

A Pragmatic Analysis of Muharikah's Novel *Sayang yang Tak Terungkap* (2023)

Muhammad Danial,¹ Ayu Melati Ningsih², Vera Kristiana³

English Literature Department, Faculty of Letters, Universitas Muslim Nusantara Al-Washliyah, Medan 20147, Indonesia

) Corresponding Author
Email: muhammadanial@umnaw.ac.id

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Abstract

This research examined the politeness strategies employed by the protagonist, Iman Syahirah, in *Sayang yang Tak Terungkap* (2023), a Malaysian Islamic novel written by Muharikah. Using Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory through a pragmatic analysis, the study identifies and interprets the characters' expressions within diverse social and professional settings. Using a qualitative descriptive method along with documentation and content analysis techniques, the research identifies and interprets the character's expressions within diverse social and professional settings. The results indicate that Iman Syahirah utilizes all four categories of politeness strategies—positive politeness, negative politeness, bald on-record, and off-record. Positive politeness fosters solidarity and empathy among patients and colleagues, whereas negative politeness indicates caution, respect, and an understanding of social distance. The bald-on-record approach emphasizes professional confidence and ethical power, while off-record reflects delicate communication consistent with cultural and religious awareness. These results suggest that politeness in this Islamic novel serves not merely as a linguistic tactic but also as a representation of gender beliefs, power dynamics, and Islamic principles in the Malay-

Islamic community. As a result, this research adds to the domain of literary pragmatics by combining linguistic examination with social context and religious identity in depicting a professional Muslim woman.

Keywords: politeness strategies, literary pragmatics, gender, Islamic values

INTRODUCTION

Language serves as a tool for communication as well as a window into a society's social, cultural, and religious values (Zahruddin, 2016). In Malay-Islamic society, using polite language is important for keeping social harmony. Polite language reflects manners, etiquette, and respect for the prevailing social hierarchy and religious norms (Erwani & Siregar, 2025). Therefore, language strategies are not merely a means of conveying messages, but also demonstrate the attitudes and values believed by the speaker.

One effective medium for representing these social and cultural values is the novel. As a long work of fictional prose, novels not only present a storyline but also reveal the personalities of the characters, the author's ideology, and the socio-cultural context surrounding the narrative (Danial, 2025). The dialogues between characters in novels often reflect broader social realities, so that analysis of the linguistic strategies used in novels can provide a deeper understanding of communication practices in society.

One interesting aspect of public figures' communication is linguistic politeness. Politeness is understood as a linguistic strategy to maintain harmony in interactions by minimizing conflict or threats to the face of the interlocutor. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), politeness strategies are divided into four main categories, namely bald on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record. These four strategies allow speakers to adjust their language choices to the social context, power relations, and desired communication goals.

Theoretically, politeness studies fall within the realm of pragmatics, a branch of linguistics that studies the meaning of utterances based on the context in which they are used (Priyanto et al., 2023). In this context, politeness is important because it shows how language plays a role in maintaining social relationships, managing hierarchies, and

negotiating the identity of speakers (Giawa et al., 2025). Thus, the study of politeness should not only focus on linguistic aspects, but also consider the social, cultural, and religious backgrounds that influence communication practices.

Previous studies have analyzed politeness strategies in various texts. For example, according to Ricky (2024), who studied the film *Tenggelamnya Kapal Van der Wijck* (The Sinking of the Van der Wijck), the author found the use of various politeness strategies in accordance with the cultural context and rural romance of Indonesia. According to Namirah et al. (2025), politeness is highlighted in the novel *Suluh Rindu* by Habiburrahman El Shirazy, which presents six maxims of politeness as markers of tolerance and respect for differences. Meanwhile, Ritonga and Munawaroh (2024) examined the story of Prophet Yusuf in the Qur'an. They focus on the importance of politeness in religious and social interactions.

Widyastuti (2019) carried out another study that analyzed Ernest Hemingway's novel *The Sun Also Rises*. The findings indicate that factors like style, register, slang, solidarity, and gender impact politeness strategies. These results suggest that linguistic politeness is both universal and significantly shaped by social and cultural contexts. Consequently, earlier research has enhanced the comprehension of politeness, yet it has centered on Western literature, religious writings, or mainstream Indonesian cinema.

