
Multimodal Construction of Women's Spiritual Journey in Umera Ahmed's Peer-e-Kamil

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Abstract

This qualitative research project explores the representation of women's spiritual journeys in the novel *Peer-e-Kamil* through Gunther Kress's theoretical framework, which emphasizes the significance of social and cultural contexts in shaping representation and meaning. Analyzing the protagonist's spiritual experiences and growth, this study examines how societal norms and expectations of women's spirituality are reflected or challenged in Pakistani literature, a literary tradition shaped by complex cultural and historical contexts. This research is particularly relevant in the Pakistani context, where women's spiritual experiences are often marginalized or overlooked. Employing content analysis, this study provides insights into the portrayal of women's spirituality in Pakistani literature and its implications for readers and society, highlighting the importance of social and cultural contexts in shaping spiritual journeys. By exploring culture, and identity, this study contributes to the understanding of women's spiritual experiences and growth in literary representations.

Keywords: Spirituality, Representation of Women, Multimodality, Peer-e-Kamil, Pakistani Literature

1. Introduction

Spirituality has long occupied a central position in South Asian literature, where it is closely connected with questions of identity, morality, faith, and social belonging. In Pakistani fiction, spiritual experience frequently serves as a literary lens through which the tensions between religious belief, cultural expectations, and individual agency are explored. Despite the prominence of spirituality in literary discourse, women's spiritual experiences have often been represented through restrictive paradigms that associate female piety with patience, obedience, and moral conformity. Such representations tend to overlook the complexity of women's inner struggles and the dynamic processes through which they negotiate faith, identity, and personal transformation.

Within contemporary Pakistani literature, Umera Ahmad's *Peer-e-Kamil* occupies a distinctive position for its sustained engagement with themes of faith, repentance, and spiritual awakening. Rather than portraying spirituality as an inherited or predetermined condition, the novel presents it as an evolving process shaped by personal choices, moral reflection, lived experience, and interpersonal relationships. This transformation is most vividly embodied in the character of Imama Hashim, whose spiritual journey unfolds gradually through internal conflict, self-examination, symbolic encounters, and meaningful interactions with others. Her development demonstrates that spirituality emerges through continuous negotiation between the self, society, and the Divine rather than through passive acceptance of religious doctrine. Although *Peer-e-Kamil*

has attracted considerable scholarly attention for its religious, ethical, and social dimensions, relatively little research has examined the representation of women's spirituality as a dynamic process of meaning-making. Existing studies have predominantly concentrated on moral instruction, religious ideology, or gender roles, often interpreting spirituality as a fixed ethical outcome rather than an evolving experiential phenomenon. Consequently, the emotional tensions, uncertainties, and relational processes through which women's spiritual identities are constructed remain insufficiently explored. Likewise, literary elements such as dialogue, symbolic objects, and character interactions have generally been discussed independently rather than as interconnected semiotic resources that collectively shape spiritual meaning.

To address this gap, the present study investigates the representation of women's spirituality in *Peer-e-Kamil* through the lens of Gunther Kress's Multimodal Discourse Theory (MDT). Kress argues that meaning is produced not through language alone but through the interaction of multiple semiotic modes operating within particular social and cultural contexts. Applied to literary analysis, this perspective enables spirituality to be understood as a multimodal phenomenon emerging from the interplay of linguistic expression, symbolic representation, spatial settings, and interpersonal relationships. In *Peer-e-Kamil*, dialogues articulate Imama's internal reflections and moral reasoning, and symbolic objects—including the Kaaba, the Qur'an, and the veil—materialise stages of her spiritual transformation. At the same time, relationships with other characters position her journey within broader cultural, ethical, and religious frameworks. Examining these semiotic resources collectively offers a more comprehensive understanding of how women's spirituality is constructed and communicated throughout the narrative. Guided by this theoretical perspective, the study seeks to examine how multimodal resources represent women's spiritual journeys in *Peer-e-Kamil*, to explore the symbolic significance of material and religious objects in shaping Imama Hashim's evolving identity, and to investigate the contribution of dialogues and interpersonal interactions to her spiritual transformation. These objectives are addressed through the following research questions: In what ways does *Peer-e-Kamil* construct women's spirituality through multimodal discourse? How do symbolic resources and interpersonal interactions influence Imama Hashim's spiritual development and identity formation?

Methodologically, the research adopts a qualitative and interpretive design informed by the constructivist paradigm. Selected dialogues from the novel constitute the primary units of analysis because they most directly reveal Imama's spiritual reflections, ethical deliberations, and evolving understanding of faith. The analysis combines thematic coding with multimodal interpretation to examine how linguistic, symbolic, spatial, and interactional modes work together in producing spiritual meaning. Emerging themes are subsequently synthesised to connect individual textual episodes with wider cultural and religious contexts. Purposive sampling ensures that only those dialogues most relevant to Imama's spiritual transformation are included. At the same time, interpretations remain grounded in textual evidence and informed by the socio-cultural environment in which the novel is situated.

