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**Intersecting Structures of Power and Fragmented Belonging: A
Crenshawian Reading of Kamila Shamsie's *Best of Friends***



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Abstract

Although Kamila Shamsie's *Best of Friends* has been examined through trauma, friendship, postcolonial identity, and representational politics, the simultaneous role of class, gender, race, structural power, and mediated representation remains comparatively underexplored. This paper employs Kimberle Crenshaw's concepts of structural, political, and representational intersectionality to address this gap. Through qualitative close textual analysis, it examines selected scenes involving aristocratic schooling, social hierarchy, digital media, familial discipline, and occupational ethics. It argues that formally equal institutions often produce unequal outcomes across class lines; familial authority regulates female responses through ideas of respectability; elite privilege transfers risk to lower-class subjects; and manipulated online images circulate racialized and gendered meanings through digital media. The narrative, therefore, shows how control, recognition, and authority reshape friendship and apparently shared identities. This article claims that *Best of Friends* portrays power and belonging as interconnected rather than separate categories. In doing so, it contributes to debates on social hierarchy, friendship, and mediated representation in contemporary Pakistani Anglophone fiction through Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality.

Keywords: Class, Digital Representation, Gender, Institutional Authority, Political Intersectionality, Race, Representational Intersectionality, Structural Intersectionality.

Introduction

Recent intersectional criticism shows that interrelated structures of race, class, gender, systemic power, and mediated representation shape identity. Such approaches examine protagonists' experiences of belonging, exclusion, and vulnerability by focusing on overlapping structures of power rather than a single domain. Crenshaw's framework is particularly useful because it exposes how apparently fair societies may claim equal opportunity while producing unequal outcomes.

Shamsie's novel, *Best of Friends*, becomes a significant site for such an examination. It exposes the intersection of these factors by portraying the protagonists' lives from childhood to adulthood and highlighting their experiences of aristocratic schooling, professional life, social hierarchy, and media culture. Through these interrelated settings, the text illuminates how power, friendship, vulnerability, and privilege are embedded in broader social structures. The novel also shows how apparently connected social groups may produce inequalities and tensions, thereby challenging the idea of a uniform identity.

Previous scholars have produced significant insights into the narrative's major concerns. Ahsan and Raza (2024), Irfan et al. (2025), and Naqvi et al. (2023) discuss female friendship, unity, and conflict, while Srivastava and Singh (2023) and Chaudhri et al. (2023) emphasize emotional vulnerability, trauma, and class-based prejudice. Other scholars, including Maryam et al. (2024), Shehzadi, Cheema, and Jahan (2025), and Saeed (2025), apply a postcolonial lens to examine hybridity, identity, and East-West tensions. Meanwhile, Riaz et al. (2024) and Kamal (2023) approach the text through re-orientalism and literary-marketplace debates, focusing on

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global representation and audience expectations. Together, these studies show that the novel is critically associated with friendship, trauma, identity, and representational politics.

Existing criticism has primarily focused on the novel's thematic or theoretical concerns. Friendship studies emphasize intimacy, psychological studies prioritize childhood trauma, postcolonial frameworks focus on hybridity, and re-orientalism foregrounds global recognition. Comparatively, little attention has been paid to how these factors operate simultaneously within the same narrative moments. As a result, the combined role of class, race, gender, media representation, and authority in shaping vulnerability, agency, and belonging within shared identity remains underexplored.

Literature Review

Previous scholars have primarily focused on friendship in Shamsie's *Best of Friends*, presenting it as a significant part of the novel. Ahsan and Raza (2024) discuss how the friendship between Maryam and Zahra becomes a form of resistance to a male-dominated society, while Irfan et al. (2025) present this relationship as female solidarity rooted in cooperation and womanhood. Naqvi et al. (2023) argue that this friendship not only shows solidarity but also exposes the influence of patriarchal culture in women's lives. Tabassum et al. (2023) further connect it to societal norms, politics, and gender roles. Srivastava and Singh (2023) link this relationship to social inequality, childhood trauma, and uneven disadvantage. These studies emphasize friendship but often treat it as a thematic issue rather than as a relationship shaped by overlapping social systems.

