



## Portrayal of the *feminine* in the selected works of Pakistani Women Writers Moniza Alvi and Kamila Shamsie

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DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.13.2.218](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.13.2.218)



### Article info

Article Received: 19/04/2025  
Article Accepted: 23/05/2025  
Published online: 27/05/2025

### Abstract

This paper explores the multiple ways in which the new feminine sensibilities or the image of the women characters are delineated in the narratives of the woman author/poet Kamila Shamsie and Moniza Alvi. The concerns that are probed in the paper comprises how the feminine perception of a third world woman is construed vis-a-vis cultural practices in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The shaping of the women's identity in the literature produced by these women writers create a Weltanschauung of women in the postcolonial context.

Keywords: Pakistani women writers, third world women, feminine, identity, hegemony.

This paper explores the multiple ways in which the new feminine sensibilities or the image of the women characters are delineated in the narratives of the woman author/poet Kamila Shamsie and Moniza Alvi. It analyses whether Shamsie or Alvi succeeds in creating a new feminine assertion out of their characters. There have been studies unearthing the portrayal of these third world women in Pakistani literature but a thorough deliberation of the image of women in these two new voices (Alvi and Shamsie) from the canon of Pakistani literature in English in the 21<sup>st</sup> century accentuates a reflective effort. Also, the authors chosen are as diverse in their genres of creative output as well the trajectory of their lives. What matters is the concern that they are voicing out

and giving agency to the subaltern third world women. Kamila Shamsie's choice of genre is fiction(novel) while Alvi delivers her craftsmanship through poetry.

The point of commonality between the two is the freedom they enjoyed as regard to their education and free atmosphere to cultivate their creativity. In a way their families and the upbringing nurtured and honed the creative impulse in spite of them being women. The conventional outlook in which the Pakistani society is said to be steeped into, was rendered superfluous when it came to these women writers. A free reign to their genius sets them apart from the women of their country.

Shamsie's work is identified with her gender, being a woman, and also as a British

national. The course of her life makes her a fitted candidate to speak up for the marginalized Pakistani women. A woman born in 1970's Pakistan, in a culture in which girls were expected to become only wives and mothers, Kamila Shamsie was fortunate in her affluent and literary family which had female writers, including her mother, Muneeza Shamsie, and her great-aunt, Attia Husain. Her global understanding has given her a singular perspective on her home environment, and this strengthens her work. Cross-cultural relationships and cultural identity with the burden of cultural history and family expectations concerning women is the premise of her work.

'Diasporic poetics raise more questions than they answer and are just as much about displacement as about place, just as much about a 'poetics of uncertainty' as about certainties of style/nation/identity' (Web). This stands true when Moniza Alvi paints her imaginative landscape on the poetic canvass. Poetry written by women poets does have the forethought of feminism but Alvi's oeuvre extends beyond to merge the political and the personal. Her poems are intensely personal yet carry a world within it. It focuses on themes from home to identity, nationality to marginalization, literary free will to patriarchy to desire to sexual orientations. Alvi charts out undiscovered spaces with her poems rendering a fresh outlook in the canon of Pakistani literature in English. A confessional style tracing the history of her life and time is the focus of her poetic imagination. Her identity as a woman and her assertion of this individuality marks her space. Her poetry while dealing with cultural hybridity essentially targets the unanswered question about the status of woman in Pakistani society.

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Weltanschauung of women in the postcolonial context. Their labelling as 'third world women' drops them to being on a periphery. They become the *other* in ethnic, national, racial, and gender aspects, a part of the minority discourse. The literary accounts coming from the South Asian authors like Shamsie and Alvi exemplify these *third-world women* as isolated at times by choice or mostly due to ethno-social hierarchies.

I employ the theoretical concept of third world feminism in relation to *these* women. I review how the new world experiences of the author Kamila Shamsie and Alvi's diasporic location help to create independent women defying stereotypes. They portray a new, unusual stance with the image of women they are creating. Deliberating on multiple roles of women as wives and mothers, third world women of colour, primarily as the one marginalized at different levels these writers voice understandings with the portrayal of new woman trying to balance tradition and modernity (free consciousness).