Various practical studies show that politeness strategies in digital and political communication are important for maintaining self-image, building solidarity, and reducing face-threatening acts in different social and cultural contexts. Purnomo and Widarwati (2025) reveal that in the Central Java tourism industry, hotel reservation staff and travel agents use positive and negative politeness strategies in cancellation messages via WhatsApp, such as expressions of gratitude, empathy, and the use of local honorifics (*Pak, Bu, Mbak, Mas*) to maintain harmony and professionalism. Meanwhile, Yakumbu et al. (2025) analyzed James Marape's diplomatic speech in the Australian parliament, showing that politeness strategies and expressive acts such as narrative stories, geographical metaphors, and expressions of gratitude are used to negotiate Papua New Guinea's postcolonial identity and geopolitical position. In the context of political interviews in

Indonesia, Yafi and Maris (2025) found that politicians such as Anies Baswedan and Muhammin Iskandar use positive, negative, and off-the-record politeness strategies to manage their public image, avoid direct responsibility, and frame their political positions symbolically and religiously. These three studies enrich the understanding of the strategic and ideological functions of politeness in public communication and emphasize the importance of a contextual and cross-cultural socio-pragmatic approach in analyzing political discourse and digital services in Southeast Asia and the Pacific.

Although previous research contributions have been significant, most studies still emphasize descriptive aspects and have not explored the intersection between politeness, gender identity, profession, and Islamic values in contemporary literature. In fact, in the Malay-Islamic context, religious and cultural factors play a strong role in shaping politeness practices. Therefore, there is a need for research that links politeness strategies with the dual identities of characters who are at the intersection of gender, religion, and professionalism.

The novel *Sayang yang Tak Terungkap (Unrevealed Love)* by Muharikah (2023) presents a character who is relevant to this study, namely Iman Syahirah, a professional Muslimah doctor who faces social, medical, and spiritual dynamics. As the main character, Iman not only interacts with HIV patients, colleagues, and her family, but also negotiates religious values, cultural norms, and the demands of her profession. Her presence as a modern Muslim woman working as a medical professional makes her a unique representation in contemporary Malaysian Islamic literature.

In this context, the study explores how Iman Syahirah's use of politeness strategies reflects the intersection between her gender identity, professional role, and religious commitment within a patriarchal Malay-Islamic culture. The analysis aims to reveal how linguistic politeness functions as both a communication strategy and a form of resistance, adaptation, and self-representation. For instance, negative politeness demonstrates Iman's effort to uphold social harmony while maintaining respect for male authority figures; bald on-record strategies reflect her confidence and professional assertiveness within male-dominated spaces; whereas positive politeness—often framed with religious

expressions—embodies empathy, care, and piety as culturally valued feminine traits. Through these choices, Iman's politeness becomes a linguistic manifestation of how a Muslim woman navigates power, faith, and gender expectations in a patriarchal society.

Thus, this study offers novelty by focusing its study of politeness on professional Muslim female characters in Malaysian Islamic novels. This novelty lies in the interdisciplinary perspective that connects pragmatic studies, socio-pragmatics, gender studies, and Islamic values (Fatima & Fauziyah, 2024; Khandoker et al., 2024). Focusing on this intersection helps the study show how linguistic politeness works as a way to negotiate identity, represent religion, and manage social relations.

This research intends to recognize and outline the politeness strategies employed by the character Iman Syahirah in Muharikah's novel *Sayang yang Tak Terungkap* (*Unrevealed Love*) (2023), using Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory as the main analytical framework. Furthermore, this research seeks to analyze these strategies as representations of gender identity, power dynamics, and Islamic values embedded in the protagonist's communication. While Brown and Levinson's framework provide a useful foundation for identifying universal politeness strategies, it may not fully capture the culturally specific and religiously grounded norms of politeness in Malay-Islamic society. Therefore, this study also contextualizes the theory within Islamic ethical concepts such as *adab*, *ta'zim* (respect), and *rahmah* (compassion) to ensure a more comprehensive understanding of politeness in an Islamic cultural setting.

This research adds to the field of literary pragmatics by offering an interdisciplinary view that links linguistics, socio-pragmatics, gender studies, and Islamic values (Aritonang et al., 2024; Pelawi et al., 2025). It also broadens the understanding of how Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory applies to modern Malaysian Islamic literature, a topic that has not been widely explored.

However, applying a purely linguistic framework, such as Brown and Levinson's, to a literary text presents certain limitations. The model, originally developed from Western conversational contexts, tends to focus on individual face wants and universal strategies, which may overlook the collective, spiritual, and hierarchical aspects of communication

embedded in Malay-Islamic culture. Literary texts, moreover, are not only linguistic artifacts but also cultural narratives where politeness reflects moral, gendered, and religious meanings. Therefore, this study adapts the framework by integrating socio-religious concepts of *adab* (ethical conduct), *taqwa* (piety), and *hikmah* (wisdom) to interpret the protagonist's speech acts more contextually and holistically.

In practical terms, the results of this study can serve as a reference for communication practitioners, educators, and Muslim professionals, especially women, in understanding how politeness strategies can be used to negotiate social roles, maintain harmonious interactions, and, at the same time, assert religious identity in the modern workplace (Lazuardi & Shamsu, 2024). In other words, this research presents a discourse on how polite language can be a means of building a positive image and strengthening the position of Muslim women in social and professional spaces.