This study contributes to literary, cultural, and gender studies by extending multimodal discourse analysis to the exploration of spirituality in contemporary Pakistani fiction. Moving beyond conventional thematic and linguistic readings, it demonstrates how women's spiritual experiences are represented through the interaction of multiple semiotic modes that collectively construct meaning. In doing so, the study challenges reductive representations of female religiosity and reconceptualises spirituality as an active, relational, and interpretive process shaped by dialogue, symbolism, and social interaction. By focusing specifically on Imama Hashim's selected dialogues in the English translation of *Peer-e-Kamil*, the research provides a contextually grounded analysis while acknowledging that its findings remain limited to the textual representations examined. Nevertheless, the study offers a methodological contribution by illustrating the value of Multimodal Discourse Theory for literary scholarship and opens new avenues for investigating spirituality, gender, and meaning-making in South Asian literature.

2. Literature Review

Research on women's spirituality has become an important area within feminist literary criticism, exploring how faith, identity, agency, and transcendence are negotiated within gendered socio-religious contexts. In postcolonial societies, these experiences are further shaped by cultural, political, and linguistic forces (Boehmer (2009)). Within Pakistani literature, Umera Ahmad's *Peer-e-Kamil* (2004) presents a compelling portrayal of women's spiritual transformation through the journey of Imama Hashim, whose movement from inherited religiosity to conscious faith reflects moral reflection, ethical struggle, and personal growth. Existing scholarship has primarily examined the novel through themes of morality, religiosity, and gender (Tassadiq, Rizwan et al. (2025)), while paying limited attention to the multimodal construction of spirituality. This omission is significant because meaning is generated through the interaction of multiple semiotic resources rather than language alone (Kress (2009); Kress (2010)). Likewise, Halliday argues that meaning emerges from the interplay of different communicative modes (Halliday and meaning (1993)). A multimodal perspective therefore enables dialogue, symbolism, spatial settings, gestures, and interpersonal relationships to be understood as interconnected resources through which spiritual meaning is constructed.

Feminist theology provides an essential framework for understanding women's spirituality by challenging patriarchal representations of religious experience. Traditional theological paradigms have privileged rationality, transcendence, and asceticism while marginalising the emotional, embodied, and relational dimensions of women's lived experiences. As a result, women have often been portrayed either as symbols of purity or sources of moral temptation. Ruether (1998) argues that these binary constructions deny women's full humanity, while Saiving (1979) contends that women's spiritual struggles are characterised less by pride than by self-negation, trivialisation, and internalised self-sacrifice. Building on these critiques, feminist theologians reconceptualise spirituality as a dynamic process grounded in justice, embodiment, relationality, and lived experience (Harrington (1993); Christ (2003)). Intersectional and womanist scholars further demonstrate that spirituality is shaped by race, class, culture, and history. Delores Williams reinterprets survival and resistance as sacred acts (Clark (2012)), while bell hooks conceptualises spirituality as an ethical practice rooted in love, justice, and community (Biana 2020). Collectively, these perspectives establish spirituality as simultaneously personal, social, and political. Although feminist theology has significantly challenged patriarchal religious traditions, much of its early development remained rooted in Eurocentric and secular assumptions that often equate women's liberation with resistance to religious authority. Such approaches inadequately explain Muslim societies where religion continues to shape moral identity and everyday life. These limitations have encouraged the development of Islamic feminist scholarship, particularly through the work of Amina Wadud and Saba Mahmood. Wadud argues that the Qur'an recognises women and men as equal moral and spiritual beings, and that gender inequality results primarily from patriarchal interpretations rather than divine revelation (Wadud and family (2009)). She therefore frames Islamic feminism as an internal reform movement grounded in Qur'anic principles of justice, moral responsibility, and human dignity. Complementing this perspective, Mahmood (2005) challenges liberal assumptions by demonstrating that religious devotion may itself constitute a form of agency. Through embodied practices such as prayer, discipline, and ethical self-cultivation, submission to God becomes an active process of moral formation rather than passive obedience (Johnson and Fairweather (2017); Mahmood (2009)).

Together, Wadud and Mahmood provide a productive framework for interpreting Imama Hashim's spiritual development. Her transformation is neither passive submission nor rejection of religion but a gradual negotiation between faith, ethical responsibility, personal conviction, and social expectations. Rather than accepting inherited beliefs unquestioningly, she develops an authentic relationship with God through reflection, discipline, and conscious moral choice, illustrating how spirituality becomes a process of ethical self-formation. The relationship between spirituality and women's agency is equally evident in South Asian women's writing, where female authors have long explored faith, identity, and social authority through

women's lived experiences. Writers such as Ismat Chughtai, Qurratulain Hyder, and Attia Hosain portray spirituality as a dynamic and contested process rather than a fixed religious doctrine Khan (2008). Chughtai critiques religious and social hypocrisy, Hyder combines history and Sufi philosophy to depict spirituality as an evolving human quest Hyder (2024), while Hosain explores memory, displacement, and Muslim women's spiritual identity during Partition Hosain (2021). This literary tradition provides an important context for understanding *Peer-e-Kamil*, which similarly represents spirituality as a process of ethical negotiation, self-discovery, and relational transformation rather than ritual observance alone. Despite the growing body of scholarship on feminist spirituality, Islamic feminism, and South Asian women's writing, little research has examined how women's spiritual experiences are constructed through multimodal meaning-making. Existing studies of *Peer-e-Kamil* largely privilege thematic, ideological, or religious interpretations, overlooking the interaction of dialogue, gestures, symbolic objects, spatial settings, emotional expression, and interpersonal relationships. Addressing this gap, the present study employs Kress's Multimodal Discourse Theory to investigate how these semiotic resources collectively represent Imama Hashim's spiritual journey, thereby extending current scholarship on Pakistani literature, multimodality, and women's spirituality.

