

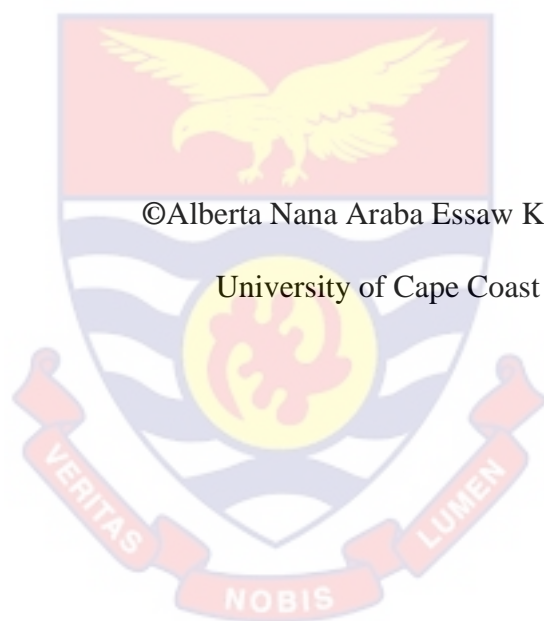
UNIVERSITY OF CAPE COAST

THE HAUNT OF A DAUNTING PAST: A PSYCHOANALYTIC  
READING OF KHALED HOSSEINI'S *THE KITE RUNNER* AND A  
*THOUSAND SPLENDID SUNS*



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READING OF KHALED HOSSEINI'S *THE KITE RUNNER* AND A  
*THOUSAND SPLENDID SUNS*.

BY

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## ABSTRACT

Individuals are inextricably shaped by their life experiences, with early life events casting lasting shadows. As Tyson (1999) posits, the world is “comprised of individual human beings, each with a psychological history that begins in childhood experiences in the family” (p. 12). This study employs the Bowen Family theory and Anna Freud’s Defense Mechanisms, both Psychoanalytic theories, as frameworks to illuminate the life experiences and psychological developments of two pivotal characters, Amir and Mariam, in Khaled Hosseini’s novels, *The Kite Runner* (2003) and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007), respectively. This study delves into the impact of their early experiences on the course of their lives, seeking to decipher the motivations behind their actions, the enduring psychological repercussions of these experiences, and the strategies they employ to cope. Psychoanalysis contends that an unconscious drive significantly influences or shapes a person’s behaviour. In the narratives of Amir and Mariam, we discern intricate threads of thought, emotion, and conduct that can be traced back to the unconscious forces of love and family. This study centres on the theme of family dynamics, specifically examining the childhood experiences of these protagonists and their contribution to character development. It sheds light on the roles of family and love in shaping the actions of Amir and Mariam, the haunting legacies of their past, the far-reaching consequences of which both characters grapple with in adulthood, and, intriguingly, exposes a unique manifestation of the Oedipal (male and female) Complex in both novels.

## KEYWORDS

Bowen Family Theory

Childhood/Haunting Memories

Coping Strategies/Defense Mechanisms

Daunting Past

Family Dynamics

Oedipal Complex

Subconscious

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

*The road not taken;  
Two roads diverged in a scary wood,  
And fearful I was to travel either.  
If to overcome fear I could,  
Then travel both I would.  
But be one traveller, long I stood  
And looked down one as far as I could  
To where it bent in the undergrowth;  
At last, a path I chose  
Into a world unknown  
Having perhaps the better claim,  
Because the path was grassy clean  
And wanted wear;  
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—  
Fearful still,  
I took the one less travelled by  
And that has made all the difference  
Without regret.*

I have reached the culmination of this academic journey, and it marks not only the end of one chapter but the promising beginning of another, perhaps a positively wild one. The words of Robert Frost's poem, *The Road Not Taken*, echo in my mind, capturing the sentiments that have accompanied me from the outset. In adapting his piece to mirror my emotions, I find myself standing at the completion of this thesis, profoundly grateful for the support and guidance of those who have shaped this endeavour.

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## DEDICATION

To my beloved parents, Mr. James Papa Kwesi Baah Korsah and Mrs. Elizabeth Selorm Klu Korsah, whose unwavering investment in my well-being and education has been the bedrock of my journey. Through the peaks and valleys of my health struggles, your prayers and constant support have been my guiding light.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

The family serves as the fundamental unit within society, functioning as a cohesive system that upholds and perpetuates traditional and ethical values of a nation. It is within the family structure that individuals learn important social norms, cultural practices, and moral values that shape their identity and guide their interactions with others. As a microcosm of society, the family unit plays a crucial role in transmitting cultural heritage, instilling moral principles, and fostering a sense of belonging and shared responsibility. The family, with its diverse roles and relationships, serves as a vital foundation for the development and well-being of its members, while also contributing to the broader social fabric of the nation.

