JOLALI
- Journal of Language and Literature -

Jurnal Sastra Inggris
Alamat Redaksi :
Program Studi S1 Sastra Inggris
Fakultas Ilmu Sosial dan Ekonomi, Universitas Respati Yogyakarta
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Vol. 4, No. 1 (2026)

JOLALI
- Journal of Language and Literature -

JOLALI: Journal of Language and Literature, Vol. 4, No. 1, 2026

NAILA'S STRUGGLE OVERCOMING GENDER DISCRIMINATION IN AISYA SAEED'S *WRITTEN IN THE STARS* NOVEL

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Abstract

This study examines gender discrimination and women's struggle as represented in Aisha Saeed's novel Written in the Stars. Gender discrimination remains a persistent issue within patriarchal societies, where women are often subjected to unequal treatment, limited autonomy, and coercive social practices. Using a descriptive qualitative research design, this study analyzes narrative passages and dialogues that depict discriminatory practices experienced by the female protagonist, Naila, and her resistance to patriarchal domination. The analysis is guided by Fakih's concept of gender discrimination and Simone de Beauvoir's feminist theory. The findings reveal that Naila experiences several forms of gender discrimination, including subordination, marginalization, and psychological violence, particularly in the context of forced marriage and restricted personal freedom. These discriminatory practices position women as objects of control within familial and cultural systems. Despite these constraints, Naila demonstrates resistance through awareness, emotional defiance, and the pursuit of self-determination. Her struggle reflects an existential process of becoming a subject who challenges oppressive gender norms. This study concludes that Written in the Stars portrays gender discrimination as a structural problem rooted in patriarchal ideology while simultaneously highlighting women's capacity for resistance. By applying feminist theory to contemporary young adult fiction, this research contributes to feminist literary studies and offers insight into how literature functions as a medium for exposing and contesting gender inequality.

Keywords: *gender discrimination; female resistance; feminism; patriarchy; subordination*

INTRODUCTION

Gender discrimination remains a persistent issue in societies structured by patriarchal values, where women often experience unequal treatment in family life, education, and personal autonomy (Fakih, 2013; Beauvoir, 2011). Such discrimination is not only a social reality but also a recurring theme in literary works that reflect and critique gender-based injustice. Literature, therefore, becomes an important medium through which gender inequality and women's resistance can be examined, particularly within cultural contexts that normalize patriarchal authority.

Aisha Saeed's novel *Written in the Stars* portrays gender discrimination through the experiences of Naila, a Pakistani American young woman who is forced into marriage under the guise of family honour and cultural obligation (Saeed, 2015). Raised in the United States with values of independence and self-determination, Naila is confronted with restrictive gender norms when she is taken to Pakistan and compelled to submit to patriarchal control. The novel highlights various forms of discrimination directed at women, including forced marriage, limitation of freedom, and the denial of personal choice, illustrating how patriarchal power operates within both familial and cultural structures.

Previous studies on *Written in the Stars* have largely focused on cultural representation and the issue of forced marriage (e.g., Nagari, 2022; Manugeren, 2020). For example, earlier research has examined the contrast between Pakistani and American cultural values or the psychological impact of arranged marriage on female characters. However, these studies tend to emphasize cultural conflict rather than systematically analyzing gender discrimination and the female protagonist's struggle against it. As a result, the specific forms of discrimination experienced by Naila and her strategies of resistance remain insufficiently explored from a feminist literary perspective.

To address this gap, the present study examines gender discrimination and women's struggle in *Written in the Stars* by applying feminist theoretical frameworks. This study draws on Fakih's concept of gender discrimination to identify the forms of discrimination experienced by the female protagonist (Fakih, 2013), and Simone de Beauvoir's feminist theory to analyze Naila's struggle to assert her agency and subjectivity (Beauvoir, 2011). By combining these perspectives, the study seeks to reveal how patriarchal domination is constructed in the narrative and how women resist such domination through acts of awareness, refusal, and self-determination.

Accordingly, this study aims to answer the following research questions: (1) What forms of gender discrimination are experienced by Naila in Aisha Saeed's *Written in the Stars*? and (2) How does Naila struggle to overcome gender discrimination within a patriarchal system? Through these questions, the study contributes to feminist literary criticism by demonstrating how contemporary young adult fiction represents women's resistance to gender discrimination and by highlighting literature's role in exposing and challenging patriarchal ideology.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a descriptive qualitative research design to examine gender discrimination and women's struggle as represented in Aisha Saeed's *Written in the Stars*. A qualitative approach is considered appropriate because the study focuses on interpreting meanings, experiences, and social relations as constructed through literary narrative rather than measuring phenomena quantitatively (Creswell, 2014). This design allows for an in-depth exploration of how gender discrimination is portrayed and how the female protagonist responds to patriarchal constraints within the novel.

The primary data source of this study is the novel *Written in the Stars* by Aisha Saeed (2015). The data consist of narrative passages, dialogues, and character actions that reflect forms of gender discrimination and women's struggle experienced by the main character, Naila. The selection of data was conducted purposively, focusing on textual evidence that illustrates discriminatory practices such as forced marriage, restriction of freedom, and marginalization, as well as moments that demonstrate resistance, awareness, and agency.

Data collection was carried out through close reading of the novel. The text was read repeatedly to gain a comprehensive understanding of the storyline, character development, and socio-cultural context. Relevant passages were identified, highlighted, and categorized based on the research focus. The data were then classified according to Fakih's concept of gender discrimination, which includes marginalization, subordination, stereotyping, violence, and workload (Fakih, 2013). Subsequently, Simone de Beauvoir's feminist theory was applied to analyze Naila's struggle to assert her subjectivity and autonomy within a patriarchal system (Beauvoir, 2011).

Data analysis followed an interpretative textual analysis procedure. The selected data were examined by identifying the forms of gender discrimination present in the narrative and interpreting how the protagonist responds to these conditions. The analysis emphasizes the relationship between patriarchal power and women's resistance, linking textual findings to feminist theoretical perspectives. Through this process, the study reveals how literary representation functions as a critique of gender inequality and highlights women's struggle for self-determination.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents and discusses the findings of the study based on the analysis of Aisha Saeed's Written in the Stars. The discussion focuses on two main aspects: the forms of gender discrimination experienced by the female protagonist, Naila, and her struggle to overcome such discrimination within a patriarchal system. The analysis is guided by Fakih's concept of gender discrimination and Simone de Beauvoir's feminist theory.

Forms of Gender Discrimination Experienced by Naila

The findings reveal that Naila experiences several forms of gender discrimination that reflect patriarchal domination. One prominent form is subordination, in which women's voices and choices are considered less important than male authority. Naila's opinions regarding her future, education, and personal relationships are repeatedly dismissed by her

family, particularly by male figures who assume the right to make decisions on her behalf. This subordination positions Naila as an object of control rather than a subject with autonomy, aligning with Fakih's (2013) assertion that patriarchy systematically places women in inferior positions.

Another form of discrimination evident in the novel is marginalization (Traesar, Saktiningrum, 2024). Naila is isolated socially and emotionally when she is taken to Pakistan and separated from her familiar environment in the United States. Her access to education, communication, and social interaction is restricted, which limits her opportunities for self-development. Such marginalization reinforces women's dependence on patriarchal structures and reduces their ability to resist oppression.

The study also identifies violence as a form of gender discrimination (Adhitya et al., 2024). Although not always physical, the violence experienced by Naila includes psychological pressure, intimidation, and coercion, particularly in relation to forced marriage. These acts of violence function as mechanisms of control that compel obedience and suppress resistance. According to Fakih (2013), violence against women often operates subtly through emotional manipulation, a pattern that is clearly reflected in Naila's experience.

Naila's Struggle Against Gender Discrimination

Despite facing multiple forms of discrimination, Naila demonstrates various forms of struggle that signify her resistance to patriarchal domination. Drawing on Simone de Beauvoir's feminist perspective, women's struggle is understood as a process of becoming a subject rather than remaining an object within a male-dominated system (Beauvoir, 2011). Naila's struggle begins with awareness, as she gradually recognizes the injustice of the restrictions imposed upon her. This awareness marks the initial stage of resistance, enabling her to question the legitimacy of patriarchal authority.

Naila's struggle is further expressed through refusal and emotional resistance. Although her physical freedom is limited, she resists internally by rejecting the values that justify her oppression. Her emotional resistance reflects Beauvoir's notion that liberation does not always begin with physical action but with the rejection of imposed meanings and roles.

Ultimately, Naila's struggle culminates in her attempt to reclaim agency and self-determination. By asserting her desire for autonomy and refusing to accept forced marriage as her destiny, Naila challenges the patriarchal system that seeks to define her identity. This struggle illustrates how women's resistance, even when constrained, represents an act of existential defiance against gender-based oppression.

The findings demonstrate that gender discrimination in Written in the Stars is not merely a personal issue but a structural problem rooted in patriarchal ideology. Naila's struggle highlights the possibility of resistance through awareness, emotional strength, and the pursuit of autonomy. By integrating Fakih's and Beauvoir's theoretical perspectives, this study reveals how literary narratives function as a space for c.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined gender discrimination and women's struggle as portrayed in Aisha Saeed's Written in the Stars. The findings show that Naila experiences various forms of gender discrimination, including subordination, marginalization, and violence, all of which stem from patriarchal power structures. These forms of discrimination restrict women's freedom and position them as objects of control within family and cultural systems.

Despite these constraints, Naila demonstrates resistance through awareness, emotional defiance, and the pursuit of self-determination. Her struggle reflects Simone de Beauvoir's concept of women's liberation as a process of becoming a subject who actively challenges oppressive structures. The study concludes *that Written in the Stars* presents gender discrimination as a systemic issue while simultaneously emphasizing women's capacity for resistance.

This research contributes to feminist literary studies by applying Fakih's and Beauvoir's theories to contemporary young adult fiction. However, the study is limited to a single literary work and focuses on textual analysis. Future research

may explore comparative studies across different cultural contexts or examine reader responses to representations of gender discrimination in young adult literature.

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JOLALI
- Journal of Language and Literature -

JOLALI: Journal of Language and Literature, Vol. 4, No. 1, 2026

ANALYSIS OF POLITENESS MAXIMS IN RAYMOND CARVER'S *WHAT WE TALK ABOUT WHEN WE TALK ABOUT LOVE*

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Abstract

This study investigates the use of Geoffrey Leech's politeness maxims in Raymond Carver's short story *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* through a qualitative descriptive approach. The study aims to identify the types of politeness maxims employed by the characters in their interactions. The data consist of utterances produced by the main characters—Mel, Terri, Nick, and Laura. The findings reveal that, among Leech's six politeness maxims, only three are present in the story: Modesty, Agreement, and Sympathy, with a total of seven occurrences. The analysis demonstrates that the characters primarily employ strategies of self-effacement, conflict minimization, and emotional alignment, which are central to discussions of love, trauma, and personal experience. The Sympathy Maxim appears most frequently, reflecting the emotional intensity surrounding narratives of past relationships and individual definitions of love. Mel predominantly uses the Modesty Maxim to soften assertive expressions, while the Agreement Maxim maintains conversational harmony by respecting differing viewpoints. These findings suggest that politeness in Carver's dialogue is highly context-dependent and closely tied to the characters' emotional openness and sensitivity. This study addresses a gap in previous research, which has largely focused on gendered or sociolinguistic aspects of the text without examining the underlying politeness strategies. By demonstrating that politeness maxims function not only as social conventions but also as emotional devices within literary dialogue, this research contributes to the field of pragmatic literary analysis.

Keywords: *Geoffrey Leech; literary conversation; politeness maxims; pragmatics; Raymond Carver*

INTRODUCTION

Language is not merely a means of communication but a complex system through which individuals negotiate social relations, express emotions, and maintain interpersonal balance (Fritzman & Crawford, 2018). Pragmatics concerns the study of meaning as communicated by a speaker (or writer) and interpreted by a listener (or reader) within a particular context (Yule, 1996, p. 3). One of the central concepts in pragmatics is politeness, which refers to the strategies employed to demonstrate awareness of another person's social face (Yule, 1996, p. 60). Because politeness plays a significant role in everyday interaction, literary works that imitate natural speech provide a valuable source for examining how politeness principles operate in discourse. Literary texts portray the complexity of human emotions and relationships, in which characters continually make interactional choices that lead to either mutual understanding or conflict. Therefore, analyzing language use through the lens of politeness offers important insight into interpersonal relations in fiction.

