



Gendered Pragmatics in the Fiction of Bapsi Sidhwa and Kamila Shamsie

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the pragmatic construction of gender in the fiction of two of Pakistan's most influential Anglophone novelists, Bapsi Sidhwa and Kamila Shamsie, by examining how linguistic interaction shapes gender identities, power relations, and forms of resistance within their narratives. The study analyzes the use of speech acts, politeness strategies, conversational implicatures, silence, indirectness, presupposition, and face negotiation in *Cracking India* and *The Pakistani Bride* by Bapsi Sidhwa and *Home Fire* and *Burnt Shadows* by Kamila Shamsie. Grounded in Speech Act Theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969), Politeness Theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987), Feminist Pragmatics (Mills, 2003; Christie, 2000), and Feminist Stylistics (Mills, 1995), the research adopts a qualitative comparative textual approach supplemented by corpus-informed observations to examine dialogue and narrative discourse. The findings reveal that both novelists strategically employ pragmatic features to expose patriarchal structures while simultaneously constructing female agency. Sidhwa foregrounds conversational conflict, irony, interruption, and linguistic resistance to depict women's struggles within traditional patriarchal settings, whereas Shamsie employs silence, indirectness, conversational ambiguity, and presupposition to represent the complexities of gender, migration, identity, and transnational politics. Across both authors, female characters negotiate power less through direct confrontation than through context-sensitive pragmatic strategies that reshape interpersonal relationships and challenge dominant gender norms.



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Introduction

Language occupies a central position in literary representations of gender because social identities are not merely described through narrative but are continuously produced through interaction. Every request, refusal, apology, interruption, compliment, threat, silence, and conversational implication contributes to the negotiation of social relationships. Within literary discourse, these pragmatic choices become powerful stylistic resources through which authors represent authority, resistance, intimacy, conflict, and identity. Consequently, the study of literary language requires attention not only to lexical or grammatical patterns

but also to the communicative functions that dialogue performs within particular cultural and ideological contexts.

Pragmatics investigates meaning as it emerges through interaction between speakers, listeners, and context rather than through linguistic forms alone. Since Austin's (1962) formulation of Speech Act Theory and Searle's (1969) subsequent classification of speech acts, pragmatics has become an important area within linguistics for understanding how language performs social action. Later developments—including Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory of politeness, Leech's (1983) politeness principle, Grice's (1975) conversational implicature, and more recent work in interpersonal pragmatics (Locher & Watts, 2005)—have demonstrated that communication is fundamentally shaped by relationships of power, social expectations, and cultural norms. Feminist scholars further argue that these pragmatic processes are deeply gendered because conversational practices often reproduce or challenge existing structures of inequality.

Feminist pragmatics extends traditional pragmatic theories by questioning assumptions of universality and highlighting the influence of gender, ideology, and power upon linguistic interaction. Sara Mills (1995, 2003), Christie (2000), and subsequent scholars argue that politeness, indirectness, interruption, silence, and conversational cooperation cannot be interpreted independently of the social structures within which communication occurs. Women's linguistic behaviour should therefore not be understood as inherently more polite or indirect but rather as responses to historically situated power relations and cultural expectations. Literary texts provide particularly rich sites for examining these dynamics because fictional dialogue condenses complex social interactions into carefully crafted linguistic exchanges that reveal underlying ideological tensions.

Pakistani English literature offers an especially productive context for such analysis. Since the late twentieth century, Pakistani novelists have explored questions of gender, nationalism, colonial history, religious identity, migration, and social transformation through innovative narrative forms. Among these writers, Bapsi Sidhwa and Kamila Shamsie occupy prominent positions for their sustained engagement with women's experiences across diverse historical and political contexts. Although separated by generation and differing stylistic preferences, both authors examine how language mediates relationships between gender and power within societies negotiating colonial legacies, nationalism, globalization, and cultural change.

Bapsi Sidhwa's fiction foregrounds women confronting patriarchal institutions, communal violence, and social marginalization. Novels such as *Cracking India* and *The Pakistani Bride* depict gender relations through highly dynamic conversational exchanges characterized by confrontation, irony, humour, and resistance. Female characters frequently negotiate unequal power structures by strategically manipulating speech acts, challenging conversational expectations, and refusing linguistic submission. Rather than portraying women as passive victims, Sidhwa constructs dialogue that exposes patriarchal authority while simultaneously revealing women's capacity for agency and resistance. Recent scholarship has highlighted her feminist critique of patriarchy and narrative experimentation, but the pragmatic mechanisms underlying these representations remain comparatively underexplored.

Kamila Shamsie's fiction approaches similar concerns through a different communicative style. Novels including *Home Fire* and *Burnt Shadows* depict multilingual, transnational characters whose identities are negotiated across diverse cultural and political settings. Her dialogue often relies upon implication, silence, understatement, and conversational ambiguity rather than explicit confrontation. Characters frequently communicate through what remains unsaid, making pragmatic inference central to interpretation. These strategies reflect broader

concerns with migration, surveillance, belonging, memory, and political violence while simultaneously challenging simplified understandings of gendered communication.

The present study investigates how gendered pragmatic strategies function within selected novels by Sidhwa and Shamsie. It asks three interrelated research questions:

1. How do speech acts, politeness strategies, and conversational implicatures construct gender identities in the selected novels?
2. How do female characters employ pragmatic strategies to negotiate, resist, or transform patriarchal power relations?
3. What similarities and differences characterize the gendered pragmatic styles of Bapsi Sidhwa and Kamila Shamsie?

