

Vol. IV, No. II (Fall 2019) | Page: 83 – 88
p-ISSN: 2663-3299 | e-ISSN: 2663-3841
L-ISSN: 2663-3299
DOI: 10.31703/glr.2019(IV-II).12
URL: [http://dx.doi.org/10.31703/glr.2019\(IV-II\).12](http://dx.doi.org/10.31703/glr.2019(IV-II).12)

The Portrayal of Pakistani Diaspora Students in Shamsie's Fiction

Abstract:

Going to the advanced countries for higher education has been in vogue for long. There is a considerable rise in the number of international students in USA universities. This paper explores how Shamsie portrays interaction among international students. It is delimited to the analysis of Shamsie's two novels: Salt and Saffron, and Kartography applying textual analysis as a research method. The insight gained through this research about friendship among international students is in keeping with the findings of the psychological research about three predictable patterns of friendship: friendship with the students of one's own country, friendship with other foreign students and friendship with students of the host country. In Kartography all three patterns of friendship are found while in Salt and Saffron only a strong bond of friendship between a Pakistani international student and her American counterpart is portrayed. Shamsie presents easy assimilation of Pakistani diaspora students.

Key Words:

Diaspora, International Students, Assimilation, and Belonging

Introduction

In recent years internationalism has become one of the most popular terms in the field of higher education. Internationalization carries different connotations for different people depending on their frame of reference and contexts. According to Hudzik & Stohl (2012) in broader terms "it can be taken as the process of integrating an international dimension into the teaching, research, and public service function of the institution." This paper explores how Shamsie has portrayed Pakistani diaspora students in her novels: *Salt and Saffron* and *Kartography* studying at different international educational institutions.

Kamila Shamsie is a Pakistani diaspora writer who has firsthand knowledge of being a diaspora subject which she skilfully presented in her fiction. She was born in Pakistan. After the completion of her schooling in Karachi, Shamsie did her bachelor degree from Hamilton College, and Masters from the University of Massachusetts Amherst. She has been working in the UK. In her fictional discourse, her main focus is on the issues of migration, place and displacement of diaspora subjects that influence individual, national, and cultural identity formation in social interaction (Zahoor, 2015).

Different researchers have been carried out on the problems of adjustment of international students studying in different universities across the world. Yue & Le (2013) opine that most of the international students find it difficult to adapt themselves to foreign lands because of the geographical and cultural unfamiliarity of the environment. Staton (2016) regards the increasing number of foreign students in American of higher

education as the most visible feature of internationalization. In her view, American universities are the most favorite choice of the majority of foreign students. All international students can be termed as diaspora subjects. They have to adjust themselves in their host countries along with working for their degrees. Moving away from one's familiar place leads to adjustment problems. Diaspora subjects experience problems in coping with "...acculturative stress and difficulties with adjustment to the environment of the host country" (Smith & Khawaja, 2011).

Zhang & Goodson (2014) refer to several predictors "of psychological adjustment of international students, such as stress, social support, English language proficiency, region/country, or origin, length of stay in the host country, acculturation, social interaction with Americans, self-efficacy gender, and personality (Zhang & Goodson 2014)." Shamsie portrays both her protagonists as international students from Pakistan, belonging to the elite class of metropolitan city Karachi. Both belong to Anglophone westernized families and studied at English medium schools before going abroad. Their stay in the USA was basically for four years of graduation. They do not have a language barrier or cultural shock as such. Both are self-assured and never display any kind of inferiority complex while dealing with their international peers. Their stress was mainly because of their homesickness and some personal family issues at home.

*Professor, Department of English, Foundation University Rawalpindi, Punjab, Pakistan.

†Associate Professor, Head, Department of Mass Communication, Women University, Rawalpindi, Punjab, Pakistan.

Email: asma.zahoor@live.com

The importance of social support is “of paramount importance in coping with stress” (Yue & Le, 2013). This has been given due importance in literature dealing with the psychological dimensions of human interaction. Friendship formation is one of the most important features of human association. Various studies have been conducted to specifically investigating “the role of friendship formation which plays important role in the international students’ experiences and the unique friendship combinations made possible by this experience” (Severiens & Wolff, 2008; Wilcox, & Fyvie-Gaud, 2005). Shamsie shows peers’ support to her diasporic subjects’ stress (Yue & Le, 2013), helping them in their adjustment at the university.