Pakistan's post-Partition women writers increasingly explored the intersections of religion, patriarchy, and political power, particularly during the Islamisation era of the 1980s. Writers such as Bano Qudsia, Kishwar Naheed, and Parveen Shakir used literature to negotiate women's identities within changing religious and social contexts Yaqin (2022). Naheed reinterprets religious symbolism to challenge patriarchal uses of the sacred without rejecting faith Qasim (2023), while Shakir presents spirituality through themes of love, loss, and feminine subjectivity, portraying religious experience as both personal and socially critical Peters (2016). Together, these writers demonstrate that women's spirituality in South Asian literature is a negotiation of identity, morality, and social expectations rather than a simple opposition between faith and resistance. Recent South Asian literary scholarship also recognises that spirituality is communicated through symbolism and aesthetic form. In *Aag Ka Darya*, Hyder employs recurring images of water and river crossings to represent spiritual transformation and philosophical inquiry Qasim (2023); Hyder (2024). Likewise, Durrani's *Blasphemy* exposes patriarchal misuse of religious authority, while Rehman's *Corona Lifestyle* (2020) situates spiritual inquiry within contemporary urban life. These studies suggest that women's spirituality is shaped through complex interactions between faith, society, and lived experience.

Research on Pakistani fiction further argues that women's identities are constructed through gendered power relations and discourse. Arshad's study of *In Other Rooms, Other Wonders* demonstrates how patriarchal narratives often deny women autonomous subjectivity Arshad, Qasim et al. (2024). Similarly, Faiz, Azhar, and Arshad (2021) show that identity is negotiated through dialogue, silence, and interaction rather than remaining fixed Faiz, Pervaiz et al. (2021). Within this literary tradition, *Peer-e-Kamil* presents Imama Hashim's spirituality as an active process of ethical reflection and self-formation, reflecting Saiving's concept of resistance to self-negation and Mahmood's notion of pious agency. This representation positions *Peer-e-Kamil* within the wider tradition of South Asian feminist writing, where faith is portrayed as a dynamic negotiation between personal conviction and communal authority. Ahmad depicts spirituality as gradual ethical transformation rather than passive obedience. Understanding this process requires a framework that extends beyond language alone. Multimodality provides such a perspective by explaining meaning through the interaction of language, imagery, typography, spatial organisation, and visual design Kress (2009). Originally developed in linguistics and semiotics, multimodal theory has increasingly informed literary studies by demonstrating that narrative meaning emerges through both verbal and material forms Rowsell (2013); Altmann, Bohrn et al. (2014).

The development of multimodal theory culminated in Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) through the work of Kress and van Leeuwen, who argued that visual and textual modes operate within socially and culturally organised systems of meaning Kress, Van Leeuwen et al. (1996). MDA examines how linguistic,

visual, spatial, and typographic resources interact to construct meaning, extending literary analysis beyond plot and character to include the communicative functions of textual design Kress and Bezemer (2023). Central to this framework is Gunther Kress's social semiotic model, which views communication as inherently multimodal and socially situated. Kress argues that each semiotic mode possesses distinct affordances, and meaning emerges through the interaction of semiotic resources within specific cultural contexts Kress (2009); Kress (2010). Typography, spatial organisation, and visual symbolism are therefore communicative resources rather than decorative features, shaping interpretation while also reflecting broader relations of culture and power Kress and Van Leeuwen (2020); Bezemer and Kress (2008); Milyakina (2018). Accordingly, literary scholarship increasingly recognises that narrative meaning is produced through the interaction of language, textual form, and visual organisation, particularly in visually complex works such as *House of Leaves*, *The Raw Shark Texts*, and *Persepolis* Emrich (2024); Chute (2008). Although *Peer-e-Kamil* has received little multimodal attention, this perspective offers an effective framework for analysing how symbols, spatial settings, and narrative organisation collectively construct Imama's spiritual transformation.

The significance of *Peer-e-Kamil* lies not only in its narrative but also in its formal construction. Imama's spiritual journey unfolds gradually through fragmented scenes, meaningful silences, and recurring symbols that encourage readers to experience rather than simply observe her transformation. Symbols, narrative pauses, and spatial settings function as multimodal resources that communicate inner struggle and ethical growth. Ahmed's use of italics to distinguish Qur'anic verses and interior monologues further layers spiritual consciousness, while symbolic spaces and visual fragmentation reinforce the uncertainty of moral transformation. In this way, spirituality is conveyed through narrative form as much as dialogue.

