

WOMEN, CHOICE, AND MORAL RESPONSIBILITY IN CONTEMPORARY PAKISTANI ANGLOPHONE FICTION: A CASE STUDY OF *BEST OF FRIENDS*

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Abstract

This article examines the relationship between women's agency, ethical choice and moral responsibility in contemporary Pakistani Anglophone fiction through a focused reading of Kamila Shamsie's *Best of Friends* (2022). Situating Shamsie's work within feminist ethical theory and postcolonial literary studies, the article argues that her fiction reconfigures female choice not as an expression of autonomous will but as a situated moral practice shaped by friendship, class, migration, and political constraint. Through close textual analysis, the study demonstrates how Shamsie foregrounds moments of hesitation, silence, and compromise to expose the ethical costs of intimacy in politically charged contexts. In *Best of Friends*, female friendship emerges as a contested moral space in which loyalty and responsibility are continually renegotiated against the pressures of global surveillance, state power, and diasporic belonging. By tracing continuities and shifts across Shamsie's oeuvre, the article shows how her recent work advances a more complex ethics of female agency—one that resists moral absolutism and instead emphasises relational accountability. The study contributes to ongoing debates on women's moral subjectivity in South Asian literature and highlights the significance of contemporary Pakistani Anglophone fiction in articulating ethically nuanced representations of women's lives.

Keywords: Pakistani Anglophone fiction, Female agency, Moral responsibility, Feminist ethics, Postcolonial literature, Diasporic literature

Background of the Study

Pakistani Anglophone fiction has, over the past three decades, emerged as a significant site for examining questions of gender, identity, ethics, and political belonging in a globalised world. Women writers in particular have played a central role in reshaping literary representations of female subjectivity by foregrounding the intersections of personal choice, social constraint, and moral accountability within postcolonial and diasporic contexts (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2002; Suleri, 1992). Within this tradition, Kamila Shamsie occupies a prominent position as a novelist whose work consistently interrogates the ethical dimensions of women's lives against the backdrop of national history, migration, and geopolitical conflict.

Shamsie's earlier novels—such as *Burnt Shadows* (2009), *A God in Every Stone* (2014), and *Home Fire* (2017)—demonstrate a sustained concern with moral decision-making under conditions shaped by imperial legacies, state violence, and transnational surveillance. Critics have noted that

her female characters are rarely granted uncomplicated agency; instead, they negotiate ethical choices within structures of power that diffuse responsibility and render it morally ambivalent (Upstone, 2017; Chambers, 2019). This narrative emphasis reflects a broader feminist ethical framework in which moral responsibility is understood as relational and context-bound rather than as an expression of individual autonomy (Gilligan, 1982; Butler, 2005).

Published in 2022, *Best of Friends* marks a notable development in Shamsie's engagement with these concerns by shifting the primary ethical focus from familial and national allegiances to female friendship. The novel examines how intimacy, loyalty, and betrayal function as moral acts within unequal social and political conditions, particularly in relation to class privilege, diaspora, and post-9/11 security regimes. Rather than presenting friendship as a space of unconditional solidarity, Shamsie exposes it as an arena in which ethical choices carry lasting emotional and political consequences. This approach resonates with contemporary feminist scholarship that views women's moral agency as embedded in affective relationships and social responsibility (Held, 2006; Tronto, 2013).

Despite growing critical attention to Shamsie's political narratives, scholarship has thus far focused primarily on how *Best of Friends* reconfigures women's moral responsibility through the lens of friendship, especially when read alongside her earlier work. Existing studies tend to privilege themes of nationalism, extremism, and postcolonial identity (Shamsie, 2018; Upstone, 2017), often overlooking the ethical significance of interpersonal relationships as sites of moral deliberation. Addressing this gap, the present study situates *Best of Friends* within Shamsie's broader literary trajectory to examine how representations of women's choice evolve from questions of survival and resistance toward a more nuanced ethics of relational accountability.

