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RESEARCH PAPER

Re-Orientalism and Diasporic Identity in Kamila Shamsie's *Churail*: Negotiating Exoticism and Rationality in South Asian Anglophone Fiction

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ABSTRACT

This study examines Kamila Shamsie's short story *Churail* through the lens of Re-Orientalism, as theorised by Lisa Lau, to investigate the ways diasporic narratives represent the East. It focuses on the manner in which the story's characters, dialogues, and symbolic elements embody and engage with orientalist tropes, particularly regarding exoticism, rationality, and diasporic identity. The study further explores the extent to which South Asian diasporic writers, while articulating their cultural specificities, interact with and respond to Western literary expectations, thereby shaping representations of the Orient for global readerships. Using close textual analysis, the research demonstrates how the short story *Churail* exaggerates and subverts traditional narratives, critiques both inherited cultural beliefs and Western perceptions of Eastern immigrants, and illustrates the complex construction of diasporic identity. The study is significant for advancing understanding of how contemporary South Asian Anglophone fiction operates within global literary markets while simultaneously challenging and reshaping orientalist imaginaries.

KEYWORDS Re-Orientalism, Self-Orientalism, Folk Narratives, Churail, Exoticism, Misrepresentation, Diasporic Identity, Negotiation, Subversion

Introduction

Re-Orientalism emerges as an extension of Edward Said's critique of Orientalism (1977/2003), offering a framework to examine not only how Orientalist discourse is externally imposed by the West but also the ways in which it is internalised, reproduced, and strategically mobilised by Eastern cultural producers. Said's intervention, shaped by Foucauldian notions of power and discourse, revealed the "Orient" as Europe's constructed Other—depicted as alluring, exotic, dangerous, and mysterious—thus enabling the West to define itself in contrast: "the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience" (Said, 2003; Lau & Mendes, 2011).

Lisa Lau, in her influential essay "Re-Orientalism: The Perpetration and Development of Orientalism by Orientals" (2009), extends this critique by emphasising that Orientalism is no longer simply imposed by the West but also perpetuated by diasporic Eastern writers themselves that is termed Re-Orientalism. She argues that Re-Orientalism represents "a process which dominates and, to a significant extent, distorts the representation of the Orient, seizing voice and platform, and once again consigning the Oriental within the Orient to a position of 'the Other'" (Lau, 2009, p. 571). In this sense, even when cultural representation emerges from within the Orient, it may still reproduce the very tropes of exoticism and Othering central to Orientalist discourse.

Building on this foundation, Lau and Ana Cristina Mendes (2011) argue that Orientalism in the twenty-first century persists in transformed ways. Whereas Said primarily addressed the means through which the West fashioned the binary of Orient and Occident, Re-Orientalism "is based on the ways cultural producers with eastern affiliations come to terms with an orientalized East, whether by complying with perceived expectations of western readers, by playing (along) with them or by discarding them altogether" (p. 3).

Thus, Re-Orientalism highlights the processes through which Orientalist practices are perpetuated by Eastern writers themselves, often as a negotiation with global literary markets.

Although the term "Re-Orientalism" gained prominence through Lau's theorisation, related concepts had already circulated under different labels: "ethno-Orientalism" (Carrier, 1992), "self-Orientalism" (Dirlik, 1996), "internal Orientalism" (Schein, 1997), and "reverse Orientalism" (Mitchell, 2004). Spivak's "new Orientalism" (1993, p. 277) and Boehmer's "neo-Orientalism" likewise recognise how global capitalism commodifies exotic difference for Western audiences. As Lau and Mendes observe, "some Orientals – South Asian-origin authors, for instance – are aggressively promoted in order to make a marketable commodity out of exoticising the 'Orient' or products from the 'Orient'" (2011, p. 4). This process is sustained by both structural conditions and deliberate authorial choices: many writers, conscious of the Western appetite for exoticised narratives, "deliberately pander to this demand and voluntarily self-Other so as to provide an unsustaining diet which will leave the consumer ever hungry, ever insatiate" (Lau & Mendes, 2011, p. 5).

At the centre of this discourse lies a paradox. Even when diasporic authors occupy elite positions in global literary markets, they often "reference the West as centre and place themselves as Other," thereby engaging in self-Othering that extends beyond individual authorship to encompass entire communities (Lau & Mendes, 2011, p. 6). The East is thus continually staged as a cultural spectacle for Western consumption. Unlike traditional Orientalist writers, who projected themselves as detached, universal authorities "able to see and represent without being seen in turn" (Mitchell, 1998, p. 470), re-Orientalist writers foreground their positionality, claiming authenticity through their status as cultural witnesses (Lau & Mendes, 2011, p. 7). This shift, while signalling self-conscious authorship, paradoxically reinforces dependence on Western validation.

Lau (2011) illustrates these issues through the example of Indian Writing in English (IWE), which, she argues, has undergone Re-Orientalisation over the past three decades, particularly through diasporic authors based in the US, UK, Canada, and Australia (p. 17). Cultural markers—such as "an ash-smeared sadhu" or "the fragrance of cumin"—have been celebrated by Western readers as "so exotic" and "marvellously authentic," though they often function as commodified signs of difference (De Kretser, 2004, cited in Lau, 2011, p. 294). Critics such as Anis Shivani contend that IWE exemplifies a subtler form of Orientalism, one that enacts "the commodification of exoticised Orientalism in global capitalist exchange" (Shivani, 2006, p. 2; Lau, 2011, p. 18). At a theoretical level, Shivani accuses this body of fiction of betraying its postcolonial commitments: "far from the former empire writing, let alone striking back, this new fiction goes out of its way to avoid creating any sense of discomfort or awareness of historical complicity in its western audience" (p. 19).