This approach resonates with Mary Daly's argument that reclaiming the sacred requires restoring women's voices Waslin (1998). Rather than relying on explicit ideological statements, Ahmed represents Imama's spiritual agency through symbolism, silence, typography, and narrative structure. Viewed through feminist theology and multimodal theory, *Peer-e-Kamil* presents spirituality as an embodied and ethically grounded process, demonstrating that women's spiritual transformation is communicated through the interaction of multiple semiotic modes rather than language alone. These multimodal choices enable Imama to reclaim sacred space on her own terms, presenting her spiritual journey as an expression of agency rather than passive devotion. By integrating narrative structure, symbolism, and visual form, *Peer-e-Kamil* demonstrates that faith and literary form work together to construct spiritual meaning. This illustrates how multimodal storytelling represents religious transformation with greater subtlety than conventional narrative alone. Existing research on South Asian women's fiction has primarily focused on narrative, sociopolitical contexts, and gender, while paying limited attention to the multimodal dimensions of literary texts (Lau, 2002). Although Mushtaq and Nayyer (2022) discuss morality and identity in Pakistani fiction, formal and semiotic features remain largely unexplored. Likewise, despite the extensive application of multimodal discourse theory to digital media (Jewitt, 2013), its use in Urdu prose fiction, particularly spiritual narratives, remains limited.

A similar gap exists between feminist theology and literary criticism. While Wadud (1999), Mahmood (2005), and Barlas (2002) have significantly advanced Islamic feminist thought, their theories have rarely been applied to literary texts. Kanwal (2015) argues that Muslim women's spirituality is often reduced to a sociological abstraction, overlooking the embodied dimensions of faith and resistance. Likewise, the feminist theological perspectives of Christ (1987) and Saiving (1979) have seldom informed analyses of contemporary Islamic fiction (Sadaf & Kanwal, 2023). This disciplinary separation limits understanding of how spiritual agency is aesthetically represented. These gaps are particularly evident in scholarship on *Peer-e-Kamil*. Despite its popularity, the novel is generally examined for its moral, romantic, or religious themes rather than its multimodal construction. Raza (2012) notes that Ahmed creates "spiritual geographies in which women reassert moral authorship through lived rather than dogmatised piety" (Ahmed, Morey et al.,

2012), yet no comprehensive study has integrated multimodal discourse, semiotics, and feminist theology to explain how the novel constructs spiritual meaning through both narrative and form. Another limitation is the absence of an intersectional multimodal perspective. Although Crenshaw (1991, 2013) demonstrates that intersecting identities shape lived experience, these insights have rarely been applied to literary representations of Islamic spirituality. Imama's spiritual journey is influenced by gender, class, and sectarian identity, but these intersections remain underexplored. Similarly, while Akbar and Saeed (2021) discuss gendered piety, they do not examine the multimodal techniques through which spiritual agency is represented (Syed, 2024). Their observation that Imama reclaims space, silence, and scripture (Akbar & Saeed, 2021, p. 73) highlights the need for an integrated framework combining intersectionality, feminist theology, and multimodal discourse. Addressing these gaps, the present study draws on Valerie Saiving, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Amina Wadud, Saba Mahmood, Gunther Kress, and Gillian Rose to argue that Imama's spiritual transformation is communicated through narrative events as well as spatial movement, symbolism, typography, silence, and composition. These multimodal resources shape readers' understanding of ethical renewal and female agency, supporting Rose's (2012) view of subjectivity as visually and symbolically constructed and Kress's (2010) conception of meaning as a multimodal ensemble. Ahmed's portrayal of spirituality also reflects Mahmood's (2005) concept of piety as ethical self-formation and Wadud's (1999) emphasis on women's engagement with the sacred through lived experience. By addressing the absence of multimodal feminist readings of *Peer-e-Kamil*, this study establishes its originality and contributes an interdisciplinary framework for analysing women's spirituality through multimodal discourse, feminist theology, and Islamic literary studies, thereby expanding scholarship on women's religiosity, cultural identity, and narrative form in the Global South.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretative research methodology informed by Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) to examine the representation of women's spiritual experience in Umera Ahmed's *Peer-e-Kamil*. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the study seeks to interpret meanings embedded within the narrative rather than quantify textual features. It enables an in-depth exploration of how Imama Hashim's spiritual transformation is constructed through language, symbolism, imagery, narrative structure, and character interactions. The study is situated within the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm, which assumes that meaning is socially and culturally constructed through the interaction between the text, its socio-cultural context, and the reader. This perspective is particularly appropriate for examining spirituality, as spiritual experience is subjective, context-dependent, and shaped by cultural and religious values. Accordingly, Imama's journey is interpreted not only as an individual process of transformation but also as a culturally embedded representation of faith, morality, gender, and identity within the Pakistani Muslim context. The study is theoretically grounded in Gunther Kress's Multimodal Discourse Theory (2010), which conceptualises meaning as the product of multiple interacting semiotic resources rather than language alone. From this perspective, *Peer-e-Kamil* is analysed as a multimodal literary text in which dialogues, narrative descriptions, recurring symbols, religious imagery, silence, and interpersonal interactions collectively represent the protagonist's spiritual journey. This framework enables the analysis to move beyond purely linguistic interpretation by examining how linguistic, symbolic, and interactional resources work together to construct meanings of spirituality, identity, and transformation. The primary data consist of the English translation of *Peer-e-Kamil*, translated by Umera Ahmed and published by Ferozsons Pvt. Ltd. The English edition is selected because it preserves the author's narrative style, symbolism, and thematic depth while making the text accessible to a wider academic readership. Data are collected through purposive sampling, whereby textual extracts are selected for their relevance to the representation of Imama Hashim's spiritual development. The selected passages include narrative descriptions, dialogues, internal monologues, recurring religious imagery, symbolic objects, and significant interactions with other characters, particularly

