

A Pathway to Female Homosociality through Disidentification in Kamila Shamsie's *Best of Friends*

Murad Ahsan, M.Phil. English Literature, University of Management and Technology
murad.ahsan497@gmail.com

Maryam Raza

Lecturer, Institute of English Studies ,University of the Punjab
maryam.english@pu.edu.pk

Abstract

The research undertakes the female-homosocial relations in Kamila Shamsie's *Best of Friends* as a subversive approach, under the discipline of Homosociality. The research explores various dynamics of disidentification as a reactive force to resist the heteronormative society, in which identities are viewed as constant and fixed. The objective of the study is to deconstruct the notion of stable identity. Thus, disidentification in Shamsie's *Best of Friends* introduces multiple tactical-survival strategies to (re)construct new identities. The research proves that female homosocial relations, as a subversive approach, empower the individuals among female gender within the socio-cultural and diasporic settings. Hence, disidentification and female homosociality defies the existing structure of heteropatriarchal society in which fixed gender binaries exist.

Keywords: Heteronormative, Disidentification, Homosociality, Pakistani Fiction, Sisterhood, Pakistani Women.

Introduction

Kamila Shamsie is renowned as one of the contemporary British-Pakistani diasporic writer. Shamsie was born in 1973 in one of the populated city of Pakistani, Karachi. She grew up with the aspiration of become a successful writer. From the university of Hamilton college of London, she completed her bachelors in creative writing. Her debut novel, *In The City by The Sea*, gained literary appreciation from all around the world. Her first novel was acknowledged as, "A colorful and peripatetic view of politics of Pakistan an interesting and interesting and promoting novel" (The Guardian).

Shamsie is a daughter of one of the most celebrated literary critic and writer, Muneeza Shamsie, who played crucial role as a literary critic of her career. Shamsie's two novels, *Broken Verse* (2005) and *Burnt Shadow* (2009), was shortlisted in Orange Prize for Fiction. Moreover, she won Women's Prize for Fiction in 2018 (Raza).

Shamsie recently published a novel, *Best of Friends* (2022), which explores multifaceted aspects of socio-cultural and diasporic spaces for minor communities. Her novel primarily highlights "The cracks and canyons caused by class in close relationship," by portraying the oppression of the heteronormative society towards women and minor communities (Mann). Also, her novel focuses on the close female friendship in which they experience the empowerment of two female characters, Maryam and Zahra, while dislocating their identity from 1970s Karachi to 2019's London (Young). *Best of Friends* (2022) is "Beautifully observed exploration of female friendship that I found compelling" (Hicks).

The research intends to highlight the empowerment of female gender through female-homosocial relations in Kamila Shamsie's novel *Best of Friends*. Therefore, the research examines the various forms of resistance against heteronormative society, such as female-homosocial relationship, disidentification, and critiques gender performance. Female-

homosocial relations is considered as the subversive approach to explore the exclusion of female gender from social and public discourses.

The research explores female individuals' disidentification and counter-identification, to challenge the hyper-functional heteronormative society within cultural and diasporic settings. The purpose of the research is to explore the multifaceted aspects of excluded groups which struggle within the heteronormative society. This is majorly because social institutes, such as gender binaries, exclude minoritarian groups by empowering majoritarian spheres in the heteronormative society. Kamila Shamsie's *Best of Friends* portrays two female protagonists, Maryam and Zahra, through their asexual, emotional bonding with one another.

Homosociality was, initially, coined by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in her book *Between Men: English Literature and Homosocial Desire* published in 1985. For her, homosocial relations refer to notions of solidarity among people of same-sex social relationships (Zhen). She proposed the idea that men, historically, defend and uphold their privileges by maintaining a strong bond with one another. Consequently, male-homosocial relations maintain a masculine order in heteropatriarchal societies (Zhen). On the contrary, the subversive approach of female homosocial relations, in response to male homosocial relations, highlights the solidarity among female gender basing on equality and equity (Hammarén).