By foregrounding moments of hesitation, silence, and compromise, this study argues that contemporary Pakistani Anglophone fiction—exemplified by Shamsie's work—offers a critical rethinking of female agency that resists moral absolutism. Instead, it proposes an ethical model grounded in responsibility to others, shaped by historical memory, political violence, and affective bonds. Such an approach not only enriches feminist literary criticism but also underscores the importance of Pakistani Anglophone women's writing in global debates on ethics, gender, and narrative form.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant for several reasons. First, it contributes to the growing body of scholarship on contemporary Pakistani Anglophone fiction by foregrounding women's moral agency as a central analytical concern. While existing criticism of Kamila Shamsie's work has largely emphasized themes of nationalism, extremism, and postcolonial identity, this study shifts attention to the ethical dimensions of women's choices, shaped by friendship, class, and political context. In doing so, it advances feminist literary criticism by demonstrating how moral responsibility in Shamsie's fiction is relational, affective, and historically situated rather than individualistic or absolute.

Second, by reading *Best of Friends* alongside Shamsie's earlier novels, the study offers a diachronic perspective on the evolution of female agency in Pakistani Anglophone writing. This comparative approach enables a deeper understanding of how Shamsie's recent work refines and complicates earlier ethical concerns, particularly through the narrative centrality of female friendship as a morally charged space. The study thus illuminates broader shifts in contemporary women's writing from national and familial ethics toward interpersonal and transnational moral frameworks.

Finally, the study has interdisciplinary relevance, engaging feminist ethics, postcolonial theory, and narrative studies. By linking literary representation to ethical theory, it underscores the capacity of contemporary fiction to intervene in global debates on responsibility, complicity, and moral judgment, particularly in relation to women's lived experiences in politically unequal worlds.

Statement of the Problem

Despite Kamila Shamsie's critical prominence and the sustained academic attention her fiction has received, there remains a notable gap in scholarship concerning the ethical significance of women's choices in her work, especially in relation to female friendship. Existing studies tend to prioritise macro-level concerns such as nationalism, radicalisation, and state power, often marginalising the role of intimate relationships as sites of moral deliberation. As a result, women's agency in Shamsie's fiction is frequently interpreted through political or ideological frameworks that overlook the ethical complexity of everyday choices, silences, and compromises.

Moreover, *Best of Friends* has yet to be examined in sustained relation to Shamsie's earlier novels to assess how her representation of women's moral responsibility has evolved over time. The absence of such a comparative ethical analysis limits our understanding of how contemporary Pakistani Anglophone fiction negotiates questions of loyalty, betrayal, and accountability within changing socio-political and diasporic contexts. This study addresses this gap by investigating how Shamsie's fiction constructs women's moral responsibility as a relational, context-dependent practice rather than a fixed or autonomous moral position.

Research Questions

1. How does *Best of Friends* represent women's choices and moral responsibility within the context of female friendship, class difference, and political constraint?
2. In what ways does Kamila Shamsie's portrayal of women's moral agency in *Best of Friends* extend, revise, or depart from her treatment of similar ethical concerns in her earlier novels?
3. How do Shamsie's narrative strategies contribute to a feminist ethics of relational accountability in contemporary Pakistani Anglophone fiction?

Literature Review

The study of contemporary Pakistani Anglophone fiction has evolved substantially over the past two decades, encompassing themes of identity, agency, and relational ethics in the works of leading writers such as Kamila Shamsie. Scholarship has consistently foregrounded Shamsie's contribution to global anglophone literature, particularly in how her fiction intersects *feminist ethics, postcoloniality, and narratives of agency* within diasporic contexts (Ashcroft *et al.*, 2002). Literary analyses of Shamsie's novels prior to *Best of Friends* have predominantly examined *Home Fire* (2017) for its portrayal of female agency amid sociopolitical pressures in the post-9/11 British Muslim experience. In *Home Fire*, Shamsie reimagines the classic *Antigone* through British-Pakistani characters negotiating loyalty, identity, and familial duty (Shamsie, 2017). A feminist stylistic analysis of *Home Fire* indicates that Shamsie foregrounds women's struggles against both external social control and internal emotional constraints, portraying characters who navigate complex personal and political terrain while challenging stereotypical depictions of Muslim women (Hanif *et al.*, 2022).

