

Reviving Traditional Knowledge: Indigenous Sericulture Practices In Trespassing. (2003)

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Abstract

This study examines how indigenous sericulture traditions in Karachi have continued and adapted over time, sustained through community cooperation and deep ecological knowledge. For generations, rural women have cultivated mulberry trees, reared silkworms, and spun silk by hand within family and community networks. Today, however, industrial production and the loss of intergenerational skills are putting these practices at risk. Viewed through the lens of Trespassing by Uzma Aslam Khan, and within the framework of late capitalism, study¹ analyses that silk develops as more than a traditional craft, it is both a cultural symbol and a literary counterpoint to consumer capitalism. Recent study, explores that silk personifies memory, highlights the gendered nature of labour, and carries intergenerational knowledge. These attributes allow it to resist the commodification while exposing the tensions between local heritage and the demands of global markets. Drawing on Fredric Jameson's concept of cultural depthlessness, the discussion explores how characters such as Dia and Riffat engage with silk beyond its market value, using it as a means of asserting identity against the forces of global homogenization. In this way, this study positions sericulture as a lens for understanding cultural resilience both in the fictional narrative and in contemporary Pakistani society. This study seeks to address that gap by bringing together literary analysis of Trespassing with ethnographic visions into contemporary sericulture practices, offering a new approach to understand the material and symbolic role of traditional knowledge in resisting consumer culture.

Key words *Indigenous sericulture, Karachi, Late capitalism, Commodification, Local identity.*

1. Introduction

Through Dia and Riffat's lives, study analyses the conflict between inherited traditions and the globalized economy's assimilating influence. In particular, the involvement in silk production stemming from native sericulture practices provides a fertile ground for the investigation of cultural identity, women's work, and ecological wisdom. In Trespassing, silk surpasses the notion of a mere commodity; it embodies a nation's resilience, artistry, and intergenerational memory. Riffat, an industrious silk farmer, manages her own mulberry plantation and oversees every stage of silk production from nurturing silkworms to reeling silk by hand preserving methods passed down through generations. Her work symbolizes not just a livelihood but a cultural legacy rooted in ecological knowledge and community-based practice. Dia, her daughter, inherits this connection. In their relationship with sericulture, both women resist the removal of artisanal heritage, even as they confront the economic and cultural disruptions brought by industrial manufacturing and global trade networks. In this way they try to revive the tradition in indigenous consumer culture. Dia

inherits this connection, and together they challenge the displacement of indigenous practices by industrial manufacturing and global trade. In doing so, they revive a tradition embedded in indigenous consumer culture, reaffirming the significance of local identity against the pressures of late capitalism.

1.1. Research Questions

How does Uzma Aslam Khan's *Trespassing* (2003) represent indigenous sericulture practices as cultural memory and resistance to consumer capitalism?

In what ways do the characters Dia and Riffat embody gendered labour and intergenerational knowledge through their engagement with silk?

How does sericulture, both in literature and in lived tradition, function as a form of cultural resilience against the homogenizing logic of late capitalism?

1.2. Research Objectives

To analyze how Uzma Aslam Khan's *Trespassing* represents indigenous sericulture as a cultural practice that embodies memory, gendered labour, and intergenerational knowledge.

To examine the tension between traditional sericulture and global consumer capitalism through Fredric Jameson's framework of cultural depthlessness.

To connect the fictional portrayal of silk in *Trespassing* with contemporary sericulture practices in Pakistan, highlighting its role in sustaining cultural resilience against homogenization.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Sericulture: Origins and Cultural Significance

Sericulture, the cultivation of silkworms for the production of silk, is one of the oldest forms of biocultural knowledge systems, dating back to at least 2700 BCE in ancient China. From there, the practice spread along the Silk Road to India, Persia, and eventually the Mediterranean world. In South Asia, particularly in the regions of Kashmir, Punjab, and Bengal, sericulture became deeply rooted in rural life, contributing not only economic sustenance but also symbolic and spiritual value.

