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Probing Interpersonal Dynamics: A Thematic Analysis of Kamila Shamsie's 'Best of Friends'

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Abstract

This research scrutinizes Kamila Shamsie's novel, "Best of Friends", authored in September 2022, employing a qualitative methodology and data analysis approach to discern major thematic elements. The study identifies five principal themes, encompassing ambivalence within friendships, societal norms and the suppression of desires, political and ethical decision-making, the construct of womanhood, and the motif of unhomeliness. This study applies Braun and Clarke's established six-phase thematic analysis framework (2006) to achieve its research objectives. The research expounds upon the interplay of these identified themes and their reverberations within the lives of the individuals central to the narrative, illuminating the intricacies that underpin the friendship between the main characters. Significantly, the analysis establishes a poignant connection between the novel's title, 'Best of Friends,' and the central theme of ambivalent friendships explored therein. This investigation not only advances comprehension of the thematic nuances within the novel but also underscores the depth and complexity of the issues it addresses. It serves as a foundational exploration, providing a springboard for future research on this recently published work and presenting a diverse array of narrative facets for scholarly inquiry.

Keywords: Kamila Shamsie, Best of Friends, Qualitative Analysis, Thematic Elements, Friendship Dynamics

Introduction

Henry Hudson explains in his book "An Introduction to the study of Literature" (1913) that Literature is a vital record of what men have seen in life, what they have experienced of it, and what they have thought and felt about those aspects of it that have the most immediate and enduring interest for all of us. It is thus fundamentally an expression of life through the medium of language. Since

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we are a community of human beings with a distinct shape and character, a distinct history, and a distinct relationship to the outside world, language inextricably links to us. Language and literature go hand in hand. They both have a part in the representation of realities (Hudson, 11).

According to Melakneh Mengistu the main notion and unifying concept of the tale is referred as the theme in "Fundamentals of Literature" (2006). According to this definition, the theme is the idea that conveys the narrative's meaning. It refers to the major notion that readers grasp after reading the entire text. The theme has a central position in a story as it explains the purpose of that particular piece of writing. Actually, the theme explores the hidden message and basic viewpoint of that text. (Mengistu, 63).

Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis framework is a systematic method for analyzing qualitative data. It involves familiarizing oneself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing a report. This iterative process helps researchers uncover rich insights from qualitative data and is widely used across various disciplines due to its flexibility and effectiveness in qualitative research.

"Best of Friends" is a British Pakistani novel by Kamila Shamsie, focusing on the friendship between two female characters, Maryam and Zahra, who suffer from patriarchy and societal limitations. The story is divided into two parts, focusing on their teenage years and their shared experiences. The novel begins in 1988, marking the start of a new term at a school, highlighting the modern era's characteristics: "The cool kids; the thuggish boys; the couples; the judgmental girls" (Shamsie 1). Zahra and Maryam, both 14 years old, are navigating their new phase of life, grappling with the emotional and psychological impact of their attraction to the opposite sex. The novel "Best of Friends" also represents a story about a friendship between Hammad and Najam, who discover their history and the consequences of their actions.

The protagonists, Maryam and Zahra, face challenges in their friendship, with Maryam attempting to restore it. Shamsie's writings often explore cross-cultural interactions, highlighting the burden of cultural history and familial expectations. The story highlights contrast between England and Pakistan, public and private spheres, political and personal, idealism and opportunism, and the wealthy and not so wealthy; this is the purpose of the researcher to investigate the notion building

on the themes of the represented characters through the said lens of Braun and Clarke's established six-phase thematic analysis framework (2006).

Textual Analysis

The study of discourse encompasses a myriad of informal organizational patterns, offering insights into the underlying structures that govern communication. Within the realm of conversational dynamics, individuals often make explicit references to the structure of discourse as it unfolds in real-time interactions (Faheem, A. 2020). Austin Warren and Rene Wellek, in their seminal work "Theory of Literature" (1956), posited that novelists possess a unique capacity to impart profound insights into the intricacies of human nature, surpassing even the deductions of psychologists 23). At the heart of any scholarly endeavour lies a unifying theme, which serves as the nucleus around which the study revolves. The concept of theme assumes a pivotal role in the realm of literary analysis, shedding light on the profound meanings interwoven within a given text.

Through the application of thematic analysis, a comprehensive exploration unfolds, delving into both the overt and covert layers of meaning embedded within a narrative. This analytical approach unveils the tapestry of human experiences, providing a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted dimensions of human character. The profound comprehension of human behavior, as facilitated by literature, stands as a cornerstone for societal advancement and progression. It is through this lens that we recognize literature's profound contribution towards the betterment of humanity, with an unwavering focus on the quintessence of the human condition (Warren and Wellek 23). In this pursuit, this study endeavors to delve into the intricacies of thematic analysis, unravelling the depths of human nature as presented through the medium of literature.