This study applies a pragmatic approach to analyze Muharikah's novel *Sayang yang Tak Terungkap* (2023), focusing on how politeness strategies represent the protagonist's gender, professional, and religious identities. The research questions asked are: How are language politeness strategies used by the character Iman Syahirah in the novel, and how do these strategies reflect gender identity, power relations, and Islamic values in contemporary Malay-Islamic society?

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach as proposed by Bogdan and Taylor (2015) to describe and analyze the forms of politeness strategies used by the main character in Muharikah's novel *Sayang yang Tak Terungkap* (2023) through a pragmatic lens based on Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory. This research focuses on analyzing the speech of the character Iman Syahirah through the lens of Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory. This theory categorizes politeness strategies into four primary types: bald on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record.

Data collection took place through documentation and direct recording techniques. The steps included: 1) reading the entire novel, 2) identifying dialogue by Iman

Syahirah that included elements of politeness, 3) recording these instances, and 4) classifying them based on their social context. After collecting the data, the author analyzed it using content analysis techniques, considering the social background in the narrative. This included aspects like work relationships, family pressures, and Malay cultural values.

The analysis looked at each politeness strategy not just as a language choice but also as a reflection of gender beliefs, power dynamics, and Islamic values. For instance, using negative politeness is seen as a cautious language form and as a way for professional Muslim women to negotiate their roles in a culture that values harmony, like in Malay-Islamic traditions. Similarly, bald on-record speech shows professional authority based on the doctor-patient relationship. Positive politeness, which includes religious phrases like *Insya-Allah*, reflects the incorporation of Islamic values in how people communicate. This approach lets the study delve into how politeness strategies influence the portrayal of modern Muslim women's identities in contemporary Malaysian Islamic literature.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Results

This study aims to identify and examine the politeness strategies used by the main character, Iman Syahirah, in Muharikah's novel *Sayang yang Tak Terungkap* (Unrevealed Love). The analysis follows Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, which categorizes politeness strategies into four main types: bald on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record. Here are some examples;

| No | Situation | Quotation | Politeness Strategy | Explanation |
|----|--------------------------|---|---------------------|--|
| 1 | With Aidan (HIV patient) | "Tentulah boleh, Aidan. Insha Allah. Yakin pada Allah, ya?" 'Of course you can, Aidan. God willing. Have faith in God, okay?' | Positive Politeness | Showing empathy and offering optimistic encouragement strengthens relationships. |
| 2 | With Aidan | "Doktor harap sangat awak bertemu dengan orang yang tepat untuk awak." 'Doctor, I hope you meet the right person for you.' | Off-Record | Expectations are conveyed indirectly, leaving room for free interpretation. |

| | | | | |
|----|-----------------------------------|---|---------------------|---|
| 3 | With Aidan | "Cuma satu saja awak kena janji dengan doktor... Jangan kembali ke zaman silam awak." 'Just one thing, you have to make a promise to me... Don't go back to the old days.' | Bald on-Record | Clear and direct instructions, emotional context encourages clarity. |
| 4 | With Faris (co-worker) | "Bukan hak kita untuk judge orang, Faris." 'It's not our right to judge people, Faris.' | Bald on-Record | A firm moral statement without compromise. |
| 5 | With Faris | "Saya lebih selesa untuk bersikap terbuka, memahami dan mendengar cerita mereka." 'I am more comfortable being open, understanding, and listening to their stories.' | Positive Politeness | Demonstrate openness and affirm empathetic solidarity. |
| 6 | With Faris (co-worker) | "Dulu profesor saya pernah nasihatkan..." 'My professor once advised me...' | Off-Record | Advice is conveyed indirectly through quotes from third parties. |
| 7 | With Johan (patient) & his mother | "Saya minta maaf mak cik. Boleh saya duduk bersama anak mak cik?" 'I'm sorry, ma'am. May I sit with your child?' | Negative Politeness | Politely requesting permission shows awareness of patient privacy.. |
| 8 | With Johan | "Johan, doktor nak tanya sedikit. Mungkin sensitif untuk awak..." 'Johan, I want to ask you something. It might be sensitive for you...' | Negative Politeness | Demonstrating care and protection for the patient's positive face. |
| 9 | With Johan | "Cuma doktor nak kamu betul-betul insaf dan bertaubat." 'Just that I want you to truly repent and turn back to God.' | Bald on-Record | Direct advice without restraint, reflecting moral urgency. |
| 10 | With Johan | "Percayalah Johan. kita semua ada pilihan." 'Believe me, Johan. We all have choices.' | Positive Politeness | Demonstrate encouragement and trust, maintain motivation, and warm relationships. |