Historical records show that sericulture in the Indian subcontinent was both indigenous and localized, adapting Chinese techniques to the subcontinent's climatic and ecological conditions. By the Mughal period, silk production had become a cornerstone of the region's artisanal economy, with hand-spun silk garments serving as indicators of class, status, and regional identity. Even under colonial rule, the British capitalized on Indian silk production, incorporating it into imperial trade networks, while unsettling the local economies that sustained traditional forms of cultivation. Sericulture in South Asia has deep historical roots, evolving as both an indigenous and adaptive practice. Archaeological sign and trade histories suggest that while wild silk rearing was native, mulberry sericulture was introduced from China via Tibet and Silk Road trade routes around the 2nd century BCE, and subsequently adapted to the subcontinent's climatic and ecological conditions (Ray, 2016; Singh et al., 2023).

By the Mughal era, silk had become central to the artisanal economy, as recorded in the *Ain-i-Akbari* (1590), which notes extensive mulberry cultivation in Kashmir under Emperor Akbar's policies that encouraged weaving innovations and artisan migration (Ray, 2016; Usha Foundation, 2023). Techniques such as Patola and Kinkhab not only served as luxury commodities but also signified elite status and regional identity (Mukherjee, 2014), a prestige further reflected in Mughal court poetry, including Amir Khusro's praise of Persian silks, Chinese brocades, and shot silks.

Colonial intervention, however, restructured sericulture toward global capitalist demands. Under British rule, Bengal and other silk-producing regions were integrated into imperial trade networks, with industrial silk filature technology displacing artisanal reeling practices (Chowdhury & Das, 2024; Ray, 2016).

In Pakistan's post-independence context, sericulture continued in provinces such as Punjab, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Azad Jammu and Kashmir, often as a rural livelihood activity for smallholder farmers, particularly women. Recent studies note that Pakistan's mulberry-based sericulture integrates traditional practices hand reeling and cottage-based weaving—with state-led initiatives to modernize production (Soomro et al., 2018; Saba et al., 2021). However, global competition, declining government support, and the encroachment of synthetic fabrics have reduced silk's role in domestic markets (Bashir et al., 2019).

This historical flight parallels the narrative tensions in *Trespassing*. In the study the artisanal silk industry of Karachi, particularly through the character of Riffat, becomes a symbolic battleground between cultural continuity and consumerist homogenization. Riffat's dedication to traditional sericulture mirrors the historical resilience of silk communities, where heritage crafts are either commodified for niche markets or removed in favour of mass-produced alternatives. By linking the socio-economic history of sericulture to the fictional world it is evident that in history and fiction, silk operates not merely as a fabric but as a material archive of identity and resistance, carrying with it the legacies of adaptation, exploitation, and survival. Sericulture has long been both an economic activity and a cultural, gendered tradition, with South Asian women preserving and transmitting silkworm-rearing knowledge through communal, ritual, and ecological practices (Shiva, 1997; Sharma, 2006).

Originating in ancient China around 2640 B.C. and credited to Empress Xi-Ling-Shi (Chowdhury, 1992), silk production remained a guarded monopoly until European monks smuggled silkworm eggs and mulberry seeds to the West (Chowdhury, 1970, 1984). The Silk Road facilitated its global diffusion, with accounts such as Marco Polo's *Il Milione* emphasizing silk's economic and cultural prestige in medieval trade networks.

2.2. Recent Studies on Sericulture in Pakistan and South Asia

More recent studies have re-examined sericulture within the frameworks of rural development, sustainability, and women's empowerment. Ali, Begum, and Yaseen (2018) conducted field-based research in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, showing that sericulture can enhance rural livelihoods with low input costs and ecological compatibility.

In Shaheen et al. (2021), sericulture is discussed in the context of "eco-rural entrepreneurship." The study emphasizes the environmental benefits of silk farming and the potential for creating green jobs. Similarly, Nasreen and Khattak (2020) explore sericulture's integration into sustainable development goals (SDGs), identifying policy gaps and recommending community-level revival of the practice. While many researchers are now interested in practical and inclusive economic practices, very few studies in Pakistan look at how sericulture links traditional knowledge, cultural identity, and modern consumerism. Most of the existing work treats economic growth and cultural issues as separate topics. This study fills that gap by showing how sericulture is not just an ecological and economic activity but also a way to protect cultural identity from the homogeneity of global markets.