Literature Review

Literary Pragmatics and Feminist Pragmatics

Pragmatics has become one of the most influential branches of contemporary linguistics because it investigates how meaning is negotiated through interaction rather than encoded exclusively within linguistic structures. Unlike semantics, which examines conventional meaning, pragmatics focuses on language in context, emphasizing speakers' intentions, hearers' interpretations, and the social conditions governing communication (Levinson, 1983; Mey, 2001). Since Austin's (1962) formulation of Speech Act Theory and Searle's (1969) systematic classification of illocutionary acts, pragmatic research has expanded considerably to include conversational implicature (Grice, 1975), politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Leech, 1983), relevance (Sperber & Wilson, 1995), interpersonal pragmatics (Locher & Watts, 2005), and impoliteness studies (Culpeper, 2011). These theoretical developments have significantly influenced literary studies by demonstrating that fictional dialogue, like everyday conversation, functions through context-sensitive communicative strategies rather than literal linguistic meaning alone.

The emergence of literary pragmatics marked an important shift in stylistic criticism by recognizing literary discourse as a form of communicative interaction. Earlier approaches to stylistics often concentrated on lexical choices, syntactic structures, figurative language, and narrative organization. Although these approaches remain valuable, they frequently overlooked the interactional dimension of literary language. Literary pragmatics instead investigates how fictional conversations construct relationships between characters, negotiate power, express emotions, and generate implied meanings through context-dependent interpretation (Sell, 1991; Chapman & Clark, 2014). Dialogue is therefore understood not merely as narrative ornamentation but as a primary mechanism through which characterization, ideology, and social relationships are developed.

Pragmatic approaches have proved particularly productive for analysing narrative fiction because novels frequently depend upon indirect communication, silence, ambiguity, presupposition, and conversational inference. Characters rarely communicate through explicit statements alone; instead, readers infer meaning from contextual information, shared knowledge, interpersonal relationships, and unspoken assumptions. Grice's (1975) Cooperative Principle illustrates how speakers deliberately observe or flout conversational maxims to generate implicatures that extend beyond literal utterances. Literary authors similarly exploit pragmatic ambiguity to encourage readers' active participation in constructing narrative meaning. Consequently, pragmatic analysis reveals dimensions of

characterization and ideology that remain inaccessible through purely grammatical or semantic approaches.

Speech Act Theory provides one of the foundational frameworks for literary pragmatics. Austin (1962) argues that utterances perform actions rather than merely describing reality. Every utterance simultaneously involves a locutionary act (what is said), an illocutionary act (what is intended), and a perlocutionary act (its effect upon the hearer). Searle (1969) further classifies speech acts into representatives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations, offering a systematic account of communicative functions. Within literary texts, speech acts contribute directly to characterization because recurring communicative patterns reveal personalities, social identities, and power relations. Requests, commands, refusals, promises, accusations, apologies, and threats all function as indicators of interpersonal hierarchy and ideological positioning.

Politeness theory has similarly become central to literary pragmatic analysis. Brown and Levinson's (1987) influential model proposes that communication is organized around the management of positive face—the desire for approval—and negative face—the desire for autonomy. Speakers continually employ politeness strategies to minimize face-threatening acts while maintaining social relationships. Literary dialogue frequently dramatizes these processes by depicting characters negotiating authority, intimacy, conflict, and solidarity through varying degrees of directness or indirectness. Although Brown and Levinson's model has attracted criticism for its claims of universality, it remains an important analytical framework for examining interpersonal dynamics within fictional discourse.

Leech's (1983) Politeness Principle further expands pragmatic analysis by emphasizing conversational cooperation through maxims such as tact, generosity, approbation, modesty, agreement, and sympathy. These principles illuminate how literary characters negotiate social expectations while balancing individual intentions with interpersonal obligations. More recent developments in interpersonal pragmatics, particularly the work of Locher and Watts (2005), argue that politeness should not be viewed as a fixed linguistic property but as an evaluative process emerging through social interaction. This perspective is especially relevant to literary analysis because fictional conversations are embedded within culturally specific systems of value rather than universal communicative norms.

Gender, Language, and Pakistani English Literature

Pakistani English literature has emerged as one of the most vibrant traditions within postcolonial Anglophone writing, offering nuanced representations of gender, identity, religion, nationalism, migration, and social transformation. Since the late twentieth century, Pakistani novelists have increasingly employed English not merely as a colonial inheritance but as a medium for articulating indigenous experiences and interrogating dominant ideological structures. Within this expanding literary tradition, language functions as a powerful cultural resource through which identities are negotiated, historical memories are reconstructed, and social inequalities are challenged. Consequently, linguistic analysis has become increasingly important for understanding how Pakistani fiction constructs gendered experiences within rapidly changing social and political contexts.

One of the most prominent developments in scholarship on Pakistani English literature has been the growing influence of feminist criticism. Early studies largely concentrated on recovering women's voices within national literary history and examining the representation of patriarchal institutions in fiction. Drawing upon postcolonial feminism, scholars have demonstrated that Pakistani women writers challenge stereotypical representations of Muslim women by portraying female characters as active participants in social, political, and cultural

life rather than passive victims of tradition (Spivak, 1988; Mohanty, 1988). These studies have substantially expanded understandings of gender in South Asian literature by foregrounding women's agency, resistance, and negotiation of intersecting systems of power.

Postcolonial feminist scholarship further argues that gender in Pakistani literature cannot be examined independently of colonial history, nationalism, class, religion, and ethnicity. Unlike many Western feminist models that prioritize gender as an isolated category, Pakistani English fiction frequently represents women's experiences through multiple and overlapping forms of identity. Female characters negotiate not only patriarchal authority but also colonial legacies, religious expectations, communal conflict, migration, and global political transformations. Such intersectional perspectives have become central to contemporary analyses of Pakistani literature, highlighting the complexity of women's linguistic and cultural experiences.

