



**PALATES OF PRIVILEGE: THE COMMODIFICATION  
OF FOOD AND THE NEGOTIATION OF PERSONAL  
INSTINCTS IN SHAMSIE'S *SALT AND SAFFRON***

**Khadija Gulzar**

[khadijagulzar26@gmail.com](mailto:khadijagulzar26@gmail.com)

MPhil Scholar, Department of English, Riphah

International University, Faisalabad, Punjab, Pakistan.

**Sanniya Sara Batool**

[Sanniya.batoolriphahfsd.edu.pk](mailto:Sanniya.batoolriphahfsd.edu.pk)

Lecturer, Department of English, Riphah International

University, Faisalabad, Punjab, Pakistan.

**Abstract**

In *Salt and Saffron*, food functions as more than nourishment it becomes a powerful symbol of ancestry, identity, cultural continuity and personal desires. This research explores how food, as both a cultural marker and a commodified good, reflects the novel's central themes of tradition, modernization, social expectations and personal desires. Drawing on Mintz's theory of food as a commodity and Lacan's psychoanalytic framework of desire, the study examines how traditional foods, once rooted in familial and ethnic identity, are transformed by global capitalist systems into status symbols and marketable goods. Mintz's perspective reveals how dishes and spices lose their localized significance, becoming recontextualized within global markets, thus mirroring broader socio-economic shifts. At the same time, Lacan's theory illuminates how food in the novel reflects deeper emotional needs and unconscious desires, particularly around identity, belonging, and memory. Characters engage with food not merely to sustain themselves but to cope with feelings of displacement, longing, and fragmented lineage. Food becomes a medium through which they express personal and collective memory, negotiate social roles, and confront the tensions between heritage and globalization. The thematic analysis shows that eating choices and culinary instincts are deeply entwined with emotional expression and the search for selfhood. Ultimately, the study highlights how *Salt and Saffron* uses food to explore the intersections of personal identity and global commodification, revealing how traditional practices are reshaped by modern forces while still serving as vessels for memory, desire, and cultural belonging.

**Keywords:** *Commodity, Food, Personal Instincts, Salt And Saffron, Symbolizes*

**Corresponding Author:** Khadija Gulzar (MPhil Scholar, Department of English, Riphah International University, Faisalabad, Punjab, Pakistan).  
Email: [khadijagulzar26@gmail.com](mailto:khadijagulzar26@gmail.com)

## 1. Food Commodification and Personal Instincts in Pakistani Context

In contemporary literature, food frequently transcends its basic role as sustenance to become a potent symbol of identity, memory, and socio cultural belonging. Shamsie's *Salt and Saffron* (2000) offers a particularly compelling exploration of this transformation, using food as both a narrative and symbolic device to interrogate cultural heritage, instinctual longing, and socio economic transformation. Through culinary traditions, Shamsie creates a rich metaphorical framework where personal identity, familial memory, and societal pressure collide. Yet, embedded within this sensory tapestry is a deeper psychological inquiry one that resonates with Lacanian notions of desire, loss, and the symbolic.

In Lacanian terms, personal instinct is never purely biological; it is mediated by language, the unconscious, and the symbolic order the network of cultural meanings that structures human subjectivity. In *Salt and Saffron*, food operates within this symbolic order. It is more than nourishment; it becomes a signifier a coded language through which characters articulate longing, difference, and belonging. For the protagonist Aliya, culinary practices reflect not only cultural and familial history but also the fragmented nature of selfhood shaped by the Lacanian lack the absence at the core of desire (Fink, 1995).

Aliya's yearning for authenticity and belonging mirrors Lacan's theory of desire as the desire of the Other. Her emotional response to salt, saffron, and other traditional foods reflects a subconscious attempt to reattach herself to a familial and cultural order that globalization and migration have partially erased. The rituals of preparing and consuming food symbolically reproduce the structures of the family and society, anchoring her to a heritage that feels increasingly abstract. Yet, the satisfaction they bring is always incomplete underscoring Lacan's idea that desire is never truly fulfilled, only displaced (Heldke, 2003).

In Shamsie's portrayal, food acts as both an entry into and a resistance against this symbolic order. Saffron-laced rice or salt passed through generations becomes a metaphor for the transmission of cultural signifiers. But these symbols are also sites of tension. They embody a past that feels both cherished and imposed. This ambivalence reflects what Lacan would call the split subject torn between the Imaginary (the idealized self-connected to family and tradition) and the Symbolic (the social world that names, categorizes, and alienates). This ambivalence reflects the complex negotiation of identity and belonging in diasporic contexts (Bhabha, 1994).

Aliya's protagonist negotiation of traditional culinary expectations such as the making of ancestral dishes evokes not only a cultural inheritance but also a psychic

inheritance of repression and desire. Her inner conflict reflects Lacan's mirror stage, wherein the self is formed through identification with an image that is both the self and not-self. The image of the ideal Pakistani woman who cooks and honors tradition becomes a kind of mirror, against which Aliya measures herself, even as she resists it. Food, then, is not only symbolic of external pressures like class, gender, and globalization but also internal ones an arena where unconscious desires, inherited neuroses, and instinctual drives play out. Aliya's inner conflict around cooking ancestral dishes and conforming to traditional roles parallels Lacan's mirror stage, where the subject forms identity by recognizing an external image that is simultaneously self and other. The idealized image of the Pakistani woman, embedded in culinary tradition, acts as a symbolic mirror against which Aliya negotiates her desires and resistances. Food becomes a site where unconscious drives and cultural repression intersect, reflecting both external social pressures and internal psychic struggles (Counihan & Van Esterik, 2013).