This debate extends to acclaimed authors such as Aravind Adiga, Arundhati Roy, and Kiran Desai, whose works—though internationally celebrated—have been criticised for presenting "skewed, partial and selective representation" shaped more by Western readerships than by lived South Asian realities (Lau, 2011, p. 20). IWE writers, according to Lau, face recurring accusations of exaggeration, stereotyping, exoticisation, pandering to Western tastes, commodifying cultural difference, and "selling out." Collectively, these critiques highlight the fraught terrain of South Asian Anglophone fiction, where questions of authenticity, marketability, and postcolonial responsibility collide.

Ultimately, Re-Orientalism both mirrors and diverges from Orientalism. Like Orientalism, it thrives on constructing the East as exotic, timeless, and Other. Unlike Orientalism, however, it is authored by Eastern or diasporic voices who claim cultural authenticity yet remain tethered to Western literary markets. Within this discourse, Kamila Shamsie's short story *Churail* becomes a pertinent site of analysis. As a South Asian

Anglophone writer, Shamsie inherits both the burden and the agency described by Lau: she must grapple with dominant Western imaginaries of Muslim and South Asian women while simultaneously deploying narrative strategies to destabilise and complicate those same perceptions.

Shamsie, an established voice in South Asian Anglophone literature, has been widely studied for her novels; however, her recent short story *Churail* (2024) has yet to receive critical attention. The story revisits the folkloric figure of the *churail* within the context of migration and diasporic life, exploring themes of cultural displacement, assimilation, and intergenerational memory. Unlike Shamsie's novels, which have been examined extensively through Orientalist and Re-Orientalist frameworks, *Churail* remains critically unexamined despite its potential to shed light on the negotiation of identity and representation in diasporic narratives.

This study aims to fill that gap by analyzing *Churail* through the framework of Re-Orientalism, as theorised by Lisa Lau (2009). It investigates how the story engages with orientalist tropes of exoticism and irrationality while simultaneously subverting them through irony, narrative exaggeration, and the interplay between rational and superstitious characters. By doing so, the research highlights how Shamsie not only critiques inherited cultural beliefs but also responds to Western expectations of diasporic literature. Ultimately, the study argues that *Churail* exemplifies the way the South Asian diasporic fiction negotiates identity within global literary markets, at once catering to and resisting orientalist imaginaries

Literature Review

Churail was first published in *Best British Short Stories* 2024 (ed. Nicholas Royle, Salt Publishing) and later appeared in *The Barcelona Review* (2024), the version examined in this study. However, it has not yet been the subject of any scholarly study or critical analysis. To date, no research has examined the story from any perspective, let alone through the framework of Re-Orientalism. The only written discussion of *Churail* appears on Atlas.org, which describes the narrative as one concerned with identity, family secrets, cultural displacement, and the haunting presence of the *churail* as a folkloric symbol of patriarchal guilt and trauma. While this overview notes themes of migration, assimilation, and intergenerational conflict, it remains descriptive rather than analytical and does not address the theme of Re-Orientalism.

Nevertheless, Kamila Shamsie is an acclaimed writer whose other works have been widely studied in relation to literary and cultural themes. In particular, the concepts of Orientalism and Re-Orientalism have received significant attention in critical studies of her novels, where scholars have examined the way her fiction negotiates questions of identity, representation, migration, and the East–West encounter. A brief review of this scholarship is presented below.

Sikandar et al. (2023) analyse Shamsie's *Home Fire* (2017) through Lisa Lau's (2009) framework of Re-Orientalism, highlighting how authenticity, representation, and generalisation function within diasporic writing. Their study contends that Shamsie's narrative risks making autobiographical "truth claims" that cater to Western readerships, often at the cost of stereotyping South Asian culture or reducing it to sensational tropes. They further argue that Shamsie's representation of the South Asian educated elite reflects a fascination with Western norms, while the subaltern is either homogenised or excluded, thus problematising authenticity and identity within re-orientalist discourse.

Similarly, Abbas et al. (2023) investigate *Burnt Shadows* (2009) through a re-orientalist lens, situating the narrative within multiple historical traumas such as the bombing of Nagasaki, the Partition of India, and post-9/11 geopolitics. They argue that

Shamsie's depiction of East–West encounters is ideologically skewed, with Western characters often portrayed more positively, whereas non-Western characters are represented in negative terms. Drawing on the frameworks of Lau and Dwivedi (2014) and Lau and Mendes (2011), they emphasise that Shamsie's narrative strategies—including unreliable narration and selective description—reproduce orientalist stereotypes. This re-orientalist positioning, whether deliberate or unconscious, aligns her work with broader trends in South Asian Anglophone fiction that reinforce Western expectations of the "Orient."

Abbasi et al. (2021) adopt a comparative framework by analysing E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924) alongside Shamsie's *Home Fire* (2017) through the dual lenses of Orientalism and Re-Orientalism. They argue that colonial writers such as Forster depicted native women as indistinct, voiceless, and mysterious, whereas postcolonial writers, despite repositioning women in central roles, sometimes continue to reproduce stereotypes that confine them to manipulative, morally questionable, or culturally negative traits. Their analysis shows that Shamsie's representation of women both challenges colonial erasures and risks reinforcing re-orientalist stereotypes aligned with Western perceptions of the "Oriental woman."

