



RESEARCH PAPER

Identity, Hybridity and Ambivalence: A Pakistani Postcolonial Study of Kamila Shamsie's Novels

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the postcolonial hybridity, ambivalence and its effects upon individuals and groups enshrined in Kamila Shamsie's novels including *In the City by the Sea* (1998), *Salt and Saffron* (2000), *Kartography* (2001), *Broken Verses* (2005), *Burnt Shadows* (2009), *A God in Every Stone* (2014), *Home Fire* (2017) and *Best of Friends* (2022) and aims to unearth the effects of migration, cultural communication, and globalization on the postcolonial Pakistani context. Postcolonial literature and theory address the effects of colonial and neo-colonialism on the culture, history, and identity of formerly colonized people and their succeeding generations. Postcolonial schools responded to colonial-era literary narratives and celebrated indigenous and local cultures, history, identity, and traditions. This paper employs the theoretical concepts proposed by Homi K Bhabha and analyses Pakistani postcolonial novelist Kamila Shamsie's novels to understand the postcolonial Pakistani identity. Diasporic and hybrid communities emerged in the late 20th century due to large-scale migration and rapid globalization, challenging the notion of pure identity and unquestioned loyalties.

KEYWORDS Identity, Hybridity, Ambivalence, Postcolonial

Introduction

The Postcolonial movement emerged in response to colonial narratives in literary studies, and writers associated with this school aimed to represent local narratives and indigenous aesthetics in their writings. In the aftermath of the Second World War, African and Asian nations gained independence from European colonial powers, and consequently, they tried to gain intellectual freedom along with political autonomy. According to Ray (2007), Postcolonial movement spread throughout the third world countries, and writers like Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Ngũgĩ v Thiong'o, R.K. Narayan, Khushwant Singh, and Zulfiqar Ghose responded to colonial narratives in their fictional stories. Simultaneously, theorists like Edward Said, Franz Fanon, and Ngũgĩ v Thiong'o critically evaluated the Western narratives about so-called oriental history, culture, and literature (Fanon 2005). In the late 20th century, rapid globalization and large-scale immigration mainly towards the Western world accelerated cultural communication, and diasporic communities emerged in America and European countries. In this phase, a new creed of writers and theorists emerged who analyzed and evaluated this cross-cultural communication and its impacts upon cultural and political identity. Postcolonial writers like Salman Rushdie, Jhumpa Lahiri, Ben Okri, Mohsin Hamid, and Kamila Shamsie wrote extensively on these emerging multicultural identities (Nayar 2015). Theorists like Homi.

Bhabha, Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy, and Garcia Nestor Canclini analyzed and evaluated emerging forms of hybrid and ambivalent identities.

This paper focuses on the ideas of hybrid identity and ambivalence, which are largely attributed to the postcolonial theorist Homi.K. Bhabha (2012), who proposed and critically analyzed the terms of identity, hybridity, and ambivalence in his groundbreaking work, *Location of Culture* (1994). Bhabha (2012) views cultural identity as a constantly evolving and hybrid entity in the postcolonial age and challenges the notion of fixed and pure identity. Bhabha (2012) also critically evaluated the affiliation and association of an individual and groups as divided and ambivalent due to a hybrid identity. In postcolonial terms, Bhabha views identity as an outcome of continuous interaction between colonizer and colonized, and hence the loyalty and affiliation of both colonizer and colonized become divided and ambivalent. British cultural theorist Stuart Hall (2003) also analyzed the idea of identity and its multifaceted and hybrid nature, and challenged the notion of fixity and stagnation of cultural identity. Paul Gilroy (1993) in his famous work *The Black Atlantic* (1993) argued that the Africans who migrated and settled in the Western world experience a phenomenon of double consciousness, and they feel themselves trapped between this hybrid identity and a divided sense of belonging and loyalty. Latin American postcolonial theorist Nestor Garcia Canclini (2002) also analyzed the phenomenon in postcolonial Latin American experience and questioned the idea of the puritan concept of identity. This paper aims to connect the theoretical concepts of hybrid identity and ambivalence with Kamila Shamsie's novels and her representation of identity, hybridity, and ambivalence in the postcolonial Pakistani context.

Kamila Shamsie (born 1973) is one of the leading novelists of the second generation of postcolonial writers who have to cope with the issues regarding diasporic consciousness, hybrid identities, divided loyalties, cultural confrontations, war, and violence in an age of rapid globalization and global connectivity. Shamsie's novels often portray the political and personal as deeply connected, and the influence of changing political realities throughout the world can be traced in her works. Shamsie (1998) debuted with *In the City by the Sea* in 1998 and with the success of her succeeding novels *Kartography* (2001), *Burnt Shadows* (2009), and especially *Home Fire* (2017). Shamsie's novels and narratives have expanded their canvas and crossed cultural and political boundaries.