❖ Ambivalence in Interpersonal Relationships

In his seminal work "On Second Thought: How Ambivalence Shapes Your Life," psychologist William Miller astutely posits that the human psyche defies facile categorization, offering a realm of complexity far beyond dichotomous classifications. This inner world harbors a spectrum of emotions and intentions, where love and animosity, the desire to remain and the impulse to depart, as well as joy and sorrow, coalesce in intricate harmony (Miller, 2021). Such profound insights find a vivid manifestation in Kamila Shamsie's "Best of Friends." Noteworthy for its pronounced political undertones, the work serves to amplify the theme of

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ambivalence within the realm of complex human relationships. Despite their apparent closeness and genuine camaraderie, Maryam and Zahra grapple with a veiled layer of secrecy, introducing a discernible undercurrent of ambivalence.

In Kamila Shamsie's work, "Best of Friends," the author adeptly portrays the complex and enduring friendship between Zahra and Maryam. Commencing their companionship at the age of fourteen, the two girls embark on a decade-long journey of camaraderie, as evidenced by the poignant statement, "At fourteen, they were ten years into what might loosely be called friendship" (Shamsie, 2). Zahra, the daughter of a prominent cricket broadcaster in 1980s Karachi, astutely observes the underrepresentation of female friendships in American cinema, where they often assume secondary roles to romantic plotlines. However, Zahra's astute observations do not diminish the significance of her steadfast bond with Maryam, which remains a central aspect of her life.

Throughout the narrative, Shamsie masterfully unravels the multifaceted dimensions of their relationship, which she aptly terms as "the most mysterious of all relationships" (Shamsie 108). The storyline is enriched with intricate details of Zahra's friendship with Maryam, a classmate belonging to a post-partition business dynasty. Their formative years are characterized by after-school gatherings in each other's homes, where impassioned discussions about their aspirations and dreams serve as a backdrop to their evolving friendship.

Zahra's proclamation of enduring friendship, asserting that even a geographical separation as drastic as relocation to Alaska would not diminish their bond, stands as a poignant testament to the depth of their connection (Shamsie 3). Similarly, Maryam affirms her devotion to Zahra, exemplified by her unwavering determination to ensure her unhindered access, even in the face of stringent security measures. Maryam's declaration, "Zahra, I gave them a picture of you and said if anyone tries to stop you from entering, I'll have them fired," underscores the unwavering commitment and protective instinct that underlie their friendship (Shamsie, 3).

A pivotal aspect of the narrative revolves around Maryam's selective disclosure of her interactions with Hammad. While the girls typically share everything, Maryam consciously withholds her encounters with Hammad from Zahra, introducing an element of secrecy and deceit into their friendship (Shamsie, 14). This first lie, as termed by the narrator, represents a breach in their previously transparent dynamic (Shamsie). As the narrative progresses, Maryam extends this pattern of secrecy to

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her contact with Babar, further emphasizing her reluctance to fully disclose her relationship with Zahra. This withholding of information hints at a deeper ambivalence within Maryam, which is echoed in Zahra's own concealed interactions with Hammad, specifically their private messages harboring (Shamsie).

The dialogue between Zahra and Hammad unveils Zahra's growing realization that Maryam is harboring secrets, further accentuating the strained nature of their friendship. Zahra's reluctance to expose Maryam to certain influences, as seen in her offer to introduce her to the video wallah, underscores her protective stance towards her friend (Shamsie, 57).

In Kamila Shamsie's novel "Best of Friends," the enduring friendship between Maryam and Zahra is punctuated by a pivotal misadventure during their formative years at the age of 14. This ill-fated car ride with Hammad and Jimmy sets in motion a chain of events with somber repercussions. Notably, Maryam assumes sole responsibility for the incident, bearing the weight of blame entirely upon her, demonstrating a profound dedication to their friendship (Shamsie 78). She confides in Zahra, expressing her fear of jeopardizing their bond in the face of potential consequences, revealing a testament to the depth of their connection (Shamsie, 79).

The incident serves as a turning point in the portrayal of their long-term relationship. Contrary to their claims of absolute transparency and unwavering trust, both Maryam and Zahra harbor secrets from each other, revolving around a singular figure, Hammad. This reveals a layer of complexity in their friendship, challenging the notion of absolute openness (Shamsie).

As time progresses, the intricate dynamics of their companionship are unveiled. Maryam's lamentation about the dwindling conversational depth after four decades of friendship highlights the evolving nature of their relationship (Shamsie, 118). Despite this, Maryam remains fiercely protective of Zahra, even in light of Zahra's occasional emotional distance (Shamsie, 142).

Shamsie encapsulates Maryam's perspective with the poignant reflection, "Best friendship wasn't a vast expanse of time anymore; it was being there when it mattered" (Shamsie, 171). This sentiment underscores the evolving nature of their bond, shifting from sheer duration to the profound significance of pivotal moments.

The revelation of Zahra's affection for Hammad precipitates a clash of emotions, with Maryam expressing a sense of betrayal, challenging the very essence of their friendship (Shamsie, 203). This conflict culminates in a mutual exchange of blame

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for the ill-fated car ride, with Zahra pointing an accusatory finger at Maryam for orchestrating the events (Shamsie 204).