Ahmed et al. (2021) examine *Home Fire* through the framework of "new-Orientalism," arguing that post-9/11 fiction has shifted the representation of the "Orient" from the exotic figure to the "new Orient." This figure, shaped by Islamophobia, globalisation, and neo-colonial discourses, is constructed as violent, dangerous, and disloyal—a perpetual threat to Western civilisation. Importantly, the authors emphasise that this discourse is not confined to Western writers but is also reproduced by postcolonial authors, who intentionally or unintentionally reinforce hegemonic narratives. Analysing Aneeka and Parvaiz as exemplars of this "new Orient," they contend that *Home Fire* problematises Muslim subjectivity, depicting characters as maligned and intolerable figures who must be contained within their own territories.

Shehzadi, Cheema, and Jahan (2025) investigate Kamila Shamsie's *Best of Friends* through the lens of re-Orientalism, focusing on how East–West binaries are constructed and negotiated. Their study emphasises how the novel represents identity and cultural belonging across Pakistan and the UK, showing the complexities of conflicted loyalties, power relations, and postcolonial inheritances. The authors argue that Shamsie destabilises rigid cultural oppositions by presenting characters with fluid and shifting identities, thereby challenging essentialist representations of the East and West often found in postcolonial literature.

Riaz et al. (2024) analyse *Best of Friends* through the framework of self-Orientalism, drawing on Dirlik (1996) and Daura (1995). They demonstrate that the novel reproduces Orientalist stereotypes by portraying Eastern characters in clichéd and subservient ways while simultaneously depicting them as aspiring to assimilate into Western culture for its perceived privileges. This process of "self-othering" shows that Shamsie's narrative, despite being authored by an Eastern writer, reinforces established East–West hierarchies.

Similarly, Saleem et al. (2022) employ Edward Said's concept of worldliness to interrogate *Home Fire*. They argue that Shamsie's narrative demonstrates a form of "latent Westoxification" which informs her representation of Pakistani diasporic Muslims. According to their reading, the novel portrays both radicalised and Westernised Muslims as potential threats, reinforcing stereotypes of Muslims as irrational, sentimental, and violent. They conclude that Shamsie's narrative, shaped by ideological worldliness, manifests latent Orientalism, as it foregrounds radicalised minorities in ways that overshadow the moderate majority. This representation, they contend, contributes to the stigmatisation of Islam and Pakistan, reflecting the persistence of orientalist tropes within diasporic literary production.

Collectively, these studies demonstrate that Shamsie's fiction has been extensively examined under the overlapping frameworks of Re-Orientalism, self-Orientalism, neo-Orientalism, and Orientalism. However, her recently published short story *Churail* has not yet been studied through any of these perspectives, nor has it been investigated in terms of other literary or cultural concerns. This study seeks to fill this gap by examining *Churail* under the framework of Re-Orientalism, as theorised by Lisa Lau, to explore how diasporic narratives represent the East. It argues that the short story exaggerates and subverts traditional narratives, critiques both inherited cultural beliefs and Western perceptions of Eastern immigrants, and illustrates the complex and multifaceted construction of diasporic identity.

Theoretical Framework

This research is anchored in the theoretical formulation of Re-Orientalism as proposed by Lisa Lau (2009; 2011). Extending from Edward Said's foundational critique of Orientalism, Lau postulates that Anglophone South Asian writers, while seeking to narrate their own cultural specificities, often remain implicated in representational strategies that cater to Western literary and critical expectations. Such strategies, rather than dismantling entrenched stereotypes, may inadvertently perpetuate essentialised and exoticised constructions of the East under the guise of authenticity. Within this paradigm, Kamila Shamsie's short story *Churail* is examined as a relevant text that emerges from the interstice of local cultural expression and global literary consumption. The framework of Re-Orientalism is thus employed to critically investigate the manner in which *Churail* either reinforces or destabilises the inherited Orientalist gaze, thereby situating the text within the wider discourse of postcolonial literary production.

Material and Methods

The study employs a qualitative method, specifically close textual analysis, to explore how the characters, dialogues, and symbolic elements in the short story *Churail* embody re-orientalism. This approach facilitates a critical exploration of Shamsie's depiction of the interplay between exoticism, rationality, and diasporic identity, elucidating the manner in which re-orientalist perspectives are articulated, contested, and negotiated within the text. The story, composed of fifty-nine paragraphs, is analysed step by step from the beginning to the end to trace the various aspects of re-orientalism; thus, the study is thorough and methodical in its execution.

Results and Discussion

Kamila Shamsie was born and raised in Karachi, but she received her education in the United States and later acquired British citizenship (Liao, 2017, p. 255). She completed her BA at Hamilton College, New York, and MFA at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, and she now resides in London. Shamsie has become thoroughly assimilated into Western culture, and her lifestyle, attire, and manner of speaking reflect the strong influence of the West (Shah, 2023). Like Indian Writing in English (IWE), which has been subject to Re-Orientalisation over the past three decades, Shamsie's fiction may also be examined through this lens. Diasporic authors based in the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia—such as Aravind Adiga, Arundhati Roy, and Kiran Desai—though widely acclaimed, have often been criticised for producing "skewed, partial and selective representation" of their societies, shaped more by the expectations of Western readerships than by local realities (Lau, 2011, p. 20).

A similar pattern can be observed in Shamsie's short story *Churail*. She presents a distorted and exaggerated portrayal of Pakistani society, particularly of the people of Karachi. While folkloric beliefs in supernatural beings can be traced to rural Pakistan, where they continue as part of oral tradition, such beliefs are rarely known or practised in urban

centres. In metropolitan contexts, especially Karachi—one of the largest cities in the world and a hub of commerce and trade—these superstitions are negligible, and when they appear, they are more likely associated with less-educated sections of society rather than with the city's mainstream population.