Other scholars examine the novel through psychological and literary perspectives. Chaudhri et al. (2023) view the protagonists' friendship as a way to cope with trauma and psychological distress in a South Asian male-dominated society. Several studies also connect the protagonists' friendship and identity to wider structures of power and history. Kalaiselvi and Karthika (2024) argue that the narrative exposes how education and solidarity affect characters' lives and enable them to resist institutional inequalities, while Bashir and Imran (2025) argue that colonial and patriarchal systems shape the protagonists' emotions and feelings. These studies are significant because they show how private feelings are socially produced, but they do not fully discuss how trauma and emotions are experienced differently through class, gender, race, and authority.

The postcolonial perspective has also been significant. Maryam et al. (2024) argue that the characters' identities are hybrid and ambivalent. Shehzadi, Cheema, and Jahan (2025) investigate identity beyond East-West divisions. Saeed (2025) broadens this discussion by claiming that Shamsie's Anglophone fiction is situated within transforming Pakistani postcolonial identity. These studies emphasize colonial background, migration, and belonging. However, postcolonialism usually focuses on broader processes of historical identity formation rather than on inequalities within the same social group. Intersectionality complements the postcolonial perspective by highlighting classed and gendered power within structures shared by national or cultural identities.

A similar discussion appears in re-orientalist criticism. Riaz et al. (2024) claim that the narrative depicts re-orientalist elements by presenting the East as backward, inferior, and savage and the West as superior and progressive. This analysis can be

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linked with Kamal's (2023) argument that Anglophone Pakistani fiction is often shaped by the international market and Western audience expectations, particularly around themes of human rights. Overall, these studies are significant because they highlight friendship, identity, trauma, colonial history, and global representation. However, they give limited attention to the internal inequalities that operate within the narrative itself. Intersectionality complements these perspectives by analyzing such internal social inequalities.

The existing scholarship on *Best of Friends* has mainly focused on friendship, trauma, hybrid identity, social standing, emotional agency, and representation through the lenses of feminism, psychology, postcolonialism, and re-orientalism. Limited attention has been paid to multiple identity factors that work simultaneously in shaping characters' lived experiences. Although class, gender, and representation have been investigated, existing studies often examine them separately rather than as interconnected forces. Because of this, they do not fully explain how differences in social class, institutional power, and media representation create unequal experiences of power, belonging, and vulnerability between individuals who seem to share a similar identity. In particular, the relationship between gender, class, race, structural power, and mediated representation has not been analyzed through Crenshaw's framework of structural, political, and representational intersectionality. This study addresses that gap by examining how these interconnected factors affect characters' lived experiences and reveal fractures within shared identities.

Theoretical Framework

The study applies Crenshaw's (1991) framework of structural, political, and representational intersectionality to investigate how class, gender, race, mediated representation, and structural authority combine to shape the protagonists' experiences in *Best of Friends*. Structural intersectionality helps expose how institutions such as schools, families, and workplaces often produce unequal outcomes. Political intersectionality is used to examine scenes of ethical conflict, unequal loyalty, and competing claims to justice. Representational intersectionality shows how media circulate gendered and racialized meanings. Through the combination of these scenes, the paper provides a clearer understanding of the interconnectedness of public structures and personal relationships within the narrative.

