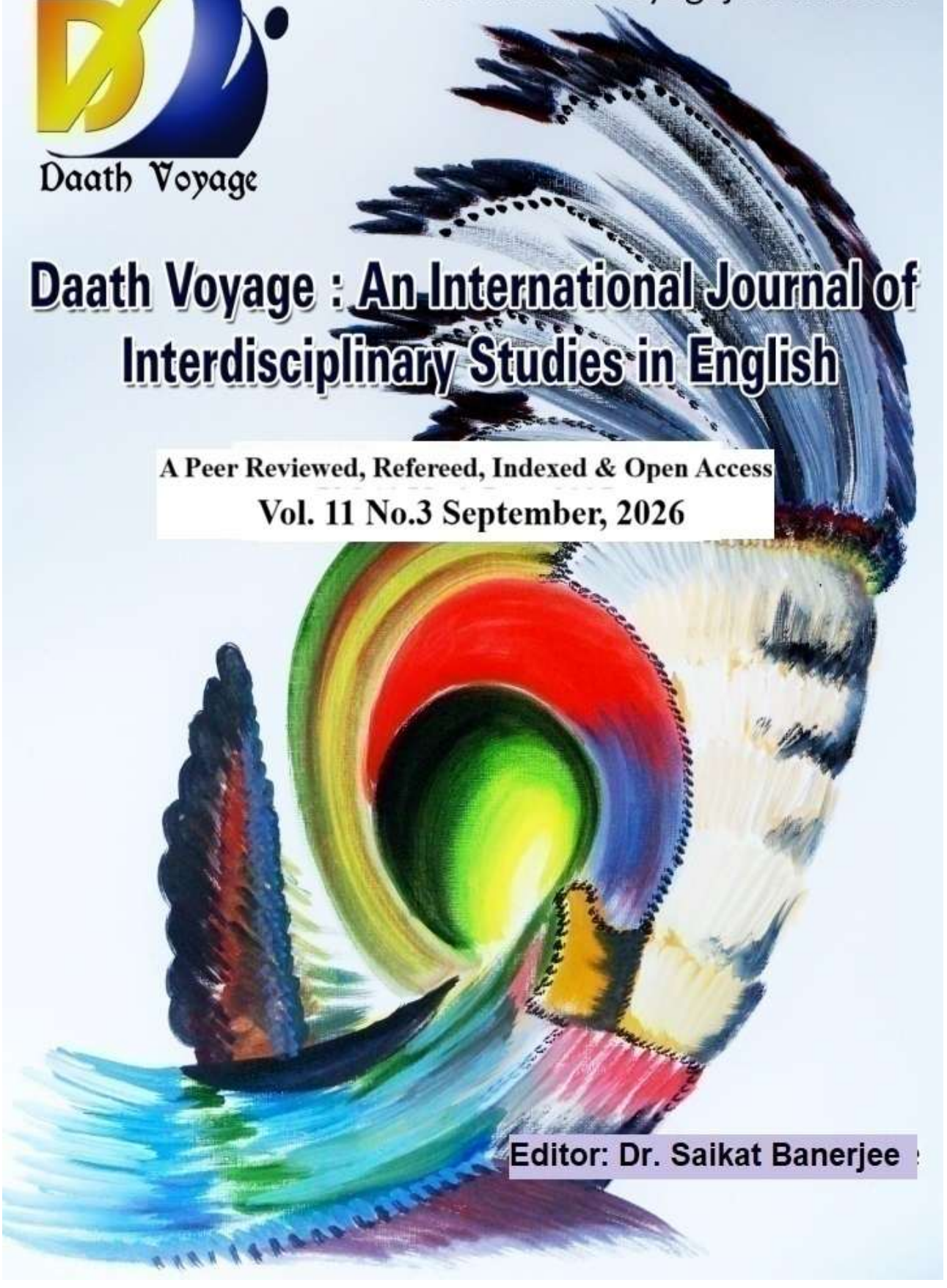
ISSN 2455-7544
www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Daath Voyage

Daath Voyage : An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English

A Peer Reviewed, Refereed, Indexed & Open Access
Vol. 11 No.3 September, 2026



Editor: Dr. Saikat Banerjee

: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English
(A Peer Reviewed, Refereed, Indexed& Open Access Journal)

ISSN 2455-7544
Vol.11/No.3 September, 2026

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Physics of Family: Exploring Tradition and Modernity through the Lens of Entropy in Kamila Shamsie's *Salt and Saffron*

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Received 10 August 2026 Revised 09 September 2026 Published 30 September 2026