Yet, Shamsie magnifies these rural folk beliefs and imposes them upon Karachi's urban setting, thereby constructing an exaggerated and skewed representation under the pretext of folkloric authenticity. Instead of presenting a realistic image of Pakistani society, she heightens the supernatural elements to create a narrative that appeals to Western readers, who are often drawn to exoticised depictions of the East. This approach reflects the working of Re-Orientalism, where writers of Eastern origin reproduce familiar stereotypes in order to align with Western literary markets.

In order to analyse the proposed study, it is first necessary to provide a brief overview of Kamila Shamsie's short story *Churail. Churail* was first published in *Best British Short Stories* 2024*,* edited by Nicholas Royle (Salt Publishing), and this version later appeared in *The Barcelona Review* in 2024. The narrative is delivered through an autodiegetic female narrator whose mother dies during childbirth. Following her death, local villagers spread rumours that the mother has transformed into a *churail*—a folkloric spirit said to haunt men from peepul trees. The narrator's father subsequently migrates with her to England, intent on assimilating into British society and severing connections with Pakistan. As the narrator grows up, her father remains emotionally distant and critical, while her cousin Zainab emerges as her closest confidante, frequently reminding her of the *churail* legend and their family's past. Years later, devastating floods in Pakistan wash away her mother's grave, prompting Zainab to send her a branch from the village peepul tree, which she plants in their London garden. The tree thrives unnaturally that is supposed to damage the house, and it terrifies her father, who believes the *churail* has returned. In the final scene, when the spirit's presence seems to call out, the narrator calmly steps into the garden, leaving her father immobilized by terror.

The very title *Churail* itself immediately invokes an exoticised representation of Karachi's people, suggesting a society that widely believes in the folkloric figure of the *churail*—a woman who, after death, is believed to transform into a witch and haunt those responsible for her demise. While such tales exist in South Asian folklore, their prevalence in metropolitan Karachi is minimal, as urban spaces are shaped by commerce, modernity, and global exchange. Shamsie's portrayal therefore amplifies an element of rural superstition and projects it onto an urban context, exaggerating a phenomenon that, in reality, is largely marginal. This heightening of superstition reflects not an authentic representation but rather an exoticised picture designed to intrigue a Western audience—a tendency aligned with re-Orientalist literary strategies.

From the outset, the story employs an autodiegetic narrator, a young girl, who recounts how her father migrated to England to escape his wife—believed to have become a *churail* after her death in childbirth. The narrator recalls:

> My father migrated to England with me weeks after I was born to protect us from my mother, who had died giving birth to me… There were four miscarriages before I came along, and after the second the doctors advised against further pregnancies. My mother talked of adoption, but my father was insistent that he must have a son of his own blood, and the universe responded as it does when men refuse to understand what nature is trying to tell them: it gave him the wrong kind of child, and it took away his wife. (Shamsie, 2024, para. 1)

This passage presents a distorted image of the father—obsessively fixated on having a male heir despite repeated medical warnings. Although the preference for male children has cultural resonance in South Asian societies, the extremity of the father's insistence appears

implausible, especially given the accepted social practice of polygamy in Pakistan, which could have provided an alternative. In this way, the father is depicted in contradictory terms: on the one hand, he is shown as oafish and bound by archaic patriarchal traditions, resembling the caricature of the irrational Oriental patriarch common in Orientalist discourse; on the other hand, he possesses the financial means and awareness to migrate to England—a feat hardly achievable for an ignorant simpleton.

The contradiction deepens as, once in England, he is represented as broadminded and cosmopolitan, refusing to remarry on the grounds that his resources should be invested in "promoting culture and cosmopolitanism." Such a portrayal renders him almost very strange: deeply conservative when in Karachi, yet remarkably liberal abroad. Rather than capturing the complexities of a single coherent character, this duality appears constructed to satisfy Western expectations of exotic conservatism contrasted with the allure of diasporic cosmopolitanism. This is precisely the re-Orientalist move: amplifying cultural contradictions for narrative effect and Western consumption.

The mother too is depicted problematically. Despite medical warnings after multiple miscarriages, she is shown risking her life to pursue her husband's desire for a son. This depiction, however, strains reasonability: if the doctor could predict the risk of maternal death, it follows that the sex of the child could also have been anticipated, yet the narrative omits such possibilities. Her character thus becomes another exaggerated representation of female submissiveness and irrational sacrifice, reinforcing Orientalist stereotypes.

In sum, the very beginning of the story constructs a skewed, exaggerated, and self-contradictory picture. By foregrounding superstition and patriarchal irrationality, Shamsie participates in a discourse that privileges exoticism over authenticity, offering her Western readership a sensationalised image of Pakistani society under the guise of folkloric realism.

The subsequent paragraph intensifies the dramatization of the South Asian countryside folktale, wherein women are believed to transform into *churails* (witch-like beings) who inhabit sacred trees after death and take revenge on those who wronged them. The narrator recounts what she was told by her cousin Zainab: shortly after the narrator's birth, her father heard his name called twice from a *peepul* tree near their home. Frightened, he froze in fear, as it was a common belief that if a name was called twice but not a third time, the *churail* would exact vengeance upon the individual. The wet nurse, having witnessed the incident, spread the story throughout the village, declaring that the narrator's mother had indeed become a *churail*: "My wet-nurse saw it all, and she was the one to spread it through our village that my mother had become a churail" (Shamsie, 2024, para. 2). This episode underscores how superstition is tied to the voices of the marginalized—such as the wet nurse—who are presented as embodying the credulousness of "simple" rural people.

