

Gender-bending the normative: A critical evaluation of Shamsie's *Best of Friends*



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Abstract: *There have been very few models of female friends' protagonists in mainstream print and visual narratives like that of Shamsie's Best of Friends. Shamsie, as a Pakistani postcolonial Muslim woman writer, has projected models of female protagonists like Vivian, Hiroko, Anika, and Raheen, but Maryam and Zahra in Shamsie's Best of Friends, stand distinct as female friends leading the story simultaneously because male characters are either absent or are gradually wiped away from the position of the protagonist. The narrative ranges from their teenage school life in Pakistan to becoming mature women in England. The female bond overrules all taboos and cultural biases about female friendship in the leading role and sustains even during social, emotional, and political crises. This necessitates investigating the motives and implications of creating such a model of protagonists in a world where the male company has always been compulsorily available to fulfill the fundamental canons of storytelling. This study draws upon the framework of female friendship provided by Terri Apter and Ruthellen Josselson, and attempts to scrutinize chunks of the story to determine the extent of success of such a prototype of female friends in the world of Pakistani postcolonial fiction and the consciousness it generates that female friendship is as enduring and influential in the fictional world as it is in actual society and can play a successful leading role at a stage when the socio-political setup of Muslim countries is rapidly embracing leading female roles.*

Keywords: Female Friendship, Postcolonial Pakistan, Young Friendships, Mature Competitive environment, Male Hero skipped

Introduction

Friendship is a voluntary bond without any blood related connection, in case of female friends especially and involves reciprocity of sharing on equal footing. This strengthens and enhances the level of confidence, intimacy and feelings of empowerment because it is mostly based on the sharing of secrets. "By extension, this implies that two or more females consciously come together to pull resources and

time to see that each member is supported through their personal goals, career paths, family situations, and life's struggles. Without the element of reciprocity and shared values, true friendship cannot be established" (Abutu, 2021, para 2). These shared values are mainly the hidden secrets and when shared, these go a long way in cementing the relationship which would only be less than a sexual relationship. Moreover, these friendships are more solid than

romantic relationships because of the level of independence these friendships ensure. Such a model of female friendship is portrayed by Shamsie which has its own repercussions because, on the one hand, it is an example of strong and solid female friendship but, on the other hand, it is permanently bombarded with the socio-political demands of society which is likely to pull apart the strongest of the friendships. “The best thing about Kamila Shamsie’s eighth novel, *Best of Friends*, is that the story isn’t hinged on a friendship gnarled with sexual, bodily, or intellectual envy. The conflict is more nuanced, primarily marred by a class difference, but more implicitly by the contradictions that exist within a life-long friendship” (Shaikh, 2022, Para 1). Shamsie does not rule out the seeds of differences turning to conflicting stage of friendship between the two women. Shamsie is dropping hints about the gradual tension seeking out because of professional, social, and personal commitments. These conflicts can be also because of social class, especially when bonding based is on power and so one partner is more powerful as compared to the other. “Power plays a pivotal role in the development and maintenance of close intimate relationships as it determines how partners relate to each other and how important decisions are made” (Kim et al, 2018, p. 192). This formula works better in the case of heterosexual relationships but in the case of female homosexual friendships, this lends stability and confidence but has slowly germinating seeds of dissatisfaction and feelings of less interdependence which may result in the breakout of a long-standing female relationship. But nonetheless, the gaps, conflicts, tensions, and rifts in a female relationship are expected to be reduced and the solidarity and intimacy can last long if the object relationship theory is involved. “According to this theory, our lifelong relationship skills are strongly rooted in our early attachments with our parents, especially our mothers. Objects refer to people or physical items that represent a person or part of a person. Object relations, then, are our internalized relationships with those people” (Fratzscher, 2023, para 1, 2). Moreover, there is seen a gentle man type behavior by a woman sometime which

may cause the same fissures. For example, “Here is a gentleman inside all female as well as a female in all gentlemen. At what time, gentleman-hood is difficulty adulthood is disjointed.” (Patil, 2017, p. 818). But there are real women also who have their personal and out of the way choices they may not be attracted to anyone or may feel attracted in the non-traditional models of men. “Ideally a strong female character is one of several different women in a story, but the most important thing is that the woman has agency — a term that simply means they are in control of their own choices” (Hannah, 2014, para 5).