In Lacanian terms, the commercialization of food that Shamsie critiques is a movement from the symbolic into the Real a traumatic realization that even the most sacred traditions are vulnerable to capitalist reduction. The comfort of traditional meals becomes overlaid with the anxiety of performance and commodification. Pakistani dishes, once emotionally charged symbols of home and authenticity, become marketable artifacts, stripped of their original psychic resonance. Aliya is left navigating a world where her instinctual pull toward heritage is continuously mediated by market logics and Western gazes where even her desire is no longer her own but shaped by the Other (Žižek, 1992).

Nostalgia, represented through motifs of *Salt and Saffron*, embodies this double movement of desire and loss. Salt, often a symbol of loyalty and emotional truth, and saffron, a marker of luxury and historical continuity, has become weighted with personal and collective memory. Yet in a commodified world, these ingredients lose their emotional purity. They become symptoms Lacanian signifiers that float freely, detached from stable meaning, reflecting the broader fragmentation of identity in a globalized and consumer driven context.

Ultimately, *Salt and Saffron* shows how food becomes both a site of memory and a field of conflict between individual instincts and collective cultural scripts. Shamsie not only critiques the commodification of culinary heritage but also exposes the psychic dissonance it produces. Food becomes a metaphor for the self-torn between the desire to belong and the instinct to break free. Through Aliya's journey, Shamsie gives voice to the Lacanian insight that identity is never whole or stable but is formed and deformed through language, desire, and loss.

By positioning food at the intersection of cultural ritual and personal desire,

Shamsie reimagines it as a language of the unconscious where salt and saffron are not merely ingredients, but symbols of longing, repression, and the ever-elusive quest for a coherent self.

## 2. Positioning the Study

Before delving into the analysis of food commodification and personal instincts in Shamsie's *Salt and Saffron*, it is useful to define how these concepts intersect within both cultural and psychoanalytic frameworks. Mintz's theory of food commodification highlights how traditional culinary practices, once rooted in community and ritual, are transformed under capitalist systems into marketable goods stripped of cultural meaning. In contrast, Lacan's theory of personal instincts particularly his ideas on desire, the unconscious, and symbolic mediation provides a lens through which to examine how food reflects internal psychological struggles. This review explores how *Salt and Saffron* positions food at the intersection of socio economic commodification and personal desire, using it as a metaphor to explore identity, memory, and cultural displacement. Within the novel, food is both a site of familial nostalgia and a symbol of capitalist intrusion, revealing the protagonist's internal conflict between inherited tradition and modern autonomy. Shamsie thus constructs a narrative that reflects broader concerns about globalization and selfhood while grounding them in the intimate rituals of cooking and eating (Mintz, 1985; Lacan, 1977; Shamsie, 2000).

Shamsie's *Salt and Saffron* (2000) intricately weaves food into its narrative not merely as a cultural element, but as a profound site of identity, memory, and socio political commentary. This literature review explores the critical intersections of food commodification, as theorized by Mintz, and personal instincts, as conceptualized by Lacan, within the context of Shamsie's novel. It aims to position *Salt and Saffron* within broader literary and theoretical discourses, illustrating how food operates both as a cultural artifact and a psychological marker of desire and loss.

Mintz's seminal work *Sweetness and Power* (1985) argues that food is never just about nutrition; rather, it functions as a system of power relations and a site of social meaning. In his analysis of sugar, Mintz demonstrates how food becomes commodified through colonialism and capitalism, losing its original ritualistic and cultural significance. In Shamsie's novel, a similar transformation occurs. Traditional foods such as saffron infused rice and symbolic uses of salt are depicted not only as inherited practices but also as commodities that reflect class stratification, global consumerism, and shifting social values. These dishes become markers of cultural capital, as Bourdieu (1984) would argue, used to perform class identity in an increasingly globalized world.

Parallel to Mintz's critique of commodification, Lacan's psychoanalytic framework provides a useful lens for understanding the internal dimensions of the protagonist's relationship to food. In Lacan's theory, personal instincts are not biologically determined but are shaped through the symbolic order, language, and the unconscious. Aliya's emotional responses to food in *Salt and Saffron* ranging from nostalgia to discomfort reflect this psychic complexity. Her longing for traditional dishes is not merely about taste, but a deeper desire to reclaim a fragmented identity, one torn between diasporic alienation and familial expectation (Lacan, 1977). The recurring motifs of salt and saffron embody both presence and absence standing in for a lost cultural unity and the impossibility of fully returning to one's roots.

Recent scholarship has increasingly recognized the role of food in postcolonial and diasporic literature as a narrative device for exploring identity and displacement. Avakian and Haber (2005) emphasize food's capacity to convey memory and trauma in diasporic narratives, while Civitello (2003) highlights how culinary practices can both preserve and distort cultural traditions. In the text, food bridges generational and cultural divides but also exposes the protagonist's inner conflict caught between reverence for heritage and resistance to its prescriptive nature. Shamsie uses culinary rituals not only to evoke cultural continuity but also to question the commercialization and appropriation of such traditions within elite, Western-influenced diasporic spaces.

