



SILVER LININGS AND PITFALLS: HUES OF FRIENDSHIP IN KAMILA SHAMSIE'S *BEST OF FRIENDS*

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Abstract

Kamila Shamsie's *Best of Friends* (2022) is a profoundly moving tale of an intimate female friendship, betrayal, separation, and loss. The novel is a stirring exploration into the bonds of friendship, right from childhood to their changing dynamics in adulthood. The narrative explores the frailty of friendship, the dynamics of power and class division in shaping and breaking bonds, the status quo under an oppressive military regime, the desire to explore one's sexuality, the global elitist mindset, and the discrete ways of wielding power. The best friends, Maryam Khan and Zahra Ali are each other's confidants bound together by love, jealousy, loyalty, and disloyalty. The novel is a meticulous study of the ways in which political intervention in the personal space crumbles the friendship which had always seemed unbreakable. It makes a conscious effort to comprehend human vulnerabilities. The proposed paper seeks to explore the diverse shades of friendship in the novel. It aims to study the cultivation of a strong bond, and the power and role of friendship in giving hope in an otherwise oppressive world and meaning to their lives. It aims to analyze the role of power asymmetry, social influence, jealousy, political inclinations, racial profiling, personality differences, vested interests, betrayal, and unaddressed trauma in contributing to the rupture and ultimate severing of a seemingly eternal friendship.

Keywords: Friendship, hope, vulnerabilities, jealousy, power asymmetry, betrayal, loss.

Kamila Shamsie's latest novel *Best of Friends* (2022) is a saga of close female friendship, its gradual rupture, and eventual break-off. The narrative is spanned over thirty years and traverses from 1988 Karachi to 2019 London. The story has at its heart the friendship of two young girls of fourteen years each, Maryam Khan and Zahra Ali, already ten years into friendship. The depth of their friendship can be felt from the conviction with which Zahra tells Maryam, "If you moved to Alaska tomorrow, we'd still be best friends for the rest of our lives." (7) The novel is an exploration into the nature and fragility of friendships, the fascination for fantasy and the lure of sexuality, the play out of power dynamics, the

capitalist mindset of the elite, the injustices of an oppressive regime, the deplorable conditions of the migrants and the failure of sisterhood.

Zahra and Maryam are like Juno's swans – eternally inextricable. Theirs is a kind of friendship that smoothens down obscure references like pebbles in their shared language, an incomprehensible bond to the people outside. They are each other's confidants. They share highlights and swap notes, documenting all the significant details about the summer they spend apart thus ensuring that they are both abreast with all the key happenings in each other's lives. The distinct choice

of subjects for their O-level course leads them on divergent paths but Maryam entwines her arm with Zahra's and tells her: "We go together as far as we can." (13) They share everything from kissing the portrait of their favorite pop superstar, George Michael, to sharing and deciphering secret codes for the good bits of a book. It is only with each other that they share their darkest fantasies and desires owing to their trust in each other. When Maryam's parents are critical of her return to Pakistan after her university education abroad, Zahra firmly supports her friend's plans. When the unbelievable news of General Zia's death comes across, only talking about it with Maryam makes it believable. In 1988, the night when Pakistan is gripped in a frenzy, impatiently awaiting the result of the nation's authentic party-based democratic elections, the two girls sat together hooked to the television screen, sleeping alternately so that "there was no moment of history that at least one of them didn't witness." (73) In the early hours, the two best friends watch the sunrise on a democratic Pakistan, a historical moment, together. They are sure they'll be the same forever even if they're geographically apart or have their spouses since they share friendship, not merely propinquity. Shamsie describes how this friendship gave stability and meaning to their lives:

The certainty that whatever happened in the world you would have this one person, this North Star, this alter ego 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 you, every heartache, every disappointment, every moment of darkness. Always this friendship, always it's light. (28)

The girls not only share a genuine affection for each other but are also willing to make sacrifices in order to protect the interests of each other. They understand each other's vulnerabilities. Maryam understands the significance of reputation in Zahra's life and family. She knew "it had something to do with the uncertainty of her social position." (25) Despite being innocent, when Maryam is accused and held responsible for the abduction of both of them on that night in the FX by Hammad and Jimmy,

she doesn't defend herself, making an attempt to shield Zahra's reputation, image and future from being sullied and lets the assumptions float by, not denying any culpability. She loathes Jimmy for terrifying her best friend. Even thirty years later, when they are both extremely busy with their respective lives, they keep Sundays aside to catch up with each other. Maryam is deliberately hostile to the Valkyrie, Zahra's mean adversary, internalizing the schoolyard rule of friendship that puts your friend's enemy as your own.

