

Framing Power through Portrayal of Politics in Fiction and Its Sociopolitical Perceptions

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Abstract: Shamsie, in her novel *Best of Friends*, explores the resilience and complexities of female bonding and its profound impact on the protagonists' social lives within the broader framework of contemporary politics in both Pakistan and the United Kingdom. In line with many Pakistani postcolonial writers, Shamsie intricately portrays the intersection of personal relationships and political structures, demonstrating how governance, power, and migration shape individual experiences. The two protagonists navigate multiple phases of Pakistani politics, ranging from military dictatorship to democratic interludes, while also confronting the dynamics of immigrant politics in the United Kingdom—the former colonial power. This paper investigates the extent to which contemporary politics permeates the sociopolitical realities of the protagonists, assessing whether these influences strengthen or disrupt their lifelong friendship. By employing a postcolonial lens, the study examines selected passages to analyze the interconnectivity between political shifts and the continuity of female friendship. A key concern of this research is whether Shamsie's inclusion of political themes serves as a reminder of Pakistan's colonial past or as an act of postcolonial resistance—a recurring motif in Pakistani postcolonial literature. The study ultimately argues that Shamsie's deliberate engagement with contemporary politics reflects a critical exploration of how political forces shape the identities and lived experiences of Pakistani women. This portrayal not only underscores the persistence of colonial legacies but also highlights the agency of female protagonists in navigating political and social transformations.

Keywords: Contemporary Politics, Female Friendship, Postcolonial Identity, Postcolonial Resistance, Sociopolitical Identity, Immigrant Politics.

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1. Introduction

Literature has always been a dynamic site for negotiating political consciousness instead of acting simply as a passive reflection of society, and as such, it has been a crucial factor in shaping the political and cultural landscapes of its time. Bakhtin (1981) declared that fiction can be the source of subversion of authority because of its polyphonic nature that allows it to carry multiple voices and perspectives and to possibly undermine singular, authoritative discourse [1]. This aligns Bakhtin with Foucault (1977), who stressed that power is constructed through discourses of fiction, which becomes a site for alternative discourses that resist and disrupt dominant power structures. Gramsci extended this idea by suggesting that literature not only challenges or reinforces political hegemony but also actively participates in shaping public

opinion. He emphasized that the intellectuals, through their discourses, use cultural production to either uphold or question the status quo [2]. Althusser (1970) similarly emphasized the ideological function of literature and argued that literature may serve the state by reinforcing dominant ideologies or, conversely, act as a space for ideological critique [3]. Rancière (2004) takes this further by asserting that literature shapes political perception because, for him, Literature redefines political possibilities. As Rancière states, "Politics and art, like forms of knowledge, construct 'fictions,' that is to say, material rearrangements of signs and images" (2004), suggesting that literature is not a mirror of reality but an active participant in reordering social experience [4]. Hannah Arendt, while talking about politics and storytelling, claims that there is a good relationship between politics, action, and narratives, without which it is difficult to understand political action and the human condition. The fiction attempts to delve deep into the political complexities of life via its portrayals of individual agency and collective action. Said (1983) is of the view that literature cannot ignore the politics of the time, especially in the postcolonial context, because literature often constructs political narratives, which, for example, either reinforced or resisted colonial or imperialistic ideologies [5].

The reflection of the above critical voices on politics and literature can be heard vividly in Pakistani Literature also because the political scenes have been an integral part of Pakistani literature, for example, Sidhwa, in *An American Brat* and *Ice Candyman* debates a clear stance on the political situation ripe at the historical moment when she was delving into her fictional narratives [6]. The same is the case with Ghose's *Murder of Aziz Khan*, wherein the writer has again and again referred to the seething political situation along with its repercussions [7]. In the modern context, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* by Hamid discusses a different political scenario that transformed the face of the world from a bipolar to an unipolar world and the consequent war on terror [8]. Some of the writers discussed the global sociopolitical issues like migration and the mass movement of the people, and added later that the ecological migrants also. Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) Critiques contemporary Indian politics, the Kashmir conflict, and gender oppression, and makes her novel a challenge to hegemonic narratives, shifting focus to marginalized voices, especially when she says that "There's really no such thing as the 'voiceless.' There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard" [9]. In the same vein, *Best of Friends* by Shamsie takes in and hybridizes the narrative by discussing female friendship under the prevailing sociopolitical situation and