Three patterns of friendship emerged from research on the intercultural relationship among international students which are: 1) International students’ friendship with individuals from their own countries, 2) friendship with international students from other countries, and 3) friendship with their peers from the host countries. Shamsie presents all these patterns in her fiction. Wu, Garza, & Guzman (2015) in their research on international students show that they often have more friends from their own country. “Research has also demonstrated that there exists a direct link between having more host-country friends, on the one hand, and satisfaction, contentment, decreased homesickness and social connectedness on the other” (Hendrikson, Rose, & Aune, 2014).

Different diaspora fiction writers have portrayed diaspora subjects and their interaction with different people in the adapted lands in their novels e.g. Mohsin Hamid’s (2013) *Changez in The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Hamid portrays Changez as an excellent student at Preston University in America. Unlike Shamsie’s elite class Karachi based female protagonists, Changez belonged a middle-class family from Lahore. He is presented as an excellent student who spent his vacation in Greece with his university fellows. There he met Erica, an aspiring writer and fell in love with her. Despite having intimacy we cannot call their friendship as a profound bonding. Hamid portrays Erica as a weak character who is unable to cope with the loss of her childhood sweetheart while Changez as a self-assured strong character.

American Dervish by Ayad Akhtar (2012) presents the trials of coming to a new land and the effort of trying to assimilate into a culture that is quite different from the culture one has been familiar with. Naveed does all he can to forget his native culture but Mina tries to embrace both cultures. Akhtar portrays that none of the approaches ensures assimilation or ultimate success. *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* by Mohja Karf (2006) portrays a Syrian diaspora, a young girl who came to America in the 1970s. Karf highlights the cultural difference of a Muslim’s life in America invoking racial discrimination. Quite in keeping with these writers, Shamsie has also presented Pakistani diaspora in her fiction.

Some researchers are of the view that “the formation of friendships across cultures on university campuses intensifies the sense of student’s own cultural/national identity” (Bhatia Ram, 2009; Phelps, 2013) while others regard it as an act of assimilation stress” (Yue & Le, 2013). All the above-mentioned writers have presented various forms of interaction among the characters they presented in their novels and their peers in the universities. They all reflect their national and cultural identity in their interaction. Shamsie’s fictional characters also share this diasporic consciousness of their national and cultural identity. Research in this field highlights that “international students’ friendship within the same institution peers is an important means of academic and social advancement” (Poyrazli, Kavanaugh, Baker, & Al-Timmi, 2004). According to Smith & Khawaja (2011), “It has a significant role in their adjustment on campus”.

Lee (2013) is of the view that the stories of international students show “endurance, adaptability, and will to succeed” (as cited by Glass, Wongtrirat, & Buu, 2015). Shamsie’s protagonist, Raheen in *Kartography*, refers to the stories the freshmen at the university were made to share to create a bond of friendship among them. She portrays how her protagonist has the ability to hide her personal pains and fabricate stories to share. Though there is no detailed direct reference to their academic activities and achievements except for the qualification of their degrees. It shows “international students’ resilience rather than susceptibility to hardships and stress” (Staton, 2016).

The Objective of the Study

Friendship formation is an important factor in the process of acculturation and adjustment of international students on American campuses. The objective of this paper is:

- to explore patterns of friendship Shamsie has presented in *Salt and Saffron* and *Kartography*
- to explore the process of assimilation of her diaspora subjects

Methodology

The study is delimited to two of Shamsie’s novels: *Salt and Saffron* and *Kartography*, because they describe at length their protagonists’ stay in American universities as international students. In this age of globalization and multiculturalism, it is important to see how do Pakistani diaspora students interact with others and form friendships while striving for their international degrees. The research method used for this study is textual analysis. According to Catherine Belsey (2005) “textual analysis as a research method” looks for the deeper meanings of the text and to the solution of an apparent problem. In this study textual analysis is used to explore how Shamsie has portrayed the patterns of her protagonists’ adjustment and friendships in American universities.

Analysis

Presentation of Pakistani Student(s) in *Salt and Saffron*

Shamsie's protagonist Aliya has been presented as an international student at an American university. The "roots of Aliya's family-Dard-e-Dil, go back to the Mughal era, passing through the British colonization, and then decolonization--Partition that divided the family" (Zahoor,2015). Our final encounter with them is "as Karachiites elite. Aliya's narrative moves between past and present as she comes to grip with the mysterious loss of a beloved Aunt Mariam Apa, her 'not-quite-twin'"(Zahoor,2015). It is with this personal tragedy that she left for America.