Ahmed (2022) notes that Shamsie's novel critiques how traditional values, particularly those tied to gender roles and class, are often preserved and performed through food. The expectation that women must carry forward culinary customs, for instance, serves as both a form of cultural preservation and patriarchal control. Through this lens, food becomes a battleground where personal autonomy and inherited obligation collide, echoing Lacan's idea of the split subject, divided between the self-one imagines and the self-shaped by societal structures.

"Fridays used to be Masood's day off. ... At lunchtime, Mariam Apa would end up eating last night's leftovers and Aba would drive me to the bazaar where we'd buy aloo puri with carrot pickles, and halva on the side to sweeten our mouths. ... It was only at college, when the racks of spices and international foods at Stop 'n's hop forced me to confront the inadequacy of my culinary English"(Shamsie, 2000 P. 12 ). In this line food serves as a powerful link to home and family rituals, contrasting instinctive cultural eating habits with the dislocation and commodification of global food products abroad.

Masood's recipes in their kitchen, even going to the extent of borrowing his pots and pans and chopping bread and knife, but never, not ones, has anyone succeeded in producing a meal that could be mistaken as Masoodian. 'Hath mein maza hai'" (Shamsie,

2000 P. 49 ). The rich, home-cooked flavors evoke emotional instincts and connections, while the act of preparing and sharing food reflects intimate family relationships and cultural belonging. These excerpts illustrate how food in *Salt and Saffron* connects to instinctual personal experience and cultural identity, while contrasting traditional Pakistani cuisine with commodified, global food alternatives.

In Jhumpa Lahiri's short story *Mrs. Sen's* from *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), food becomes a tangible link to the protagonist's homeland, reflecting her struggle with displacement and cultural preservation. The ritualistic chopping of vegetables and the longing for fresh fish signify more than sustenance they represent emotional instinct and cultural rootedness, slowly eroded in a commodified Western environment.

The poetry of Agha Shahid Ali, particularly his collections like *Call Me Ishmael Tonight* (2003), frequently employs food and drink metaphors often tea or sherbet as symbols of loss, memory, and identity amid exile and partition. Ali's evocative imagery reflects how beverages carry affective and historical weight, embodying both intimate personal instincts and broader socio-political fractures (Ali, 2003). His work resonates with Bhabha's concept of hybridity and cultural creolization, illustrating how culinary symbols navigate ambivalence and cultural negotiation.

Similarly, Walcott's Caribbean poetry often contemplates the legacy of colonialism through food and drink imagery. In poems like *The Schooner Flight* (1986), rum and local beverages signify not only cultural pride but also the commodified aftermath of colonial exploitation (Walcott, 1986). Walcott's work complements Mintz's historical perspective on how commodities entwine with identity, history, and power dynamics.

In Lahiri's short story *Mrs. Sen's* (1999), tea and fish preparation serve as tangible links to homeland and cultural memory, evoking emotional instincts rooted in displacement and diasporic longing (Lahiri, 1999). The rituals around food and drink are imbued with meanings that resist commodification but simultaneously are vulnerable to erosion in a foreign cultural context. This tension mirrors Lacanian notions of desire mediated by the symbolic order and Mintz's ideas about cultural transformation under global capitalism.

In short, the interplay between food commodification and personal instincts in *Salt and Saffron* offers a multifaceted understanding of how identity, memory, and culture are mediated through food. Drawing from Mintz's critique of commodification and Lacan's psychoanalytic theory of desire, Shamsie presents food as both a symbolic anchor and a site of cultural and psychological conflict. Her novel invites readers to consider how deeply personal and yet socially constructed our relationships with food can be revealing the often-invisible tensions between nostalgia, performance, and the capitalist

commodification of cultural rituals.

### 3. Lacanian Instincts and Mintz Creolization

Shamsie's *Salt and Saffron* (2000) presents food not merely as a backdrop for cultural and familial storytelling but as a vital narrative device through which identity, heritage, and psychological tension are articulated. The novel is particularly rich in its use of culinary traditions to explore the intersection of individual psychology and broader cultural transformations. This analysis synthesizes Lacan's theory of personal instincts and Mintz's theory of food creolization to demonstrate how *Salt and Saffron* constructs food as both a psychic space of conflict and a socio cultural site of hybridity and transformation. Through this dual framework, food emerges as a symbolic medium through which characters especially the protagonist Aliya navigate desire, memory, social expectation, and the contradictions of modernity in a postcolonial, globalized Pakistani context. As When the protagonist moved to London, she missed the taste of saffron and the way the rice would shimmer with it, even though she had learned to cook it there too, using powdered saffron from the supermarket. The taste was nowhere near the real thing. The use of powdered saffron from the supermarket symbolizes the commodification of a traditionally cherished ingredient in Pakistani cooking. The shift from authentic to packaged or processed versions of food can be understood through the lens of creolization, where traditional dishes are altered by the availability and accessibility of global food products. The authentic and the commodified versions of saffron represent the tension between cultural roots and globalized adaptations.