Kamila Shamsie's novel *Best of Friends* was published in 2022. It is divided into two parts: the first section revolves around the memory of Maryam's and Zahra's childhood experiences in the cultural setting of Pakistan during 1980s. While the second part is set in 2019 in London. It is in the second part that Zahra and Maryam (re)construct their new identities within diasporic community. Thus, Shamsie's novel highlights the diasporic experiences of female-transnational migrants, under the cultural oppression within cultural locus.

Maryam was the granddaughter of the influential Khan Leather Business's owner. Her grandfather wanted Maryam to take over the business after his death. She was the most exceptional girl in her family, who was loved by her grandfather and upon him he hinged all future hopes. Thus, Shamsie's novel is analysed to highlight a heterocentric society, in which the power surprisingly transfers from one man to another man.

The American Gender Studies scholar, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, developed a useful theoretical framework of male-homosocial relations in her book titled *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. It was published in 1985, wherein male bonding upholds all power positions in a heteronormative society. She opines that male-homosocial relations are fundamentally asymmetrical, whereby men infer women as either silent or absent.

Sedgwick sheds light onto two kinds of homosocial relations, namely, Hierarchal Homosociality and Horizontal Homosociality. Hierarchal Homosociality ensures that power is maintained among men. To facilitate, men empower other men by upholding their status in the society and by being competitive with one another. On the other hand, Horizontal Homosociality is a non-competitive, asexual, and emotional bond for women. Horizontal Homosociality, can be used as a subversive approach, which aims to strengthen the female gender through their homosocial bonding. Thus, Horizontal Homosociality is examined in the paper as a challenge against heteronormative relationships, while stressing on a symmetrical/non-heteronormative relationship among women to empower other women.

The study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. How does Shamsie's novel portray the significance of female-homosocial relations within the socio-cultural and the diasporic settings?
2. How do female-homosocial relations explore the possibilities of ambiguous-gender identities in Shamsie's selected text, *Best of Friends*?

Literature Review

For Eve Sedgwick in *Homosocial Desire* (1985), the homosocial-relation demonstrates the same-sex relationship in response to heteronormative society (Zhen, 69). To illustrate, the discourse of gender binaries structures the sex differences between two genders, whereof the man is viewed as dominant and woman as subordinate to man. She argues that the homosocial desire is a kind of oxymoron which infers the idea that the homosocial desire can be seen as a social force to strengthen the same-sex members of the community (2). Indeed, homosocial relations encourage same-sex relationship in which no gender is subordinated to the other gender.

The homosocial relations reject the stereotypical notions of gender roles in which man is perceived as dominant (Zhen, 70). The patriarchal structures encourage the hegemonic institutions, such as marriage, to maintain the asymmetrical relationship between man and woman (Butler, 69). Since the system of stark class and gender subordination becomes an active force in the heterocentric society, female homosocial relations can neutralize the male-dominant society (Butler, 3).

The gender dichotomy "in which sexuality functions as a signifier for power relations" (Sedgwick, 7). The heterosocial bonds construct asymmetrical power relations whereby woman's passive and servile position is already pre-determined in the society by men (Zhen 72). Indeed, Sedgwick assumes that "sexuality, gender roles and power domination can seem to line up in this perfect chain of echoic meaning thereby femaleness is subjugated by men and eventually the female subjectivity is lost" (Sedgwick, 10). In other words, The heterocentric society constructs asymmetrical relations between male and female; wherein heterosocial and heterosexual relations are only seen as normal and functional (Sedgwick, 4). Indeed, the homosocial relations, in response to heterocentric social bonds, can promote various anti-normative and anti-essentialist perspectives by promoting the interest of same-sex bonding, communications and equality among the female gender.

Eve Sedgwick argues that the male homosocial relations promote the interest of other men while excluding the female gender from the public discourse (4). Additionally, the male homosocial relations "tend to bond, build closed teams, and defend their privileges and positions" (Hammaren & Johansson 1). In other words, the heterocentric society constructs the symmetrical relations among men, male-homosocial relations, by securing the interest of other men. Thus, the male homosocial relations can be viewed as a "mechanism and social dynamic that explains the maintenance of hegemonic masculinity" (Hammaren & Johansson, 1). As a result, the male gender aims to sustain the positions of power by excluding the female gender from the public discourse in a heterocentric society. Sedgwick also assumes that "male enhances the statuses of male —usefully symmetrical as it would be, that grouping meets with prohibitive structural obstacle" (3).