"Best of Friends" masterfully portrays the evolution of a long-term friendship, replete with moments of accountability, concealment, and emotional turmoil. The misadventure at its core serves as a catalyst, unraveling and unravelling the intricacies of their companionship. Through the lens of Maryam and Zahra's relationship, Shamsie delves into the complexities inherent in enduring friendships, challenging conventional notions of transparency and loyalty. This nuanced exploration prompts readers to contemplate the multifaceted nature of human connections and how they are navigated over time.

Shamsie's narrative deftly navigates this question, offering a nuanced exploration characterized by introspection and unforeseen narrative twists. Despite the complexities woven into the storyline, a note of optimism prevails, embodied by Maryam's resolute declaration, "We'll make this OK. We'll fix it" (Shamsie, 209), signaling the potential for reconciliation and redemption. This denouement prompts a profound reflection on the prerequisites of genuine friendship, underscoring the necessity for a shared intimacy of thought. The resonance of habits and perspectives emerges as a pivotal factor in the cultivation of a successful and enduring friendship. Furthermore, the cornerstone of a healthy and affirming bond lies in the presence of sincerity, loyalty, and unwavering trust.

❖ Normative of Social Constructs & Inner Desire Constraints

In Kamila Shamsie's novel "Best of Friends," an intricate exploration of psychological nuances between the protagonists, Maryam and Zahra, unfolds. As the story progresses, the focal point shifts towards the commencement of a new academic year for these two individuals, marking a crucial juncture in their personal and psychological journeys. Zahra, occupying the central role, emerges as a discerning, perceptive, and intellectually astute character. Hailing from a family where educational pursuits are held in high regard - her mother assuming the position of a school principal in Karachi and her father serving as a cricket broadcaster - Zahra is nurtured in an environment steeped in academic rigor and refinement. This upbringing instilled in her a deep-seated reverence for tradition from an early age, endowing her with a maturity of thought that is remarkable for someone of her age. Her educational aspirations are keenly directed towards securing a scholarship in Britain or obtaining financial aid in America, a testament to her unwavering commitment to academic excellence (Shamsie, 6).

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Yet, beneath this exterior of composure, Zahra grapples with an inner turmoil of suppressed desires, emblematic of the societal constraints embedded in Pakistani culture. Her yearning for intimate proximity with the opposite gender is juxtaposed against the prevailing norms that impose significant restrictions on the outward expression of such inclinations. This inner struggle is subtly conveyed when, within the sanctum of Maryam's home, Zahra hesitates before bestowing a kiss upon a male figure's photograph. This act serves as a poignant illustration of Zahra's internal strife, reflecting her dedication to upholding the conventions and expectations placed upon her (Shamsie, 15). Zahra's internal narrative underscores the tension between her innate desires and the societal strictures that govern her behavior endeavour.

In her endeavor to conform to the ideals of an exemplary daughter, student, and citizen, Zahra undergoes a continual process of self-suppression. While Pakistani society venerates its cultural heritage and traditions, it occasionally imposes constraints on individual autonomy. Zahra, though not overtly rebellious, navigates this environment with a sense of inner disquiet, perpetually contemplating her perceived disconnection from her cultural milieu. This underlying tension is most palpably expressed in Zahra's aspirations for the United Kingdom, emblematic of her sense of alienation from her native culture and its established norms.

The narrative unveils Zahra's intimate yet confined sentiments, culminating in behaviors that reflect the extremities of her emotional struggle. This internal conflict, if left unaddressed, has the potential to cultivate a sense of suppressed individuality or, in some cases, even evoke a rebellious disposition. While Zahra refrains from overt acts of defiance, she grapples with a discernible disconnect within her persona. This complex interplay of cultural expectations and individual yearnings forms a prominent theme in her character development, offering a profound insight into the intricate tapestry of human psychology and cultural influence.

“I wanted someone else to make her feel the way she made herself feel late at night” (Shamsie 20). The novel depicts Pakistani culture, highlighting contradictions in her thinking and actions, leading to psychological conflict due to the need to accept sexual desires as basic needs. Zahra, a character in Shamsie, is a happy individual who fulfills suppressed desires in her imaginative world. Despite her family's traditions, she cannot let go of her internal desires. At 40, she admits her liking for

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Hammad, shocking Maryam and the reader. This revelation highlights the contrast between friendship and love. Zahra's family, supported by her father Habib Ali, values her intelligence, simplicity, and innocence. Maryam's parents also admire her, recognizing her as a smart, well-mannered, and thoughtful friend (Shamsie, 15).

The middle-aged man responds, "Rundi," and Zahra feels embarrassed at her immoral act afterwards. "She recognized immediately the feeling of shame that had come upon her the moment when the man called her prostitute." (Shamsie, 30) It implies her awareness of morality and ethical values. She is mature enough to differentiate between good and evil. She is helpless in front of her natural instinct. The crucial social norms are a great hindrance for her. In Pakistani society, men are also in charge of women's emotions. (Faheem, A. 2022)

The novel's most shocking scene involves a car ride with Jimmy, revealing harsh realities in Pakistan. Zahra's suppressed desires and family background prevent her from expressing them openly, leading to a question mark over her friendship. Maryam later reveals this reality. "But you are the one who opened the car door. You are the one who stepped inside. But I couldn't say no to you" (Shamsie, 204). Zahra's friendship with Maryam ultimately leads to nothing, highlighting the impact of society on individual destiny. Despite her social status, she experiences an unsuccessful marriage. "My husband was offered a job in New York, which he didn't feel he could turn down. When I decided to stay in London, the marriage ended" (Shamsie, 94).