Literature Review

Nawaz,Shoaib,Ali & Younis (2024) in their article titled Environmental Consciousness: An Eco-Critical Study of Kamila Shamsie's *In the City by the Sea* argue that Shamsie has explored the mutual relationship between human beings and nature in her debut novel, *In the City by the Sea* (1998). They argue that *In the City by the Sea* (1998) that external natural surroundings and human conditions are integrally interconnected, and this relationship is evident in Kamila Shamsie's *In the City by the Sea* (1998). They (2024) further argue that in countryside settings, birds and fields are directly linked with ecology, and the major and minor characters are highly affected by the presence and absence of nature around them. Every character of the novel is linked with their natural environment. They (2024) further emphasize that the character of Hasan seems to be attached to nature, and his early risings and his connection with the beauty of nature are visible in the story.

Kaur (2017) in her article titled Political History Through Inverted Gaze: A Critical Study of Kamila Shamsie's in *The City by the Sea* (1998), argues that Kamila Shamsie's take on history doesn't represent the working class and common people. The attitude regarding the depiction of history is bourgeois, and she accesses the world of the common people indirectly through her major protagonists, who don't belong with the common people.

Kaur (2017) argues that Shamsie takes an elitist and bourgeoisie point of view to reshape the past of the country. Kaur (2017) also proposes that Shamsie's employment of the technique of magical realism breaks the boundaries between reality and imagined reality, and the character of Widow stands for the forceful depiction of this phenomenon. The nightmares about her dead husband and her continuous ramblings, and her desire for death and their ultimate reunification, post the impression of magic, while its minute and realistic description gives it more authenticity. Kaur observes that Shamsie's blending of magic and reality has given a supernatural sense to the surroundings and the story.

Shirazi (2014) in her article Tradition and Modernity in Kamila Shamsie's *Salt and Saffron* (2000) concludes that the novel *Salt and Saffron* is an impressive effort to hybridize and reconcile native and foreign, modern and traditional and history and contemporary realities. Shirazi (2014) claims that Shamsie's *Salt and Saffron* uses a modern and comparatively futuristic approach and denounces the traditional way of looking at things and downplays the old notions of family, purity, and class distinction. Shirazi (2014) concludes that Shamsie's *Salt and Saffron* successfully and engagingly reshape a novel way of looking upon the identity based on cosmopolitan cultural, ethnic, and national values.

Singh (2020), in his article titled Kamila Shamsie's Kartography as a National Allegory of The Chain of Partition and its Continuing Legacies argues that Shamsie's *Kartography* (2003) can be seen as a critique and indictment of the national consciousness for silencing the issues related to the 1971 civil war and its after effects, and as a brutal consequence, the split between East and West Pakistan. Singh (2020) claims that the national guilt can come to the surface at any moment of history, which has been continuously repressed and made taboo for the national and collective memory of the people of Pakistan.

Hussain & Jabeen (2019) in the article titled A Feminist Stylistic Analysis of "*Broken Verses*" by Kamila Shamsie, argue that women and men have been represented in various forms in the novel, and the novel explores the traditional roles associated to men and women in a traditional Pakistani society. They further argue that the focus of the text remains mainly upon the social position of women and men rather than their physical appearance.

Ullah and Khan.S & Khan.H (2023) in the article titled Tracing Pakistani Women's Political Voice in Kamila Shamsie's *Broken Verses* argue that Shamsie explores the country's recent past and its vulnerable and volatile political situation, which has damaged its international image as a thriving democracy. Shamsie laments the military interference in politics and consequently its damaging effects upon the literary world. They argue that Shamsie has unveiled the interference of security agencies in politics and its effects upon the character of Samina and her daughter Aasmani.

Singh (2011) in the article titled Insurgent Metaphors: Decentering 9/11 in Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and Kamila Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows* (2009) states that Shamsie's story has a large canvas and a long historical and geographical reach, which carries the reader's imagination from far east to the other corners of the world and deals with major political events of 20th and early 21st century. This approach looks into the global history to trace the catastrophic incidents of wars and violence throughout the globe.

Rivaldy, Budiman & Tambunan (2019) in the article titled Muslim Diasporic Identities in Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire* (2017), conclude that Kamila Shamsie tries to present the alternative narrative and understanding proposed by the Muslims. Shamsie tries to deconstruct the stereotyping of Muslims, and her characters build their diverse

identities. Shamsie tries to maintain through her various characters that Muslim culture should not be generalized nor should it be seen through the same lenses.

Ahsan and Raza (2024) in the article titled A Pathway to Female Homo-sociality through Dis-identification in Kamila Shamsie's *Best of Friends* argue that Kamila Shamsie has completely changed the understanding of the binary of man-woman and female-female relationship, and she uses the idea of platonic friendship between two women to emphasize this understanding. They (2024) further argue that their same sex fellowship looks for shared goals and to fulfil homo-social desires.

