

TRACING EAST-WEST BINARIES: A RE-ORIENTALIST READING OF KAMILA SHAMSIE'S BEST OF FRIENDS

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Article Info



Abstract

The study explores how Kamila Shamsie's novel, Best of Friends illustrates East-West binaries, highlighting the portrayal of identity and culture, as characters traverse through tangled power structures. By investigating character's experiences in Pakistan and the UK, this study examines how Shamsie redefines cultural binaries, and widens the gulf between both extremes by offering an understanding of how traditional dynamics and identities are presented in postcolonial literature. The study will apply the theory of re-orientalism as a theoretical framework, as it revisits the typical stereotypes often portrayed in postcolonial literature through indigenous writers. Through tenants of Re-orientalism, this study analyzes how Shamsie reinterprets East-West binaries in a globalized world. The study will reinforce how Best of Friends challenges East-West binaries by presenting characters with fluidic conventional identities. The novel's narration of conflicted loyalties, power dynamics, sense of belonging and identities between Pakistan and the UK criticizes both the postcolonial impact and the current power dynamics. This study will also explore how Shamsie's narrative showcases the East-West binaries without prioritizing one over the other.



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Keywords: Reorientalism, East-West binaries, postcolonial literature, cultural identity.

Introduction

Kamila Shamsie is a two-time British Book Awards winner, considered to be one of the brightest British-Pakistani writers by her wide explorations into questions of identity, migration, and belonging within the postcolonial and contemporary global narratives. Her novels often cross intricate cultural frontiers to engage with subtle experiences of people struggling to find a balance between two worlds. Born and brought up in Karachi, Pakistan, later to move to the United Kingdom, Shamsie carries the cultural duality her characters undergo. She probed the issues of displacement, cultural hybridity, and the residual impact of colonialism as she moves further into more other dimensional projections of South Asian identities within spaces dominated by the west. Shamsie's *Best of Friends* (2022) drains all the complexities of friendship, identity and belonging into the national and political spaces that traverse times. The lives of Maryam and Zahra, the two friends who leave Karachi to settle in London, make Shamsie excavate the intricate dynamics of East and West. She brings into sharp relief the ways in which cultural binaries and socio-political factors influence personal identity.

The novel explores a world in which these characters negotiate the complexities of identity formation within the context of an increasingly global world, characterized by their different socio-economic backgrounds and uniquely shaped viewpoints. According to Mavroudis (2022), Shamsie writes her characters in such a way that she reveals how cultural roots and political ideologies of one's surroundings can shape personal and moral decisions. How Maryam and Zahra respond differently to questions of privacy and even refugee rights strike a chord with the controversies heard in modern times regarding cultural assimilation and retention of identity. In the context of this understanding, *Best of Friends* is a very apt example of "Re-Orientalism," as defined by Lisa Lau, wherein the authors of South Asian origin illustrate their own cultures to a Western readership but engage in critical introspection over traditional East-West binaries (Lau, 2009). Shamsie's protagonists' struggles have been portrayed to depict aspects of Re-Orientalism yet not discussed much by making the East and West not only geographical concepts but something that people live in, contain, and even conflict within themselves. Therefore, this study discusses Shamsie's representation of these cultural binaries and how *Best of Friends* contributes to a fuller understanding of the postcolonial identity and belonging in this increasingly global world.

Literature Review

The term reorientalism to give a new twist to Edward Said's Orientalism (1978) in showing how "Re-Orientalism is based on how cultural producers with eastern affiliations come to terms with an orientalised East, whether by complying with perceived expectations of western readers, by playing (along) with them or by discarding them altogether" (Lau, 2009). In so doing, it shows how these writers are both insiders, with authentic cultural views, and participants in the global literary market, shaped by Western expectations. Therefore, reorientalism both critiques and reproduces stereotypes while allowing authors to contest binaries in the face of expectations. This theory is supported by the the idea of hybridity as expressed in the words that "It is in the emergence of the 'third space' that new forms of cultural identity can be produced, that the contestations of the cultural signs of identity can be mapped" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 37). The works of Shamsie embody the characteristics of reorientalism by introducing genuine South Asian stories that have subjects relevant to the Western audience: migrants and identity crisis. The novel *Best of Friends* has a reorientalist flavor as it brings together two contradictory elements of the narrative, namely Zahra's Pakistani roots and her work life in Britain. It establishes this "third space," an amalgamation, which erases the essentializing tendencies of identities leading to new, hybrid culture formation. While moving from global conflict to personal dynamics of migration in *Best of Friends*, the trajectories take two forms in Zahra and Maryam. She is committed to justice with all the progressive values she has been holding on to while her counterpart Maryam speaks of the wealth-driven ethos, thereby symbolizing capitalistic desires. Both are migrants to London, experiencing the multicultural space, where

self-representation defies stereotypes. Karachi as the microcosm of world tensions and London as the site of cultural negotiation become the ground on which these East-West binaries are navigated.