2.3. Theory of Depthlessness and Sericulture in the Context of Late Capitalism

Fredric Jameson's (1991) concept of depthlessness describes the postmodern condition in which the depth, history, and meaning of cultural forms are replaced by surface-level aesthetics and instant visual appeal. In late capitalism, commodities are detached from their original socio-historical contexts and re-signified primarily for their exchange value, rather than their use value or cultural embeddedness. This phenomenon is closely tied to what

Jameson calls the “waning of affect” and the dominance of “the image” over historical narrative. Depthlessness results in a flattening of meaning, where objects are consumed for their style, novelty, or symbolic association rather than the lived traditions and labor that produced them. This transformation exemplifies Jameson’s depthlessness: the historical lineage of silk, once a conduit of memory and tradition, is flattened into a commodified aesthetic object, designed for rapid consumption and detached from its origins. Such a shift not only redefines the meaning of silk in the cultural imagination but also aligns with wider patterns of cultural homogenization, where diverse heritage practices are rebranded into globally palatable, ahistorical products. In this way, depthlessness is not just about appearance it also relocates indigenous identities, replacing them with commodified versions.

3. Analysis

In *Trespassing*, Riffat Mansoor’s work shows this connection. She started a silk line in her textile mill, questioned the need to import seeds, and used her land near Thatta to grow mulberry trees, which are the natural food for silkworms. By using local resources and knowledge, she avoided dependence on outside supply chains. Through Riffat’s character it shows how sericulture can be a form of cultural resistance which values the heritage and sustainability over profit.

Characters like Dia and Riffat symbolize this link Riffat preserves traditional silk-making methods as a form of self-reliance and heritage, while Dia’s awareness of her surroundings shows the tension between global consumer culture and local traditions. Riffat’s commitment to traditional silk-making resists the market’s push for mass-produced textiles, asserting the value of self-reliance and cultural continuity over profit gaining consistency. Similarly, Dia’s sensitivity to her environment symbolizes her struggle to maintain authentic connections to place and heritage in a world where global consumer culture threatens to erase the local identities. Through these characters, the narrative highlights how indigenous practices like sericulture can challenge the cultural flattening and commodification which is characteristic of late capitalism. Riffat’s desire for a cosmopolitan lifestyle, influenced by global trends also symbolizes the impact of consumer culture on personal choices and desires.

“The sericulture project had been entirely, Riffat Mansoor’s. it was she who introduced a silk line in her textile mill, and she who questioned the wisdom of importing seeds... the climate suited the growth of mulberries, the food of insect and she owned a large plot of land near Thatta on which to cultivate the trees” (khan, 2003, p.98).

Riffat’s initiative imitates a pressure between national economic independence and participation in a capitalist system that prefers, profit over sustainability. While her sericulture project is rooted in a local landscape (Thatta), it remains entangled in consumer culture, where silk’s desirability is shaped by multinational corporations, advertising, and the aesthetics of global luxury markets. The cultivation of mulberries for silk production shows how natural resources and traditional industries are unified into global capitalist circuits.

3.1. The Empress's Discovery and Sericulture

“Silk was discovered in China more than four thousand years ago, purely by accident. For many months Emperor Huang-ti had noticed the mulberry bushes in his succulent garden steadily losing their leaves. His bride, Hsi-Ling-Shih, was asked to investigate. She noticed little insects crawling about the bushes and found several small, white pellets. Taking a pellet with her to the palace, with nothing but instinct she ventured to the best place to put it: in a tub of boiling water. Almost at once, a mesh of curious fine thread separated itself from the softball. The Empress gently pulled the thread. It was half a mile long. She wove

it into a royal robe for her husband, the first silk item in history. Since then, sericulture has remained a woman's job, in particular, an empress" (khan,2003, p.10).