Language occupies a particularly significant position within these feminist narratives because communication itself frequently becomes a site of ideological struggle. Characters negotiate authority through dialogue, silence, humour, irony, metaphor, and narrative voice, demonstrating that linguistic interaction reflects broader social hierarchies. Feminist linguistics has consistently argued that language both reproduces and contests gendered power relations (Cameron, 1992; Mills, 2003). Literary dialogue therefore provides valuable evidence for examining how gender identities are constructed through every day communicative practices rather than merely represented through thematic content.

Recent stylistic studies have increasingly emphasized the importance of narrative discourse in Pakistani English fiction. Researchers have examined characterization, narrative perspective, transitivity patterns, modality, metaphor, and evaluative language to explain how literary texts construct ideological meanings. Corpus stylistics has further expanded these investigations by identifying recurring lexical and grammatical patterns across literary corpora. Nevertheless, despite these methodological advances, relatively little attention has been devoted to pragmatic dimensions of literary discourse. Features such as speech acts, conversational implicatures, politeness strategies, turn-taking, interruption, silence, and face negotiation remain considerably underexplored within Pakistani literary scholarship.

The relationship between gender and communication is especially important within Pakistani society, where linguistic behaviour is often shaped by culturally specific expectations concerning age, family hierarchy, social status, and gender roles. Politeness, respect, indirectness, and deference frequently function as markers of social identity rather than simply communicative preferences. Women may be expected to demonstrate greater linguistic accommodation, emotional restraint, and interpersonal sensitivity, while men may be granted greater conversational authority in both domestic and public settings. Pakistani novelists frequently engage with these sociolinguistic realities by depicting characters whose communicative practices either conform to or challenge prevailing gender norms.

Methodology and Analytical Framework

This study adopts a qualitative comparative research design to examine the construction of gendered pragmatics in the fiction of Bapsi Sidhwa and Kamila Shamsie. Grounded in an interpretivist paradigm, it investigates how pragmatic meanings emerge through dialogue and narrative discourse within specific socio-cultural and historical contexts. The corpus comprises four purposively selected novels—*Cracking India* and *The Pakistani Bride* by Bapsi Sidhwa, and *Burnt Shadows* and *Home Fire* by Kamila Shamsie—chosen because they foreground women's experiences, contain extensive dialogic interaction, and represent

diverse historical and transnational settings. While qualitative textual interpretation constitutes the primary method, corpus-informed observations are incorporated to identify recurring linguistic and pragmatic patterns, thereby enhancing the depth and reliability of the analysis.

The analytical framework integrates four complementary theoretical perspectives: Speech Act Theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969), Politeness Theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Leech, 1983), Feminist Pragmatics (Mills, 2003; Christie, 2000), and Feminist Stylistics (Mills, 1995). These frameworks are employed in a complementary manner to examine how communicative acts, politeness strategies, conversational implicatures, face negotiation, silence, and indirectness contribute to the construction of gender identities and power relations. Rather than analysing isolated utterances, the study interprets dialogue within its immediate conversational and broader narrative context, allowing pragmatic choices to be understood as literary strategies that shape characterization, interpersonal relationships, and ideological meanings.

The primary unit of analysis consists of dialogic interactions in which gender relations are explicitly or implicitly negotiated, including conversations related to family, marriage, authority, identity, migration, political conflict, and interpersonal confrontation. Textual data are systematically examined through coding categories such as speech acts, politeness strategies, face-threatening acts, conversational implicatures, silence, indirectness, and gendered interactional patterns, including turn-taking, interruption, and the negotiation of authority. Corpus-informed observations of recurring lexical and discourse features, including modal auxiliaries, hedges, reporting verbs, discourse markers, and vocatives, support the qualitative interpretation without reducing the analysis to quantitative measurement. Analytical rigor is ensured through triangulation of theoretical perspectives, comparative examination across four novels, and close textual analysis grounded in established pragmatic theory, providing a coherent framework for exploring how language functions as a site of gender, power, and resistance in contemporary Pakistani English fiction.

Data Analysis and Discussion

Gendered Speech Acts in the Fiction of Bapsi Sidhwa and Kamila Shamsie

Speech acts constitute one of the principal mechanisms through which literary characters negotiate interpersonal relationships, social identities, and institutional authority. Building upon Austin's (1962) distinction between locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts and Searle's (1969) taxonomy of speech acts, this study argues that the dialogue in the selected novels functions not merely as a vehicle for narrative progression but as a performative site where gendered power relations are continuously enacted and contested. Across the fiction of Bapsi Sidhwa and Kamila Shamsie, requests, commands, refusals, promises, apologies, accusations, and expressive acts reveal how women negotiate patriarchal structures through language. While both writers foreground female agency, they employ markedly different pragmatic strategies: Sidhwa frequently relies on overt verbal confrontation and dialogic resistance, whereas Shamsie privileges negotiation, implication, and ethically complex communicative exchanges.

A recurring feature of Sidhwa's fiction is the unequal distribution of directive speech acts between male and female characters. In *The Pakistani Bride*, patriarchal authority is frequently exercised through commands, prohibitions, and imperatives issued by male figures who assume institutional control over women's bodies and choices. Husbands, tribal elders, and fathers employ directives that function not merely as requests but as assertions of social

hierarchy. These utterances perform illocutionary acts of domination by presupposing obedience as a cultural obligation rather than a negotiable outcome. From a pragmatic perspective, such directives reinforce gender asymmetry because the authority of the speaker is embedded within broader social structures rather than established solely through the immediate conversational context.

Female characters, however, do not remain passive recipients of these directives. Zaitoon, for example, increasingly responds through refusals, challenges, and strategic non-compliance. Her refusals often avoid direct contradiction, employing hesitation, delayed responses, or contextual resistance that reflects the risks associated with openly challenging patriarchal authority. These communicative choices illustrate feminist pragmatic claims that indirectness should not automatically be interpreted as linguistic weakness but rather as an adaptive strategy within unequal power relations (Mills, 2003). The illocutionary force of Zaitoon's responses lies less in explicit opposition than in their gradual disruption of patriarchal expectations. Silence, postponement, and qualified disagreement become speech acts of resistance whose significance depends upon their cultural context.