D’Cruze (2023) states that the South Asian narratives often explore the complexities of identity formation in a postcolonial context, highlighting the fluid and hybrid nature of identities shaped by historical and cultural influences. Even Shamsie’s novels “invite readers to critically engage with the narratives of power and identity, encouraging a deeper understanding of the multifaceted nature of cultural encounters in a postcolonial world” (Sahar, 2019, p 31). “South Asian English fiction subverts conventional narratives” (Masroor & Ajmal, 2024, p.1442). Their works challenge the dominant clash-of-civilizations narrative, particularly in the post-9/11 era, by offering nuanced portrayals of Islamic faith and cultural hybridity” (Morrissey, 2016, p. 512). Their narratives are usually “framed by re-orientalism theory, highlighting the ongoing renegotiation of power and influence between the East and West” (Lau & Mendes, 2021, p.54). Shamsie is critiqued for her portrayal of characters based on their national affiliations, where Western characters are depicted more favorably compared to their Eastern counterparts (Abbas & Iqbal, 2023).

Much scholarship has already been done on reorientalism and hybridity, though the gap remains when regarding the techniques of reorientalism applied by Shamsie in *Best of Friends*. Most research is based on general South Asian literature or, in this case, Shamsie's previous work without giving consideration to nuanced critique concerning class and identity in the transnational context. It thus fills the gap with regard to this study on how *Best of Friends* questions have reorientalized class, gender, and identity in diaspora spaces.

Theoretical Framework

The study sets itself out to trace Shamsie 's novel, *Best of Friends* to move beyond complex East-West binaries, and thereby understand a set of theories framed together: postcolonialism, Reorientalism, and hybrid identity in understanding cultural dynamics in Shamsie's narrative within identity construction and experiencing persons of the two regions with its very intricate portrayals of these. The core idea of postcolonial theory provides a basis upon which East-West binaries find place in Edward Said's theory “The Orient is the place of Europe’s greatest and richest and most ancient colonies, the source of its ideas of civilization and culture” (Said, 1978, p.1). Reorientalism proposes that contemporary non-Western authors, while often using and challenging the classic Western "Orientalist" depictions, concurrently sustain some aspects of the cultural stereotypes. In *Best of Friends*, by Shamsie, two female Pakistanis, Zahra and Maryam, dwell and construct their identities along the lines of both eastern and western environments, but their narrative reworks and deconstructs the given dichotomy. “The Orientalist image of the East, with its emphasis on exoticism, backwardness, and despotism, has been internalized by many writers from the East, who reproduce these stereotypes in their work” (Lau & Mendes, 2014, p. 25).

Edward Said argued that Orientalism is all about the representations of the Orient by the West, particularly emphasizing difference and inferiority. As Said points out, "The East is exotic, and Orientalist discourse presents the 'East' as being 'backwards,' 'uncivilized,' and in need of enlightenment from the West" (Said, 1978). “The relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony... In this sense, the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience” (Said, 1978, p.5). On the other hand, Lau’s (2009) concept of reorientalism takes for granted that non-Western authors themselves participate in the redrawing of those binaries. Reorientalism assumes that while the Eastern writers deconstruct the Western Orientalist stereotypes, they also rely on cultural markers appealing to the expectations of their Western audience and therefore also complicate the East West dynamic.