Lacan's psychoanalytic theory moves beyond Freud's biological understanding of drives to emphasize how personal instincts are socially and symbolically mediated. Identity, according to Lacan, is constituted through the interaction of the Real, the Imaginary, and the Symbolic. The Symbolic order comprising language, family structures, and social norms plays a crucial role in shaping desire and identity. In *Salt and Saffron*, food operates within this symbolic domain, carrying the weight of tradition, class, and familial authority. Aliya's engagement with food, especially traditional dishes passed down through generations reveals the psychological complexity of her identity. Her relationship to these meals is not just about memory or taste; it is about her position within a symbolic system that defines her social role and restricts her autonomy. These culinary experiences awaken conflicting instincts in Aliya instincts that are not primal, but shaped by the gaze and desire of the Other, a Lacanian concept referring to how one is perceived and defined by external social structures. The comfort of a saffron infused dish coexists with the pressure to conform to familial expectations, illustrating the Lacanian notion of manque or lack the idea that desire is structured around an unfillable absence. Food

becomes a site where Aliya encounters the conflict between what she wants to be and what her cultural inheritance demands of her.

Complementing Lacan's inward focus, Mintz offers an outward, historical perspective on food and identity. In *Sweetness and Power* (1985), he explores how foods like sugar became commodified through processes of colonialism and capitalism. His concept of creolization where distinct food traditions merge, evolve, and hybridize under global forces resonates with the culinary landscape in the text. Pakistani cuisine in the novel is not static; it reflects Mughal, British, and diasporic influences, symbolizing the layered nature of cultural identity in a postcolonial world. Food in the novel is both preserved and transformed family recipes that are shared across generations but also modified or even commercialized in diasporic contexts, detaching them from their original cultural meanings.

Creolization also operates along lines of class and gender. Shamsie highlights how traditional dishes, once markers of familial intimacy, are repackaged to signal social prestige or perform cultural authenticity in elite spaces. This aligns with Mintz's assertion that food reflects not only taste but also power dynamics both in its production and in its symbolic consumption. Food becomes cultural capital, a marker of social standing, and an instrument of distinction, echoing the critiques of Bourdieu and the capitalist commodification of culture. "The traditional Pakistani dishes, like haleem and kababs, were a connection to their cultural heritage" (Shamsie, 2000 P. 78). This passage highlights the incorporation of new ingredients alongside traditional spices like cumin and cardamom. The line reflects the creolization of food in *Salt and Saffron* by illustrating how traditional cuisine becomes a hybrid marker of identity. Dishes like haleem and kababs are themselves products of cultural fusion haleem, for example, blends Middle Eastern, Central Asian, and South Asian influences, revealing the long history of culinary exchange in the region. In the context of the novel, these foods serve not only as a link to the characters' cultural roots but also as tools for negotiating identity in diaspora. When prepared or remembered outside of Pakistan, such dishes are often adapted to local ingredients and environments, reflecting the process of creolization in which cultural forms are both preserved and transformed. Thus, food becomes a site where personal memory, cultural heritage, and global influence intersect. Shamsie uses these culinary references to show how food carries emotional and historical weight, allowing characters to maintain a sense of belonging while also navigating the hybrid realities of modern, globalized life.

By integrating Lacan's psychoanalytic theory with Mintz's anthropological insights, *Salt and Saffron* reveals food as a convergence point of psychological desire and socio cultural transformation. The motifs of salt and saffron operate metonymically they

are not just ingredients but symbols loaded with familial memory, colonial history, and global commodification. Aliya's inner conflict over food whether to embrace, reject, or reinvent her culinary inheritance mirrors a broader tension between rootedness and reinvention, heritage and hybridity. This unified framework illustrates that food in the text is both an internal psychological site and an external cultural artifact. It is where personal instincts mediated by familial expectations, gender roles, and class structures encounter global forces of commodification and cultural fusion. Aliya's struggle is emblematic of a generation navigating postcolonial identity in a globalized world, where even the most intimate rituals of eating and cooking are shaped by larger historical and economic structures. Through the interplay of Lacanian desire and Mintzian creolization, Shamsie's novel transforms food into a dynamic symbol through which selfhood, memory, and tradition are continually negotiated, contested, and reimagined.

#### 4. Food Commodification and Global Displacement

Global capitalism reconfigures traditional foodways by eroding their socio-cultural specificity, reducing them to consumable units of taste and utility (Mintz, 1985). "Samia had become a sandwich eater." Bread, mayonnaise, mustard, salami, sliced roast beef, lettuce, tomatoes, gherkins, tuna salad. Good God, how dreary" (Shamsie, 2000, p.14). These lines demonstrate Aliya's disdain for her cousin's processed Western lunch underscores the loss of meaningful food traditions. The bland, commodified sandwich mass produced and devoid of cultural resonance serves as a critique of globalization's flattening of culinary and cultural identities.

In the same scene, Aliya reaches into the fridge and retrieves a small sauceboat of tamarind labelled "Imli" that instantly transports her: "I lifted it out of the fridge with both hands and held it to my face. Tamarind!" (Shamsie, 2000, p. 14). The vivid sensory reaction Aliya lifting the sauceboat with both hands and pressing it to her face captures the visceral power of food as a trigger for memory and belonging. Yet even this artifact of tradition is out of place: set amidst European fare, the tamarind represents a cultural transplant struggling in a disjointed environment. It underscores not only personal longing but also the dislocation of food traditions within a globalized diaspora. "Open baked trucks carrying huge, mushroom-shaped bales of hay lumbered past, and Sameer veered off to the far lane and slowed down until they passed" (Shamsie, 2000 P. 58). The image of "open baked trucks carrying huge, mushroom-shaped bales of hay" in *Salt and Saffron* subtly reflects the intertwined themes of food commodification and global displacement. The hay, presented as uniform and industrially packaged, represents the transformation of agricultural products into commodified goods, stripped of their local context and cultural value. This echoes how global capitalism turns food into standardized, tradable items,

disconnecting them from traditional practices and meanings. The trucks, moving heavily through the space, symbolize the dominant force of global systems, while Sameer's act of veering off and slowing down reflects the individual's passive negotiation with these overpowering forces. His response suggests how people, particularly those caught between cultures or locations, must continually adjust to the disruptions caused by modernization and global trade. In this way, even a brief scene like this becomes a metaphor for how food, land, and identity are reshaped by the pressures of globalization, emphasizing Shamsie's critique of cultural and personal dislocation in a commodified world.