"Shamsie tackles the challenges faced by a Karachiites (Pakistani) of finding reconciliation between the westernized culture of progressive values and allegiance to family customs and tradition"(Zahoor,2015). The novel begins with the description of Aliya, the protagonist, who has just graduated from an American university and is on her way back home to Karachi to spend summer with her family" (Zahoor, 2015).

Shamsie does not refer to any kind of linguistic or cultural shock during her stay at the university. She presents a very cordial bond of friendship between Aliya and her American counterpart. Talking about Celeste, her American room-mate at the university, Shamsie's protagonist, Aliya says:

"We stayed roommates for all four years of college, though we could have got singles by our junior year. She said I did her a favor by not moving out and leaving herself silly, but I know that I was the one on the receiving end of a generous gesture of friendship" (Shamsie, 2000, p.159).

When Aliya went to the American university, she was mentally disturbed because of the "disappearance of her not-quite-twin, Mariam Apa"(Shamsie,2000). She used to have nightmares about her which made her wake up in horror. She said that it happened for the first time when they had been at college for less than a month. Celeste was considerate enough:

"...she sang lullabies to me. She said it had seemed a good idea, but after I went back to sleep she worried that it was neo-imperialistic of her to assume that 'Mary Had a Little Lamp' had any significance in my life. (I replied, 'Your neo-imperialism anticipates my post-colonialism. Fortunately, we ceased being enamored of such talk before long.')(Shamsie, 2000, p. 158-159)

Here it is pertinent to note that Shamsie does not portray her fictional characters in the light of postcolonial binaries. Her Pakistan characters do show any kind of inferiority complex while dealing with their native counterparts. Rather they are portrayed as humans on equal footings. Her portrayal of the American characters and their behavior is also in the positive light. What Shamsie wants to convey is that there was no national, cultural or racial barrier between Aliya and Celeste. They developed a cordial bond of friendship between them and remained together during their stay at the university. Despite having a choice to change the roommates Aliya and Celeste preferred to stay together. Shamsie's protagonist herself reveals that her exhaustion after her nightmares was far less marked when Celeste was around to talk her back to sleep. Celeste has been a great source of relief and consolation for Aliya who further explains:

"...I'd jerk upright in bed maybe once, twice a month, looking like someone in horror movie who only had even seconds of screen time and was determined to make it memorable, even if it was only memorable for the outrageous overacting. She was generally awake when this happened...when she tried to talk to me I wouldn't answer but she'd go on talking until I fell asleep again." (Shamsie, 2000, p.159).

In a light vein, Celeste termed sleep as "bourgeois luxury" referring to Aliya's Pakistani family background. Shamsie throws further light on their mutual good relationship by telling that Aliya shared the story of Mariam Apa's disappearance with Celeste only. It was Celeste who suggested that there was a connection between her nightmares and Mariam Apa's disappearance and Aliya agreed that Mariam's disappearance "was the greatest shock of her life" (Shamsie,2000) and it disturbed her a lot. It was through Celeste's constant emotional and psychological moral support and friendly care that enabled Aliya to overcome her grief and normalize herself.

Shamsie's protagonist shares that whenever she used to wake up in the morning, after all, such bad experiences of waking up at night out of fear and then lulled back to sleep by Celeste and tried to say sorry for the inconvenience to Celeste she had always shrugged and said something like this, "You should seriously audition for the next Stephan King movie (Shamsie, 2000, p.159)" Such comments in the light vein also suggests their friendly terms. Shamsie portrays beautiful human associations that are far above any kind of racial discrimination.

Aliya's constant source of the disturbance was her personal fear of Mariam Apa's unhappy life. She asked Celeste to draw Mariam's sketch "older and happy" to show her wishful thinking and Celeste was kind and friendly enough to do so. Aliya kept that sketch at her bedside. All this shows how Shamsie portrays American Celeste and the bond of friendship between her and Pakistani diaspora student, Aliya in a good light. In this novel, we find only one pattern of friendship that is an international student from Pakistan who has a friendship with her American room-mate Celeste only.

Presentation of International Student(s) in *Kartography*

Once again in *Kartography* Shamsie presents an elite circle from Karachi to which she herself belongs. People in that circle have been accustomed to sending their children abroad for higher education to various international universities especially to American universities. Raheen, the protagonist also went to an American university. In the case of Raheen different patterns of friendship can be observed. She has friends among the Americans, other country nationals and also with other Pakistanis like Zia.