Zahra and Maryam share a friendship of contrasts. Both the girls belong to the privileged class but Maryam belongs to the elite set. Social class can impact the opportunities and networks available to individuals. Higher social classes often have access to influential networks, professional opportunities, and social connections that can provide advantages and open doors. In some cases, these opportunities and networks can facilitate friendships, while the lack of access to such resources can create challenges for individuals from lower social classes in forming connections. Maryam's parents were part of the social set, "who went abroad for their summer holidays and swam at the same private members' club" (9) Zahra, belonging to an upper-middle-class family, sees overseas education as her gateway to progress and security. Her family cannot afford education overseas. She wanted enough score "to qualify for a scholarship in Britain or financial aid in America." (12) But contrary to Zahra's dedication to earning a scholarship for securing admission at a reputed university abroad, Maryam exhibits a casual attitude toward academics, believing in the power and influence of money in paving the way for her admission. "For Maryam, university was just an interruption before she could take over the family business." (14) She "wasn't at all sure why she had to go to a university, but her grandfather seemed to think it was necessary." (24) Socioeconomic differences also contribute to the disparity in thought processes on social and political issues. This can be attributed to Maryam and Zahra's distinct experiences and responses to the political climate of Pakistan in the 1980s. Their dreams for the future stand in stark contrast too. While Maryam envisions

her future unfolding in Karachi, Zahra expresses no will to return to the city once she leaves. Power dynamics play a crucial role in the fundamental building blocks of any relationship and can affect outcomes such as its quality to a great degree. In an article entitled, *Power in romantic relationships: How positional and experienced power are associated with relationship quality*, Robert Körner and Astrid Schütz emphatically state that “Power is a social construct that is pervasive in everyday interactions and relationships.” Class divisions often come with power dynamics and social hierarchies. In friendships where there is a significant disparity in socioeconomic status, power imbalances may arise. These imbalances can affect decision-making, influence, and the overall dynamics of the friendship. This class disparity often acts as a barrier to communication and disrupts bonds when it unconsciously seeps into a female bonding, thus engendering feelings of superiority, jealousy, hatred, and belittling each other, thus subverting the whole narrative of sisterhood. In *Sisterhood: Political Solidarity between Women*, Bell Hooks critiques such shallow bonds postulating that “women have internalized sexist, racist, classist, and homophobic ideologies and stereotypes which in turn disable communication and understanding across different lines.” Class superiority invariably puts Maryam at the powerful end. Maryam’s mother would describe Zahra’s parents as “decent hard-working people” (25) with an air of condescension “towards those who couldn’t simply assume a position in the world, regardless of character or action.” (25) Addressing power dynamics and mitigating the negative effects of power asymmetry is important for fostering healthy and equitable friendships.

Zahra’s acknowledgment of her family’s limitations is also an acknowledgment of her own position in the power network and how power dynamics play out. The friend with more privilege and resources may hold more influence and control, which can create challenges in maintaining equality and mutual respect. Maryam can resort to the means of blackmailing and even terrorizing if she senses even the slightest danger to her guarded interests. While Zahra is terrorized by the night in