This type of portrayal of women has not been non-existent in literature. For example, women feature strongly in Chaucer's earlier works, such as “*The Boke of the Duchess*” and “*Troilus and Criseyde*”, we only find three women on the pilgrimage described in “*The Canterbury Tales*”: The Wife of Bath, The Prioress, and her maid. (Sima Singh, 2019, P.40). But the portrayal of women has been interpreted as wicked, heartless, prostitute, mother, wife, sister, deceit, partner, and confidants. Besides, many writers from south Asia have been giving a non-conformist women portrayal in their novels. This portrayal is of real, modern urban women who defy the traditional role. “Amongst the modern Indian writers Shobha De is one of the most radical writers who can voice her opinions in a strong contemporary and ultra-modern way through her novels. Women in her writings are portrayed in a quite exceptional and nonconformist way” (Singh, 2019, p.40). African writer Adichie also attempted the experiment of female protagonist and found it extremely satisfying like Shamsie. Adichie found herself working for more uplift of her womanhood than simply fighting for feminism. “Adichie’s portrayal of the female protagonists justifies the author’s aim at reformist feminism, cooperation and complementarity – involving men as partners in women’s quest for freedom and emancipation in the development of Nigerian and African societies” (Olorunfemi, 2023).

Females claim that their friendship is mostly strong because of a capability of molding and

redesigning their life. Women also constantly communicate to each other what they experience during the strong bond of friendship. Henceforth, this role of female friendships, especially, has worked wonders in preparing and strengthening women to find support for each other to meet challenges posed by the patriarchal structures in many societies of the world. This holds good among the female friends at the school or college level where it has been observed that female friendship has been useful in their moral and academic development. "Data from [their] interviews showed that during college, women discussed issues of academic anxiety, racial and ethnic self-image, politics, future aspirations, parenthood, sexuality, and romantic partners" (Ray, 2020, para 4). According to Friedman (2015), friendship is a unique bond among human beings that does not require any sanction of the church or society and has no obligation of marriage and that is why "women, historically diminished by the government and burdened by the family, find such fulfillment and power among friends" (Friedman, 2015, para 1). In the last few centuries, these friendships of women were more rampantly formed because women had nothing to deal with the political and social affairs of the state and many of them who were divorced had no one to discuss with. Such and many other reasons contributed to making women make friends and form strong bonds with the neighboring women and school or college fellows.

Abel (1981) is of the view that at the beginning of the 20th century when Virginia Woolf was writing as a female writer, and critic, the emphasis was more on the mother-daughter relation which illuminates the dynamics of women's friendship even today. The female friendship of recent times and recent representation in the fiction of current century "seem to have provided women with the intellectual stimulus, the emotional support, and the spiritual fulfillment that was often missing in their relationships with men" (Emma, 2023, p. 1). These (women) friendships last longer and the only interval is the marriage of any partner but have proved to be more sustainable and

durable. "Female friendships as portrayed by women writers of the period thus seemed to create a female space for intellectual development, while they provided solace, companionship, and very probably a listening ear to their discontents" (Emma, 2023, p. 3). There have always been examples and models of support among women of all ages, especially in workplaces. The workplaces and the friendships there help not only maintain work stress and shared skills but also the management of anxiety takes place. This promotes not only the quality of life but also eases the struggles because "women are encouraged to aid one another in their self-regulation techniques and navigate a myriad of choices about what to eat and wear, through celebrations of female friendship" (Martinussen, Wetherell and Brail, 2019, p. 5). One of the major benefits of these workplace friendships is to shed the usual formalities that the women need to observe not only at home but also with their male partners because "friendships are crafted as sites where one does not have to be nice, relatable or develop one's capabilities for being optimistic, where the boundaries of niceness and 'being bad' are played with" (Martinussen, Wetherell and Brail, 2019, p.10). As such, a workplace becomes the site not for difficulty but for escape, time off, and refuge in a neoliberal postfeminist society.