| | | | | |
|----|----------------------|--|---------------------|---|
| 11 | With Faris (Husband) | “At least kita boleh sama-sama pergi checkup, jumpa psikologis, and talk about this? ‘At least we can go for a checkup together, see a psychologist, and talk about this?’ | Bald on-Record | Direct yet cooperative suggestion reflecting marital care and initiative to resolve conflict. |
| 12 | With Faris (Husband) | “If you betul-betul tak sihat, nanti you apply MC... then if esok keadaan masih sama saja, kita buat check up untuk you, ya?” ‘If you’re really not feeling well, you can apply for MC later... then if the situation is still the same tomorrow, we’ll do a check-up for you, okay?’ | Positive Politeness | Expresses concern in a warm and supportive tone, reducing tension through empathy. |
| 13 | With Faris (Husband) | “Maybe ada childhood trauma yang menyebabkan you bersikap begini?” ‘Maybe there was childhood trauma that caused you to act like this?’ | Negative Politeness | Uses tentative wording (<i>maybe</i>) to respect the listener’s personal boundaries. |
| 14 | With Faris (Husband) | “Ada perkara yang awak sembunyikan daripada saya ke, Faris?” ‘Is there something you’re hiding from me, Faris?’ | Off-Record | Indirect question implying suspicion, allowing to respond without confrontation. |

Table 1. Analysis of Iman Syahirah's Politeness Strategy

Based on the representative dialogue excerpts analyzed, the frequency of politeness strategy usage was obtained as follows:

| No. | Politeness Strategy | Frequency | Percentage % |
|-----|---------------------|-----------|--------------|
| 1 | Positive Politeness | 40 | 40% |
| 2 | Negative Politeness | 30 | 30% |
| 3 | Bald on-Record | 17 | 17% |
| 4 | Off-Record | 12 | 12% |

Table 2. Politeness Strategy Frequency

From the table, it can be seen that the most dominant strategies used were positive politeness (30%). This indicates that Iman Syahirah, as the main character, tended to display an empathetic and caring attitude (positive politeness).

Positive Politeness

Iman Syahirah uses positive politeness strategies in the context of building good interpersonal relationships with patients, colleagues, and family members. For example, in the quote, "*Tentulah boleh, Aidan. Insha Allah. Yakin pada Allah, ya?*" 'Of course you can, Aidan. Insya Allah. Have faith in Allah, okay?' (Muharikah, 2023), Iman shows a supportive and optimistic attitude that strengthens the patient's spirit. This strategy serves to reduce social distance and foster a sense of security in communication.

This strategy is also present when Iman wants to show confidence in the changes that patients may make, as in the sentence, "*Percayalah Johan. Kita semua ada pilihan.*" 'Trust me, Johan. We all have choices (Muharikah, 2023). This strategy is effective in alleviating the feelings of inferiority and despair experienced by other characters in the novel.

Negative Politeness

Negative politeness strategies emerge when Iman Syahirah discusses sensitive topics, especially those involving authority, privacy, or other people's self-worth. For example, when she says, "*Saya minta maaf mak cik. Boleh saya duduk bersama anak mak cik?*" 'I'm sorry, ma'am. May I sit with your child?' (Muharikah, 2023), She conveys her intention carefully and politely so as not to offend the patient's mother.

A similar thing happens when she gives a warning before asking a sensitive question: "*Johan, doktor nak tanya sedikit. Mungkin sensitif untuk awak...*" 'Johan, the doctor wants to ask you something. It might be sensitive for you...' (Muharikah, 2023). This is a form of protection for Johan's 'face' or social image as a patient.

Bald on-Record

The bald-on-record strategy is used in situations that require clarity, assertiveness, or direct instructions, especially in religious and ethical contexts (Ricky & Afriana, 2024). An example of this strategy can be seen in the statement: “*Jangan kembali ke zaman silam awak*” ‘Don’t go back to the old days, Aidan.’ (Muharikah, 2023). This statement is intended to emphasize the desired change in Aidan’s character.

Iman also expresses moral values firmly to his colleague: “*Bukan hak kita untuk judge orang, Faris.*” ‘It is not our right to judge people, Faris.’ (Muharikah, 2023). This assertiveness shows a professional attitude as well as a religious attitude, which are strong characteristics of Iman Syahirah.

Off-Record

The off-record strategy is used when Iman wants to convey meaning subtly or avoid confrontation. For example, when he says, “*Doktor harap sangat awak bertemu dengan orang yang tepat untuk awak.*” ‘Doctor, I hope you meet the right person for you.’ (Muharikah, 2023). This statement can have multiple meanings—it provides support and expresses hope, without forcing the listener.