Abstract: Family is an exemplification of abilities that come from evolving instabilities. It is a system of competing generations; one preserves and the other revises. Instabilities are found in the nature of all these characters - be it the acceptance of traditions by a woman who wants to define herself as modern, or the modernity found in the woman who is the cornerstone of tradition. This pushes an individual to explore and understand the fundamental nature of generational differences i.e., tradition and modernity. Also, to disseminate interdisciplinary fields, this paper correlates the idea of entropy, which is a concept in Physics, with the notion of traditional and modern life as expressed by Pakistani writer, Kamila Shamsie in her work. Entropy is a measure of randomness or disorder in any given system. Applying Prigogine and Stengers' concept of entropy to Kamila Shamsie's *Salt and Saffron* engages the reader into yet another dimension of understanding life. It allows the researchers to compare the storyline, incidents, trends in mindsets, perceptions of one's self by significant characters in the novel and compare them with natural entropic phenomena like low entropy, high entropy and far from equilibrium. This reaffirms the connection between man and nature. This paper strives to bring about how the science concept, rather than being a metaphor, provides a conceptual framework for wider literary understanding. This research focuses on studying different generations and their acceptance of traditions by tracking their psyche with entropy concepts.

Keywords: Interdisciplinary, Entropy, Tradition, Modernity, Kamila Shamsie.

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Introduction

Tradition is the root of an individual and modernity is the individuality of a person. Together, it represents the significance of ideologies of different generations. This hyper-connected world makes the exploration of other cultures extremely accessible, and it shows the flexible adaptability of contemporary generation. While it might mean that the contemporary generation is adaptable, on the contrary, it explains the possible eradication of authenticity due to the selective usage of culture just to be in trend. Tradition preserves the cultural morality and societal individuality. Tradition, as Shils points out, "is anything which is transmitted or handed down from the past to the present" (12). The older generation, at times, emphasizes only the process of preserving tradition, failing to impart its purpose. Usually, it makes the young people veer off the course (the course being what is perceived as the right way to live in accordance with the tradition) and this reveals the difference in thoughts between generations. To accentuate the purpose of analysing these differences, this paper explores *Salt and Saffron* by Kamila Shamsie. Inspired by the well-known writers in her family and by holding dual citizenship, Shamsie shows her expertise in blending cultural changes and generational variations.

Charles Baudelaire coined the term 'modernity' in his work in 19th century (Suman 57), eventually it is disseminated among the German writers. Around the same period, German physicist and mathematician Rudolf Clausius introduced the concept 'entropy' in one of his major scientific papers in 1865. This shows the simultaneous development of literature and science.

Entropy was further developed with statistical methods by American and Austrian key figures J. Willard Gibbs and Ludwig Boltzmann (Tsallis 137, 139) and later with Information Theory by Claude Shannon (Tsallis 144; Fontaine and Amigo 2). Philosopher Serres built a bridge between scientific context of entropy and cultural meaning one could make out of it (Kroth 2). Later, many literary researchers followed along the same lines, using physics concepts like inertia, passivity, and entropy to analyse character disorder, social instability, and sublime anxiety. Existing scholarships of *Salt and Saffron* focuses on stylistics, language and tone (Nazeer et al.; Anam et al.). Further studies explored gender, diaspora, Muslim female subjectivity, cultural identity, and trauma (Safdar and Yasmin; Zahir et al.; Khan et al.)

This brings to the understanding of how entropy is explored in literature as a metaphor and not as an analytical framework. Application of the concept of entropy with the help of Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers' *Order out of chaos* in Kamila Shamsie's renowned work *Salt and Saffron* focuses on how the

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www.daathvoyagejournal.com

characters strive to sustain the tension between tradition and modernity by moving to the 'far from equilibrium' space, where the emergence of new order occurs (Prigogine and Stengers 178).

Salt and Saffron portrays the life of a young woman, Aliya. Born in an aristocratic Dard-e-Dil family, Aliya returns to Karachi after completing her education in Western countries. Dard-e-Dil is filled with histories, hidden truths, secrets, and tales of lost love. Aliya's relationship with Khaleel, who belongs to a less privileged class arises tension and it leads her to confront the hidden past and thus, shapes her perspective.

Low entropic Dard-e-Dil

Dard-e-Dil, a royal family in the neighbourhood had a Rajput princess in their family. Abida Dadi retells such histories to reinforce their status among the other families. Low entropy/Weak entropy is the concentrated energy in a system. It remains in order with the help of external energy. For example, the ice cubes with the low temperature utilize the energy to stabilize the structure over disorder (Prigogine and Stengers 125). In simple terms, the particles in a system are frozen in an order preventing their free flow across the system. Here, Dard-e-Dil is the system where Dadi becomes the external energy that preserves their culture and tradition. She tries to make her lineage live in a consistent order. Dadi insists her younger generation to be bound by the roots and she passed down the histories like 'five hundred years of empirical evidence' and myths like 'not-quite-twins' and framed each scenario in a rationalized order which connects them emotionally, "The older group continuously reinstate their family pride by referring back to past through family trees and maps of lineage, souvenirs, photographs and orally transmitted stories." (Shirazi 26).

