

Platonic Friendship and Sisterhood: A Feminist Reading of Kamila Shamsie’s Best of Friends

Dania Irfan¹, Farnaz Bano², Fatima Nasir Alvi³ and Hina Jamal⁴

Abstract

This study analyzes the work of Kamila Shamsie’s, *Best of Friends*, to explore the dynamics of platonic friendship and sisterhood between the female protagonists employing the “theory of feminism” based on Plato’s concept of friendship along with Bell Hook’s idea of sisterhood. The analysis portrays the efforts and role of the two main characters of the novel in maintaining their relationship and trying to support one another in a male dominant society where females are not safe. This study probes into the novel through the lens of feminism, platonic friendship (Plato) and sisterhood (Bell Hooks, 2000). It underscores the strong connection between Zahra and Maryam mapping the evolution of their relationship from childhood to adulthood. A series of events test their sincerity in return shaping their friendship dynamics.

Keywords: platonic friendship, sisterhood, solidarity, girl fear

Introduction

This research article aims at exploring “Platonic friendship” and “sisterhood” in *Best of Friends* by Kamila Shamsie analyzing how both main characters support and stand by each other through thick and thin. It also explains how Zahra and Maryam shared a long yet loyal and faithful bond of friendship from their childhood till their forties. They also experienced girl fear in a patriarchal society. Platonic friendship and sisterhood between both main characters strengthen each other in almost every situation by mutual support.

¹ Department of English, Lahore College for Women University, Lahore – Pakistan

²⁻³⁻⁴ Department of English, Government Islamia Graduate College for Women Cooper Road, Lahore – Pakistan

The term “platonic” was named after a renowned Greek philosopher Plato. He suggested that platonic friendship brings two people spiritually closer, establishing a trust and loyalty-based relationship between them (Bergmann, 1982, Rowe, 1995). On the other hand, “sisterhood” is a term which emerged as a model for feminist intercommunity relations between two women based on support, faith, and solidarity against common oppression and victimization (Oyewumi, 2001).

The novel *Best of Friends* by Kamila Shamsie published on September 27, 2022 is mainly about relationships, specially the relation between two women, resulting in a close friendship based on fidelity. The protagonists Zahra and Maryam being friends since their childhood are in their forties now, living in London. Despite the personal and social differences, a strong bond exists between them though a lot is still hidden and unspoken.

The terms Platonic friendship and sisterhood fall under the theory of feminism, and the idea of sisterhood because they challenge and resist traditional gender specific roles and foster a sense of comradeship among women; advocating intellectual and emotional connections based on mutual respect and equality (Hooks, 2000, Mohanty, 2003). This is quite evident in the novel.

Gloria Jean Watkins using pen name Bell Hooks was an American author who took the discussion of sisterhood to another level. She is well known for her writings about feminism, race, and gender along with repression. She is from the third wave of feminism. She wrote 40 books which include different essays, poetry along with many books for children. Her main achievement is that along with the third wave of feminism, Bell Hooks mainly talked about sisterhood in detail. She did her bachelors from Stanford University, Masters from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and lastly her PhD from University of California, Santa Cruz. What Hooks assert is that sisterhood is not all about being a woman as it needs in depth understanding of women experiences in a diverse manner particularly beyond the lines of cultural background, race and class. In *Best of Friends* Zahra and Maryam are tested because their lives split due to economic and social differences. Moreover, according to Hooks sisterhood is rooted in a commitment which is shared by females in order to disrupt patriarchal systems. Shamsie's novel touches this as the characters negotiate societal expectations and are in dispute with the traditional roles allocated with gender in their society.

According to Bell Hooks the male dominant societies are the reason for the disabled sisterhood. From Hook's point of view women personalize the ways in which men act and get in competition with each other. She was the one who critically and deeply discussed about sisterhood in many of her works. Unity is something which is related with sisterhood because it deals with females supporting each other, and in order to have all this firstly we need to have some common purposes and aims so that we can build sisterhood. In her article *In Sisterhood: Political Solidarity between Women*, Bell Hooks in 1986 stood for women, their rights and took sisterhood to another level of discussion. While talking about sisterhood she further explains that women are the ones who are badly affected by repression and the term sisterhood given by feminists and the ones who work for the freedom of women was mainly about the repression and subduing that all women were facing commonly. This is the thing which a feminist movement: Me Too Movement talks about when women say that you are not alone we too have suffered. Moreover, in this article Hooks suggests that women should come to the front to explain power solidarity because sisterhood is something which is very closely related to solidarity which also means to support each other.