Similarly, *Cracking India* presents dialogue as a contested space where authority is negotiated rather than simply exercised. Through the child narrator Lenny, Sidhwa represents conversations in which adults attempt to impose ideological interpretations of Partition while women repeatedly challenge these dominant narratives. Ayah's interactions with male admirers are particularly revealing because compliments, invitations, promises, and declarations of affection frequently function as attempts to regulate female autonomy. Although these utterances appear polite on the surface, their pragmatic force often involves implicit claims to possession and authority. Sidhwa thereby demonstrates that speech acts cannot be analysed independently of the ideological assumptions informing their interpretation.

Ayah's responses frequently subvert these communicative expectations through humour, irony, and selective participation. Rather than openly rejecting every conversational advance, she often redirects discussions, employs playful ambiguity, or withholds commitment. Such responses illustrate Gricean implicature by generating meanings beyond literal utterances. Readers infer resistance not because Ayah explicitly articulates opposition but because her conversational behaviour systematically refuses to validate patriarchal assumptions. Her speech acts therefore perform dual functions: maintaining conversational cooperation while simultaneously undermining unequal gender relations.

Expressive speech acts also play an important role in Sidhwa's characterization of women. Apologies, expressions of sympathy, and declarations of affection are frequently employed to strengthen female solidarity rather than reinforce social subordination. Female conversations often differ pragmatically from male interactions by emphasizing mutual support, emotional validation, and collaborative problem-solving. These communicative patterns should not be interpreted as essential characteristics of women's language; rather, they emerge from shared experiences of structural inequality. Feminist pragmatics emphasizes that expressive speech acts frequently perform political as well as interpersonal functions by creating alternative communities of support within patriarchal societies.

Kamila Shamsie's fiction presents a more restrained but equally sophisticated deployment of speech acts. In *Home Fire*, directives rarely appear as explicit commands; instead, they are embedded within questions, suggestions, or emotionally charged requests. Isma's interactions with family members illustrate how requests frequently function as expressions of care while simultaneously negotiating responsibility, obligation, and personal autonomy. The pragmatic

complexity of these exchanges arises because individual utterances often perform multiple illocutionary acts simultaneously. A request may also function as advice, emotional reassurance, or moral appeal depending upon the interpersonal context.

This multiplicity reflects Shamsie's broader narrative style, which privileges ambiguity over confrontation. Speech acts frequently depend upon shared background knowledge, making conversational implicature central to interpretation. Characters regularly avoid direct statements regarding political violence, religious identity, or emotional vulnerability, preferring indirect formulations that require readers to infer underlying meanings. Such communicative strategies demonstrate that pragmatic competence extends beyond identifying speech-act categories to understanding the contextual conditions governing their interpretation.

The relationship between Isma and Aneeka provides particularly illuminating examples of gendered commissive speech acts. Promises and commitments within the novel are repeatedly negotiated against competing obligations to family, nation, and personal identity. Female characters frequently undertake responsibilities that exceed conventional expectations of familial care, transforming commissive speech acts into expressions of ethical agency. Rather than functioning merely as narrative devices, promises become performative acts through which women define their moral identities despite external political pressures.

In *Burnt Shadows*, expressive and representative speech acts similarly reveal the intersection of personal relationships with historical trauma. Hiroko's conversations frequently involve restrained emotional expression, where the absence of explicit declaration becomes as significant as spoken language itself. Her speech acts often achieve their perlocutionary effects through understatement rather than emotional intensity. This pragmatic restraint reflects the novel's transnational setting, where communication occurs across cultural, linguistic, and historical boundaries. Misunderstandings, hesitations, and partial disclosures become recurring features of dialogue, emphasizing that meaning is continually negotiated rather than transparently transmitted.

One notable distinction between Sidhwa and Shamsie concerns the distribution of confrontational speech acts. Sidhwa's novels contain a higher frequency of overt accusations, refusals, and verbal challenges, reflecting the immediate social conflicts surrounding Partition and patriarchal violence. Dialogue frequently becomes the primary arena through which characters contest authority, exposing ideological divisions through explicit linguistic confrontation. In contrast, Shamsie's fiction often relocates conflict beneath the surface of conversation. Disagreement is communicated through implication, silence, interrupted dialogue, and strategically incomplete utterances. These contrasting pragmatic styles correspond to different narrative aesthetics rather than differing commitments to feminist representation.

Despite these stylistic differences, both writers consistently challenge patriarchal communicative norms by redistributing pragmatic authority to female characters. Women are not merely recipients of male speech acts but active participants who shape conversational outcomes through strategic linguistic choices. Their agency emerges through the ability to refuse, negotiate, reinterpret, question, and redefine interpersonal relationships. Speech acts therefore function as indicators of ideological transformation, demonstrating that gender is continuously produced through communicative interaction rather than fixed social roles.

From the perspective of feminist pragmatics, these findings support Mills' (2003) argument that communicative practices cannot be separated from institutional power. Directives, expressives, commissives, and refusals acquire gendered significance because they are

interpreted within cultural systems regulating authority and obedience. The selected novels repeatedly demonstrate that identical speech acts carry different pragmatic implications depending upon the speaker's gender, social position, and historical circumstances. Female requests may be interpreted as obligations, male commands as legitimate authority, and women's silence as compliance despite underlying resistance. By exposing these unequal interpretive frameworks, both Sidhwa and Shamsie reveal the ideological foundations of everyday communication.