The narrator, however, who lives in London and is distanced from such beliefs, describes these tales with a sense of irony. She explains that women who die in childbirth are often believed to become *churails*, who reside in *peepul* trees and lure their victims with deceptive sweetness. The danger, she recalls, is greatest on misty nights, when the spectral figure might appear beautiful yet conceal her backward-facing feet. According to the tale, she always calls her victim's name exactly twice and never more. Once lured, men are said to be drained of vitality and held captive until they become aged and frail. Released only when decades had passed, they return to a world where everyone they once knew is gone, ultimately ending their lives in isolation (para. 3). This elaborate folkloric description recalls the metamorphic and mythical imagery reminiscent of Medieval Europe, yet Shamsie situates it within Karachi, one of the largest Muslim metropolitan centers. The disjunction is striking, as such narratives run counter to Islamic thought, which strongly opposes such supernatural notions. Shamsie, therefore, exaggerates the folktale story by attributing it to urban Karachiites, thereby constructing a distorted and exoticized representation of the city for Western consumption. This reflects the feature of re-Orientalism, where authenticity is

questioned by native readers but valorized by Western audiences. Lau (2011) highlights that in re-Orientalist discourse, authenticity is often sacrificed for appeal, as Western readers expect depictions of the East as exotic and strange, while native audiences reject such misrepresentations.

The story is also enlivened through the humour of Zainab, the narrator's cousin, who, being Westernized, dismisses such folk beliefs with irony. She jokes that the narrative resembles "Rip van Winkle … with the sex censored," emphasizing her irreverent attitude toward both superstition and propriety (Shamsie, 2024, para. 4). Yet, in the same breath, she asserts that the narrator's father refuses to return to Pakistan, not because it is "a terrible place," as he claims, but because he fears that the *churail*—his deceased wife—still awaits him there (para. 4). This contradiction further highlights the self-Orientalist tendency: a man who is later represented as cosmopolitan and modern is also depicted as irrationally afraid of his wife's spirit. Moreover, the description of Pakistan as a "terrible place" reflects Orientalist discourse that paints the East as dark, backward, and threatening. Shamsie's narrative thus exemplifies re-Orientalism, where native authors reproduce such imagery to render their stories exotic and appealing to Western audiences, even if such depictions are alien to the lived realities of most Pakistanis.

In paragraph five, however, the father is described in ways that challenge the expectations of both traditional Orientalist and Western readers. Rather than embodying the simpleton trapped in superstition, he emerges as an ambitious, modern man who fully embraces cosmopolitan life. The narrator recalls how they moved successively through different parts of England, eventually settling in Kensington in a house with the seventh largest garden in London. The father told his daughter that now she could "make friends," suggesting that previous moves were to blame for her difficulties rather than her own insecurities. He also sent her to an elite school and advised her not to associate with the "wrong girl by which he meant other Pakistanis" (para. 5). Here, the father embodies the paradox of re-Orientalist portrayal: while earlier characterized as irrational and bound by superstition, he is also represented as fully assimilated into Western cosmopolitanism, ambitious, and invested in cultural capital. This duality reinforces Shamsie's tendency to exaggerate and juxtapose extremes, creating characters that are less realistic and more exoticized for external consumption.

Thus, depicting a man both as representative of the simpleton beliefs of the East and at the same time showing the strong traits of the West demonstrates the re-orientalist tendencies that, as Lau (2009; 2011) explains, simultaneously engage with orientalist stereotypes, resist them, and yet exploit their appeal. On the one hand, the father is shown as fearful and superstitious, but on the other, he is represented as extremely ambitious, surpassing many natives and eventually acquiring a prestigious property: "a house with a garden – the seventh largest in London, six places down from Buckingham Palace" (Shamsie, 2024, para. 5). This juxtaposition creates a contradictory image: how can a man supposedly terrified of his wife's spirit as a *churail* also emerge as a shrewd cosmopolitan figure who owns one of the grandest houses in London? Such inconsistency reinforces Shamsie's tendency to exaggerate and misrepresent, producing an account that is less about authentic representation and more about catering to Western audiences, which is central to re-orientalism.

Similarly, the narrative emphasizes the father's contradictions when it highlights his conservatism in Pakistan—pressuring his wife to bear a fifth child despite medical warnings—against his seemingly liberal and assimilative persona in England. As the narrator observes, he expressed "huge disdain for his brother who had moved to England without any interest in becoming English" (para. 5), insisting that "if you enter someone's home as a guest you must find ways of being pleasing to them" (para. 5). His own attempts to ingratiate himself with the English included adopting squash, hiring an accent coach, donating to the arts, and joining an elite men-only club (para. 5). This passage reflects

Shamsie's deliberate construction of a character at once rigid and fearful, yet simultaneously cosmopolitan and performatively Western. The contradiction, again, reveals a re-orientalist logic: reinforcing orientalist assumptions of Eastern irrationality while paradoxically subverting them by portraying a Pakistani man as sophisticated, worldly and wealthy.

