

# Unveiling the Language of Expression: Decoding Verbal and Non-verbal Cues in English Literature

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## Abstract

This qualitative content analysis decodes the complex interplay of verbal and non-verbal cues in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*. Focused on characters Saeed and Nadia, the study reveals nuanced power dynamics and challenges to traditional gendered communication norms. Examining instances of conformity and resistance to gendered communication ideals, the analysis sheds light on emotional intelligence and societal negotiation. The study not only enhances understanding of character dynamics but contributes to broader discussions in literary, cultural, and gender studies. Additionally, this research invites further exploration into the evolving nature of communication in contemporary literature.

## Introduction

In John Gray's popular book *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus: a Practical Guide for Improving Communication and Getting What You Want in a Relationship*, he outlines the underlying differences in communication styles between men and women. Gray's book is one of the most important benchmark pieces of literature on communication differences across gender of the twentieth century. He suggests that men and women are so different in their approaches to communicating that they are from different planets: they have different needs, goals, and values in the way they communicate (Gary, 1992) Women are consistently characterized as having a consistent predisposition to be communal—to care for and attend to the well-being of others. The typical woman is thought to be kind, caring, sensitive, empathic, and emotional. However, men are believed to be primarily agentic and instrumental. The characteristic male is felt to be independent, confident, decisive, aggressive, and strong (Deaux, 2008) It is not surprising then that people believe that women and men show distinctive patterns of non-verbal behavior. For example, Briton and Hall (1995) found that people think that women are more non-verbally expressive and responsive than are men. Women are also thought to be better at sending and deciphering nonverbal messages. In contrast, males are believed to be louder and more interruptive and to show more restless body movements and dysfluent vocal behaviors, such as inserting filled and unfilled pauses while speaking. The issue here, as is the case with stereotypes more generally, has to do with the validity or accuracy of such beliefs.

There is more to gender beliefs than simple assumptions such as the idea that women express more positive emotion than men (Shields, 1987). Not only are men and women believed to have different repertoires of nonverbal behavior, some nonverbal behaviors are understood a priori to be feminine or

masculine. Therefore, crying—which is believed to be something that women do more than men (Ad Vingerhoets, 2000))—denotes femininity in the crier (sometimes called effeminacy if the crier happens to be male). This pre-gendering of nonverbal behavior reinforces ideas about who (men or women) should exhibit which behaviors, and it impinges on what behaviors men and women choose to display when motivated to avoid being perceived as gender deviant

### **Statement**

Gender differences in communication have been of interest to researchers because these differences are assumed to explain, in part, the nature of relationships between men and women. The primary explanation for these differences is the use of dominant and submissive roles by males and females. The folk linguistic assumptions such as; women are more talkative than men (chattering women), or men interrupt women more, have been among the controversial topics in gender studies.

The question of how the interpretation of such natural phenomena is to be accommodated within a cognitively oriented pragmatic theory. How are non-verbal behaviors interpreted? What do they convey? What is the relation between natural non-verbal behaviors and those non-verbal behaviors that are not natural? What is the difference between masculine and feminine verbal cues and the responses that they generate?

The presence of even small changes in a given setting can magnify or minimize the expression of nonverbal behavior differences in men and women, such that gender differences in a given domain (e.g., smiling) will be larger in certain contexts and smaller or even reversed in others. Both men and women strive to “do gender” well so as to avoid being perceived as gender-deviant (Zimmerman, 1987). Women tend to gaze at their interaction partners more than men do, and they also tend to be looked at more than men are. Both factors lead to the highest levels of partner gazing in female–female pairs. Similarly, some research suggests that touch behaviour is more acceptable and expected in female–female dyads compared to male–male dyads (V. J Derlega, 2001).