hence making the politics a part of her narrative [10]. Shamsie has also explored and portrayed politics as an omnipresent force that can be both oppressive and liberating. As such, the political frames are deeply connected with the lives of the individuals growing up under either of these types of situations. Shamsie attempts to interpret this influence by portraying how the two of her characters not only grow up under both aspects of political life but also how these shape their identities, moralities, and human connections. However, it also explores the tension between the pragmatic and idealistic approaches to politics, which may further influence the personal and the collective. This is the context under which this paper attempts to explore the lives of two female protagonists in this novel.

2. Literature Review

There are two phases that the two friends, Zahra and Marium, experience in their life-changing experiences under the political events around them: first, school and growing up in Karachi, Pakistan, and second, experiencing international politics as successful businesspersons in the United Kingdom. At the beginning of the term, at school, the friends portrayed by Shamsie think only of their own small worlds, but within months, dramatic events see a woman elected to lead this patriarchal country. On the night of Benazir Bhutto's inauguration, a misjudgment is made that puts both in danger and will have repercussions neither can imagine. Forty years later, both are living in London, leading very different lives: Zahra as the head of the country's civil liberties body, and Maryam successful enough to hobnob with the prime minister and his chancellor. So close, they're family to each other, these two will find themselves political opposites as the events of that evening in 1988 are brought back into sharp focus, threatening a schism in this long, intimate friendship that has sustained them both. Osborne takes it as an ideal amalgamation of Personal and political and proves the concept by discussing the personal ideals of both Zahra and Marium being converted into political ones. For example, "While Zhara has a streak of pragmatism, she remains true to her ideals as far as she can, contrasting with Maryam's flexibility in the pursuit of profit" (2022) [11]. Osborne (2022) further thinks that the introduction of the new term, 'Girl Fear', in her narrative has converted this text into a feminist one, which again brings the personal to the public because what the girls think individually can be generalized collectively. On the other hand, Marium Wasif Khan (2025) believes that the life of young girls is impacted and can change their attitude towards the facets of Pakistani politics. For example, when a young female prime minister takes charge, both girls feel empowered and

free and begin hating the world dictatorship because they had also witnessed the evils of dictatorship [12].

The writer does not fail to hint at the fact that when affective relationships collide with political realities and ethical realities, it is most likely to be affected differently, as it happened in the case of *Home Fire* also [13]. That is why the reader finds an evident situation that the teen aged self of both the girls, Marium and Zahra, are overshadowed by the broadened political climate and repressive sexual politics fully permeated in the environment of Pakistan and the UK. Zahra's fear that her politically independent father will be hurt by the dictator General Zia is juxtaposed with her burgeoning desire for sexual experimentation. Maryam's imperviousness to the political situation is offset by the attention her newly formed body brings her, along with a sense of gender-based threat.

3. Theoretical Underpinnings

According to Raymond Williams, literature is not a detached artistic product; it is rather evidence of its historical and political context, which actively shapes society. Consequently, fictional narratives shape the lived experience of historical moments and shape the understanding of the reader. This concept can be associated with the theoretical framework of Fredrick Jameson and Said to understand and analyze the text of Shamsie's *Best of Friends*. Fredric Jameson, in his *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (1981), suggests that all narratives are inherently political, even if they appear personal, apolitical, or purely aesthetic [14]. He suggests that every text must be understood in relation to its historical moment and material conditions. Beneath the explicit plot, a text contains latent political meanings that reflect broader ideological conflicts.