Female-Homosocial relations, essentially, are non-profitable in their nature: female-homosocial relations strengthen the emotional bond wherein women support one another to achieve solidarity, closeness, and strength among female individuals (Hammaren & Johansson 5-6). Put simply, female homosocial relations aim to achieve togetherness among the female gender. On the other hand, male homosocial relations uphold the positions of power and privileges.

Research Methodology

The research is based on content analysis of Kamila Shamsie' novel *Best of Friends* as a primary text. The theoretical framework of homosocial relations by Eve Sedgwick from *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985) highlights various forms of resilience towards the heteropatriarchal society in the novel, as the secondary tool for research. The review pertaining to the aforementioned author, novel, and theory from the secondary sources for the research.

The research is qualitative in its nature with specific focus on content analysis. With specific focus on female-homosocial relations, the subversive approach is applied in homosocial relations. The theoretical framework of Butler's gender performativity deconstructs multiple stereotypical notions of gender identity in *Best of Friends*. Then it is analysed how Zahra and Maryam (re)construct their disidentified identities in their forties. This is ensued by an exploration of the female-transnational migrants' experiences under diasporic settings. Disidentification is deciphered to be a survival strategy against the heteronormative society in the novel.

The significance of the research lies in its exploration of new terrains of deconstruction of pre-established gender roles within cultural and diasporic settings. Moreover, the research aims to depict an egalitarian society by highlighting multi-variant forms of rejection of traditional and cultural norms of an otherwise heteronormative society.

Discussion and Analysis

The research explores the significance of female-homosocial relations by proposing the idea of solidarity among female gender, within and outside of cultural and diasporic settings, to de-establish the hierarchal structures of heteronormative society.

Judith Butler reinforces the idea to resist the hetero-centric society by viewing homosocial desire as a primary force to promote non-heteronormative society (22). For her, the hegemonic order of heteronormative society constructs the asymmetrical power relationships between man and woman. Therefore, the female subjects undergo through the marginalization in the heterocentric society. *Best of Friends* portrays a strong female homosocial relationship between Zahra and Maryam as a resistance against the heterocentric society in the novel. To illustrate, Maryam and Zahra experience "the feeling of completeness when they were together that could surely only be possible when you'd been best friends" (18). In other words, both protagonists, Maryam and Zahra, reject any form of compliance and dependency on the male subjects to be empowered. The research discusses the female homosocial desire as a reactionary force to resist the authority of the patriarchal society. For example, Maryam confronts the domestic oppression under the authority of her grandfather's dictatorship in the novel. Therefore, Maryam upholds the strong platonic relationship with Zahra to be empowered. Moreover, both characters, Maryam and Zahra, explore their private space as "the one person in the world she wanted to spend all her time with was Maryam" (31). The research rejects all forms of social compliance wherein heteropatriarchal society is functionalized through the exclusion of female gender from the social discourse.

Best of Friends disrupts the continuum between heteronormative society as a regulatory functioning system. Maryam and Zahra share a close intimate relationship with one another by avoiding any form of relationship with male gender. In other words, for Zahra and Maryam, their homosocial desire avoids heterosexual relation with men in which "both knew that no one had the kind of friendship when they forty that the two of them had at fourteen" (33). The research essentially assumes that female-homosocial relations disrupt the social and familial structures of the heteronormative society wherein Maryam and Zahra uphold their friendship with one another (45).

In *Best of Friends*, Maryam and Zahra maintain their female homosocial relation basing on their emotional bonding and togetherness with one another (10-12). Maryam's grandfather upholds his strong bond with Maryam's father as a homosocial relation to retain the sustainability of his business (4-5).

