

## **Cross-Cultural Pragmatic Failure of Female Characters in “A Thousand Splendid Suns”**

### **Abstract**

*The purpose of this research paper is to examine Khaled Hosseini’s novel “A Thousand Splendid Suns” from the socio-linguistic perspective of “cross cultural pragmatic failure”. “Pragmalinguistics failure” is only language specific as Mariam, an outcast and illegitimate child, is not able to learn and understand the language of society. She knows the few words which are spoken by Jalil, her father, Nana her mother, Mullah Faizullah her Quran tutor and Bibi jo. E.g. Mariam is not able to understand the word ‘gramophone’ because in her isolated life she has not seen or heard about the gramophone. “Socio-pragmatic failure” is caused by ignorance of culture: in the novel Mariam is not able to understand the meaning of ‘harami’ until she is transferred to the culture of legitimate people. The article refers to Jenny Thomas’ (1983) conceptual framework in order to highlight the inability of females to understand society. In this novel there are two types of “Pragmatic Failures”: “Pragmalinguistics failure” and “Socio-pragmatic failure. Catherine Belsey’s (2005) method of text analysis as suggested in her essay “Textual Analysis” has been used for the purposes of analysis. The study is significant because it points out the angles which cause the subjugation of women by men, the inability of women to protest for their rights and their inability to improve their situation.*

**Key Words:** *Pragmatics, linguistics, culture, failure, society, illegitimate, listener, speaker, legitimate*

### **INTRODUCTION**

“A Thousand Splendid Suns” is the story of a woman who has to spend the first fifteen years of her life in a secluded place with only her mother as company. She lives away from society and culture about which she has only heard from different people. There are two different cultures: the culture of secluded Mariam which is narrow, limited, crowded with ideals, removed from real life and the culture of

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real people which is broad, inclusive and real. When Mariam is transferred from her limited culture to the wider culture, she has to suffer due to cross cultural pragmatic failure.

Part I of the novel begins when Mariam is a teenager living with her mother Nana. She is an illegitimate or *Harami* child of Jalil and Nana. Jalil is a rich cinema owner who settles Nana and Mariam in a small hut outside of the city of Herat. Jalil refuses to acknowledge her as a true member of his family and is embarrassed by her. One day, against Nana's will, she goes to Herat for the first time in order to see her father. Jalil refuses to meet her and sends her back to her mother. Upon her return, she sees her mother hanging from a rope. Jalil marries Mariam off to Rasheed who is a poor old man in Kabul and is thirty years her senior. In Kabul Mariam cannot understand the cosmopolitan atmosphere. Rasheed wants Mariam to bear him sons and initially shows a very kind and loving attitude towards her but after multiple miscarriages he becomes cruel and abusive.

Part II is about Laila who is a neighbor of Rasheed and Mariam. Laila is fortunate enough to be educated. She is in love with Tariq but their relationship proves to be very dangerous during the Mujahideen's fighting and they sleep together for the first time when Tariq's family migrates to Pakistan. A rocket hits Laila's home and her parents are killed.

Part III is about Laila and Mariam's relationship: Rasheed saves Laila and takes her as his second wife. Laila agrees because she has become pregnant with Tariq's illegitimate child and this is the only way to protect her reputation. One day Laila informs Mariam that she is saving money in order to escape to Pakistan. They are betrayed at the bus station and Rasheed beats and locks them up. One day Tariq comes to meet Laila and the meeting is exposed by Zalmai, the son of Laila by Rasheed. Rasheed beats Laila severely; at this point Mariam kills Rasheed and surrenders herself. She is imprisoned and after a brief trial she is executed. The novel ends with Laila teaching and working for an orphanage. She is pregnant with a baby girl who will be named Mariam.

