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A Study of Identity Crisis through Politeness Theory in Aziz Amna's American Fever

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this qualitative study is to investigate the politeness strategies in the novel American Fever by Dur Aziz Amina through the postulates of Politeness Theory by Brown and Levinson (1987). The data are collected from the selected novel in form of some excerpts. The selected texts are analyzed through the postulates of Politeness Theory. The findings indicate that the writer uses politeness strategies to voice themes of identity. Through a close linguistic and literary analysis, the study intends to contribute to the broader discourse on intercultural pragmatics, literary stylistics, and the sociolinguistic dimensions of narrative fiction. Ultimately, this research aspires to offer fresh insights into the intersection of language, culture, and literature by demonstrating the critical role of politeness strategies in shaping character interactions and constructing the ideological undercurrents of contemporary multicultural fiction. This study significantly contributes to contemporary literature in pragmatics by identifying the role of linguistic politeness in enhancing narrative depth and cultural realism.

Keywords: American Fever, cultural assimilation pragmatics, narrative techniques, themes, politeness strategies

Introduction

Politeness theory is a well-known idea in the field of pragmatics, introduced by Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson in the 1970s. They built their theory on the concept of face, which was originally introduced by Erving Goffman in 1955, who described face as the image we try to show others during our interactions, the intended version of ourselves we want others to accept and respect. He saw it as something we all work to protect, especially when dealing with other people. The purpose of this study is to emphasize the importance of theoretical models in analyzing lexico-semantic relationships within texts, particularly in the context of identity in Dur Aziz Amna's American Fever, which explores the contrasting cultures

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of Pakistan and America. The study will further investigate how the subtleties of politeness not only serve interpersonal functions within the narrative but also contribute to larger thematic concerns such as identity crisis. In doing so, this thesis will argue that politeness in American Fever is not merely a surface-level linguistic choice but a powerful tool that both stabilizes and destabilizes cultural subjectivities.

People generally have two main kinds of face: positive face (the need to be liked and accepted) and negative face (the need to be independent and free from pressure). Politeness, then, becomes a way to soften these threats to help things go smoothly and avoid conflict (Metts & Cupach, 2009). Brown and Levinson broke down politeness into different strategies. They showed how people use different ways of speaking depending on the situation, the relationship, and the level of risk to someone's face (Mary, 2019). But even though their theory has been very influential, it's not without its critics. For example, Watts (2003) pointed out that politeness works differently in different cultures, and it's not fair to assume one model fits all. Similarly, Verschueren (1999) argued that politeness always depends on the situation things like culture, roles, and social expectations all play a big part in how people choose their words and manage politeness.

Pragmatic Analysis

The term pragmatic analysis refers to a set of logical and linguistic tools that researchers use to systematically explain how political language works in real-life interactions. It focuses on understanding all the possible meanings, interpretations, and inferences that a listener or reader might draw from a speaker's or writer's words always within the specific context those words are used. Thomas (1995) introduces the core ideas and theories behind pragmatics, laying the foundation for this kind of analysis. Pragmatic analysis fits well with what Hall (1999) describes as "specific history" a type of research where analysts examine how people at a certain time understood the events happening around them, before those events were studied by historians. In other words, this approach helps us understand why people acted the way they did and why things happened the way they did by recovering the meanings those events had at the time. One of the strengths of pragmatic analysis is that it's methodical and transparent: another researcher can follow the same steps and reach the same conclusions. Every inference made in the analysis has to be clearly spelled out.

Brown and Levinson (1987) also shed light on how language is used to maintain social harmony and to avoid face-threatening acts. In the same way, pragmatic analysis allows critics to point to specific inferential steps in an argument if they wish to challenge its findings this keeps academic debates focused and productive. By examining how meanings are constructed through interaction, pragmatic analysis helps test constructivist theories that explore how language shapes human behavior, social practices, institutions, and systems. As a relatively new approach to studying political discourse, pragmatic analysis looks at how speech acts and communication shape our understanding of events. According to Indede (2009, p. 108), the linguistic tools we use in this process help us grasp the speaker's intentions, implied meanings, and the audience's interpretations. One technological development in this area is the Relatus Natural Language Understanding System, developed by John Mallery and

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others. This system converts English text into a network of ideas or agents, linking them in a way that helps track meanings and infer connections. Once a text is processed, Relatus can even answer questions about the narrative's context. Arundale (2006) used this system to explore how inmates engaged in dilemma games, showing how pragmatic tools can uncover deep patterns in communication.