According to Mintz's, this is a clear example of food creolization and commodification how culinary choices are no longer just about sustenance or tradition but about performing identity in a consumer driven, transnational context. "I was thinking along the lines of swordfish"(Shamsie, 2000, P. 78). Swordfish symbolizes modernity and cosmopolitanism a shift away from the ghar ka khana home food that represents tradition, memory, and familial expectation. It reflects global consumer trends: the kind of food that appears on fine-dining menus, stripped of cultural roots, and repackaged as a symbol of taste, class, or sophistication. Aliya's mention of swordfish might seem flippant, but it encapsulates her internal tension between personal instinct and cultural tradition, and between authentic identity and commodified modernity. Through single food choice, Shamsie reveals how what we eat or say we want to eat can signal deeply personal desires, cultural shifts, and social positioning.

"I have guava that I'll receive nothing less from you" (Shamsie, 2000, P. 63). The phrase can be read as a metaphorical assertion of expectation, value, and reciprocity tied to food, which carries both personal instinctual meaning and commodified significance. Guava, a tropical fruit often linked to home, tradition, and natural abundance, symbolizes authenticity and personal cultural heritage. To claim possession of guava is to assert connection to a natural, instinctual source of nourishment and identity. The demand that one receives "nothing less" signifies an insistence on authentic exchange and respect, underscoring a desire that is both personal and symbolic rooted in emotional instinct and cultural meaning. At the same time, this phrase can highlight the tension in food commodification, where natural, culturally significant foods become objects of transaction and negotiation. The guava becomes not just a fruit but a commodity whose value is measured by the social or emotional return expected from another. This transactional aspect reflects how food often mediates personal relationships and cultural bonds in marketized or social contexts.

From a Lacanian viewpoint, the guava represents a signifier of desire, tied to the Other's recognition and the symbolic order of exchange and meaning. The insistence on "nothing less" speaks to the lack at the heart of desire, where satisfaction is perpetually

deferred and mediated through symbolic acts here, the giving and receiving of guava as a token of belonging or affection. Thus, this phrase encapsulates the interplay between personal instinctual yearning for authentic connection and the commodified reality where food functions as a medium of social and economic exchange.

### **5. Instinctual Memory and Symbolic Longings**

Instinctual memory refers to deeply embodied, involuntary recollections often triggered by sensory experiences like taste, smell, or touch that bypass rational thought and evoke intense emotional or psychological responses. These memories are not just reflections of the past, but living experiences that surface without conscious effort (Proust, 2003). "When I tasted that food I saw Mariam in a kitchen, a vast glorious kitchen, brushing saffron off her husband's neck and dusting it on to her own lips.... To eat that meal was to eat centuries of artistry, refined in kitchens across the subcontinent. The flavors we tasted were not just the flavors in the food, but also the flavors the food remembered" (Shamsie, 2000, p. 201). This richly sensory description taps into Aliya's Lacanian unconscious: food awakens powerful instinctual memories and desire. It transcends taste to embody familial intimacy, historical continuity, and a nostalgic longing for connection highlighting how food becomes a psychic trigger for identity and loss.

The concept of *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory), explains how memory is often embedded in physical objects, practices, or rituals including food which serve as carriers of communal or personal identity. While his focus is collective memory, he acknowledges how these sites function viscerally and emotionally, offering an almost instinctual connection to history (Nora, 1989). "To eat that meal was to eat centuries of artistry, refined in kitchens across the subcontinent. The flavors... were not just the flavors in the food, but also the flavors the food remembered." (Shamsie, 2000, P. 201). In this line saffron transforms from a spice into a symbolic vessel of memory. Aliya's phrasing flavors the food remembered reveals a deep psychoanalytic resonance: the dish itself carries the collective past, evoking experiences far beyond her individual sensory history. This symbolism reflects Lacan's symbolic order, whereby food conveys cultural narratives and forms of belonging entwined with desire. The saffron meal is thus both ancestral inheritance and a site of psychic longing representing Aliya's ongoing negotiation between memory and identity.

In Lacanian and Proust term, taste can unlock the Real that which exists outside the language but holds psychic weight. "Beneath numerous tents great feasts were laid out, with special emphases placed on mango" (Shamsie, 2000, P. 40). The feast is a site of unconscious longing, where the sensory experience of mango reconnects the individual (Aliya, or even the reader) with desires rooted in the past. The imagery of great feasts and

the emphasis on mango evokes more than just a description of abundance it touches on deeply rooted emotional and cultural instincts tied to memory, identity, and desire. Mango, as a fruit, is powerfully associated with childhood summers, familial rituals, and emotional intimacy in South Asian culture. Its inclusion in a lavish setting immediately triggers sensory and emotional memory the taste, smell, and texture of mangoes can recall moments of joy, nostalgia, and belonging.