By setting her protagonists in both the Eastern and Western settings, Shamsie navigates through all these complexities. Zahra is a human rights lawyer in London and Maryam heads a successful tech

company. The two women of Eastern heritage and western aspirations are the two sides of the same coin. Their interaction and conflicts with identity can be looked upon through the prism of reorientalism. Shamsie both portrays and condemns the cross-cultural expectations that her protagonists have to undergo. By so doing, the model will be useful for us in tracing the lines whereby the orientalism reorientalist forces influence Zahra's and Maryam's identity from both sides concerning perception by their counterparts concerning the Pakistani and Britain context. "Hybridity is a process of cultural mixing that can produce new and unexpected forms of identity" (Bhabha, 1994, p.2). The concept of hybridity propounded by Homi Bhabha within his 1994 works is greatly instrumental in description as to how the protagonists in Shamsie work in trying to bridge across the cross-border cultural identification. "Hybridity is the 'third space' which enables other positions to emerge... It is in the 'interstitial' spaces of this hybrid space that the negotiation of cultural meaning takes place" (Bhabha, 1994, p.37). For Zahra and Maryam, Pakistani heritage and British professional lives create a hybrid identity and force them to negotiate between these worlds. This hybridity is more particularly exemplified in Zahra's human rights work where the Eastern background influences her activism in the West. This means that Bhabha's concept of hybridity will assist in the examination of fluid, adaptive identities assumed by Shamsie's characters as they navigate various cultural milieus. This theoretical framework operating under the inspiration of the constructs of Orientalism and Reorientalism in grounding with theoretical perspectives in hybridity grounds the conceptual scrutiny of East-West binaries and polarities as they shape out in *Best of Friends*, an underlying aspect reflected from Shamsie's work towards blurring cultural identity fluidly. This continues to show through negotiation between self-permission within these social constraints to the socio-economic order.

Discussion and Analysis

Best of Friends by Shamsie is an incredibly complex work, covering issues of identity, belonging, and the play of power between East and West. Zahra and Maryam are two such lady friends whose relationship forms the very heart of this book that explores the stories of Pakistan to the UK migration with cultural identities being more accentuated in a fragile political environment. These two question East and West through the lenses of post-colonialism, power and gender, while viewing their constructs. With the theoretical framework developed by Lisa Lau in *Reorientalism* (2010), which coincides with Edward Said's idea of *Orientalism* (1978), the conflict experienced by the characters as they attempt to reconcile their cultural heritage with the demands of Western modernity can be deconstructed. Besides this, theories of postcolonialism, such as Homi Bhabha's works on hybridity (1994) and Stuart Hall's study on cultural representation (1997), work to explain how the characters negotiate and define their identity in a fractured world.

Best of Friends is the instrument Shamsie uses in exploring East-West binaries and their creation and sustenance within postcolonial literature. "A drift had begun, which would only grow as the years went on. Deep down they both knew that no one had the kind of friendship when they were forty that the two of them had at fourteen" (Shamsie, 2022, p.33). Located in Karachi, Zahra and Maryam are far away from the western ideals of modernity and progress against what can be understood as the East's backwardness or exotism. Push and pull against these opposed forces, this struggle has a life force as it builds into these characters now moving between Pakistan and the UK in struggles against themselves trying to settle these reconciled identities within some kind of a historical colonial scheme of global relations. Most of the terrain for one's understanding has been drawn out in Edward Said's *Orientalism* theory is how, "Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and (most of the time) 'the Occident'" (Said, 1978, p.2). The conceptualization of the East as a space of stasis and barbarism served not only as a political tool but also as a way of constructing European superiority. In *Best of Friends*, Shamsie reflects these colonial dynamics, especially through Zahra's experience in the UK. Zahra's experience in the West is profoundly marked with otherness. She is thrown into confrontations with caricaturely stereotypical thinking about the East,

whereby she gets portrayed, with her cosmopolitan background, however. This is because with her training in London, Zahra becomes acutely conscious of how the west views "the Otherness"-a space conceptualized because of its 'inferiority' as well as 'exoticism'.

However, Maryam's experience of this East-West binary is complex. She experiences a climate that was more liberal and Westernized in the city of Karachi. She only realizes contradiction, however, due to being raised in Karachi. The stereotype shows, however, when Maryam arrives in the UK to study higher education. This would therefore reconfirm the impression that the power dynamic between East and West is neither exclusively geographical but rather highly socially and politically entrenched structures out of which life continues to spill in postcolonial subjectivities. "talking about the death threats and trolling that inevitably, and depressingly, attach themselves to a migrant Muslim woman who has become the voice of Britain's conscience since she took on the position of Director at Britain's oldest civil liberties organisation a decade ago" (Shamsie, 2022, p.139).