The tale of Empress Hsi Ling-Shih's discovery of silk highlights the historical and cultural significance of silk in ancient China. However, the weakening of historicity is evident as the cultural and historical roots of silk are overshadowed by its commodification into a global product. The focus shifts from the cultural origins of silk to its status as a luxury item. This transformation reflects how consumerism market values over historical context. The legend of Empress Hsi-Ling-Shih's discovery of silk highlights its historical and cultural significance in ancient China. However, in the context of postmodern consumerism, this cultural heritage becomes commodified. The weakening of historicity occurs as the cultural and historical roots of silk are overshadowed by its transformation into a global commodity. The emphasis shifts from understanding and appreciating the cultural origins of silk to viewing it primarily as a luxury product. This process leads to a weakening of historicity as the original cultural and historical context is often overlooked or simplified in favour of market-oriented narratives. Through examining the manipulation of corporate practices, the commodification of identity, and the erosion of historicity, this study provides a nuanced understanding of how postmodern consumerism shapes contemporary society. It underscores the importance of recognizing the historical roots and cultural significance of practices and products in a world increasingly determined by consumer culture and corporate interests.

This study emphasizes the historical origins of silk production in China, particularly through the perspective of one of its central characters, Dia. This study explores the ancient Chinese empress's curiosity about mulberry leaf-eating insects which ultimately led to the discovery of silk. Dia contemplates the potential consequences if the empress had foreseen the future implications of her discovery. The study debates hypothetical scenarios, wondering if the empress had known about the discovery that would follow the silk trade over the centuries. It raises questions about the ethical considerations and unintended consequences tied to technological advancements and discoveries throughout history. The reference to Sicilians trying to make silk from spider webs and their alleged kidnapping and torturing of Greek weavers highlights the lengths to which people have gone to acquire knowledge and technology related to silk production. The historical narrative then shifts to the British colonial era, where Bengali and Benarsi weavers suffered due to the exploitation violence, and unintended consequences associated with the trade. It stimulates readers to reflect on the human cost of technological advancements and the global interconnectedness of historical events.

3.2. Dia's Epiphany in the Silken Dance

"The thought of visiting the silkworm tomorrow lifted Dia's spirits. The caterpillars had begun spinning their cocoons, though they were notoriously private when performing their artistry...she could freeze even in a room with humidity of over seventy percent, with sweat dripping from her brows, and binoculars swiftly fogging up. she'd watch tomorrow" (khan,2003, p.14). Her epiphany imitates the strain between appreciating slow, traditional processes and living in a fast-paced consumer culture that undervalues such craftsmanship. Together, Riffat and Dia illustrate how sericulture in the study becomes a site of cultural resistance, ecological care, and identity preservation in the age of late capitalism. Dia's quiet anticipation captures the tension between valuing slow, traditional processes and existing within a fast-paced consumer culture that dismisses such craftsmanship. In the study, Dia and Riffat's shared engagement with sericulture becomes more than a livelihood it is a means of sustaining cultural identity, resisting commodification, and practicing ecological care. Their work illustrates how indigenous traditions can preserve local identity and act as forms of cultural resistance in the age of late capitalism.

3.3. Weaving Exploitation and Depthlessness in Trespassing

“Riffat Mansoor walked briskly, as always. Leaning over the trays of caterpillars she exchanged few words with her employees, examined the Mulberry stock, drafted notes on her clipboard and exhaled so vigorously the curl on her forehead fluttered like down feathers, she was exhausted. Every few weeks a team of men arrived with long list of reasons why they needed to be paid. Otherwise, they threatened to burn her form, and simply cut off the water supply. She was tired of ringing her lawyer who would increase his charges” (khan,2003, p.409).

This gendered heritage deepens Riffat’s role as a preserver of cultural tradition.

Riffat Mansoor’s experience on her sericulture farm strongly illustrates the predicaments of individual agency within the exploitative and hyperreal structures of late capitalism. The passage where “Riffat Mansoor walked briskly, as always... she was exhausted” (Khan, 2003, p. 409) reveals not only the physical toll of her labour but also the psychological and economic pressure she endures as a woman facing a one-sided capitalist establishment. This study exemplifies how late capitalist systems, reduce meaningful work and identity into risky presentations within a hypercommodified and unstable reality. She and Dia spent the entire day chopping a ton of leaves. Riffat Mansoor’s brisk pace through the caterpillar trays, her clipped instructions to employees, and her methodical note-taking paint the image of a woman operating within the relentless machinery of late capitalism. Yet, this surface-level portrayal of efficiency belies the deeper currents of exploitation and alienation she endures. Her exhaustion manifested in the fluttering curl on her forehead symbolizes the weight of systemic pressures, an embodiment of what Fredric Jameson calls depthlessness. The silk-making industry, historically tied to women’s labour and often romanticized as a craft, is here incorporated into the commodified logic of global markets.