Crenshaw (1991) explains intersectionality as a framework for understanding how race and gender overlap and affect the lived experiences of women of color, while also showing how other factors, such as class, age, and color, may shape their lives. In *Mapping the Margins*, she explains "the various ways in which race and gender interact" to form the "multiple dimensions" of women of color's lives (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1244). The term 'interact' is significant because it emphasizes overlapping systems of race, gender, and class and shows how they produce marginalization and power rather than operating as separate entities. It also highlights that individuals' social interactions and lived experiences are shaped by interconnected structures of power. She divides the framework into three interconnected sections: structural intersectionality, which explains how domestic violence, rape, and access to help work differently when race and gender combine; political intersectionality, which exposes how feminist and antiracist movements can themselves marginalize women of color by treating race and gender as separate issues; and representational intersectionality, which explains how mediated representation and stereotypes can

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erase or distort the suffering of women of color. Overall, this theory explains that identity categories are interconnected rather than separate and that violence against women of color cannot be fully addressed through a single factor. Although this framework was developed in a legal context, it also helps scholars analyze fiction, which often depicts how institutions, identities, and social systems overlap in everyday life. In this paper, intersectionality is employed as a literary method to analyze how characters' relationships, social systems, and narrative scenes expose unequal authority.

This paper argues that *Best of Friends* depicts identity, belonging, and agency as shaped by intersecting elements of class, race, gender, and representation rather than by a single factor. It reveals how individuals who seem to share similar identities experience unequal access to power, media visibility, and ethical authority through the protagonists' friendship, elite girlhood, family life, and professional lives. By highlighting this, the paper shows that intersectionality operates as a condition in which unity and inequality are produced simultaneously. In this way, the paper contributes to scholarship on Pakistani Anglophone fiction by exposing the connection between lived experience and wider systems of control.

Research Methodology

This paper applies qualitative close textual analysis to Shamsie's *Best of Friends*. A qualitative interpretive method is appropriate because the paper investigates identity, power, social hierarchy, and belonging as they are formed through the text's language, dialogue, and characterization. Passages are selected because they address the research question of how interrelated forms of power create uneven experiences of agency and belonging among characters who appear to share social identities. Each selected passage is analyzed through the interconnected framework of structural, political, and representational intersectionality, allowing the study to discuss how textual details, character responses, interpersonal interactions, and media representation expose differences within seemingly unified social categories. In this way, the methodology explains how the discussion section employs Crenshaw's theory to investigate patterns of power, contradiction, and differentiated experience in the text.

Discussion and Analysis

The narrative emphasizes repeated patterns of difference within groups that appear unified, showing how power structures shape belonging, obligation, and recognition in Shamsie's *Best of Friends*. Through specific dialogues, narrative contrasts, and shifting social contexts, Shamsie exposes how broader structures of control operate within social interactions and personal relationships. The discussion, therefore, focuses on selected episodes that show the role of interrelated forms of power in domestic life, educational settings, digital spaces, and professional environments.

This concept appears through Zahra's experience of sexualized attention and social expectation when a person from a neighbouring car calls her "Rundi." She immediately experiences the "feeling of shame" but also recognizes something new and "something gorgeous... deeper than she'd ever been herself," as she touches her body while her parents remain unaware (Shamsie, 2022, pp. 76–77). This passage is significant because it shows the tension between Zahra's personal desire and social expectation; her identity is shaped by the intersection of desire, social control, and

reputation. Her desire for pleasure is associated with the fear that she might damage her image as a “girl from a good family,” depicting her physical and emotional awakening as linked with rules that make her feel shame and confidence at the same time. The scene shows that intersectionality can make experience empowering and vulnerable simultaneously (Shamsie, 2022, p. 53). Womanhood in this context is never experienced outside social norms associated with classed femininity. Crenshaw claims that identity politics “frequently conflates or ignores intragroup differences” (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1242). This suggests that women who appear to belong to the same categories, such as Muslims, elites, or families, may seem unified but still experience inequality and internal hierarchy. This idea is depicted through Maryam and Zahra, who belong to the same broad social class yet develop moral sensibility and confidence differently. It is also demonstrated through their physical contrast: Maryam is portrayed as curvaceous, while Zahra is described as thin, adding “another element to their study in contrasts” (Shamsie, 2022, p. 31). Crenshaw’s argument that identity politics can obscure differences within seemingly unified groups (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1242) helps expose social hierarchy in the text. This is visible when Zahra addresses her driver as “Abu Bakr Bhai” and notices Maryam’s horror at this address. The moment appears linguistically minor, but it is socially significant because it reveals how language forms social distance. The term “Bhai” carries respect, while Maryam’s reaction exposes a class ideology that separates employers from workers. Hierarchy is both produced and normalized through dialogue and characterization. Elite identity is therefore not only formed by wealth but also maintained through everyday habits. It exposes the false impression of unified elite girlhood through Zahra’s and Maryam’s different viewpoints, which are rooted in different moral values despite their shared social group. It shows how small changes in speech can reveal ideas of hierarchy, status, and respect, often becoming the very site where power is reproduced and negotiated. A similar pattern appears when Maryam realizes that she is “less upset about Abu Bakr’s fate than she was by the tone of disgust in her grandfather’s voice when he told her she had ceased to be exceptional” (Shamsie, 2022, p. 104). This moment reveals different emotional priorities within the same family and challenges the idea of uniform privilege inside the household. The novel therefore extends Crenshaw’s insight by showing that hierarchy can operate affectively as well as materially.