Politeness, Face Negotiation, and Patriarchal Power

Politeness is not merely a matter of linguistic etiquette but a socially constructed mechanism through which speakers negotiate interpersonal relationships, institutional authority, and cultural expectations. Brown and Levinson (1987) conceptualize politeness as the management of face, distinguishing between positive face, the desire to be appreciated and accepted, and negative face, the desire to act freely without undue imposition. Every interaction potentially threatens one or both aspects of face, prompting speakers to adopt linguistic strategies that minimize conflict or strengthen social bonds. Feminist pragmatics, however, argues that these processes cannot be understood independently of gendered power structures because expectations regarding politeness are unequally distributed across men and women (Mills, 2003). In patriarchal societies, women are frequently expected to display greater accommodation, empathy, deference, and emotional labour, while men enjoy greater freedom to employ directness and authority. The fiction of Bapsi Sidhwa and Kamila Shamsie vividly illustrates how politeness functions as a site where these unequal expectations are both reproduced and challenged.

In Sidhwa's *The Pakistani Bride*, politeness frequently operates as a mechanism of social control. Female characters are expected to demonstrate respect toward fathers, husbands, elders, and tribal authorities through deferential forms of address, mitigated responses, and restrained disagreement. Such communicative practices are presented not simply as cultural conventions but as institutional expectations governing women's behaviour. Requests directed toward women often assume compliance, while women's own requests require careful linguistic mitigation to avoid appearing confrontational. The unequal distribution of politeness obligations reflects broader patriarchal hierarchies in which maintaining interpersonal harmony becomes disproportionately the responsibility of female speakers.

Yet Sidhwa consistently complicates these expectations by portraying women who manipulate politeness strategically rather than submissively. Zaitoon frequently employs negative politeness through hesitation, qualified responses, and indirect refusals. These linguistic choices initially appear deferential; however, closer pragmatic analysis reveals that they function as mechanisms for delaying compliance, questioning authority, and preserving personal autonomy. Rather than openly rejecting patriarchal directives—a strategy that would invite immediate punishment—she negotiates resistance through subtle conversational manoeuvres. Her politeness therefore performs a dual function: it satisfies surface expectations of femininity while simultaneously creating space for agency within restrictive social environments.

This strategic use of politeness aligns closely with Mills' (2003) argument that women's politeness should not be interpreted as an inherent characteristic of feminine language but as a socially situated response to unequal distributions of power. In Sidhwa's fiction, linguistic accommodation is rarely voluntary in a simplistic sense; instead, it reflects careful calculations regarding personal safety, social reputation, and emotional survival. Female

politeness becomes an adaptive communicative practice through which women navigate patriarchal institutions without surrendering entirely to them.

Cracking India presents a more complex pattern of face negotiation because the political violence of Partition destabilizes ordinary social relationships. Communal conflict repeatedly transforms previously cooperative interactions into sites of suspicion and hostility. Brown and Levinson's distinction between positive and negative face becomes particularly useful in explaining these changing dynamics. Characters who once shared mutual trust increasingly interpret ordinary conversational acts as threats to identity, religion, and community. Face-threatening acts therefore acquire heightened ideological significance, extending beyond individual relationships to encompass collective identities.

Ayah's interactions with the group of male admirers surrounding her provide a compelling example of these processes. Many male characters employ positive politeness strategies through compliments, humour, expressions of admiration, and demonstrations of solidarity. On the surface, these strategies appear to enhance interpersonal intimacy. However, feminist pragmatic analysis reveals that such politeness frequently masks unequal assumptions regarding male entitlement to female attention and emotional availability. Compliments function simultaneously as expressions of appreciation and subtle assertions of possession. Their pragmatic force depends not solely upon linguistic form but upon gendered social expectations regulating interpersonal relationships.

Ayah's responses challenge these assumptions through selective reciprocity. She accepts certain forms of conversational solidarity while rejecting others, carefully managing both her own face and that of her interlocutors. Rather than engaging in constant verbal confrontation, she often employs humour, irony, or topic shifts to maintain conversational balance without relinquishing autonomy. These pragmatic strategies illustrate that face negotiation is an active process through which women reshape interpersonal relationships instead of merely accommodating male expectations.

Kamila Shamsie's fiction approaches politeness through greater communicative subtlety. In *Home Fire*, interactions among family members frequently depend upon positive politeness strategies emphasizing emotional support, shared identity, and mutual responsibility. Expressions of concern, reassurance, and encouragement strengthen interpersonal solidarity while simultaneously negotiating conflicting obligations involving family, religion, citizenship, and political loyalty. Unlike Sidhwa's more overt confrontations, Shamsie's dialogue often derives its emotional intensity from what remains implicit rather than explicitly articulated.

The relationship between Isma and Aneeka demonstrates how positive politeness becomes intertwined with ethical responsibility. Their conversations are characterized by empathy, mutual understanding, and indirect expressions of care. Requests are frequently softened through explanation, shared memories, or emotional framing, reducing their potential threat to negative face. However, these apparently harmonious interactions also reveal underlying tensions concerning sacrifice, personal freedom, and familial obligation. Politeness does not eliminate conflict; instead, it enables disagreement to be managed without undermining relational intimacy.

Political interactions in *Home Fire* illustrate a contrasting pragmatic pattern. Conversations involving representatives of state authority frequently rely upon institutional politeness that conceals asymmetrical power relations. Officials employ formally respectful language while simultaneously exercising surveillance, control, and exclusion. Such interactions expose the ideological limitations of conventional politeness theory, demonstrating that linguistic civility

does not necessarily correspond to ethical communication. Feminist pragmatics is particularly valuable here because it highlights how institutional discourse may preserve unequal social structures despite maintaining superficially polite interaction.

In *Burnt Shadows*, face negotiation becomes increasingly complex because characters communicate across multiple linguistic, national, and cultural contexts. Hiroko repeatedly negotiates positive and negative face while interacting with individuals from different historical experiences and cultural traditions. Her communicative restraint reflects sensitivity to diverse conversational norms rather than passive submission. Misunderstandings frequently arise because identical politeness strategies carry different pragmatic meanings across cultural contexts. Shamsie therefore expands traditional politeness theory by demonstrating that face negotiation must be understood within transnational and multilingual environments rather than homogeneous speech communities.