Within the confines of societal norms, Zahra finds herself constrained, unable to openly explore her natural desires. Instead, she retreats into her thoughts, delving into imagined intimacies with the opposite gender. This internal struggle remains a topic too delicate to broach with her confidante, Maryam, as cultural conventions dictate such discussions to be inappropriate and uncultured. This prevailing constraint impedes individuals from seeking the necessary guidance when grappling with such emotions, disproportionately affecting females in this context. Zahra carries the weight of this inner turmoil in solitude, skillfully concealing her sentiments. From a psychological standpoint, Zahra's character manifests duality, a direct consequence of her suppressed desires, setting her apart from the comparatively straightforward disposition of Maryam.

A poignant manifestation of Zahra's internal conflict materializes when she embarks on a romantic entanglement with a Sri Lankan mathematician, subsequently becoming entangled in an affair with her law tutor. This series of events serves to

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underscore the intricate nature of Zahra's character, characterized by a propensity for intricate emotional dynamics (Shamsie 120). These actions unveil the multifaceted layers of her inner world, offering insight into the profound impact of societal restrictions on her emotional expression and decision-making processes.

Maryam faces mental agony and dissatisfaction due to her family's suppression of her desire for revenge. She loses everything, including her family, career, and dream, to run Khan Leather. This socially traditional behavior hinders her personality development and leads to a deficiency in self-respect. At 40, she remembers this tragic incident and feels sad. Maryam and Zahra's psychological conflict creates a twist in the narrative, enhancing the reader's interest. Maryam's patriarchal father and Zahra's family limitations are external forces that may influence her personality development.

❖ Feminine Identity and Expression

“The predominant patriarchal culture in the country fosters the subordination of women and therefore places women on the margins of society. In other words, in the socio- political, economic, and educational spheres, women have experienced and continue to experience discrimination and underrepresentation based on gender” (Women’s Marginalization, 2021).

Kamila Shamsie's novel "Best of Friends" intricately examines the constraints and underestimations women face within the confines of Pakistani society. Maryam, positioned as the anticipated successor to her grandfather's leather enterprise, grapples with the weighty burden of substantial expectations while enjoying the privileges afforded by affluence, including a fortified residence safeguarded by the trappings of military influence. In contrast, Zahra possesses fewer material luxuries but hails from a refined and educated family background. The novel serves as a poignant commentary on the prevailing patriarchal norms entrenched in Pakistani society, where Maryam and Zahra find themselves constrained and marginalized by the overarching constructs of femininity and gender bias. This is exemplified in the observation that "In Karachi, men stared if you were a girl" (Shamsie, 8).

Dr. Naima Tabassum, in her work "Women in Pakistan," expounds on the composite nature of Pakistani culture, influenced by diverse ethnic, religious, and sectarian subcultures. She underscores how this amalgamation imposes stringent limitations on the roles and status of women. In the patriarchal context of Pakistan, men exercise dominion over women across all facets of social existence. The prevalent social, political, economic, and religious frameworks perpetuate and fortify the

authority of Pakistani males within a significant sector of society. This results in less favorable conditions for women in areas such as politics, economics, health, and education as compared to their male counterparts (2016).

Maryam's grandfather, a figure of influence in her life, consistently encourages her to be assertive and self-assured, motivating her to eventually assume control of his leather enterprise due to the absence of a male heir. He has nurtured in her a sense of self-assuredness typically associated with males from a young age. Yet, there is a palpable sense of regret in her grandfather's sentiments for not having any grandsons, only three granddaughters, a sentiment he often expresses with a tinge of melancholy: "Three daughters and no sons" (Shamsie, 14).

In this dynamic, Maryam emerges as the logical choice to navigate this circumstance, a responsibility she assumes with a mixture of joy and emotion: "Responsibility must fall to Maryam" (Shamsie, 8). While her mother, Zeno, initially leans towards prioritizing Maryam's education over familial obligations, her voice is often disregarded, a consequence of her gender. The patriarchal authority of Maryam's grandfather ultimately prevails over the reservations of Zeno, and Maryam, too, aligns with her grandfather's perspective, inadvertently contributing to the perpetuation of conventional gender norms. Even on the cricket field, the ostensibly progressive "Patriarch Maryam's grandfather" appears tethered to traditional and bourgeois conceptions of femininity.

Kamila Shamsie adeptly portrays Pakistani society through a distinctive lens, depicting a populace that may possess education and open-mindedness, yet still views women through a specific, often traditional, perspective (Faheem, A. 2022). This perspective is deeply rooted in the local customs, religious beliefs, and cultural norms that shape the societal understanding of gender dynamics. In this patriarchal framework, women are relegated to subordinate roles, subject to the authority wielded by males. This is succinctly captured in the sentiment expressed: "There is no justice in this world for girls, is there?" (Shamsie, 79).