Short stories are particularly suitable for pragmatic analysis due to their brevity, intensive use of dialogue, and focus on character interaction. Among American writers of the same period, Raymond Carver is widely recognized for his minimalist narrative style, emotional intensity, and heavy reliance on dialogue. His short story What We Talk About When We Talk About Love is especially appropriate for linguistic analysis because the narrative unfolds almost entirely through conversation rather than descriptive exposition (Carver, 2015, p. 137). Carver's writing captures everyday speech in a way that reveals the hidden conflicts, desires, and emotional uncertainties of the characters. The story revolves around four individuals—Mel, Terri, Nick, and Laura—who gather to discuss their personal experiences and interpretations of love. As conversation progresses, dialogue becomes the primary vehicle for expressing emotions, revealing relationships,

and exposing subtle tensions. Consequently, attention to how the characters speak, express agreement or disagreement, show compassion, and position themselves in interaction is crucial for understanding the story's meaning.

The decision to analyze Geoffrey Leech's politeness maxims in Carver's short story is justified by the narrative's emotional and thematic complexity. Conversations about love often involve sensitive and personal experiences, including trauma, failed relationships, and unresolved emotional issues. In such interactions, speakers must carefully manage their utterances to express personal viewpoints while maintaining relational harmony. Politeness strategies thus function not only as social conventions but also as emotional tools that help prevent conflict and sustain interpersonal bonds. Carver's minimalist style further amplifies the pragmatic significance of each utterance, as seemingly simple lines carry substantial emotional and interactional weight. The story, with four friends sitting together, drinking and recounting past experiences, provides a natural context for the emergence of pragmatic patterns that closely reflect real-life conversational behavior.

This study is grounded in Geoffrey Leech's Politeness Principle, which proposes six maxims aimed at promoting socially harmonious interaction: Tact, Generosity, Approbation, Modesty, Agreement, and Sympathy (Leech, 2016). While all six maxims contribute to polite communication, the present study focuses on the three most salient in the narrative: Modesty, Agreement, and Sympathy. The Modesty Maxim encourages speakers to minimize self-praise and maximize self-dispraise, reflecting humility and social awareness. The Agreement Maxim emphasizes minimizing disagreement and highlighting common ground, which is particularly important when characters express differing views on love. The Sympathy Maxim involves expressing empathy, concern, and emotional support, which are central to a narrative that addresses love, loss, and vulnerability. Through these maxims, the analysis reveals not only surface-level meanings but also the interpersonal strategies that guide the characters' interactions.

The primary data source for this study is Raymond Carver's What We Talk About When We Talk About Love, accessed in its published version, which contains the dialogue of the four main characters (Carver, 2015, p. 137). The story is characterized by continuous conversational exchange, allowing readers to access the characters' inner perspectives through their spoken interactions. Such dialogue-driven narration makes the text particularly suitable for pragmatic analysis. Given the emotionally charged nature of love, the characters' language choices often reflect politeness strategies aimed at managing feelings, avoiding confrontation, and strengthening social bonds.

Previous studies on the short story have primarily focused on sociolinguistic and gender-based aspects of the characters' interactions. For instance, Galisteo (2011) examines gender-specific language patterns in What We Talk About When We Talk About Love, but does not address politeness maxims or apply Leech's theoretical framework. As a result, broader pragmatic mechanisms governing agreement, empathy, and interpersonal sensitivity remain underexplored. This limitation highlights a significant research gap concerning the role of politeness strategies in the narrative.

Addressing this gap, the present study investigates the politeness maxims employed by the characters in What We Talk About When We Talk About Love, using Geoffrey Leech's framework. By examining how politeness operates within emotionally sensitive conversations, this research demonstrates that politeness maxims function not only as social norms but also as narrative devices that shape character relationships and thematic meaning.

METHODOLOGY

The study employs a descriptive qualitative method as its primary approach to describe, interpret, and explain the presence of politeness maxims in the exchanges in Raymond Carver's What We Talk About When We Talk About Love. In pragmatics, meaning is closely associated with context, the speaker's intention, and interpersonal relations (Kortmann, 2020). The qualitative approach henceforth becomes the logical choice because it permits the researchers to examine the language in its natural state within the imaginary dialogue. This method did not deal with numbers but with interpretation; therefore, it tries to see how the characters are being polite, conflict-avoiding, or showing sympathy. This

method was especially beneficial for the study of characters' relations in literature, where tone, nuance, and emotion are the very essence of communication.

The narrative is recognized as an excellent option in qualitative studies because of its strong reliance on dialogue, which enables the attentive examination of the distinct linguistic styles characters use for social interaction. Minimalist fiction presents the reader with the challenge of interpreting what is said and what is left unsaid; thus, the analysis of pragmatic dimensions becomes very necessary. The communication of all verbal exchanges reveals not only the characters' thoughts but also the dynamics of their relationship, how they perceive each other, and the emotional balance they try to maintain during close conversation. (Hu, 2014). By focusing on specific dialogue sections in the text, the researchers could identify instances of Leech's politeness maxims and assess their significance for the story's emotional and interpersonal development.

Data collection is thorough and systematic. Initially, the researchers not only read the story once but also several times to perceive the flow of the dialogue and the emotional changes within it. At this point, the researchers observed the characters' responses to one another, their handling of delicate issues, and the rise or fall of their politeness. The next step was to identify the utterances that could be considered as polite hints according to Leech's politeness theory. Even though Leech lists six maxims, this research reveals that only three are present in the short story: the Modesty, Agreement, and Sympathy maxims. These categories served as the basis for the organization's data, as they were found to be highly active in the dialogue and essential to the interaction's development.

Through the descriptive qualitative method, the researchers were able to show not only what characters say but also how they say it. This is vital because Carver's writing method is understated and minimalistic, usually depending on suggested meaning rather than direct exposition. The emotional power of the dialogue, which ranges from laughter and anger to tears, is evident in the meticulous examination of politeness maxims.

One additional advantage of using the descriptive qualitative methodology is that it helps us understand the social and emotional aspects of politeness in a fictitious context. Even though the dialogues are fictitious, they still illustrate everyday life, with people talking to each other. Thus, the results are not only significant for the study of literature but also provide more detailed insights into the pragmatic behavior of the people involved. The approach also recognized that interpretation was a pivotal issue and that different readers might offer varying interpretations of certain utterances depending on their cultural backgrounds or personal experiences. The research, which applies this methodology, illustrates how the strategy of politeness helps the characters manage emotional tension, maintain group harmony, and express their feelings during love talk.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The analysis of the utterances of the four characters in Carver's "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love" shows that out of Geoffrey Leech's six politeness maxims, only three are present. In total, 7 data points are assigned to the three maxims: Modesty Maxim (2), Agreement Maxim (2), and Sympathy Maxim (3). On the other hand, the maxims Tact, Generosity, and Approbation are absent from the conversation data (Table 1).

Table 1. Frequency types of politeness maxims

Types of politeness maxims	Frequency
Tact	0 datum
Modesty	2 data
Approbation	0 datum
Generosity	0 datum
Agreement	2 data
Sympathy	3 data
Total 6 maxims	7 data

The occurrence of the three maxims in Table 1 illustrates how politeness is context-driven, thereby supporting Leech's argument that politeness is not universal but rather a matter of situational requirements. The short story characters employ politeness techniques that not only reduce self-assertion but also facilitate interpersonal connections and, to some extent, even create intimacy. The data distribution indicates that the Sympathy Maxim is the most common. It is not surprising that the characters' conversations are full of emotion and contemplation, as they grapple with past traumas, love affairs, and, to a certain extent, the very nature of love. The characters often understand each other's stories, particularly in recounting each other's pain. This emotional aspect indeed causes the selection of words that highlight sympathy and emotional involvement.

Table 1 also highlights the absence of the Tact, Generosity, and Approbation Maxims. This uneven distribution provides insight into the interactional dynamics and social forces shaping the characters' conversational behavior. The absence of these maxims suggests that the characters are not engaged in interactions involving power negotiation, benefit exchange, or explicit praise. Instead, their communication primarily focuses on sharing personal experiences and emotional reflections rather than managing obligations, social distance, or interpersonal hierarchy. Consequently, the frequency table not only illustrates the linguistic patterns present in the dialogue but also reflects the situational context and interactional goals that motivate the conversation.

Discussion

The analysis indicates that seven data points exemplify the use of Geoffrey Leech's politeness maxims, which are discussed in the following section:

Modesty Maxims

(Minimize praise of self; maximize dispraise of self)

a. Mel: "I am not educated; I learned my stuff, I am a heart surgeon, but I am just a mechanic." (p. 8)
(Maximize dispraise of self; minimize praise of self)

Mel and Terri, Nick and Laura, are engaged in a discussion at Mel's and Terri's kitchen table. Initially, they went from small talk to a serious discussion about love. The mood is slowly shifting from carefree to the strong, emotional intensity of love. Mel's comment is directed at everyone in the room, but in fact, he is speaking to Nick and Laura, who are both very interested in Mel's clear expression of his views on love.

Mel's utterance indicates Geoffrey Leech's Modesty Maxim, which demands that speakers minimize praise of the self and maximize self-dispraise to avoid being heard as self-promoting. "I am not educated," the quotation shows that Mel's statement is an overt act of maximising dispraise of self, as he gives a negative assessment of his own intellectual background. He is a cardiologist, a highly educated and respected profession, yet he presents himself as someone without formal education. On the other hand, his statement, "I learned my stuff, I am a heart surgeon, but I am just a mechanic," is a clear datum of minimizing praise of oneself. Mel, though being a heart surgeon, still devalues his expertise by comparing it to that of a mechanic, implying not only that he possesses it but that it is "simple" rather than "elite" skill.

Mel's self-deprecating attitude shows that he wants to maintain equal footing among the participants in the heated, emotionally charged conversation about love. In effect, he is not asserting his superiority or power over the group by diminishing his achievements. The way he presents himself as humble is a major factor in others' rejection of his perceived boastfulness, mostly because the topic is very intimate and open to interpretation. Therefore, Mel's speech is consistent with Leech's Modesty Maxim, as it maintains a social setting that is easy-going, non-threatening, and humble. Mel's modesty, in a way, is a politeness maxim that allows him to keep the peace and become friends rather than drive them away.

b. Mel: "I don't know anything; and I'm the first one to admit it." (p.2)
(Maximize dispraise of self; minimize praise of self)

Dialogue occurs at a crucial moment in the story: when the characters are deeply embroiled in various fights over what love is. Mel speaker's direct way is through everybody sitting around the table, Terri, Nick, and Laura, because they all can be part of the discussion. The dialogue gets more serious and passionate, and Mel utters these words when he feels that love's definition is tricky and the conversation is already tense.

Mel very clearly takes on a self-deprecating stance, which is the maximization of self-dispraise. "I don't know anything" suggests that Mel casts himself in a less authoritative role by reducing his knowledge and experience. Ironically, this is the case because Mel is a renowned, highly educated cardiologist, a field that often demands great intellectual respect. He is deliberately denying his knowledge to lower his social standing relative to his opponents. However, his primary reason is not the fact that he truly thinks himself to be ignorant, but rather that the subject of conversation-love-is very abstract, subjective, and immensely emotionally charged. His overstated claim of being unknowledgeable is meant to convey humility and to imply that he does not regard himself as a moral or experiential superior to the others in such a discussion.

Mel's follow-up statement, "And I'm the first one to admit it," is a means of minimizing praise of self. He does not claim to be a very courageous or very liberal-minded person (which would be indirect self-praise), but rather presents his lack of knowledge as a truthful and immediate confession. This action enhances his humility even more since he does not put himself in the position of someone who is sure or can teach others about love. One might take this as very quiet self-praise for being truthful, but Mel manages to express it in a way that puts himself forward by being honest about his flaws rather than drawing attention to his good side. These data show how Mel's utterances confirm Leech's Modesty Maxim. By downplaying his own merits and exaggerating faults, Mel shapes a modest speaking character that fits the heated subject of love. His use of language reveals an intention to maintain harmony in the group and to eliminate potential interpersonal disputes, all of which align with Leech's politeness maxims.

Agreement Maxims

(Minimise disagreement between self and other; maximize agreement between self and other)

a. Mel: "Terri's right; But seriously, they were in some shape, those oldsters." (p. 7)
   (Maximise agreement between self and others; minimize disagreement between self and others)

The conversation comes up during Mel's narration of the short story about the two older adults he could only save after a road crash. Mel uses the story of the old couple to express his views on love, yet he maintains decency and politeness throughout the conversation. Mel mostly addresses Terri, but Nick and Laura are also at the table, listening.