For Maryam and Zahra, the above referred workspaces was of many dimensions i.e., the school, the functions, the education in London and ultimately entrepreneurship in London. Maryam and Zahra shared their intimate moments even when were just girls. For example, they wanted to experience what is it to kiss a man. They kissed a man in poster, first Maryam and then Zahra but both could not enjoy just felt the taste of their saliva. They attempted to kiss each other, too, to have a taste of the human kiss. This brought them together and close to each other more than ever and they decided to keep the secrets of each other love each other if the distances of the world occur between them. They then sat together on the bed in their usual position touching shoulder to shoulder. But the difference of class there occasionally manifested itself, especially when

the matter of the girls being married came up. Maryam's mother praised Zahra in the sense that she was a decent and good-looking girl and that anyone would be willing to marry her. She further thought that it would be alright when she married, and she would be free of the clutches of her parent's background.

Zahra further reflected her concern for her reputation and honour because of the experiences learnt at school for example when one of the girls returned to school after a few days, and the explanation was given that she had pains in stomach, she saw that the girl was thought to have been abducted or she disappeared like that. She was careful even not to stay in the market to eat anything rather preferred to go in the safety of the four walls of her home. For example, when they had bought corn, Maryam wanted to stay in the market and enjoy it then and there but "Zahra had insisted they take the corn home and eat it in her room rather than staying out any longer. And at the end of it all, the chilli-lemon-flavoured kernels were hard with over-roasting" (Shamsie, 2022, p.37).

Besides this simple pleasure of childhood, both the girls proved fortunate enough to witness the political turmoil and the happy democratic forces ended and new dictatorial powers gaining control which could not bring any type of break up in the mutual friendship bond even when they had a different set up of their respective families. Such was the strong bond of friendship in the beginning of their life. Similarly, both the girls were fortunate enough to witness the pleasure of restoration of democracy to Pakistan, votes and installation of a women prime minister in Pakistan. It was symbolic of women power also that is both the girls were excited and wanted to rise in the world; both were looking at their own powerful future in the rise of a women prime minister. "That way, there was no moment of history that at least one of them didn't witness. In the early morning, Zahra's parents came home and said the results were clear and it was time for everyone to sleep. Maryam and Zahra said no, there was something important for which they still needed to stay up. The adults, smiling and indulgent in a way that was new,

didn't argue. At dawn the two girls stepped out on to the balcony to watch the sun rise on a democratic Pakistan which would soon have Benazir as its Prime Minister" (Shamsie, 2022, p.70). The change introduced a new confidence in both the girls and they liked and appreciated to see that a woman was about to control the affairs of the country. This also ensured the female bonding.

The bonding kept on when the teenagers touched the maturity level. In the novel, the girls are portrayed as confident of each other and so could hide from the world what they wanted to. Maryam and Zahra were the secret and confident company of each other also. They could pass through difficult situations and share with their parents only that much which was necessary to keep them satisfied with their daughters. For example, after the full night adventure because of their class fellows Hammad and Jimmy, they decided not to reveal any details about "running red lights and cars sitting in darkness in the middle of the road and transactions that had certainly been criminal" (Shamsie, 2022, p.102). With the growing number of years and their socialization Maryam and Zahra developed into love for each other. For example, when Maryam would order chai paratha, she would do so for her friend too. In the same way, when Maryam became upset, sad, and felt pain, Zahra felt the same pain in her heart which she called love. Soon, the change of space occurred, and both the girls shifted to London, and this brought a level of maturity as well. Maryam became head of a tech company and Zahra too, appointed herself as a director of a company called CCL. Their friendship did not disappear, as occasionally, their business style faded and friends appeared again, whenever they were together. For example, while they discussed routine matters even in the company of their children, they were warm with their love for each other again. "The sociable Maryam of their teenage years had been replaced by a woman who guarded family time too much to be drawn into new friendships" (Shamsie, 2022, p.142). And again,

