphold the very reason for her loss as a norm. So, her pathology is actually fed constantly by the society, in which case Aliya ultimately has to use her agency at the risk of being a social outcast like Mariam to achieve some resolution of her loss through a conscious act of mourning by deconstructing the family history in her effort to find Mariam. From the initial pages of *Salt and Saffron*, it is very apparent that Aliya is a narrator with personal prejudices and limitations of knowledge. This is consistent with the theme of the novel that represents the evolution of her character from a biased perspective to free-thinking and from ignorance to knowledge. As noted above, Aliya's ignorance, from which she is to evolve later to knowledge, has resulted from the boundaries of the knowable imposed by her postmemories. Just as knowledge is limited by crippling memories, so is there a limit of imagination as well. For example, Aliya tells her artist friend Celeste to paint Aunt Mariam's picture older and happy because her imagination only allows her to picture Mariam as unhappy for her elopement with a man from the lower class.

### **Aliya's Melancholy and Mourning**

All these limitations of perception – cognitive, imaginative, and, as we will discuss later, linguistic – are crucial to the understanding of Aliya's loss and her melancholic psychic state. As said before, she is able to communicate with Mariam almost telepathically just as some twins are believed to do even before the development of ear and larynx in the mother's womb. It is Mariam's recognition of Aliya's presence that invests her existence with visibility. The closeness between the aunt and niece, however, cannot help Aliya transcend the class biases so indelibly inculcated in her – so much so that she cannot imagine anything beyond the realm of possibility defined by her aristocratic lineage. The shock of Mariam's departure and the impending shock of discovering (though not admitting to herself) that she has been just as disgusted as the rest of the family at Mariam's elopement with Masood horrify her. Aliya remembers how she actually feels when she hear the news: "... I *had* felt something other than shock. When Aba [her father] told me she'd eloped I felt humiliation. Also, anger. Worse, I felt disgust. *She's having sex with a servant.* Those words exactly flashed through my mind" (112-113). Her affection for Mariam, however strong it is, cannot accommodate Masood in the world she has been born into. It is for the same reason that Aliya is reluctant about seriously considering a life with Khaleel: "I was born into a world that recoiled at such prospects" (51). The blinding discovery of class prejudices within herself makes Aliya react as she does by slapping Dadi, her grandmother, moments later when she apparently calls Mariam a "whore" (104). She needs to believe in the comfortable lie that she slapped her grandma because, whatever Mariam has done notwithstanding, she remains family and, therefore, needs not be called names. However, it is only much later that she recognizes that her reaction has been unjustified, that she has recoiled like the rest



of the Dard-e-Dils at Mariam's marriage with Masood. Discovery of the self as a being limited in perception and perspective is, therefore, what induces Aliya's melancholy. Her terrible reaction is accompanied by the "diminution in ... self-regard" (Freud 22). Aliya's being degraded in her own eyes, a characteristic that distinguishes melancholy from mourning, is evident in how she feels about herself immediately after the incident: "I had so often felt the urge to smash my fist through my reflection in the mirror in the weeks after Mariam left" (114). This urge to smash the image of the self implies its massive diminution for Aliya. Her disgust at the thought of Mariam's having sex with the servant Masood is caused by her deep-seated class consciousness rooted in the society. Social stratification is also the reason for Mariam's having to flee from her surroundings with Masood. Aliya's psychological state of melancholy, therefore, has a social origin that not only causes it but makes it difficult for her to wrench herself out of it as well.