Mel's reply illustrates very clearly how concord can come before conflict to keep politeness. The quotation "Terri's right" is a datum of total agreement, as Mel very clearly backs Terri's previous opinion before giving his own. This first agreement acts as a politeness cushion, preventing the next comment from being heard as an attack.

Mel's follow-up clause, "But seriously, they were in some shape, those oldsters." The quotation appears to be minimizing disagreement through redirection, not denial. Mel does not dismiss Terri's argument but instead offers more information to expand the debate. By presenting his minimal disagreement as a new angle rather than a contradiction, he adheres to Leech's maxim that communicators should lessen conflict to keep social unity. Mel's tactic of prior agreement strengthens the dialogue and upholds courteous communication.

b. Mel: "Maybe we'll just go eat. How does that sound?"
   Nick: "Sounds fine to me; eat or not eat. Or keep drinking. I could head right on out into the sunset." (p.10)
   (Maximize agreement between self and other; minimize disagreement between self and other)

This conversation comes up toward the end of the story when the group appears confused on what to do-be it dinner or drinking. The atmosphere is subdued and dull after the lengthy discussion on love, so Nick just goes along with it and wants to keep the mood peaceful. Nick is talking to Mel, who proposes a break and a meal for all, but Terri and Laura are also paying attention at the table.

Nick's reaction emphasizes his readiness to collaborate and observe the Agreement Maxim. His initial statement, "Sounds fine to me," unequivocally indicates that he is maximizing his agreement and suggesting that he will not oppose Mell's recommendations. This concurrence reduces tension in the conversation and indicates that he will be accommodating others.

Nick's subsequent statements, "Eat or not eat. Or keep drinking. I could head right on out into the sunset," are indicative of minimising conflict, since he gives several options without pushing for any of them. Nick's neutrality dims the conflict by not imposing and embracing everyone's wishes. His showing of flexibility and non-contentiousness aligns with Leech's proposition that maximizing agreement lowers the social cost of interaction and fortifies the group. Nick's diction positions him as a narrator easy to agree with and a part of the restoration of the social setting's interpersonal cordiality.

Sympathy Maxim

(Minimise antipathy between self and others; Maximise sympathy between self and other)

a. Terri: "He shot himself in the mouth."
   Laura: "It sounds like a nightmare; But what exactly happened after he shot himself?" (p. 3)
   (Maximise sympathy between self and other; minimize antipathy between self and other)

The protagonist, Terri, in a narrative way openly shares her most intimate feelings through a discourse with the man whom she calls "a really abusive ex-husband" by telling her story with him. Laura's comment not only sympathizes with Terri but also makes the conversation gentle and calming as they address the delicate issue. Laura speaks to Terri directly, responding to the hard story of Terri about Ed's violence and his later attempted suicide.

Laura's remark is a powerful utterance of the Sympathy Maxim. "It sounds like a nightmare." The quotation serves as the greatest expression of sympathy since the speaker not only recognizes the trauma but also accepts the emotional suffering felt by Terri. By such a sympathetic statement, the speaker openly expresses emotional closeness and anxiety regarding Terri's health.

The question "But what exactly happened after he shot himself?" is a datum of minimizing antipathy under the curious tone that invites Terri to keep on talking. Laura's questioning is not a symptom of annoyance, disbelief, or moral evaluation, but, on the contrary, an expression of her supportive company. The way she conveys it illustrates her recognition of Terri's fragile emotions, and, concurrently, her linguistic choices prevent any undermining or contradictory assertions regarding Terri's feelings.

Laura's interaction, according to Leech's Sympathy Maxim, not only brings the group closer emotionally but also deepens that closeness through understanding and attention. The empathy she presents creates a bond and, at the same time, lessens the emotional distance during the talk about past abuse and trauma that was hard for the speakers.

b. Terri: "Poor Ed; I was in the room with him when he died. He did not have anyone else." (p.2, p. 3)
   (Maximise sympathy between self and other; minimise antipathy between self and other)

Initially, the conversation indicates the point at which she reveals to the others the truth about her previous marriage to Ed, who was violent. Terri's talk aligns with the narration of Ed's brutality and his sorrowful demise, thereby setting a gloomy atmosphere for the conversation. Terri primarily addresses Nick, Laura, and Mel, as they are the only ones listening at the kitchen table.

Terri's statements regarding Ed, her abusive ex-husband, clearly illustrate a complicated but strong application of the Sympathy Maxim. The speaker's "Poor Ed" indicates her pity and emotional compassion for the abuser, a situation where she excessively sympathizes, as even a highly painful man like Ed still gets her pity and empathy. This shows that Terri is a very compassionate person who can even put herself in the position of the worst people.

Terri's subsequent remark, "I was in the room with him when he died. He did not have anyone else," shows that the portrayal of Ed is not as a cruel person but as a lonely and sad one. Terri regards his brutality as an expression of

emotional need, not evil. By choosing to be with him at the end of his life, she expresses her deeply compassionate, human-like concern.

Terri's sympathetic language aligns with Leech's maxim because it prioritizes emotional support over resentment. Her compassion makes Ed's picture less harsh and enables the group to view him no longer just as a source of trauma but rather as a person. The case shows that sympathy can still occur in morally difficult relationships and can determine the tone of interpersonal communication. (Halpern, 2018).

c. Mel: "Can you imagine?; The man's heart was breaking because he couldn't turn his goddamn head and see his goddamn wife." (p.9)
(Minimise antipathy between self and others; maximise sympathy between self and others)

The conversation takes place in the story's midpoint, where Mel narrates the elderly couple, he treats after a major automobile accident. Mel's story about the old couple becomes a metaphor for deep emotional loyalty among couples, shaping the group's discussion of love. Mel is addressing the entire table, which consists of Terri, Nick, and Laura, all of whom are ears for his story.

Mel's utterance indicates that he is deeply emotionally empathetic with the old couple he assisted. His rhetorical question, "Can you imagine?" is an invitation for the audience to feel rather than be apathetic towards the narrative, thereby indicating a reduction of opposition. This question invites the audience to engage in emotional meditation and opens the door to empathy.

"The man's heart was breaking because he could not turn his goddamn head and see his goddamn wife." The quotation from him illustrates complete sympathy, as Mel indicates the emotional pain rather than purely the physical damage. By stating that the husband could not bear to look at his wife, as the most painful, Mel underlines the strength of their emotional connection and the misfortune of their circumstance.

This maxim encourages the group to empathize with one another and reveals Mel's sensitivity, which usually complements his persona. His narrative flows in perfect harmony with Leech's third principle of politeness, the Sympathy Maxim, which means it creates more understanding and less emotional barrier. Besides, the mention of the couple's commitment to one another is not only a textual reference but also a contrast to the characters' attempts to express love in its essence.

By applying Leech's Politeness Maxims, this study offers a different yet complementary perspective on the previous research, "What Men and Women Do When They Talk About Love: A Sociolinguistic Analysis". In contrast to the former investigation dealing with communication patterns between genders, considering men's and women's differences in the aspects of dominance, emotionality, and dialogue, the current one has emerged through the analysis of politeness maxims applied to the dialogues, revealing the characters' management of the emotional tension and the relationships of the characters through the conversation.

Earlier research showed that story-related exchanges depended most on emotional experience and personal interpretation, a fact reflected in the observation that the Sympathy Maxim is the most used in the current study. The two studies suggest that the characters use emotionally charged methods in their discussions of love. Previous research suggested this was due to gender differences (e.g., women being more likely to empathize), whereas the current research shows that Sympathy Maxim is a powerful politeness strategy regardless of gender, as the topic requires emotional validation and mutual understanding.

The earlier research characterized Mel as an overall speaker, characterized by mostly interruptions and sluggish storytelling, while the present study shows that Mel is, at the same time, using the Modesty Maxim, through which he diminishes his importance and comes across as unpretentious. This further supports the argument against the former interpretation that male narrators are merely authoritative. Realistically, the assessment presents a different viewpoint: that power and politeness can coexist and that even the most outspoken individuals may still use humility to moderate their assertions, particularly on philosophical or emotionally charged subjects.

Past studies in sociolinguistics did not consider politeness maxims as influencing the emotional part of the conversation. The present study shows that Agreement and Sympathy Maxims significantly contribute to the general harmony of the group while discussing topics like trauma, abusive relationships, and personal definitions of love. Therefore, the study offers a new pragmatic perspective: the politeness maxims in the narrative do not only serve as social manners but also as emotional modulation devices that guide the interlocutors through the intricacies and sensitivities involved in expressing love.

Identifying seven data points across three politeness maxims, this research has broadened the theoretical perception of politeness in literary dialogues. It closes the gap left by earlier studies, which focused mainly on sociolinguistics and gender. The current research points out that, in Carver's story, politeness is highly context-dependent, depending on the degree of emotion, narrative style, and the closeness of the characters. This provokes a new pragmatic perspective in the existing literature, demonstrating that literary dialogue can be a fertile ground for analyzing the selection, adaptation, and even omission of politeness maxims depending on the relationship and emotions involved.

CONCLUSION

The present study aims to conduct a thorough investigation of the application of Geoffrey Leech's politeness maxims in Raymond Carver's What We Talk About When We Talk About Love and to reveal how the characters use politeness to navigate emotionally charged conversations about love. The results indicate that, out of Leech's six maxims, only the three, namely Modesty, Agreement, and Sympathy, are present in the dialogues, with the Sympathy Maxim being the most prevalent. This indicates that politeness in Carver's storyline is not scattered randomly but is very much in tune with the emotional context of the interaction. Since the characters' talk is about intimate experiences, painful memories, and differing views on love, the politeness maxims that appear are those that help to keep emotional comfort, reduce conflict, and encourage empathy. This research establishes that linguistic politeness in literary dialogue works not just as a social tool, but also as an emotional and interpersonal strategy (Llopis et al., 2016). Furthermore, the research offers a significant input to the field of pragmatics in literary texts. Notably, earlier work, such as that investigating gendered language patterns, has scrutinized the communication of males and females in Carver's narrative but did not examine the pragmatic factors involved in such interactions. By utilizing Leech's politeness maxims, this study shows that politeness is a critical factor in determining the emotional and interactional aspects of the characters (Gretenkort & Tylén, 2021). Such pragmatic results not only support but also broaden the scope of previous sociolinguistic interpretations, thereby providing a new perspective on the role of politeness in the narrative as a contributor to harmony, tension regulation, and relational intertwining.

The main impact of the research on subsequent studies is the demonstration that literary dialogue can be highly illuminating for the researcher of pragmatic principles. The selective occurrence of politeness maxims in Carver's work makes it clear that the fictional talks may even resemble the real ones, particularly so when the topics are sensitive. Future scholars might continue this inquiry by analyzing politeness maxims across various writers, genres, and cultural settings to see how narrative context shapes pragmatic choices. The scholars may not only raise but also explain in detail the interaction between politeness and other pragmatic aspects, such as implicature, context, and speech acts, thereby arriving at a broader understanding of literary communication. In this manner, the current research opens the way for future interdisciplinary collaborations between pragmatics and literary studies, thereby demonstrating that politeness maxims are not merely theoretical constructs but also practical tools that reveal the complexity of human relations in literature.

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JOLALI
- Journal of Language and Literature -

JOLALI: Journal of Language and Literature, Vol. 4, No. 1, 2026

SIGNA'S CHARACTER BUILDING IN ADALYN GRACE'S *BELLADONNA*

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Abstract

This study analyzes the character development of Signa Farrow, the orphan protagonist in Adalyn Grace's *Belladonna* (2022), using Erik Erikson's theory of Identity vs. Role Confusion. The research aims to identify the stages of Signa's character development and to explain the impact of her character's development on the narrative and other characters in the novel. This study applies a qualitative descriptive method with a psychological literary approach. The data are taken from narrative descriptions, dialogues, and events that portray Signa's emotional, moral, and psychological growth. The findings reveal that Signa's character building develops through four main stages: struggles and isolation, adaptation and social learning, moral conflict and responsibility, and identity acceptance. These stages reflect Erikson's identity development process, showing how Signa transforms from an emotionally insecure orphan into a confident young woman with a clear sense of self. The study concludes that *Belladonna* presents orphanhood not merely as a condition of loss, but as a psychological foundation for identity formation and emotional resilience in young adult fiction.