The family serves as a crucial context for a child's life and growth; it is the primary socialising agent, providing a nurturing and supportive environment for a child's physical, emotional, cognitive, and social development. By providing a secure and stable foundation for a child's growth, the presence of loving and attentive parents or caregivers fosters a sense of security, trust, and attachment, which are essential for healthy development. Thus, a supportive family environment promotes emotional well-being, self-esteem, and resilience, enabling children to navigate life's challenges and setbacks. Moreover, the family shapes a child's identity and sense of self. Family members serve as role models, influencing a child's beliefs, attitudes, and aspirations. Positive family relationships and supportive parenting practices contribute to a child's self-esteem, self-confidence, and a healthy sense of identity. Conversely, dysfunctional family dynamics, such as

neglect, abuse, or inconsistent parenting, can have detrimental effects on a child's emotional well-being and overall development. Understanding the role and impact of the family is essential for promoting healthy child development and creating supportive environments that foster their growth and potential.

Research demonstrates the detrimental effects of dysfunctional family dynamics on a child's emotional well-being and overall development. Neglect, abuse, and inconsistent parenting have been extensively studied as contributors to negative outcomes in children. They can disrupt the sense of security and stability that a child needs for healthy growth. For example, studies by Trickett, Negriff, Ji, and Peckins (2011) and Dubowitz et al. (2007) highlight the lasting impact of neglect and abuse on children's emotional health, with increased risk for depression, anxiety, and behavioural problems. These negative experiences can lead to emotional distress, low self-esteem, and difficulties in forming healthy relationships. Inconsistent parenting, characterised by unpredictable or erratic behaviour, can leave children feeling confused and uncertain about their environment, leading to emotional instability and insecurity. Gadeyne, Ghesquière, and Onghena (2004) and DeGarmo and Forgatch (2007) emphasise the importance of consistent and supportive parenting in promoting positive outcomes and resilience in children. Children who experience neglect may struggle with feelings of abandonment and have difficulties forming trusting relationships. Victims may suffer from trauma, anxiety, and a range of emotional and behavioural problems.

In recent decades, the field of literary studies has increasingly turned its attention to the impact of trauma on individuals and communities. The

concept of trauma has evolved beyond its origins in psychoanalysis and psychotherapy to become a significant term in cultural criticism and literary theory. Scholars like Cathy Caruth, in her book *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996), have made significant contributions to trauma theory. Caruth defines trauma as the response to a violent event or events that are initially incomprehensible but later manifest through flashbacks, nightmares, or other repetitive phenomena. This understanding highlights the enduring impact of trauma on an individual's psyche. Anne Whitehead, in her work, *Trauma Fiction* (2004) also explores the intersection of trauma theory and literary texts. She identifies trauma fiction as a relatively new genre that emerged alongside trauma theory. This genre serves as a means to delve into the ethical and cultural implications of trauma, examining the politics, ethics, and aesthetics of remembering traumatic experiences. Whitehead's exploration emphasises the potential of literature to engage with and articulate the complexities of trauma.

Trauma, as a lived experience, shapes and reshapes our subjectivity, affecting our emotions, memories, and ways of engaging with the world. Traumatic experiences, whether caused by war, violence, displacement, or personal tragedies, leave lasting imprints on individuals and communities, shaping their identities, relationships, and narratives. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1990), Freud delineates trauma as a psychological disruption experienced by individuals who have endured distressing events that pose a threat to life, such as railway disasters, accidents, or war. Moreover, Kai Erikson, in his seminal work, *Everything in Its Path* (1976), explores the concept of trauma in the context of the Buffalo Creek catastrophe. Erikson



introduces the distinction between “individual trauma” and “collective trauma” as two distinct forms of psychological and social distress experienced by those affected.

By individual trauma I mean a blow to the psyche that breaks through one’s defenses so suddenly and with such brutal force that one cannot react to it effectively.... By collective trauma, on the other hand, I mean a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of community. The collective trauma works its way slowly and even insidiously into the awareness of those who suffer from it, so it does not have the quality of suddenness normally associated with “trauma”. But it is a form of shock all the same, a gradual realization that the community no longer exists as an effective source of support and that an important part of the self has disappeared.... “I” continue to exist, though damaged and maybe even permanently changed. “You” continue to exist, though distant and hard to relate to. But “we” no longer exist as a connected pair or as linked cells in a larger communal body. (Erikson, 1976, pp. 153-154)