"If you smell my food, you will be so overcome with temptation that you'll break your fast on the spot" (Shamsie, 2000, P. 49). This line is a vivid example of how food operates as an expression of instinctual desire and cultural power in the text. It is not just a boast about cooking skill it dramatizes the sensory power of food to override religious discipline fasting, suggesting that the smell alone can provoke a visceral, uncontrollable response. The line centers on smell, a powerful sense tied directly to emotional memory and instinctual responses. As Proust illustrates through his concept of involuntary memory, sensory cues like taste or smell bypass rational control and unlock deeply embedded desires. The speaker claims that food merely through aroma can provoke a bodily impulse so strongly that it defeats willpower. This illustrates how personal instincts (here, hunger and desire) reside beneath social or religious constraints, revealing the tension between bodily drives and symbolic rules such as fasting.

The idea of habitus the unconscious, internalized dispositions that guide behavior in culturally specific ways. Mariam's hand doesn't just stir food; it stirs cultural memory encoded in action (Bourdieu, 1977). "Mariam's hand moved with a practiced ease, chopping and stirring and seasoning the food" (Shamsie, 2000, P. 78). The phrase practiced ease suggests that Mariam's movements are habitual, ingrained, and instinctual, not requiring conscious thought. This aligns with the concept of embodied memory the idea that certain forms of knowledge like cooking are passed down not just intellectually but physically, through muscle memory and sensory repetition. In literary and psychoanalytic terms, this shows how personal instincts are shaped by cultural practice. Mariam is not merely cooking she is performing memory, enacting a deeply rooted familiarity with rituals that connect her to family, history, and identity.

*Salt and Saffron* use food to define culture and family. Traditional meals like samosas, baklava, and chicken curry are described in depth to preserve cultural heritage and family history. Food is a key part of homecoming and nostalgia. It connects the protagonist to her past, bringing back memories of a simpler, more intimate time when food was directly related to family and culture. This link between food and identity is especially acute in the context of globalizing cultural commodification. Mintz claims that capitalist food commercialization has diminished its cultural and emotional value. The move from home-cooked to pre-packaged, mass-produced food is more than just

convenient; it symbolizes the novel's social and economic changes. The protagonist's battle to preserve family traditions in the face of modernization and commercialization echoes Mintz's view that food has lost its cultural roots due to globalization.

*Salt and Saffron's* "Children selling vegetables of fixing tires or chasing each other along the roads without pavement"(Shamsie, 2000, P. 130). As the capitalist market compromises personal, emotional relationships to food, this commodity of food symbolizes the depersonalization of culture in a worldwide society. Food becomes a product that can be bought and eaten without concern for its origins or emotional worth. The text explores the transformation of food from cultural artifact to commodity. Through Mintz's idea of food as a commodity, we may study the novel's representation of how market pressures strip traditional food of its cultural and personal meaning. Global trade networks and capitalist models turn local culinary traditions into exports, reflecting economic shifts.

A fistful of saffron sprinkling over my eyelids where I sleep; a shell yielding to my cochlea the whisper of waves allied to the sound of waves allied to the sound of footsteps running away from the rushing tide"( Shamsie, 2000, P. 86). This line reflects how commodification strips cultural symbols of their original meaning and emotional depth. Saffron, once a potent marker of tradition, care, and cultural memory in the text is here reduced to a distant, dreamlike sensation no longer tasted or felt intimately, but merely imagined, scattered across closed eyes. This transformation mirrors how saffron, now mass-produced and globally traded, has been severed from its heritage and turned into a superficial commodity. The reference to the shell and the fading sound of footsteps reinforces this sense of loss and disconnection, evoking memories that are present only as echoes, not lived experiences. Through this imagery, Shamsie illustrates how commodification leads to cultural and emotional displacement, turning meaningful objects into hollow symbols within a globalized world.

This supports Mintz's notion that capitalist economies decontextualize food into a consumer product. Supply and demand reduce food's emotional and cultural value. The protagonist's understanding of food's commodification emphasizes the novel's contradiction between tradition and modernity. The cuisine that previously brought families together in intimate settings is now produced and consumed globally, separating it from its cultural roots. The transformation of food from a symbol of family and tradition to a commodity parallels greater socioeconomic changes in *Salt and Saffron*, where consumer capitalism overshadows human relationships and traditional values.

The Lacanian concept of desire, which stresses external objects in human identity, complicates the link between food and instincts. According to Lacan (1977), human desire

is based on objects that are not naturally gratifying but have symbolic significance that corresponds to unconscious desires. *Salt and Saffron's* want items include food, indicating the characters' emotional and psychological gaps. When the protagonist says, "I ate to fill the emptiness inside me, but no amount of food could satisfy the hunger I felt for the past" (Shamshie, 2000, p. 156), food becomes a symbol of desire as well as physical sustenance. Why the protagonist utilizes food to express her unspoken aspirations is explained by Lacan's mirror stage theory. She uses food to replace the hole left by family, emotional intimacy, and cultural identity.