The impact of sisterhood and platonic friendship can be spotted in the novel *Best of Friends* when both girls stand by each other through thick and thin. Even after a lapse of almost thirty years their bond has stood the test of love, sincerity, and faith. Besides platonic friendship and sisterhood, the novel *Best of Friends* also touches the conflicts and the depths of being in a very close relation of friendship. The novel explores the term girl fear used by the author several times, which is evidently related to the theory of feminism as in such societies, women are being harassed and oppressed by males. It also shows how one cannot always share each and everything in a friendship no matter how loyal someone is. The novel revolves around the story of two friends Zahra and Maryam and their lives, circumstances, conflicts, and relationship from their childhood till their forties.

Review of the Literature

Platonic friendship and sisterhood in reference to the theory of feminism along with the idea of Plato and Bell Hooks is explored in this section.

Kamila crafts a compelling world through language which is almost perfect and her talent has turned her art into a career which is quite unparalleled (Sethna 2014). A

critical essay "Changing images of Pakistani Women" in Kamila Shamsie's *Salt and Saffron*, and *Broken Verses* talks about Shamsie's portrayal of female characters. Kamila Shamsie is someone who is quite famous for the portrayal of her female characters in her fiction like that of Aliya in her novel *Salt and Saffron* where she is the main protagonist trying to find out hidden truths about their family tree. Her novel *Best of Friends* portrays both female protagonists from a feminist point of view and their survival in a society where male is privileged highlighting fear, and the desires of her female characters. Shamsie's portrayal of her female character's tribulations, desires, and quests in *Salt and Saffron*, *Kartography*, and *Broken Verses* from a feminist perspective is quite unique (Yaqoob & Hussain 2012). The author's pre-occupation with platonic bond of friendship between her female protagonists Zahra and Maryam who belong to a pre-partition family shows their faithful and long relation of platonic friendship (Chakraborty 2022).

In an interview Kamila Shamsie while talking about Karachi as the setting of her recent novel *Best of Friends* said that she wanted to re-visit the landscape of her initial novels which were set in Karachi in a certain time frame and vicinity of two square miles but with a more critical approach and perspective about gender and power dynamics of that world (Shamsie 2022). Revisiting Karachi leads to an exploration of diasporic consciousness based on her own experience of diaspora through a variety of diasporic characters in her novel as well as major influencers such as world war II, colonization, decolonization, Fall of Dhaka, 9/11 incident and its aftermath Afghanistan and war on terror (Zahoor, 2019).

There main female characters are from families which are quite different from each other, Maryam's family background is quite strong as she belongs from a wealthy family with political connections while Zahra is from a middle-class family which makes their life experiences and values different also though both learn from each other but their opposite views about different things keep testing their bond. None of them suffered any mental issue or any kind of extreme suffering. They were harassed, in a car incident where the boys with them had bad intentions towards them. (Young 2022) points out that the lives of both protagonists intrinsically lack conflict though there was a skirmish however their reaction was devoid of feelings. This novel is quite similar to *Neapolitan Quartet* by Elena Ferrante which is a series of fiction consisting of almost four parts because just like Elena's *Neapolitan series*, *Best of Friends* also contains the topics of puberty, sex, rivalries, conflicts, girlhood along with some intimate secrets and much more (Rashid 2022). The complexity of

gender roles rooted in the Sub-continent's history allows for reassessment of patriarchy through feminist theory highlighting women resilience, autonomy, social restrictions through multiple cultural contexts (Naqvi, Yousaf, & Sultan, 2023).

Methodology

The research is qualitative in nature as it chiefly employs the method of textual analysis for exploring Kamila Shamsie's *Best of Friends* by utilizing the critical framework of feminism in general and sisterhood and platonic friendship in particular.

The primary source for this research is Kamila Shamsie's *Best of Friends*, critically analyzed under some secondary sources including electronic media, articles, research papers available at different websites and books about the text under consideration.

This study consists of four chapters. An introduction and literature review being the first and second chapters respectively. The third chapter is of textual analysis on dynamics of platonic friendship and sisterhood. The last chapter consists of conclusion.

Analysis

This section of the research analyzes the platonic idea of friendship given by Plato, employing the literary theory of feminism in reference to the idea of sisterhood by Bell Hooks. Sisterhood is an extreme form of platonic friendship and that is how platonic friendship also falls under the theory of feminism.