Mariam's life is categorized into three orders: Imaginary order, Symbolic order and the trauma of the Real. Imaginary order and Symbolic order of Mariam are caused by her Pragmatic failure. Imaginary order: a world of fullness, completeness and delight is the life she spends with her mother with a positive image of her father. Symbolic order: the experience of separation, seeking and compensation is the life she spends

after the death of her mother which also causes separation from her father. She seeks the love of Rasheed and gets compensation in the form of the love of Aziza. The trauma of the Real is the discovery of her defeat and misery. She kills Rasheed when she finds out that he will not change and that he intends to kill Laila. With this discovery she kills Rasheed; as Lacan explains about the Real, “A curtain...upon which our whole world is embroidered, and we know that behind that curtain is the Real” (Tyson, 2006, P. 32).

The novel “A Thousand Splendid Suns” by Khaled Hosseini involves multilayered and complex writing because of pragmatic failure in which what is explicit on the surface level is not implied at its deeper and intended level. The understanding of irony of explicit meaning in order to get implicit meaning falls under the category of pragmatics. The female characters are not able to understand the situation and they suffer because of pragmatic failure. In order to dig out the implicit meaning i. e, the reality in the story, the dialogues of the characters have been analyzed at a deeper level. What is said by the characters in the beginning of the novel is proved the opposite at the end of the book. The ambiguity between covert and overt meanings becomes the cause of tragedy for the main characters. The inability of the main characters to differentiate between the surface and intended meaning of their interaction brings about their tragic end.

### **Theoretical Framework:**

The novel has been analyzed from the perspective of cross cultural pragmatic failure. The causes of the misunderstanding in interaction among the major characters are caused due to a) “Pragma-linguistic Failure” b) “Socio-Pragmatic Failure” as proposed by Jenny Thomas. She argues:

“Pragmatics, 'language in use', is the place where a speaker's knowledge of grammar comes into contact with his/her knowledge of the world. But both systems of knowledge are filtered through systems of beliefs—beliefs about language and beliefs about the world.” (Thomas, 1983, p. 99)

In the category of “Pragma-linguistic Failure” there are two sub-types: one is on the part of the speaker since s/he is not transferring knowledge appropriately and the other is on the part of the listener in that s/he is not giving the response expected by the speaker due to prejudice, emotional attachment or lack of argument. In both situations the intended purpose is not attained either due to the incompetency of the speaker or due to the carelessness of the listener.

In the category of “Socio-Pragmatic Failure” there is a wide range of failures such as miscalculation of the culture of the other or lack of “social competence” and ignorance of ‘pragmatic ground rules’ which is unawareness of the connotative meanings of the culture of the other. These connotative meanings are decided by the society and are called ‘oblique or indirect lie’ and ‘different assessment of power or social distance’ as power relation between husband and wife is different in the East and West. The “Cross Cultural Pragmatic Failure” in this novel is not confined to different dominant cultures but pervades the same culture. Cross Cultural misunderstanding may be perceived between different regions, ethnic groups, political parties, workers or management, police and criminals, classes, age, sex or people who may share the same culture, political ethos and country. In the words of Elain Chaika, “Cultures may vary in their use of language and body motions” (Chaika, 2000, p. 59). “Pragma-linguistic Failure” is not similar to “Communicative Failure” which involves grammar; rather “Pragmatics” involves the ability to use language effectively in order to achieve a specific purpose and to understand language in context.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

“A Thousand Splendid Suns” is full of the dilemmas of ‘cross cultural pragmatic failure’ and its disastrous effects. In this novel ‘cross cultural pragmatic failure’ occurs in a country where different sub-cultures, social classes and elements of patriarchy are present conspicuously. Nana is the bearer of cultural scripts for Mariam. She tells her about the society of legitimate and illegitimate people, patriarchy, the real role of her father and the difference between appearance and reality. Anna Wierzbicka states, “Cultural scripts describe cultural norms and values from within rather than from the outside, that is, from the point of view of those people who are the bearers of the postulated norms and values” (Wierzbicka, 2008, P. 39). Mariam ignores the cultural scripts of her mother when she claims to participate in the world of legitimate people because she has no practical experience and is therefore unable to understand the norms of the culture. She tries to go against the stream because of her ignorance and consequently has to suffer by ignoring cultural pragmatics rules.