Scientists believed anything in life can be solved with systematic rules of life. Like a cubic square, with formulae and rules, one can solve it in minutes (Prigogine xiv). Similarly, the traditions and class system in Dard-e-Dil were the rules that help them to sustain their elite life. Even if the family is thrown with past dirt, they conceal them all with some stories. For example, the crimes of Nawab assaulting a servant covered by a made-up story to protect their power and respect.

In *Order Out of Chaos*, weak entropy is exemplified as each particle being imprisoned with the interaction it has with its neighbors (Prigogine and Stengers 126). Parallel to this, the family is stuck with social class and family pride sabotaging their own nourishment and development. The way Abida treats other class people with her attitude and silence shows how this family establishes their superiority, "the

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silence of my grandmother, which was meant to inform those who received it of the lowliness of their stature" (Shamsie 5). Their rigid traditions and rules make them remain unconnected with the rest of the world, which hinders their development.

Expelling the ones who go against their family norm is another extreme measure Dard-e-Dil uses to preserve the family's dignity and order. Taimur was once in the position to lead this privileged family. His daughter, Mariam, was born across class lines, and later married Masood, their cook. The family framed her as an imposter and refused to affix her picture in the family tree, "if anyone mentions Mariam they're to say she is no relation to them. She was an imposter" (Shamsie 126). Abolishing the person who contaminates the lineage she has been grooming for ages is the powerful way of Dadi to keep the family stable and in order.

High Entropic Youngsters

High entropy is the measure of maximum energy, which can cause a disorder in a system. The tightly packed ice cube, when subjected to high temperatures, melts, and its molecules move freely and spread out unevenly (Choudhary). Aliya, Samia, and Sameer are the next generation for whom the family dynamics seems a fallacy. Her relatives' typical way of positioning everyone in and out of their family convinced Aliya to take the modern route. Through the lens of Aliya, Dard-e-Dil is a closed system. Her modern thoughts are perceived as high entropy by Dard-e-Dil family.

Moving abroad gave Aliya an opportunity to look at her family through a new lens. Aliya detaches from the family after witnessing their classist judgement on Mariam, who was a source of comfort for Aliya during her childhood. Aliya's attraction towards Khaleel who belongs to a lower class brings to light, the intensity of Dard-e-Dil's discrimination of classes. "I think our family's attitude towards the nouveau riche is another symptom of fear. We're uncomfortable around them because they remind us that class is fluid" (Shamsie 184). Aliya's perception elucidates how the young generation questions the discrimination brought about in the name of tradition by the older generations (Shirazi 25).

"How can we recognize ourselves in the random world of the atoms?" (Prigogine and Stengers 3). Scientifically, moving out of order is a sign of high entropy. It is a move towards randomness and disorder. This resembles Aliya's belief that disrupting the tradition to move towards a new modern life is the solution to the inconveniences caused by her family. She overlooked the initial trajectories and diverted her entire way to a random world of atoms (high entropy state) where she risks losing her identity by erasing her

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roots. Aliya's resistance to her family's stereotypical behaviour blinds her to a point where she didn't notice the cultural death it leads to.

Another high entropic fluctuation is seen with the internal confusion Aliya experiences while retaining her identity. Aliya's modern thoughts may lead to cultural exhaustion, meanwhile her own dilemma with traditional attachment creates disorder in her personal life. In the process of retrieving a new modern identity, Aliya found herself immersed in a web of family's ideologies. Her education tells her to look at the people with no class difference, but she inherited a tainted legacy that runs through her blood. The curse of 'not-quite-twins' twisted the perception of Aliya. Once Aliya found that her fate was connected with Mariam Apa, she was afraid that she might do the same thing with Khaleel as Mariam did with Masood to their family. "But seeing that star against my name, seeing that other star against Mariam's name and thinking of what she'd done and how my family had reacted… made me feel – still made me feel – so sick, so trapped." (Shamsie 71) Aliya was emotionally broken when she realized her embarrassment towards Mariam's elopement and Khaleel's class. She was scared of the fate and hesitated to reciprocate Khaleel's feelings, which proves her confusion between traditional myths and modern ideals.

Far from Equilibrium and the Space for New Energy

Aliya's internal instability creates an emotional imbalance. But she yearns to be evolved, to outgrow the prejudiced thoughts, to walk towards the path of development. "Why can't my heart be as evolved as my mind?" (Shamsie 33). Her mind remains an open system with flux and energy. This shows the essence of far from equilibrium, an ongoing condition rather than resolving, giving space to construct and build their choice of life from scratch. Far-from-equilibrium can be the solution for the oscillating entropy-driven world. It forces the energy out of the static state and makes the system active. Also, it brings the "bifurcation point" (Stengers and Prigogine xv) where the systems must choose a path to drive away the energy, unlike equilibrium which keeps the energy equal and same without using it.