Politeness Techniques in American Fever

The term American Fever might refer to a distinctly American phenomenon or could be used metaphorically in connection with a specific concept or work. Schloss (2009) delves into the history and cultural roots of American manners and politeness strategies, exploring how these practices shape societal customs and, by extension, American literature. If you're referring to the general practices of politeness in American culture, there are several commonly used techniques:

Polite Speech:

Americans frequently use expressions such as "please," "thank you," "sorry," "excuse me," and other polite terms to show respect and maintain social harmony.

Formal Titles and Address: When meeting someone for the first time or engaging in a formal conversation, Americans often use titles and surnames, such as "Mr. Smith" or "Dr. Jones." It's only after a person invites them to use their first name that the formality usually drops.

Respect for Personal Space:

Americans generally value personal space, expecting social interactions to occur at a comfortable distance. Observing these boundaries ensures that individuals don't feel uncomfortable or encroached upon.

Small Talk:

Engaging in small talk is a common politeness strategy and serves as a friendly gesture. Topics like the weather, recent events, or other light subjects are typically used to initiate conversation and build rapport.

Active Listening:

Demonstrating attentiveness is a key element of politeness. Active listening involves nodding, making eye contact, and offering verbal cues like "I see" or "That's interesting," which show the speaker that their words are being heard and valued.

Offering Help:

In American culture, offering assistance is an important gesture of politeness. Phrases like "Shall I help you with that?" or "Is there anything I can do for you?" are used to offer help in a courteous manner.

Apologizing:

When misunderstandings or mistakes occur, Americans often apologize to resolve conflicts. Phrases like "I'm sorry" or "I apologize for the inconvenience" are commonly used to restore goodwill and maintain relationships.

Acknowledging Efforts:

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Offering words of encouragement or recognition, such as "Well done" or "I heard you went through a lot of stress," helps to validate others' efforts and provide positive reinforcement.

Literature Review

The theory of face developed by Brown and Levinson in 1987 has become the foundational framework in politeness studies. According to both Hobbs (2003) and Ji (2000), analyzing speech acts is a critical element. Brown and Levinson's theory integrates three fundamental components that address face, Face-Threatening Acts (FTAs), and politeness. They define "face" as “the persona that every member wishes to have in society,” which encompasses public perceptions of self-image. This observed social identity consists of two key elements. The first, negative face, relates to an individual’s desire for freedom of movement and immunity from coercion, while the second, positive face, involves the desire for approval and acceptance of one's personality by others. Every verbal interaction can threaten face by challenging either negative face needs or positive face maintenance.

Brown and Levinson (1987) explain that speech acts such as requests, proposals, arguments, and compliments inherently threaten the face-wants of either the speaker or the hearer, thus requiring politeness strategies to mitigate these threats. The three core approaches to speech acts are positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record politeness.

Positive politeness: This strategy seeks to enhance the addressee's positive face.

Negative politeness: This aims to minimize impositions on the addressee’s rights.

Off-record politeness: This strategy involves violating one of Grice’s (1975) maxims, allowing the recipient to infer the intended meaning based on the context. According to the Cooperative Principle (Grice, 1975), all conversational contributions must serve a specific purpose within the exchange, which helps guide interpretation.

The development of an impeccable language involves envisioning and creating formal structures and sentence forms to be used in an ideal language, which must be metaphorically quarantined. The genuine effort to philosophically ground scientific endeavors begins immediately as scientists adopt an ideal language for all their statements.

Llorica and Sosas (2024) analyze the use of Brown and Levinson’s Politeness Strategies among Filipino teenagers in household interactions. They found that Filipino teenagers predominantly used positive politeness strategies to express warmth and kindness, in addition to strategies like bald-on-record and negative politeness. Their study also examines the influence of home environment and culture on communication patterns.

Murphy and De Felice (2012) focus on pragmatic politeness strategies and analyze pragmatic expressions such as directness, requests, and the use of words like “please” in English communication. In their study on "Routine Politeness in American and British English," published in the Journal of Pragmatics, they explore workplace emails and observe that American English emails used "please" more frequently and directly, reflecting a straightforward approach to politeness. In contrast, British English emails employed indirectness and flexibility, embodying a formal request approach to politeness.

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According to Adolphs (2007), off-record politeness involves violating Grice's maxims, which are classified as follows:

Authenticity: Communicators should ensure that their contributions are accurate.

Informativeness: Communicators should provide sufficient information to the recipient.

Relevance: Contributions should be relevant to the ongoing conversation.

Length: Contributions should be appropriately concise and easy to understand.

Grice (1975) provides examples of these maxims:

Quantity: If I ask for your help fixing my car, I expect you to provide the correct number of screws—nothing more or less, such as four screws when only four are needed.

Quality: I expect you to provide genuine ideas, not fake ones.

