

## **Are Afghan Women More Polite than Men: Insights from “A Thousand Splendid Suns”**

**Mujtaba Jamal,  
Mangatur Nababan,  
Riyadi Santosa,  
Djatmika**

Sebelas Maret University,  
Jalan Ir. Sutami 36 Kentingan, Jebres, Surakarta, Jawa Tengah. Indonesia  
[mujtabajamal2014@gmail.com](mailto:mujtabajamal2014@gmail.com)

### **ABSTRACT**

The novel “A Thousand Splendid Suns” is written by Khalid Hosseini, an Afghan American writer, about the lives of Afghans in Afghanistan. Considering the novel as a social semiotic, this paper intends to analyze the politeness strategies used by the two main characters: Mariam, the female protagonist, and Rasheed the male antagonist to conclude whether the female character is more polite or the male character. This paper is qualitative research, and it uses the theoretical framework of Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson. The result of the paper indicates that both the characters used bald on record dominantly followed by positive politeness, negative politeness, and off record; also, the result indicates that women are more polite than men in the novel. It is because the female character used more off record and negative politeness than the male character. This paper adds to our knowledge of how the female and male characters are portrayed in the novel A Thousand Splendid Suns, and it also suggests that future researchers conduct ethnographic research to conclude about the politeness of the male and female in Afghan Society itself.

**Keywords:** Afghan women and men, politeness, characterization

### **INTRODUCTION**

The power relationship between men and women has always been a controversial topic in the world; specifically, when the concept of feminism has come into existence. The term “feminism” refers to various sociopolitical movements and ideas that seek to define and promote gender equality in terms of politics, economy, individual, and society. According to feminism, women are treated unfairly and male viewpoints are valued more highly in society (Gamble, 2004). The struggle against gender stereotypes and the enhancement of women's educational, professional, and

interpersonal opportunities and outcomes are some of the efforts being made to change this.

These efforts to change the double standard situation have not stayed in the European and American countries but have also traveled to the Asian countries including Afghanistan. It is because in Afghanistan also, there are double standards for women and men. Men can have all the social, political, and cultural rights and access whereas women cannot have such rights. This situation is evident from the work of authors writing non-fictional and fictional books. Among the many, the two books could be pointed at. The first book is written by Nordberg (2014). He writes on page 67 of her book *The Underground Girls of Kabul: The Hidden Lives of Afghan Girls Disguised as Boys* about "bacha posh," a colloquial Dari phrase meaning "dressed like a boy." She describes the life of Afghan girls who were subjected to maltreatment at home, forced marriage, honor killings, divorce, and female genital mutilation. Likewise, Afghan American novelist Khalid Hosseini provided insights into the lives of Afghan women in Afghanistan in his novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns*.

*A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Hosseini's novel, became very popular and has been published multiple times in different countries due to its story about the lives of women and men in Afghanistan; and also, many researchers have investigated this novel from various perspectives (Budi Setiawan, 2020; Gordan & Almutairi, 2013; Istikomah, 2015; Khan, 2017; Mansourabadi & Karimnia, 2013; Yeasmin, 2020). Setiawan focused on the worldview of Khalid Hosseini in the novel and found out three problems that exist in Afghanistan community: education system, marriage, and domestic violence. Gordan and Almutairi focused on the female level of resistance through the viewpoint of post-colonialism and feminism, and the result shows that the women in the novel are women of resistance. Istikomah focused on the kinds of gender discrimination and the attitudes of women towards gender discrimination. He found out that there are types of violence such as sexual, psychological, and physical violence, stereotypes that women are submissive and foolish, and marginalization from health and educational facilities. Also, he found out that women have two types of attitudes in the novel. Nana does not show any resistance whereas Mariam and Laila show resistance through escaping from Kabul, fighting Rasheed, and using education to end discrimination. Khan studied Khalid Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* for its portrayal of Afghan women and offer a feminist critique. Second, he investigated whether Hosseini's depictions of Afghan women aligned with popular stereotypes. Mansourabadi looked at the ideological differences between Hosseini's novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and its two Persian translations, by Ganji and Soleimani and Ghebrai. The results of chi-square revealed that there were no ideological difference between the source text and its two translations. Moreover, the translators selected similar vocabularies for representing the ideology of the origin. Yeasmin focuses on the documentation of the cultural, social, and political

aspects of Afghan history in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* as a result she shows that the women resist the oppressive edicts of the country, demonstrate the power of womanhood, and successfully achieve self-values.