Salar. Preference is given to episodes depicting spiritual conflict, moral reflection, religious awakening, and personal transformation, as these constitute the principal stages of the protagonist's spiritual development. The selected extracts are analysed using Multimodal Discourse Analysis informed by Kress's social semiotic framework and supported by qualitative thematic analysis. The analytical process begins with repeated close readings of the selected passages to identify recurring patterns and multimodal resources associated with spirituality. The data are then coded inductively to generate themes related to spiritual awakening, inner conflict, divine guidance, moral transformation, faith, and identity. These themes subsequently guide the multimodal analysis, in which the textual data are organised into three interrelated analytical dimensions: linguistic, symbolic, and interactional. The linguistic dimension examines dialogues, narrative descriptions, and internal monologues that reveal Imama's evolving spiritual consciousness. The symbolic dimension focuses on recurring cultural and religious symbols—including the Qur'an, the white *dupatta*, letters, silence, and sacred spaces—to explore how they signify faith, repentance, purity, and spiritual transformation. The interactional dimension investigates interpersonal relationships, particularly those between Imama and Salar, to examine how dialogue, emotional conflict, moral negotiation, and interpersonal communication contribute to the protagonist's spiritual awakening. Each selected passage is interpreted within its narrative, cultural, and religious context to examine how these multimodal resources interact to construct spiritual meaning. Rather than analysing linguistic, symbolic, and interactional features independently, the study emphasises their interdependence in representing women's spirituality. The findings from thematic coding and multimodal analysis are synthesised to explain how *Peer-e-Kamil* constructs women's spiritual experience through the coordinated use of multiple semiotic resources. This integrated methodological framework provides a coherent basis for examining the novel as a culturally situated multimodal text and for producing a nuanced interpretation of spirituality, womanhood, and identity in contemporary Pakistani literature.

4. Analysis

This chapter presents the analysis of selected data from the English translation of Ahmed's *Peer-e-Kamil*, focusing on the multimodal representation of Imama Hashim's spiritual journey. Guided by Gunther Kress's Multimodal Discourse Theory (2010), the analysis examines how dialogue, silence, emotional expression, symbolic objects, spatial positioning, and interpersonal interaction collectively construct women's spiritual experience. Rather than portraying spirituality as a fixed religious condition, the novel represents it as a gradual process of moral reflection, self-discovery, and relational negotiation. The selected dialogues were chosen for their multimodal significance and their relevance to the study's research questions. Instead of following the chronological sequence of the narrative, the discussion is organised thematically to highlight recurring patterns of spiritual conflict, transformation, and ethical agency.

This chapter addresses the following research questions:

Q1: In what ways does *Peer-e-Kamil* construct women's spirituality through multimodal discourse?

Q2: How do symbolic resources and interpersonal interactions influence Imama Hashim's spiritual development and identity formation?

The findings are organised into thematic sections beginning with Imama's early spiritual conflict and identity formation.

Early Spiritual Conflict and Identity Formation

Imama Hashim's spiritual journey begins with uncertainty about religious identity, where inherited beliefs conflict with personal inquiry and social expectations. During this stage, spirituality is characterised by doubt, emotional vulnerability, and moral questioning rather than certainty. The selected dialogues demonstrate that her emerging faith develops through critical reflection while remaining constrained by familial authority and sectarian expectations.

Imama's earliest spiritual conflict appears in her questioning of religious identity:

"Am I not a Muslim? Does my closest friend too not accept me as a Muslim?"

The interrogative structure and implied silence reveal identity insecurity shaped by social exclusion. Rather than expressing theological disagreement, the dialogue reflects the emotional consequences of sectarian rejection and illustrates how personal faith becomes intertwined with interpersonal acceptance.

Her intellectual engagement with religion becomes evident through independent reading:

"I have gone through so many translations and interpretations of the Quran... It is amazing there's no mention of our sect in any one of them."

This moment marks the beginning of cognitive and ethical inquiry. Reading functions as more than an individual activity; it symbolises a movement from inherited belief towards personal understanding, suggesting that spiritual transformation begins through reflection rather than unquestioned acceptance.

The relational environment further intensifies this conflict:

What difference does it make when you say I'm not part of your sect? You treat me as non-Islam.

Are you in your right mind? We have no need of such things. (Waseem)

You were born with a silver spoon... because of this prophet whose infallibility you're questioning. (Hashim Mubeen)

Collectively, these interactions demonstrate how peer judgement and patriarchal authority regulate Imama's spiritual inquiry. Religious questioning is portrayed as socially unacceptable, positioning her search for truth within relationships marked by criticism, exclusion, and power.

Non-verbal communication reinforces this early struggle:

She lowered her eyes, the silence heavier than words. Her lips trembled, but she said nothing.

Silence becomes an important multimodal resource through which emotional conflict and restrained resistance are communicated. Rather than indicating passive submission, her bodily responses reflect an inward negotiation between obedience and personal conviction.

Similarly, paternal authority explicitly associates religious inquiry with social disobedience:

Religion is what our elders have followed, Imama. Questioning it is questioning your own roots.

The statement frames inherited belief as unquestionable tradition, reinforcing the tension between collective authority and individual moral agency that characterises Imama's early spiritual development.

Following this period of uncertainty, Imama gradually develops an autonomous understanding of faith.

I know I cannot blindly follow what I have been told. I must understand it for myself first.