Similarly, when he advises Faris by saying, “*Dulu profesor saya pernah nasihatkan...*” ‘My professor once advised me...’ (Muharikah, 2023), Iman conveys a motivational message without being directly patronizing.

The politeness strategy of Iman Syahirah in the novel *Sayang yang Tak Terungkap* (Unrevealed Love) shows how language responds to social pressures, including family expectations, work relationships, and Malay culture. When interacting with patients from sensitive backgrounds, Iman uses negative politeness and off-the-record strategies to maintain dignity and empathy, following religious and cultural values. In the workplace, he uses bald on-record and positive politeness to show professionalism while upholding ethics. Meanwhile, Malay culture values politeness and indirect communication. This promotes the use of

positive politeness and off-record strategies, especially when interacting with older individuals or addressing taboo topics.

This overall strategy demonstrates that Iman's choice of language is not just a practical decision. It reflects her social position, cultural values, and inner conflicts. Thus, a socio-pragmatic analysis of this character opens up a deeper understanding of how language becomes a tool for social and spiritual navigation in the Malay-Islamic context.

Discussion

Positive Politeness: Building Familiarity and Trust

In the interaction between Iman Syahirah and Aidan, an HIV patient, the application of positive politeness strategies can be seen through expressions such as:

"Tentulah boleh, Aidan. Insy-Allah. Yakin pada Allah, ya?" (Muharikah, 2023).

Translation: 'Of course you can, Aidan. Insha'Allah. Have faith in Allah, okay?'

This strategy not only serves to build familiarity and provide optimistic encouragement (Khandoker et al., 2024; Lazuardi & Shamsu, 2024) but also maintains Aidan's positive face (Priyanto et al., 2023), namely the need to be appreciated and accepted. From a contextual pragmatics perspective (Amin & Mansyur, 2024; Giawa et al., 2025), the use of religious expressions in the context of a disease laden with stigma shows an effort to adapt language to the sensitivity of the situation. In terms of literary pragmatics, this utterance constructs Iman's character as a religious and empathetic professional Muslim woman, while from a socio-pragmatic perspective, it reduces the hierarchical distance between doctor and patient by emphasizing solidarity. Within the framework of gendered Islamic pragmatics (Lazuardi & Shamsu, 2024; Vidunaite, 2023), this strategy reflects Iman's dual identity as a woman, a Muslim, and a professional, who presents religious empathy without neglecting her medical authority.

In his conversation with Faris, a coworker, Iman said:

“Saya lebih selesa untuk bersikap terbuka, memahami dan mendengar cerita mereka.” (Muharikah, 2023) Translation: ‘I feel more comfortable being open, understanding, and listening to their stories.’

This expression demonstrates a strategy of positive politeness by emphasizing openness and solidarity among colleagues. From the perspective of face theory (Laini & Budiyono, 2025), Iman tries to maintain Faris' positive face by avoiding direct criticism and instead inviting mutual understanding. In the framework of contextual pragmatics, this choice of words shows adaptation to a professional context that demands harmonious cooperation. In terms of literary pragmatics, this dialogue reinforces Iman's image as a humanistic and inclusive figure, not merely an authoritative one. Meanwhile, through the lens of socio-pragmatics, this utterance affirms the egalitarian horizontal relationship between two colleagues, and in the framework of gendered Islamic pragmatics, it presents a construction of Muslim identity that emphasizes empathy, patience, and professionalism. Next, in her interaction with Johan, a patient, Iman used a strategy of positive politeness by saying:

“Percayalah Johan. kita semua ada pilihan.” (Muharikah, 2023). Translation: ‘Trust me, Johan. We all have choices.’

This utterance pragmatically reflects the strategy of optimistic encouragement (Brown & Levinson, 1987), which not only builds patient confidence but also includes Johan in a wider social community with the phrase “all of us.” This reinforces Johan's positive face, which may have been shaken by feelings of inferiority due to his illness. Based on contextual pragmatics, this utterance is relevant because it is placed in a sensitive medical situation, so that the choice of inclusive language can reduce the potential for stigma. From a literary pragmatics perspective, this quote serves to build the novel's major themes, namely struggle, religiosity, and hope. From a socio-pragmatic perspective, this strategy shows how a doctor uses language to reduce social distance while asserting professionalism. Within the framework of gendered Islamic pragmatics, this utterance displays a

balance between religious values (ikhtiar and tawakal) and human agency, reflecting the figure of a modern Muslim woman who can negotiate her gender, religious, and professional roles through her choice of language.

Beside that, in her interaction with Faris, her husband, Iman used a strategy of positive politeness by saying:

"If you betul-betul tak sihat, nanti you apply MC... then if esok keadaan masih sama saja, kita buat checkup untuk you, ya?" (Muharikah, 2023). Translation: 'If you're really not feeling well, you can apply for MC later... then if the situation is still the same tomorrow, we'll do a check-up for you, okay?'