Structural intersectionality is depicted in the school disciplinary meeting where the headmistress emphasizes that “both girls had done the same thing...what punishment awaited one girl must befall the other,” even though the text recognizes that “The rich lived in a different universe” and that the consequences would not affect them equally (Shamsie, 2022, pp. 177–178). This contrast is significant because it shows how similar punishment may be only an inconvenience for the wealthy but a serious threat for someone from another class position. Rules that appear neutral can therefore conceal inequality. This idea relates to Crenshaw’s framework of structural intersectionality because institutional claims of equality do not necessarily produce equality of consequences. The narrative further shows differentiated vulnerability through Zahra’s realization as she watches Maryam suffering and recognizes that, despite their shared world, “surrounded by a world she’d known forever, Maryam was lost” (Shamsie, 2022, p. 207). This moment increases Zahra’s empathy for Maryam and illuminates how vulnerability and belonging affect individuals within the same social group differently. It also shows that power does not guarantee psychological

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wellbeing and that belonging and suffering can coexist.

Crenshaw's concept of structural intersectionality explains how harm is produced through "multilayered and routinized forms of domination" that converge in women's lives (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1245). Suppression is not always visible in a single event; it is rooted in institutions, norms, financial dependence, and normalized power. This idea appears when Maryam learns that Abu Bakr has been dismissed for permitting her to drive the Mercedes secretly, as her grandfather emphasizes that "Abu Bakr is the one who's lost his job over it" (Shamsie, 2022, p. 102). Through Zahra's realization, Shamsie encourages readers to analyze class order from the perspective of those who benefit from it. The scene exposes a social order that punishes people unequally because of their lower class position and lack of power.

Structural power also operates through Maryam's parents' decision to send her abroad because they believe she is "too wild, too reckless" (Shamsie, 2022, p. 205). Their language suggests care, discipline, and concern for her future, yet it also hides anxiety about family reputation. The decision is therefore not an isolated punishment; it is shaped by expectations about gender, social respectability, and class. This illuminates how systemic power functions within families in socially accepted forms. Thus, the narrative shows that patriarchal rules operate through intimate relationships as well as social institutions. The novel further depicts structural intersectionality in a digital context through the abuse of a Muslim schoolgirl whose image is manipulated online and who is bullied on social media through "a wealth of cruel comments" directed at "a piggish girl in a hijab" (Shamsie, 2022, pp. 251–252). This episode updates Crenshaw's concept for the contemporary moment by showing how media, prejudice, and digital platforms intersect to produce harm. It also illuminates the presence of gendered humiliation and Islamophobia in modern technology.

Crenshaw's concept of political intersectionality explains how women who belong to multiple subordinate groups often face "conflicting political agendas" (Crenshaw, 1991, pp. 1251–1252). This idea clarifies Zahra's ambivalent feelings after the assault scene, especially when she realizes that the attacker "had the look of someone to whom the world had never done a single favor" and that sending him to jail might make her part of "a cruel system" (Shamsie, 2022, pp. 299–300). Her response exposes how social structures and competing ideas of justice shape her thoughts and actions.