Keywords: *character building; Erikson theory; identity development; orphan character; young adult fiction*

INTRODUCTION

Young adult fiction frequently portrays identity as a dynamic process shaped by emotional conflict and moral decision-making. Among the character types that embody this process, the orphan protagonist occupies a prominent position. Deprived of consistent familial support, orphan characters often confront instability, social alienation, and uncertainty regarding their sense of self. Despite their narrative significance, critical discussions tend to address these figures symbolically rather than examining the psychological mechanisms underlying their identity formation.

Existing literary scholarship largely frames orphan characters in terms of social marginalization, moral allegory, or narrative utility (Lawton & Cain, 2022; Zasacka, 2023). Other studies highlight the association between orphanhood and themes of independence or empowerment in contemporary young adult narratives (Spencer & Craig, 2023). However, such analyses frequently emphasize outward struggle and thematic meaning, leaving a noticeable gap in the exploration of how identity is internally constructed through emotional experience and personal conflict.

Erik Erikson's psychosocial theory offers a valuable perspective for addressing this gap. His concept of identity versus role confusion describes adolescence as a period marked by exploration, crisis, and eventual identity consolidation (Erikson, 1968). These developmental stages parallel the structural logic of coming-of-age narratives, making the theory particularly relevant to literary analysis. Nevertheless, while Erikson's framework is well established in psychology, its application to orphan identity formation in young adult fantasy fiction, especially in works featuring female protagonists, remains limited.

Grace (2022) offers a distinctive narrative through Signa Farrow, an orphan whose life is shaped by emotional rejection and supernatural fear of Death. Rather than reinforcing traditional portrayals of orphans as powerless, the novel depicts Signa's identity as emerging through gradual psychological growth, ethical responsibility, social engagement, and self-acceptance. This progression positions her character as an effective subject for psychosocial literary analysis.

In response, the present study examines Signa Farrow's character development as an orphan using Erikson's theory of identity formation. The study seeks to (1) delineate the stages of Signa's character development in *Belladonna* and (2) analyze how these stages influence her behavior, relationships, and narrative significance. By emphasizing the psychological dimension of orphan identity construction, this research contributes to discussions of young adult literature. It offers insight into representations of resilience, agency, and identity among marginalized protagonists.

METHODOLOGY

The analysis was guided by Erik Erikson's psychosocial framework, focusing specifically on the identity formation process reflected in the narrative. Textual data was interpreted thematically by grouping events and character responses into stages of identity conflict and resolution. All data were derived from *Belladonna* (2022), with emphasis placed on narrative elements that portray Signa Farrow's emotional responses, moral decisions, and psychological transformation. Dialogues, descriptions, and critical plot developments served as the main analytical units. The interpretive process relied on the researcher as the primary instrument, responsible for selecting, organizing, and contextualizing relevant excerpts. Through repeated close reading, the researcher ensured coherence between textual evidence and theoretical interpretation. This study applied a qualitative descriptive research design, prioritizing interpretive understanding over quantification. The approach enabled an in-depth examination of character building by focusing on meaning construction, emotional development, and identity negotiation within the literary text.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Stages of Signa Farrow's Character Building

The findings reveal that Signa Farrow's character development in *Belladonna* progresses through four interconnected stages: initial isolation, adaptation and social learning, moral responsibility, and identity acceptance. These stages align with Erik Erikson's psychosocial concept of *Identity vs. Role Confusion*, demonstrating how Signa's identity gradually evolves from confusion toward clarity through lived experience.

Early Isolation and Identity Confusion

At the beginning of the novel, Signa is portrayed as an orphan marked by instability, rejection, and emotional neglect. Her repeated displacement among guardians and the stigma surrounding her supernatural abilities contribute to deep identity confusion. The data indicate that Signa internalizes social rejection and interprets herself as dangerous and unwanted. This condition reflects Erikson's assertion that the absence of emotional security disrupts identity formation during early development.

Adaptation at Thorn Grove

The second stage emerges when Signa arrives at Thorn Grove. Unlike her previous environments, Thorn Grove provides structure, social interaction, and relative emotional safety. The findings show that exposure to social norms, etiquette, and interpersonal relationships allows Signa to begin experimenting with new social roles. Her confusion about manners and belonging illustrates an identity exploration phase, in which she begins to redefine herself beyond the label of a cursed orphan.

Moral Agency and Responsibility

The third stage is marked by Signa's increasing moral awareness and sense of responsibility, particularly through her involvement in uncovering the truth behind Blythe's poisoning. Rather than remaining passive, Signa actively seeks solutions, confronts authority figures, and accepts emotional risk. This phase indicates a shift from survival-oriented behavior to value-driven decision-making, signaling progress toward identity consolidation.

Identity Acceptance and Resolution

The final stage of character building occurs when Signa accepts her supernatural abilities and reinterprets her past. Instead of viewing herself as cursed, she recognizes her role as a mediator between life and death. Validation from other characters reinforces her self-worth and confirms the stability of her emerging identity. This stage reflects Erikson's notion of identity achievement, in which personal values, abilities, and social roles are integrated.

The results demonstrate that Signa Farrow's character building is not a linear transformation but a cumulative psychological process shaped by trauma, relationships, and moral challenges. This finding supports Erikson's theory that identity formation requires active engagement with conflict rather than avoidance. (Erikson, 1968).

Consistent with Lawton & Cain (2022)The study shows that orphan protagonists function as mirrors of adolescent psychological struggle. Signa's early emotional withdrawal aligns with Spencer & Craig (2023) argument that the absence of parental guidance forces orphan characters to construct identity through experience rather than inherited values. Her gradual trust in Sylas and the Hawthorne family illustrates how substitute emotional bonds facilitate identity exploration.

Furthermore, Signa's transition from passivity to moral agency supports Dollarhide et al. (2023They claim that character development is driven by ethical decision-making rather than instruction. Her willingness to confront danger and authority indicates identity formation grounded in personal values. This transformation challenges earlier literary representations of orphan characters as passive victims and as supporting characters. Zasacka (2023) view of modern female protagonists as active agents of self-definition.

Psychologically, Signa's acceptance of her abilities represents a successful resolution of Erikson's identity crisis. By reframing her past trauma as a source of strength, she achieves emotional integration. This finding aligns with Maehler & Hernández-Torrano (2025), who argue that identity is fluid and reconstructed through reflection and social validation.

Overall, the findings confirm that *Belladonna* presents orphanhood not merely as a condition of loss but as a catalyst for resilience, moral growth, and identity achievement. Signa's character building illustrates how adversity, when paired with supportive relationships, can lead to psychological maturity and self-acceptance.

CONCLUSION

Identity resolution, rather than prolonged suffering, ultimately defines Signa Farrow's character development in Adalyn Grace's *Belladonna*. By accepting her abilities and reconstructing her past, Signa achieves psychological maturity that reflects Erikson's concept of successful identity formation. Emotional recognition from significant relationships further stabilizes her self-concept and transforms her former sense of alienation into a sense of self-worth. Before reaching this stage, Signa undergoes a process of moral and emotional testing that reshapes her identity. Her decision to take responsibility for Blythe's safety signals a shift from withdrawal to ethical agency, illustrating the transition from role confusion toward purposeful action. These choices demonstrate that identity emerges through responsibility and moral commitment rather than passive endurance. Social adaptation at Thorn Grove plays a central role in this transformation. Exposure to stability, guidance, and interpersonal connection allows Signa to challenge the internalized beliefs formed during her early experiences as an orphan. This environment facilitates identity exploration by offering alternatives to the fear and isolation that previously defined her self-image. At the foundation of this process lies Signa's childhood, marked by abandonment, instability, and emotional deprivation. These early conditions generate identity confusion consistent with Erikson's theory, establishing the psychological conflict that drives her development. Taken together, this study confirms that Signa's character-building illustrates how identity in orphan narratives is constructed through adversity, relational support, and self-acceptance, reinforcing the relevance of psychosocial theory to literary analysis.

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JOLALI
- Journal of Language and Literature -

JOLALI: Journal of Language and Literature, Vol. 4, No. 1, 2026

A FELICITY CONDITION ANALYSIS OF THE MAIN CHARACTER IN *LITTLE WOMEN (2019)*

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Abstract

This study examines the types of speech acts and the realization of felicity conditions performed by the main characters in the *Little Women (2019)* movie, using Austin's (1962) speech act theory and Searle's (1969) felicity condition framework. Employing a descriptive qualitative method, the research identifies 97 utterances comprising assertive, directive, commissive, expressive, and declarative acts. It analyzes whether each fulfills or deviates from the propositional content, preparatory, sincerity, and essential conditions. The findings show that 81 utterances are felicitous and 16 are infelicitous, demonstrating that successful communication occurs when intention, context, and authority support the speech act, while infelicity arises from insincerity, lack of ability, or mismatched context, thereby deviating from the felicity conditions. These pragmatic outcomes play a significant role in understanding how felicitous and infelicitous utterances shape the movie's emotional dynamics, character, and plot tension. The study also concludes that felicity conditions are essential for understanding how speech acts function effectively or deviate in the movie utterances, offering deeper insight into how communication constructs relationships and meaning in a movie.

Keywords: *Austin; felicity conditions; illocutionary; Little Women; Searle; speech act*

INTRODUCTION

Among the many branches of linguistics, pragmatics plays a crucial role in explaining how language functions in real communicative situations by examining how meaning is shaped through speaker intention, social roles, and situational context (Levinson, 1985; Siregar et al., 2024). Pragmatics emphasizes that meaning does not reside solely in linguistic forms but emerges through language use in context to achieve specific communicative purposes (Thomas, 1995). From this perspective, language is understood not merely as a static system of symbols, but as a form of social action performed through interaction. This view is most clearly articulated in Speech Act Theory, introduced by Austin (1962) and further developed by Searle (1969), which proposes that speaking is itself a form of acting. Through utterances, speakers perform actions such as asserting, requesting, promising, apologizing, or commanding. However, not all speech acts successfully achieve their intended functions. The effectiveness of an utterance depends on pragmatic requirements known as felicity conditions, which determine whether a speech act is appropriate, valid, and effective within a particular context (Austin, 1962). When these conditions are not met, utterances may become infelicitous, leading to pragmatic failure or miscommunication (Cutting, 2005).

Speech Act Theory and felicity conditions remain foundational frameworks in pragmatic research and are widely applied across diverse communicative contexts, including everyday conversation, social media interaction, legal discourse, and literary texts (Apriyanto, 2020; Rabiah, 2018; Babazade, 2025). Recent studies have demonstrated that language functions not only to convey information but also to perform actions that shape social relationships, express emotions, and influence interlocutors' responses. Several previous studies have examined the application of felicity conditions across diverse communicative contexts, demonstrating the breadth and relevance of speech act theory. Research has explored felicity conditions in social media discourse (Yunita & Simatupang, 2022), legal and courtroom settings (Zakiyah, 2024), political and diplomatic speeches (Setiawan, 2024; Toisuta & Aritonang, 2024), pandemic-related

news involving public figures (Hadiati et al., 2023), and interactive game narratives (Setyawan & Cahyaningrum, 2023). Other studies have focused on fictional and cinematic discourse, including animated movies such as Raya and the Last Dragon (Muhamad & Simatupang, 2020) and Onward (Rianurhasanah, 2023), as well as mystery and drama movies like Knives Out (Dianita & Sofyan, 2023) and Enola Holmes (Azzahra & Dianita, 2025). Collectively, these studies predominantly employ descriptive qualitative methods and draw on the frameworks of Austin (1962), Searle (1969), and Yule (1996), revealing varying dominance of sincerity, preparatory, general, or essential conditions depending on context and genre. While these findings confirm that the fulfillment of felicity conditions determines the success or failure of speech acts in both real and fictional discourse, most studies tend to focus on specific contexts, dominant conditions, or particular speech act types. Consequently, comprehensive analyses that simultaneously examine both felicitous and infelicitous conditions across multiple speech acts in historical drama movies remain limited, leaving a gap that the present study seeks to address. Despite their contributions, many of these studies rely primarily on general speech act classifications or focus predominantly on felicitous utterances, resulting in partial analyses that overlook pragmatic failure and the underlying causes of infelicity.

Based on the review of previous studies, research examining felicity conditions in drama movies—particularly historical drama movies—remains limited. Existing studies tend to emphasize dominant or successful speech acts without systematically addressing infelicitous utterances and the specific felicity conditions that fail to obtain. Moreover, few studies comprehensively apply Searle's framework by analyzing all four types of felicity conditions—propositional content, preparatory, sincerity, and essential conditions—across different categories of speech acts. The influence of cultural, historical, and emotional contexts on the fulfillment or deviation of felicity conditions in cinematic discourse also remains underexplored. These limitations indicate a clear need for a more comprehensive pragmatic analysis that captures both pragmatic success and failure within movie utterances.