The ideal friendship is based on care and mutual appreciation, fostering an understanding of both inner and outer beauty (Kraut, 2008). For Plato, true friendship is about persuasion of shared values, truth and moral excellence (Sheffield, 2017). Platonic friendship is a deep connection or friendship between two people. It is a strong relation of friendship, trust, loyalty and faith without any physical intimacy or romance, which is related to sisterhood somehow, or suffices it to say that it is an extreme form of sisterhood.

In the beginning of Kamila Shamsie's novel *Best of Friends* both Zahra and Maryam's friendship is almost unbreakable. Just like best friends both of them support and guide one another in good and bad times. Maryam went abroad for vacations with her family and there she recorded almost everything for her best friend Zahra, so that she could share each and every moment of her vacations with her. This reflects the deep bond of their friendship and love. "And her outstretched hand held a cassette that was always her belated birthday present to her best friend – a mix tape that she had recorded off the radio, with the best of London charts" (Shamsie, 7)

As far as platonic friendship is concerned, it is a deep connection or relation between two people based on a number of factors such as loyalty and trust which both female protagonists have in each other. The want to be close to each other as long as they can, "We go together as far as we can, said Maryam, linking her arm with Zahra's as they left the classroom". (Shamsie, 23)

In friendship, one usually shares secrets with friends; this sharing secret is something which is not possible without the element of trust. In the novel, at one place Zahra and Maryam are talking about a boy, but Maryam does not tell her just because she will not approve of it. "What difference does that make? We tell each other everything" (Shamsie, p. 23).

True friendship is a test of one's commitment and the wish to stand by each other for maximum time of their life. When Zahra and Maryam discuss marriage, both are steadfast in their long-lasting friendship. It is obvious that their lives after marriages were going to be a bit different but still they are trying to assert that their strong bond of friendship will remain intact no matter what. "I suppose we'll be married with children..... I suppose we'll want those kinds of things one day', Zahra said, a little gloomily. 'But we'll be us when we're together, won't we? We'll be always us, said Maryam firmly" (Shamsie, 28)

Here the feministic aspect is quite evident when Maryam and Zahra talk about finding such a husband, who has no objection to Maryam running her family business, as usually in patriarchal societies, females are not allowed to work in presence of their husbands or fathers. "The difficult part will be finding a husband who doesn't mind that I'm running my own company and letting him have no say in it at all. But he can't be weak." (Shamsie, 28)

The strength of their relationship is evident through mutual trust. Maryam orders her gatekeeper to let Zahra and her mother enter without any checking. “she turned to the guard. “This is another person who is always allowed in, understand?” (Shamsie, 29)

A short drift is caused between the two when they stop sharing everything with one another but it is short lived. This drift can be seen between Zahra and Maryam as change is a part of life and of course their friendship will not be the same after forty years. “A drift had begun, which would only grow as the years went on. Deep down they both knew that no one had the kind of friendship when they were forty that the two of them had at fourteen.” (Shamsie, 33)

Friendship of these two can also be seen in an incident where both girls have to attend a party given by their class fellow’s elder brother. He specially wants Maryam to be at the party instead of Zahra, but Maryam will accept only if Zahra will be there with her. The two friends rely on each other, that is why they always do everything together. “Maryam said, ‘I’ll come if Zahra’s coming’, and then he said, ‘Zahra, be a sport’.” (Shamsie, 87)

The terrifying incident of Jimmy and Hammad taking Zahra and Maryam on a long ride has an everlasting impact on their minds. Even at that time both the friends were a constant support for one another thus making their friendship based not only on the things said but unsaid as well. “...perhaps friendships weren’t all about what you said to each other but also about what you didn’t say.” (Shamsie, 113)

Their relationship transcends mere companionship, becoming a source of mutual strength, especially in moments of crisis, such as their terrifying car ride with two boys, Jimmy and Hammad. The terrifying incident has an everlasting impact on their minds. Even at that time both the friends were a constant support for one another thus making their friendship based not only on the things said but unsaid as well. “...perhaps friendships weren’t all about what you said to each other but also about what you didn’t say.” (Shamsie, 113). Despite the distress, the bond between Zahra and Maryam remains unbroken, as they both protect and comfort each other. Their friendship also demonstrates the sacrifices typical of sisterhood, where each person stands by the other, even when it involves personal cost, as seen when Maryam sacrifices her reputation to protect Zahra.