The most striking example of this exaggerated duality comes when the father's obsession with Western respectability clashes with his daughter's ordinary actions. Despite investing in piano lessons, tennis coaching, and French au pairs to polish her into the "perfect immigrant daughter," he reacts with fury upon finding her in the kitchen, assembling a sandwich. The narrator recalls how the sight provoked him: "No matter what I do you'll always look like a peasant working in the fields, he said" (paras. 6–7). This harsh judgment underscores his mimicry of Western ideals and his desperate rejection of Pakistani cultural markers, even in mundane acts. Yet his rage simultaneously exposes his deep insecurities—his fear that despite wealth and assimilation, his origins will betray him. Shamsie, therefore, overstates his contradictions: a man both cosmopolitan and irrational, sophisticated yet haunted by superstition. This tension exemplifies what Lau (2011) identifies as the "appeal to Western consumers" in re-orientalist narratives, where the East is represented as strange, exotic, and internally conflicted, even by its own writers.

Later, Zainab provides a feminist reinterpretation of the churail folktale, listing the various circumstances under which women could become churails — dying in childbirth, in abusive marriages, in sexual deprivation, or under tragic conditions (paras. 11-16). Her sarcastic cataloging reframes the folktale as an allegory of women's systemic marginalization in patriarchal societies. This is further reinforced when the two cousins mockingly "identify" famous Western women as potential churails — Marilyn Monroe, Amy Winehouse, Princess Diana — thereby ridiculing both the superstition and its cultural appropriation (para. 16). Here, Shamsie again depicts diasporic characters who laugh at their own heritage, aligning with the re-orientalist tendency of self-exoticization.

The father's contradictory disposition becomes even clearer when, despite dismissing the notion of the churail as "superstitious nonsense" (p. 20), his trembling hand as he fumbles with his keys betrays his fear. This tension between outward rationality and inward superstition is echoed in his over-protectiveness in England, where he installs surveillance cameras throughout the house to guard against imagined threats as the narrator tells: "This was the sort of thing [that her father was doing] I thought often and never said out loud, except to Zainab" (para. 20). Thus, Shamsie presents him simultaneously as pragmatic and irrational, undermining authenticity through an exaggerated and contradictory characterization.

His fear eventually overwhelms his admiration for Zainab, leading him to ban her from the house despite having earlier welcomed her Western sophistication: "The next day Zainab texted to say my father had banned her from seeing me any more. When I went weeping to my father, he said, Exactly the kind of bad influence I've tried my whole life to keep you away from" *(*para. 21). This reversal reflects how superstition is depicted as capable of overpowering rationality even in a Westernized, pragmatic man.

Yet, Shamsie also depicts the father as remarkably entrepreneurial, a figure who rejects his brother's taxi business to pursue wealth independently. Paraphrasing the narrator's account, after migrating to England following his wife's death, he quickly recognized both the economic limitations of his homeland and the opportunities abroad. He completely cuts off ties with his homeland considering it a dump. He thought that he would become rich in England but it is not possible by attaching to his brother's mini-cab company. He experimented with several ventures, eventually earning his fortune through a marriage application tailored to Muslim clients, offering discounts on venues, catering, and tailoring services (p. 23). Such details emphasize his pragmatism and cosmopolitan identity, contradicting the earlier depiction of him as an irrational, superstitious figure.

Thus, a pragmatic picture is drawn, contrasting him with the Western stereotype that those who believe in spirits are irrational Orientals. Similarly, contrary to the orientalist assumption- as Said (1977) observes that Eastern people are portrayed as excessively lustful and sexual (pp. 8, 69, 154)- the narrator's father neither indulges in sexual affairs nor remarries; rather, most of his interactions with women are transactional. As the narrator recalls:

> Why didn't you ever marry again? I asked when I could speak to him once more. Didn't you want a son? Sometimes there were short-term girlfriends in his life, but I was certain that most of his relations with women were uncomplicatedly transactional. (Shamsie, 2024, para. 24)

His response to his daughter shows that his earlier obsession with having a male heir had shifted—partly because it cost his wife her life, and partly because life in England had broadened his outlook: "Not once I understood there are other ways to leave a legacy, he said. He was a man who liked to stamp his name on things – university scholarships, renovated theatre foyers, museum wings" (para. 25). On the one hand, then, he is portrayed as superstitious, but on the other, as a cosmopolitan assimilated into Western culture. Shamsie thereby presents him as both pragmatic and strangely exotic, reinforcing a re-Orientalist and skewed representation.

Later, his contradictory nature is emphasized further. When his daughter asks about her place in his legacy, he ignores her, turning his attention instead to "Dancing with the Stars" (para. 27). The narrator also recalls that she had to secretly meet Zainab, her cousin, since her father had banned her from entering their home after she laughed at the idea of a churail (para. 28).

The story develops as devastating floods hit Pakistan one summer. Zainab, having left her investment banking job, dedicated herself to relief work. Out of respect, she visited her uncle (the narrator's father) to seek a donation for their ancestral village, explaining that it was "underwater" (para. 29). Instead of responding with empathy, he dismissed her request, insisting that his "village" was not in Pakistan but in Kensington and Chelsea, before leaving abruptly (para. 30). When Zainab pressed further, telling him that his relatives in Karachi had lost everything, he remained unmoved, though the narrator recalls a fleeting moment when his body revealed a tiny crack in his composure (para. 32).

Thus, once again, Shamsie paints an exotic picture of the father—a wealthy Londoner who funds scholarships, theatre foyers, and museums in England, but severs ties with his homeland. On the one hand, he assimilates into foreign culture; on the other, he still believes in spirits like churails, banning his niece for mocking them. Such contradictions make his representation both strange and inauthentic. It also misrepresents Pakistani diaspora figures who, like him, are shown as wealthy yet disconnected from their roots, refusing to aid their countrymen in crises.

