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**FEMALE FRIENDSHIPS IN SOUTH ASIA: PATRIARCHAL  
CHALLENGES AND DEFENSE MECHANISMS IN SHAMSIE'S  
*BEST OF FRIENDS***

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**ABSTRACT**

*Though friendship is a common theme in South Asian writing, not much has been written about female friendship and even much less about how friendship between females can help them develop a coping mechanism to deal with their traumas. Shamsie's novel Best of Friends, published in 2022, presents a distinctive exploration of the tumultuous struggles of two adolescent girls as they navigate unresolved traumas. Set against the backdrop of a patriarchal society, the narrative provides a social context to elucidate the impact of defense mechanisms on the interpersonal bond of friendship between female characters, Mariam and Zahra. Drawing upon psychoanalytic theory, specifically Freud's (1962) defense mechanism theory, the study using qualitative method and close textual approach argues that Maryam and Zahra are unable to reconcile the conflicts between their primal urges (the id) and their moral principles (the super-ego). Consequently, they frequently exhibit emotional distress to deal with which they use a variety of self-defense methods. By delving into the depths of human psychology, this paper will add to the scholarly debates on psychological issues that torment South Asian women in a patriarchal society.*

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**Keywords:** Childhood trauma, Social norms, Defense mechanisms, Feminism, Psychoanalytic theory, Repression, Unconsciousness

**INTRODUCTION**

A prolific writer from Pakistan, Shamsie has published eight novels. Shamsie's enthralling literary oeuvre is a brilliant commentary on the profound depths of human experience. The latest novel by Shamsie, *Best of Friends* (2022) encapsulates the experiences of two

fourteen-year-old girls, Maryam and Zahra, living in Karachi during the late 1980s, as their friendship is tested by the impact of social class, political turmoil, and gender-based violence in the novel. The novel garnered worldwide fame for its poignant portrayal of adolescent self-consciousness and the harrowing realities of approaching adulthood (Chakraborty, 2022). Young's (2022:2) book review of Shamsie's *Best of Friends* was, titled "A Study of friendship where the past really is another country". The novel's core theme is reflected in the title of the book review, which highlights how one's past can feel like an unfamiliar and distant land that shapes present-day relationships. It draws attention to the necessity of recognizing and comprehending one's past to truly understand the complexities of interpersonal relationships. The novel depicts two cataclysmic events that put the girls' bond to the test. In Part I both friends are young teenagers when they go on a fateful "joy ride" (Shamsie, 2022:115) with Jimmy and Hammad. The psychological repercussion of that harrowing incident has a tumultuous impact on the sensibilities of both characters. However, their dismissal of its continuing impact on them beyond their youth is a defense mechanism aimed at prematurely fixing a lingering psychological issue, enabling them to minimize the anguish brought on by the traumatic event. This research paper shall seek to look into how two friends who have had unresolved traumas use defense mechanisms to avoid falling out. Moving forward in Part II each woman faces morally challenging professional situations as an adult throughout the narrative. Maryam is embroiled in an online harassment incident because of a social media app backed by her venture capital fund. Zahra on the other hand, is dealing with the detention of an immigrant whom her organization has been aiding with a residency application. The ghosts from her past interfering with her professional life present a complex ethical quandary for Zahra. The reappearance of Hammad and Jimmy stands in stark contrast to the refined and stylish upper-class environment of the current jobs of both female characters in the novel under study. These two men serve as a harsh reminder of past experiences as well as ideologies from which both women have very carefully moved on. Exploring defense mechanisms is instrumental in critically evaluating the characters' responses to the same situations which further indicate their idiosyncrasies and emotional fragilities. The study of such nature is

pivotal in developing an understanding of human behavior that how people especially women handle conflict and confront distressing memories.

#### RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research questions have guided this study:

1. How is friendship between girls viewed in a conservative, patriarchal society?
2. How do women in patriarchal societies employ defense mechanisms to tackle gender oppression?
3. How does a study of defense mechanisms delineate the psychological challenges, social dynamics, and cultural complexities that assail Pakistani women?

#### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

**Theoretical Framework:** The study has been conducted using the qualitative method by analyzing the primary text through the conceptual framework proposed by Freud (1962). A detailed close textual analysis of *Best of Friends* was done to explore and investigate the psychological ailments that the female characters face in the novel. Close textual analysis is essential for this research paper because it facilitates “the construction of meaning within various cultural texts” (Lockyer, 2008:865). According to McKee (2003), textual analysis enables us to comprehend how people interpret the world both within and outside of our societies. It allows us to delve into the human psyche, develop empathy for characters from different eras and cultures, and discover the significant moral, social, and psychological ramifications that come with the study of defense mechanisms.