Crenshaw's framework of political intersectionality is also visible in Zahra's divided roles as a victim of gendered violence and as a legal professional. When she insists, "Because he came to my place of work needing help. We don't throw anyone out unless they're abusive or violent, and he was neither" (Shamsie, 2022, p. 412), her response shows her commitment to professional ethics, which contradicts Maryam's demand for personal loyalty. Across these moments, Zahra's hesitation is shaped by pressures created by several factors at once. This supports Crenshaw's claim that people who occupy interrelated social positions face difficult tensions in making moral and political choices.

Crenshaw describes representational intersectionality as the "cultural construction of women of color" (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1245). This concept highlights that representation is not neutral; it is shaped by public perception and can legitimize hierarchy. It clarifies the moment when a manipulated image goes viral online, exaggerating the blond attacker's and Ray and Bangladeshi cook's skin color, "the color of coal," while the post circulates with the hashtag "#Crucifixion" (Shamsie,

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2022, p. 305). The manipulated image demonstrates how digital media can intensify racial meanings and shape public views about power and race. In this way, the episode supports Crenshaw's idea of representational politics by showing that digital images do not merely reflect reality; they actively produce racialized and gendered meanings. *Best of Friends* appears to reject the idea of a stable or unified identity. Elite girlhood contains differences of physicality and feeling; family belonging hides hierarchy; institutions claim equality while producing unequal consequences; friendship contains jealousy as well as affection; professional norms conflict with loyalty; and media produces representational violence. Therefore, identity in the text is portrayed as a relational and unstable category formed by unequal systems of power. It indicates that unified social groups and social interactions in Shamsie's *Best of Friends* are shaped by the interconnectedness of class, race, gender, digital representation, and power. It illustrates that individuals within seemingly shared social worlds experience recognition, authority, and protection unevenly. The narrative depicts friendship, domestic life, educational spaces, and workplace environments to expose the tension between unity and social hierarchy. The analysis also highlights that individuals' political and moral choices are shaped by divided loyalties and social rules, while digital media intensifies racial and gender stereotypes that maintain social hierarchies. Finally, the paper shows that Crenshaw's framework is useful because it reveals these contradictions rather than analyzing characters through a single domain.

The study contributes to existing scholarship by showing the novel's major themes, including friendship, hierarchy, childhood trauma, social class, hybrid identity, and mediated violence, as interconnected rather than separate. The study extends existing scholarship by showing how solidarity and inequality are produced together in the text and how shared identities are fractured by differences in moral perspective, access to power, and digital racialization. By depicting differences within the same group, unequal accountability, and divided loyalties, *Best of Friends* emerges as a literary site that exposes hidden fractures within seemingly shared identities.

Conclusion

Intersectionality operates as a condition through which unity and inequality function simultaneously in family, institutional, and professional life. The findings further show that institutions claiming neutrality often produce unequal results. Relationships are not merely personal; they are formed through hierarchy, emotions, conflicting ideas, and competing obligations. The study demonstrates that characters' personal, familial, and professional lives are shaped by structures of power. The study also focuses on digital media, which intensifies issues of race and gender through visual circulation and exaggerated meanings. Taken together, these points show that unity and inequality are created simultaneously through intersecting systems of power rather than through a single factor. Intersectionality is not limited to legal and sociological inquiries but can also be used as a literary method. Through fiction, intersectionality demonstrates how power and inequality are felt emotionally, relationally, and symbolically in everyday life. *Best of Friends* emerges as a significant work through which privilege, fractured unity, and power can be examined. Future research can extend this study through comparative analysis of Shamsie's fiction alongside writers such as Mohsin Hamid and Nadeem Aslam. Researchers may also explore masculinity, diaspora identity, digital surveillance, and reader response through intersectional frameworks in South Asian fiction. These directions can

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improve understanding of how contemporary literature depicts identity and power in a changing society.

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