Nonetheless, the novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* was studied from various angles, no researcher has ever looked at the politeness strategy of the male and female characters. Investigation of politeness is important since it is attached to the power dynamic and it also indicates the relationship between the interlocutors. Therefore, this paper aims to look at the politeness strategies of the two main characters Mariam, the female character, and Rasheed, the male character, and conclude whether the female character is more polite or the male character.

## **METHOD**

According to Creswell & Creswell (2017) and Santosa (2021), there are various approaches to take in qualitative research such as grounded theory, phenomenological research, narrative research, and case study. This research takes a case study approach. According to Merriam (1988) a case is a 'bounded system' (p. 9), or a defined individual or entity that a researcher wishes to explore. (Yin, 2009) classifies case studies into two designs: single-case design and multiple-case design. For him, a single-case design is analogous to one experiment and a multiple-case design is analogous to more than one experiment. He further describes each case design could be either holistic or embedded depending on the unit of analysis. In a single holistic case design, the analysis is done on a single case with one unit of analysis, and in a single embedded case design, the analysis is done on a single case with multiple units of analysis. Based on the above clarification, this study is a single-embedded case study design.

The research location for this research is the novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* written by Hosseini (2009) about the life of a family in Afghanistan. The data is collected through document analysis and validated by the focused group discussion (FGD).

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

Mariam is one of the main characters in the novel '*A Thousand Splendid Suns*' whose story is written by Khalid Hussein from her early childhood to her death. During her life, she experienced a great extent of ups and downs such as being born as an illegitimate child, getting forced married, having miscarriages, and being ill-treated by Rasheed. On the other hand, Rasheed is the opposing character originally from the Kandahar province of Afghanistan and lives in Kabul. He married Mariam and brought her to Kabul and they lived together. The ups and downs of their life led them to the production of various politeness strategies: bald on record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off record.

Table 1:  
 The Politeness Strategy of Mariam and Rasheed (The female Protagonist  
 and the Male protagonist)

Number	Politeness strategy	Female Protagonist		Male Antagonist	
		Data	Percentage	Data	Percentage
1	Bald on Record	121	66,85%	124	68,89%
2	Positive Politeness	40	22,10%	47	26,11%
3	Negative Politeness	12	6,63%	6	3,33%
4	Off Record	8	4,42%	3	1,67%
Total		181	100,00%	180	100,00%

Table 1 above indicates the politeness strategy of Mariam, the female protagonist, and Rasheed, the male antagonist. For Mariam, from the total of 181 utterances, 121 data (66,85%) were classified as bald on record, 40 data (22,10%) as positive politeness, 12 data (6,63%) as negative politeness, and 8 data (4,42%) as off record. For Rasheed, from the total of 180 data, 124 data (68,89%) are classified as bald on record, 47 data (26,11%) as positive politeness, 6 data (3,33%) as negative politeness, and 3 data (1,67%) as off record.

Table 1 also indicates that the most dominant strategy used by the female character and the male character is bald on record followed by positive politeness, negative politeness, and off record. The following are some examples of the politeness strategies used by them.

### **Bald on record**

Bald on record is the strategy used to communicate the message clearly and unambiguously, and it does not include any politeness marker. According to Brown et al. (1987), it resembles the cooperative principle of Grice (1975). The examples are as follows:

#### **Example 1**

Datum: F/19

"I can't pay you. I don't have any money."

In this example, Mariam was promised by his father to take her to his cinema to watch a movie along with her brothers and sisters, but Jalil Khan, his father, broke the promise and did not show up. Hence, Mariam went to the city of Herat leaving her mother to find Jalil Khan in his house. On the way, she asked a stranger having a horse-drawn gari to show her Jalil Khan's house. He knew his house and asked Mariam to climb on. Then Mariam said she could not pay and did not have money. In this example, there is no politeness marker; hence, it is classified as bald on record.

#### **Example 2**

Datum F/020

"I'm here to see Jalil Khan. I'm Mariam. His daughter."

In the above example, Mariam knocked on the door of Jalil Khan's house, and his driver opened the door. she introduced herself to the driver. Since there is no politeness marker found, the strategy is classified as bald on record.

Example 3

Datum F/036

"You don't need excuses. Not you."

In the above example, After Mariam's mother's death, she moved to his father's house, Jalil Khan, and Mullah Faizullah, who was the preacher in the village and had a close relationship with Mariam and taught her Qura'an came to Jalil's house to visit her. He said "I confess, then. I've been found out. But I can think of worse excuses to visit you." Then she said he did not need any excuses for visiting. The above example was classified as bald on record because there was no politeness marker.