According to Catterson (2017), close reading entails carefully investigating and scrutinizing a text's specific elements. By looking at the interactions between Maryam and Zahra, their repressed thoughts and inner conflicts will become apparent and this will consequently, give us important new understandings of psychological experiences, social dynamics, and cultural complexities. Additionally, close textual analysis is pivotal in bringing forth those contextual elements that affect defense mechanisms, such as societal structures, power dynamics, and cultural norms.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Freud defined a defense mechanism as an unconscious psychological strategy employed to mitigate feelings of anxiety caused by unfavorable or possibly damaging stimuli (Vaillant, 2011). Talking about psychological traumas and primarily defense mechanisms is frequently deemed taboo by certain social groups (Cramer, 1998). Nevertheless, it has been widely established that defense mechanisms play a pivotal role in ensuring the well-being of a person specifically preventing the onset of anxiety (Sandler & Joffe, 1967). People are prone to negative feelings when exposed to challenging situations. Scholars have developed several theories to explain the conscious and unconscious mechanisms that people use to control their emotions in such circumstances. Two important ideas that have drawn a lot of attention are coping mechanisms and defense mechanisms (Suls, David, & Harvey, 1996). Defense mechanisms and coping mechanisms are behavioral techniques for helping people deal with difficult situations (Cramer, 1998), but they have different underlying behaviors and outcomes. According to psychoanalytic theory, defense mechanisms are an array of cognitive processes that let the mind come up with alternatives for conflicts that it can't directly resolve. These processes, which are usually unconscious, involve hiding inner urges or feelings that might negatively impact self-esteem or trigger anxiety. This notion is centered on the psychoanalytic theory that the mind integrates conflicting forces that are perpetually at war with one another. Freud (1962) first used the phrase "defense mechanisms" (p. 46). He proposed a tripartite model of the mind made up of the id, ego, and superego. The id stands for fundamental needs, urges, and desires that call for instant gratification. By acting as a mediator between the id and the outside world, the ego preserves conscious awareness. When confronted with psychologically threatening circumstances, people use defense mechanisms to shield themselves from anxiety. Freud initially focused on the struggle between the ego and basic drives (such as sexual and aggressive drives) however, later, he accorded more importance to maintaining self-esteem, arguing that when these qualities are threatened, defense mechanisms are automatically triggered (Baumeister et.al., 2002). Freud (1936) compiled the first comprehensive list of defense mechanisms. According to the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (2022), psychoanalysts

have demarcated a variety of defense mechanisms, such as repression (pushing unwanted thoughts into the unconscious), reaction formation (adopting opposite feelings to hide fears), projection (attributing unwanted feelings to others), regression (going back to earlier stages of development), sublimation (redirecting instinctual drives), denial (refusing to recognize uncomfortable facts), and rationalization (supplying guarded justifications for behavior). At the dawn of the new millennium, psychoanalysts explored a new dimension in the study of defense mechanisms.

Crammer (1998) asserted that defense mechanisms are mental constructs that describe how the mind works, whereas defense behaviors are the outward signs of these constructs. Furthermore, Crammer (1998) argued that men and women may respond differently to the same defense mechanism. Independent evaluations have shown that men who rely on projection are frequently viewed as being untrustworthy, blaming others, manipulative, hostile, anxious, and depressed. On the other hand, according to independent assessments, women who rely on projection are typically seen as lively, upbeat, and extraverted, and do not exhibit the same level of caution and mistrust as men. In understanding the changes in defense mechanisms during adult hood, various hypotheses have been proposed. The regression hypothesis suggests that individuals may revert to using defenses from earlier developmental stages as they age (Gutmann, 1964). The growth hypothesis proposes that older individuals employ fewer distorting defenses, aiming for a more realistic outlook (Vaillant, 2011).

Shamsie's work (2010) has taken on new meanings as a writer from a colonized region of the world whose life has been lived, in whole or in part, in Britain. Researchers have found similar strains of the South Asian Diaspora in the UK in the writings of Kiran Desai, Kamila Shamsie, and Monica Ali (Lobo, 2017). The political and social commentary in Shamsie's writings on Pakistan, Islam, and the West has received a great deal of scrutiny (Al Nindita et.al, 2012). The themes of Islam and Islamophobia have been studied by other academics in Shamsie's works as well (Barman, 2022; Chambers, 2019). As Muslims frequently are unfairly targeted and subject to discrimination, Shamsie (2009) asserts that an in-depth knowledge of free expression and censorship is needed. She further emphasizes the significance of celebrating diversity and identifying South Asia as a

"tri-sub-continental" region that includes Bangladesh, Pakistan, and India (Shamsie, 2007). Shamsie, (2017) also wrote vicariously about the Black and Asian communities pre-Brexit Britain era.