Iman Syahirah's statement represents a positive politeness strategy (Brown & Levinson, 1987) that shows empathy, concern, and solidarity in a husband-wife relationship. Through a gentle tone and cooperative invitation, Iman maintains Faris's positive face by not imposing her will, but rather offering a rational and compassionate solution. From a contextual, pragmatic, and socio-pragmatic perspective, this utterance reflects Malay-Islamic cultural values that emphasize responsibility, sincerity, and civilized communication. As a professional Muslim woman, Iman displays a balance between gentleness and assertiveness and demonstrates empathetic leadership in emotional situations. This strategy shows that politeness lies not only in the form of language but also in the intention, context, and spiritual values that underlie communicative actions.

Furthermore, the portrayal of Iman Syahirah both reinforces and challenges common stereotypes about Muslim women's communication and authority. On one hand, her politeness aligns with traditional expectations of modesty and empathy often associated with Muslim femininity. On the other hand, her ability to speak firmly, guide her husband, and lead conversations in professional and domestic spaces challenges the notion that Muslim women are passive communicators. Through Iman's character, the novel redefines politeness as a form of empowered communication—one that harmonizes piety with agency and reclaims authority without abandoning Islamic ethics.

Negative Politeness: Respecting Privacy and the Positive Side of Your Conversation Partner

In a conversation between Iman Syahirah, Johan, and his mother, the expression;

"Saya minta maaf mak cik. Boleh saya duduk bersama anak mak cik?"
(Muharikah, 2023). Translation: 'Excuse me, ma'am. May I sit with your child?'

This is a clear example of a negative politeness strategy. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), this strategy aims to protect negative face, which is the right of the other person to be free from pressure or interference. The request for permission, along with an apology, shows a full understanding of the privacy and authority of the patient's mother. From the perspective of face theory, Brown & Levinson (1987), this utterance protects the patient's mother's self-image by giving her room to make decisions. Based on contextual pragmatics Pelawi et al., 2025), the sensitive context of doctor-patient family interactions requires a more careful linguistic strategy so that communication takes place without threatening honor. In terms of literary pragmatics, this quote reinforces the representation of Iman as a Muslim woman who upholds manners and etiquette in communication. From the perspective of socio-pragmatics (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Purnomo & Widarwati, 2025) this statement reflects the Malay-Islamic cultural norm that emphasizes politeness towards elders. Furthermore, through the lens of gendered Islamic pragmatics (Bragg, 2024; Khandoker et al., 2024), Iman displays the identity of a professional Muslim woman who balances medical authority with religious values and respect for elders, a reflection of gender agency within the framework of Islam.

Later, in conversation with Johan, Iman said,

"Johan, doktor nak tanya sedikit. Mungkin sensitif untuk awak..."
(Muharikah, 2023). Translation: 'Johan, I want to ask you something. It might be sensitive for you...'

This utterance again represents a strategy of negative politeness because Iman conveys a warning before asking a question that has the potential to threaten the patient's positive face. By showing caution, Iman protects Johan's self-esteem so that he does not feel cornered or humiliated. From the perspective of face theory, this action maintains the patient's social honor. Within the framework of contextual pragmatics, this utterance adapts to medical situations that often involve personal information, thus requiring mitigation strategies. In terms of literary pragmatics, the use of this strategy reinforces Iman's character as a Muslim doctor who is sensitive to the emotional state of her patients. From a socio-pragmatics viewpoint, this strategy aligns with Malay-Islamic values of politeness. These values stress the importance of indirect communication to steer clear of confrontation. At the same time, through gendered Islamic pragmatics, this strategy portrays a professional Muslim woman. She values gentleness, caution, and empathy. It also demonstrates how gender identity and religious values weave into communication practices.

In a conversation between Iman Syahirah with Faris, her husband, the expression;

"Maybe ada childhood trauma yang menyebabkan you bersikap begini?" (Muharikah, 2023). Translation: 'Maybe there was childhood trauma that caused you to act like this?'

Iman Syahirah's statement demonstrates the application of a negative politeness strategy (Brown & Levinson, 1987) aimed at respecting Faris's personal freedom with careful language that does not threaten his self-esteem. The use of the word "maybe" as mitigation reflects empathy for sensitive topics, while maintaining Faris's negative face so that he does not feel cornered. In the context of Malay-Islamic culture, this strategy reflects the values of hikmah and adab, where careful speech is a form of politeness rooted in spirituality and social norms. As a wife and a medical professional, Iman appears balanced not dominant, but still firm and authoritative by showing concern without violating privacy. From the perspective of Gendered Islamic Pragmatics, Iman demonstrates the leadership of a Muslim

woman who is able to convey emotional issues gently but meaningfully, so that this negative politeness strategy becomes a means of building honest, civilized, and compassionate communication.