Further scholarship situates *Home Fire* within postcolonial discourse on identity and media representation, highlighting how digital and traditional media shape the subjectivities and roles of the novel's female protagonists within Western society (Indiana University East, 2024). Such work

suggests that Shamsie presents female agency as interconnected with broader societal structures rather than autonomous individualism.

Published in 2022, *Best of Friends* marks a departure from Shamsie's earlier focus on family and national politics toward an exploration of *long-term female friendship* as a locus of moral choice and ethical accountability. The narrative charts the lives of Zahra and Maryam from adolescence in Karachi to adulthood in London, tracing how their bond is tested by socio-political divergences and differing moral commitments. Reviews highlight how *Best of Friends* places high significance on the continuity and complexity of platonic female relationships across cultural and temporal shifts, suggesting that friendship itself becomes a central ethical and emotional project in the novel. Recent scholarship foregrounds the dynamics of platonic female friendship in this novel through feminist frameworks, exploring how Shamsie articulates sisterhood and solidarity in a patriarchal context that often marginalises women's social autonomy (Irfan *et al.*, 2025). This study emphasises the evolution of their bond "from childhood to adulthood," observing how loyalty and mutual support function as ethical signifiers within a gendered social order.

Complementing this, research on women's agency in *Best of Friends* underscores Shamsie's nuanced portrayal of how her protagonists exercise and redefine autonomy amid competing norms of cultural expectation and personal aspiration. Such work locates the female protagonists not as passive recipients of societal pressures but as active negotiators of agency, resilience, and identity within patriarchal constraints.

Critical reception of *Best of Friends* also foregrounds the *ethical complexities* of female friendship in socio-politically charged settings, noting that Shamsie's characters remain deeply embedded within structures of power, privilege, and political consequence. Reviews suggest that the novel grapples with how moral commitments shift when friendship intersects with public positions of influence and conflicting ideological commitments, thereby offering a narrative space to interrogate women's moral responsibility in contemporary global contexts.

Alongside evaluations of Shamsie's fiction, broader scholarship on Pakistani Anglophone literature emphasises that women's literary voices increasingly disrupt traditional binaries of private/public, individual/community, and personal/political spheres—asserting that female subjectivity in contemporary narratives participates in broader ethical discourse about relational obligation and choice within postcolonial societies (Ashcroft *et al.*, 2002).

Although recent studies engage *Best of Friends* from feminist and platonic perspectives, *comparative ethical analyses* that trace the evolution of Shamsie's representation of *female moral agency* from earlier novels (e.g., *Home Fire*) to *Best of Friends* remain limited. Existing work tends to treat Shamsie's novels in isolation or to focus predominantly on political identity and postcolonial themes, without a sustained ethical comparison across texts. This gap highlights the need for an integrated analysis that situates *Best of Friends* within Shamsie's broader oeuvre to explore how Shamsie's narrative strategies evolve to express relational accountability, moral responsibility, and the negotiation of female ethical choice.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that draws primarily on feminist ethics, postcolonial theory, and narrative ethics to examine women's choices and moral responsibility in contemporary Pakistani Anglophone fiction. Feminist ethical theory, particularly the ethics of care, provides the central conceptual lens through which women's moral agency is understood. Gilligan's (1982) critique of abstract, justice-based moral reasoning and her emphasis on relational, context-dependent ethics inform this study's reading of female friendship in *Best of*

Friends. Women's choices in Shamsie's fiction are not framed as isolated acts of individual autonomy but as ethically situated decisions shaped by affective bonds, loyalty, and responsibility to others. This perspective is further supported by Held's (2006) articulation of care ethics, which foregrounds moral accountability within interpersonal relationships.