Dadi's forbidden love with the not-quite-twin, Taimur, exemplifies the common ground Aliya and Dadi shares. "Taimur left because he loved Abida, and stayed away because he loved Akbar" (Shamsie 234). This complex love triangle changed Dadi's life. She had the confidence and pride of being loved by someone until this complexity of life happened. Similar to Dadi, Aliya takes pride in being loved by others, her parents, cousins, and Khaleel. The painful love of Dadi made Aliya realize that her Dadi was fragile,

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was in pain, was in love, sharing the same fears and scars of family that Aliya currently goes through. Discovering the buried past of Dadi pushes Aliya to the realization that her Dadi is a woman capable of errors and passion, just like Aliya. She realizes her Dadi was once a young woman who sacrificed her passion for family, and indulged every piece of her in protecting their family's peace. Her ways of teaching and understanding may not be right, but her compassion towards them is real.

This common ground between Aliya and Abida could be juxtaposed to a scientific phenomenon. The progress of science from focusing on the system of the clock and inventions of machines (traditional science), to analysing the process of sculpture (extraordinary of life) mirrors the familial evolution of Dard-e-Dil. Incorporating such notions, this analysis brings out that the traditional science eventually mixes with the art of life, pushing lines towards the elevation of life. The study of Prigogine and Stengers proves that art and science rely on each other, and bring out what is necessary, as Aliya's understanding on Dadi's life as well as her way of living pushes her to see what the family really needs.

Final family meal incident shows the essentiality of far from equilibrium in life. Aliya's cousin Sameer, after discussions and arguments regarding Khaleel, surprises her by bringing him to her home. Her family was more concerned about the multisensory feel of the food he brought than Aliya's love towards Khaleel, a low-class man. It reminded them of the flavors they tasted long back, in the hands of Masood, their family cook. Masood cooked for years in the Dard-e-Dil's kitchen, personalizing food to their preference. It is a nostalgic representation of their traditions. And this meal by Masood, after years, was brought to one of the Dard-e-Dil's houses. The modern Pakistani-American, 'Liaquatabad' Khaleel bringing of this portrays his love with Aliya. This portrays Dard-e-Dil's ongoing change that is no longer stuck between palaces or with specific social class, "When our hearts live, we are more than ourselves" (Shamsie 243). For years, the family was devastated by the elopement of Mariam and Masood. But this meal brought numerous contemplations, where it pushed them to close the book on the past, so the younger generations could write a new chapter.

Modern research proves that the idea of Boltzmann was right and Prigogine and Stengers affirm that if the universe becomes equilibrium with everything predictable the beauty and use of time is meaningless because nothing will indicate the evolution of any system. (16-17) This circles back to the point that high entropy may not have an order but it paves a way to life. A system or an individual when left in high entropy spaces, it forces them to reach a far from equilibrium space where they have to make

ISSN 2455-7544
Vol.11/No.3 September, 2026

their own choices and by doing so, they continue shaping their lives. After days of experimenting with her thoughts, prejudice, and months of exploring her family's histories and secrets, Aliya understands and accepts that change is necessary. Aliya was attracted to someone out of their class. Though confused in between, she didn't discard him away or her family, she fights. She fights for her love, for her compassion with her family, with the elitist rules, with her own prejudice, to find a thin line that pushes her beyond the separation without eradicating her roots. This uses the framework of Prigogine and Stengers. Therefore, science and literature together agree in a point that the world needs right classical methods and modern life elements in a far from equilibrium space to develop. This shows the inevitability of interdisciplinary approach in life.

Conclusion

Aliya was submerged with the traditional upbringing while adventuring the western life through education and exploration. Once she found the buried histories and the secrets of her family, she was pushed to sense the tension of low and high entropic life. Her realization opened the path of far from equilibrium for her family to accept the changes. Aliya sustains the tension between low and high entropic ideals in Dard-e-Dil, finding a far from equilibrium space that keeps new order emerging from it.

Jaroslav Pelikan distinguishes that "tradition is the living faith of the dead traditionalism is the dead faith of the living" (65). Preserving the traditional ideals while embracing their modernity ends the misconception, as Aliya's parents accepted Khaleel and Aliya's realization of love overcame her prejudice. Masoodian meal creates a space for the centuries of culinary artistry and the modern choices remain in contact without erasure of each other. Analysing this through the application of the framework 'far from equilibrium' proves that change is necessary to elevate a known environment. Aliya, instead of abandoning both beliefs, refined them. Science and Literature together proves the necessity of interdisciplinary studies. This paper arrives at a conclusion that literature with science concepts weaves together as tradition and modernity does, that produces a new mode of coexistence.

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