Shamsi's *Best of Friends* (2022) is about the story of two young women whose childhood as well as their old age we witnessed. They migrate from Pakistan to England, and because of the element of migration from a post-colonial country to a colonizing country. That involves Said's theory of Postcolonialism and orientalism. This novel is also about the colonial legacies and the intersection of personal and political history of the characters, especially that of Marium and Zahra, who have their personal history identity and colonial legacy as individuals, and they interact with the people of the colonial country not only at the individual level but also at the social level. As such, the novel becomes a negative, awful tension between Pakistan and Britain, especially when it highlights issues of migration, belonging, and cultural displacement. These

key issues are also the topics of debate in Said's theory of Orientalism. Therefore, the theory of postcolonialism and orientalism by Said can be applied to this novel. For example, Said says that "Stories are at the heart of what explorers and novelists say about strange regions of the world. They also become the method colonized people use to assert their own identity" [15]. Consequently, Shamsie's narrative becomes the subject of debate because it offers an insider's view of Pakistan and, hence, challenges the Western stereotypes. For example, Shamsie elaborates this aspect when she comments that "In London, Zahra had become adept at explaining Pakistan in terms that an English audience could understand, but she had never quite worked out how to explain England to herself".

To read and analyze text, Braun and Clarke's (2006) model of the six-phase formation of individual characters is followed in this study because this suggests the way how the power, ideology, and political identities shape the character and events of a narrative [16]. Braun and Clarke laid out these 6 stages as follows:

- 1: Familiarization with the Data
- 2: Generating Initial Codes
- 3: Searching for Themes
- 4: Reviewing Themes
- 5: Defining and Naming Themes
- 6: Producing the Report

The text of the novel is to be analyzed by keeping the above parameters in view, and it is to be observed and analyzed as to how the characters of both friends undergo multiple developments under the influence of the politics around, domestic or otherwise.

4. Discussion

Through her two female protagonists, Shamsie weaves an intricate web of colliding personal and public histories in the political environment, ranging from their childhood to adulthood. The politics of martial law, democratic interlude in Karachi, Pakistan, to the politics of migration and immigrants in the global perspective keep haunting these histories and seem to work as a background as well as a blanket cover. The politically charged environment plays a crucial role in shaping and engendering the class, gender, and social norms through which the protagonists grow up and take up their careers as adults. The narrator shifts the landscape from Karachi to London, which enhances the comparative value of European liberalism with the conservatism of

Pakistan and helps the readers understand the way politics shapes the public and private histories and the social behaviors. The politics test and challenge the central bond of friendship between the two protagonists because of their shift of loyalties to differing political ideologies.

The women's friendship remains the central pivot around which the whole stage of politics is enacted, but the same also keeps on rising and falling as does the friendship of Mariam and Zahra. At the school level these friends are deeply and emotionally attached but the car incident with Jimmy causes disruption and the same happens in politics surrounding them. When they grow up into young woman and follow their careers in the United Kingdom, again the intensity of friendship is loosened because of the sociopolitical environment around them. The capitalistic attitude of Mariam conflicts with Zahra's humanistic the same happens when the political government of England wants the deportation of Pakistani migrants. Their friendship is also tested and challenged. Ultimately, the thread of friendship breaks because of the pressures of their own psyches under the influence of politics around them.