Next day after the incident Zahra was worried about the consequences, because it was very clear that their future and their dream for scholarships was in the dark now. Zahra was tense, but again Maryam was there to help and support her friend. "Zahra had imagined her future disappearing into a dark void, regardless of her parents telling her that she was over-reacting and Maryam's assurances that she wouldn't let Zahra take blame for anything". (Shamsie, 114)

It was not just Maryam who was not willing to leave her best friend but also Zahra, who did not want Maryam to go far away from her. For Zahra living without her friend would be extremely hard, as they were used to each other's company. "Maryam in England. Never coming back. What would Zahra do without this friend by her side?" (Shamsie, 132)

A feministic aspect can be seen during a conversation between Maryam and her grandfather, where he is trying to make Maryam understand that in our society there are many people, especially males are present with bad intentions towards women, and that it's not safe for a girl to survive like that in the society. It shows that our society is male dominated. "But you're just a girl, aren't you? You'll always be a girl. And there'll always be Jimmys out there (Shamsie, 123)

Zahra was still very afraid of that event when they were being helpless and vulnerable in the car with two boys and the way both girls ended up being in the area where prostitutes live, Napier Road. She wanted to be courageous like Maryam, who told her that it was totally fine and she should stop being scared now but soon Maryam realized that it was not just fear but it was girl fear. "It's not just fear, it's girl fear". (Shamsie, 127)

When one is in deep friendship a point comes when no proper words are needed only few words are enough to convey one's thoughts. Zahra and Maryam are grown-ups and they are in friendship for almost forty years. A very deep friendship. They were having a conversation the way friends usually do and their whole discussion was of few syllables "Forty years of friendship compressed an entire conversation into those few syllables". (Shamsie, 174)

The strong bonding of Zahra and Maryam shows a relationship of deep understanding and loyalty for each other. It's been years to the car incident with

Zahra and Maryam, but that thing still haunts Zahra and she said “He terrorized us. He wanted us to know what men can do to women”. (Shamsie, 268)

Sisterhood is the support of two or more women for each other in difficult times. Inspite of flaws and weaknesses present in Zahra and Maryam, both were present to help each other, “who knew your every flaw down to your atoms and who still, despite it all, chose to stand with you and by you through everything that the world had yet to throw at darkness.” (Shamsie, 28)

In the novel Maryam was quite unhappy and tense when her family was about to take some decision regarding Maryam’s future, by sending her away from Pakistan so that she could take over her family business of Khan leather. In this difficult time, again Zahra was the one who assured Maryam that no matter what she will always be there to support her. “Zahra touched her fingers against Maryam to say that whatever her parents were trying to do here, she was on Maryam’s side.” (Shamsie, 55)

In the incident, where Hammad and Jimmy took the girls on a car ride was a very terrifying incident for Zahra and Maryam who were just fourteen. This was the time where one friend supported the other by standing firmly for each other. Maryam, being the stronger of the two, tried to console Zahra by making her feel at ease. She wanted Zahra to not worry about the consequences, even though she herself was quite concerned. “Maryam leaned forward between the front seats, one hand on Zahra’s shoulder. ‘So here’s the situation’, she said, in her most conversational tone of voice, even while her thumb moved in reassuring circles on Zahra’s Denim shirt.” (Shamsie, 104)

Furthermore, during the whole ride Maryam was the one who was trying to comfort Zahra through small gestures and actions, just to let her know that no matter what she was not alone. Maryam was always by Zahra’s side, and as long as they had each other everything would be fine. Zahra was tense because Jimmy was taking the girls to Napier Road, which was known as the red- light area. “Maryam kept her hand on Zahra’s shoulder, wishing her friend’s muscles would start to uncoil now that Maryam had taken charge”. (Shamsie, 105)

After Zahra and Maryam reached home Maryam’s parents were mad at her that she was the one who had put Zahra in danger, not knowing that it was actually Zahra

who wanted to go with the boys, not Maryam. Zahra was preparing mentally to tell everybody that it was actually her not Maryam, who insisted on going with the boys, so that she could save her friend from scolding. On the other hand, Maryam was also silent not telling anybody the real situation. Both wanted to take the blame on themselves. That's how both tried to support each other. "Zahra formed the sentence in her mind that she would say Maryam had been the one who wanted to go back to the party, and that she, Zahra, had got into the car when they could have walked through the gates to safety". (Shamsie, 109)

After the car incident, on the way home, there was a gesture of faith and support, when Maryam again tried to assure Zahra that everything was fine. Though she was already aware of the fact that Zahra was guilty but still she remained silent in order to keep Zahra safe. Sacrifice is also one main feature of sisterhood which can be seen here in this whole incident. "On the way out, Maryam reached for Zahra's hand, clasping it. Zahra pressed down against her friend's fingers." (Shamsie, 110)