Judith Butler's (2005) notion of ethical responsibility as emerging through relationality and vulnerability further underpins the analysis. Butler's framework allows the study to conceptualise women's moral subjectivity as produced through social exposure, power asymmetries, and the demand to "give an account of oneself" within unequal political contexts. This is particularly relevant to *Best of Friends*, where female characters negotiate ethical responsibility within transnational spaces marked by surveillance, privilege, and political violence.

Postcolonial theory complements this ethical framework by situating women's choices within broader historical and geopolitical structures. Drawing on Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (2002), the study recognises that moral agency in postcolonial fiction is inseparable from colonial legacies, class hierarchies, and global power relations. Shamsie's fiction, especially when read across her oeuvre, demonstrates how women's ethical decisions are shaped by national histories, diasporic displacement, and post-9/11 security regimes. Finally, narrative ethics provides a literary lens to analyse how ethical dilemmas are embedded in narrative form, focalisation, and silence. Through this combined framework, the study examines how Shamsie constructs women's moral responsibility as relational, ambiguous, and resistant to moral absolutism.

Research Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative, interpretive literary methodology based on close textual analysis. The primary texts for analysis are Kamila Shamsie's *Best of Friends* (2022) and selected earlier novels, including *Burnt Shadows* (2009) and *Home Fire* (2017). These texts are examined comparatively to trace the evolution of women's moral agency and ethical choice across Shamsie's literary career. The selection of texts is purposive, as each novel foregrounds female protagonists negotiating ethical decisions within politically charged contexts.

The study employs thematic and narrative analysis to identify recurring patterns in women's choices, moral responsibility, loyalty, betrayal, silence, and complicity. Particular attention is paid to moments of ethical tension—instances in which characters hesitate, compromise, or remain silent—since they reveal how moral responsibility is narratively constructed. Narrative techniques such as focalisation, temporal shifts, and dialogic absence are analysed to understand how ethical meaning is produced through form and content.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

This section presents a qualitative textual analysis of *Best of Friends* (2022), read alongside Kamila Shamsie's earlier novels—particularly *Home Fire* (2017) and *Burnt Shadows* (2009)—to examine how women's choices and moral responsibility are narratively constructed. The analysis focuses on moments of ethical tension where friendship, loyalty, and political context intersect, revealing how Shamsie conceptualises female moral agency as relational, situated, and morally ambivalent. One of the most distinctive features of *Best of Friends* is its framing of female friendship as an ethically charged space rather than a purely affective bond. Zahra and Maryam's relationship is marked by deep intimacy but also by asymmetries of class, power, and political positioning. Early in the novel, the narrator reflects on how easily closeness can coexist with unspoken hierarchies, suggesting that friendship does not erase inequality but often masks it (Shamsie, 2022).

From a feminist ethics perspective, this representation aligns with Gilligan's (1982) argument that moral life is embedded in relationships rather than abstract principles. Zahra's and Maryam's

choices are repeatedly shaped by concern for one another, yet these concerns are compromised by privilege and political access. Friendship thus becomes a site where moral responsibility is negotiated rather than resolved. Shamsie resists idealising female solidarity, instead presenting it as ethically demanding and emotionally costly.

A recurring narrative strategy in *Best of Friends* is the use of silence as an ethical act. When political events intrude upon the characters' personal lives—particularly in relation to state power and surveillance—moments of silence signal not only moral failure but also the limits of ethical action within unequal systems. Zahra's hesitation to confront certain injustices reflects a moral dilemma rooted in vulnerability and fear rather than indifference (Shamsie, 2022).

Judith Butler's (2005) concept of ethical responsibility as emerging from vulnerability and exposure is particularly useful here. Zahra's silence illustrates how moral responsibility is constrained by structural power; the capacity to act ethically is unevenly distributed. Shamsie's narrative does not condemn silence outright but situates it within a network of affective obligation and political risk. This approach complicates conventional binaries of resistance versus complicity, especially for women positioned at the margins of institutional power.