Example 4:

datum M/05

"What's this crying about?"

In this example, Mariam arrived in Kabul at Rasheed's house, and she remembered her house in Herat, her mother, Mullah Faizuallh. Therefore, she started crying. Rasheed asked her "What's this crying about?" crossly. Hence, there is no politeness marker, this datum is classified as bald on record.

Example 5:

Datum M/010

"I won't take that personally. This time."

In this example, when Mariam arrived in Kabul with Rasheed. Mariam missing her home in Herat said to Rasheed that she wanted to go back. Rasheed did not like her saying and directly stated "I won't take that personally. This time." This datum is classified as bald on record because there is no politeness marker.

Example 6:

Datum M/041

"I think it's a boy. Yes. A boy.

In this example, Mariam is pregnant and Rasheed says "I think it's a boy. Yes. A boy. This datum is classified as bald on record because there is no politeness marker found in the utterance.

### **Positive politeness**

Positive politeness is defined as a redressive verbal act that is orientated toward the positive face of the hearer, and it is an approach-based strategy (Brown et al., 1987). The following are some examples of the positive politeness used by Mariam.

Example 1

Datum: F/035

"You know I don't need lessons anymore, Mullah sahib. You taught me every surah and Ayat in the Koran years ago."

In this example, after Mariam moved to Jalil's house, Mullah Faizullah came to visit her, and he said "I figured no sense in skipping our routine, eh?" then Mariam responded to Mullah Faizullah with Mullah Sahib. In the culture of Afghanistan, Sahib is used as a positive marker which means referent, or admiral. Therefore, this data is classified as positive politeness.

Example 2

"Why don't we go outside for a minute, Aziza jo?" "Your mother needs to talk to Kaka Zaman here. Just for a minute. Now, come on."

In this example, the situation of the country and Rasheed are financially terrible; therefore, Rasheed forces Laila and Mariam to take Aziza to the orphanage. When they arrived at the orphanage, Laila wanted to talk to Kaka Zaman, the chairholder of the orphanage. Mariam did not want Aziza to know, so she used the positive politeness marker 'we' to take her outside.

Example 3

Datum M/158

"Tashakor," Rasheed said. "I won't forget this."

In this example, Rasheed and Mariam wanted to talk to Mariam's father to help them financially, so they went to the telecommunication site and asked for help to call and find out about Jalil Khan, Mariam's father. The doorman said the satellite was from his supervisor, so they had five minutes only. Rasheed thanked him and said he won't forget this. This is classified as positive politeness, for Rasheed thanked him.

Example 4

Datum M/176

"Did you sit and talk with him too?" - "I asked you a question, boy."

In this example, Rasheed talked to his son, Zalmai, if he also talked to Tariq, Laila's lover. He used the positive politeness marker boy, therefore it is classified as positive politeness.

### **Negative politeness**

Negative politeness is also a redressive verbal act that is oriented toward the negative face of the hearer, the face that does not want to be imposed on. The following are some examples of the negative politeness used.

Example 1

Datum F/018

"Can you point me?"

In this example, Mariam was looking for the house of his father Jalil Khan, so she went to the city of Herat. She asked a man with a horse-drawn gari if he could show her house.

Example 2

Datum F/055

"Around Kabul?"

In this example, Rasheed said to Laila that tomorrow is Jumaat, he would take her for sightseeing. Mariam asked the question about Kabul. This data is classified as negative politeness because it is a question with intonation.

Example 3

Datum M/113

"God help me, I think I love you,"

In the above example, Rasheed tried to approach Laila and fulfill his desire as a husband. He used hedges, think, to show his desire. Therefore, this strategy was classified as negative politeness.

Example 2

Datum M/014

"You can thank me then."

In the above example, Rasheed talked to Mariam and pointed her to some tuberoses he put on the wall and then asked her if she liked them. Mariam said yes, so Rasheed said you can thank me then. This data is classified as negative politeness since the word can and then minimize the imposition.

### **Off record**

Off record is a communicative act that cannot be attributed to a single clear communicative purpose. This strategy is either too general or different from what the speaker means. (Brown et al., 1987) The examples are as follows.

Example 1

Datum F/051

"I'm here."

In this example, Rasheed calls on Mariam "You can't be sleeping already. It's only seven. Are you awake? Answer me. Come, now." She replies I'm here, and her purpose is not clearly stated either she says she is not sleeping or she talks about her whereabouts.