For four years after Mariam's departure, Aliya stays away in the US, doing her undergrad in English Literature and only coming back to Karachi for three months during summer vacations when she knows Dadi will be in France visiting her son. She earns a name for her storytelling abilities in college though there is one story that she never tells: Mariam's. Storytelling comes to her naturally, as discussed before, because she is brought up in a family where stories connect people to their pasts and determine their futures in a postmemorial way. That Aliya never tells Mariam's story is a sign that her linguistic capacity lacks the means of expression when it comes to Mariam's disappearance. Her repeated avoidance of Dadi and inability to speak of Mariam are evidences enough that Aliya is caught up in a melancholic state. The gaping hole of her loss defies linguistic rendition and re-enacts the scene of loss over and over again. Physical symptoms of Aliya's melancholy are evident in her changed sleeping pattern and the repeated nightmares she has in her college dorm room. When she attempts to tell Celeste the story of Mariam, she can only produce a fragmented narrative because she has not quite been able to come to terms with it yet. When she ruminates over Samia's question about not telling that story ever, she concludes that she does so as it does not have a resolution. Being in melancholy implies being trapped in the cycle of re-enactments of the scene of loss that are necessarily without resolution. The process of working through only begins when she actively endeavors to find out about where Mariam came from and where she has left, thereby giving her story a resolution, as an act of principled remembrance or ethical recalling. Consisting of Aliya's narration, the narrative of the novel itself is the story with a resolution, where her quest for Mariam ultimately transforms her personality and psychic state, breaking away from melancholic re-enactments of class prejudices to mourning that allows her the freedom to dare to be with Khaleel.

As said before, *Salt and Saffron* is written entirely in a manner akin to storytelling; it is as if Aliya were producing a narrative account of her quest for Mariam and Masood. She would rather not give details of Mariam's story in the college years and refuses to answer any questions about it. It is when the Starched Aunts propose

a comfortable excuse at a family meeting for Mariam's questionable conduct by branding her as an imposter who took advantage of the Dard-e-Dils, Aliya starts searching for Mariam as an ethical choice between repressing the unpleasant past and reclaiming it. The Starched Aunts' attempt to erase Mariam from the family history or, at least, to push her to its fringes is the instance of an active act of memory-making through which a familial metanarrative will eventually be created, suppressing the reality of Mariam's existence. Aliya registers how she feels when the excuse is proposed and comments on the formation of the dominant story:

I could almost hear the scissors snipping away the strings which bound Mariam Apa to our lives. Here, now, the story was shaping; the one that would be repeated, passed down, seducing us all with its symmetry. In parentheses the story-tellers would add, "There are still those who say she really was a Dard-e-Dil, but a new identity was fabricated for her by those who felt she blemished the family name." (129).

The motive behind constructing a revised story about Mariam is to prevent the reality of the event from destabilizing the class consciousness of the family members. Aliya's persistent love for her aunt enables her to go against the new family narrative – an act that ultimately leads her to rise above class prejudices. In short, her struggle to remember Mariam has translated into a struggle against the power of class metanarrative. It is her memory that enables her to be an active agent rather than a passive actor enacting the story. In the process, she finds a way of working through her past that leads to mourning from melancholy. A willful forgetting of Mariam complying with the prescription of the new narrative would push Aliya further into the depths of her melancholy. Keeping memories alive is, therefore, a means of preserving agency and the capacity for working through – at least for Aliya. She is aware that her imaginative reconstruction, with which she puts up the ethical resistance to the metanarrative, is no surrogate for the real events that have led up to Mariam's elopement. However, this narrative is what ultimately helps her in working through her melancholy. It not only enables her to accept Mariam and Masood's marriage, but eats away the superstructure of her class bias, so that she can accept Khaleel's hand, about which she has been reluctant only because of his Liaquatabad roots.

Once Aliya consciously decides to look her melancholy in the eye and forces herself to work through to an ethical alternative to willful forgetting, time progresses for her. While the family's oldest member's comment at the family meeting nearly obliterates Mariam from the family's chronicles except as an imposter, "what we were we no longer are" (129), her nostalgia for a mythical past transforms into an admission of facts for Dadi and Baji's generation: "What we are, we are" (43, 113). From that point, Aliya's resolution to take Khaleel by the hand before the entire family and say, "*Just because a thing has always been so, it does not always have to be so*" (193; italics original) is definitely a progression of history and an evolution of mindset. Even

though Shamsie envisions no miraculous solution for the India-Pakistan animosity, the fact that borders are going to become more unstable and people more mobile, it is always possible to start anew for the new generation of Dard-e-Dils on neutral soil just as Samia and Rehana, an Indian cousin, do in London.