'Well, friends can be overrated.' Maryam laughed, glad to see the Director of CCL fading into the background and becoming her Za again.

‘So, what was that earlier? That look when Zola asked about sexual partners. Is there someone?’ ‘No,’ Zahra said. Then, ‘Just someone in the corner of my eye. Not even worth talking about.’ ‘Since when do we only talk about things that are worth talking about?’ But Zahra wouldn’t be drawn. It was nothing, she insisted. There’d been a moment of flirtation weeks ago, that was all. ‘Your usual type?’ Maryam said. Zahra shrugged. Maryam said, ‘Zahra!’ Zahra said, ‘Maryam.’ Forty years of friendship compressed an entire conversation into those few syllables. (Shamsie, 2022, p.157)

The intimacy and love for each other as girlfriends never eroded even in the hectic busy and very active life. These two girls kept on meeting each other and shared everything. Even their daughters and the near and dear ones also joined hands together because they belonged to these two. So, the friendship extended from one generation to the other. They had developed a lot of nostalgia because of their increasing age and responsibilities. But above love remained unstoppable.

The phone played a happy tune. It was Layla, calling to see how the evening was going. She would be listening to the ringing phone, imagining Zahra and Maryam sipping wine, laughing, swapping stories of childhood, the meal they’d cooked waiting to be devoured, the ornaments put away until they brought them back out next year for another Christmas together, much like the one before and the one before that. Maryam let the phone ring and ring, elbows braced on the breakfast bar, head in her hands. A monster. (271)

Keeping the aforesaid in view, it can be argued that, firstly the author has attempted to bend the gender norms of fictionalizing the story and secondly, the protagonists play the world of fiction through a stronger bond of female friendship. This is not a new experiment for the readers of postcolonial or postmodern because postcolonial literary theory has a resistive side also which emphasizes the bending of the normative and so the traditional significance of a male hero to make fictional story has been challenged and the story is made to exhibit its success through a bond of friendship between

the two female protagonists. But the aspect of super humans has been only realistically touched as per human nature. The struggle to challenge the traditional sociopolitical norms apparently looks more *Übermensch* in the beginning but not without passion for humanity along with a sense of competition and success. This is equally supported by the story when both the protagonists insist on their essential individual human nature.

The initial bonding between two young and teenaged girls is there being school fellows which is further strengthened because of their sharing of teenage secrets of the crushes for the boys. They grow up into young women and feel the energy of their youth which they express by talking and loving pictures of their favorite actors and heroes. Many a time Zahra visits the bedroom of Mariam, and they enjoy intimate moments for long time, watch movies together, listen to music and talk a lot. This bonding strengthens to the next level when they must spend night outside because of bad behavior of their classmates, Hamad and Jimmy. Mariam saves Zahra by taking blame on herself even when it was Zahra who wanted the company of Hamad. After completion of school, both the girls and their families undergo political stress because of the military regime and their life begins to alter in Pakistan. Both girls walk on separate paths of their life and big gaps begin to appear in their friendship but the stay in London unites them together. So, from the supervised friendship of two young females, they initiate next phase of their independent unguarded friendship as two independent social human beings, simultaneously inhabiting their individual circles and letting these circles inter cross each other as and when they wish to.