### **Aims and Objectives**

The objective of this research is to differentiate between feminine and masculine verbal cues and non-verbal cues. A vast majority of these cues, if not all, are understood a priori to be feminine or masculine. The aim of this study is to analyse the forces that assign these characteristics to such cues and to whether femininity is associated with greater expressivity. There is evidence that women are more likely than men to suppress the expression of anger, presumably because anger is seen to be incompatible with femininity or prescriptive gender stereotypes. This suggests a possible interaction between sex-role identification.

Researchers have contributed sophisticated and nuanced examinations of individual variation and causal factors affecting gendered aspects of nonverbal behaviour, this study deconstructs what goes into gender in the first place and expands the typical binary category described by biological sex (i.e., male and female) and focusing instead on the multiple ways that gender can be understood. For example, one line of work argues that a key dimension known as sex-role identification or psychological gender (Lipsitz, 1977) reflects the degree to which women and men identify with characteristics that society typically

assigns to females and males. Regarding nonverbal behaviour, the question then converts to whether a person's (male or female) degree of identification with feminine and masculine traits is reflected in his or her nonverbal behaviour. An example of the standard question is whether women smile more than men. A sex-role identification question asks, instead, whether people who score high in femininity smile more than those who score low in femininity and/or more than people who score high in masculinity regardless of their sex. The objective of this research is to explain the contemporary relationship between assigned gender and sex through the context of non-verbal and verbal cues.

### **Methodology**

A qualitative approach was employed to delve into the rich nuances of verbal and non-verbal communication within the novel *Exit West* by Mohsin Hamid. This method allowed for an in-depth exploration of characters' expressions, considering both spoken words and non-verbal gestures. The primary focus was on the characters Saeed and Nadia, with periodic attention to other significant characters for contextual understanding. Their dialogues and actions were meticulously examined to discern patterns and variations in verbal and non-verbal communication. The entire novel was systematically read to extract relevant passages involving communication between characters. Dialogues, monologues, and descriptions of non-verbal cues were compiled for analysis. Instances of dialogue, including tone, language, and content, were documented. Particular attention was given to how characters expressed desires, emotions, and intentions through spoken words. Additionally, descriptions of characters' physical actions, facial expressions, and body language were recorded. Special emphasis was placed on scenes involving significant non-verbal communication, such as gestures, postures, and attire.

### **Discussion and Analysis**

The interplay of character dialogues is intricately intertwined with the behavioural dynamics of male and female characters. The classification of characters into gendered groups significantly shapes their communication patterns, aligning with societal expectations. In the context of Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*, the characters defy conventional communication norms attributed to their respective genders. Notably, there is a discernible departure from anticipated gender-associated communication values.

A salient observation in the narrative is the deviation from traditional gender roles in communication, exemplified by the characters Saeed and Nadia. Saeed exhibits a more expressive, tentative, and courteous conversational style, employing communication as a tool to foster a deeper connection with Nadia. On the contrary, Nadia adopts a more straightforward, assertive, and direct approach to communication. This deviation challenges established gender norms and underscores the fluidity of communication styles within the narrative (Hamid, 2017).

This departure from expected gendered communication patterns in *Exit West* serves as a narrative device, contributing to a nuanced exploration of characters and challenging societal preconceptions regarding gendered behavior. The divergent communication styles of Saeed and Nadia not only reflect their individual personalities but also disrupt traditional gendered expectations, adding layers of complexity to the portrayal of interpersonal dynamics in the novel (Hamid, 2017).

Throughout the narrative, Saeed exhibits a measured and restrained approach to communication, demonstrating a careful consideration of how his desires and intentions are conveyed. In contrast, Nadia's communication style is characterized by directness and a lack of restraint. Notably, she explicitly informs Saeed that her invitation for him to come home is not an invitation for physical intimacy, asserting her right to make choices regarding her boundaries and desires.

Nadia's communication is marked by a distinct assertiveness, emphasizing her autonomy and the importance she places on making choices. Her clear articulation of the purpose behind inviting Saeed into her space not only reflects a desire to cultivate a relationship but also showcases a high level of emotional intelligence. This intentional communication ensures the effectiveness of the message, preventing any potential misinterpretation while maintaining control over her choices and actions.