Relation: The assistance I require should be provided at the right moment in the process—for instance, giving an oven cloth during baking rather than at the beginning.

Manner: I expect someone I'm in a relationship with to express what they're contributing and do so in a reasonable time frame.

In real-life situations, people often do not strictly adhere to the cooperative principle. These communicative norms are frequently violated, highlighting the concepts of deception, evasion, ambiguity, and dishonesty in language use (Chilton & Schaffner, 2002). Information that might be disadvantageous to the speaker or uncomfortable for the hearer is often avoided. When asked about information they are unwilling to disclose, individuals may protect their "face," especially in organizational or public relations contexts.

Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory of face acknowledge that face has universal roots but is significantly shaped by culture. They describe face as an element that both interlocutors must consider during interactions to preserve or develop, or even lose entirely. Interlocutors must regulate their behaviour to avoid threatening acts to their face value. As Brown and Levinson (1987, p. 64) draw from Kenny (1966), conventional logic maintains truth across propositions and offers a connection between ends and appropriate means for preserving satisfaction principles.

Research Methodology

To investigate the theme of identity crisis through politeness, textual analysis is applied to the selected texts in American Fever by Dur e Aziz Amna in order to identify politeness with the narratives. This method concerns concrete episodes, scenes with characters' interactions, and the representative samples of the narrative that respond to the concept of politeness. The selected portions were analyzed using through the applied framework.

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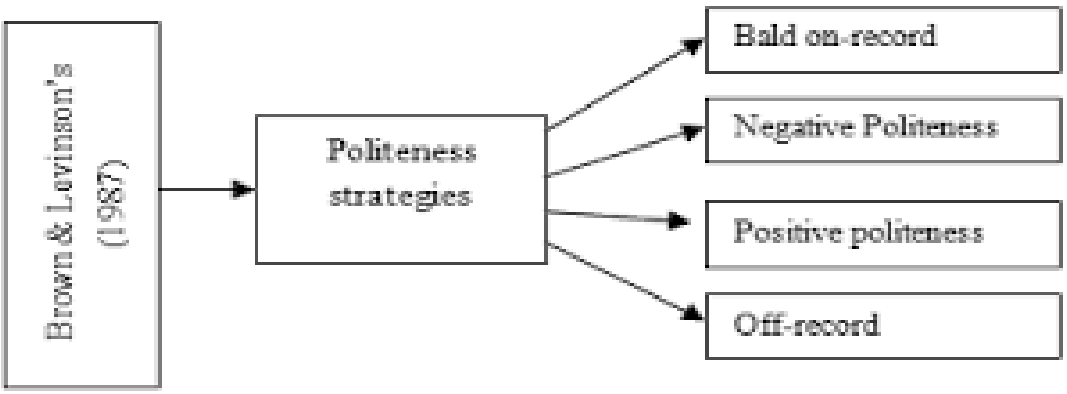
Figure 3.1
Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory



Data Analysis

Description of Theme of Identity

Excerpt 1: "Kelly loves it when I posit myself as a virgin to America, so that cheers her up a bit."

With respect to Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory, particularly concerning the theme of identity, the politeness strategies evident in the analyzed sentence "Kelly loves it when I posit myself as a virgin to America, so that cheers her up a bit" involve the deliberate manipulation of the speaker's identity to produce a desired social outcome. In alignment with positive politeness strategies, the speaker attempts to associate more closely with the addressee, seeking mutual understanding and rapport. The statement that Kelly "loves it when there is a virgin to America around" suggests that the speaker presents themselves in a way that evokes sympathy or fascination from Kelly.

This demonstrates how individuals can intentionally showcase a reflective aspect of their identity that the recipient finds interesting or relatable.

Furthermore, the phrase "addressed to a virgin who stands before America" could symbolize a desire to appear cautious, naive, or inexperienced in front of Americans. By portraying themselves as a newcomer or outsider, the speaker seeks to protect their social image and avoid negative judgment. This strategy allows the speaker to foster closeness with Kelly, potentially creating common ground and shared experiences. The phrase "so that cheers her up a bit" indicates the speaker's intention to uplift Kelly's mood indirectly, aligning with intercultural norms of politeness that value subtlety over directness.

Moreover, signs of embedded indirectness, combined with a desire to promote Kelly's well-being, reflect elements of negative politeness as well. By maintaining a respectful distance while still expressing concern, the speaker manages to balance attentiveness with deference. The use of proxemic sensitivity creating emotional closeness while respecting personal boundaries highlights the speaker's awareness of Kelly's needs and preferences.