Silence, Indirectness, and Female Agency

Silence and indirectness have traditionally occupied an ambiguous position within linguistic research. Early sociolinguistic studies often interpreted indirect communication and conversational silence as indicators of linguistic insecurity, passivity, or reduced communicative competence. Feminist pragmatics has fundamentally challenged this assumption by demonstrating that silence and indirectness are context-dependent communicative strategies whose meanings emerge through social, cultural, and institutional conditions rather than through linguistic form alone (Mills, 2003). Within patriarchal societies, where direct opposition may expose women to social sanctions or physical danger, silence frequently becomes a deliberate act of negotiation rather than an absence of agency. Likewise, indirectness functions as a sophisticated pragmatic resource enabling speakers to communicate disagreement, resistance, and emotional complexity without openly violating dominant social expectations. The fiction of Bapsi Sidhwa and Kamila Shamsie consistently illustrates these possibilities, portraying silence not as communicative failure but as an alternative language of power.

In Sidhwa's *The Pakistani Bride*, silence repeatedly emerges as a survival strategy within a rigid patriarchal order. Female characters inhabit social environments where overt disagreement with male authority is often interpreted as moral transgression rather than legitimate self-expression. Consequently, important communicative acts occur through pauses, delayed responses, incomplete utterances, and strategic withdrawal from conversation. These moments require readers to infer pragmatic meaning from narrative context, demonstrating the centrality of Grice's (1975) conversational implicature to literary interpretation. Meaning is produced not solely through spoken language but also through what remains deliberately unsaid.

Zaitoon provides one of the clearest examples of this phenomenon. Throughout the novel, she frequently responds to patriarchal directives with hesitation rather than immediate acceptance or explicit refusal. Such hesitation initially appears to reinforce conventional gender expectations of obedience. However, feminist pragmatic analysis reveals that these responses often function as acts of resistance that delay compliance, preserve emotional autonomy, and create opportunities for later action. Silence therefore becomes an illocutionary act in its own right, communicating dissent without exposing the speaker to immediate confrontation. Its pragmatic force derives precisely from its ambiguity, allowing multiple interpretations while protecting the speaker within unequal power structures.

Sidhwa further demonstrates that silence often carries greater emotional intensity than explicit verbal expression. Moments of communal violence, forced marriage, and personal

loss are frequently represented through interrupted dialogue or the inability of characters to articulate traumatic experience. Narrative description supplements these communicative absences, inviting readers to interpret silence as evidence of psychological suffering rather than communicative deficiency. Such representations resonate with trauma theory, which argues that extreme experiences often resist direct linguistic representation. Within this context, silence becomes both a consequence of violence and a means of preserving personal dignity.

Ayah's communicative behaviour in *Cracking India* similarly illustrates the pragmatic complexity of indirectness. Throughout the novel, she negotiates persistent male attention through humour, irony, selective disclosure, and conversational redirection. Rather than confronting every instance of objectification directly, she frequently transforms potentially threatening interactions into ambiguous conversational exchanges that preserve her social position while limiting male control over the interaction. Her indirect responses are neither evasive nor submissive; instead, they reflect an acute awareness of the interpersonal risks associated with explicit rejection within patriarchal social environments.

Grice's theory of conversational implicature provides a useful framework for understanding these interactions. Ayah frequently communicates meanings that extend beyond the literal content of her utterances. Irony, understatement, playful ambiguity, and carefully chosen silences encourage interlocutors—and readers—to infer intentions from contextual knowledge rather than explicit linguistic statements. Such pragmatic complexity contributes significantly to her characterization, portraying intelligence and resilience through communicative performance rather than narrative description alone.

Kamila Shamsie's fiction extends these strategies within transnational and psychologically complex settings. Her novels are characterized by restrained dialogue in which emotional intensity frequently depends upon implication rather than direct declaration. In *Home Fire*, many of the most significant conversations occur through partial disclosures, interrupted exchanges, and emotionally charged silences. Characters rarely articulate their deepest fears, loyalties, or political convictions directly. Instead, meaning emerges through shared history, contextual knowledge, and the gradual accumulation of conversational implications.

The relationship between Isma and Aneeka exemplifies this communicative pattern. Their conversations often revolve around family responsibilities, personal sacrifice, and conflicting moral obligations. Yet these issues are seldom addressed explicitly. Requests remain partially formulated, disagreements are softened through topic shifts, and emotional distress is frequently conveyed through silence rather than verbal explanation. Such interactions illustrate how indirectness can strengthen rather than weaken interpersonal communication by allowing emotionally sensitive topics to be negotiated without destroying relational solidarity.

From a feminist pragmatic perspective, these conversational strategies constitute forms of agency rather than avoidance. Isma's communicative restraint reflects ethical responsibility and emotional intelligence rather than submissiveness. She carefully calibrates her linguistic choices according to interpersonal circumstances, demonstrating that pragmatic competence involves selecting contextually appropriate forms of expression rather than maximizing directness. Her agency resides in her capacity to shape conversational outcomes through implication, timing, and strategic omission.

Hiroko, the central figure in *Burnt Shadows*, presents an even more intricate example of silence as communicative practice. Having experienced profound historical trauma, her dialogue frequently reveals the limits of language itself. Instead of offering explicit

descriptions of suffering, Hiroko often communicates through restrained observation, incomplete narratives, and reflective pauses. These silences invite readers to participate actively in meaning-making, transforming interpretation into a collaborative pragmatic process. The narrative thus challenges conventional assumptions that effective communication requires complete verbal transparency.