Class difference plays a decisive role in shaping moral responsibility in *Best of Friends*. Maryam's access to elite political and social networks stands in stark contrast to Zahra's precarious position. At several points, Maryam's actions—framed as pragmatic or necessary—carry consequences that Zahra must ethically absorb. This imbalance highlights how moral burdens are unevenly allocated along class lines.

Drawing on care ethics (Held, 2006), this dynamic demonstrates how responsibility often falls upon those with fewer resources to refuse it. Shamsie exposes how privilege enables moral distance, while marginality enforces ethical proximity. Women's choices are thus not evaluated in isolation but in relation to structural advantage, reinforcing the postcolonial insight that agency is always mediated by power (Ashcroft et al., 2002).

A comparative reading of *Home Fire* reveals important continuities in Shamsie's treatment of women's moral agency. In *Home Fire*, Isma and Aneeka are repeatedly forced to choose between familial loyalty and political principle. Isma's decision to cooperate with state authorities is presented not as betrayal but as an ethically complex act shaped by fear, care, and responsibility toward her family (Shamsie, 2017).

Both *Home Fire* and *Best of Friends* portray women's choices as ethically constrained rather than freely chosen. However, while *Home Fire* situates moral responsibility primarily within family and nation, *Best of Friends* relocates it within friendship and classed intimacy. This shift signals an evolution in Shamsie's ethical vision—from national tragedy to interpersonal accountability—without abandoning the political stakes that define women's moral lives.

In *Burnt Shadows*, Shamsie foregrounds historical memory as a form of moral responsibility, particularly through the character of Hiroko, whose life is shaped by the long afterlives of imperial violence (Shamsie, 2009). Hiroko's ethical orientation is marked by attentiveness to suffering across borders and generations.

When read alongside *Best of Friends*, *Burnt Shadows* reveals how Shamsie's fiction consistently links women's ethical responsibility to memory and relational awareness. However, *Best of Friends* narrows this focus, demonstrating how moral responsibility operates not only at historical or global levels but also in everyday friendships. This evolution reflects a more intimate and psychologically complex ethical framework, one that emphasises the emotional costs of moral choice.

Shamsie's restrained narrative voice and avoidance of explicit moral judgment compel readers to participate in ethical evaluation. The absence of a clear moral resolution in *Best of Friends* places interpretive responsibility on the reader, mirroring the characters' own ethical uncertainty.

From the perspective of narrative ethics, this strategy underscores literature's role in cultivating moral reflection rather than prescribing ethical answers. By withholding closure, Shamsie invites readers to confront the discomfort of moral ambiguity, particularly regarding women's choices under constraint. This reinforces the study's central argument that contemporary Pakistani Anglophone fiction articulates an ethics grounded in relational accountability rather than moral certainty.

The analysis demonstrates that *Best of Friends*, when read alongside Shamsie's earlier fiction, constructs women's moral responsibility as relational, unevenly distributed, and shaped by political and social power. Female friendship emerges as a crucial ethical site where loyalty, silence, and betrayal acquire moral weight. Shamsie's evolving narrative strategy reflects a broader shift in contemporary Pakistani Anglophone fiction toward ethically nuanced representations of women's lives, challenging simplistic notions of agency and moral choice.

Discussion

The findings of this study reinforce and extend existing scholarship on contemporary Pakistani Anglophone fiction by demonstrating that women's moral agency in Kamila Shamsie's work is constructed as relational, ethically ambivalent, and deeply embedded within socio-political structures. Consistent with feminist ethical theory, the analysis confirms that Shamsie resists representing women's choices as expressions of autonomous individualism. Instead, moral responsibility in *Best of Friends* emerges through affective relationships—particularly female friendship—where loyalty, silence, and compromise function as ethically charged practices rather than personal failings. This supports Gilligan's (1982) assertion that women's moral reasoning often prioritises responsibility to others over abstract principles of justice.