Shamsie's narrative does not reflect this kind of East-West division. It complicates it. There's a kind of suggestion from the novel that binary can't be so fluid but rather is a shifting, and fluid, terrain by which identities are continuously built up and torn down on grounds of global forces. Here, with Zahra and Maryam, Shamsie reveals how fluid cultural boundaries really are, how the limits of such boundaries can both be challenged, reinforced, and redetermined within a personal experience.

Lisa Lau's theory of Reorientalism is a deconstructive approach toward comprehending how post-colonial subjects, especially from South Asia, relate with the socially constructed idea of the Orient. Where Orientalism has been the conceptual framework for studies of how the West gazes upon the East, Reorientalism is about the appropriative and resistant mechanisms deployed by post-colonial societies, the South Asian diaspora in particular, when dealing with colonial constructs. Lau's Reorientalist framework of importance is that it shows how Zahra and Maryam's identities grow vis-à-vis both the Western gaze and their cultural backgrounds. But Zahra ends up in the middle, caught between the expectations of her Pakistani heritage and her attraction to Western modernity. She feels an inferiority inside because of the way she was brought up in Pakistan, where there was an overbearing dominance of Western ideals. As Zahra starts to integrate into the British society, she is filled with feelings of dislocation and the fact that her cultural background is inferior. This relationship with the West is further complicated by expectations from her family who think that she has betrayed her traditional values by leaving Pakistan. Along the way, Zahra's journey in *Best of Friends* becomes an exploration of self-identity within the broader context of Reorientalism. She internalizes the Western ideal of progress and modernity but in tandem tries to reconcile this position as a Pakistani woman in a world that portrays her as "Other". This tension reflects the double binds of postcolonial identity, where people constantly have to navigate between conflicting demands of their cultural legacy and the imperatives of globalized modernity. "Lucky,' Zahra said, and Maryam grinned. She liked nothing better than to be compared to Lucky Santangelo, heroine of the Jackie Collins novels, composed in equal parts of courage, ruthlessness and loyalty" (Shamsie, 2022, p.8). The position of Maryam is complex because though she was brought up in a liberal, westernized household in Karachi that granted her a privilege to which Zahra had no access, exposure to the racial and cultural discrimination in the UK forces her to confront her own position within the East-West binary. Maryam's crossing between two worlds is an example of the fluidity and change that the identity of being cultural is not something but changeable. In theory, reorientalism as Lau brought forward supports Maryam's experience in the UK in changing and transforming the sense of identification and belonging for the writer. In both the characters, Shamsie opens up and shows how subjects of post-colonial cultures have developed and reacted to colonial legacies and how they contest fixed, binary concepts of East versus West.

Homi Bhabha's theory of hybridity (1994) is central to the comprehension of identity negotiation in *Best of Friends*. "Hybridity is the 'third space' which enables other positions to emerge... It is in the 'interstitial' spaces of this hybrid space that the negotiation of cultural meaning takes place" (Bhabha, 1994, p.37). This concept best describes the experiences of Zahra and Maryam as they navigate between different worlds of culture. In both of them-from Karachi to London. Bhabha's concept of hybridity comes alive as they go through a struggle to rationalize the cultural differences which shape their identities. For Zahra, hybridity develops as a survival mechanism. For her, cultural negotiation would be more of keeping things in balance between what she wants her Pakistani family to have and what Britain would want from her. Zahra's UK experience is perhaps the best description of Bhabha's theory of the "third space" through which new identities are produced by cultural crossing. It is not as simple and straightforward as taking up the ideals of the West but rather a complicated and, at times, very painful process of weaving in and out Pakistani roots with the reality of life in the modern, globalized world that has been made very Westernized. Thus, Bhabha's concept of hybridity depicts how Zahra's identity is constructed in the tension between her Pakistani background and her desire to find accommodation in the West. But for Maryam, it has to do with the self rather than survival. Since Maryam spent most of her life in the West, she was in contact with the contradictions within her cultural identity. But the UK experience makes her question the very basis of self-understanding and her position in the world. Maryam's hybridity is not survival but embracing the complexity of being herself. The Bhabha theory clarifies how Maryam's identity is fluid and shifts between different cultural influences she handles to create relationships with Zahra, her family, and the larger socio-political forces at work here. "She was filled with the satisfaction of being with a group of people and knowing the words and tone that would produce exactly the effect you wanted. This was what was meant by belonging and home, words she understood in" (Shamsie, 2022, p.30). Stuart Hall's work on cultural representation 1997 is a must-know regarding how identity was constructed by cultural discourses especially within the context of postcolonial migration. "Representation is the production of meaning through language. It is not a reflection of the world, but the creation of meaning through language" (Hall, 1977, p. 15). *Best of Friends* deals with cultural representation not only in Pakistan but in the UK, too. This cultural representation has gone on to form Zahra and Maryam's identities.