To address these gaps, the present study investigates the fulfillment and violation of felicity conditions in the speech acts of the main characters in *Little Women (2019),* directed by Greta Gerwig. This study is guided by the research question: How are felicity conditions felicitous or infelicitous in these speech acts? The objective of this study is to examine how felicity conditions operate in both successful and unsuccessful speech acts by applying Searle's framework of propositional content, preparatory, sincerity, and essential conditions. The novelty of this research lies in its systematic and comprehensive analysis of both felicitous and infelicitous speech acts in a historical drama movie, offering empirical insights into how contextual, interpersonal, and emotional factors shape pragmatic success and failure in cinematic discourse. The findings are expected to contribute theoretically to pragmatic studies and practically to the analysis of language use in movies, particularly in understanding how communication breakdowns and pragmatic effectiveness influence character development and narrative progression.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive research design to analyze how felicity conditions are felicitous or infelicitous in the speech acts of the main characters in *Little Women (2019).* This design is appropriate because the study focuses on interpreting meaning, intention, and contextual appropriateness in language use rather than on numerical measurement (Creswell, 2014). The research subjects consist of selected utterances produced by the main characters—Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy March. The data were purposively selected for their clear illocutionary acts and indications of either felicitous or infelicitous felicity conditions, making the sampling relevant to the research objective.

Data were collected through systematic observation and documentation. The movie and its official script were downloaded on 04 November 2025. The movie was watched repeatedly to understand the communicative contexts, and relevant utterances were identified and matched with the script to ensure accuracy. Data analysis was conducted qualitatively using Speech Act Theory and Searle's framework of felicity conditions. Utterances were classified into illocutionary act types and analyzed with respect to propositional content, preparatory conditions, sincerity, and essential conditions. The utterances were then categorized as felicitous or infelicitous to explain pragmatic success or failure in the movie.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Based on Austin's (1962) speech act theory and Searle's (1969) felicity conditions, Selected utterances from the main characters Jo, Amy, Meg, and Beth were analyzed qualitatively to identify speech act types and determine whether they were felicitous or infelicitous. To support the qualitative analysis, a frequency table is also provided as a descriptive overview. The findings focus on the classification of speech acts and the analysis of felicity conditions, which are then discussed in relation to the movie's context and the characters' communication styles.

Table 1. Frequency of Speech Act

No.	Types of Speech Act	Frequency
1.	Assertive speech act	41
2.	Commissive speech act	8
3.	Declarative speech act	-
4.	Directive speech act	15
5.	Expressive speech act	33
	Total	97

Table 2. Frequency of Felicity Conditions

No.	Felicity Conditions	Frequency
1.	Felicitous conditions	81
2.	Infelicitous conditions	16
	Total	97

Discussion

Felicitous Condition

Data C2

Beth: "I do not want to go, but I wish I could hear all the music."

Jo: ***"I will keep it all in my head and try to sing it for you when I get home."***

Jo's utterance is classified as a commissive speech act because it commits her to performing a future action. By saying, "I will keep it all in my head and try to sing it for you when I get home," Jo takes responsibility for remembering the music and singing it for Beth later. This commitment to a future course of action reflects the core characteristic of commissive, particularly promises, where the speaker voluntarily binds herself to do something for the hearer's benefit. In this scene, Jo and Meg are going to the theater to see a play. Beth, their younger sister who loves music, wants to hear the music being played there, but she doesn't want to go with them. Jo's utterance functions as a promise, and the conditions for a propositional content are fulfilled because it refers to a future action that she will do—remembering the music and singing it for Beth. The preparatory condition is fulfilled because Jo is in a position to attend the event, listen to music, and then try to reproduce it for Beth; nothing prevents her from carrying out this future action. The condition of sincerity is also fulfilled, because Jo genuinely intends to comfort Beth and sincerely intends to try to remember and sing the music for her. Finally, the essential condition is met because the statement constitutes a binding commitment to future action. Since all conditions are felicitous, Jo's promise is successful, functioning as a sincere promise to give Beth attention and affection.

Data Di6

Marmee: "…. Don't mind the clutter, Mr. Laurence, we don't."

Laurie: "Laurie, please."

Jo: ***"Can I call you Teddy?"***

Laurie: "Yes!"

Jo's utterance is categorized as a directive speech act because it is intended to elicit a response or action from the hearer, namely, granting permission. By asking "Can I call you Teddy?", Jo is not merely expressing a thought but requesting Laurie's consent to perform a future action. This places the responsibility on Laurie to respond with approval or refusal, which is a key feature of directives. The utterance aims to influence the hearer's behavior—specifically, to authorize a particular form of address—therefore functioning as a polite request and fitting the category of a directive speech act. In this scene, Laurie visits Jo's house for the first time and meets the March family. Since Laurie is a neighbor who is still somewhat unfamiliar, Marmee tries to address her formally, but she refuses. Jo's utterance functions as a directive, and the propositional content condition is fulfilled because her question relates to a future action she wants to do—calling Laurie by the affectionate nickname "Teddy." The preparatory condition is fulfilled because Jo has reason to believe that Laurie has the authority to grant or deny permission regarding how she is addressed. Nothing is preventing her from responding (Traesar, Sujiwa, & Adhitya, 2025).. The condition of sincerity is also fulfilled because Jo genuinely wants to use the nickname and sincerely seeks Laurie's consent rather than imposing it without permission. Finally, the essential condition was fulfilled because her question was intended as a request for Laurie's permission. Since all conditions were fulfilled and Laurie accepted the request, "Yes!", the directive was felicitous, successfully establishing a new, more intimate form of address between them.

Data E22

Marmee: "Jo will teach you."

Jo: ***"ME?! I already teach Beth!"***

Meg: "You are a good teacher."

Jo's utterance is categorized as an expressive speech act because it primarily functions to express her psychological state and emotional reaction to Marmee's suggestion. By exclaiming "ME?! I already teach Beth!", Jo is not committing herself to an action, requesting someone else to do something, or stating an objective fact. Instead, she conveys surprise, frustration, and reluctance toward the new responsibility imposed on her. The utterance reflects Jo's feelings about the situation rather than aiming to change the external world, which is the defining characteristic of expressive speech acts. In this scene, because her teacher has just beaten Amy, Mr. Davis, Marmee suggests that Amy study at home and be taught by Jo. Jo's utterance serves as an emotional expression, conveying her surprise and protest at being assigned additional teaching responsibilities. The propositional content is fulfilled because her statement conveys her emotional reaction, surprise, and frustration by highlighting that she is already responsible for teaching Beth and does not want to teach Amy as well. The preparation condition is also fulfilled, because the situation reasonably justifies the emotional response that Marmee suddenly assigns an additional task without warning, so Jo has reason to react. The sincerity condition is fulfilled because Jo genuinely feels overwhelmed and honestly expresses her unwillingness and discomfort at that moment. Finally, the essential condition is fulfilled because the utterance expresses her emotional attitude toward the new obligation. With all the conditions of felicity fulfilled, Jo's expressive utterance is felicitous, functioning as a genuine emotional protest.

Data Di12

Amy: "You are going somewhere with Laurie, I know it!"

Jo: ***"Yes, we are, now stop bothering."***

Jo's utterance is classified as a directive speech act because it is intended to make the hearer perform (or stop performing) an action. By saying "now stop bothering," Jo directly commands Amy to cease her behavior and leave them alone. The utterance places the responsibility for changing her actions on Amy, which is the defining feature of directives. Rather than expressing feelings alone or committing herself to a future action, Jo uses language to control the situation by instructing Amy what to do, making the utterance function clearly as a directive, specifically a command. In this scene, Jo and Laurie are about to go ice skating when Amy arrives and asks to join them, but Jo firmly tells her she has not been

invited. Jo's utterance "now stop bothering" functions as a command, and the propositional content condition is fulfilled because the utterance refers to a future action that Jo wants Amy to do—namely, to leave and not join them. The preparatory condition is fulfilled because Jo reasonably believes that Amy is capable of performing the behavior and that Amy's presence is disruptive, thus providing a valid reason for Jo to make the request. The condition of sincerity is also fulfilled because Jo is genuinely annoyed and sincerely wants Amy to stop bothering her at that moment. Finally, the essential condition is fulfilled because Jo intends her statement to be an attempt to persuade Amy to change her mind about coming along. With all the conditions of felicity fulfilled, Jo's command is felicitous, effectively realizing her desire not to invite Amy.

Data A34

Jo: (angry) "You will be bored with him in two years, and we will be interesting forever."

Meg: ***"Just because my dreams are not the same as yours does not mean they are unimportant."***

Meg's utterance is categorized as an assertive speech act because it functions to state and affirm a belief that Meg holds to be true. By saying "Just because my dreams are not the same as yours does not mean they are unimportant," Meg is asserting her perspective about the value of her dreams and correcting Jo's assumption that they are inferior. The utterance presents a claim about reality—specifically, the legitimacy of her personal aspirations—rather than requesting action, expressing emotion alone, or committing to future behavior. Therefore, it functions as an assertion that conveys Meg's conviction and defends the truth of her viewpoint. In this scene, it is Meg's wedding day. Jo, who believes it is better to work and support herself than to marry and live with someone else, tries to convince Meg to stay with her and pursue their dreams. Meg's utterance serves as an assertive statement, and the propositional content condition is fulfilled because she makes a statement that evaluates the truth about her real dream. The preparation condition is fulfilled because Meg has sufficient evidence to assert it; Jo explicitly belittles her dreams, giving Meg a reason to correct that implication. The sincerity condition is also fulfilled because Meg genuinely believes that her desires—marriage and household happiness—are meaningful even though Jo rejects them, and she expresses this belief sincerely. Finally, the essential condition is fulfilled because her statement is intended as a corrective claim, defending her argument about her own dreams. With all the felicity conditions met, Meg's statement is felicitous and serves as a firm yet honest rebuttal to Jo's accusation.

Data A40

Jo: "When did you become so wise?"

Amy: ***"I always have been; you were just too busy noticing my faults."***

Amy's utterance is classified as an assertive speech act because it functions to state what she believes to be true about herself and Jo's behavior. By saying "I always have been, you were just too busy noticing my faults," Amy presents a claim about reality—her consistent wisdom and Jo's past failure to recognize it—rather than asking for action, expressing emotion alone, or committing to future behavior. The utterance is intended to inform and correct Jo's assumption, which is the defining function of assertive speech acts. In this scene, Amy previously expresses her opinion about the importance of writing, which amazes and surprises Jo. Amy's utterance serves as an assertive statement, and the propositional content is fulfilled because she claims herself (that she is always wise) and about Jo's past behavior (that Jo is too focused on her flaws). The preparatory condition is fulfilled because Amy has a reasonable reason for making this statement, and Jo's past tendency to criticize or ignore Amy's strengths provides contextual justification for her claim. The condition of sincerity is fulfilled, because Amy genuinely believes both parts of her statement, her own worth and Jo's past indifference. Finally, the essential condition is fulfilled because Amy clearly intends for her statement to be taken as an act of stating or correcting Jo's assumptions about her. With all felicity conditions fulfilled, Amy's assertive statement is felicitous, functioning as a confident and honest self-statement.

Infelicitous Condition

Data C1

Jo: "A friend of mine desired me to offer a story, by her, she wrote it - ***she would be glad to write more if this suits."***

Mr. Dashwood: "Not a first attempt, I take it?"

Jo's utterance "she would be glad to write more if this suit" is classified as a commissive speech act because it commits the speaker (indirectly) to a future course of action, namely the production of more stories if the current one is accepted. Even though Jo attributes the commitment to a "friend," the illocutionary force of the utterance is an offer of future work, which is a subtype of commissive. The statement projects a future action contingent on the publisher's approval and functions to assure Mr. Dashwood of continued cooperation. Therefore, despite the later-revealed insincerity and misrepresentation of the author, the utterance pragmatically functions as a commissive because it attempts to bind the (supposed) writer to writing more in the future. In this scene, Jo submits her friend's novel to the publisher, Mr. Dashwood, and makes a further offer regarding her next work. However, what she submitted was actually her own work. Jo's utterance functions as a commissive because it offers a future action (providing more stories) on behalf of the person she claims to represent. The propositional content condition is fulfilled, because the utterance expresses a future action that "she" will take if the editor approves the manuscript. However, the preparatory condition is violated, because a promise requires the speaker (or the person they commit) actually to be able to perform the promised action. However, Jo's "friend" is fictional or imaginary, making it impossible for that person to write more stories. The sincerity condition also deviates, because Jo does not truly intend for a "friend" to fulfill the offer; she is the author herself, yet she hides this fact and pretends to commit someone else. Finally, although the essential condition is structurally fulfilled (the utterance is still considered as an attempt to commit someone to a future action), the commissive becomes infelicitous because the key background facts and genuine intention required for a valid promise are deviated.