I cannot let opinions of others dictate my understanding of God; my actions must reflect sincerity, not approval.

Even if following the truth means standing alone, then I am prepared for it.

Unlike the earlier interrogatives, these declarative statements express ethical certainty and independent reasoning. The shift from questioning to affirmation illustrates the emergence of spiritual agency grounded in personal conviction rather than external approval. Emotional restraint, confidence, and moral clarity now operate together to represent an integrated spiritual identity.

This transformation culminates in Imama's reflection:

Guidance helps, but understanding must come from within; I must reconcile what I learn with what my heart accepts.

The statement synthesises religious knowledge with personal experience, demonstrating that spiritual maturity in the novel depends upon the integration of cognition, ethical reasoning, and inward conviction rather than unquestioning conformity.

Symbolic Objects and Sacred Spaces in Imama's Spiritual Growth

The analysis demonstrates that symbolic objects and sacred spaces function as active mediators of Imama's spiritual development rather than passive religious artefacts. Their meanings evolve alongside her

transformation, reflecting the movement from externally regulated belief towards internally grounded faith. Imama's early engagement with religious texts is shaped by hesitation and external control.

What's this, Imama? It's the interpretation of the Holy Quran.

The interaction introduces the Qur'an as a contested symbolic object. Rather than providing immediate spiritual certainty, religious knowledge becomes associated with surveillance and restriction, reflecting the influence of patriarchal authority on personal inquiry.

This restriction becomes more explicit through paternal intervention:

You'll return these books tomorrow... or I'll throw them out!

The dialogue illustrates how access to religious interpretation is regulated through familial authority. Consequently, the Qur'an initially functions as a site of ideological conflict rather than spiritual empowerment.

Similarly, *"She spread the mat uncertainly, wondering if her prayers would be accepted"*.

The prayer mat symbolises hesitant participation in religious practice. Gestural uncertainty and emotional vulnerability reveal that ritual remains shaped by self-doubt and external judgement rather than inner assurance.

Following Imama's spiritual awakening, these symbolic objects acquire new meanings.

"I must read these words carefully, not just recite; each verse must touch my understanding, not just my lips".

The Qur'an becomes a source of reflective understanding rather than ritual obligation. The emphasis on comprehension signals the integration of intellectual inquiry with ethical commitment.

Likewise, *"She laid the mat with intention, every movement a preparation for sincere connection"*.

Prayer is transformed from habitual performance into conscious spiritual practice. Bodily movement, emotional composure, and religious intention operate together to represent embodied spiritual agency.

The culmination of this transformation occurs during pilgrimage:

"Standing before the Kaaba, she realized that love and devotion required sincerity, not mere adherence to tradition".

The Kaaba symbolises the completion of Imama's spiritual journey, where faith is grounded in sincerity, ethical understanding, and personal conviction rather than inherited conformity.

Sacred spaces undergo a similar transformation throughout the narrative.

During the pre-transformation stage,

The mosque was quiet, yet she felt exposed, as if every glance judged her sincerity.

Although physically sacred, the mosque is experienced as a socially regulated space where religious practice is overshadowed by anxiety and perceived judgement.

Likewise, *"Her prostrations were mechanical, her thoughts elsewhere, distracted by doubt and fear"*.

The separation between ritual movement and spiritual intention reflects the incompleteness of her early religious experience.

Following her transformation,

She knelt on the mat, the mosque silent around her, and each bow and prostration felt like a conscious dialogue with God.

Prayer becomes an intentional act of communication rather than obligation. The mosque now functions as a space of reflection, where bodily practice and inner conviction are fully integrated.

Finally,

Standing before the Kaaba, she realized that love and devotion required sincerity, not mere adherence to tradition.

The Kaaba represents the highest expression of spiritual integration, where sacred space, ethical reasoning, and embodied faith converge to affirm Imama's mature religious identity.

Role of Character Interactions in Shaping Imama Hashim's Spiritual Journey

Character interactions constitute an important dimension of Imama's spiritual development. Her transformation is shaped through continuous dialogue, disagreement, and emotional negotiation with family members and peers. These interactions demonstrate how spiritual agency evolves from externally constrained obedience to ethical independence.

Am I not a Muslim? Does my closest friend too not accept me as a Muslim?

This interaction illustrates how peer relationships destabilise Imama's religious identity. The unanswered question reflects emotional vulnerability and reveals that her early spiritual conflict is primarily internalised. Similarly, *What difference does it make when you say I'm not part of your sect? You treat me as non-Islam; I am just giving my example differently.*

Although Imama begins to defend her beliefs, her response remains cautious and reactive. The dialogue reflects emerging moral awareness while demonstrating that her agency is still constrained by social judgement.

Patriarchal authority becomes more explicit through Waseem's response:

Are you in your right mind? We have no need of such things.

This dismissal suppresses independent religious inquiry and reinforces existing power structures. Imama's silence in response highlights how interpersonal authority initially restricts spiritual expression while simultaneously motivating her search for authentic understanding.

Role of Character Interactions in Shaping Imama Hashim's Spiritual Journey

This section addresses the second research question by examining how interpersonal relationships contribute to Imama Hashim's spiritual development. The findings indicate that spirituality in *Peer-e-Kamil* evolves through dialogue, emotional negotiation, and relational conflict rather than through isolated personal reflection. Character interactions function as multimodal resources that either constrain or facilitate Imama's moral agency. The contrast between the pre- and post-transformation phases demonstrates a clear movement from externally regulated faith to internally grounded spiritual conviction.