The friendship keeps on existing and the role of both the young women remains integral as protagonists of the story, but the sense of competition and social survival keeps them at bay from each other in the sense that intervals of longer time intervene between their friendship. Their marriages or interhuman relations also contribute to the lingering of the longer intervals. For example, Zahra marries man of her choice but always remains dissatisfied and so

keeps on changing her life partners and as a result deals with her emotional issues. She occasionally meets her friend. The similar situation, Maryam faces because of her not marrying anyone but a woman and keeping her daughter to raise at her home which causes her too busy and involved in the social set up of England. Their participation in politics and meeting with the political high ups of the English society continuously keeps them engaged. The social media app employed for images causes some disruption but is controlled soon. But these small businesses of life keep creating distances and keep them more engaged in their respective sphere. This begins to cross each other's when the past reiterates and reasserts itself with the same faces. Hammad and Jamshed both appear on the horizon of London. Mariam attempts to save Hammad which is crossed by Zahra. Zahra attempts to save Jimmy before he is expelled on the complaint by the immigration department. The past deepens the differences between the two so much so that Zahra comes out of the flat of Maryam and neither Maryam nor her daughter try to bring Maryam back and so the friendship and desire to rise and become significant also ends.

The type of sharing discussed above reflects the tendency of intense friendship among women even when they have migrated with other families. They develop and maintain friendships as if they would do so as a part of their communal behavior. They friend with each other as "a relations normally found between blood relatives, with a strong focus on empathy and responsiveness to others' needs. These close bonds may even have supported mutual childcare" (Campbell, 2013, p. 145 to 177), which men would never enjoy because of their equitable give and take nature and shifting tactical alliances. The portrayal of friendship also is an inquiry into the female friendship because a time comes when Zahra declares Mariam a monster and Mariam terms Zahra to be responsible for all her losses because of the unresolved issue of that night adventure with Jimmy in his FX and the issue of Mariam being thrown out of the flat by Layla in the presence of Zahra. All this remains unresolved, and Mariam

first avenges herself on Jimmy by getting him deported and separating him from his daughter. The life-long female friendship between and Mariam and Zahra reached the highest level of bitterness because "Over the course of years, female friendships get burdened by unresolved complaints, many of which we carry to our graves." (Vanishka quoted in Srivastava & Singh, 2023, p. 287)

This conflicting situation has its seeds in the class consciousness of society which counted Maryam always at an advantage position and Zahra as at a non-privileged one. Even the difference between the appearances of moms was realized. For example, Zahra Mother did not wear costly make up because costly make up was not available to her, and, so, Zahra's mother smelled like Talcum powder. "Maryam's mother is not necessarily more beautiful, just More "elaborately arranged." (Lodhi, 2022, Para 8). Above all these conflicts, the bond of friendship proved more enduring than feeble because the bond was established in childhood. "Childhood friendship really was the most mysterious of all relationships, it was built around rules that didn't extend to any other pairing in life. You weren't tied by blood, or profession, or an enmeshed domesticity or even—as was the case with friendships made in adulthood—much by common interests" (Nair, 2022, para 9).

This conflicting cum bonding paradigm in Shamsie's *Best of Friends* is an intricate Web of interlinked conflicts because of the temporality and spatially of the friendship. If, on the one hand, it is the friendship between the two very young teenagers, It is, on the hand, impacted by the growing years which brings disloyalty, ego and class consciousness. As the girls grow up, they meet multiple social standards which deliberately push them apart into their own worlds and so have a big strain on the mutual relationship. Besides, their friendship seemingly falls apart because of the political turmoil around, for example, the removal of popular political leader by a military dictator and its consequences among the masses in general brings lots of jolts and bumps into the life of young friends. "The novel is a meticulous study

of the ways in which political intervention in the personal space crumbles the friendship which had always seemed unbreakable. It makes a conscious effort to comprehend human vulnerabilities” (2023, p.281)