Sara Suleri declared that there are no women in third world while Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak questioned whether the subaltern can speak. These notions lead my evaluation of the third world women in Shamsie and Alvi's fiction/poetry. Analyzing few representative works of both Shamsie and Alvi like *Broken Verses*, *Salt and Saffron* and *Split World* this study brings out the *feminine* captured by their vision.

*Broken Verses* is a feminist voice in the male centric Pakistani society. In this novel Kamila Shamsie blends rudiments of national, socio-political and cultural aspects of the patriarchal society. It analyses the position of women in Pakistan; the predicament of the educated, liberal woman who find themselves on the threshold of a dominating society and only too aware of the independent world outside. Shamsie recounts a story of a daughter's quest for her mother. The plot revolves around the disappearance of Samina

Akram, a feminist activist, two years after her lover a famous Pakistani poet, described as The Poet, is brutally murdered by government minions. The merging of the public and the private marks the unfolding of the plot. The protagonist Aasmaani, is overwhelmed with grief and anger over the abandonment by her mother. Through her quest for the truth, Shamsie's *Broken Verses* draws parallel with the state of affairs in a thinly disguised autocracy in Pakistan. The ideologies practiced by fundamentalists in an atmosphere of stiff biases vis-à-vis the religion and democracy is the markers of revolution in the novel. The agents of change in this rigid atmosphere happen to be the Poet and Aasmaani's mother, Samina. In the course of action Kamila Shamsie has created a "fiercely independent woman" (*Broken Verses*,87) in the character of Samina. She becomes the muse of the radical, anti-government poet Nazim. The open defiant way in which she involves with him is critiqued as the influence of western liberalism on the third world women. The hegemonic society essentially treats her attitude as brazen amounting to be exactly contrary to the ideal of a woman which has been perpetuated by them conventionally. Shamsie narrates how the Poet "made her a figure of rebellion, of salvation, she played into it" (*Broken Verses*,88). She becomes the symbol of the educated class willing to taste emancipation and soon finds herself invited to speak at girl's colleges and join panel discussions on Women's Upliftment. But what Shamsie achieves through the narrative is the image of a free woman in the real sense of the word. Samina's character is crafted with a fiery resolve; she is not a woman contented to live in the shadows. She walks out on her relationship with the poet only to find her own identity. She becomes an agitator, an activist often risking physical harm and imprisonment as she seeks to protest against the government's misogynistic policies.

Samina creates a niche with her discourse on carving a feminism suited to their needs.

Exactly what Chandra Talpade Mohanty talks about in her discourse of the third world women, that the women conventionally are marginalized and the local factors like religion and politics embroil these third world women to a space which is completely on the periphery. The patriarchy employed in these third world countries is fundamentalist in its approach relegating the women *no space* in the scheme of things. In a country based on such a regressive attitude for women the character of Samina Akram is idyllic. With her secular outlook, she also has deep knowledge of religious texts and tackles intractable clerics to point out their biased interpretation of the Koran.

*Broken Verses* can be read as a narrative of women's quest for self in a patriarchal society. Shamsie achieves a masterstroke with the nature of her characterization in the form of female characters that are nonconformist and radical. The narrative interweaves the lives of three modern and educated women Aasmaani Inqalab, the protagonist and the narrator of the story, Samina Akram, Aasmaani's mother and an activist for women's rights and Shehnaz Saeed, a famous actor and Mir Adnan Akbar Khan's mother. They raise their voice of dissent and express their rage and frustration with their conditions and attempt to establish themselves as free individuals who can defy restrictions imposed upon them by the patriarchal society.

Samina is the seminal woman who challenges the assumption of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak that the subaltern cannot speak. Shamsie has refuted the conjecture of a woman being unable to speak. Samina is the one of the most vocal female voices in Pakistani literature. In fact, the portrayal of Aasmaani's step mother, Beena, acts as a foil. Kamila paints an idyllic picture of a forgiving, nourishing, caring woman who is only too willing to sacrifice her individuality for the family; being identified merely in relation to her family, her lack of identity as a woman stands in stark contrast to Samina Akram.