Hammaern and Johansson argue that female homosociality potentially disrupts the hegemonic order of the heterosocial society (1). Similarly, Judith Butler assumes that fixed gendered identity is essentially imbued with external definitional structures of gender identity (77-84). For example, in the novel, female character of Benazir is empowered by viewing her inauguration as "A woman was in power" (102). Similarly, Maryam's future as the inherited owner of her grandfather leather business as "she was going to take over the family business and Benazir would put an arm around her shoulder and say, Welcome to the club" (102). In other words, Shamsie's book highlights various female homosocial relation whereby women look forward to strengthening one another (101-102)

Hammaren and Johansson argue that female homosocial relations can promote the togetherness, solidarity and close emotional bonding among female individuals (3). To argue, they aim to promote the equality and togetherness among female individuals to neutralize the supremacy of a heterocentric society (Hammaren & Johansson, 4). Maryam idealizes the female computer scientist, Margaret Wright, as a role model to become a competitive person in the tech society (155). Similarly, Maryam thinks that "Women must be willing to make demands and take up more space. Of course, there are cultural forces that hold women back from doing so and that's why it's important to have role models, I had Margaret Wright" (147). In other words, Maryam appreciates togetherness among female individuals. Therefore, she idealizes other successful women to be like one of them in future (166). The title of Book, *Best of Friends*, conceptualizes the utopian social space in which female gender admires female close emotional bonding. Consequently, the female homosocial relations, in Shamsie's *Best of Friends*, function to strengthen the female gender based on the idea of togetherness and solidarity in both social and private spaces.

Feminism promotes womanhood by emphasizing togetherness among female subjects while living in heterocentric society (Rudy, 197). For instance, *Best of Friends* significantly highlights the idea of common interest among female individuals, such as the emotional bond between Maryam and Zahra living in Karachi (13). Maryam and Zahra were not bonded by any blood relation, or even by profession. However, they were strongly bonded with one another based on the similar gender-identity (9-14). While living in heteropatriarchal society, Zahra and Maryam's homosocial desire is essentially based on their understanding towards one another (43). For instance, Zahra and Maryam experience a lifelong relationship as "You weren't tied by blood, or profession, or an enmeshed domesticity or even – as was the case with friendship made in adulthood – much by way of common interest" (160). Therefore, the research analyses the female homosocial desire to fundamentally disrupt the stable binary of heterosexual society by replacing it with the homosocial society rather heterosocial society. Maryam and Zahra secure each other's common interests by maintaining their strong emotional bond with one another.

Shamsie has disrupted the binary of man-female relationship with female-female friendship. To highlight, she has used the epitome of female friendship as the pure form of relationship between two people. For example, "The two old women were almost out of sight at the end of the road, and they seemed to be deep in conversation – perhaps the older one's slight stoop came from a lifetime of bending to hear her friend's whispered secrets" (227). The following phrase of old women refers to the lifetime relationship between two females. *Best of Friends* portrays the female homosocial desire as regulatory force to secure common

interests amongst female gender. Maryam and Zahra share the platonic homosocial relationship with one another in which they praise the sight of two old female friends talking to one another. Indeed, Maryam and Zahra seek homosocial desire to secure the common interest whilst maintaining a strong emotional bonding.

The theme of *Home* portrays the physical and existential nucleus for both Maryam and Zahra. Shamsie has discussed the idea of home with Maryam and Zahra's homosocial relationship. For example, "England felt like home to me almost right away. Not because of England, but because you were here" (228). For Shamsie, Maryam and Zahra, as transnational migrants, comfort one another with their strong emotional bonding. In other words, within transnational sphere and diasporic setting, Maryam and Zahra's homosocial relation helps them to uphold their sense of security and belonging to one another. For instance, "Both knew that no one had the kind of friendship when they were forty that the two of them had at fourteen" (33). Additionally, while Maryam and Zahra were living under the atrocity of General Zia, Maryam and Zahra comfort one another under cultural and socio-political settings. Therefore, Shamsie's novel portrays the female homosocial relations as a way to uphold their sense of home and belonging. Thus, within the socio-cultural and diasporic settings, Maryam and Zahra provide each other a sense of belonging and home.