Maryam not only supported Zahra in front of their family and friends but also in front of their school headmistress in her office. Because she knew for Zahra how important reputation was. "And now Maryam's hand reached out, shielded from the headmistress's sight by the desk, and gripped Zahra's hand, steadying her." (Shamsie, 115)

Maryam and Zahra standing side by side means they are standing in support of each other. Maryam sacrificed her reputation for Zahra's sake, and Zahra was trying to cope with the guilt of letting Maryam take all the blame on herself. This is another scene related to sisterhood. "...all blame fell on Maryam and the parents who hadn't known how to raise her. Zahra looked at Maryam, wanting to convey her embarrassment at the unfairness of this judgment, but it appeared Maryam either hadn't noticed or didn't care." (Shamsie, 116)

From the feministic point of view sisterhood is a support of women from women against men of a patriarchal society. This is what Zahra and Maryam are doing for each other giving support to one another against the men in society. Maryam even said that she wanted Jimmy to die because he terrified her best friend Zahra. The emotional interaction and sense of belonging shows their strong bonding with one another. "I want you to die. Zahra remembered Maryam's voice saying those words to Jimmy." (Shamsie, 131)

Now after many years Zahra and Maryam both are women in their forties and have moved abroad. Both of them are influential personalities and currently they were performing their duties in London, but still both are with each other just like before, even though it's obvious that time has brought changes in their lives. Zahra and Maryam are busy in their life routines, but they still keep a check on each other. Maryam reads about Zahra in *The Guardian*. "since when you read the *Guardian*? 'since I've set up for you tells me you're in it.'" (Shamsie, 151)

Zahra, being a grownup lady seems bold and well- settled in life, but the fact is that she is still affected by that incident from her childhood, where she and Maryam were taken by the boys on a scary car ride. And now when she meets Jimmy in her office and offered him tea, she puts up a brave front as if she has forgotten everything that took place in the past, but deep down she was still terrified. Maryam was offended that Zahra had offered him tea, but after realizing Zahra's dilemma, Maryam tried to console her. "Oh, Za.' Maryam sat down, put her arms around her oldest, dearest friend. Zahra leaned into her, forehead pressed against Maryam's shoulder. (Shamsie, 268).

Conclusively their relationship embodies ideals of Platonic friendship and feminist sisterhood in a patriarchal society. Their constant support, mutual care reflects a deep bond which aligns with both the philosophical and feminist concepts of friendship and confronts gender-based oppression leading to personal growth.

Conclusion

The novel *Best of Friends* by Kamila Shamsie has been examined and evaluated by applying the theory of feminism, relating it with the idea of platonic friendship as given by Plato and sisterhood by Bell Hooks (2000). . This analysis of the novel is important in terms of contemporary feminist discourse because it brings to light female solidarity, resilience, and the complexities of women's friendships in a patriarchal society. It highlights the depth of relationship and societal expectations which shape their choices and interactions. The analysis adds to gender-based feminist discourse emphasizing on autonomy, resistance and strength of women's relationships in the face of external challenges.

The writer gives an analysis of the dynamics of platonic friendship. It is stated in detail that how the protagonists, Zahra and Maryam were having a deep connection

of platonic friendship starting from their childhood and continuing till adulthood. Their loyalty, trust, faith, and the different roles both of them were playing in the relation of friendship by supporting each other in times of difficulty. The true spirit of friendship is highlighted in their close association and love for one another.

Kamila Shamsie gives an insight into the lives of two friends, who are willing to sacrifice and help one another whenever the need arises. The element of sacrifice and compromise is present among the two friends, relating it with the idea of sisterhood. Maryam was the one making more sacrifices and compromises for their friendship. One is more devoted and caring as compared to the other, which is an important aspect of sisterhood. The writer has shown these qualities in her protagonist by establishing a strong bond that is unbreakable between the two friends.

The long-lasting friendship is a test of time in which they emerge successful. Lastly, the intimate relationship revolving around the two friends is deep-rooted and complicated. Although, both protagonists are from different backgrounds, they emerge as bold and powerful women. The essence of true friendship and sisterhood is present in the loyalty, respect, dignity, sacrifice, compassion, and sharing of secrets among two friends. So, the novel by addressing the themes of solidarity and friendship along with the resistance by females in patriarchal society contributes to the deep understanding of gender dynamics and female experiences adding to contemporary feminist discourse.

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Correspondence:

Dania Irfan

daniairfan001@gmail.com