To analyze how Shamsie depicts Pakistani geographies and landscapes, academics like Mader (2010) and Dogar (2017) investigated her literary works through an inter section of phenomenology and feminist geography. According to Shamsie metaphorical representation is more important than separating politics from everyday life (Cilano, 2007). Shamsie also suggests a "post-national geography" that prioritizes memory-based cartography to give a clearer picture of space and place (Mallot, 2007). Additionally, Shamsie's works have been the subject of postcolonial Gothic studies by Alhaj (2021) and Lalhlanpuui (2022).

Researchers have unearthed feminist dimensions in her works as well. Ali (2012) and Ranasinha (2012) delved into how gender and the nationalist imaginary intersect in the works of Pakistani women writers. In her non-fictional works, Shamsie has done a brief commentary on the political landscape (Shamsie, 1998) and the plight of the South Asian Diaspora as well (Shamsie, 2009).

#### **ANALYSIS**

At the cusp of adolescence, the female characters Maryam and Zahra from Shamsie's *Best of Friends* are curious to indulge in merry-making with a group of friends away from the prying and foreboding eyes of their parents. It is during that fateful night when a rendezvous, followed by a car ride with two boys, forever changed the course of their lives. The girls wish to break free from social norms and live lives according to their terms. "Why could they not be allowed to break free, the world was new and different now" (Shamsie, 2022:92). Their first interaction with Hammad and Jimmy emotionally scarred both teenagers. Zahra was petrified during that car ride. "His touch was soft but not gentle as if he knew she would obey the slightest pressure" (Shamsie, 2022:97). The unwarranted attention made her feel claustrophobic with three other individuals in that car. The drastic change from casual flirting to overpowering behavior made her feel sick. "A snaking terror moved from her stomach up her windpipe." (98) One of Freud's primary defense mechanisms involves the unconscious restricting fun acceptable thoughts, memories, or desires

from reaching conscious awareness. Zahra's claustrophobia and sickness in the car with the three other people may be due to her repression of Jimmy's uncomfortable and intrusive behavior. Her mind is trying to keep her from accepting and fully processing the upsetting experience. Another defense mechanism is displacement, which involves redirecting one's feelings or impulses from the source to a substitute target. Jimmy's sudden and intense transition from casual flirtation to dominating behavior, as described by Zahra, implies that she endures a sudden and intense shift in her emotions. The "snaking terror" moving from her stomach up her windpipe reflects her mounting anxiety and unease. The reorientation of emotions from the source, Jimmy's actions, to her physical sensations, is a defense mechanism aimed at avoiding the unpleasant emotions linked to the situation. Jimmy's rash driving made Zahra increasingly uneasy. She had inkling that something was wrong, and she was nervous that Jimmy would leave her to a tragic fate by placing them on a boat. Zahra began singing to detach herself from the situation, first reciting Wordsworth's "Daffodils," and later singing the "Charge of the Light Brigade." Her emotions got the best of her, and she was unable to prevent the tears from flowing down her face. Zahra's growing unease and fear as a result of Jimmy's reckless driving is an example of anxiety caused by the reality of the situation. Zahra uses two defense mechanisms to deal with her anxiety: displacement and sublimation.

Displacement is evident as Zahra endeavors to distract herself from the distressing situation by singing songs such as "Daffodils" and "Charge of the Light Brigade". Zahra displaces her fear and anxiety on to a more manageable outlet by directing her attention and emotions towards these artistic expressions. Sublimation is also at work as Zahra transmits here motions through singing. Sublimation is the process of redirecting unwelcome impulses or emotions into socially acceptable actions. Heller (2005:70) explained living in civilized society requires that we channel socially unacceptable impulses into acceptable, even admirable behavior that we sublimate. The surgeon channels aggressive energy into constructive medical work; the artist employs the libido to produce a masterpiece. And of course, there's all the screaming, yelling, and chest pounding at the Sunday football game. Freud viewed Leonardo daVinci's painting of the Madonna as a sublimation of his longing for intimacy with his mother, who left when he was very young.