the FX, Maryam wants to be the terrorizer by putting Jimmy through a similar kind of terrifying experience, and right at that moment, Zahra comprehends what it means to be powerful and becomes equally aware of her own powerlessness. In a research chapter titled *Power in Close Intimate Relationships*, James J. Kim et al. posit that, “wanting versus having power can have different implications for relationship well-being.” Maryam, being a prisoner of the past, yearns to avenge Jimmy for intimidating her and making her feel helpless. Their understanding of life and social experiences is an outright mismatch too. Their experiences of life, too, are shaped by the class disparity, where Zahra shares the experiences of her fellow citizens, Maryam’s focal interest lies in the resources of power. The presence of a repellent dictator and everyday violence makes Zahra vulnerable but Maryam is indifferent and bold. Zahra is familiar with the paranoia that a dictatorial regime engenders by suppressing the voices of dissent and curtailing the right to free speech with the constant surveillance by the intelligence services but Maryam’s affluent family with their capitalistic orientation makes such ground realities nothing but fictional accounts of oppression under a military regime. Years later in London, she refutes Zahra’s fears and concerns regarding their life in Pakistan under General Zia’s regime reflecting, “I mean, come on, the only thing anyone really worried about was crossed lines with someone from your social set.” (155) as if there didn’t exist a world beyond one’s social set. Thirty years down the line, Zahra leads the Centre for Civil Liberty as the Director, battling for the rights of immigrants and against the injustices of the prevailing government while Maryam is the ‘Czarina’ of tech in the UK, single focused on safeguarding her money and multiplying it. Zahra’s commitment to activism doesn’t align with Maryam’s commitment to multiplying her investments. Maryam is untouched and ignorant of the cruelties, hostilities, and injustices that the immigrant community is put through, while Zahra’s sensitivity and empathy toward the victims coax her to devote all her professional life to the cause. Zahra’s undeterred efforts yielded significant changes in the legislation. Shamsie states: “The rolling back of anti-terror laws,

amendments to the Hate Crimes Bill, an end to the Snoopers' Charter- all these were, in part, CCL victories. Britain was a different place, a better place, because of this office. She'd made her father so proud." (188) Shamsie addresses Zahra as Britain's conscience and Maryam as the Global Business Envoy – the extreme ends of the same thread. While Zahra fights against racism and harsh anti-immigrant policies of the hostile new government, the concepts of justice and democracy seem to be abstract for Maryam. Maryam is representative of the transnational capital elite – a class that is notably cosmopolitan and unbridled by the national frontiers. She belongs to the global ruling class, works in a globalized circuit, and collaborates with the government only to serve and benefit her vested interests and to seal herself a spot at the nucleus of global power, robustly establishing herself as a player of global capitalism. Zahra's passionate commitment to and engagement in activism becomes a bone of contention that puts their friendship under strain.

Political situations often lead to polarizing societal discourse. Differing ideologies and perspectives can indeed cause disagreements and conflicts within society. Political ideologies often align with specific identity groups or communities, which can further contribute to polarization. This grouping can intensify conflicts as individuals identify strongly with their chosen ideologies and view opposing ideologies as threats to their identity or community. Alexander W. Schmidt-Catran & Christian S. Czymara in their study entitled, *Political elite discourses polarize attitudes toward immigration along ideological lines. A comparative longitudinal analysis of Europe in the twenty-first century* "exclusionary attitudes on the side of the native population are the result of struggles over the allocation of resources. In this view, migrants are threats to the social status quo." Zahra, a migrant Muslim woman, was perceived as a threat for voicing out her dissent and protesting against the government. Zahra and Maryam's contrasting political ideologies were defined by their priorities, perceptions, and inclinations, engendering conflicts and making them emotionally distant from each other. Zahra was extremely resentful of and enraged

at the government for turning down Azam's application for Indefinite Leave to Remain in the UK, a subtle move aiming an attack at her. When Maryam announces that she has accepted the Prime Minister's proposal of being the face of the government's campaign to aid in repairing its public image, it is Zola, Maryam and Layla's daughter who's offended by Maryam's decision to side with her 'godmother' Zahra Khala's adversaries and insulting and subverting all her hard efforts. She says, "Here Zahra Khala was, spending her entire life trying to stop him [the Prime Minister] from drowning people who were escaping from war zones. What was Mama doing getting involved with one of his campaigns?" (276) Echo chambers, where individuals are exposed primarily to information and viewpoints that reinforce their existing beliefs, can deepen ideological divisions and make it harder for people to find common ground or engage in constructive dialogue. Political beliefs often carry emotional significance for individuals, making political disagreements more charged and personal. When people feel strongly about an issue or ideology, their emotions can influence the way they perceive and respond to differing viewpoints, making it difficult to have productive conversations. Zahra and Maryam's differing viewpoints of the governments back in Pakistan and in present-day London make the conflicts inevitable. While much of Zahra's experiences are shaped by the authoritative and oppressive military regime back in Pakistan, Maryam remains untouched and unaware, holding a neutral ground due to her belonging to a socially influential and elite class, for whom money matters hold more significance than human sufferings. The different political experiences and ideologies invariably polarize societal discourse. Driven by their respective interests, Zahra is critical of the government and its dictatorial policies and unjust laws and Maryam is highly optimistic about the prevailing government owing to its concern about and investment in tech. While political disagreements and conflicts are inevitable, they can also be an opportunity for growth, learning, and the exploration of different perspectives. While Zahra was battling against the harsh anti-immigrant policies, Maryam outrightly refused to associate