Pragmatic Resistance and Feminist Discourse

The preceding analyses demonstrate that speech acts, politeness strategies, silence, and indirectness function as interconnected pragmatic resources rather than isolated linguistic phenomena. Considered collectively, these communicative practices constitute a broader feminist discourse through which Bapsi Sidhwa and Kamila Shamsie interrogate patriarchal authority, reconstruct female subjectivity, and reimagine gendered power relations. Feminist discourse in the selected novels does not emerge exclusively through explicit ideological statements or narrative commentary. Instead, it is embedded within the everyday interactions of characters whose linguistic choices reveal subtle negotiations of authority, identity, and resistance. Literary pragmatics therefore provides an effective framework for understanding how feminist meanings are produced through communication itself.

A defining characteristic of feminist discourse in both authors is the rejection of binary representations of women as either submissive victims or heroic rebels. Instead, resistance is presented as a dynamic communicative process shaped by historical, cultural, and interpersonal conditions. Female characters continuously negotiate the limits of socially acceptable behaviour through context-sensitive pragmatic strategies. Requests become negotiations rather than expressions of dependence; refusals become carefully calibrated challenges rather than outright rejection; and silence becomes a meaningful response rather than evidence of passivity. These linguistic practices demonstrate that resistance often develops incrementally through everyday interaction rather than through dramatic acts of confrontation.

In Sidhwa's fiction, feminist discourse is closely connected to exposing the ordinary language of patriarchy. Male authority is rarely established solely through physical coercion or institutional power; it is also reproduced through routine conversational practices that normalize unequal gender relations. Commands, interruptions, evaluative judgments, and dismissive responses repeatedly reinforce assumptions regarding male entitlement and female obedience. Because these communicative behaviours appear ordinary, they often escape critical scrutiny within the fictional worlds themselves. Sidhwa's narrative strategy brings these everyday interactions into focus, revealing how language contributes to maintaining patriarchal social structures.

Importantly, Sidhwa does not merely depict oppressive discourse; she also demonstrates its gradual destabilization. Female characters increasingly interrupt expected conversational patterns by refusing automatic compliance, questioning dominant assumptions, or redefining interpersonal relationships through alternative communicative strategies. Resistance therefore occurs within discourse rather than outside it. Patriarchal language is appropriated, reshaped, and challenged from within everyday conversation, illustrating the productive possibilities of pragmatic agency.

This process is particularly evident in interactions involving generational differences among women. Older female characters sometimes reproduce patriarchal norms through advice emphasizing obedience, sacrifice, and family honour. Younger women, however, frequently reinterpret these expectations without rejecting familial relationships altogether. Their communicative strategies reveal negotiation rather than simple rebellion, suggesting that

feminist discourse develops through dialogue across generations rather than through absolute ideological opposition. Such representations complicate simplistic understandings of patriarchy by acknowledging women's varied positions within systems of social power.

Kamila Shamsie's fiction develops feminist discourse through a different pragmatic aesthetic. Rather than foregrounding overt confrontation, Shamsie emphasizes ethical dialogue, emotional complexity, and moral ambiguity. Her female protagonists seldom challenge patriarchal authority through direct ideological declarations. Instead, they transform interpersonal relationships through sustained communicative engagement characterized by empathy, critical reflection, and contextual negotiation. Feminist resistance therefore emerges as an ethical practice grounded in responsible communication rather than rhetorical confrontation alone.

This communicative ethic is particularly significant in *Home Fire*, where female characters navigate competing obligations involving family loyalty, political identity, religious belief, and personal autonomy. Their conversations resist simplistic moral binaries by acknowledging the legitimacy of conflicting perspectives while refusing institutional injustice. Pragmatically, these interactions rely upon indirectness, careful questioning, and strategic disclosure rather than uncompromising assertion. Such communicative restraint should not be interpreted as political moderation; instead, it reflects a sophisticated understanding that meaningful dialogue often requires preserving interpersonal relationships even amid profound disagreement.

Shamsie's treatment of multilingual and transnational communication further expands feminist discourse beyond national boundaries. Her characters regularly negotiate linguistic and cultural differences while constructing relationships across diverse social contexts. Feminist agency consequently involves the ability to interpret multiple communicative systems and adapt strategically to changing conversational environments. This cosmopolitan pragmatics distinguishes Shamsie's fiction from more localized representations of gender while maintaining a consistent commitment to social justice and ethical responsibility.

Comparative Pragmatic Styles of Bapsi Sidhwa and Kamila Shamsie

The comparative analysis demonstrates that although Bapsi Sidhwa and Kamila Shamsie share a sustained commitment to representing women's experiences within patriarchal societies, they employ distinct pragmatic and stylistic strategies to construct female agency. These differences are not merely aesthetic preferences but reflect contrasting historical contexts, narrative objectives, and ideological emphases. Sidhwa's fiction emerges from the immediate social realities of Partition, communal violence, and patriarchal tribal structures, while Shamsie's novels engage with globalization, migration, transnational politics, and contemporary debates surrounding identity, citizenship, and belonging. These differing contexts shape the pragmatic organization of dialogue, influencing how characters negotiate authority, express resistance, and construct interpersonal relationships.

One of the most significant distinctions concerns the realization of speech acts. Sidhwa frequently represents conflict through explicit directives, accusations, refusals, and confrontational exchanges. Conversations often involve direct challenges to patriarchal authority, making dialogue itself the principal arena of ideological struggle. Male characters commonly employ imperatives, commands, and evaluative judgments that assert institutional authority, while female characters respond through increasingly assertive refusals, counterarguments, and strategic challenges. The performative force of these speech acts reflects the urgency of social conflicts surrounding gender oppression, forced marriage, and

communal violence. Consequently, Sidhwa's pragmatic style foregrounds verbal confrontation as a catalyst for personal and social transformation.