Zahra converts her inner turmoil into a creative outlet through singing, allowing her to feel at ease. Finally, Maryam's confrontation with Jimmy and her stern warning can be viewed as an example of the defense mechanism of reaction formation. Reaction formation is the expression of feelings or attitudes that are opposed to one's true desires or emotions. Maryam's strong reaction could be a defense mechanism designed to counteract her feelings of vulnerability while also protecting herself and her friend from potential harm. Later on after that fateful night, the interrogation conducted by Maryam's grandfather also has a great impact on her. She has a bitter realization that she felt insecure and vulnerable in a car ride with Jimmy. The blow to Maryam's ego can be seen as a result of the conflict between her need for self-expression and independence, and the societal expectations imposed on her, which may include conforming to traditional gender roles. Her confession to her grandfather that she felt threatened by Jimmy's behavior clashed starkly with the idealized image she struggled hard to project. The fateful ride gave vent to feelings of shame or inadequacy. She probably felt doubt and uncertainty after the confrontation. As a result, Maryam's reaction to her grandfather's reprimanding episode was regressive behavior. "Regression means retreating to an earlier, more primitive form of behavior to avoid pain or threat" and Freud made this comparison to "a stream of water which meets with an obstacle in the river bed, is dammed up and flows back into old channels which had formerly seemed fated to run dry" (Heller, 2005:70). Maryam's regressive Actions can be interpreted as an unconscious effort on her part to shield herself from the emotional pain the confrontation would otherwise have caused.

After the fateful night and the cataclysmic event that had transpired, there is a time leap and the narrative shifts to the year 2019 when Zahra and Maryam are both thriving career-oriented women doing well in their lives. We meet the girls a few years later in London, where both have accomplished professional success. Maryam has expertise in venture capital, whereas Zahra is an acclaimed human rights lawyer. Despite overcoming childhood obstacles and accomplishing success in their professions, both women are inextricably linked to their past, when certain individuals from their youth reappear.

The friendship between Maryam and Zahra is impacted by three events that occur in the novel's second half. The first is the chance encounter between Jimmy, Hammad, and Zahra. The second is Maryam's furious, nearly hysterical reaction to it. Last but not least, there is a fight between Maryam and Zahra after Zahra realizes how Maryam single-handedly crushed Jimmy's hopes by arranging for his deportation in a long-ago case. "There were two Zahras in relation to men-Suitable Zahra and Proclivity Zahra. Proclivity Zahra dated the Sri Lankan mathematician who made hoppers for her in the morning; Proclivity Zahra cheated on him with her law tutor (Shamsie, 2022: 177). Between her "Proclivity Zahra", who enjoys casual relationships, and her "Suitable Zahra", who abides by social norms, Zahra draws a distinction. Indulging in behavior that might go against societal norms, Zahra can maintain appearances. Later, the tables had turned when three decades later, Jimmy accompanied Hammad to Zahra's office for legal assistance. The formidable Zahra was different from the meek, gawky Zahra of her teens, who could not utter a word in the presence of strange men. Now, after the lapse of three decades, confronted with skeletons from her past, Zahra's immediate reaction upon meeting Hammad and Jimmy was that she needed to leave the office. Beneath the table, "she was gripping her leg" (Shamsie, 2022:258). Meeting them after all these years had brought back painful and agonizing memories. Incidentally, Hammad had brought Jimmy to Zahra's office, and Jimmy recalls how "thirty years later, he [Hammad] is still angry" (258). Later, in Zahra's office, Jimmy tried to strike up a conversation with her and seemed a bit garrulous. Zahra detected something "unpleasant" in his tone and felt dismayed at the turn of events. Jimmy needed legal advice for indefinite leave, and he believed Zahra could assist him in this regard. He even tried to make amends for his behavior in the past by making a half-hearted attempt to say, "I said I am sorry", but Zahra politely reminded him that he had not articulated those words (Shamsie, 2022:258). Zahra's immediate response of wanting to head out of the office and clutching her leg symbolizes anxiety-induced repression in Freudian terms of defense mechanisms. The past was confronted, bringing back unpleasant memories.

Hammad's rage and Jimmy's rambling behavior showed displacement when they focused their emotions on Zahra. Later, when Zahra told Maryam about the interaction with Jimmy and Hammad in

office, Maryam was livid, disgusted, and annoyed at her for lending helping hand. She urged Zahra to consider the fateful car ride and its horrible repercussions. Maryam was perhaps projecting her fears and insecurities on to Zahra's actions, avoiding confronting her vulnerabilities. In Maryam's case, her reactions to Zahra's actions may indicate repression, as she avoids directly addressing the emotional impact of the incident. Maryam protects herself from the unpleasant feelings connected to the event by repressing the memory fit and refusing to acknowledge her vulnerabilities. Overall, Maryam's emotional reaction to Zahra's assistance can be interpreted as a projection of her fears and insecurities, which could serve as a way to avoid personal introspection. Furthermore, her reactions could involve sublimation and repression defense mechanisms, as she diverts her negative emotions and blocks her conscious awareness of the car ride incident to alleviate her internal conflicts.