with the term 'immigrant'. Shamsie writes: "she shrugged off words such as 'migrant', with its whiff of misfortune...She was a mover and therefore not a migrant but an expat or even an émigré." (214) Politics intrudes their personal space to shake the very roots of their friendship. However, constructive dialogue, active listening, and respectful engagement are crucial for finding common ground, understanding diverse viewpoints, and working toward collective solutions. Society benefits from fostering an environment that encourages healthy debates and respectful discussions, even in the face of ideological differences.

Instances of racial profiling and discriminatory practices by law enforcement have been reported, which can disproportionately affect Pakistani immigrants. This can involve verbal abuse, physical assaults, vandalism, or other forms of targeted attacks based on their Pakistani identity. The racist attack on Zahra's CCL office with a bagful of excretion is a downright manifestation of the hostile attitude towards Pakistani immigrants, negative stereotyping, Islamophobia, and Xenophobia. Such incidents create a climate of fear and contribute to the marginalization of the Muslim community. Another discriminatory incident that Shamsie throws light upon is the bullying of a 13-year-old, Tahera, a Muslim in a hijab in London, whose picture is morphed into a pig-girl-like image, quickly circulated and attacked with racist comments, owing largely to her Muslim identity. The psychological abuse forced the little girl to attempt suicide. It is against such discriminatory, prejudiced, and hostile practices toward the immigrants that Zahra is fighting and criticizing the government and demanding its intervention. Zahra's close encounters with acts of xenophobia made her almost resolute in discerning racism everywhere in the UK. It is reflected when she says, "Does it look more indolent than English ivy, do you think?" (173) after Maryam has spotted a Persian ivy. Efforts to combat racism and prejudices against Pakistani immigrants in the UK require a comprehensive approach, including public awareness campaigns, anti-discrimination legislation and policies, community engagement, and education to promote tolerance and understanding.

The sexual orientations put them both on opposite ends of the spectrum. Zahra's adolescent urge to acknowledge and explore her sexual desires/sexuality is dominant but inexplicable. But the weight of her parents' trust and expectations do not let her inmost feelings surface to the fore. In a study titled *A Theory of Conformity*, B. Douglas Bernheim argues that "Most social scientists agree that individual behavior is motivated in large part by "social" factors, such as the desire for prestige, esteem, popularity, or acceptance." The fear of being penalized by social groups coerces an individual to operate within a framework that conforms to the established social norms and expectations. This adds another strand in their relationship of contrasts as Maryam is assertive and doesn't see a point in considering anyone's opinion when it comes to deciding or doing what she wanted. While Zahra explores her sexuality with different partners and in different settings, Maryam finds fulfillment in Layla, and marries her without caring for the opinions of the society, critical of homosexual relationships. The need for conformity suppresses a person's individuality and suppression can potentially undermine not just an individual's communication but also his social functioning to a notable degree. In a research article, *The Social Costs of Emotional Suppression: A Prospective Study of the Transition to College*, Sanjay Srivastava et al. find that "individuals who make frequent use of suppression deal with stressful situations by masking their inner feelings and clamping down their outward displays of emotion" which can be regarded as the social cost of suppression. Zahra's desire to be the object of Hammad's touch is repressed initially but finds expression when they meet at Lord's, followed by their shedding the remaining inhibitions in Zahra's bedroom. Maryam is entirely unknown to Zahra's proclivities and her overpowering need for men.