Shamsie presents how on a rainy day, during Raheen's stay at the university campus, she invited all to her room:

"I had a crowd of people clustered in my room as, freshly showered and dressed in sweats and fleece jumper, I poured hot chocolate with marshmallow bits from a large saucepan into mugs and plastic glasses bearing the university's crest. Tamara from my next-door held up my romance novel with whoop of delight and the rest of my friends chanted, 'Read Raheen read,' over and over until, with choic resignation I took the book from Tamara, sat on the window ledge by my bed, cleared my throat and started reading out aloud choice passages in breathy, emotive style." (Shamsie, 2002, p.114)

And later when outside weather made her nostalgic and she wanted them to leave her alone, they did. Tamara whose nationality has not been mentioned by Shamsie, but she seemed to be from Eastern Europe, lived in the room next to Raheen's. She asked Jake who had yet to finish his coffee to accompany her to her room and finish it there. Jake saw Raheen and Tamara sharing a nod of understanding between them and said goodbye. Shamsie throws light on Raheen and Jake's friendship. Raheen kept a distance and was not interested in Jake the way he was interested in her. Despite understanding that she distanced herself he blamed her for walking out on him after dinner the previous night. First, she tried to justify herself by saying that she had work to do but then got irritated and said, "OK, after I walked out on you... what? (Shamsie, 2002, p.115)" This obviously refers to the fact that they both were on different trajectories.

While referring to her friendship with Jake, an American boy Raheen says, "I had told him he just didn't understand Pakistani attitudes towards friendships... (Shamsie, 2002, p.115)." Here the use of "Pakistani attitude towards friendship" refers to the cultural difference between Pakistani and American societies. Shamsie shows that Jake was disillusioned at this attitude and exclaimed with sorrow that his presence or absence would not make any difference to her. Despite all her amicability, Raheen was rather unpredictable in her attitudes to all her friends in general and to Jake in particular. While parting Jake said:

I have never met anyone who knows how to be cruel to you, Raheen. You charm us all. And not, as you think, because you're the life of the party when you are in that partying mood. It's mainly because you'll always find something of worth in even the most useless among us, in even our most pathetic moments. People generally brush away a spider's web. Raheen, but not you.' (Shamsie, 2002, p.119).

He added her honesty sometimes looked like unkindness but her intentions had never been hurtful. He told Raheen that her friends adored her "because at the end of the day she would always forgive them no matter how hideously they had behaved" (Shamsie, 2002). He further stated that they adored her friendship because she offered it to them without asking anything in return. But he blamed her "You do ask for something. You ask that we never expect you to need us." (Shamsie, 2002, p.119). This is how Shamsie portrays the self-sufficiency of her protagonist as an international student. Once again Shamsie does not portray her protagonist belonging to Pakistan as being impressed by her American counterpart. Unlike Aliya, in *Salt and Saffron* who depends on American Celeste, Raheen depends on no one.

Raheen thought "Until then I had always thought my college friends saw me as the entertainer. And as the one who could not keep her opinions to herself. It was true, I suppose that I do not bear grudges or hold people accountable for every slip-up..." (Shamsie, 2002, p.119). Since she was not involved with Jake, so he was least bothered about his reaction or opinion. She is presented having a friendship with the American boys on campus but within limits.

Shamsie refers to the arrangement made by the administration of the American university at the beginning of the session to create a bond of friendship among the students by sharing their experiences. Even during that session, Raheen kept herself to herself. Shamsie presents the early days stress on her protagonist and how she kept her private pains to herself and shared only invented stories. Raheen recalled her orientation sessions:

In my first days of college, I had gritted my teeth through freshman orientation with its attempts to create an artificial bond between everyone in the hall by getting us to share our most private pains, our most personal stories. I lied my way through it, of course, inventing broken hearts, ruined friendships, family disease, all in an attempt to keep up with the tragedies of the eighteen years lives around me. (Shamsie, 2002, p.120)

Shamsie presents her protagonist as a typical "diaspora who always kept her ties" (Zahoor, 2015) with her native friends intact. While talking to her soul mate Karim on the telephone and looking at their photograph she thought, "The four of us had never really ceased being 'the four of us to me, despite all the intervening years..." (Shamsie, 2002, p.129). The four childhood school friends went to different universities and lived far apart across the world but their bond of friendship remained intact. These strong ties with the people of the native land also counted towards making Raheen self-sufficient.