Cultural representation is significant in how Zahra feels about herself and how others perceive her. Being a Pakistani woman within the UK, Zahra comes with a set of cultural stereotypes that place her as an outsider. One of the theories by Hall, regarding representation, would be helpful in explaining this, on how the pictures of the East within Western media influence Zahra's self-concept. These representations are not only an external force but are also internalized by Zahra as she grapples with her own sense of identity. Zahra's experience reflects the way cultural representations are not neutral; they are deeply embedded within power structures that determine who gets to speak and who is silenced. For Maryam, cultural representation is not a matter of battling stereotypes but rather a matter of negotiating the contradictions between her Pakistani heritage and her Westernized upbringing. She is forced to confront how her cultural identity is represented in both contexts by moving between these two worlds. Hall's theory throws light on the tension Maryam undergoes in an attempt to define herself within the larger cultural narratives that shape her life. At its best, Shamsie's *Best of Friends* presents perhaps the deepest exploration of complexities in postcolonial identities, East-West binaries, and dynamics of power that continue shaping lives of people in this world of globalization. The theme of identity is central to *Best of Friends*, reflecting Zahra and Maryam's struggles with dual identities. Zahra's pragmatic approach reflects her attempt to reconcile her Pakistani heritage with her ambitions in London's political sphere, highlighting the fluidity of identity as shaped by societal expectations. Conversely, Maryam's loyalty to her roots underscores a resistance to full assimilation, embodying a form of cultural preservation that challenges homogenized Western narratives. Belonging emerges as a dual-edged concept. Zahra's professional success in the UK contrasts with her subtle feelings of alienation, suggesting that assimilation

into Western society often comes at the cost of cultural erasure. Maryam, on the other hand, remains deeply connected to Pakistan, her philanthropic endeavors signaling defiance against Western cultural hegemony. This dynamic echoes Lau's emphasis on Re-Orientalism as a way for South Asian writers to assert their cultural agency. Power dynamics underpin Zahra and Maryam's relationship, as well as their interactions within their respective societies. Zahra's political career reflects her navigation of neo-imperial structures, emphasizing the compromises necessary for success in Western spaces (Shamsie, 2022). Maryam's position, tied to her influence in Pakistan, highlights the lingering impact of colonial hierarchies in determining access to power.

Shamsie critiques the hegemonic structures that perpetuate these imbalances, aligning with Said's (1978) argument that cultural dominance is maintained through narratives that "otherize" non-Western identities. However, Zahra's ability to wield power within these structures complicates this binary, presenting her as both a subject of and a challenger to Western dominance. Zahra and Maryam serve as foils, representing divergent responses to cultural hybridity. Zahra's trajectory reflects the compromises inherent in assimilation, as her professional success in the UK necessitates a dilution of her cultural roots. This aligns with Said's (1978) observation of how colonial power demands conformity, even from those it marginalizes. Maryam, in contrast, remains firmly rooted in her Pakistani identity, using her privilege to resist Western norms. Her decision to prioritize her heritage over assimilation highlights the agency of South Asian characters to defy reductive stereotypes (Lau, 2009). Together, Zahra and Maryam exemplify the multifaceted nature of identity, resisting the fixed categorizations of "East" and "West." The contrasting settings of Karachi and London symbolize the duality of Zahra and Maryam's identities. Karachi represents their shared past and cultural foundation, while London signifies their present struggles with integration and alienation. This geographical binary mirrors the broader East-West divide, underscoring the complexities of cultural hybridity. Shamsie uses cultural artifacts, such as food and language, to emphasize the characters' navigation of identity. Zahra's adaptation to British norms contrasts with Maryam's preservation of Pakistani traditions, highlighting their differing approaches to cultural negotiation.