Repeated visits from men demanding payment, threatening to burn Riffat’s farm, and cutting off her water show how gendered power operates within this consumer space. . This reflects how women’s essential work is often pushed to the margins and undervalued in male-dominated systems. Riffat’s role as a silk farmer—linked to traditional ideas of femininity becomes a small-scale example of postmodern consumer culture, where commodification erases the unique value of labour. The industry’s link to women becomes a tool of oppression, reinforcing the belief that women’s labour—no matter its skill—remains ripe for exploitation. Her struggle summarizes the condition of women in late capitalism, tirelessly nourishing systems that systematically devalue them, their resistance rendered invisible under the surface of market efficiency. This parallels the theme of depthlessness within late capitalism’s simplified consumer culture, where commodification and the unyielding chase of profit override human life and dignity. While most writing on sericulture frames it in terms of farming, trade, or the environment, studies of consumer culture in Pakistan rarely address traditional crafts, leaving a critical gap in the discourse.

Her careful administration is criticized rather than celebrated, mocked by those who reap its benefits without giving her due credit. This study brings the two together. It builds on the works discussed in the literature review and offers a fresh look at *Trespassing*, showing how an old skill like silk-making can push back against the sameness and pressures of today’s global market.

“When her husband died, Riffat hadn’t let her in-laws take over her farm. Her brother-in-law urged the family to let her be. ...That was the price of a proud woman had to pay” (khan, 2003, p. 199). Riffat’s defense of her farm parallels Dia’s quiet commitment to indigenous sericulture. Both women resist the encroachment of late-capitalist homogenization—Riffat through land ownership, Dia through the preservation of traditional silk production. The farm and the silkworms operate as cultural and economic anchors, binding each woman to a form of livelihood rooted in local knowledge rather than the abstract, speculative flows of global capital.

However, both acts of resistance come at a cost. For Riffat, it is the social isolation implied in “the price a proud woman had to pay.” For Dia, it is the exhausting labour and loneliness of tending to an art form whose value is invisible to consumer markets dominated by commodified, mass-produced “global silk.” These sacrifices reveal that in late capitalism, preserving cultural autonomy whether through land or craft requires crossing both patriarchal control and market pressures. In this way, Riffat’s farm and Dia’s silkworms become parallel symbols of female agency under obstruction, standing as small but strong acts of boldness against the double forces of cultural erasure and economic exploitation.

4. Conclusion

In examining the gendered changing aspects of sericulture within the context of *Trespassing*, it becomes clear that the industry’s association with women functions as both a site of skill preservation and a mechanism of systemic vulnerability. The structural placement of women’s labour with undervaluation certifies that even the most careful management and generational expertise are trivialized and mocked, this marginalization explores the wider conditions of late capitalism, where women sustain the very systems that devalue them, their agency obscured behind the façade of economic rationality. Yet in *Trespassing*, Riffat and Dia resist this erasure. In spite of social criticism and economic pressure, they preserve indigenous sericulture techniques, threading each strand of silk with memory, skill, and belonging. Their work refuses the flattening logic of commodification, transforming a vulnerable craft into a living archive of identity. In sustaining these practices, they weave not only silk but also a counter-narrative—one in which tradition survives the market’s depthlessness, and cultural heritage is spun into a future where dignity and identity are not for sale. Through Fredric Jameson’s notion of depthlessness, this erasure becomes more than an economic act it transforms into a cultural condition in which heritage crafts, stripped of their historical and social depth, are recast as interchangeable commodities. In Pakistani culture, traditional crafts like sericulture are rarely acknowledged, by bringing indigenous sericulture into conversation with theories of commodification, depthlessness, and the political economy of late capitalism, this study challenges the homogenizing logic of global consumer markets. It reasserts the value of craft as both a repository of cultural memory and a form of resistance against the profit-gaining removal of human dignity and ecological sustainability. *Trespassing* to demonstrate how literature preserves, critiques, and reimagines traditional practices in the face of globalization, thereby enriching both cultural studies and sustainability discourse.

5. References

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