The study's findings also align with Butler's (2005) argument that ethical responsibility is inseparable from vulnerability and social exposure. Zahra's silences and hesitations in *Best of Friends* illustrate how moral action is constrained by fear, political surveillance, and class inequality. Rather than framing silence as an ethical deficiency, Shamsie situates it within unequal power dynamics, complicating binary distinctions between resistance and complicity. This reading challenges dominant postcolonial critiques that privilege overt acts of resistance, suggesting instead that moral responsibility in contemporary fiction must be understood within the limits imposed by structural vulnerability.

In relation to existing analyses of *Home Fire*, this study corroborates earlier claims that Shamsie foregrounds ethical conflict through women's relational ties rather than ideological alignment. However, it advances the discussion by showing how *Best of Friends* marks a significant shift in ethical focus. Whereas *Home Fire* situates moral responsibility within the intersecting spheres of family, state, and nation, *Best of Friends* relocates ethical struggle into the ostensibly private domain of female friendship. This shift reflects a broader literary movement in post-2020 Pakistani Anglophone fiction toward examining how global politics permeate intimate relationships, thereby redefining the moral significance of everyday choices.

Furthermore, the findings extend postcolonial scholarship by highlighting the role of class privilege in shaping moral accountability. The analysis demonstrates that moral burdens in *Best of Friends* are unevenly distributed, with less privileged women bearing the emotional and ethical costs of decisions made within elite political spaces. This observation supports Held's (2006)

contention that care ethics must attend to asymmetries of power and responsibility. By foregrounding classed differences within female friendship, Shamsie complicates idealised notions of feminist solidarity and exposes how privilege enables moral distance.

The study also contributes to narrative ethics by illustrating how Shamsie's refusal of moral closure engages readers as ethical participants. The absence of definitive moral judgment requires readers to navigate ethical ambiguity alongside the characters, reinforcing literature's capacity to cultivate moral reflection rather than prescribe ethical solutions. This narrative strategy resonates with contemporary critical approaches that view fiction as a space for ethical inquiry rather than moral instruction.

Overall, the discussion confirms that *Best of Friends* represents a maturation of Shamsie's ethical vision, characterised by greater attention to interpersonal accountability and moral uncertainty. By situating women's choices within networks of friendship, class, and political power, Shamsie's fiction challenges reductive readings of female agency and expands the ethical possibilities of contemporary Pakistani Anglophone literature. This study thus underscores the importance of relational ethics as a critical framework for understanding women's moral responsibility in postcolonial and diasporic narratives.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Kamila Shamsie's *Best of Friends* exemplifies a sophisticated engagement with women's moral agency in contemporary Pakistani Anglophone fiction. Through a comparative reading of *Best of Friends* alongside Shamsie's earlier works, particularly *Home Fire* and *Burnt Shadows*, the analysis has shown that women's ethical decision-making is consistently represented as relational, context-bound, and morally ambivalent. Shamsie foregrounds the ethical complexities of female friendship, highlighting how loyalty, compromise, and silence operate within asymmetric social, political, and classed structures. Such representation challenges conventional literary frameworks that privilege individualistic or ideologically absolute conceptions of agency.

By situating women's choices within the intimate and affective sphere of friendship, Shamsie extends feminist ethical discourse into the domain of postcolonial and diasporic experience. The study illustrates that moral responsibility in her fiction is inseparable from structural vulnerability, historical memory, and relational obligation, aligning with the insights of Gilligan (1982), Butler (2005), and Held (2006). Moreover, Shamsie's narrative strategies—particularly her refusal to provide moral closure—actively engage the reader in ethical deliberation, reinforcing literature's capacity to cultivate reflection on the complexity of moral life.

Best of Friends represents both a continuation and refinement of Shamsie's literary project: it reconceptualises female moral responsibility from the broad arenas of nation and family to the more intimate, ethically charged realm of friendship. This study contributes to scholarship on Pakistani Anglophone literature by highlighting the interplay of gender, power, and ethics, and underscores the relevance of feminist, postcolonial, and narrative ethical frameworks for interpreting contemporary fiction. Future research may extend this inquiry by examining similar ethical representations in the work of other South Asian women writers, thereby situating Shamsie's work within a comparative global literary context.

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