Shamsie's novel ends with Maryam and Zahra's lifelong friendship with one another. For Maryam and Zahra, their homosocial desire symbolizes the same-sex relationship in which all forms of dichotomies and binaries are challenged and disrupted. For instance: "Zahra leaned forward, her cheek against Maryam's. Maryam put her arms around Zahra, felt the comfort of their togetherness, the unchanging truth of their friendship through everything the world could throw at them, through everything they could throw at each other" (166).

The selected novel highlights various forms of physical proximity, physical comfort, between Maryam and Zahra. In the novel, "only Zahra could make her feel so grateful for a compliment, as grateful as she'd been decades ago when Zahra said she was her only real friend and everyone else was in her life because of propinquity" (276). In other words, there is always a possibility of homoerotic relationship within a homosocial relation. However, in Shamsie's novel, Maryam and Zahra experience such kinds of encounter in which they come close enough. For Shamsie, Maryam and Zahra experience the certain homoerotic desire for one another. For instance, "Do you think it would be that different, if you closed your eyes... What? To kiss a girl. A new kind of possibility, suggested.... You mean each other? (25). Within the discipline of queer theory, homosocial relation confronts any form of normative conception of the society. Therefore, both protagonists, Maryam and Zahra, experience the homoerotic desire for each other. Female-homosocial relations, under the discipline of queer theory, focus to highlight any form of resilience towards a normative society. For example, "Let me introduce you to the difference in meaning between the words "friendship" and "propinquity", Zahra smiled (275). Thus, the physical proximity and homoerotic desire encourages the theorization of queer relations in which all forms of non-normative practices are encouraged.

Conclusion

The research concludes the literary manifestation of female homosocial relations among the disidentified individuals across cultural and diasporic settings. The female-homosocial relation, as a subversive approach, replaces the heterocentric society with homocentric society wherein binaries are disrupted altogether. The research proclaims to destabilize all forms of stable identical categories. Therefore, the literary manifestation of female homosocial relations, among female gender, eliminate the gender binary between man and woman. In other words, female homosociality is skeptical towards maintaining any form

of binary relationship. Thus, female-female platonic relationship promotes the non-heteronormative society. The research concludes to promote togetherness and fraternity among marginalized female groups.

The female homosocial relation between Maryam and Zahra is essentially based on emotional bonding and togetherness with one another. In other words, Maryam and Zahra, by their homosocial relation, question the hegemonic order of the heteropatriarchal society in which men are in the positions of power. While living in Karachi, they question the power dynamics within the hands of men and undermine the various contingencies of fixed structure of power among men. However, by migrating from Karachi to London, Maryam and Zahra uphold the positions of power by becoming successful in their professions. Maryam and Zahra's female homosocial relation, within diasporic settings, upholds the positions of power by staying together with one another. Thus, the literary manifestation of female homosocial relations in Shamsie's *Best of Friends* reinforces and rearticulates the changing dynamics of non-heteronormative society in which traditional gender roles and heterosocial relations are questioned.

Female-Homosocial relations have various practical implications, such as the formation of the egalitarian society among women. Moreover, female-homosocial relations empower the female gender to support one another, provide emotional support, mentorship, and collaboration among female individuals. Therefore, female-homosocial relations undermine the traditional gender roles by fostering a utopian idea of solidarity among females. In other words, female homosocial relations question the heteronormative society by replacing it with a homosocial society. The heterosocial society reinscribes the gender traditional roles. However, a homosocial society encourages the empowerment of females based on the emotional bond and support for one another.