Material and Methods

The following textual analysis is a subjective study of Kamila Shamsie's novels. This study will use Kamila Shamsie's novels including *In the City by the Sea* (1998), *Salt and Saffron* (2000), *Kartography* (2001), *Broken Verses* (2005), *Burnt Shadows* (2009), *A God in Every Stone* (2014), *Home Fire* (2017) and *Best of Friends* (2022) as primary text and it will be evaluated by applying postcolonial theory. The secondary sources, like already conducted research, reviews, and commentaries, will be used for a better understanding and interpretation of the primary text.

Results and Discussion

Kamila Shamsie's writings have been heavily influenced by postcolonial identity issues, the emergence of hybrid, diasporic, and cosmopolitan societies, and, as a consequence, ambivalent loyalties and associations. Shamsie's debut novel *In the City by the Sea* (1998), also emphasizes the hybrid influences of colonial culture and narratives. Shamsie's cultural and literary allusions are evidence of the strong influences of European colonization and the emergence of global communities in the wake of immigration and displacement. Kamila Shamsie's *City* is a hybrid and ambivalent space where individuals are facing the questions of their fidelity and loyalty with diverse political, cultural, and ideological positions.

"Hassan shrugged like an eleven-year-old who's sitting in the City while the President is in the capital surrounded by guards. But at night when I read part of *The Lord of the Rings*, I really believe that I can do, you know, something. 'Heard of something? Don Quixote?'" (Shamsie 1998)

In her novel *Salt and Saffron* (2000), the changing idea of identity and ambivalent feelings towards the new perception of identity, both as an Indian Muslim and a newly emerging Pakistani based upon religious identity, have been expressed in the story.

'My brother died in a communal riot just after partition. Your grandparents, and all those other Dard-e-Dils who leapt on to the Pakistan bandwagon, had left by then, were in Karachi; so my brother died in their place.' (Shamsie 2000)

The house of Dard-e-Dil remains divided in their conception of identities, and their historical Indian past and post-partition identity remains haunting them. Those who accepted their new homeland as their refuge and moved from India to Pakistan always remained in a continuous struggle to reconcile with this new idea of identity. Their relocation from India to Pakistan and reunion in England also emphasizes the hybrid idea of identity, which continues to reshape it. Aaliya, the central voice of the story, carrying her traditional aristocratic roots along with her Anglo-Saxon cultural influences, expresses her hybrid identity and simultaneously ambivalent position.

"Denied my Richard II moments (so weeping-smiling greet I thee, my earth') I have learnt to crane forward, or sideways, towards a window, to await the dip of the plane's wing the descent from the clouds and almost there now-the giant expanse of Karachi glittering under the darkened sky." (Shamsie 2000)

Shamsie builds her narrative interwoven in a complex web of Muslim cultural and religious influences, historically Indian native and local heritage, and colonial experience, which gives birth to an idea of identity that is hybrid, multifaceted, and cosmopolitan, and simultaneously ambivalent and ambiguous. Her characters remain in perpetual struggle to locate themselves in this complex situation and find themselves unable to associate themselves with any pure form or position.

Kamila Shamsie also explored the idea of hybrid identity and ambivalence through her novel *Broken Verses* (2005) in which the characters of the story struggle to locate themselves in their natural habitat but remain in continuous turmoil to find their exact place and identity. This ambiguity and ambivalence lead to a state of postcolonial disillusionment, and it has been emphasized in the words of 'the poet' in the novel as follows.

The poet used to say we all have a particular topography in which we feel ourselves at home, though not all of us are fortunate enough to find the landscape which makes us so aware of that thing called 'the soul'. (Shamsie 2005)

The postcolonial Pakistani identity accepts the various cultural and literary influences, and its hybrid nature has been traced and explored by Shamsie in *Broken Verses* (2005). The influences of Western cultures and literature, Arabic and Persian allusions, Greek myths, and the stories of gods and goddesses have formed the plot of the story. The poet's association with world literature also emphasizes the inevitability of a hybrid version of his identity.

The month my parents married, the Poet wrote his most famous narrative poem, Laila. Reconfiguring the Laila-Majnu story, the poem centres on Laila, bereft after Qais has been banished from her presence. (Shamsie 2005)

Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire* (2017) also deals with the idea of hybridity and the consequent ambivalent and divided state of individuals whose loyalties and associations are always questioned and doubted. Aneeka, Isma, Eamonn, and all other characters whose roots are connected with Pakistan always remain in an ambiguous state, and they are unable to reconcile with their identities.