The study "Pakistani Women and Traditional Values: The Role of Culture in Work-Life Balance" concludes that the lives of women in Pakistan are significantly influenced by cultural factors, which have a considerable impact on their ability to navigate the demands of work and family life. The delicate balance between these spheres is profoundly influenced by prevailing cultural norms and the increasing representation of women in the Pakistani workforce (Ibrahim and Shakir, 2021).

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Shamsie masterfully illustrates the traditional attitudes of Pakistani males towards females in the narrative. Zahra's father, while genuinely loving his daughter and providing her with a comfortable life, also exhibits a level of trust in her capabilities. When Zahra overhears her father engaging in a conversation, Habib Ali confidently addresses his cousin's disapproval of co-education, reaffirming his unwavering faith in Zahra. This incident evokes a complex mix of pride and the weight of living up to such immense trust within Zahra. However, it is noteworthy that Zahra is groomed traditionally from childhood, embodying obedience and restraint in contrast to her parents' more progressive outlook.

The weight of responsibility borne by these women is indeed considerable, placing a significant burden on their shoulders. When a woman is acutely aware of societal expectations and strives to uphold her family's honor, she must often navigate a delicate balance, often suppressing her desires and aspirations. This theme is prominently reflected in Zahra's experiences. Maryam's grandfather envisions a future for her marked by boldness and confidence, potentially even as a business leader. However, his vision is rooted in his entrenched mindset, leading to instances of harsh reprimand, as demonstrated when Maryam visits his office, a space where she is meant to assume ownership in the future. The starkness of her grandfather's rebuke, so contrary to their usual interactions, is strikingly evident: "Get out!" (Shamsie, 28).

His reluctance to permit Maryam to meet Billu, based solely on his presence in the office, is emblematic of an unjustified bias. While Billu is indeed a stranger and involved in illicit activities, Maryam's treatment is primarily a reflection of her gender. It is a demonstration of gender discrimination and a manifestation of traditional male attitudes. Maryam's attempts to assert herself and insist on her eventual role in the business are met with dismissive retorts, exemplifying the patriarchal desire to control and manipulate her: "If you want me to introduce you to people who'll one day have to take you seriously, don't walk into my office looking like you've been in one of those Indian movies where rain drenches the woman in a white sari" (Shamsie 29).

Such patriarchal tendencies persist in Maryam's grandfather's ongoing desire for her to embody fearlessness, a trait he perceives as starkly distinct from the perceived softness and foolishness he associates with other girls (Shamsie, 43). Shamsie adeptly captures the deeply ingrained traditional beliefs held by Pakistani males, offering readers an opportunity for reflection through the nuanced experiences of

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these two young women. As they navigate their internal conflicts, their once uncomplicated relationship becomes tinged with ambiguity. The incident of the ill-fated car ride stands as a potent illustration of these entrenched attitudes. Although the evening's events unfold unintentionally, the aftermath is substantial. While Hammad's departure from school is a consequence, the fallout for Maryam and Zahra, both female, carries far more weight. This incident, as Shamsie poignantly portrays, underscores the unequal burden borne by women due to their gender. Maryam's protective actions towards Zahra serve as a poignant reminder of the challenges faced by women in such circumstances and the resilience they demonstrate in the face of adversity.

Maryam confides in Zahra, grappling with the weight of her womanhood: "I'm just a girl" (Shamsie, 89). Her poignant question, "There is no justice in this world for girls. Is there?" (79), encapsulates the challenges and inequalities that women face in society. Kamila Shamsie astutely highlights the political landscape, mentioning Benazir as the Prime Minister of Pakistan. Despite such notable strides, patriarchal norms remain deeply entrenched in our society, making it challenging for men to fully embrace women in positions of power, even if they desire to do so. Maryam's observations about women's empowerment through the example of Benazir elicit a patriarchal response from her grandfather: "A girl is running a country" (Shamsie, 83). His retort reflects the persistent challenges faced by women in positions of authority: "She'll never run anything. Even now, we're hearing more about her husband than we are about her" (Shamsie, 84).

The plot's progression in the latter half of the narrative may appear somewhat forced with elements from the initial storyline coming together in a way that feels orchestrated. The Guardian aptly describes Zahra as "a Muslim immigrant woman who, since assuming the role of director at Britain's oldest civil liberties organization a decade ago (Shamsie), has emerged as the conscience of Britain" (Shamsie, 6). This characterization underscores the significant impact Zahra has on the broader socio-political landscape, embodying a powerful voice for civil liberties and social justice.

The pervasive influence of patriarchal power takes a toll on Maryam's sense of self. The stark experiences of her early adolescence have left an indelible mark on her psyche. She now perceives the fundamental differences in how men and women carry themselves: "Men strode, owning the world. Women walked with smaller steps, watched, and were watchful" (Shamsie 75). This transformation in her

perspective is startling. Despite her prominent position in her social sphere, she is a changed individual, grappling with inner turmoil. Throughout the narrative, her inability to seek retribution against Jimmy for the disgrace she endured weighs heavily on her: "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, 106).