IBald on-Record: Firmness in Urgent Situations

In her conversation with Aidan, Iman Syahirah said: “*Cuma satu saja awak kena janji dengan doktor... Jangan kembali ke zaman silam awak.*” (Muharikah, 2023). Translation: ‘Just one thing, you have to promise to me... Don't go back to the old days.’

This statement is a clear example of a bald on-record strategy because it is delivered firmly, directly, and without mitigation (Brown & Levinson, 1987). This strategy is commonly used in emotional situations that require clear instructions, especially when doctors emphasize important moral or health messages. From the perspective of face theory (Laini & Budiyono, 2025), this strategy does have the potential to threaten the patient's negative face (their desire to be free from coercion), but the emotional context requires clarity so that the message is not misunderstood. Based on contextual pragmatics by Pramujiono et al., (2024), this choice of a firm tone arises because the communication situation demands urgency: a patient at risk of relapse requires direct guidance. In terms of literary pragmatics, this quote builds the characterization of Iman as a figure who is able to balance empathy and assertiveness, thus appearing as a professional Muslim woman with an authoritative voice. From a socio-pragmatic perspective, this statement reflects the role of doctors who are in a dominant position in the medical communication hierarchy, but still in line with Malay-Islamic cultural norms that value moral guidance. Within the framework of gendered Islamic pragmatics (Glas, 2022; Piani et al., 2024; Zahruddin, 2016), this utterance shows a form of Muslim female leadership that does not hesitate to be firm for the good of the patient, combining religious, professional, and gender dimensions in one speech act.

Something similar was seen in the interaction with Johan when Iman said;

“Cuma doktor nak kamu betul-betul insaf dan bertaubat.” (Muharikah, 2023). Translation: ‘Just that I want you to truly repent and turn back to God.’

The bald on-record strategy is used to convey a very firm and urgent religious message. In Brown & Levinson's theory (1987), this direct form is indeed lacking in politeness, but it is relevant in the context of communication that requires speed and clarity, such as giving moral advice. From the perspective of face theory, this statement threatens Johan's positive face (the need to be respected), but it actually shows the doctor's concern for the patient's spiritual well-being. Within the framework of contextual pragmatics, this utterance makes sense because religious and sensitive situations require direct guidance to reinforce moral values. In the realm of literary pragmatics, this quote reinforces the novel's narrative as an Islamic text that combines medical, social, and religious elements. From a socio-pragmatic point of view, this statement reflects a communication pattern typical of Malay-Islamic culture, where moral authority is often conveyed explicitly, especially in hierarchical relationships such as doctor-patient. Meanwhile, through the lens of gendered Islamic pragmatics, this statement presents the figure of a professional Muslim woman who not only cares for physical health but also affirms spiritual and moral roles, thus demonstrating a balance between religious authority, gender identity, and social responsibility.

The interaction between Iman Syahirah with Faris her husband, said;

“At least kita boleh sama-sama pergi checkup, jumpa psikologis, and talk about this?” (Muharikah, 2023). Translation: ‘At least we can go for a checkup together, see a psychologist, and talk about this?’

Iman Syahirah's statement to Faris, is an example of a bald on-record strategy (Brown & Levinson, 1987) because it is delivered directly without mitigation in a situation that demands clarity and solutions. Although potentially threatening Faris's negative face, the use of the word "you're welcome" shows empathy and togetherness, thus maintaining interpersonal relationships. From a contextual pragmatic perspective (Amin & Mansyur, 2024; Giawa et al., 2025), this

statement reflects politeness that is in accordance with Malay-Islamic cultural values, where assertiveness for the common good is considered polite. From a socio-pragmatic perspective, Iman appears as a professional Muslim woman who is responsible and active in resolving household conflicts. Within the framework of gendered Islamic pragmatics (Lazuardi & Shamsu, 2024), the utterance demonstrates female leadership that combines gentleness, rationality, and spiritual values, so that this direct strategy remains considered polite and meaningful in the context of contemporary Islamic culture.

Off-Record: Gentle Sarcasm and Indirect Advice

In conversation with Aidan, Iman said: *"Doktor harap sangat awak bertemu dengan orang yang tepat untuk awak."* (Muharikah, 2023). Translation: 'Doctor, I hope you meet the right person for you.'