In “Pragma-linguistics Failure” semantic failure occurs on the part of the listener. When Mariam is five years old she is not able to understand the true meaning of *harami*. She assumes that *harami* is an ugly, despicable thing like an insect and is not aware of the implicit meaning of the word. Her tragedy starts from this misunderstanding: since she is unaware of her position in society, she claims the things and rights of legitimate children which are love, family, home, acceptance etc.

secondly, Mariam considers Jalil, her father, to be a good man since she misunderstands the concept of *harami*. Thus, the dire warnings and advice of her mother prove futile and ineffective. At that point the important difference between firsthand knowledge and secondhand knowledge is highlighted. Jonathan Turner states, “The only “real reality” is what we observe by watching people; all else imposes analytical categories and, hence, amounts to the reification of analytical thinking” (Turner, 2002, p. 30). Thus, literal and cultural meanings are very important to understand the culture because they show our position and status in society.

In “Pragma-linguistic Failure” the intentions of ‘Speaker’ and ‘Effects on Listener’ matter a lot. If the listener is unable to understand the expected meaning of the speaker then the result is ‘pragma-linguistic failure’. In this novel Nana, as the speaker, warns Mariam but Mariam cannot understand the warnings of Nana and in spite of her advice Mariam takes the bold step of leaving home. Understanding comes when Mariam interacts with representatives of the culture from which Nana gains her understanding. The listener, in this case, may not be able to understand the meaning of the speaker due to many reasons: grammatical or semantic failure as Mariam is not able to understand the implicit meaning of *harami*; failure of reference as Mariam is not able to understand which place is referred by Rasheed for picnic and whether it is Kabul or Baghdad; failure to understand the intended force of speaker’s utterance as Nana’s threat of suicide is substantial but Mariam considers it only a notional one to stop her from going with her father. “Pragma-linguistic failure” is the cause of the death of Nana. She warns her in the novel, “I’ll die if you go.... You’ll see, I’ll swallow my tongue and die. Don’t leave me, Mariam jo” (Hosseini, 2007, p. 26). Mariam is not convinced by the threat of Nana and leaves home. After returning she has to suffer due to the suicidal death of Nana. The foreboding of Nana “I’ll die if you go” comes true as she commits suicide. Mariam practically gets the understanding of motherhood after her miscarriages through her motherly feelings for Aziza and her assumed responsibility of motherhood for Laila. Thus, warnings are futile if the listener does not take them seriously.

In the novel “Pragma-linguistic failure” occurs due to emotional attachment: Nana does her best to convince Mariam that her father is a liar because Mariam is not able to understand the implicit meaning of his promises. Nana says in the novel about Jalil, “Rich man telling rich lies.... He cast us out. He cast us out of his big fancy house like we were nothing to him. He did it happily” (Hosseini, 2007, p. 5). But Mariam remains firm due to her emotional attachment with her father and does not think of herself as an illegitimate child. On the contrary she feels that she deserves the

bounties, gifts, smiles and endearments. She claims to be with her legitimate sibling in her father's cinema due to "pragma-linguistic failure". When Jalil promises that he will come to pick Mariam for the cinema, the explicit meaning is that he will come as promised to Mariam. However Nana knows the implicit meaning that Jalil is afraid of society to acknowledge his illegitimate daughter and he will not come as has been predicted by Nana. Mariam goes alone to her father's home assuming that he may be unwell or busy. Her positive image of Jalil crashes to the ground when she leaves home and understands the real culture of legitimate people; when she observes it herself and not from the viewpoint of Jalil and or through the warning eyes of Nana. Jalil, as predicted by Nana, does not allow her to enter his home, as predicted by Nana, and sends Mariam back to Nana.