Works Cited

- 'Best of Friends' Review: An Underwhelming Tale of Childhood Friendship. The Harvard Crimson. 15 November 2022, www.thecrimson.com/article/2022/11/15/best-of-friends-review-kamila-shamsie-2022.
- Eguchi, Shinsuke, and Godfried Asante. "Disidentifications Revisited: Queer(Y)Ing Intercultural Communication Theory." *Unm*, 2015, www.academia.edu/15880740/Disidentifications_Revisited_Queer_y_ing_Intercultural_Communication_Theory.
- Gérardin-Laverge, Mona. "Realistic Approach to the Performativity of Gender." *Nordic Wittgenstein Review*, Nordic Wittgenstein Society, 2022, doi:10.15845/nwr.v11.3635.
- Gedro, Julie, and Robert C. Mizzi. "Feminist Theory and Queer Theory." *Advances in Developing Human Resources*, vol. 16, no. 4, 2014, pp. 445–56, doi:10.1177/1523422314543820.
- Gonzalez, Marcos. "José Muñoz's the Sense of Brown / Marcos Gonzalez - ASAP/J." *ASAP/J*, 2020, asapjournal.com/jose-munozs-the-sense-of-brown-marcos-gonzalez.
- Grzanka, Patrick. "Queer Theory." *ResearchGate*, 2019, www.researchgate.net/publication/336221331_Queer_Theory.
- Halperin, David M. "The Normalization of Queer Theory." *Journal of Homosexuality*, Vol. 45, No. 2-4, 2003, 339-443. https://transreads.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/2021-07-15_60f03fcc333b7_david-m-halperin-the-normalization-of-queer-theory.pdf.
- Hammarén, Nils, and Thomas Johansson. "Homosociality." *SAGE Open*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2014.
- Marshall, J. *A Critical Theory of the Self: Wittgenstein, Nietzsche, Foucault*. 2001, www.semanticscholar.org/paper/A-Critical-Theory-of-the-Self%3A-Wittgenstein%2C-Marshall/a88b279a6be8c31f20f2088852eaf7b0e3735fa4.

- Hicks, Jan. "Best of Friends." What I Think About When I Think About Reading, 10 September 2023, thinkaboutreading.wordpress.com/2023/05/09/best-of-friends.
- Medina, José Luis Valdez. "Identity Trouble." *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, vol. 29, no. 6, 2003, pp. 655–80, doi:10.1177/0191453703296002.
- Miller, Jennifer. "Chapter 1: Thirty Years of Queer Theory." Pressbooks, milnepublishing.geneseo.edu/introlgbtqstudies/chapter/thirty-years-of-queer-theory.
- Pathan, Salman. "Gender Studies and Queer Theory (1970s-present) GENDER(S), Power, and Marginalization." 2021, www.academia.edu/49245511/Gender_Studies_and_Queer_Theory_1970s_present_GENDER_S_POWER_AND_MARGINALIZATION.
- Piantato, G. "How Has Queer Theory Influenced the Ways We Think About Gender?" *Working Paper of Public Health*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2016, doi:10.4081/wpph.2016.6948.
- Ranjan, Ritesh. "Queer Theory: A Critical Analysis of Its Implication in Art Historical Readings." *IJCIRAS*, 2019, www.academia.edu/39977038/QUEER_THEORY_A_CRITICAL_ANALYSIS_OF_ITS_IMPLICATION_IN_ART_HISTORICAL_READINGS.
- Riggs, Damien W., and Gareth J. Treharne. "Queer Theory." Palgrave Macmillan UK eBooks, 2017, doi:10.1057/978-1-137-51018-1_6.
- Rudy, Kathy. "Queer Theory and Feminism." *Women's Studies*, vol. 29, no. 2, 2000, pp. 195–216, doi:10.1080/00497878.2000.9979308.
- St, Bedford, and Martin. "Queer Theory." *Harris Eng*, vol. 101, 2005, www.sjsu.edu/faculty/harris/Eng101_QueerDef.pdf.
- Williams, Cobretti D. "Feminism Is Queer: The Intimate Connection Between Queer and Feminist Theory." *Journal of Homosexuality*, vol. 66, no. 14, 2018, pp. 2059–61, doi:10.1080/00918369.2018.1517501.
- Zhao, Xu. "On Homo-sociality: Sedgwick's Critical Theory". 2018. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/328487739_On_Homo-sociality_Sedgwickrs_Critical_Theory.