The same happens when they, as children, witness the rise and fall of democracy in Pakistan. For example, they spent an intense and emotional bond of friendship while they were teens, and the country, which had been under martial law for a long time, was to experience democracy. Like any other Pakistani, they felt rejuvenated about the restoration of democracy, especially the government by a young woman. This meant a total shift in politics around them. This solidified their friendship, which soon started to experience more difficulties because of the new situation when democracy was again under threat, and their parents decided to leave the country and give their girls a chance to fulfill their ambitions in England. Even this migration can be associated with the developing harshness of the political system and the collapse of democracy. When the girls live under the stable democratic system in England, they grow up into highly competitive and empowered women running their independent businesses and interacting with the sociopolitical environment more conveniently. Politics, therefore, is not simply a backdrop but also an active force that shapes and designs the lives of the two friends in the novel, both at the personal and systemic levels. The plot and the development of character are also dominated by the politics of the society, both in Pakistan and the United Kingdom. Zahra becomes a human rights lawyer in London. Her career reflects her moral stance on state surveillance, immigration laws, and civil liberties. She criticizes political compromise and fights for the oppressed. Maryam, being a wealthy tech entrepreneur, operates within capitalism and global networks, and

her political liberalism and her privilege allow her to benefit from systems of power. Her business, however, is indirectly tied to government surveillance contracts.

“There were no girls on bicycles... not because it was against the law, but because it was against something deeper than law.” The sentences like this reveal not only the mention of the girls’ curtailed freedom but also the unwritten laws. This time it was not because of the social criticism initiated in the name of culture, custom, and tradition, but by the rules and regulations introduced by the martial law of that time, which was the political system of Pakistan during the 1980s and 1990s. Although Zahra and Mariam both belonged to the non-conservative liberal families, they had to maintain a clever balance between the liberal values and the authoritarianism they had to comply with. So, this is the way through which politics and political systems seep into the lives of the people and mold into what the politics of the day wishes.

The novel *Best of Friends* by Shamsie explores the relationship of power and privilege through two characters, Zahra and Mariam. Zahra explores this relationship through her services as an advocate and human rights activist, and Mariam does the same through her possession of the capital. But both undergo a different experience, almost a type of contrasting one, as per the enunciation of Said that “The power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism” [17], which shows that the novel challenges the dominant Western narratives about Pakistan because of its more nuanced view of the narrative. Shamsie, for example, says that “*London had taught Zahra that silence was a form of power, a way to keep people from knowing exactly where you stood.*” This narrative exhibits the way power structures control the narrative as per the assertions of Said’s critique of imperial power structures. Shamsie also attempts to subvert the gendered nature of political oppression, which Said says is because “*Orientalism is fundamentally a male conception, a way of feminizing the East to justify its control*” [18], by portraying two powerful female characters in her narrative. This portrayal is a clear defiance of the gendered stereotypes of women in the East. The writer says that “*What was the correct English phrase for this particular mix of admiration and condescension that she saw in the eyes of men who thought she was impressive and yet somehow diminished by being a woman?*”, which is a clear statement of Said against the theoretical framework of gendered imperialism.

Shamsie reminds us of the colonial politics as well as contemporary politics by alluding to section 144, which, as per thinking of Zahra when she saw the signboard of section 144, was only a token to control the people both in the colonial times and postcolonial times. “In her History class, Zahra had learnt about the use of Section 144 during the Raj to prevent gatherings of anti-colonial demonstrators: now she felt embarrassed on behalf of her nation that it was used to keep people from swimming in the monsoonal sea with its murderous undertow” (37). According to her, life had become difficult in Pakistan because of the dictatorial policies, which seem to have gained power from the rules like section 144 devised by the Whiteman to perpetuate his rule and power. Because of contemporary politics of the times, at that time, a sense of insecurity had gained control over the senses of the parents, and the same pressured their young kids not to go out alone on the sea because of the fear of kidnapping. “... Zahra only felt vulnerable, her mind going to the stories of kidnappings that circulated in the schoolyard. One of the girls in Class 8 had missed three days of school the previous year and, though she’d returned claiming she’d had a stomach bug, the whisper went around that she’d been kidnapped and ransomed, but her parents didn’t want anyone to know because people would wonder what had been done to the girl in those three days among criminal men”.