In the latter half of the narrative, Maryam is taken aback and deeply fearful when her daughter, Zola, expresses a desire to venture out into the world alone. This unexpected request at such a young age leaves Maryam apprehensive, unwilling to let Zola face potential dangers on her own: "The racists, the homophobes, the Jimmys—so many routes to girl fear" (Shamsie 115). A newspaper report from London further emphasizes the grave reality of gender discrimination and marginalization, highlighting the distressing case of a thirteen-year-old schoolgirl's attempted suicide due to bullying (Shamsie, 113).

As the narrative unfolds, it becomes evident that the systems governing society mirror the flaws and complexities inherent in its human inhabitants. Kamila Shamsie, a skilled and empathetic writer, uses her voice to address pressing issues in a world increasingly dominated by sound bites and tweets. The trust she places in her readers to discern the emotional resonance within her adult characters' recollections of girlhood and their experiences in another nation is a testament to her faith in her audience.

Maryam and Zahra, as women, exemplify a selfless dedication to their families. Their willingness to sacrifice for their loved ones ultimately leads them towards a sense of alienation and a complex bond of friendship. This poignant portrayal serves as a powerful reminder of the challenges faced by women in navigating societal expectations and gendered roles.

❖ Political Realities and Ethical Decision-Making

Within the novel "Best of Friends" by Kamila Shamsie, the author deftly portrays not only the societal fabric of Pakistan but also sheds light on its intricate political landscape. As a contemporary writer, Shamsie consistently gravitates towards exploring modern trends and endeavors to raise awareness among her readers regarding prevalent national issues. In an interview “The Politics of Being Best of

Friends" with Torsa Ghosal, Shamsie answered a question about politics and friendship as:

"All those posts about 'lose your friends with politics'--- I will be surprised if very many of them came from Pakistanis. When I went to university in America, and I was writing, people started to make comments about bringing politics into fiction, as though politics was something that stood outside. But when I was growing up, it wasn't something standing outside of daily life. Some of my earliest memories include the day Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was hanged when I was six" (Shamsie, Interview 2022).

The novel navigates the political landscape, chronicling the transition from General Zia ul-Haq's regime to the impending government of Benazir Bhutto. The sudden demise of Pakistan's military dictator, General Zia ul-Haq, in a tragic aircraft crash, occurring just hours after Zahra's father defies one of his directives, sends shockwaves through the nation. As news of his passing reaches Zahra's family, the atmosphere is one of disbelief and unrest, encapsulated in Shehnaz Ali's exclamation, "He's dead! He's dead…someone finally killed him" (Shamsie 39). This event sets off a wave of upheaval across the country. Simultaneously, Maryam, while eager to discuss the matter with Zahra, hesitates, recognizing the limitations of a telephone conversation: "His plane exploded" (Shamsie, 40).

In addition to the political turmoil, Shamsie unravels the intricate webs of conspiracy and Machiavellian tactics employed by politicians, providing readers with an insightful portrayal of how they entangle the populace in their machinations. Journalists, who endeavour to expose such cunning strategies, often face illegal barriers. Habib Ali, a broadcaster for Three Slips, grapples with the mental strain of this environment. Zahra, deeply caring for her father, advises caution when navigating such perilous political waters, warning, "They'll hurt you" (Shamsie, 35). Habib Ali, cognizant of the potential repercussions, acknowledges the prevalent suppression of dissenting voices, citing the example of Iqbal Bano, who faced restrictions for singing a Faiz poem: "At worst, he'll ban me from the airwave, as they did to Iqbal Bano" (Shamsie 35). However, Shamsie underscores that even in the face of such unjust treatment, genuine voices will find avenues to express themselves, as evidenced by Habib Ali's resolve: "I'll still have the newspaper column" (Shamsie, 35).

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Three decades later, Zahra confronts the plight of an Afghan acquaintance facing the rejection of his plea for an indefinite stay in a London detention facility. Yet, the climax of the conflict between the main characters feels belated, a conflict that should have transpired three decades earlier—a point Zahra seems to comprehend far earlier than the narrative's progression suggests. In 1988, with Pakistan emerging from the shadows of authoritarianism and embracing a promising future under Benazir Bhutto's leadership, the girls transitioned into adulthood, facing uncertainties about the impact this new era would have on their lives ("Benazir elections" Shamsie, 40). The innocence of their childhood years fades, replaced by a newfound awareness of the complexities of the world they are entering.

In a recent interview with Scott Simon, Kamila Shamsie provides insight into the political backdrop that informs her novel "Best of Friends." She reflects on the enduring rule of the dictator Zia ul-Haq, noting that his reign began when she was just four years old. The idea of his demise and the advent of democratic elections seemed inconceivable to her at the time ("Kamila Shamsie's novel Best of Friends Asks if All Friendships are Meant to Last" 2022).

Maryam, in contrast, approaches the political shift with a heightened sensitivity, anticipating positive changes in a nation transitioning back to democracy. She envisions a future where women can fully embrace their femininity while enjoying equal rights.