### **The Partition, Language, and Silence**

Although Aliya's loss and melancholy are not directly related to the Partition of the subcontinent, the novel is deeply steeped in Partition trauma. The entire Dard-e-Dil family is cut into two by the event of the Partition, resulting in eternal animosity across borders. Like *The Shadow Lines*, yet in a different way, *Salt and Saffron* refuses to confine the Partition to the few months around 14-15 August 1947 but illustrates its transgenerational aftereffects in the present. The novel suggests that the Partition is the severance of ties between siblings and family members. Many other Partition novels also use the "sibling rivalry" trope to imply tensed relationship between India and Pakistan since their independence as it is difficult, Suvir Kaul points out, not to use this metaphor in the South Asian context (8). For example, both Anita Desai and Salman Rushdie dramatize enmity between a brother and a sister in *Clear Light of Day* and *Midnight's Children* respectively. In *Salt and Saffron*, among the triplets born in 1920 (a year after the Jalianwalla Bagh massacre), Mariam's father Taimur disappears nine years before the Partition while Akbar seeks a new future in Karachi at the prospect of Pakistan in 1946, and Sulaiman stays back in India. They are "handcuffed" to history, to echo Salman Rushdie (3), by their lives and times in that crucial historical period of South Asia. It should be noted here that both severances have resulted from misunderstandings and miscommunications, which could be easily resolved if it were not for the pride and prejudices of the people concerned. Strong affection remains unabated beneath the surface of enmity irrespective of nationality among the old members of the Dard-e-Dil family. Aliya remembers how Dadi weeps for not being told about the visit of the Prufrock lady from India despite the fierce enmity she supposedly feels about those who have remained on the other side of the border since they share a common history – personal as well as collective – that Dadi evokes while shedding tears for her childhood friend: "We were girls together" (28). The family of Dard-e-Dil – now ruptured into two irreconcilable branches – has to go through an enormous change to reconfigure itself because of its division caused by Partition trauma. Ananya Jahanara Kabir, whose own family was fractured in the Partition, comments on such ruptures and their consequences: "The fracturing of families through the permanent reconfiguration of the personal, the political, and the collective dimensions of loyalty and belonging was amongst the most painful aspects of Partition" (6). Apparently, the Dard-e-Dil family has been divided, but it is still one in Babuji's genealogical records. Even the curse of not-quite-twins has neither broken nor doubled because of the split. The principle of one set of twins at a time has also not ceased to determine the actors of the curse regardless of the sides they take in an India-Pakistan cricket match.

As said before, the Partition implies severance of ties between people who have strong feelings for each other in *Salt and Saffron*. In Taimur's disappearance, Dadi loses the person she loves; and Akbar and Sulaiman lose the brother they have so far been inseparable from during the first rains of monsoon in the year 1938. Since then, during each monsoon Dadi and Akbar, whom she loves as well and eventually marries, barely exchange any words, for each of the two understands the need for the other's grieving. In 1971, Akbar dies of heart failure just at the fateful moment of the first rains. (And it should not be forgotten that the second fracture of the subcontinent, as a result of which Bangladesh became separate from the west wing of Pakistan as an independent nation, occurred in the same year.) Dadi has been running away from the monsoon to France since Akbar's death as rain has acquired a haunting implication for her, triggering memories of losing loved ones. It is the same monsoon in which Dadi decides to stay in Karachi that Aliya resolves to encounter her class-handicapped self and find out the whereabouts of Mariam and Masood. This mainly involves creating a narrative of the events leading up to Mariam's disappearance, deconstructing family myths, listening to unsaid things, and analyzing pregnant silences.