The first drift in their bonding comes over Hammad, whose character is pivotal to the impetus of the plot. He becomes the first reason for Maryam to lie to Zahra when they were fourteen. Zahra's disapproval of Hammad leads Maryam to talk to him only when Zahra isn't around. She also doesn't share with Zahra her secret tryst with Hammad at the

video shop for their first date. She keeps this secret tryst as her own personal adventure. In a bond where they tell each other everything, this concealing of information feels like a personal blow. Shamsie puts down: "A drift had begun, which would only grow as the years went on." (33)

The incident that marks a concomitant shift in their lives and relationship occurs when both of them are held hostage by Hammad and Jimmy. Insecurities about oneself can contribute to jealousy and competition in friendships. When friends are vying for the attention of a mutual love interest, it can intensify feelings of competition and jealousy. Zahra feels compelled to compete to validate herself and this fear of missing out or being left behind inevitably strains their friendship. Maryam wants to go back inside but it is Zahra's longing for an exciting experience, her unspoken desire of being touched by Hammad, and her inner urges hanging heavy that leads her to the front seat of the car, despite Maryam's protests, just at one gesture from him. Maryam, unwillingly but helplessly, follows her in the backseat. Power asymmetry in friendships can manifest in one person exerting more influence and control over the dynamics and decisions, leaving the other one feeling unheard, marginalized, or exploited within the friendship. Maryam's authoritative voice ordering Jimmy to drop them both at Zahra's makes her hate Maryam but his act of defiance and turning in the opposite direction instead, delights her. The narrator's comment that "Zahra found herself delighted that for once Maryam's imperiousness had so little effect." (95) clearly reflects the idea of Zahra unconsciously envying her best friend for exercising her agency and having a lasting influence on the people they encounter. In an article, *Sisterhood Articulates a New Definition of Moral Female Identity: Jane Austen's Adaptation of the Eighteenth-Century Tradition*, that focuses on reshaping the stereotype of dangerous female friendships and embracing sisterhood, Katherine Curtis recognizes "women's social vulnerability, which endangers female friendship and turns it into a site of competition". Jealousy and competition are common dynamics that can arise in friendships. While friendships are generally built on trust, support, and mutual care, it

is natural for feelings of envy or competition to emerge in certain situations. Once back home, Maryam is seen as the culprit and is reprimanded by her parents for putting Zahra in such a perilous situation but Zahra remains speechless and lets the blame fall on Maryam. Zahra's silence subjects Maryam to humiliation, not just before their parents but in school as well. Despite being innocent, Maryam doesn't try to clear off her image because her foremost concern is guarding Zahra's image against being tarnished and her dreams destroyed. Zahra's vested interest keeps her tight-lipped while Maryam's selfless regard for their friendship forbids her from defending herself. The incident could result in the suspension of one or both of the girls which would have been directly proportional to putting an end to their friendship. Deep down, the frailty of their friendship to survive this storm is an unspoken fear shared by both of them.

Personality differences can indeed become more pronounced with time and can impact female friendships in various ways. Over time, individuals may become more aware of their own personalities and preferences, which can affect their friendships. The initial timidity and boldness of Zahra and Maryam respectively, gave way to dynamic personalities in their adulthood. The dissimilarities became strikingly noticeable as Zahra and Maryam gradually grew well-informed and more assertive of their personalities and preferences with Zahra's indomitable commitment to activism and Maryam's steadfast commitment to multiplying her investments. Zahra's sensitive and empathetic personality is juxtaposed with Maryam's covetous and profit-oriented one. This contrast challenges the compatibility between them. If friends have complementary traits and values, their bond may grow stronger. However, if their personalities clash significantly, it may lead to conflicts in the friendship. These differences can influence how friends interact and understand each other, potentially leading to miscommunication or misunderstandings. When Layla condemns Maryam's callous disregard for human sensibility and suffering by telling her, "Things like justice and democracy really do matter to her. It's odd how you understand everything about her [Zahra] except

that.” (253), Maryam makes the polarity in their personalities, perceptions, and preferences conspicuous by responding that “She [Zahra] acts as if they personally aimed a shit missile into her office from Number 10...She calls them dictators and gets upset when they mind. Am I supposed to let fourteen billion dollars slip away because Zahra’s decided to take the government personally? One of us is a professional.” (253) If personality differences result in a lack of understanding or empathy, it can strain the friendship. Personality differences often lead to divergent interests and preferences, requiring effort and compromise to maintain shared activities and experiences.