Thus, the analysis illustrates that the speaker consciously performs socially appropriate behaviors, employing positive and negative politeness strategies,

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indirectness, and face-saving techniques to sustain and strengthen their interpersonal relationship with Kelly. Through these strategies, the speaker not only showcases an awareness of existential aspects of identity but also demonstrates a deep understanding of social etiquette and cultural expectations.

Excerpt 2: "Four inches, when every inch was political"

The statement "Four inches, and every inch political," when examined through Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory, serves as a profound example of the theme of identity and, more significantly, of how language is employed to create subtle meanings associated with power, identity, and interpersonal relations. In the expression "Four inches," we can identify a parameter of practical or figurative value that occupies an essential role within a particular context. This measurement may symbolize aspects of one's identity something situationally significant or imbued with meaning.

In this instance, the speaker consciously focuses on presenting their identity as the central element of the narrative, using a seemingly minor detail that carries a deeper, impactful message. The statement investigates not only the personal space as political territory but also suggests that every social or contextual environment, regardless of size, holds political significance. This highlights the intrinsic relationship between the self and its surrounding social, cultural, or political environments.

By framing identity as an inherently political concept, the speaker captures the essence of the term: fractures in identity do not stem solely from individual characteristics but emerge from the way identities are decoded and shaped by external powers and social relations. Language becomes a means of rendering identity — a complex signal reflecting both individual memory and collective societal structures. Through the metaphorical use of measurement, the speaker conveys that identity, much like ethnicity, is not a fixed concept. Rather, it is dynamic, fluid, and capable of being reimagined within broader political frameworks.

Finally, the metaphor suggesting that the street is more political than the people living on it reinforces the idea that power relations permeate personal identities and encourage reflection on how individuals position themselves within societal structures.

Excerpt 3: "Ours was never a propaganda household. Ammi and Abbu parented in uneven ways, often sending out contradictory messages about faith and practice and leaving it to Faisal and me to reconcile them as we saw fit."

The family never used propaganda to change the thinking of its members; instead, the setting remained grounded and open. The use of the term "propaganda" highlights a recognizable flaw in systems of total control, where the aim is to make children think in only one prescribed way or support only a single perspective. In contrast, the family environment described here reflects an example of positive politeness, wherein parents made conscious efforts to preserve their children's free will in the construction of their identities. No rigid structures or predetermined narratives were imposed upon them.

The portrayal of "different ways" and "confusing messages" regarding "religion/practice" demonstrates how family life contributed to identity formation through the presentation of multiple, and sometimes conflicting, options.

A minor but telling example is the inconsistency between the parents' fear of confrontation and their gradual, subtle efforts to instill their values. This strategy created a space where children including Faisal and myself could interpret and integrate these messages in ways that made sense to each of us individually.

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Faisal and I were allowed to make our own decisions and merge various influences according to our personal understanding. This empowerment handed control over our lives and destinies back to us, allowing us to forge identities in the ways we desired. It represents a celebration of positive politeness, where parents encouraged independence while offering guidance without imposition. In fact, the youths emphasized that the younger generation has an active and vital role in constructing its own complex identity. By adopting such a stance, the parents demonstrated their respect for the opinions and autonomy of the younger members, understanding that without such mutual respect, meaningful integration into the social environment would not have been possible.

Excerpt 4: "Identity isn't something you choose; it's something you carry with you, whether you like it or not."

The passage represents the theme of identity and emphasizes the idea that identity is an inherent attribute rather than a personal choice. This notion is expressed through a positive politeness strategy, presenting identity as a shared undertaking among all people, distinct from an individually chosen vocation. In this way, the construction of identity-related issues is sustained, enabling listeners to embrace the collective aspects of identity, which influence both how they feel about themselves and how they are perceived by others.

On the other hand, the phrase “whether you like it or not” reflects a negative politeness strategy, acknowledging the potential discomfort or hardship that may arise when individuals are confronted with aspects of their identity. Here, the author suggests that while people may perceive their identity from various angles or adopt different attitudes toward it, the fundamental identification the core of their being remains constant, in line with the concept of face requirements.

Throughout the speaker’s narrative, the most pervasive form of politeness identifiable is non-confrontational politeness. Despite clearly articulating the enduring nature of identity, the speaker also acknowledges its complexities and the potential awkwardness it may cause. This strategy permits the exploration of multiple perspectives on identity while minimizing opportunities for conflict or discomfort.

Finally, the discussion skillfully employs positive politeness to foster cooperation among readers and to encourage recognition of the cross-cultural nature of self-referential experience. Simultaneously, negative politeness is used to empathize with readers who may find the subject matter personally challenging. Thus, the effective use of polite strategies helps to establish a respectful, considerate tone, ensuring that the conversation remains both well-mannered and sensitive to the reader’s emotional responses.