Much of *Salt and Saffron* constitutes Shamsie's deliberations on the inadequacy of language and eloquence of silence. Language has been demonstrated as being an inept medium for expression of complex human feelings. Faced with the possibility of meeting Dadi for the first time in four years, Aliya cannot decide how she feels about it because of the disaster of their last encounter. The word "nervous" cannot capture the complexity of multiple feelings she has at the prospect of seeing Dadi, nor do words like "love" or "hate" express Aliya's emotion for her (88-89). Her self-conscious narrative contains many gaps that render it an unreliable account of the true events. She compares the drainage of meaning with the lack of salt in food, which, in each narration, interrogates the very endeavor of representing facts in language. The crisis of meaning is more acute when a language that is euphemistic in nature is used. The South Asian decorum and Dard-e-Dil protocol of aristocracy require that language be used euphemistically, even at the expense of the vulgarity of truth as Dadi says, "When you live in euphemism you can't speak to people who are accustomed to direct speech" (107). Shamsie further examines how the second language speakers of English, the former colonial masters' language, drain it of meaning. The repeated use of "flay" and "miscreant" in Pakistani dailies deprives the words of their subtle nuances, making them unable to evoke any specific action or person (110). In the worst case scenario, language is entirely drained of the emotions it inspires as when a very funny Turkish movie is rendered completely mirthless by its subtitle. Only Mariam, whose understanding of the funny moments of the movie gives Aliya the first hint that she might be from Turkey, nearly rolls on the floor while the subtitle readers – Samia, Sameer and Aliya – look on at the screen, perplexed. Shamsie does not deny, however, the possibility of multiplicity of meaning when she describes the same couplet on the wall of Mariam's room as

having one meaning to the general readers and something else for the Dard-e-Dils. Therefore, the richness of language, the author seems to imply, lies in its fluidity, instability and openness to interpretation.

Set against the inadequacy and instability of language is the eloquence of silence. Mariam never utters a single word except while ordering Masood for food – a peculiarity that perplexes all who know her, and everyone has his/her own theory about it. No theory is, however, verifiable, and Mariam's silence generates interpretations *ad infinitum* even after her departure as though the absence of words has inspired a clamor of interpretations. Two of the interpretations – one by Aliya and the other by Sameer – deserve close attention. Aliya believes that Mariam's silence has neither resulted from her inability to speak, nor is it that she does not have anything to say. It is her desperate need to listen to other people, perhaps in order to find out the reason for her father's departure that has rendered her speechless. Or perhaps she has found out why Taimur has had to leave and does not want to communicate with the world that has no place for her father. Sameer, on the other hand, interprets her silence as an attempt at subversion. The fact that she always gives Masood orders about meals in questions rather than imperatives, convinces Sameer that Mariam has been trying to subvert the class prejudices built into language by refusing to use it. And, when she does use language, it is only with Masood, the cook from the lower class, her manner of speaking undercutting the established "employer servant paradigm" (214). These interpretations of silences lead to introspection about established beliefs and accepted norms and, eventually, help Aliya in the process of working through. The only person for whom Mariam's silence never seems to be a problem is Aliya, for she could communicate with her Aunt without speaking at all. Aliya owes the habit of translating silence into words to Mariam, who emits meanings, as it were, by unsaying things. It is the failure of Aliya for not listening to the silences in between utterances that provokes her to slap Dadi. Dadi's love for Taimur is misinterpreted as hatred for Mariam as the utterance is recognized as meaningful and not the silence. If this miscommunication can undo eighteen years of love between Dadi and her grandchild, one can easily surmise how much one can be misled by written or oral history.

### **History of the Partition and National Melancholy**

Historiography in India and Pakistan around the Partition took very different turns following their independence. The originary story of India is woven around the Nehruvian narrative of the long struggle against the colonial power for freedom of a nation that made a "tryst with destiny" long ago (Nehru). It stipulates a vision of secularism and accommodation of diverse people within one national entity. Pakistan, on the other hand, considers Islam as its unifying force and celebrates the birth of a new Muslim nation, but for which followers of the Islamic faith would have assumed a minority status in a Hindu-dominated country in the post-British reality. Both metanarratives are taught to schoolchildren and have formed their consciousness about the respective histories of their countries. The rupture

of the subcontinent is generally attributed to the power-hungry Jinnah and his Muslim League in India while the Hindu leadership and their supposed intention of communal domination over Muslims are held accountable in Pakistan. Even as these stories feature the tragic “sacrifices” people had to make for their independence, both of them have celebratory rings to them as well. They generally consider the enormous human sufferings of the Partition as the sacrificial price they had to pay for independence. The celebration of independence combined with the narrative of sacrifice has drowned the cries and sufferings of the Partition for far too long. This is similar to how the familial metanarratives of the Dard-e-Dil house overwhelms individual choices and voices. An uncanny silence reigned on both sides of the Radcliffe Line about the lives and properties lost, people dislocated and bodies violated. History books treated the violence of the Partition as a corollary of the independence, reducing stories of sufferings to brief descriptions and statistical data – so much so that it would not be untrue to say that there had not been any “history” of the Partition for a very long time. However, the voices drowned by the independence metanarrative had eventually to come out to take stock of the freedom that generates so much popular jubilation.