The 7/7 terrorists were never described by the media as "British Terrorists". Even when the word British was used it was always "British of Pakistani descent" or British Muslim or my favourite, "British passport-holders", always something interposed between their Britishness and terrorism.' (Shamsie 2017)

These characters cannot be identified either as British or Pakistani, and their hybridity leads to a mixed and ambiguous position which is neither purely 'Muslim', 'British' nor Pakistani. The complex mixture of entirely different cultures and their subsequent requirements put the individuals and groups of people in a precarious state, though the pure form or identity seems unattainable.

Shamsie's *Kartography* (2001) also explores the deep-rooted dilemmas of identity, hybridity, and rootlessness, which develop into an ambiguous state of existence, and the

major characters remain ambivalent regarding their relationships with the people around them, and their loyalties always remain in question. The East Pakistan split from the West Pakistan remains central to the question of identity, which emerges from the differences in the concept of identity based upon religion and language. Yasmin expresses her astonishment and anguish about Maheen's position, who remains in Pakistan, and her loyalty and association with the country remain under scrutiny. The Bengali ethnicity and Muslim Pakistani identity merge to form a hybrid form of identity and a further ambivalent position.

If this is how I feel, Yasmin thought, how must Maheen feel, a Bengali living in Pakistan? (Shamsie 2001)

Burnt Shadows (2009) also vividly portrays the idea of hybrid identities as its major characters belong to different ethnicities, religious and cultural backgrounds, and are connected through hybrid languages. Hiroko, a Japanese teacher, Konrad, a German writer, James, an English lawyer, Elizabeth, half German-half English women, Sajjad Ali Ashraf, an Indian Muslim and an immigrant, Raza Konrad Ashraf, half Japanese-half Pakistani who carries a German name as part of his full name and many other characters whose linguistic, cultural, religious and ethnic boundaries have been broken and their identities remain in constant change. This hybrid form of identity creates an ambivalent position, and they are divided in their feelings, attachments, and positions. Konrad, in his agitation, expresses his feelings regarding his half-sister, whose identity has been changed with her association with her husband James Burton, and she has been reduced to her English identity, though she continues to feel German inside.

"Half-sister, he corrects. 'And its been a long time since she was Ilse Weiss. Now it's just Elizabeth Burton.'" (Shamsie 2009)

Shamsie's characters in the novel *Burnt Shadows* (2009) go through the postcolonial experience of an age filled with large-scale migration, globalization, emergence of diasporic and immigrant communities, which erases the unique and pure forms of identity and produces hybrid identities and ambivalent space in a postcolonial Pakistani context.

Kamial Shamsie's *Best of Friends* (2022) also delves deep inside the postcolonial chaos and political turmoil, where class distinction and power struggle put the society in an ambivalent situation regarding their perception of identity. The emergence of diaspora and its cross-cultural nature brings the people from different postcolonial societies and their old masters in close contact, and the distinction between former colonizer and colonized seems to blur. Maryam, Zahra, and Zola represent the diasporic communities settled in London, and their assimilation into British society seems to play a significant role in making England a multicultural and hybrid country. The Muslim Pakistani heritage of Zahra and Maryam, and the African ancestry of Zola, and their mutual acceptance and harmony emphasize the inevitability of hybrid culture and identity.

"WH should Zahra Ali have any photography skills? She's Britain's conscience. Let other people take the photographs. Let Zola's Mum do it." (Shamsie 2009)

Kamila Shamsie's *A God in Every Stone* (2014) explores the relationship between colonizer and colonized and their further dependence upon each other. Shamsie also explored the influences of continuous cross-cultural interaction between the English colonizer and the Indian native, which resulted in an inevitable hybrid identity and ambivalent approach towards each other. The cultural and historical references in *A God in Every Stone* (2014) also emphasize the hybrid nature of culture and identity.

Today, he wasn't among the revellers gathered at the broad walkway on top of the Mughal gateway of Gor Khatri, the highest elevation in the Walled City. The invitation cards to 'Olympian Night at Gor Khatri' had come with a handwritten note instructing each guest which Greek god they would play for the evening. (Shamsie 2014)

The cultural reference of Olympians and Greek myths and their celebration in colonial India explains the cultural hybridity where the purity and exclusivity of cultural identity remains an unattainable quest, and hybridity becomes inevitable. Vivian's quest to save the people of Peshawar also emphasizes the ambivalent relationship between colonizer and colonized. Qayum Gul also faces a similar dilemma, and his feelings also remain divided and ambiguous towards English.

Conclusion

Kamila Shamsie's novels explore the questions of identity, its hybrid form, and the resulting emergence of an ambiguous and ambivalent space where individuals and groups feel divided and doubtful about their loyalties and associations. Kamila Shamsie's novels emerge in the postcolonial Pakistani context and explore the relationship between former colonizer and colonized nations and their subsequent interdependence. The analysis of Kamila Shamsie's novels also unearths the inevitability of hybridity and plurality and rejects the idea of a static and pure form of identity. Kamila Shamsie's novels effectively represent the postcolonial consciousness and the ideas attached to it.

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