The second most important feminine voice in the narrative is of the daughter, Aasmani. Nostalgically she reminisces, "I'd spent all those years shuttling between the picture-perfect normality of life with Dad, Beena and Rabia and the utter unconventionality of my mother's house with its connecting door to her lover's garden" (*Broken Verses*, 102). Her attitude towards her mother is the result of the feminine construct conditioned by the dominant society. Aasmani's rite of passage to evolve from a confused daughter to an awakening of her inner strength as a woman herself builds up the feminine consciousness in the narrative.

Kamila Shamsie, on being asked about being a woman in the world today, says, —Wherever in the world you go, you're living in the world's oldest and most pervasive empire, which is the empire of patriarchy. I don't know a place I've been to where it doesn't exist. (WEB)

In *Salt and Saffron* (2000) as well, Shamsie has depicted the female characters within the novel with their emotional, cultural and modern ins and outs. She reveals not only anxiety and anguish about their own situation, but also their growing perception of themselves as individuals capable of self-willed action. The novel traces the history of the Dard-e-Dils showing the social milieu changing gradually from a strictly conservative one to that of progress and liberalism. By reflecting on the persistent grimness of conflict in the lives of Pakistani women at various levels, Kamila advocates a reformative outlook of the society towards its women. The conflict is about the third world woman in general, with the finer distinctions of class amongst them.

The novel delineates the tale of several women across class and generation of different backgrounds, from elitist Aliya's confusion regarding her choices in life, to midwife Taj's struggle for existence. Apart from the female characters caught in the shackles of conventions, Shamsie has also created such characters that show a spirit of revolt and take strides towards

attainment of selfhood, independence and dignity. The stereotyped characters have been presented as juxtaposed and parallel to the central female characters to draw attention to and criticize the primeval conditioning of third world women by a dominating patriarchal culture.

Shamsie has portrayed the inner experiences of her female characters by employing a female narrator, Aliya. Aliya - the storyteller is a young, American graduated and modern woman, who is compelled to investigate the history of her royal clan in order to arrive at truth regarding her own position and identity. It traces the journey of Aliya's education, her coming to consciousness, her search for authenticity and a subsequent development of herself.

A Pakistani third world woman's identity is usually connected to and defined by the societal and cultural norms of the existing patriarchal culture. Her identity is constituted in different contexts, settings and situations such as her relation to men, family, community and society. Beauvoir believes that it is the society which prescribes certain gender roles, and compels individuals to abide by the standards of masculinity and femininity in terms of their rights and responsibilities. Society is responsible for conditioning women in feminine virtues. Aliya is stunned to recognize the way she has been trained by the society which constricts her choices in life. Her view of herself as a free, autonomous being who is able to think and behave as an unprejudiced individual is disillusioned at the very beginning of the novel. She is confronted with an actual conflict when she becomes aware of Khaleel's origin, the man whom she meets on the plane on her way back to Pakistan and is charismatically drawn towards him. Aliya experiences inner conflict from this point onwards, leading her to reflect on her position in a conventional society in general and her family in particular. The novel realistically depicts Aliya's confusion and her attempts to overcome these conflicts and



confusions. Despite her education and independence, she is unable to shrug off the age-old conditioning of her family and the society. Aliya is agonized at her own reaction on knowing about Khaleel's origin. Though she wants to break free from the long-standing mores of her family, but she finds herself awfully helpless. As she admits:

I wanted to shout out. I've deconstructed it, analyzed it, and I have refused to take on the attitude of my relatives with their centuries of inbred snobbery. Why can't my heart be as evolved as my mind? Why did 'Liaquatabad' hit me so bruisingly in the solar plexus? (*Salt and Saffron*, 32-33)

Having this realization, she keeps on alternating between the conservative norms of her upbringing and the liberal environment of the Western culture where she was educated.