Data E1

Friedrich: "You are on fire."

Jo: ***"Thank you."***

Friedrich: "You are on fire!"

Jo's utterance is considered an expressive speech act because its primary function is to express her emotional state, rather than to state a fact, give a command, or commit to a future action. Through her tone and wording, Jo conveys feelings such as surprise, frustration, or anger in response to the situation she is facing. The utterance reflects her psychological attitude toward the circumstances, allowing the hearer to understand how she feels at that moment. Since expressing emotions and personal reactions is the defining feature of expressive speech acts, Jo's utterance fits this category. In this scene, Friedrich is actually warning Jo that her skirt is on fire because she is standing in front of the fireplace. However, she thinks he is complimenting her because she is excited about her novel being accepted by Mr. Dashwood. Jo's response, "Thank you," to Friedrich's warning, "You are on fire," is infelicitous because the felicity conditions do not align with the intended speech act. The propositional content condition is violated because Jo interprets Friedrich's utterance as praise rather than a literal statement of danger, leading her response to mismatch the actual situation. The preparatory condition also deviates, as Jo mistakenly believes Friedrich is expressing admiration, which fails to alert her to a factual problem, so she lacks the appropriate contextual understanding needed to thank him. The sincerity condition is fulfilled because Jo genuinely expresses gratitude based on her misunderstanding of the utterance. The essential condition is also met, as her reply still counts as an expressive act of thanking. However, because the propositional content and preparatory conditions are deviated, Jo's expressive utterance becomes infelicitous, creating a pragmatic mismatch between Friedrich's assertive warning and Jo's expressive gratitude.

Data A24

Jo: "What did you do?"

Amy: ***"Just a drawing and then... Mr. Davis hit me."***

Amy's utterance is categorized as an assertive speech act because it functions to report and describe a past event that she believes (or presents as) true. By saying "Just a drawing and then... Mr. Davis hit me," Amy is giving Jo information about what happened at school, thereby presenting a claim about a state of affairs in the world. The utterance is not intended to request an action, express emotion alone, or commit to future behavior, but to state and explain events, which is the defining function of assertive speech acts, even though the report is incomplete and thus pragmatically infelicitous. In this scene, Amy comes home from school with an injured hand because her teacher, Mr. Davis, hit her. She was hit because she talked about Mr. Davis with her friends, and her friends asked her to draw Mr. Davis on her small blackboard because she was good at drawing, which was meant to mock Mr. Davis. Amy's utterance is an assertion in which she reports past events, but it becomes partially infelicitous because she conceals her true intention. The propositional content condition is fulfilled because she presents a description of what happened; however, she selectively frames the act as "just a drawing," omitting the fact that it was a mocking caricature, creating an incomplete representation. The preparatory condition is violated because an assertive act requires the speaker to have adequate evidence and present it truthfully. However, Amy deliberately withheld information by not explaining in detail why she was hit. The sincerity condition is violated because Amy does not fully believe her own argument; she presents herself as knowing she drew something provocative, but chooses to minimize her responsibility to elicit sympathy. The essential condition is still fulfilled, because her utterance functions as an attempt to report a state of affairs. Overall, the assertive becomes infelicitous because Amy's utterance deviates from the sincerity and preparatory conditions, resulting in a report that misleads the listener despite maintaining the structural form of an assertion.

Data E25

Marmee: "Do not let the sun go down on your anger. Forgive her. Help each other, and you begin again tomorrow."

Jo: ***"She does not deserve my forgiveness. I will hate her! I will hate her forever!"***

Jo's utterance is categorized as an expressive speech act because its primary function is to express her emotional state, not to describe facts, request action, or commit to future behavior. By saying it, Jo expresses intense feelings of anger, hurt, and resentment toward Amy after discovering that Amy's manuscript had been burned. The utterance conveys Jo's psychological attitude toward the situation rather than aiming to change the external world. This focus on expressing emotion—especially through exaggerated and emotionally charged language—is the defining characteristic of expressive speech acts, which is why Jo's utterance is classified as expressive, even though it later proves to be insincere or temporary. In this scene, Jo is very angry after learning that Amy deliberately burned her novel. Jo's utterance is an expressive one because it conveys intense anger and emotional rejection towards Amy. The propositional content condition is fulfilled because the utterance describes Jo's emotional attitude, her stated hatred and refusal to forgive, which is appropriate content for an expressive utterance. The preparatory condition is also fulfilled, because the context (Amy burning her manuscript) reasonably justifies Jo's strong emotional response, providing a situational basis for expressing anger. However, the condition of sincerity is compromised, because Jo does not truly intend to hate Amy "forever"; her utterances are driven by anger rather than a stable, honest emotional state, and subsequent events show that she does not maintain this hatred. Nevertheless, the essential condition is met because the utterance remains an attempt to express an emotional reaction. Because the condition of sincerity is deviated, Jo's expressive utterance becomes infelicitous, representing an emotionally charged statement rather than a sincere expression of lasting feelings.

Data E29

Beth: "Now your hair is off."

Hannah: "You look like a boy."

Jo: ***"It does not affect the fate of the nation, so do not wail."***

Jo's utterance is classified as an expressive speech act because it is used to display her emotional attitude toward the situation, rather than to state a fact, give an order, or commit to future action. By saying, "It does not affect the fate of

the nation, so do not wail," Jo attempts to convey indifference and emotional control about cutting her hair, framing it as something trivial. The utterance reflects how she wants her feelings to be perceived and functions to express (or perform) an emotional stance. Since expressing a psychological attitude—whether sincere or not—is the defining function of expressive speech acts, Jo's utterance fits this category, even though her true feelings later contradict it. In this scene, Marmee wants to visit her sick father at the army headquarters, but she doesn't have enough money. They are all surprised when they see Jo handing Marmee a large sum of money, which turns out to be the result of her cutting her hair. Jo's utterance functions as an expressive act because she is presenting an emotional stance, trying to appear unaffected by cutting her hair, even though the emotion she expresses is not genuine. The propositional content condition is fulfilled because the utterance conveys her supposed attitude that the haircut is trivial and not worth crying over. However, the preparatory condition is deviant, because an expression requires that the situation appropriately warrants the emotion being displayed. However, Jo is actually distressed, making her calm, joking stance contextually inappropriate. The sincerity condition is also deviant, because Jo does not truly feel the nonchalance she expresses; the following scene reveals she cried over the loss of her hair, proving that her expressed emotion does not match her real psychological state. The essential condition is still fulfilled because the utterance counts as an attempt to express an emotional stance, even if that stance is false. Therefore, the expressive act becomes infelicitous, primarily due to Jo's deviated sincerity condition and preparatory condition, which the situation mismatched between expressed and actual feelings.

Data A37

Amy: "Marmee! Marmee! Aunt March is going to Europe and..."

Jo: ***"...wants me to go with her! How wonderful! Now I know why I spent all those boring hours reading to her!"***

Amy: "No, she... she wanted me to come. As her companion."

Jo's utterance is categorized as an assertive speech act because it functions to state what she believes to be a fact about the world. By saying it, Jo is presenting her assumption as a truth, namely that Aunt March intends to take her to Europe. She is not asking for confirmation, expressing emotion alone, or committing to a future action; instead, she is asserting a belief and concluding Aunt March's decision. Even though the belief turns out to be false and lacks sufficient evidence, the illocutionary force of the utterance remains assertive because its primary purpose is to claim and state a presumed reality. In the previous scene, Aunt March had said that Jo might be taken to Europe if she behaved well and was faithful. Jo interpreted this promise as a certainty. However, in this scene, Aunt March chose Amy. Jo's utterance functions as an assertive speech act, but it becomes partially infelicitous because one of Searle's felicity conditions fails. The propositional content condition is fulfilled because Jo produces a statement that she believes to be true about Aunt March's supposed intention to take her to Europe, even though it is ultimately false. The preparatory condition is not met because Jo lacked evidence to justify her decision to go to Europe. Her assumption was based solely on Aunt March's previous ambiguous statement, which could not reasonably serve as a strong basis for asserting that Aunt March truly intended to take her. The sincerity condition is fulfilled because she genuinely believes her claim at the moment she says it. Likewise, the essential condition is fulfilled because Jo is clearly attempting to assert a fact about the world. Because the preparatory condition is deviated, the assertive becomes infelicitous, revealing a mismatch between Jo's assumption and the actual situation.

Discussion of Felicitous and Infelicitous Findings in The Movie

Most utterances in *Little Women (2019)* are categorized as felicitous because the characters perform speech acts in appropriate contexts, with clear intentions, sufficient authority, and mutual understanding between speakers and hearers. These utterances generally fulfill Searle's (1969) felicity conditions—prepositional content, preparatory, sincerity, and essential conditions—resulting in effective communication. Interactions among Jo, Amy, Meg, and Beth are largely sincere and contextually appropriate, allowing the characters to express emotions such as affection, concern, and encouragement directly, which supports the portrayal of close interpersonal relationships and emotional depth in the movie.

However, several utterances are infelicitous due to the deviation of one or more felicity conditions, often arising from emotional tension, suppressed feelings, or conflicting intentions. In particular, Jo's infelicitous utterances frequently result from unmet sincerity or essential conditions when she hides her true emotions, reflecting inner conflict rather than simple pragmatic failure. These infelicitous moments function as narrative devices that reveal character traits, emotional struggles, and interpersonal conflict, enriching the story's complexity.

While previous studies on felicity conditions generally focus on classifying and counting felicitous and infelicitous speech acts separately—often treating infelicity as a communicative failure—this study examines them simultaneously. By analyzing how and why felicity conditions are fulfilled or deviated within the same communicative context, this research demonstrates that infelicitous utterances can serve meaningful pragmatic and narrative functions. Applying Searle's complete framework to emotionally and historically situated discourse, this study offers a more comprehensive understanding of felicity conditions as indicators of character development and relational dynamics rather than mere markers of communicative breakdown.

CONCLUSION

Based on Tables 1 and 2, a total of 97 speech acts by the main characters in Little Women (2019) were identified: 41 assertive, 33 expressive, 15 directive, 8 commissive, and none declarative. The dominance of assertive speech acts indicates that the movie relies heavily on statements, explanations, and expressions of opinion. In contrast, the high frequency of expressive acts reflects the emotionally driven nature of the narrative. Directive acts occur mainly in moments of guidance or conflict, whereas commissive acts occur less frequently and are typically tied to promises or commitments in emotionally significant scenes. The absence of declarative acts aligns with the lack of institutional authority among the main characters.

The findings reveal the distribution of felicity conditions in the utterances of *Little Women (2019),* showing how successfully the characters' speech acts fulfill Searle's felicity conditions. Of the 97 analyzed utterances, 81 are categorized as felicitous, indicating that most speech acts effectively align speaker intention, contextual appropriateness, and conventional procedures. These felicitous utterances fulfill all four felicity conditions—propositional content, preparatory, sincerity, and essential conditions—allowing the illocutionary force to function successfully. As a result, they contribute to character development, emotional depth, and narrative progression, reflecting the movie's emphasis on effective illocutionary performance. In contrast, 16 utterances are identified as infelicitous, indicating instances where the intended illocutionary force fails due to unmet felicity conditions. According to Austin (1962), such deviations result in misfires or abuses, where the speaker's intended action is not properly recognized or accepted by the listener. These infelicitous utterances often lead to misunderstanding, emotional tension, or communicative failure, thereby enriching the portrayal of interpersonal conflict and emotional complexity among the characters.

Based on the findings of this study, several suggestions are proposed for future research and educational practice. Future researchers are encouraged to examine a wider range of characters or compare multiple movie adaptations to explore how historical, social, and cultural contexts influence the fulfillment of felicity conditions, including comparisons between novel and movie adaptations. Researchers may also integrate other pragmatic frameworks, such as implicature, politeness strategies, or conversational maxims, to gain a more comprehensive understanding of communicative behavior. In addition, educators can use the *Little Women (2019)* movie as a teaching resource to demonstrate how speech acts operate within narrative contexts. Finally, students are encouraged to apply felicity condition analysis to various genres, including novels, television series, and digital discourse, to enhance their awareness of pragmatic success and failure in communication.