"Am I not a Muslim? Does my closest friend too not accept me as a Muslim?"

This question reflects the beginning of Imama's spiritual crisis, where religious identity is shaped by social judgement rather than personal conviction. The interrogative structure and implied silence communicate emotional vulnerability, illustrating how peer relationships intensify her uncertainty and weaken her sense of belonging.

"What difference does it make when you say I'm not part of your sect? You treat me as non-Islam."

This exchange represents Imama's first attempt to defend her beliefs. Although she begins to articulate an independent position, her response remains largely defensive, indicating that her spiritual agency is still constrained by sectarian exclusion and interpersonal pressure.

"Are you in your right mind? We have no need of such things."

Waseem's dismissal demonstrates how patriarchal authority discourages religious inquiry. Rather than encouraging reflection, the interaction positions questioning as unacceptable, reinforcing Imama's dependence upon external authority while simultaneously motivating her search for religious understanding.

"You were born with a silver spoon... because of this prophet whose infallibility you're questioning."

"She lowered her eyes, the silence heavier than words. Her lips trembled, but she said nothing."

These passages represent the strongest expression of patriarchal control within the novel. Hashim Mubeen equates spiritual questioning with moral disobedience, while Imama's silence functions as an embodied expression of fear, restraint, and internal resistance. Instead of passive submission, silence becomes a multimodal indicator of unresolved ethical conflict.

"I'm telling you that in future I will not read anything you don't want me to. I will not say anything you disapprove of. Baba, please!"

Imama's emotional pleading illustrates the extent to which paternal authority regulates her spiritual exploration. Her repeated appeals reveal that moral judgement continues to be mediated through family approval rather than independent conviction.

"I know I cannot blindly follow what I have been told. I must understand it for myself first."

This statement marks a decisive shift from dependence to moral autonomy. Unlike earlier defensive responses, Imama now presents faith as a conscious process of understanding rather than inherited acceptance.

"Even if they label me wrongly, I will not compromise my principles for the sake of acceptance."

Here, social approval no longer determines spiritual identity. The declarative tone reflects ethical confidence, demonstrating that personal conviction has replaced external validation as the basis of religious commitment.

"I know a lot, Baba. I'm twenty years old; I don't have to be led by you..."

"Marriage is a lifetime commitment. I want to marry of my own choice."

"Why should I go to hell for their beliefs or abandon my faith for their sake?"

These interactions illustrate the culmination of Imama's spiritual independence. She challenges paternal authority calmly and rationally, replacing fear with ethical reasoning. Her confidence reflects the integration of religious understanding, moral responsibility, and personal agency.

"There was a steadiness in her that unsettled him."

"You have something I have been searching for all my life—certainty."

"For the first time, their prayers carried the same weight."

The later interactions demonstrate that Imama's transformation also influences those around her. Her composure and ethical consistency become multimodal expressions of spiritual authority, particularly in her relationship with Salar. Shared prayer symbolises mutual spiritual alignment, suggesting that spirituality in the novel ultimately develops through reciprocal relationships rather than individual experience.

Interconnected Spiritual Journeys of Imama Hashim and Salar Sikander

The relationship between Imama and Salar demonstrates that spiritual transformation in *Peer-e-Kamil* is relational rather than individual. Although both characters begin with different forms of incompleteness, their interactions gradually produce mutual moral and spiritual growth.

"Despite having everything, he felt as though something essential was missing."

Salar's dissatisfaction establishes the emotional foundation of his later transformation. Material success fails to provide fulfilment, leaving him receptive to a different understanding of purpose and faith.

"I do not know if I can trust my feelings; everything feels confusing."

At the same time, Imama continues to struggle with religious uncertainty. While Salar experiences existential emptiness, Imama confronts moral confusion, creating parallel spiritual trajectories that later converge.

Transitional Stage

"There was a steadiness in her that unsettled him."

This moment marks the turning point in their relationship. Rather than persuading Salar through explicit religious instruction, Imama influences him through emotional composure, ethical consistency, and embodied faith. Her transformation becomes visible through behaviour rather than argument.

"You have something I have been searching for all my life—certainty."

Salar's acknowledgement confirms Imama's emergence as a moral reference point. Her spirituality is recognised not because of religious authority but because of her ethical stability and personal integrity.

"For the first time, their prayers carried the same weight."

Shared worship symbolises the completion of both spiritual journeys. Prayer becomes a multimodal

expression of mutual belief, emotional harmony, and ethical alignment, demonstrating that spiritual growth ultimately develops through reciprocal relationships.

The findings provide clear answers to the two research questions. First, *Peer-e-Kamil* constructs women's spirituality through a multimodal framework in which language, silence, gestures, emotional expression, symbolism, and spatial representation interact to produce spiritual meaning. Imama Hashim's journey evolves from uncertainty and dependence to ethical confidence and religious conviction, demonstrating that spirituality is represented as a dynamic and transformative process rather than a fixed state. Through dialogue, embodied actions, and symbolic experiences, the novel portrays spiritual growth as an integration of cognitive, emotional, ethical, and relational dimensions.