Shamsie has realistically presented the gender hierarchy of her society. Aliya's stress and confusion to follow norms sanctioned by the society makes her feel suffocated. She has a deep impulse to be freed from the bonds of her family traditions, which is manifested in her attraction for Khaleel, whom she is unable to let go. He is the *other* for her, her world. This kind of *othering*, creating binaries on the grounds of gender or class is generally seen in the third world patriarchal societies. This society recognizes a woman's identity only in socially acceptable terms; whenever a woman transcends social boundaries and refuses to subdue her desires she is labeled as an evil influence, a breaking away from the tradition which leads ultimately to the toppling of the hegemony. It is only towards the end of the novel, that Aliya is able to look at her life as full of possibilities, whereby she has the all the courage to do what she has never dreamt of and affirm her being.

Mapping out the history of her family Dard-e-Dil, Aliya relates numerous tales affirming the truth that the third world women have always been relegated to the inferior status,

considered as mere sex objects and treated as the *other*, the one always on the periphery with no right to exert their own will. Women in such situations suffer due of the male chauvinist attitude.

Shamsie's foresight in creating a free world with a free will for women is obvious in her depiction of such characters as Aliya and Sameer. They are the ones to infer what Mariam thought. The character of Mariam, with her unorthodox approach in life implies a social change which Shamsie wants to incorporate in this third world. Mariam is a symbol of hope in this patriarchal society striving to recreate her *self* as a woman improvising her role in the society. Mariam's exertion of her will in marriage to a person from a lower class with her own choice is a proof of her truly liberated self. The novelist intended to create a character of a woman who transforms herself from an adjected third world woman into an independent one. Shamsie's portrayal of Abida Dadi, Meher Dadi, the Starched Aunts acts as a foil to these independent characters.

*Salt and Saffron* is a seminal novel in terms of its feminine sensibility, attempting to revolutionize the perception of the Pakistani women trapped in the shackles of a patriarchal society. Shamsie's location as an insider who has experienced the third world society doubled with an independent free-thinking woman of the western world enhances her observation of the Pakistani women. Her portrayal of strong-willed Samina Akram to Mariam to the liberated Aliya, from women like Dadi the self-proclaimed matriarch who perpetuates patriarchy to the underdog Taj formulates a more liberated attitude of the society towards its women. The female characters in her novels redefine and recreate their roles subverting the patriarchal ideology.

Leading the discussion towards Moniza Alvi and her vision of femininity created in, through her poetic oeuvre, one concludes that her poetry is imbued with a spirit of duality,

partition, fractured identity and transformation. As a daughter of a Pakistani father and an English mother she has to negotiate a dual identity of living in disparate worlds. As she is neither completely Pakistani nor English, Alvi creates a third world or 'space' in Bhabha's terminology. This liminal position creates for Alvi a unique site. Alvi defines the feminine search of her identity and home with her poems. Alvi's poetry serves as a positive example for diasporic writing as a mode of (re)claiming a woman's own identity.

Alvi's collection of poems in, *The Country at My Shoulder*, deal with issues of identity, home and exile. She defines identity as something deeper, something that has to do with one's spirit.

"I suppose I would define identity...But it's important to know where you come from, ... I think it's important to know what has gone into your making, even quite far back, I think it gives you a sense perhaps of richness" (Web). This constant duality of negotiation of spaces ignites her poetry. Her writing serves as a means of release and catharsis for her, a woman's uncertain identity.

"I was raised in a glove compartment" is the first poem in the autobiographical section of *The Country at My Shoulder*. The glove compartment is a metaphor for the womb and Alvi miniaturizes herself in order to fit in it. "I Would Like to be a Dot in a Painting by Miro" draws its inspiration from the work of surrealist Juan Miro. The poet expresses the desire to be transformed into a miniature in this poem too: "I would like to be a dot in a painting by Miro". Not knowing what is going on is an expression of confusion and Alvi's confusion is precisely her perspective, a liminal outlook because of her hybrid/diasporic background.