Zahra and Maryam's friendship reflects the broader dialogue between East and West. Their conflicts and reconciliations embody the tensions inherent in navigating dual identities, offering a microcosmic view of the cultural and political forces shaping their lives. "Perhaps friendship was not only about what you said to each other, but also about what you didn't" (Shamsie, 2022, p.134). Shamsie's work challenges traditional representations of East-West binaries by emphasizing the agency of South Asian characters. Her portrayal of Zahra and Maryam resists homogenized depictions, presenting them as individuals navigating complex socio-political landscapes. This approach aligns with Lau's concept of Re-Orientalism, which calls for a re-examination of South Asian identities from within. By situating her narrative across Pakistan and the UK, Shamsie critiques the lingering effects of colonialism while celebrating the diversity and resilience of South Asian cultures. Shamsie's focus on female perspectives provides a distinctive lens. Her nuanced exploration of cultural hybridity offers a significant contribution to postcolonial literature, emphasizing the complexities of globalized identities.

However, *Best of Friends* does not represent the static existence of such East-West binaries, but it compels and recasts them instead. By concept of hybridity, which Bhabha discusses in 1994, *Best of Friends* exhibits that identity does not come out as fixed and singular but, rather fluid, dynamic processes. In simple words, the whole experience of Zahra and Maryam during the transition from Pakistan to the UK can be portrayed better if there is an understanding that identity is not shaped by outside forces but rather constructed in response to such forces. In his notion of "third space," negotiation, and contestation, Bhabha provides a very useful frame through which the navigating of postcolonial identity is understood in relation to Zahra and Maryam. Their hybridity is only a means to survival, adaptation, and definition in

a fluid world where any fixed boundary exists no more. *Best of Friends* is not merely a story of two women traversing the labyrinth of East and West but is, rather, more a commentary on the fluidity of identity and the power of cultural negotiation in a postcolonial world. Through the lives of Zahra and Maryam, Shamsie provokes us to think differently about the East-West divide, giving us a more nuanced, layered view of postcolonial identity that reflects the complexity and contradictions of the globalized world. Further, the theoretical perspective of Stuart Hall's (1997) work on cultural representation augments our understanding of how Zahra and Maryam's identities are constructed not only from their experiences in the UK but also by the broader cultural narratives that circulate in both the East and the West. Hall's research on the way representation is bound to power relations makes sense of why these cultural stereotypes are internalized, both constructing and constraining possibilities for self-definition. Zahra's sense of inferiority in the UK, molded by Western representations of the East, and Maryam's more complex negotiation of her identity within her Westernized Pakistani context, concur with the ideas put forth by Hall, that identities are created through representation and cultural discourse. Ultimately, Shamsie's novel reveals the intricate ways in which postcolonial subjects interact with and resist the legacies of colonialism through complex identity negotiations. By exploring internalization and resistance to colonial narratives within Zahra and Maryam, *Best of Friends* beautifully enacts a nuanced postcolonial condition—there's no zero-sum game of rigid East-West opposition but dynamic and multilevel constructs instead. In a world where globalization's forces are gradually eroding the traditional boundaries of culture, Shamsie reminds us that identity is not fixed or static but a dynamic, continually negotiated product of the constant interplay between cultural, political, and historical forces.

Conclusion

Best of Friends by Shamsie is a very intricate discussion on the tension between East and West, and in this regard, it raises complexities of postcolonial identity and power dynamics characterizing the lives of those straddling two worlds. Through Zahra and Maryam, Shamsie unwinds the fact that the subject is not just a passive actor of colonial and postcolonial forces but a conscious agent participating in the relentless process of cultural negotiation and self-definition. The novel offers a complex notion of how postcolonial subjects, specifically women, negotiate the binaries of tradition and modernity, East and West, and the internalized legacies of colonialism that continue to shape their identities. (1978), it is in that context that the dichotomy of Orient and the Occident proves to be something real, really affecting the living experience of its characters. What has happened in the UK in relation to the case of Zahra, for example, suggests that Orientalist discourse is still strong enough in defining the imagination of the West as inferior and a place not as advanced, or even 'exotic.'. Said's Orientalism theory is crucial in the sense that it explains how such representations were internalized by a character like Zahra, who appears to have difficulty coming to terms with her Pakistani identity within the parameters and stereotypes of the Western world. This process, however, forms but one aspect of the larger Reorientalism process identified by Lisa Lau wherein postcolonial subjects both subvert and internalize these colonial constructs for the sake of identity. Zahra's is a story of how people are compelled to negotiate these powerful, usually contradictory forces in a world that continues to perpetuate colonial binaries.

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