The keeping of secrets and silent betrayal lead their friendship on a road to hostility. Maryam’s being a part of the High Table cuts through Zahra’s heart who is critical of the government, protesting against its hostile anti-immigrant policies and rampant Islamophobia. Likewise, Zahra’s ‘clandestine entanglement’ with Hammad is a sheer let-down for Maryam. It unwittingly becomes an exchange of betrayals. When Zahra reveals that she had lately been texting Hammad and acknowledges Maryam’s expression of disgust, she says, “I stopped it because I knew how betrayed you’d feel. But yesterday, well, I felt betrayed by you, so-” (266) In a corollary to this, Zahra’s hospitality followed by offering legal help to Jimmy baffles and enrages her. Zahra’s proclamation demanding the prevailing government to take action against Maryam’s firm Imij and Babar’s informing her that the High Table secret has been unintentionally revealed to Zahra prepares Maryam for the conflict she has been averting for a long time. The High Table is a setup that arranges for regular meetings with the Chancellor and provides access to the Prime Minister. The High Table is an elite donor club that serves as a means to protect her firm and investments, her sole area of interest. She astutely negotiates with the Prime Minister when he asks her to be the face of the government’s ‘Britain’s Open for Business’ campaign by indirectly coercing him to retreat from and revoke the government’s decision to impose charges and take action against Imij. She proudly says, “I’ll be a Global Business Envoy.” (276) Maryam’s betrayal by being a reason for Jimmy’s

detention and eventual deportation hurts Zahra to the core paving the way for the inevitable faceoff. It is through the High Table that Maryam could successfully navigate to avenge Jimmy by sending the information and evidence across to the Home Office that would exacerbate the process of his removal from the country and separation from his daughters. Shamsie comments: “He was the dime on which her life had turned...He had cost her so much: Karachi, Khan Leather, her grandfather. There would be no justice for that, not in any court of law. But there are older forms of justice. An eye for an eye.” (274) However, it’s important to note that personality differences don’t automatically lead to conflicts or difficulties in female friendships. In fact, diverse personalities can bring richness and balance to relationships. Understanding and respecting each other’s personalities, effective communication, and willingness to accommodate differences can help navigate potential challenges and strengthen female friendships over time.

The resentment was slowly brewing in both their hearts. Finding Maryam unconsciously siding with her enemies and at the other end of the battlefield, with utter irreverence for her efforts and insensitive to her fight against the unjust government, Zahra is piqued. Shamsie narrates: “She’d been too embarrassed by her own poor judgment – the thought encompassed both Hammad and Maryam.” (257) Maryam’s acknowledgment of Zahra deliberately citing the episode of Layla throwing Maryam out of their flat and outrightly disregarding the rage and grief she was immersed in, after her grandfather’s demise, to demean her, unfurls a rift that would only widen as the time passes. The gradual buildup of disappointment and rage culminates in an outburst. In an article entitled *Why Women Should Stop Taking Friendships For Granted*, Vanshika states that “Over the course of years, female friendships get burdened by unresolved complaints, many of which we carry to our graves.” Since the night in the FX, they had carried around shame, fear, and dismay in their hearts which never found an outlet. Zahra wishes to blot Jimmy out from her memory and even humiliates him but Maryam’s act of vengeance against him makes her feel betrayed by her best

friend and at the same time morally responsible for Jimmy's plight, leading her to resign from her post. They inadvertently activate each other's dormant triggers. Consequently, their friendship blows up. In a blog titled *Do you expect too much from your friends?* Alisoun Mackenzie asserts that "To expect friends to be aware of your unconscious triggers and how we're feeling without letting them know, is unrealistic and could be sabotaging otherwise good friends." A lack of open and honest communication can exacerbate bitterness and fissures in the strongest of relationships.