By choosing the floods—a recurring disaster in Pakistan often tied to poverty and dependency on international relief—Shamsie further reinforces an exoticized image of Pakistan as perpetually in need. Yet, the narrative avoids mentioning how such environmental disasters are deeply linked to global pollution caused largely by the West.

In contrast, after her father's refusal, the narrator shows solidarity with Zainab by accompanying her to an ATM, withdrawing the maximum sum from her debit card to contribute to flood relief (para. 33). This juxtaposition reinforces another stereotype: that the Westernized younger generation, raised abroad, maintains stronger ties to their homeland and compassion for the poor, while wealthy diaspora figures like the father prefer to cut themselves off. The story thus caters to Western expectations, exoticizing both Pakistan and its people.

While on the way to the ATM, the cousin's conversation again returns humorously to the *Churail*. The narrator observes that the *Churail* is the figure "who had led first to my exile from Pakistan, then Zainab's expulsion from my home" (para. 33). This functions as a satire on her father, a Pakistani man, who feared the *Churail* so much that he brought his daughter to England, and who later banned Zainab from his home for laughing at the concept. The cousins, however, as westernized young women, reinterpret and satirize the figure of the *Churail* (traditionally believed in South Asian folklore to be a dead woman who returns in supernatural form) by linking it to the mistreatment of women in Pakistan that causes their suffering and death. Their exchange reframes the *Churail* in ironic, almost parodic, feminist terms: the narrator remarks that she is "the victim of patriarchy who enacts revenge on men," while Zainab interjects that she is seen as evil only because of her attractiveness and sexual freedom. The narrator suggests she embodies "patriarchy's guilt," while Zainab wryly adds that even when men imagine themselves victims, they cast themselves as hyper-masculine "sex-gods" pursued by her insatiable beauty. The cousins end the discussion by laughing and pushing the idea further with playful remarks, such as whether there could be "queer churail" (paras. 34-42).

Thus, the cousins' laughter indirectly mocks the narrator's father—culpable in his wife's death—and also the people of their homeland, particularly Karachi, who hold firmly to such beliefs. Yet the satire does not come from Western outsiders, but rather from Pakistani women raised and educated in England. This indicates a form of self-Orientalism or re-Orientalism, where insiders mock their own cultural traditions from a position shaped by the West. Similarly, the father's disdain for Pakistan reflects another layer of self-Orientalism. Therefore, both at the level of the characters (the cousins) and at the level of narrative (Shamsie's authorial voice), Pakistani beliefs embodied in the *Churail* are ridiculed through the lens of re-Orientalism.

On the way to the ATM, the narrator also shares with Zainab her wish to visit their family village and her mother's grave upon turning eighteen (para. 43). Yet this desire cannot be realized: Zainab later reports that the "graveyard ha[s] been washed away in flooding along with every home in the village" (para. 43). Even the *peepul* tree has been destroyed, and the only remnant she brings back is a small cutting, "six or seven inches long, with small heart-shaped leaves growing from it" (para. 43). She calls it a "climate refugee" (para. 43). Bringing the *peepul* tree, traditionally associated with *Churail* in South Asian folklore, into England symbolizes the transplantation of such "exotic" beliefs by migrants into the West. The narrator responds rationalistically, noting that "peepul trees can't grow in England. They want sun and humidity to thrive" (para. 44). Nonetheless, she plants the cutting "in the corner of our garden where there was the most sunlight" (para. 44).

Unexpectedly, the tree does survive, as the text describes: although it stagnates in winter and remains a "stubby sad thing," a Sri Lankan cook warns the gardener not to remove it due to its religious significance, while the father remains unaware that a remnant of his village is growing in their ornamental English garden (para. 44). This survival illustrates the persistence of cultural and spiritual symbols in a hostile environment, though the narrative portrays this persistence in an ironic, almost exaggerated way, in line with re-Orientalist tendencies. The episode reinforces the transnational circulation of South Asian folklore, extending beyond Pakistan into the wider subcontinent, while also satirizing the persistence of irrational beliefs within modern diasporic contexts.

Later, the narrator realizes that the *peepul* tree's roots have supposed to disrupt the water supply of their home. A plumber is called, who explains that the plant has invasive qualities, capable of spreading its roots deep in search of water. He warns that it has already entered the pipes and might even be threatening the foundations of the house (paras. 46–47). Here, the *peepul* tree—imbued with spiritual significance in South Asia—becomes symbolic of Pakistani beliefs transplanted to the West, where they are regarded as invasive or dangerous to the social fabric of England. The plumber represents Western authority,

diagnosing the foreign plant as a threat in much the same way Western discourse often associates Islam, religious traditions, or irrational beliefs with danger to national stability.

The father, initially unaware of the plant's origins, becomes horrified when the narrator tells him that the cutting originated from the very tree in Pakistan where he had once believed his wife's spirit called to him and Zainab "brought it, clipped from the peepul tree across the street from our house" (para. 48). His reaction is described vividly: "His face! Like a man receiving news of a sickness so old and deep in him that there's no way of cutting it out without excising his organs with it" (para. 49). The plumber further suggests that an expert will be required to remove the plant, noting that even if cut down, "the roots would continue to grow" and that the extent of damage is unknowable (paras. 50). This illustrates how Western discourse often perceives foreign cultural values as inherently threatening, even when evidence is inconclusive.

Thus, Shamsie critiques both sides: on one hand, the irrationality of exotic South Asian beliefs that persist in diasporic contexts; on the other, the Western tendency to treat such cultural remnants as existential threats. This dual critique epitomizes re-Orientalism, where diasporic writers simultaneously exoticize their homelands and subvert Western misrepresentations, particularly in the post-9/11 climate of suspicion towards Muslim and Pakistani migrants.