In Pragmatics the "Argumentation Theory" plays a significant role. In "A Thousand Splendid Suns" despite Nana's warnings and apprehensions Mariam clings to the idea of going to Jalil; she gets ready for Jalil and waits for him despite Nana saying, "What a stupid girl you are! You think you matter to him, that you're wanted in his house? You think you're a daughter to him? That he's going to take you in?" (Hosseini, 2007, p. 26). These hints are not effective because Mariam does not argue with her mother; she remains silent and infers without arguments that her mother is jealous of her because she is going to experience happiness from the society that her mother had been thrown out of. In the case of Mariam one of the causes of her tragedy is that she does not argue with her mother and withdraws into herself. Lilian Bermejo-Luque writes in the preface of her book, "Argumentation so often...is terribly useful. By arguing well, we show our claims to be correct and, fortunately, this is a very effective way of persuading others" (Bermejo-Luque, 2011, p. vii).

After the death of Nana she understands the implicit nature of the culture of legitimate people when Jalil marries her to an old and poor shoe maker Rasheed, who is already married. At the time of departure Mariam says good bye with the determination never to see her father again. She finally understands the implicit nature of her father through her direct contact with the real culture of her father with the additional implicit understanding of her mother's warnings. As she says, to her father, "I used to worship you....You were ashamed of me.... I won't see you. Don't you come. I don't want to hear from you. Ever. Ever....It ends here for you and me" (Hosseini, 2007, p. 50). Pragmatic understanding comes with practical contact with society and people and Mariam understands society after practical and active interaction.

“Socio-Pragmatic Failure” is caused by the miscalculation of the other culture or lack of “social competence”. In this novel Mariam miscalculates her father’s culture as she thinks he will accept her like his legitimate child but Jalil does not do so; in fact he does not allow her even to enter his home. “Social competence” includes the knowledge of assessment of power or social distance. Mariam wrongly assesses the power of her father in patriarchal society. She thinks him to be like her mother and assumes that he would do whatever she wants but she is wrong. Her father does not come to pick her according to his promise and sends her back. Ignoring her resistance, he marries her to an old man against her will.

In this novel another characteristic of “Socio-Pragmatic Failure” is ignorance of ‘pragmatic ground rules’ which means that what is said cannot be taken in the literal sense which is called “Co-operative Lie, White lie, Indirect lie”. When she is going with Rasheed for a picnic Rasheed tells her that the place is called ‘Chicken Street.’ Out of curiosity, Mariam says that there is no chicken in ‘Chicken Street’; she does not know the reason for naming a place ‘Chicken Street’ because she does not know the ‘pragmatic ground rules’ of Kabul. The next tragedy of Mariam starts after her marriage with the cause of this tragedy being the same: Cross culture pragmatic failure. The reason is that all her life she has lived in seclusion, alone with her mother, away from other people. There are only three visitors: her father; Mullah Faizullah and Bibi Jo. She lives a few days at Herat with her father but she has minimal contact with other family members at home. After her marriage with Rasheed she has to survive in a strange culture where ‘cross cultural pragmatic failure’ causes much harm. She has to move from Herat to Kabul and she is not familiar with the dialect of Kabul: as *jan* is used instead of *jon*, *hamshira* instead of *hamshierh*. In 15 years of her life she has not tasted ice cream and she is not aware of how to eat ice cream. She also does not know how to bake bread at the communal *tandoor*. She cannot understand Rasheed’s description of modern men who don’t mind their wives walking among strangers with makeup on their faces and no covering on their heads because all her life she has been confined to walking in secluded places in Herat.