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JOLALI
- Journal of Language and Literature -

JOLALI: Journal of Language and Literature, Vol. 4, No. 1, 2026

FAITH, CARE, AND CONTRADICTION: MARY COOPER'S POSTHUMAN MOTHERHOOD IN *YOUNG SHELDON*

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Abstract

This study explores the representation of Mary Cooper, the mother figure in the television series *Young Sheldon* (2017–2024), through Rosi Braidotti's Mother–Monster–Machine framework. As a prequel to *The Big Bang Theory*, the series revisits the conflict between science and religion in small-town Texas, centering on Mary, a devout Baptist mother raising a child prodigy whose rational worldview often challenges her faith. Using a qualitative descriptive approach with textual and narrative analysis, this research examines episodes that highlight Mary's negotiations of faith, motherhood, and moral authority. The findings reveal that Mary embodies three interconnected subjectivities: as Mother, she performs care rooted in faith and emotional endurance; as Monster, she embodies the patriarchal fear of religious intensity; and as Machine, she mediates the ideological tension between belief and reason, serving as an ethical interface within her family. These overlapping identities present Mary Cooper as a posthuman hybrid, illustrating how religious motherhood adapts to the contradictions of modernity. The study concludes that Young Sheldon transforms motherhood from a static moral category into an ethical negotiation, redefining faith as both emotional intelligence and a strategy for resilience in a rational, posthuman world.

Keywords/Kata Kunci: *Mary Cooper; Mother–Monster–Machine; Posthumanism; religious motherhood; Young Sheldon*

INTRODUCTION

The CBS television series *Young Sheldon* (2017–2024) functions as a prequel to the globally popular sitcom *The Big Bang Theory* (2007–2019), yet it introduces a significant ideological reorientation. While *The Big Bang Theory* situates Sheldon Cooper as an adult prodigy embedded in a secular, science-driven academic environment, *Young Sheldon* relocates the narrative to late-1980s East Texas, a region closely associated with evangelical Christianity and conservative social values. This shift transforms the series from a science-centered comedy into a reflective portrayal of family life, faith, and moral negotiation within the cultural context of America's Bible Belt. As a result, the series foregrounds a persistent tension between religious belief and scientific rationality as it unfolds within everyday domestic life.

This tension is most visibly embodied through the figure of Mary Cooper, Sheldon's mother, portrayed by Zoe Perry. As a devout Baptist, Mary occupies the spiritual and moral center of the Cooper family, expressing her faith through prayer, discipline, and a firm belief in divine protection. At the same time, her maternal devotion is marked by deep anxiety toward her son's rejection of religious belief and his intellectual arrogance. Through Mary's character, *Young Sheldon* dramatizes broader cultural negotiations between humility and pride, belief and doubt, and devotion and rationalism, reflecting ongoing struggles over moral authority in late-twentieth-century American society.

Mary Cooper's maternal identity further reveals the contradictions inherent in conservative religious culture. Her piety grants her moral legitimacy within her church community, yet it also renders her emotionally vulnerable and socially scrutinized as the mother of a child who openly challenges religious norms. Admired as a model Christian mother but judged for her perceived failure to transmit faith, Mary is positioned simultaneously as a moral ideal and a

moral anomaly. This paradox highlights motherhood not as a stable or unified role but as a contested site where gendered expectations, religious devotion, and cultural anxiety intersect.

Previous studies on American television sitcoms have largely focused on representations of secularism, science, masculinity, and intellectual authority, particularly in relation to *The Big Bang Theory* (Lewis & Molloy, 2015; Dahle & Kro, 2021). These analyses emphasize how scientific rationality is often constructed as cultural superiority, while religious belief is framed as irrational or obsolete. However, such scholarship tends to privilege male intellectual subjects and overlooks the domestic and maternal spaces where ideological conflicts are negotiated on an everyday basis.

Feminist media studies have addressed motherhood as a moral and ideological construct, demonstrating how maternal figures in American television are frequently depicted as sentimental nurturers or moral guardians responsible for maintaining social order (Douglas & Michaels, 2004; Warner, 2018). While these studies illuminate the gendered burden placed upon mothers, religious motherhood is often treated as static, conservative, or ideologically fixed, rather than as a dynamic and ambivalent form of subjectivity. At the same time, posthuman feminist theorists have challenged such essentialist frameworks by emphasizing hybridity, becoming, and the instability of subject positions. Braidotti (2013) and Ferrando (2019) argue that posthuman subjectivity emerges through the entanglement of affect, embodiment, technology, and moral agency, destabilizing traditional humanist binaries such as those between reason and belief. Despite these theoretical developments, Traesar and Saktiningrum (2024) argue that little attention has been given to how posthuman frameworks might illuminate representations of religious motherhood in mainstream television.

This absence reveals a critical gap in existing scholarship. While religion, gender, and science have been examined as separate analytical concerns, few studies explore how maternal figures function as mediators between competing epistemological systems within popular media. In the context of *Young Sheldon*, Mary Cooper occupies precisely this intermediary position, navigating evangelical belief, maternal care, and scientific modernity. Existing approaches have yet to fully account for how her maternal subjectivity exceeds humanist and feminist interpretations, thus necessitating a posthuman analytical lens.

Addressing this gap, the present study applies Rosi Braidotti's Mother–Monster–Machine framework to analyze the representation of Mary Cooper as a posthuman maternal subject in *Young Sheldon*. Drawing on *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming* (2002) and *Nomadic Subjects* (2011), Braidotti conceptualizes the figures of the Mother, Monster, and Machine as overlapping modes through which femininity is regulated, idealized, and instrumentalized within patriarchal and posthuman cultures. The Mother signifies nurture and moral continuity, the Monster embodies excess and deviance, and the Machine represents mediation and functional adaptation within ideological systems (Braidotti, 2002, p. 79).

This study asks how Mary Cooper is represented as a posthuman maternal figure negotiating faith, care, and rationality within the socio-religious landscape of small-town Texas. The research aims to examine how her religious devotion operates as moral labor, how her faith renders her simultaneously authoritative and abject, and how she functions as a mediating figure between scientific rationalism and evangelical belief. The novelty of this study lies in its integration of posthuman feminist theory with television motherhood studies, offering a new perspective on religious maternal subjectivity in mainstream American media.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative descriptive research design to examine the representation of religious motherhood in the television series *Young Sheldon* (CBS, 2017–2024). A qualitative approach is appropriate for addressing the research question, as the study seeks to interpret cultural meanings, narrative structures, and ideological negotiations rather than to measure variables quantitatively (Creswell, 2014). The subject of the research is the character of Mary Cooper, selected due to her central role in mediating faith, maternal care, and scientific rationality within the narrative. Using purposive sampling, the study focuses on selected episodes and narratives that explicitly depict moments of religious practice, moral conflict, and interaction between belief and reason. Data were collected through repeated

close viewing and transcription of significant dialogues, with attention to narrative context, tone, gesture, and affective expression. The data recorded consist of textual excerpts and descriptive observations that highlight ideological and emotional tensions surrounding Mary's maternal identity.

Data analysis is guided by Rosi Braidotti's Mother–Monster–Machine framework, developed in *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming* (2002) and further elaborated in *The Posthuman* (2013). This framework conceptualizes the Mother as care and moral continuity, the Monster as excess and deviation, and the Machine as mediation between ideological systems (Braidotti, 2002, p. 79). These figurations function as overlapping analytical categories rather than fixed archetypes. The analysis proceeded by identifying and categorizing selected scenes according to this triadic framework, followed by interpretive analysis that situates the findings within posthuman feminist thought (Haraway, 1991; Braidotti, 2013). Through this procedure, the study examines how Mary Cooper is constructed as a posthuman maternal subject negotiating faith, emotion, and rational modernity in contemporary American television.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of Mary Cooper in Young Sheldon reveals that her character embodies Rosi Braidotti's triadic conceptualization of the Mother–Monster–Machine, functioning as a dynamic site of negotiation between religion, gender, and rationality. Her portrayal challenges simplistic readings of religious motherhood, presenting instead a hybrid subject who moves between caregiving, discipline, and mediation. Drawing on feminist and posthuman perspectives, this section discusses how Mary's identity emerges through key scenes across seasons, with close attention to cultural, narrative, and theoretical contexts.

The Mother: Faith as Care and Moral Continuity

Mary Cooper represents the archetype of the religious mother, the moral compass of her family, whose care is grounded in spirituality rather than psychology. In Braidotti's (2002) model, the Mother signifies the continuity of life and ethical order—she "embodies moral memory in a time of fragmentation" (p. 81). Mary's character continues the lineage of her older self in *The Big Bang Theory*, where the adult Mary (played by Laurie Metcalf) appears as a strict yet loving Baptist woman. *Young Sheldon*, however, deepens this figure by exploring her vulnerability as a younger mother navigating belief, modernity, and motherhood in late-1980s Texas.

In Season 1, Episode 2 ("Rockets, Communists, and the Dewey Decimal System"), Mary kneels beside Sheldon's bed to pray before his first day of school. When Sheldon questions the logic of prayer,

MARY: "Some things you do not measure—you believe."
SHELDON: "I'd rather not."
MARY: "Suit yourself."
(Mary prays beside the bed while Sheldon looks unimpressed.)
(*Young Sheldon*, S1E2, 00:04:15).

Mary replies, "Some things you don't measure—you believe." This interaction encapsulates what Warner (2018) calls the "ethics of maternal care," where affection and morality function as pedagogical forces (p. 57). Mary teaches not just manners but metaphysics: that love and faith are inseparable. Her faith-based care aligns with broader televisual representations of religious motherhood in American culture. Recent scholarship notes that TV mothers increasingly embody "moral multitasking"—balancing care, belief, and emotional labor amid social change (Lewis, 2019; Goff, 2022). Mary's care, while gentle, is also doctrinal: her parenting performs theology in everyday life.

In Season 2, Episode 13 ("A Nuclear Reactor and a Boy Called Lovey"), after Sheldon's science experiment fails, Mary comforts him, saying, "You're not failing, sweetheart. You're learning." (*Young Sheldon*, S2E13, 00:15:40 – 00:16:30). The moment intertwines faith with resilience, echoing Braidotti's (2013) posthuman ethics of "becoming through

compassion" (p. 191). Mary's ability to transform scientific failure into moral wisdom shows how religion in Young Sheldon is not dogmatic but dynamic.

Nevertheless, her motherhood is constrained by patriarchal expectations. As Hays (1996) and Douglas and Michaels (2021) argue, "intensive mothering" often glorifies sacrifice as virtue, hiding systemic inequity. Mary's devotion makes her indispensable yet invisible. Even George Sr. often trivializes her religiosity, treating it as sentimental excess. Tuchman's (1978) "symbolic annihilation" aptly describes this erasure of women's moral labor.

Thus, Mary's maternal identity carries a paradox: faith empowers her emotionally yet confines her socially. Her devotion sustains the household but also marks her as outdated in a rational world—a tension that evolves into the monstrous.

The Monster: Religious Excess and Social Stigma

If the Mother ensures moral continuity, the Monster emerges when that morality becomes too visible, too intense, or too disobedient to patriarchal norms. Braidotti (2002) defines the Monster as "a materialization of fear and fascination toward female difference" (p. 89). Mary's monstrosity stems from the same virtues that once defined her goodness—devotion, protectiveness, and emotional intensity.

In Season 3, Episode 11 ("A Live Chicken, a Fried Chicken, and Holy Matrimony"), Mary forbids Georgie, Sheldon's older brother, from having romantic feelings, declaring it sinful. Her tears and anger transform her into the "monstrous mother" archetype, not through cruelty but through the excess of virtue. As Kristeva (1982) observes, the abject mother "haunts the boundaries of love and law" (p. 3). Mary's fury reveals the instability of faith under pressure—love becomes surveillance, care becomes control.