The inability of friends to express their feelings, concerns, or vulnerabilities with each other, opens up a chasm of misunderstandings and resentments, the gradual build-up of which, leads to a more competitive or jealous dynamic. The two best friends engage in a filthy fight. Until that day, Maryam holds Jimmy responsible for all that she had lost but the outburst pushes her suppressed rage to the fore, accusing Zahra of taking everything away from her, and of being driven off her country, far away from her home and family, her grandfather in particular. In an article titled *Does Suppressing Feelings Help or Hurt Your Relationship?* Melanie Greenberg puts down that "Chronically suppressing emotions can make you feel more distant and resentful." With the past trauma afresh, Maryam, resentful of Zahra's methodical moves, tells Zahra, "You haven't changed, have you? You want something to happen, and you don't want to take any responsibility for it happening, so it all shifts to me. That was Zahra then and its Zahra now." (297-98) Zahra's willed silence, letting Maryam bear the brunt despite being faultless, still tugs at her heart, and she accuses Zahra of begetting her losses. "You're the reason. You're why I lost everything." (299) Zahra smoothly shifts the blame on Maryam, accusing Maryam of having a devilishly wicked mindset, going as far as calling her best friend a monster. This assertion is like a bolt from the blue for Maryam and she comments: "All these years, you've carried this around. This belief that I'm a monster." (300) In no time, the best friends indulge in mudslinging, hurling heart-shattering abuses, allegations, and disgrace at each other. To establish her ground and attack Maryam's air of superiority,

Zahra didn't stop short of dragging Layla into the heated fight, saying, "She was a blaze of light when I first met her...She capitulated. That's what you made her do. That's what you did to her...You put out her light." (301) For her comeback, Maryam reveals Zahra's dark side and denigrates her by outrightly denying Zahra's essential goodness. She demeans Zahra for being pretentious, saying: "I know all the dark places that you try so hard to hide from everyone, maybe even from yourself, maybe especially from yourself. You try so hard to be a good person, Za, I've never seen anyone try so hard...You try to be good and you fail." (302) The unresolved trauma of the past often shows up in unexpected ways and dismantles strong camaraderie. Shamsie points out that, "It was so easy, too easy, for each of them to draw blood; they knew all the exposed places, the armour-chinks and the softness of the belly beneath." (301) The fiery exchange of insults leads Zahra to switch on the self-destruct mode, giving up her post, unprepared for the dark future that lies ahead, "the disgrace that lay ahead, the empty days, the shame-filled nights, the end of the whole life she had so carefully planned for herself." (307) and leaves Maryam to feel detached, breathing in the term 'monster'.

The friendship that blossomed in childhood, withers away at the crossroads of adulthood. The sisterhood is soured as the crevasse of misunderstandings and resentment widens. Maryam and Zahra fail to navigate through conflicts successfully. In the end, their paths intersect but they refuse to acknowledge each other's presence. They continue walking on the same path without exchanging even a glance. Shamsie comments: "All the while they kept looking ahead and didn't speak. There was nothing to say, and nowhere else to be." (314)

The narrative is a diligent inquiry into the power of female bonding and the repercussions of its disintegration. Women need to come together and build a united front. Female solidarity is non-negotiable and is vitally important to encourage women's empowerment. hooks critically posits that "women must take initiative and demonstrate the power of solidarity. Unless we can show that barriers

separating women can be eliminated, that solidarity cannot exist, we cannot hope to change and transform society as a whole." (4)

Zahra and Maryam seem to be two pieces on the chessboard of ripening adulthood with their distinct forward and lateral moves. An article entitled *Expectations that can destroy your relationship* affirms that "Expectations have the power to drive people apart or bring them together." Irrational expectations often usher individuals to walk down a road of disillusionment. Maryam and Zahra's friendship is as fraught as it is gratifying. A bond that is watered and cultivated by soaking up each other's dreams, fears, anxieties, and vulnerabilities, reduces to ashes. Shamsie rebuffs the myth of a 'perfect' friendship reminding Aristotle's words that, "Perfect friendship is made up of men who are good and alike in virtue; for each alike wishes well to each other... they are good in themselves." Zahra and Maryam are poles apart in their attitude and response toward their surroundings. Rigid notions of right and wrong and a limited view of friendship rupture their bond. Mackenzie argues that "it's the diversity of experiences, values, cultures, and opinions that form the basis of stimulating and meaningful conversations and friendships." Compassion and empathy are two non-negotiable tenets of a healthy relationship. Mackenzie further opines that "Accepting everyone is human, does their best, yet also makes mistakes helps foster deeper and more compassionate relationships" Acceptance and accommodation are the prerequisites of any lasting relationship. A lack of acceptance sets up room for resentment and conflict and can challenge the cornerstone of a seemingly close and sturdy relationship. Shamsie's *Best of Friends* is a meticulous study into the depth, intricacies, and complexities of a friendship, addressing the push and pull of being the best of friends.

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