Following Zia's reign, Benazir Bhutto assumed the role of Prime Minister under the PPP government. The military now salutes her, a stark contrast to the past when she endured the loss of her father, imprisonment, and exile. This shift in power underscores the volatile and often self-serving nature of politics, where control over the populace and their sentiments is a coveted prize.

Shamsie's work resonates with the ideas of prominent political philosopher and feminist thinker Iris Marion Young (1949–2006), as evidenced in essays such as "On Female Body Experience, Throwing like a Girl," among others. Young astutely observes that in modern consumerist culture, women often do not fully utilize the spatial potential of their bodies, displaying caution, uncertainty, and reticence in their movements. This dual reluctance stems from a lack of self-belief on one hand and societal mistrust of their physical prowess on the other (Young 2005). Maryam's realization of her newfound vulnerability and the need to navigate her changing

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body speaks to this disparity: "a target now, her body a target" (Shamsie, 75). She begins to understand the marked difference in how men and women move through the world: "Men strode, owning the world. Women walked with smaller steps, watched, and were watchful" (Shamsie 75).

"Best of Friends" stands as a poignant and thought-provoking work of literature, delving into the complexities of its characters, showcasing their imperfections, self-interest, and capacity for love without resorting to simplistic solutions for intricate ethical dilemmas. Through its compelling narrative, the novel unveils the dynamics of power, its transformative potential, and the ease with which the oppressed can become oppressors. At the narrative's core are Maryam and Zahra, both relatively young and still maturing, navigating their lives amidst the waning days of Zia-ul-Haq's military rule in Pakistan. The first half of the novel unfolds in Karachi during the late 1980s, immersing the reader in the teenage world of school, infatuations, fashion, illicit films, Walkman music, and the ubiquitous presence of George Michael posters.

While Zahra emerges as the academically-driven and politically-aware daughter of a prominent TV cricket anchor, Maryam embodies vivacity and privilege, hailing from a wealthy leather business family, accustomed to chauffeur-driven rides and London vacations. Yet, their differing backgrounds fail to impede the blossoming of their friendship.

Ironically, as Benazir Bhutto assumes leadership, Maryam welcomes a female head of state with a sense of satisfaction, viewing it as an embodiment of women's empowerment. This notion injects a sense of worth, significance, and confidence into the girls of that era, who idolize Benazir. In this respect, Maryam becomes a poignant representation of the aspirations and sentiments of ordinary women navigating a traditional patriarchal environment.

"Maryam's contemplations often revolved around a potential encounter with Benazir" (Shamsie 68). However, an unexpected incident—a car ride with two young men—fundamentally alters the trajectory for both protagonists. This segment, marked by its substantial length, emotional depth, and astute portrayal, poignantly captures the heightened sensitivity of adolescent girls, or what Maryam aptly terms 'female terror'. Shamsie excellently illustrates the enduring influence of traditional bourgeois ideologies. Instead of embracing a country led by a woman, men seem

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resistant to accepting the evolving norms of Pakistani society. They cling steadfastly to antiquated notions that fail to elevate the status of women. Maryam contends, "A girl is running a country" (Shamsie, 83). To this, the patriarchal grandfather retorts, "She'll never run anything. Even now, we're hearing more about her husband than we are about her" (Shamsie, 84).

❖ Exploring the Notion of 'Unhomeliness'

The narrative unfolds against the backdrop of both Pakistan and London, spanning a prolonged phase of friendship. As a Pakistani author, Shamsie draws from her own experiences, highlighting the challenges faced by individuals when they are away from their homeland. Maryam, hailing from an affluent background, often spends her vacations abroad. At the onset of the term, she reflects, "There was no one in London she could talk to about this" (Shamsie, 9). Her time in London is marked by a sense of dissatisfaction, with a lack of companionship and the added responsibility of caring for young children when her family members are away. Conversely, her return to Karachi brings a sense of mental contentment and confidence. Here, she finds it easier to express her desires and lead a life characterized by serenity and satisfaction, despite the prevalent security concerns and lawlessness. She takes pride in her ability to discern underlying meanings in her interactions: "Back in Karachi, she'd prided herself on her skill at reading subtexts" (Shamsie, 9).

Maryam and Zahra share a close friendship and attend the same school, but their backgrounds and aspirations differ. While Maryam often ventures abroad during her vacations, Zahra harbors ambitions of securing a scholarship to pursue higher education in London. Zahra's contemplation about life's purpose prompts reflection: "Do you think everyone has a purpose in life, or do we invent purpose to stop feeling irrelevant?" (Shamsie, 11). Maryam grapples with a response, offering her ambitions within Khan Leather as an answer, but Zahra discerns it as ambition, not a purpose. Their perspectives diverge on various matters.

Maryam's sense of 'otherness' in London gives way to a profound sense of belonging as she embarks on a new term in her homeland. Here, she revels in a more relaxed and familiar atmosphere, free from the formalities that marked her time abroad. In this context, she gains a deeper understanding of the concepts of 'belonging' and 'home', much akin to Zahra's comprehension of 'purpose' and 'irrelevance'. It is a realization that transcends mere semantics: "This is what was meant by 'belonging'

and ‘home’, words she understood in the same way that Zahra understood ‘purpose’ and 'irrelevant’" (Shamsie, 11).