Within the realm of literature, critics have employed various narrative strategies and artistic techniques to convey the complexities of trauma, inviting readers to grapple with its emotional and psychological consequences. Khaled Hosseini, a renowned Afghan-American author, has emerged as a powerful storyteller who confronts the complexities of trauma in his novels, offering a poignant exploration of its psychological and emotional dimensions. In *The Kite Runner*, Khaled Hosseini employs a first-person narrative perspective to portray the loss and intense fear experienced by the Afghan people. He skillfully intertwines the personal trauma of the protagonist, Amir, as he navigates his journey from sin to self-salvation, with the larger collective trauma resulting from racial and national conflicts in Afghanistan. Through this narrative technique, Hosseini not only emphasises the central theme of coming-of-age which explores notions of sin, guilt, and redemption, but also

effectively depicts the racial conflicts and national pain that permeate Afghan society. By merging the personal and collective traumas, Hosseini provides a nuanced portrayal of the multifaceted challenges faced by individuals and the broader Afghan community. In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Khaled Hosseini employs a narrative that explores both individual and collective trauma, similar to his approach in *The Kite Runner*. Through the intertwining stories of Mariam and Laila, the novel delves into the personal traumas they endure and the broader collective trauma of Afghan society. Through Mariam's first-person perspective and her journey of trauma, from enduring abuse and oppression to finding strength and resilience, Hosseini sheds light on the individual trauma constantly experienced by Afghan women. At the same time, Mariam's story is embedded within the broader context of the collective trauma faced by Afghan society, marked by war, political turmoil, and the subjugation of women. Through Mariam's experiences, the novel explores the interconnectedness of personal and societal trauma, emphasising the resilience and perseverance of Afghan women in the face of adversity. This thesis, therefore, aims to analyse the intricate relationship between trauma and subjectivity in Hosseini's works using a psychoanalytic theoretical framework.

The psychoanalytic lens provides a valuable tool for understanding the effects of trauma on individual psychology, particularly in terms of unconscious processes, defense mechanisms, and the formation of identity. Sigmund Freud's groundbreaking theories, along with the subsequent developments within psychoanalysis, offer insights into the dynamics of trauma, memory, and the construction of subjectivity. By employing this theoretical framework, this study seeks to shed light on how trauma is

represented, internalised, and negotiated by the characters in Hosseini's novels. Building upon the rich tradition of trauma studies in literature, this research will focus on two of Hosseini's most celebrated works: *The Kite Runner* (2003) and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007). These novels delve into themes of war, displacement, loss, and the enduring effects of trauma on personal and collective narratives. Through a psychoanalytic examination of these texts, this thesis explores ways in which trauma, specifically emotional trauma relating to family dynamics, shapes the characters' psyche, influences their relationships, and informs their understanding of self.

### **Background to the Study**

Many Afghanistan works of literature have emerged over the years, criticising society, religion, traditions, cultures, and beliefs, and Khaled Hosseini is one of the many prolific writers who have written about Afghan culture, traditions, and other issues. *Kite Runner* is the first book of Hosseini, a New York Times bestseller, that brought him onto the literary scene. He went on to write *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and others, (*And The Mountains Echoed*, *Sea Prayer*) also having similar themes of tradition, culture, Afghan politics, family, and narration about and through the lens of a child. *Kite Runner* (2003) and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007) are Bildungsroman texts that take the reader through the formative years of the main characters.

An auto-diegetic narrative text set in Afghanistan during two time periods, the 1970s and 2001, *The Kite Runner* (2003) is a story about an unlikely relationship, or bond, between Amir, a wealthy Afghan Pashtun Sunni Muslim boy, and Hassan, a Hazara Shi'a Muslim boy, the son of Amir's father's servant, who, many years later, after his (Hassan's) death, is revealed

to be the biological son of Amir's father, Baba. The text follows the life of Amir, the protagonist, with his psychological and emotional struggles revealing the difficult truth and a dawning realisation that Amir would not be able to escape his past and would have to face it in the future in order to be free from it. Hosseini's second novel, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007), unlike *The Kite Runner* (which is an auto-diegetic narrative beginning from the present adult stage of the protagonist Amir and told in a flashback), is told by an omniscient narrator beginning from the beginning, that is, from past to present. Set in Afghanistan from the early 1960s to the early 2000s, the novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007) is about two female protagonists of different generations, with a difference of age of about two decades between them, Mariam and Laila, who are forced to marry an old widowed shoemaker from Kabul at very young ages of barely fifteen years old after a family tragedy hit each of them. Mariam is an illegitimate teenage daughter born out of wedlock to a servant and wealthy businessman from Herat who lives the first fifteen years of her life with her estranged, bitter mother, Nana. The text, also a Bildungsroman, follows the lives of both female protagonists, beginning with Mariam, whose only sin was to be born out of wedlock. A sin, not hers, which drags her through the cruelty of life and leaves her haunted by ghosts of her memories, her past, and her actions, and she sees herself—her whole being—as a sin. In both texts, the protagonists experience psychological and emotional abuse, enduring the pain of neglect and the glaring subjective feelings of lovelessness from their immediate family, the only persons who have direct access to them.