Example 2

Datum F/063

"I don't know, but ever since the baby-"

In this example, Mariam wants to know if Rasheed is angry with her, so she asked if he is angry. Then Rasheed replied, "Why would I be angry?" She could not directly say because of the miscarriage that she had, so she understated that. Therefore, this data is classified as off-record.

Example 3

Datum M/142

"It's an interesting eye color she has, Aziza. Don't you think? It's neither yours nor mine."

In the above example, Rasheed talked to Laila. He looked at Aziza and said "It's an interesting eye color she has, Aziza. Don't you think? It's neither yours nor mine." This example is classified as off record because Rasheed's purpose is not clear what he means by saying It's neither yours nor mine.

#### Example 4

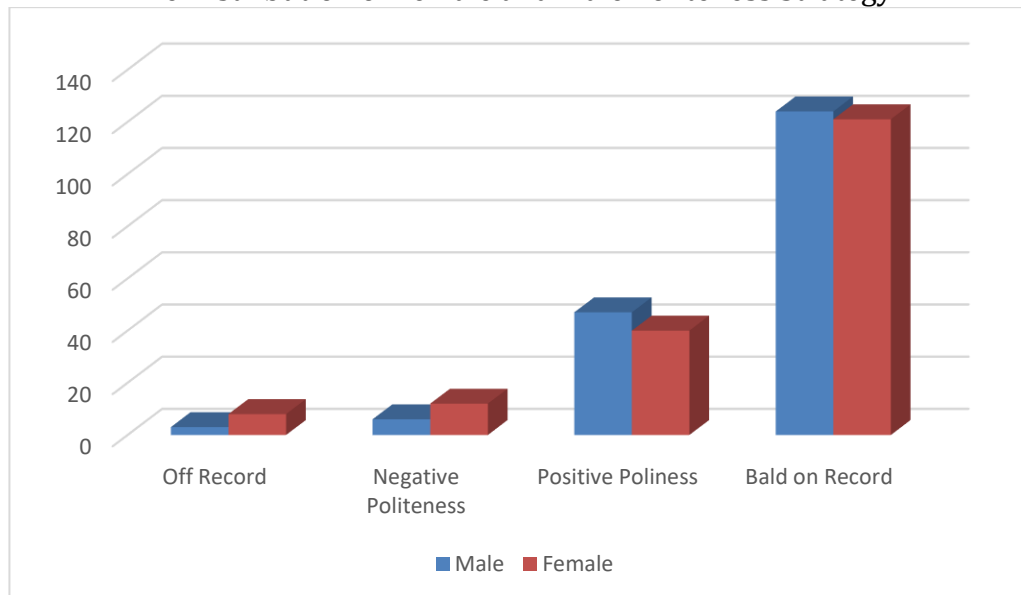
Datum M/148

"Things will turn around. They always do. Look, he likes it. See?"

Rasheed's financial condition was poor, but he still brought toys and other things for Zalmai, his son. Laila asked him "How will you pay them back?" he answered things will turn around. This example is classified as off record because his purpose is not clear what he means.

From the table above, it is clear that Mariam and Rasheed used bald on record dominantly followed by positive, negative, and off record strategies. Now the question is are women more polite than men in the novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns*? The chart below indicates whether women are polite or men.

Graphic 1:  
The Distribution of Female and Male Politeness Strategy



According to the chart, the female character used more off record and negative politeness than the male character. However, the male character used only more positive politeness than the female character. On the other hand, the female character used less bald on record than the male character. In line with Brown et al. (1987) who wrote that the highest number of strategies in a series of off record, negative politeness, positive politeness, and bald on record, the highest is the mitigation of face-threatening acts. Therefore, the female character is considered more polite than the male character, for she used more off record and negative politeness and then less bald on record than the male character. On the other hand, the male character is considered impolite compared to the female character, first because he used less off record and negative politeness than the female character and then used more bald on record than the male character.



## CONCLUSION

This paper investigated the politeness strategies of the female and male characters in the novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and found that both the characters used bald on record strategy dominantly followed by positive politeness, negative politeness, and off record. This paper aimed also to find out whether the female character is more polite than the male character. The result of the study indicates that the female character, Mariam is more polite than the male character, Rasheed. This paper adds to our knowledge of how the female and male characters are portrayed in the novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Hosseini (2009). This paper investigated the politeness of males and females in the novel; however, it also suggests that future researchers take ethnographic research to draw conclusions from Afghan Society itself.

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