This statement is an off-the-record strategy because its meaning is conveyed implicitly, leaving room for interpretation by the listener (Sulistianah et al., 2025). Instead of directly stating who is meant by "the right person," Iman chooses a vague form of hope, allowing Aidan to freely interpret its meaning. From the perspective of face theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Harun et al., 2025), this utterance reduces the threat to Aidan's negative face by not pressuring or forcing him, while maintaining positive face by providing emotional encouragement. Within the framework of contextual pragmatics (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Custović, 2025), this strategy is relevant to the sensitive context: an HIV patient who is socially and psychologically vulnerable, making implicit language safer than direct commands. From the perspective of literary pragmatics, this utterance serves to show Iman's gentle side while building a religious and empathetic characterization. Meanwhile, in the framework of socio-pragmatics, the use of this implicit strategy is in line with Malay-Islamic culture, which upholds indirect politeness, especially when discussing taboo or personal matters. From a gendered Islamic pragmatics perspective, this strategy reflects the representation of professional Muslim women who rely on gentleness and religious politeness in navigating difficult

conversations, thus demonstrating a blend of gender values, religiosity, and professionalism.

Other expressions, "*Dulu profesor saya pernah nasihatkan...*" (Muharikah, 2023). Translation: 'My professor once advised me...'

To Faris, it also shows the application of an off-the-record strategy. Iman conveys advice indirectly through a quote from a third party (a professor), so that the moral message does not sound patronizing. In Brown & Levinson's theory (1987), this is a mitigation strategy that allows the interlocutor to accept the message without feeling threatened. Based on face theory, this strategy maintains Faris' positive face because advice that appears to come from another party does not damage his self-esteem. From a contextual pragmatics perspective, the choice of this strategy is in line with the situation between equal colleagues, where overly direct speech has the potential to cause resistance. In terms of literary pragmatics, this quote serves to emphasize Iman's role as a wise figure who maintains politeness even though she is in a position of moral authority. From a socio-pragmatic perspective, this strategy is in line with Malay-Islamic values that emphasize politeness, humility, and indirect communication in peer relationships. Finally, with gendered Islamic pragmatics, this strategy presents the image of a professional Muslim woman who conveys messages in a gentle, humble manner, yet still full of religious and moral meaning, demonstrating a form of feminine leadership in the Islamic context.

In conversation with her husband (Faris), Iman said "*Ada perkara yang awak sembunyikan daripada saya ke, Faris?*" (Muharikah, 2023). Translation: 'Is there something you're hiding from me, Faris?'

Iman Syahirah's statement demonstrates the application of an off-record politeness strategy used to subtly convey suspicion without directly threatening Faris's privacy (Brown & Levinson, 1987). By choosing a gentle and tentative form of questioning, Iman maintains a balance between curiosity and respect for her husband's feelings, and protects Faris's negative face from pressure. In the context

of Malay-Islamic culture, this strategy reflects the values of *budi bahasa* and *adab al-hiwar*, where politeness is demonstrated through caution in discussing personal issues. As a professional Muslim woman, Iman appears wise and empathetic, demonstrating that women can convey the truth politely and strategically without losing authority. This strategy demonstrates emotional and spiritual intelligence in communication and portrays the image of an empowered woman who prioritizes compassion, wisdom, and harmony in interpersonal relationships.

CONCLUSION

In *Sayang yang Tak Terungkap* (2025) by Muharikah, the protagonist Iman Syahirah employs all four of Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness strategies—positive politeness, negative politeness, bald on record, and off-record—to navigate her multifaceted identity as a Muslim woman, a doctor, and a member of the Malay-Islamic community. Each strategy reflects a different aspect of her social role: positive politeness expresses empathy and encouragement, negative politeness shows deference and respect for others' autonomy, bald on record conveys authority and urgency, while off-record speech reveals emotional depth and cultural sensitivity.

These strategies go beyond mere linguistic choices; they serve as tools for negotiating social roles and religious values. Iman's speech reflects core Islamic principles such as *sabr* (patience), *rahmah* (compassion), and *ta'zim* (respect), illustrating how politeness becomes a medium for expressing spiritual integrity and maintaining social cohesion. Her communication style demonstrates how Islamic ethics shape interpersonal interactions, especially in contexts where gender, faith, and professional identity intersect.

The study contributes to literary pragmatics by offering an interpretive lens that connects language use with cultural and ideological frameworks, highlighting how Muslim female characters like Iman can be seen as active agents in moral and social discourse. The author's ideological positioning as a Muslim writer and

medical professional significantly influences this representation, framing politeness not merely as a linguistic choice but as a moral and spiritual practice. Through Muharikah's narrative perspective, politeness becomes an expression of *adab* (ethical communication) grounded in Islamic principles of modesty, compassion, and social harmony. Consequently, Iman's use of polite language reflects moral strength and professional integrity, challenging the perception of Muslim women as passive communicators and instead presenting them as empowered figures who embody Islamic values in both domestic and professional spheres.

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