Shamsie, by contrast, constructs speech acts through greater conversational subtlety. Her characters frequently communicate through implication, partial disclosure, hesitation, and carefully negotiated exchanges rather than direct confrontation. Directives are often embedded within questions, suggestions, or expressions of concern, while refusals remain implicit rather than explicitly articulated. This pragmatic restraint does not weaken feminist critique; instead, it reflects the psychological complexity of characters navigating transnational political realities where identities are fragmented and moral choices are rarely unambiguous. The indirectness characteristic of Shamsie's dialogue therefore functions as an ethical mode of communication that acknowledges uncertainty while preserving the possibility of interpersonal understanding.

Politeness strategies constitute another important area of divergence. In Sidhwa's fiction, politeness frequently reflects visible asymmetries of power embedded within traditional family and community structures. Women are expected to employ deferential language, respectful address forms, and indirect requests in interactions with male authority figures. However, these expectations are repeatedly destabilized as female characters strategically manipulate politeness to resist patriarchal control. The tension between social obligation and personal autonomy becomes a defining feature of conversational interaction, revealing how politeness may simultaneously reproduce and challenge unequal gender relations.

Shamsie's treatment of politeness is comparatively relational and dialogic. Positive politeness often functions to preserve emotional intimacy among family members despite profound political disagreements. Rather than emphasizing hierarchical authority alone, her novels explore how face negotiation sustains relationships across ideological, cultural, and national boundaries. Politeness becomes an ethical practice grounded in empathy, mutual recognition, and responsible communication. This shift reflects the broader thematic concerns of her fiction, where interpersonal dialogue frequently serves as a counterbalance to political polarization and institutional violence.

The representation of silence further distinguishes the two writers' pragmatic styles. Sidhwa frequently employs silence as a response to immediate oppression, trauma, and restricted female mobility. Characters remain silent because speech carries significant social risks, making communicative restraint an adaptive strategy within highly unequal environments. Silence often precedes acts of resistance, functioning as a period of observation, emotional preservation, or tactical preparation. Its pragmatic significance therefore derives from unequal distributions of power operating within clearly identifiable patriarchal institutions.

Shamsie's use of silence is more introspective and psychologically layered. Characters often choose silence despite possessing opportunities to speak, suggesting that communicative restraint may represent ethical reflection rather than imposed limitation. Silence becomes a means of respecting emotional complexity, acknowledging historical trauma, or avoiding simplistic moral judgments. Readers are invited to infer meaning through contextual interpretation, making silence an active component of narrative discourse rather than merely the absence of dialogue. This stylistic preference contributes to the contemplative quality that characterizes much of Shamsie's fiction.

The treatment of conversational implicature also reveals important contrasts. Sidhwa frequently employs irony, humour, and satire to expose patriarchal contradictions and social hypocrisy. Implicatures tend to reinforce explicit ideological critiques, enabling readers to recognize discrepancies between public discourse and lived experience. Humorous exchanges

often conceal sharp political observations, demonstrating how pragmatic ambiguity can strengthen feminist commentary without diminishing its critical force.

Shamsie's implicatures are generally more understated and emotionally complex. Meanings emerge gradually through repeated interactions rather than isolated conversational moments. Characters rarely communicate complete truths in a single exchange; instead, readers assemble meaning from fragmented conversations, shared memories, and contextual clues distributed throughout the narrative. This cumulative pragmatics reflects Shamsie's interest in the long-term consequences of historical events and interpersonal decisions, emphasizing interpretation as an ongoing process rather than an immediate achievement.

Despite these stylistic differences, the comparative analysis identifies several important convergences. Both writers reject deterministic representations of gender by portraying female agency as linguistically negotiated rather than inherently possessed or entirely denied. Women exercise power through communicative competence, selecting speech acts, politeness strategies, silences, and conversational implicatures appropriate to particular social circumstances. Agency therefore emerges not from unrestricted freedom but from the ability to navigate unequal communicative environments creatively and strategically.

Both authors also challenge essentialist assumptions concerning women's language. Their female characters do not consistently employ greater politeness, indirectness, or emotional expressiveness than male characters. Instead, communicative behaviour varies according to context, social position, historical circumstance, and interpersonal relationships. This variability supports feminist pragmatic critiques of universal gender differences by demonstrating that linguistic practices are socially constructed rather than biologically determined. Women speak differently not because of innate communicative styles but because they negotiate different institutional expectations and social consequences.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that gendered pragmatics provides a valuable framework for understanding the fiction of Bapsi Sidhwa and Kamila Shamsie by revealing how linguistic choices, conversational strategies, silence, indirectness, code-switching, and narrative discourse construct and negotiate gender identities within patriarchal and postcolonial contexts. Rather than portraying women as passive victims of oppression, both novelists depict female characters as active agents who strategically employ language to negotiate authority, resist marginalization, and reshape their social identities. Although Sidhwa and Shamsie belong to different literary generations and represent distinct historical and cultural settings, their works collectively underscore the dynamic relationship between language, gender, and power. Sidhwa foregrounds the linguistic realities of Partition-era Pakistan through irony, storytelling, and conversational resistance, whereas Shamsie explores the complexities of migration, political conflict, religious identity, and transnational belonging through silence, presupposition, ambiguity, and indirectness. The comparative analysis further demonstrates that gendered pragmatics extends beyond the analysis of speech acts to encompass broader sociocultural and ideological meanings embedded in discourse, positioning language as a site where identities are negotiated, power relations are contested, and feminist resistance is enacted. By integrating literary pragmatics with feminist stylistics and postcolonial criticism, this study contributes to scholarship on Pakistani English literature and illustrates how pragmatic analysis deepens our understanding of the interaction between discourse, ideology, and gender. Future research may build upon this framework by incorporating corpus-based pragmatics, multimodal discourse analysis, or comparative

studies of other South Asian women writers to further explore the evolving relationship between language, gender, and power in contemporary literature.

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