Lacanian theory states that desire is always molded by what is absent, not what is present. The protagonist craves traditional, home-cooked meals for connection, nostalgia, and cultural belonging, not just food. After losing home, family, or culture, the protagonists crave food, which symbolizes their deprivation. Food symbolizes absence, stressing the psychological complexities that influence characters' connections with it. *Salt and Saffron's* protagonists find emotional stability and security in food. The protagonist's use of eating to cope with her emotional issues shows how food brings solace. Food provides short relief from the enormous forces of change and loss in personal crises (Shamshie, 2000, p. 101). This emotional relationship to food supports Lacan's theory that desire is shaped by unmet wants, typically expressed through objects. Food is a Lacanian self-object that helps the subject cope with alienation and detachment. Eating is a way to fill the emotional hole caused by personal instability and loss. Food's emotional importance resembles Lacanian object petit a, which is the unattainable object of desire that embodies fullness or completeness (Lacan, 1977). "I smiled benignly at my aunt and hid behind a samosa" (Shamsie, 2000 P.100). This line reflects subtly illustrates the role of emotional memory and generational knowledge in food traditions. In this moment, the samosa becomes more than just a snack it serves as a comforting shield, a silent mediator between the narrator and her aunt, symbolizing familiarity, inherited tradition, and the warmth of familial bonds. The act of "hiding" behind the food suggests both affection and emotional complexity, reflecting how food carries not only flavor but also memories, tensions, and connections passed down through generations. Unlike commercial or instructional approaches to food, where ingredients and preparation are standardized and detached from personal context, this interaction is deeply rooted in cultural continuity and lived experience. Shamsie uses the simplicity of this moment to contrast traditional, memory laden foods with the impersonal nature of commodified consumption, emphasizing how culinary practices function as vessels of identity, emotion, and unspoken understanding within families.

## 6. Beverages as Cultural Signifiers of Desire and Commodification

Beverages often overshadowed by more elaborate culinary dishes function as culturally coded signifiers, bearing emotional and symbolic weight. Tea, in particular, emerges as a ritualized beverage that evokes familial intimacy, memory, and belonging. From a Lacanian perspective, the act of consuming tea is not merely about quenching thirst; it is a symbolic act that speaks to the desire of the Other the internalized cultural and familial expectations that shape the subject's desire." He bought me a cup of coffee" (Shamsie, 2000, P. 58). In this phrase beverages as cultural signifiers, it is rich with symbolic meaning. In the Lacanian sense, this act is not just about sharing a drink; it reflects a deeper structure of desire mediated through the Other. The offering of coffee becomes a performance of affection, care, or even social obligation a way of expressing desire not directly, but through a culturally sanctioned medium. The cup of coffee, then, becomes a signifier of connection, attention, or intimacy never the desire itself, but a displaced symbol of it.

Drawing from Mintz's theory, coffee is also a historically commodified beverage tied to global capitalism, colonial histories, and social rituals. What was once a colonial luxury is now a mass-market product branded, packaged, and ritualized in everyday life. In this context, the coffee offered is also a product of commodification, part of a global system that gives emotional and social meaning to a mass-produced item. It reflects how deeply our relationships and our expressions of desire are filtered through cultural commodities.

"I dipped a lump of sugar into my coffee and watched it change color. he hadn't said, what's the Karachi like? as so many people did, as though they thought, I could answer the question with a single, simple analogy. My stock answer was like a chicken" (Shamsie, 2000, P.40). The act of dipping sugar into coffee and watching it change color is more than a sensory detail it is a moment of personal reflection and symbolic meaning. The coffee becomes a metaphorical space where identity, displacement, and emotional instinct unfold. From a Lacanian perspective, this quiet gesture reflects the subject's internal negotiation of desire and alienation. Coffee, here, becomes a mirror for the self a culturally charged object through which Aliya reflects on her diasporic identity, subtly performing a moment of disconnection and contemplation. Her unspoken expectation that someone might ask about Karachi, and her ironic answer ("like a chicken"), further reveals how cultural identity is both consumed and misunderstood, just like food and beverage customs themselves.

Mintz's framework, coffee is also emblematic of commodified consumption. Once an elite, colonial beverage, coffee is now globalized, ritualized, and symbolic a drink you "order," "share," and "perform" with others. By associating coffee with a conversation that never happened, Shamsie quietly critiques how personal and cultural narratives are

often overshadowed by surface-level, commodified interactions a gesture (buying or sharing coffee) becomes a substitute for real connection or inquiry. The changing color of sugar in coffee visually symbolizes assimilation and transformation perhaps how cultural identity, like the sugar, is altered as it dissolves into the global (often Western) cultural drink. In this moment, Aliya's instinctual longing for home, understanding, and belonging is mediated through a globalized, everyday commodity coffee which carries with it layers of colonial history, capitalist exchange, and emotional symbolism.

"It seemed like Samia had turned into one of those desis who drinks lassi in London and Pepsi in Pakistan"(Shamsie, 2000, P.3). This sharp observation about Samia captures the cultural dissonance and performative consumption embedded in diasporic identity. Lassi, a traditional yogurt-based drink, symbolizes cultural authenticity and rootedness in South Asian tradition. In contrast, Pepsi, a Western, mass-produced soft drink, represents global capitalist influence and consumer modernity. The reversal of expectations drinking lassi in London and Pepsi in Pakistan suggests a detachment from instinctual cultural practices, replaced by commodified performance shaped by place and audience. From a Lacanian perspective, this contradiction reflects the split subject torn between imaginary identification with cultural roots and the symbolic order dominated by external validation, consumerism, and globalization. Samia's choice of beverage isn't just about taste; it's a response to the desire of the Other to be seen as authentically desi abroad and "cosmopolitan" at home. Her instincts are no longer self-driven but mediated through symbolic structures of belonging, identity, and market logic. Building on Mintz's argument that food and drink are shaped by historical and economic systems, this moment underscores how beverages act as markers of social positioning. Lassi becomes exoticized and consumed for its ethnic capital in the West, while Pepsi, ironically, becomes a signifier of modernity in its place of origin. These fluid cultural codes turn beverages into commodities of identity, where desire is displaced onto what one drinks, rather than who one is.