The historiography on the Partition witnessed a decisive moment of shift in its focus during the anti-Sikh riots in 1984 in Delhi and elsewhere in the wake of the murder of Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguard. Survivors and witnesses of the mayhem against the Sikh population, one in which the state was thought to be indirectly complicit, realized that the communal violence against them is a repetition of what took place in 1947. This came as an epiphany to the oral historian Urvashi Butalia when a Sikh elder said to her that it was like the Partition all over again. Butalia observes the presentness of the past here: “It took 1984 to make me understand how ever-present the Partition was in our lives too, to recognize that it could not be so easily put away inside the covers of history books” (6). The oral narratives she collected were compiled in her seminal work entitled *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* (1998). A similar work of oral historiography was done by Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin titled *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition* (1998). Both works, the latter to a greater degree, are notable for their emphasis on the gendered dimension of Partition violence.

The efforts of Butalia and others to salvage history through oral historiography was complimented by subaltern historiography. Subaltern historiography brought the stories of real people's suffering in their everyday life around the time of the Partition to the foreground – something very opposite of what metanarratives of grand political events do. Instead of grand political events, it focused more, for instance, on the story of the pregnant woman who had a miscarriage on the road before strangers' eyes in broad daylight, while migrating on foot from Lahore to India, or the father who slaughtered his daughter to “save” her “purity” from the imminent gangrape by men of other religion. In addition, the renewed enthusiasm in literary

representation of the Partition, both in regional languages and English, resulted in many instances of scholarly re-evaluation of the Partition in several research areas treating literary works as “fictive’ testimonies” or “testimonial fictions” (3, 5). The cumulative achievement of all these researches is that they questioned the official metanarratives of independence and successfully cast doubts on their seemingly inviolable premises.

The Partition has become a trope or a motif in the subcontinental history that cannot be left behind in the past. Instead, the communal violence witnessed in 1947 resurfaces at the socio-political level every so often with a slightest nudge to the so-called religious feelings, as exemplified by the anti-Sikh riots in 1984, Gujrat pogrom in 2002, and the acts of lynching that have become so common in India today. Similar events have been reported from Pakistan and Bangladesh as well. Indeed, the most significant repetition of geopolitical fracture seen for the first time in 1947 was 1971 when the east wing of Pakistan got separated in the process of the bloody independence of Bangladesh. The recent events of the persecution of minorities, hardening of identities along religious lines across South Asia, and the ongoing crisis of Kashmir reminds us of the “unfinished” nature of the Partition (Saint 9). Despite oral and subaltern historiography or “fictive” witnessing of the Partition, the absolute absence of official memorialization may have resulted in the repeated acting out of religious violence in post-Partition times, which may be countered in an ethical and cultural act of mourning. The total unwillingness of commemoration by the states of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh keeps the past wounds alive, festering them in the present and holding possibilities of future traumas in the forms of ethnic and religious hostility. As a moral obligation, therefore, South Asian states must engage with their traumatic memories that have been repressed for more than seventy years. The refusal or avoidance has been unsuccessful in laying the ghosts of the past to rest who have so often come back to haunt the region with resurgences of violence. If *Salt and Saffron* has any contribution to the act of working through of Partition trauma, it is the underscoring of the importance of listening to silences along with all the other kinds of historical narratives. Aliya represents a modern post-Partition nation-state with a complex mix of modern ideas and deep-seated prejudices. Just as her mourning involves an active engagement with the past through the interpretation of silences as much as words, the nations of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh need to work through their Partition-melancholy and break the cycle of violence by being attentive to the silences of history that official metanarratives have caused. In other words, an elegy of history has to be constructed with sustained analyses of articulated and unexpressed memories instead of being trapped in the perennial lament that South Asian history has become.

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