The communication dynamics in *Exit West* present a nuanced exploration of gender performance. Notably, Nadia challenges traditional gender norms by adopting communication traits typically associated with masculinity, such as the use of harsh language and swear words. However, her use of such language is distinctive in its playfulness, conveying assertion rather than aggression. This subversion of gendered verbal tones highlights the fluidity of gender performances in the novel, offering a complex portrayal of characters that goes beyond conventional expectations.

In the textual dynamics between Saeed and Nadia, an interesting power dynamic emerges in their communication. Although both characters exhibit a level of consideration and respect for each other, the majority of the conversations suggest Nadia taking the lead. She frequently initiates discussions about future prospects, positioning herself as the conversational leader. Saeed, in contrast, appears more agreeable, rarely expressing dissenting opinions. Despite initially initiating a conversation, his leading role is seldom witnessed again in their dynamic throughout the novel.

The fluidity of gender expectations in their communication is evident, yet instances arise where they conform to traditional gender ideals. Notably, after the loss of Saeed's mother, he restrains the expression of his emotions, a behavior often associated with traditional masculine norms. Conversely, Nadia demonstrates an understanding of non-verbal cues, offering comfort to Saeed without the need for explicit verbal communication. Saeed's father, however, openly expresses his grief, refusing to leave the home associated with sentimental value.

Nadia's reclaiming of control over her public persona through non-verbal actions, such as wearing a black robe, signifies her desire to be perceived as a conservative woman of faith, challenging societal expectations. Additionally, her openness to intimacy within a seemingly conservative culture challenges the traditional 'performance' of femininity, which often dictates submission in matters related to relationships. This divergence from conventional gender norms adds depth to the exploration of their characters and relationships in *Exit West*.

These nuances in communication and gender dynamics contribute to a multifaceted portrayal of characters, offering readers a rich understanding of the complexities associated with societal expectations and personal agency within the novel's narrative framework.

## Conclusion

The methodological exploration of verbal and non-verbal cues in *Exit West* has illuminated the intricate layers of communication within the narrative. Through a qualitative content analysis, this paper has delved into the expressions of characters, with a primary focus on Saeed and Nadia, unraveling the complexities of their interactions. This study not only contributes to the understanding of individual character dynamics but also sheds light on broader themes such as gendered communication norms and cultural influences.

The findings highlight a fascinating interplay between verbal and non-verbal cues, showcasing how characters navigate relationships, express desires, and challenge societal expectations. Saeed and Nadia's communication, while respectful, reveals a distinctive power dynamic, with Nadia often taking the lead in conversations about their future. This aligns with broader societal shifts where traditional gender roles are renegotiated.

Furthermore, the analysis discerns instances where characters conform to or challenge gendered communication ideals. Saeed's restrained expression of grief after the loss of his mother aligns with traditional masculine norms, while Nadia's comforting non-verbal cues showcase a nuanced understanding of emotional intelligence. The novel subverts expectations as Nadia openly expresses her desire for intimacy within a seemingly conservative culture, challenging conventional notions of feminine submission.

As these findings are interpreted, it is crucial to acknowledge the dynamic interplay between the characters and the socio-cultural context within the novel. The methodology employed, rooted in qualitative content analysis, allowed for a nuanced examination of textual elements, providing a comprehensive understanding of communication dynamics.

While this analysis focuses on *Exit West*, its broader implications extend to the realm of literary studies, cultural studies, and gender studies. It invites further research into the evolving nature of communication in contemporary literature and its reflection on societal shifts.

In conclusion, the exploration of verbal and non-verbal cues in "Exit West" has not only deepened the understanding of character dynamics but also offered a lens through which to analyse broader societal and cultural themes. This study contributes to the ongoing discourse in the fields of literature, cultural studies, and gender studies, urging scholars to continue unravelling the intricate threads of communication within literary narratives.

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