Shamsie also presents her protagonist, Raheen's bond of friendship with another Pakistani diaspora subject, Zia:

America brought Zia and me together again-literally. At university, in the middle of New York state, nostalgic for things we'd never paid attention to, like Urdu music and basmati rice, Zia and I scoured the neighboring towns and found each other at a moment when familiarity was ready to save as synonym for friendship. (Shamsie, 2002, p.150)

In *Kartography* she presents all the three patterns of friendships found among the international students. Raheen has a friendship with American students. She has a friendship with students from other countries and she retains her friendship with her Pakistani friend Zia as well.

Conclusion

This paper aimed to discover how Pakistani diaspora students' interaction with American counterparts is depicted in two of Shamsie's novels: *Salt and Saffron* and *Kartography*. She features Pakistani international students as her main characters and analyzed their diasporic feelings as well as their interaction with other Americans and other international students. She portrays the challenges of their assimilation in a foreign culture. The conclusion drawn through analysis is that such portrayals can be identified with the postulations of predictable patterns of friendship identified in psychological research on friendship formation among foreign students: one such pattern is friendship with the members of the host country, another is friendship with the other international students and the third is friendship with the native students. She also highlights the polite, but firm aloofness with which Raheen, one of her protagonists, keeps fellow students at a distance.

In *Salt and Saffron*, we find the protagonist, Aliya, an international student from Pakistan having a very cordial relationship with her American room-mate Celeste. There is no reference to her friendship with any other international student from any other country or any other Pakistani student on the campus. Whereas in *Kartography* all three patterns of friendship are found. Raheen has a friendship with the Americans but she maintains her distance in her friendship with the American boys. Her friendship with Jake can be quoted as an example. She has a friendship with other girls on campus. They gathered in her room to be entertained with listening to the reading of a romantic novel and drinking hot chocolate. Shamsie also refers to Raheen's friendship with another Pakistani international student Zia, her school friend studying at another American university.

To conclude we can say that Shamsie's portrayal of Pakistani diaspora on American university campuses is a representation of the peaceful co-existence of people belonging to different parts of the world. The confidence and ease with which they move do not reflect any cultural shock or aloofness but easy assimilation.

References

- Akhtar, A. (2012). *American Dervish*. New York: Little Brown
- Belsey, C. (2005). *Textual Analysis as a research method*. In Griffen, G. (ed)(2005) *Research Methods for English Studies* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Hamid, M. (2012). *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*: Ernst Klett Sprachen.
- Hendrikson, B., Rosen, D., & Aune, K.(2011).An analysis of friendship networks, social connectedness, homesickness, and satisfaction levels of international students. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, Vol 35,281-295.
- Hudzik, J. K., & Stohl, M. (2012).Comprehensive and strategic internationalization of U.S. higher education. In D. K. Deaedoff, H.de Wit, J. D. Heyl & T. Adams (Eds.).SAGE handbook of international higher education (pp.66-81).Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Kahf, M. (2006). *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*. New York: Carroll& Graf.
- Severiens, S., & Wolff, R. (2008). A comparison of ethnic minority and majority students: Social and academic integration, and quality of learning. *Studies in Higher Education*, 33(30), 253-266. doi 10.1080/03075070802049194
- Shamsie, K. (2002). *Kartography*. A&C Black.
- Shamsie, K. (2000). *Salt and Saffron*: Bloomsbury Publishing USA.
- Smith, R., & Khawaja, N.G. (2011). A review of acculturation experiences of international students. *International Journal of Intercultural Relation* Vol 35(6), 699-713, doi:10.1016/j.ijintrel.2011.08.004
- Staton, M. (2016). International Students in the U.S.A.: Portrayals in South Asian and Middle Eastern Diaspora Novels. *NUML Journal of Critical Inquiry* Vol 14(1), 1-15
- Wilcox, P., Winn, S, & Fyvie-Gauid, M. (2005). It was nothing to do with the university, it was just the people: The role of social support in the first-year experience of higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 30(6), 707-722.doi:10.1080/03075070500340036
- Wu, H.P., Graza, E., &Guzman. (2015).International Student's challenges and adjustment to college. *Education Research International*. doi:10.1155/2015/202753.
- Yue, Y., & Lê, Q. (2013). Coping Strategies Adopted by International Students in an Australian Tertiary Context. *The International Journal of Interdisciplinary Educational Studies*, 7(2), 25–39. doi: 10.18848/2327-011x/cgp/v07i02/53235
- Zahoor, A. (2015). Kamila Shamsie's Fiction: an Analytical Study of Diaspora
- Zhang, J., Goodson, P. (2014). Predictors of international students' psychological adjustment to life in the United States: A systematic review. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*.35 (2), 139-162.doi: 10:1016//j.ijintrel.2010.11.011