Excerpt 5: "Arrogance is a terrible look. And trust me, our society does not forgive it in young ladies like yourself."

In the course of this dialogue, the author applies Brown and Levinson's **Politeness Theory** to explore the demands of society, particularly in relation to gender roles. The author asserts that society does not spare even young women who follow the rules, as evidenced by the statement, “Arrogance is a terrible look.” This line reflects self-ridicule, where the speaker implies that pride is wrong, and that common public

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formalities are employed to attract others. The speaker suggests that one can socially negate perceived negative behaviors in order to maintain positive interactions. This is achieved through an appeal to societal membership, which governs the behavior of girls, especially in the context of beauty standards.

The statement relies on **negative politeness**, as it emphasizes societal expectations over individual perspectives. In doing so, the author introduces the audience to the discrimination arising from gender stereotypes prevalent in society. This serves as one of the indirect reasons why individuals, particularly women, feel compelled to conform to the behavior expected of their gender. The underlying strategy is to mitigate potential threats to one's social standing while advocating for behaviors that align with conventional understandings, especially those that challenge societal norms. Ultimately, the sentence illustrates one of the key purposes of the author's discussion on mannerism strategies: to assign roles within the social framework of gender while also promoting benevolence.

Table 4.1:
Showcasing Themes and Sub-Themes of the Quotations from the Text

Themes	Sub-Themes	Quotations
Identity	Cultural Dichotomy	"Kelly loves it when I posit myself as a virgin to America, so that cheers her up a bit."
	Societal Scrutiny	"Four inches, when every inch was political."
	complexities of identity formation	"Ours was never a propaganda household. Ammi and Abbu parented in uneven ways, often sending out contradictory messages about faith and practice and leaving it to Faisal and me to reconcile them as we saw fit."
	Embracing Individuality	"Identity isn't something you choose; it's something you carry with you, whether you like it or not."
	tension between personal identity and societal expectations	"Arrogance is a terrible look. And trust me, our society does not forgive it in young ladies like yourself."

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Shared Alienation	I am like you, also not from here.
Evolving Homes	Home doesn't stay the same after you move. You change, it changes

Discussion

In American Fever (2022), the theme of the Diasporic experience is evident in the fact that the characters have left their home countries and are now living in the United States. Like Minhaj, the protagonist of American Fever, Hira also moved to the USA for her studies. She now lives with her host family in Oregon. The narrative features only a few Muslim characters, including Hamid, a Muslim boy from Lebanon who is Hira's classmate. Both face numerous challenges and difficulties as Muslims, especially as Muslims around the world are often stereotyped and demonized, particularly in Europe and America, following the 9/11 incident.

Brown (2006) describes Muslims as being perceived as a "people problem" in contemporary global portrayals, where they are often depicted as terrorists. As Said (1978) argues, this portrayal justifies discrimination against minorities. Thus, by associating Islam with terrorism, Muslims are similarly stigmatized as terrorists. Migration can serve as material for literary exploration, offering inspiration and a subject matter that demands a broader vision. American Fever provides an example of this, as it delves into themes of migration, identity, and the challenges faced by the diaspora.

Dur-e-Aziz Amna, a significant Pakistani Diaspora writer, has made notable contributions to this field. As Cohen's characteristics of Diaspora suggest, the essential aspects of Diasporic identity are not solely tied to geographical origin but are instead shaped by assumptions, social structures, and behavioral patterns that people often carry with them. Amna's work, rooted in the contemporary Diaspora, reflects these qualities and offers a unique perspective, especially since she resides in Pakistan, unlike many other diaspora writers who live in Western countries.

Conclusion

In order to conclude, it can be stated that in the midst of political and social turmoil, Khaled Hosseini's A Thousand Splendid Suns is a noteworthy literary masterpiece that gives deep insights into the lives of Afghan women. The novel has sparked a huge variety of educational conversations, including feminist criticism, cultural research, and looks at how resilient people can be in the face of difficulty. Gender, trauma, and geopolitical troubles have all been the problem of an awful lot scholarly dialogue analyzed the A Thousand Splendid Suns. Postcolonial concept, trauma studies, and feminist literary grievance are just a few of the important perspectives that academics have used to analyze the novel. The novel has drawn praise for its rich historical detail and transferring narrative, but it has also drawn complaint for viable

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orientalist overtones. However, it remains an essential piece of literature that illuminates the real-lifestyles realities of Afghan ladies whilst presenting readers with a stirring account of perseverance and hope. In addition to enhancing our comprehension of the novel, those scholarly investigations improve discussions about gender, culture and war in literature.

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