The narrator's father, upon being informed that the tree in their garden is of the same species from which his late wife was believed to have called him as a *churail* in Pakistan, becomes deeply apprehensive. He imagines that with the tree, the spirit of the *churail* has followed them into England. Whereas the house had previously been open and airy, he now ensures that every window is closed and locked, reflecting his state of fear, his instinct to control, and his cautious spirit. Perceiving her father's anxiety, the narrator approaches him and stands beside him:

> That night my father stood in the rarely used drawing room, looking out at the seventh largest garden in London. We'd been leaving the windows open at night to let in the breeze but as I walked through the house in search of him I saw that each one was closed and locked. I went to stand beside him. (para. 51)

Overcome with anxiety, the father seems to relive, or perhaps hallucinate, a memory of the East, perceiving his wife's spirit as a *churail* in the tree. He asks his daughter whether she can "see her" (para. 52). Unlike him, the daughter, shaped by her Western rationality, sees nothing supernatural. She simply observes it as a frail, spindly tree, noting, "with nothing of the magnificence of the broad-trunked peepul I'd seen in pictures, with their aerial roots, their great height" (para. 53). Her response suggests that she dismisses the mystical significance her father attaches to it, interpreting the tree merely as one that has failed to flourish in foreign soil. The father, however, remains consumed by his sense of guilt over his wife's death, interpreting the tree and its associations as a haunting presence seeking retribution even in England.

Yet, in this moment of heightened tension, the daughter too becomes unsettled. Although rational, she begins to share in the uncanny experience, perceiving spectral signs. In her narration, she describes how the night deepens, the air stirs, and she perceives a slender, outstretched figure extending its arms towards the house, accompanied by the echo of a voice that calls her name twice. She recalls stepping into the garden, feeling the dry grass beneath her feet as she moves towards the waiting tree. The father, visibly shaken, clutches her wrist, while she, in turn, warns him that the spirit "won't like it" if she opens the window—an exchange that unsettles them both. This scene underscores how Shamsie deliberately unsettles Western expectations by showing that even a seemingly rational, Westernised narrator may succumb to the power of ghostly narratives when continuously

exposed to them. Thus, the *churail* becomes a figure that traverses borders, transporting the haunting fears of Pakistan into the migrant space of England.

The narrator further entertains the possibility that the mysterious figure might not be her mother's spirit but her cousin Zainab, whose rebellion against patriarchal authority—particularly her uncle's restrictions—could symbolically position her as the one haunting him. She speculates that Zainab, aware of the myth that a *churail* calls out a man's name twice to threaten him, could be deliberately playing into this fear. However, she also concedes that what she perceives might not be reducible to myth alone. She reflects:

> Perhaps I would find my cousin Zainab hiding in the darkness. Perhaps I would find the real truth of the churail, a creature much older than the myths men wove around her, desperate to be the centre of her story. One step and then another and another. I stopped, sat on the grass, and hugged my legs to my chest, my face turned up to the sky. There was no rush. I would sit there awhile, and my father would stand and watch me while the echo of the churail's voice burrowed deep inside him, shaking every foundation. (para. 59)

The story concludes with this chilling ambiguity. Both the superstitious father and the rational daughter experience the spectral presence of the *churail*, revealing how cultural memory and haunting travel with the migrant, destabilising even those who believe themselves immune to superstition.

Conclusion

In short, Shamsie dramatizes the story of the *churail*, a South Asian folk tale, and represents it in such a way that people from Pakistan, especially those from cosmopolitan Karachi, are depicted as still believing in it even after relocating to London. This approach exemplifies re-orientalism or self-orientalism, as these tales are folkloric in origin but rarely believed by urban populations. Shamsie exaggerates these beliefs to resonate with Western readers who expect such an exoticised portrayal of South Asia and the East, aligning with observations made by Lau on Western perceptions of the East.

However, contrary to traditional Orientalist perspectives that portray Eastern people as uniformly irrational, Shamsie's characters—particularly the narrator and her cousin Zainab—are depicted as rational, Westernised individuals who laugh at the *churail* story, demonstrating re-orientalism. The author herself, being from Karachi, exaggerates the *churail* and connects it to the people of Karachi in the narrative, further illustrating self-orientalism, as she seeks to make the story appealing and exotic to a Western audience interested in such representations.

Moreover, to heighten the sense of exoticism, Shamsie subverts Western expectations by portraying a successful and assimilated businessman who still believes in the *churail* tale. In the conclusion of the story, even the rational narrator is affected by the supernatural events, suggesting that belief in such folklore is not limited to traditionally "superstitious" individuals. This narrative choice challenges Western assumptions that only "irrational" or unassimilated Easterners are susceptible to such beliefs. At the same time, Shamsie critiques the Western tendency to perceive the cultural and spiritual practices of Eastern migrants as threats, particularly in post-9/11 contexts. In this sense, Shamsie writes back to Western cultural discourse, which has long considered the bizarre beliefs of Oriental immigrants as a threat.

Thus, the story functions as a critique of both Eastern and Western perspectives. Shamsie demonstrates how Eastern cultural producers engage with the Orientalised image of the East, either by conforming to Western expectations, exaggerating them for effect, or challenging them through narrative subversion. *Churail* serves as a compelling example of

re-orientalism, illustrating how the diaspora negotiates the portrayal of the East while simultaneously writing back to Western audiences, a concept articulated by Lau.

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