At the social level, the novel *Best of Friends* by Shamsie is an intricate attempt to explore and portray not simply the strengths and weaknesses of female friendship but also novel challenges the boundaries of traditional portrayal of the male protagonist. Here, two female protagonists play the main role of leading the story. But during the trajectory of life journey, their friendship experiences challenges and obstructions because of the world around them. This study aimed to explore these challenges as the gradually increasing force to snap the bond of two female friends. The study further investigated the model of female protagonists as the lead of the story. There has been an increasing tendency of giving more space to the female protagonists in fiction, especially in the modern novel. “Although the proportion of female protagonists has increased over this 60-year period, male protagonists remain overrepresented even in the 21st century. Despite ample evidence of gender bias in children’s books prior to 2000, there is a dearth of evidence on female gender representations in the 21st Century (Casey et al., 2021), particularly for books published in the UK”. (Lindahl-Wise, 2023, Para 8). Shobha De Women in her writings are portrayed in a quite exceptional and nonconformist way. Her novels are a blend of Romance, love, lust, hatred and extra marital relationship, but in an extravagant way. Shobha De’s women break all sorts of prohibitions and feel unconventional. Her novels highlight the vital reality and create awareness of women miseries and injustices subjected to them by their equivalents in the male-controlled society (p.30). Shamsie goes one step ahead by introducing female friends performing as the protagonists.

The two friends performing as protagonists is because of the friendship that initiates in childhood and sustains the ups and downs of life. The two girls, Zahra and Maryam studied at the same school and enjoyed each other more as

compared to the company of boys. Shamsie narrates the story with the same spirit of strong friendship when she says “Zahra, standing beside the archway that housed the brass bell, was using her height to look over the heads of all the girls and most of the boys, searching” (Shamsie, 2022, p.11). Zahra was less interested in seeing the boys and other interesting things and rather was trying to find her friend. Together they passed through the adolescent and innocent time of their life while they had to face a little embarrassment when they were stared at because they were growing into young women. Similarly, they preferred the love of their friendship instead of getting upset by the school psychology of the boys and girls around them or their parents at their respective homes even when both did not like many habits of each other family. Such was the strength of their friendship between them. “So, for instance, Maryam never discussed how embarrassed she was by the indolence of her parents’ lives, the superficiality of their concerns, so at odds with the kind of adult behaviour she saw in Zahra’s home. Even the names by which her parents were known to their friends –Toufiq and Zenobia shortened to Toff and Zeno – were caricatures compared to the solidity of the Alis, Habib and Shehnaz” (Shamsie, 2022, p.27). This solidarity of friends initiated in childhood and solidified in adulthood becomes the basis of their joint ventures in England as well in making them the successful women entrepreneurs. They kept on sharing their love with other with the same tone and style which strengthened them further to play protagonists or leading persons.

Conclusion

The argument that the author of *Best of Friends* has challenged the normative of gender in case of the protagonists of fictional narratives is almost feasibly assured herein. This aligns with the transformations and evolutions of the modern novel in the sense that it brought significant changes in the outlook and role of the protagonist; from being an absolute hero to a protagonist who attempts to be his maximum but without undergoing Shakespearean and Aristotelian concept grand hero. Like the postwar novel, the postcolonial novel too

challenged these traditional norms and so changed the look of the narrative. Shamsie too made her protagonist undergo similar experimentation and came out with a successful model of a pair of protagonists without caring for the end of the very roots of modern novel protagonists. The author modelled the protagonists as a prototype of the same yet a living human being with her full potential as women also. They live their life to the full and not allowing anyone to obstruct their way. They have their ambitions, emotions and desires and they exercise the same in the world for their personal happiness and to satisfy their sociopolitical and emotional needs. They stand apart in their efforts to justify their role in the story. Both the women friends exhibit the way of a life in the free world where fulfillment of life is available to them without the contribution of any male partner. They have their choices which they exercise even upon themselves to question, challenge and display as individual also and to claim their individuality yet with sense of companionship with each other also.

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