This postcolonial narrative frames the power structure with the assumption that the power of the country resided in the military dictator who influenced the life of the people through the media and wanted it to work as a tool for the propagation of their image, even when the power did not come from a democratic process, but from the gun. For example, Zahra’s father did a program on TV on the ongoing cricket and its role in international diplomacy. After one of the victories, he commented on the efforts of the nation, players, and other relevant parties without admiring or even naming the military dictator. He was visited by the military emissary to warn and advise him to show his respect for the general. He asserted that he’s a fan of the show, so he would have been watching. He’s not a man who asks for praise or thanks, but even so, he’s a human being. My guess is – and I’m only guessing here – that he’s a little hurt. This is a coercive way adopted by the power to keep the people convinced that the power is always right and that it needs to be appreciated. This coercive procedure is exactly in line with the oppressive state apparatus employed to change the minds of the people and to keep them under control. The author highlights the sociopolitical life of Zahra and Maryam and their families, growing up while absorbing the impact of the power surrounding them and training them constantly for their future

roles and the kind of relationship they need to manage. Although they were friends, there existed a power difference between the two, and the same keeps on highlighting itself. The friendship of the two girls is symptomatic of the role of power in social structure, which the author has manifested on a larger scale in the presence of a dictator and his dictates. This is not only the manifestation of the politics of the teenage but also the politics of the postcolonial mind. But the people wished for democracy and did not want to live under the dictatorship of martial law, and so Zahara's mother said: "Elections. Benazir" (60), when her father was pleased to hear that the oppressor's rule was about to end. The happiness of the people in Pakistan doubled when they found that party-based elections would be held and Benazir would be able to contest the election, though the violence and military intervention were there, along with the conspiracy of timing to make the election campaign as difficult as possible. But "Benazir outwitted them all by wearing voluminous clothing that made it impossible to know if she was in her second or third trimester and then had her baby in September, well in time to take an active part in the November elections" (67). This is how Shamsie has intermingled the politics of the time with the passion of the people for democracy. It is reflective of the approach of the people towards the politics of their country and, on the other hand, the attitude of the state towards moulding the opinion of the people exactly on the same pattern as was done during the colonial era. And consequently, in the narratives of Pakistani postcolonial fiction, contemporary politics of the nation and its contemporary thought process are indicated, and the main dominating forces are the postcolonial background.

Shamsie explores the gender bias also when, after the election day, Benazir wins, the people showed anxiety about a girl being the ruler. But the protagonists believed she was a mature woman, not a girl. This belief in Benazir reflects the confidence of the people of Pakistan in general, in the political process underway in Pakistan. The same confidence was reflected in the cheerful faces of the people. For example, Mariam and Zahra kept vigil all night in their happiness of entering again into a democratic Era. "The adults, smiling and indulgent in a new way, didn't argue. At dawn, the two girls stepped out onto the balcony to watch the sun rise on a democratic Pakistan which would soon have Benazir as its Prime Minister" (70). By pursuing this style of narrative, the writer has made a point that the girls should not miss any of the political process going on around them. This is how the political reality of the age has been

blurred into a fictional narrative, which becomes a significant part of the Pakistani postcolonial fictional narratives.

The two girls, Marium and Zahra, in their young age in Karachi, witnessed politics being displayed on the walls of the country, but only after a decade of martial law. They were feeling the new air and breathing in Pakistan. The effect of the democratic freedom was felt by all and sundry because the air was filled with it. The pleasure effect was more on the lower and middle classes than on the elite. For example, for Zahra, “The city lights dazzled, posters of Benazir hung everywhere ... MQM’s election song, Benazir’s election song ... high spirits everywhere. And beyond all this, the feeling of freedom, of choosing at last to embrace life outside the same circuit of homes and families that had been her entire existence”. But the same freedom was marred because of the treatment of women seen by Zahra in her country, which made her sad, especially when she thought about the prostitutes in her city, and therefore even the existing political situation, where a woman was made prime minister of the country, but to her, “Benazir Bhutto taking the oath of office felt very far away”. She fiercely realized that “You could do anything to a woman on this street and no one would stop you”.