GEORGIE: I think I might marry Veronica someday.
MARY: Excuse me?
GEORGIE: Yeah. She's pretty, she's sweet, she loves Jesus… what's not to like?
MARY: (raising her voice slightly) Georgie, you're sixteen years old! You don't need to be talking about marriage.
GEORGIE: But if it's God's plan—
MARY: (interrupts) God's plan? Don't you use the Lord to justify hormones!
GEORGIE: We just held hands and prayed!
MARY: And that's how it starts. One minute you're praying, the next you're sinning!
(She crosses her arms, visibly shaken; the tone mixes comedy with genuine alarm.)
GEORGIE: You think everything's a sin.
MARY: Because I'm your mother, and it's my job to keep you from going to hell!
(She exhales sharply, on the verge of tears. Georgie storms off.)
(*Young Sheldon*, S3E11, 00:13:20–00:14:55)

The emotional staging of this scene—Mary's trembling voice, lowered lighting, and camera focus on her clasped hands—portrays Kristeva's (1982) concept of abjection. Mary's moral panic becomes a physical manifestation of the instability between sacred law and human affection. Her body, oscillating between prayer and anger, materializes the tension between spiritual virtue and maternal fear.

This moral intensity links Mary to broader depictions of religious women in Western media, from *Carrie*'s Margaret White to *The Handmaid's Tale*'s Aunt Lydia. Yet, *Young Sheldon* complicates this lineage. Rather than rendering her as villainous, the series portrays her anxiety as profoundly human. As O'Brien (2018) suggests, modern sitcoms recast controlling mothers as "emblems of cultural fear about moral collapse" (p. 121). Mary's strictness thus functions as both comedy and critique—a reminder that behind religious certainty lies maternal fragility.

In Season 4, Episode 3 ("Training Wheels and an Unleashed Chicken"), Mary faces gossip within her church community, where congregants subtly accuse her of failing as a Christian mother because of Sheldon's irreverence.

The scene portrays Braidotti's (2011) notion of monstrosity as a social mechanism—society expels the woman who fails to conform (p. 118).

PEG: Well, I heard from my cousin that Sheldon called the Bible "a book of fairy tales."
BRENDA: (chuckling) Oh, bless your heart, Mary. Must be hard raising a little heathen.
MARY: He's not a heathen. He's just… curious.
PEG: Curiosity's fine, but questioning the Good Book? That's how it starts.
(The women exchange glances. Mary forces a polite smile, holding back irritation.)
MARY: (quietly) Well, I'll keep praying for him.
BRENDA: You might wanna pray a little harder.
(They laugh; Mary's expression falls. She exits the room stiffly, clearly hurt.)
(*Young Sheldon*, S4E3, 00:09:00–00:10:40)

The subtle cruelty of this exchange—masked as humor and "concern"—embodies what Braidotti (2011) identifies as the disciplinary aspect of monstrosity. Mary's polite restraint amidst derision illustrates the quiet violence of moral surveillance within conservative communities. Audience reception studies also suggest that viewers sympathize with Mary's tension rather than condemn it. As demonstrated by empirical analyses of online fan communities (Nguyen, 2023), Mary's character resonates with religious and secular audiences alike because she embodies "imperfect faith." Fans often describe her as "flawed but faithful"—a mother struggling to remain good in a world that mocks belief.

In Season 2, Episode 2 ("A Rival Prodigy and Sir Isaac Neutron"), Mary oscillates between pride and guilt over Sheldon's extraordinary achievements. When another child prodigy is introduced at church, Mary beams with pride as the pastor praises her son's intellect—but her smile falters when a congregant jokes that "cleverness isn't always godliness." This moment of hesitation portrays the moral double bind she endures, pride feels sinful, yet humility feels like denial of her child's gifts. Her conflicting emotions reflect Ahmed's (2017) theory of affective economies, where emotions circulate to define social value (p. 10). In Mary's case, guilt and love become the moral currency of motherhood—feelings that both affirm and punish her sense of devotion.

PASTOR JEFF: We are blessed to have not one, but two gifted young minds among us—Sheldon Cooper and our newest visitor, Paige Swanson.
MARY: (smiling) That's wonderful. (look proudly at Sheldon)
PEG: (to Brenda) He's not the only smart kid in town anymore.
BRENDA: (laughing softly) Guess being special just got less special.
(Mary overhears; her smile fades slightly.)
PASTOR JEFF: Let's remember that wisdom without humility can lead us astray.
(Mary glances down, embarrassed, then folds her hands.)
MARY: (quietly, to herself) Thank you, Pastor.
(She forces a polite smile as the congregation laughs lightly. Sheldon looks around, oblivious.)
(*Young Sheldon*, S2E2, 00:09:10–00:10:40)

Mary's discomfort in this scene marks a crucial transformation: her faith collides with pride, producing what Braidotti (2002) terms the monstrous threshold—a moment when contradictions destabilize fixed identities (p. 91). The congregation's laughter and her forced humility expose the emotional cost of sustaining moral perfection. Within this tension, Young Sheldon redefines monstrosity not as evil but as revelation. Mary's guilt becomes the very mechanism of ethical becoming; through emotional struggle, she negotiates new forms of understanding and care. Her monstrosity, far from demonic, thus becomes a catalyst for moral growth—a transitional space between fear and acceptance, where faith and maternal love coexist as processes of transformation rather than certainty (Adhitya et al., 2024).

The Machine: Mediating Faith and Reason

In Braidotti's (2013) posthuman framework, the Machine represents the human as mediator—a connective system linking organic, technological, and ideological domains (p. 97). Mary Cooper performs this role through emotional

translation. Her purpose within *Young Sheldon*'s narrative is to mediate the incompatibility between her son's scientific rationalism and her community's faith-based worldview.

In Season 1, Episode 7 ("A Brisket, Voodoo, and Cannonball Run"), Sheldon confronts Pastor Jeff about divine control, questioning the logic of God's role in physics. Mary intervenes with the diplomatic line, "God gave you that smart brain, honey. Maybe He wants you to use it." Her statement fuses theology and pragmatism, enacting what Lewis and Molloy (2015) describe as "secularized spirituality in comedic frameworks" (p. 143). In this moment, Mary becomes a moral interface—translating dogma into compassion and ensuring that faith and reason coexist without hierarchy.

Her emotional diplomacy aligns closely with Hochschild's (1983) concept of emotional labor, later expanded by Jarrett (2022) to digital-age contexts. Mary processes familial tension as affective energy—absorbing conflict, converting it into humor, and releasing comfort. She becomes, in effect, a living algorithm of empathy, maintaining harmony between contrasting worldviews.

The series further extends this machinic mediation metaphor into the digital and ideological age. Scholars such as Fuller (2019) and Gane (2020) note that posthuman ethics increasingly relies on hybrid empathy—humans acting as emotional processors between systems of knowledge and technology. Mary embodies this hybrid condition: she serves as a moral interface, connecting belief to data and faith to logic. Her negotiation between prayer and intellect anticipates twenty-first-century discourses on the convergence of artificial intelligence and spirituality, where emotion, code, and faith overlap (Campbell & Shepherd, 2020).

Yet, the cost of this mediation is profound emotional fatigue. In Season 5, Episode 6 ("Money Laundering and a Cascade of Hormones"), Mary laments, "If I stop holding it all together, everything falls apart." This articulation of invisible labor echoes Braidotti's (2013) concept of posthuman fatigue—the depletion of a self that sustains systems it cannot escape (p. 101). A similar exhaustion recurs in Season 6, Episode 8 ("Legalese and a Whole Hoo-Ha"), when Mary prays alone in her bedroom:

MARY: (sighs) Lord, I'm tired of fixing everyone. Fix me instead.
(*Young Sheldon*, S6E8, 00:15:25 – 00:15:55)

The quiet, dimly lit scene captures both her weariness and renewal. As she closes her eyes and exhales, the moment portrays self-reprogramming through faith. Religion functions here as her internal software for emotional restoration, performing what Braidotti (2013) terms an affirmative ethics of transformation (p. 191).

In this convergence of exhaustion and transcendence, Mary embodies both human vulnerability and mechanical persistence, the exhausted yet adaptive circuitry of care. Her faith, rather than rigid dogma, becomes a flexible operating system that continually updates in response to moral and emotional strain. Through this machinic subjectivity, *Young Sheldon* reframes spirituality as an act of translation and endurance. Mary's religiosity thus emerges as a form of emotional intelligence within a posthuman framework, redefining belief as adaptive technology—resilient, iterative, and profoundly humane.

Gender, Class, and Regional Context

Mary's subjectivity is inseparable from her class and regional identity. As a working-class woman in conservative Texas, her faith doubles as both moral compass and social capital. Scholars such as Whitehead (2021) and Brasher (2019) show that Southern Protestant women often sustain communities through "relational religiosity," a combination of service, humility, and strength. Mary epitomizes this form of embodied belief. Her employment at the church (Season 5, Episode 10, "An Ugly Car, an Affair, and Some Kickass Football") symbolizes both economic necessity and moral identity. Within patriarchal structures, her labor is respected only insofar as it supports communal faith. Denton (2022) terms this phenomenon "moralized labor," where virtue substitutes for autonomy (p. 211).

Mary's class status also accentuates her conflict with Sheldon's intellectual elitism. His skepticism often frames her faith as ignorance, mirroring broader cultural hierarchies between science and religion. Yet, as Rose (2021) argues, working-class religiosity contains its own epistemology—what she calls "vernacular theology," or the everyday

reasoning of belief (p. 52). Mary's compassion, patience, and humor constitute moral intelligence that complements, not contradicts, reason. This depiction subverts the stereotype of Southern religiosity as backward. *Young Sheldon* reclaims it as an ethic of care—emotionally rich, relational, and sustainable in a world fragmented by technological rationality.

Mary Cooper as Posthuman Hybrid

Synthesizing these readings, Mary Cooper emerges as a posthuman hybrid, embodying all three figures simultaneously. She is a Mother whose faith nurtures continuity, a Monster whose morality challenges conformity, and a Machine whose empathy mediates contradiction. Her identity shifts fluidly across situations, affirming Braidotti's (2013) assertion that the posthuman subject "exists through relation, not essence" (p. 123).

Tabel 1. Mary Cooper as Mother, Monster, Machine.

Braidotti's Figure	Manifestation in Mary Cooper	Representative Episodes	Interpretation
Mother	Nurturing, spiritually anchored, morally consistent	S1E2, S2E13	Faith as affective technology sustaining moral order
Monster	Rigid, stigmatized, emotionally excessive	S3E11, S4E3	Religious motherhood as deviant resistance and critique
Machine	Mediator, translator, emotional processor	S1E7, S2E2, S6E8	Posthuman motherhood: woman as connective, adaptive interface

By Season 7, Mary achieves synthesis. In Episode 6 ("Community Service and the Key to a Happy Marriage"), she tells Sheldon, "Maybe God made you the way you are so you could ask the questions the rest of us are afraid to." The line represents her transformation: faith and reason no longer oppose each other. She has learned coexistence—a posthuman virtue that transcends binary categories.

Her journey mirrors cultural shifts in contemporary media. As Lotz (2018) and Lewis (2019) observe, post-2010 television increasingly portrays mothers as philosophical subjects rather than sentimental ones. Mary's blend of faith, humor, and frustration embodies this evolution. She becomes a figure of affirmative hybridity, proving that moral conviction and adaptability can coexist.

In conclusion, Mary Cooper's evolution redefines religious motherhood for the posthuman era. She symbolizes ethical coexistence between faith and science, emotion and logic, devotion and autonomy. Her triadic identity not only enriches feminist media studies but also illuminates how belief continues to evolve within technologically mediated culture.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how Mary Cooper in *Young Sheldon* (2017–2024) represents religious motherhood through Rosi Braidotti's Mother–Monster–Machine framework. The analysis shows that Mary embodies a posthuman hybrid who continually negotiates faith, morality, and rationality. As Mother, she performs care as moral resilience; as Monster, she reveals how patriarchal culture disciplines devout women through moral contradiction; and as Machine, she mediates between belief and reason, turning faith into an adaptive ethical technology.

These findings meet the study's objective by reframing religious motherhood as an active, hybrid subjectivity rather than a static ideal. The work advances feminist media scholarship by extending Braidotti's posthuman lens to mainstream television and by demonstrating how spirituality can function as emotional and ethical intelligence within contemporary life.

Theoretically, the study bridges feminist, religious, and posthuman perspectives; culturally, it highlights how media narratives shape public ideas of goodness, care, and intelligence in a rationalized world. Future research can compare parallel figures across different series or cultural contexts and investigate audience reception to trace how viewers interpret the coexistence of faith and reason in female characters.

In sum, Mary Cooper models an ethics of resilience: she nurtures, resists, and translates—embodying a dynamic synthesis of belief and intellect that enriches debates on gender, faith, and posthuman identity in twenty-first-century media.

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