Second, symbolic resources and interpersonal interactions play a crucial role in shaping Imama's spiritual development and identity formation. Symbolic objects and sacred spaces, such as the Qur'an, prayer mat, and Kaaba, function as mediators of reflection, self-discovery, and moral commitment, gradually transforming from markers of inherited religiosity into sources of internalised faith. At the same time, relationships with family, peers, and Salar Sikander significantly influence her spiritual trajectory. While early interactions are characterised by patriarchal authority, social pressure, and sectarian constraints, later relationships affirm her ethical autonomy and spiritual maturity. Together, these symbolic and relational influences demonstrate that spiritual identity in *Peer-e-Kamil* is constructed through continuous engagement with both sacred resources and social relationships.

The findings therefore suggest that women's spirituality in *Peer-e-Kamil* is simultaneously personal, relational, and culturally situated.

Presentation of Findings

The analysis demonstrates that women's spirituality in *Peer-e-Kamil* is represented as a gradual multimodal process shaped by language, symbolism, interpersonal relationships, and religious experience. Rather than portraying spiritual transformation as a sudden event, the novel presents it as a continuous movement from uncertainty to ethical and spiritual maturity.

Three major patterns emerge from the findings. First, multimodal resources—including dialogue, silence, emotional expression, gesture, and narrative description—collectively construct Imama's evolving spiritual identity. Second, symbolic objects and sacred spaces facilitate the transition from externally regulated religiosity to consciously chosen faith by supporting reflection, repentance, and identity formation. Third, character interactions provide the relational context through which spiritual agency develops, with family relationships initially constraining Imama's autonomy before later interactions, particularly with Salar, reinforce ethical confidence and mutual spiritual growth.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that *Peer-e-Kamil* represents women's spirituality as a dynamic, relational, and multimodal process rather than a fixed state of religious devotion. Imama Hashim's journey illustrates how spiritual identity develops gradually through dialogue, silence, symbolic engagement, emotional experience, interpersonal relationships, and ethical reflection. These findings extend Kress's Multimodal Discourse Theory by showing that literary representations of spirituality are constructed through the interaction of multiple semiotic resources rather than language alone. Spiritual growth is therefore presented as an embodied process in which cognition, emotion, gesture, symbolism, and spatial experience collectively contribute to meaning-making. The analysis also confirms that symbolic objects and sacred spaces function as active mediators of spiritual transformation. Objects such as the Qur'an, the prayer mat, and the Kaaba evolve from symbols associated with uncertainty and external authority into resources that support personal understanding, ethical reasoning, and religious commitment. Likewise, sacred spaces gradually shift from sites of social scrutiny to spaces of inner reflection and spiritual certainty. These

findings suggest that spirituality in *Peer-e-Kamil* is represented through continuous interaction between external religious symbols and internal moral consciousness.

Character relationships further demonstrate that spiritual development is socially mediated rather than individually constructed. Early interactions with family members and peers restrict Imama's agency through patriarchal authority, sectarian pressure, and emotional control. However, as her spiritual confidence develops, these relationships gradually change. Her ethical clarity and emotional composure ultimately influence others, particularly Salar Sikander, whose own spiritual awakening emerges through sustained interaction with Imama. The novel therefore presents spirituality as reciprocal and relational, where personal transformation also becomes a catalyst for the transformation of others. These findings correspond with feminist scholarship that views women's spirituality as relational, ethical, and socially situated, while also extending existing research through a multimodal perspective. Previous studies have primarily examined religious themes, gender representation, or narrative structure, whereas the present study demonstrates how multiple semiotic resources jointly construct spiritual meaning. By integrating multimodal discourse analysis with feminist literary criticism, the study offers a more comprehensive framework for understanding the representation of women's spiritual agency in South Asian fiction. The study also has methodological implications. It demonstrates that Multimodal Discourse Analysis can be effectively applied to literary texts, allowing researchers to examine how verbal and non-verbal semiotic resources interact in the construction of meaning. This approach may be extended to other South Asian novels, comparative literary studies, and interdisciplinary research involving literature, religion, cultural studies, and gender studies. Future research may further investigate multimodal representations of spirituality across different authors, languages, literary genres, or visual adaptations such as film and television. Reader-response studies may also provide valuable insights into how audiences interpret multimodal representations of female spirituality and ethical agency.

Despite these contributions, several limitations should be acknowledged. The study focuses on a single English translation of *Peer-e-Kamil*, which limits the generalisability of its findings to other literary texts and may not fully capture the nuances of the original Urdu version. Furthermore, multimodal interpretation of literary description inevitably involves a degree of analytical subjectivity because gestures, emotions, and spatial meanings are inferred from textual representation rather than directly observed. Nevertheless, the systematic application of Kress's theoretical framework provides methodological consistency and offers a useful model for future literary research. Overall, this study demonstrates that *Peer-e-Kamil* constructs women's spirituality as an evolving process shaped by multimodal meaning-making, symbolic engagement, and interpersonal relationships. Imama Hashim's movement from uncertainty to ethical conviction illustrates that spiritual transformation is gradual, relational, and culturally situated rather than instantaneous or purely individual. By combining Multimodal Discourse Theory with feminist literary perspectives, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of female spirituality in Pakistani literature and highlights the value of multimodal approaches for future literary and discourse-based research.

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