These political circumstance poses its impact differently also on the two individuals, especially if one individual belongs to the upper class and the other to the middle class. It may be because of the clash of interests and the development of individuals under a different set of circumstances. But the breach begins to sift through because of the multiple nature of the impact of the change of circumstance. For example, the changing democratic norms around Zahara were affecting her differently and her friend in a different way.

While in England, both girls were watching, seeing, and interacting with the politics of the time. The first interaction occurred at a garden party where the prime minister of England was seen to be attentively listening to the people while his head was bent and his arms folded over his body. The political leaders in England were the same in many ways, but were different as well. For example, the prime minister of England in the party found Marium to be an interesting person for the promotion of his interests while he was running a campaign for investment in England. And for this purpose, according to the prime minister, “someone like Maryam would be perfect as one of the faces of the campaign” (200).

The prime ministers in England were far closer to the public, or at least the significant individuals, than in Pakistan. The policies are made by them, but they would make the people

join. The prime minister of England was interacting with the migrants even in his gatherings. For example, when he wanted to expel the migrants from his country, he sought the support of the legal migrants residing in England. This very interaction influenced the lives of Marium and Zahra. Marium wanted to support him and work on her own business agenda, while on the other hand, Zahra did not want this. The rift grew, and they developed a huge difference of opinion, visible in the speech of Zola. She said,

The Prime Minister was a sadistic flapjack, an absolute pimple pus-head. Here, Zahra Khala was spending her entire life trying to stop him from drowning people who were escaping from war zones. What was Mama doing getting involved with one of his campaigns? (246)

Said believes that there is a deep connection between capitalism, empire, and political power, which shapes the wealth distribution, and so Marium's financial success in London is an evident proof for this because "*Maryam understood capital. She knew how to move it, how to make it work for her,*" which reflect the interplay between wealth, political power and how it needs to be distributed. Marium can be seen as a postcolonial capitalist because she believes that wealth means power, and she does earn that, even if she has to alienate herself from the struggling Karachiites. In comparison, Zahra is the postcolonial subject struggling and resisting the political and capitalistic power. In the words of Marium becomes a new sort of political power as soon as she moves from her mother country to the center of the empire.

One of the major and dominant political influences in Shamsie's novel is the presence of the British colonial legacy in Pakistan. The best example is the instability in the sociopolitical infrastructure of Karachi, which was established during British rule and persists even now, and echoes the colonial setup. This is reflected through the lives of Zahra and Marium, though fast friends, but their portrayal from two different classes is the representation of two different classes in the city. The similar rift upsets the cart of the friendship of Marium and Zahra when in England, because of the ghosts of imperialism persisting in the sense that London keeps on attempting to control the lives of the people from their former colonies. The weapons of deporting, settlement, and rehabilitation of the immigrants are at the mercy of British control.

5. Conclusion

It is therefore possible to declare that the novel *Best of Friends* by Shamsie is modeled on the lines of Said's Critique of post-colonial theory, which is definitely a political element. Firstly, the most important matter is that of the complex identities of both the girls, which are shaped as per their sociopolitical standing and their performativity in the center, which means the United Kingdom. We also see that a similar reflection of contemporary politics keeps on happening in the novel of Shamsie. 2nd is the role of capitalism because it is also the legacy of colonialism, where a few capitalists thrived and survived, but the people from these colonies continuously suffered and underwent multiple changes in their lives. This and many other aspects of the novel take it back to the politics of colonialism, which continuously reverberates in the contemporary world, and it shapes the lives and landscapes around it. The society fiction and the politics of the age are intertwined, as is done by Shamsi in her novel, *The Best of Friends*. This, therefore, is a combination of sense of belonging, migration, the continuous sociopolitical issues, and the lives of the people under these influences, especially those of the women in Pakistan.

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