Mariam, due to her cross cultural pragmatic failure cannot understand the current condition of Kabul and is also unable to understand the concepts of Communism and Marxism. She is unable to understand the moods, likes and dislikes of her husband and considers the gifts from Jalil to be original and proof of his fatherly love; it is only later that she realizes that the gifts are for compensation of his guilt. Similarly she considers the gifts of Rasheed to be true and meant for her only, showing again the misunderstanding of implicit meaning. At this time the gifts are not for her, rather

the implicit intention is Rasheed's desire for a son which is the main drive behind gifts. When Rasheed is disappointed in getting a son from Mariam, his true nature becomes evident since Mariam thinks, "Meanwhile, a change had come over Rasheed.... to fault her cooking, to complain about clutter around the yard or point out even minor uncleanliness in the house.... He didn't buy her sweets or gifts" (Hosseini, 2007, p. 85). By the time Mariam gets a complete implicit understanding of the culture of the male dominated society, of married life and the culture of Kabul, there is no time for amendments. Elaine Chaika says, "Being on time is so important to our particular culture," (Chaika,2000, p. 41) she kills Rasheed because she cannot suffer the loss of Laila; Mariam's speculation, before the murder of Rasheed, shows her true understanding, "He'd taken so much from her in twenty-seven years of marriage. She would not watch him take Laila too.....it occurred to her that this was the first time that she was deciding the course of her own life" (Hosseini, 2007, p. 310, 311). At the point of death Mariam understands the implicit meaning of her mother's proverb because the Taliban judge accuses Mariam of the murder of Rasheed. He does not blame Rasheed for his firm intention of murdering Laila and his brutal attitude towards Mariam and Laila. At the end of the novel Mariam understands the implicit meaning of the proverb; "Like a compass needle that points north, a man's accusing finger always finds a woman. Always. You remember that, Mariam" (Hosseini, 2007, P. 7, 323).

'Cross culture pragmatic failure' plays a tyrannical role in the life of Laila. Her suffering and loss are lesser than Mariam's because she has lived in the society of legitimate people from the very beginning of her life. Thus, her exposure and experiences are different from Mariam's, whereas living in the same society Mariam is unaware of male culture and that her plan of escape is not a new one. She does not know that women do not beg the help of strangers to buy a ticket for them in order to migrate from Afghanistan to Pakistan, which she does due to 'Socio-pragmatic failure'. The stranger knows their intentions because of his awareness of women escaping and he reports to the police. The reason for all her miseries and her exploitation by Rasheed is her unawareness of this culture. When she gets awareness of the culture of strong women all her miseries disappear immediately. She punches Rasheed for the first time, and this is quickly followed by the idea of killing Rasheed: she then goes ahead and kills him. After that Laila marries Tariq and serves her country by helping Lala Zaman in an orphanage.

**CONCLUSION:**

The analysis of the novel demonstrates that if Mariam had understand the difference between legitimate and illegitimate cultures in her childhood, she would not have suffered the hard realities of life. It is mainly her idealistic approach towards life and her seclusion from the real world which results in her failure to understand the culture of the male dominated society, the culture of legitimate people and the condition of illegitimate people in a community of legitimate people. Though her mother tells her the real situation of the world outside her secluded life but Mariam is unable to understand, showing that true understanding of other culture/s comes through real-life interaction. At the very beginning of the novel Mariam is totally ignorant about power relations due to her lack of empirical experience and the understanding of power relations and social distance which comes through real interaction with her father, her siblings and her husband.

“Social competence” or “Pragmatic understanding” cannot be simply grafted on theoretical basis, as Nana explains the reality of the world; rather it is attained through empirical experience. Mariam does not care about her mother’s warnings although she finds all the warnings to come true after encountering practical and heuristic experiences. The most important thing about “Pragmatic competence” is time. If “Pragmatic competence” is acquired in time then there is no harm but when it comes late, the result may be very disappointing. Mariam gains “Pragmatic competence” very late in life; if she had had contact with the real world right from her childhood, the situation would have been different: she would not have had expectations from Jalil, Nana would not have died in vain and she may not have had to marry Rasheed.

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