Repression, as a defense mechanism, becomes effective not only in such a spectacular case of symptom formation as dissociative amnesia but also in others. Repression needs to be understood as a blockage in remembering personally significant biographical episodes that are at the same time aversive and tend to be conflict-laden; memory is thus suppressed, but not suspended (López, 2020:302).

Maryam's desire for acceptance is morphed into the role of protector and savior. She reminds Zahra how she has sacrificed herself on behalf of others to ensure Zahra's well-being. Notably, Zahra's reaction to the Jimmy episode differed vastly from Maryam's agitation and furious temperament. The interaction between Zahra and Maryam demonstrates how defense mechanisms can differ between people, even within long-standing friendships. At that moment, Zahra realized that they could never see eye to eye on things. "It was as though the forty years of friendship between them was just a lesson in the unknown ability of other people" (Shamsie, 2022:269). Later on, Shamsie points out that, "Zahra peeling away from the present into the thing they'd hardly ever talked about night how he'd felt, the absolute terror of it, the certainty that something awful was going to happen which couldn't put a name to, hadn't wanted to put a name to, Yes Maryam said, yes" (Shamsie, 2020:270). Zahra's act of "peeling away from the present" represents her psychological withdrawal from the current situation into an unresolved and seldom spoken about the event from

their past. This detachment from the present and immersion in the past can be interpreted as repression. The unconscious blocking or rejection of distressing or threatening experiences, thoughts, or emotions from conscious awareness is referred to as repression. Zahra's description of "the absolute terror" and the "certainty that something awful was going to happen" indicates that she felt uneasy and apprehensive that night. Repression allows her to push the memories and emotions associated with them into the unconscious, safeguarding her from conscious awareness. Denial, on the other hand, assists Zahra in maintaining a psychological distance from the intense fear and uncertainty she experienced that night, permitting her to steer clear of fully acknowledging and tackling those distressing emotions. Zahra's agreement with Maryam's response, "Yes," could represent a moment of shared comprehension. It could mean that Zahra recognizes the truth in Maryam's statement or point of view, perhaps admitting the presence of underlying emotions or events that both of them had avoided discussing or confronting up to that point.

Later in the novel, Maryam strategically implicates Jimmy in a case that ultimately results in his deportation from the country. However, Zahra feels betrayed after learning Maryam's underlying reasons for seeking vengeance for a thing that happened in the remote past. Recognizing the conflict of interest, Zahra makes a hard choice to resign from her job and cut ties with some of her closest friends. This turn of events emphasizes that there is always a clash when loyalty and moral integrity collide with personal agendas. Zahra's sudden decision to resign and let go of her dexterously curated professional life is emblematic of repressed desires that Freud best described as "frozen anger" He insisted that it is "anger directed against oneself, replete with reproaches, low self-esteem, and even self-hate and self-attack" (Heller, 2005:70). Zahra's decision to resign and distance herself from her friend (Maryam) can be interpreted as a reaction to her intense emotional turmoil. She may be striving to protect herself and reclaim control of her life by separating herself from the cause of her enmity.

#### **CONCLUSION**

*Best of Friends* (2022) is a saga of female friendships where Zahra is the studious daughter of an anchor for a TV cricket show. Maryam, on the other hand, comes from a wealthy family who is

enthusiastic about inheriting her grandfather's leather company. Regardless of their opposing and distinctive worldviews, both girls strike up a friendship and fit in tandem like two peas in a pod. However, the opposing responses of Maryam and Zahra to the Jimmy episode shed light on how South Asian women use defense mechanisms when faced with deep and oppressive patriarchy. Maryam's agitation and projection of fears onto Zahra, as well as Zahra's retreat into unspoken emotions and denial, demonstrate how defense mechanisms serve as buffers against the anguish triggered by patriarchal norms and standards. Furthermore, Freudian analysis enabled us to investigate the characters' relationships and how unconscious desires and unresolved conflicts may have led to their breakup. It offers a framework for comprehending the intricate social relationships and the impact of social conventions and expectations on female sensibility. These culturally and societally rooted defense mechanisms provide South Asian women with a way to survive and cope with the problems presented by patriarchal structures.

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