## 7. Conclusion

Shamsie explores the complex relationship between food, culture, and personal identity in *Salt and Saffron*, showing how food becomes a symbol and a commodity in a globalizing society. Mintz's food commodification theory and Lacan's psychoanalysis are used in the novel to critique food commercialization and show how food becomes an object of desire linked to emotional and cultural fulfillment. Shamsie views food as more than just fuel. It represents identity, tradition, and psychological comfort. Home cooked, culturally rich meals are being replaced by mass produced, internationally available consumables, reflecting global capitalism and modernization. In the novel, food

commodification symbolizes the loss of personal and cultural bonds, representing global economic systems' effects on individuals. Food's role as a desire object matches Lacanian psychoanalysis, where it can heal physically and emotionally. The characters' emotional connection to food whether through nostalgia, comfort, or identity shows how important food is to the mind. It symbolizes the protagonists' struggle to fill a void while providing brief comfort.

Moreover, the novel explores the tension between inherited tastes and contemporary consumption patterns. Characters straddle worlds caught between the richness of ancestral flavors and the allure (or necessity) of globalized convenience. In doing so, *Salt and Saffron* presents food as a space of negotiation, where personal instincts, shaped by memory and longing, clash with the commodified realities of modern life. Ultimately, Shamsie positions food as more than sustenance: it becomes a language through which characters communicate belonging, alienation, love, and loss. In a world increasingly defined by displacement and commercialism, food in *Salt and Saffron* is both an anchor and a mirror reflecting the fragmented nature of identity in a globalizing society, and offering, however fleetingly, a taste of wholeness.

Given *Salt and Saffron*'s emphasis on food, future research could delve into the representation of food in post-colonial literature. Exploring the intersections of food, identity, and commercialization across colonial and post-colonial contexts may offer insights into how global forces continue to shape both individual and cultural narratives. Adopting a multidisciplinary approach combining literary, cultural, and psychological perspectives could further enrich the analysis. Investigating how food serves as a medium for navigating emotional and psychological experiences would enhance our understanding of its role in shaping human identity. The application of Lacanian psychoanalysis alongside cultural theory within culinary studies could illuminate how individuals connect with their histories and cultural roots in an increasingly globalized world.

Another promising direction for research is the relationship between food and gender in *Salt and Saffron*. The novel often associates food with cultural and familial symbolism, deeply intertwined with traditional gender roles. Analyzing gendered food practices and patterns of consumption may uncover underlying dynamics of power, family expectations, and social norms, offering a critique of patriarchal structures. Additionally, Shamsie's portrayal of food commercialization invites broader discussions on globalization and the fate of local cuisines. Examining how international trade and mass production influence traditional food cultures can contribute to ongoing conversations about cultural erosion and the impact of globalization on local and national identities.

## References

- Ahmed, S. (2022). *Culinary Memory and Cultural Identity in South Asian Diaspora Literature*. Oxford University Press.
- Ali, A. S. (2003). *Call me Ishmael tonight: A book of ghazals*. W. W. Norton & Company.
- Avakian, A., & Haber, B. (2005). *From Betty Crocker to Feminist Food Studies: Critical Perspectives on Women and Food*. University of Massachusetts Press.
- Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *The location of culture*. Routledge
- Bourdieu, P. (1977). *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge University Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Harvard University Press.
- Civitello, L. (2003). *Cuisine and Culture: A History of Food and People*. Wiley.
- Counihan, C. M., & Van Esterik, P. (Eds.). (2013). *Food and culture: A reader* (3rd ed.). Routledge
- Fink, B. (1995). *The Lacanian subject: Between language and jouissance*
- Heldke, L. (2003). *Exotic appetites: Ruminations of a food adventurer*. Routledge
- Lacan, J. (1977). *Écrits: A Selection*. (A. Sheridan, Trans.). Routledge.
- Lahiri, J. (1999). Mrs. Sen's. In *Interpreter of maladies* (pp. 13–27). Houghton Mifflin
- Lahiri, Jhumpa. *Interpreter of Maladies*. Mariner Books, 1999.
- Mintz, S. (1985). *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History*. Penguin.
- Mintz, S. W. (1985). *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History*. Viking.
- Mintz, S. W. (1985). *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History*. Viking.
- Nora, P. (1989). *Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire*. *Representations*, no. 26, pp. 7–24.
- Proust, M. (2003). *In Search of Lost Time*, trans. C.K. Scott Moncrieff & Terence Kilmartin. Modern Library.
- Shamsie, K. (2000). *Salt and Saffron*. Granta Books.
- Walcott, D. (1986). *Collected poems* (R. Phillips, Ed.). Farrar, Straus and Giroux
- Žižek, S. (1992). *Looking awry: An introduction to Jacques Lacan through popular culture*. MIT Press.