"Throwing Out My Father's Dictionary" shows words growing shoots in the bins and changes taking place in spellings, punctuations. The poet here wants to suggest that language is always in flux and one cannot possess it by

inscribing one's name. Language is a major concern for Alvi as she is not at home with her first language, Urdu. She has taken English as another lingua franca to search for her identity. In "Hindi Urdu Bol Chaal" from *A Bowl of Warm Air* hands become a metaphor for reaching out over the distance of difference. Hands are naturally used to reach out to that which is separate or distant from us. Her location/ space in England molds her relation with her country of origin, Pakistan.

"Presents from My Aunts in Pakistan" sheds light on a young girl who is trying to unravel the mixture that makes up the fabric of her identity. She feels that her identity was indecisive and fragmented.

"I pictured my birth place  
from fifties' photographs,  
When I was older  
there was conflict, a fractured land  
throbbing through newsprint" (*Ibid*, 33).

The poem depicts a sequence of personal memories causing confusion with her identity.

*Luckbir* is a pen-portrait of the poet's aunt who read Jane Austen but never lived beyond the confines of a home. Her aunt's identity could never be exploited. The feminine of her *self* was limited.

The titular poem, *The Country at My Shoulder* tells of the burden of a woman's inheritance and culture. It refers to Pakistan without naming, the country of her birth where under the military rule, public execution took place in the square. Women cry at the sight. The poet says:

"I try to shake the dust from the country,  
Smooth it with my hands" (*Ibid*, 37).

Alvi says that the country has become her body that she cannot break off. The mixed identity of the poet does not let her rest. She says:

"I water the country with English rain,  
Cover it with English Words  
Soon it will burst, or fall like a meteor"  
(*Ibid*, 37-38)

In "An Unknown Girl" from *A Bowl of Warm Air* Alvi writes about an unknown girl in a neon-lit bazaar, who is applying henna patterns to her palm. They become a metaphor for a new fate, or a new identity but unfortunately, they "will fade in a week." They are the lines of a map. Alvi's dilemma is visible when "She rubs her face / against a map of the world" in "The Colours of the World."

The stubborn insistence on one's home is the focus of "My Aunts don't want to move", one of the more desolate poems in *A Bowl of Warm Air*. As the title suggests, it is about the poet's aunts and their reluctance to leave their house. The aunts themselves are mostly absent from the poem, not described directly in person or speech and only referred to with the pronoun "they", that stands in place of the real women. They do not have a voice or any agency. The aunts do not want to move beyond their small existence into the big bad world. The patriarchy implicit in Pakistani society is hinted at through the dead male members. The house is ironically a metaphor for a safe haven and also the claustrophobic male-controlled world the aunts have got habituated to.

The search for home and belonging through metaphors of home and country is a constant preoccupation for the woman in Alvi's world. "I wanted to marry a country," she says in "The Wedding." "You grow a second city in your head" she says in "Exile." In "Rainy Season" she takes herself high above the neighborhood of "the house where [she] was born" and then commences to conjure up a flood where presumably all else is destroyed except her house, which she sets "like an ark on the ocean." In "The Airborne House", "ceiling fans whirl like helicopters" and the house takes off.

"Rolling" in which the poet travels thousands of miles through her entire history, her "father's house / before he fled to Pakistan", her family name, into "the girl / I might have been."

Cultural identity and gender, female body and autonomy, mythical and maternal figures are the major tropes coupled with the theme of silencing of women in Alvi's poetry. The unspoken female experiences with the juxtaposition of the personal and the political resonates the essence of postcolonial feminism.

Both Shamsie and Alvi explore the multifaceted nature of female identity. Shamsie's characters actively challenge societal norms, seeking autonomy and self-expression. In contrast, Alvi's poetic approach offers a more introspective examination of women's roles and identities. Together, their works contribute to a broader understanding of women's experiences, the cultural conflict experienced by the third world woman, in contemporary Pakistani society. The female body in their works becomes a site of cultural inscription and patriarchal hegemony. The two writer's central focus is the women's experiences within the context of diasporic and postcolonial identity.

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