Maryam's mother consistently underscores Zahra's aspiration for higher education in London, opposing the wishes of her grandfather for Zahra to take over the family business in Pakistan. Maryam, on the other hand, aligns herself with her grandfather's ideas. Given the absence of a male heir, the responsibility naturally falls to Maryam. She often visualizes her challenging experiences in London, where she grapples with feelings of displacement, isolation, and an overly formal environment. "Elsewhere was where no one was" (Shamsie, 14). This sentiment is mirrored by Zahra, who reassures Maryam, "We'll always be us" (Shamsie, 16). Her unwavering loyalty to her friend deters her from considering studying abroad, despite the security concerns in Karachi.

Even during her drives, Maryam is accompanied by Abu Baker, the trusted driver, providing her with a sense of comfort and familiarity. Shamsie underscores the significance of intimacy in one's life, a fundamental element for sound mental well-being. Regrettably, the unfortunate car ride incident Maryam to leave her homeland. Her mother, Zeno, is in favor of this decision, seeing it as a means to liberate Maryam from societal norms surrounding sexuality (Shamsie 109). In the latter part of the novel, after spending three decades in London, Maryam's parents contemplate returning to Karachi, yearning for an environment imbued with a sense of independence and homeliness. With the sale of Khan Leather, Maryam's father finds himself with ample leisure time, courtesy of his wife's astute property investments. They envision a seamless reintegration into the fabric of Karachi life, as "Home had always been a place waiting for them" (Shamsie, 109).

While Maryam's mother envisions engaging in "ladies' teas" and contributing to "charity boards," her father anticipates continuing his pursuits in crosswords, outdoor activities, and socializing, all in their native country. "They would slip so easily back into Karachi life" (Shamsie, 109). When Zola expresses a desire to venture out on her own, Maryam is not only taken aback but also filled with trepidation. The thought of her child navigating a world she perceives as fraught with potential dangers fills her with fear. She reflects on the challenges one might face in England, including racism, homophobia, and encounters with individuals like Jimmy (Shamsie, 115).

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Maryam ultimately acquiesces to Zola's request, permitting her to venture into the park alone. She provides explicit instructions for Zola to call her immediately should any issues arise. In a gesture of added security, Maryam holds the phone herself, observing a rapidly moving blue dot on the screen as it approaches the park. She reassures Zola of the park's safety measures, including the presence of CCTV cameras. Zahra, however, chuckles at the notion, remarking, "I promise you, the police aren't going to go search through CCTV footage to find someone who makes a black kid feel uncomfortable on the streets of London" (Shamsie, 116).

Zahra expresses skepticism regarding the equitable use of surveillance technology, sharing her belief in its biased application in England. Drawing from her involvement with the Centre for Civil Liberties, where she engages with members of Britain's oldest civil liberties organization, Zahra possesses a nuanced understanding of the prevailing attitudes among the English populace. Her firsthand experiences in her civil role provide her with a deep insight into the realities of racism in London. Maryam occasionally finds Zahra's perspectives on racism to be somewhat exaggerated, contemplating whether they stem from a sense of humor or a genuine determination to detect racism in every corner of England (Shamsie, 116). In response, Zahra asserts simply, "They're racist" (Shamsie, 117).

Conclusion

In Kamila Shamsie's book "Best of Friends", the novel explores the complexity of friendship, cultural conventions, political realities, and the need for belonging. The story revolves around the friendship between Maryam and Zahra, highlighting how expectations and dynamics change as people grow and mature. The novel explores the concept of "undecided friendship," which highlights the mental and emotional disruption caused by true relationships based on acceptance, trust, and support.

Friendship is a unique and complex relationship that demands acceptance, trust, and support. In Pakistan, female friendships are more sensitive, with women seeking direct communication, emotional support, and physical interaction. Social norms, particularly in traditional bonding societies, can affect female friendships, leading to compromises and sacrifices. Repression, a form of repression, is a common symptom of mental illness and can lead to psychological trauma. The novel emphasizes the need for flexibility in social norms to support female friendships and

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promote value in individuals, regardless of gender discrimination, for the betterment of society.

Feminism involves acting in a feminine or girlish manner, with different cultural understandings. Society should respect females and allow them to fulfil their instincts. The patriarchal system should not be rigid and encourage females to show their capabilities. Shamsie explores the lives of Zahra and Maryam, revealing their unconventional behavior and challenges. Political stability is crucial for a country's development, economic success, and survival. Unhomeliness, a feeling of being stuck between two competing cultures, destroys mental peace and human activity. Positive and passionate relationships have health benefits, such as less stress, quicker recovery, healthier habits, and longer life spans.

Families play a crucial role in social development, upbringing, education, and socialization. Positive understanding between family members is essential, and generation gaps should not hinder personality development. Maryam's family mistrusted her, while Zahra's family suppressed her personality due to excessive family norms. Family rules must be flexible and family ownership is essential for a healthy and supportive environment.

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