It is difficult to escape from one's past, as the experiences are usually steeped in the mind (unconscious). Freud (1936) refers to the process of pushing things away into the unconscious as a defence mechanism to protect the individual from experiencing or minimising feelings of guilt or anxiety. These experiences become memories that flash to the fore of the mind from time to time. Tyson (1999) also suggests that individuals would have to come to terms with their guilt by facing and dealing with the past experiences that haunt them; that is, by breaking the defence mechanisms and uncovering and dealing with these hidden or pushed-aside thoughts. The quote, "*You cannot escape from your past! But you can understand it! And once you understand it, you don't have to escape from it any longer! Understanding liberates you!*" by Mehmet Murat Ildan, a Turkish playwright, is highly reflected in the novels. It is this thought that man cannot escape his past unless he faces it head-on and deals with it that forms part of the foundation for this study.

The concept articulated in Mehmet Murat Ildan's quote, emphasising that one cannot escape from the past but can liberate oneself through understanding, aligns with the foundational premise of this study in psychology. Here, the exploration of the human psyche involves facing and comprehending one's inescapable past to foster personal growth and well-being. Psychology is the study of the human psyche to understand the reasons behind the course of action and classify them accordingly. Tyson (2006) shares the view that the world is "comprised of individual human beings, each with a psychological history that begins in childhood experiences in the family" (p. 12). Psychoanalysis suggests that a person's behaviour is influenced by an unconscious drive. The selected texts, as this work will

demonstrate later, reveal that the unconscious drive of Amir and Mariam is driven by the forces of love and family. Bowen (1978) defines family as an emotional unit in which every single member is interconnected to form a whole and is influenced and affected by each other. Any changes that occur within one person may affect the whole family system. Looking into how love and family influence their actions and their lives and how these have haunted them throughout their lives, the research will uncover a unique manifestation of the Oedipal Complex, the consequences of which the protagonists would have to deal with in their adulthood, as well as an Electra Complex that turns sour against the father. The research will also delve into how both protagonists deal with the consequences of their past, which are the effects of their experiences, and how they affect their characterisation. The study aims to illuminate the intricate representations of trauma within Hosseini's narratives, examining how traumatic experiences manifest and impact the characters' psychological landscapes.

### **Thesis Statement**

This study's focus is on the theme of family dynamics and the haunting memories of the childhood experiences of the main characters in Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* (2003) and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007). The study also examines how these variables contribute to their characterisation. Although there are quite a number of studies, critiques, and reviews on Khaled Hosseini's novels, there remains a notable gap when it comes to the extensive and analytical discussion and application of the psychoanalysis theory to his works. While previous scholars have examined Khaled Hosseini's novels from various critical perspectives (Jefferess, 2009; Lucchardt, 2010; Rahim, 2019;

Zhang & Wang, 2014) and psychoanalytic perspectives, including Lacanian, Jungian, Eriksonian, and Freudian theories, and others (Anggraini, 2020; Fathi & Ahmadi, 2020; Ge, 2015; Kai-fu, 2019; Sharma & Kumar Verma, 2021; Wang, 2015; Wang, 2019; Wen, 2019), the focus on the family from a psychoanalytic perspective has not been exhausted. The specific psychoanalytic lens related to family and its dynamics remains relatively unexplored or underexplored. It is this that has attracted the interest of the present researcher, who is motivated by the opportunity to explore this underrepresented aspect of psychoanalytic study.

This study will delve deeply into the psychoanalytic perspective of family dynamics, with a specific emphasis on the childhood experiences of the main characters, Amir and Mariam, and the consequential impact of their family dynamics on their personal development and characterisation. It offers a new perspective by examining family relationships as emotional units, drawing upon Bowen's psychosocial theory and Freudian concepts like the family romance, Oedipal complex, and defense mechanisms. In addressing this gap in the existing scholarship, this research aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of these characters and their narratives. The study explores the theme of family dynamics and painful childhood memories in the texts with Bowen's (1976) definition of the family as an "emotional unit," which plays a key role as the reason (cause) in totality for the characters' past actions or their shortfalls. A re-look at the characters from the psychoanalytic perspective of emotional interconnectedness and interdependence within families, as described by Bowen (1976), would therefore enhance our understanding and critical reception of the novels. By

employing the Bowen theory and Freudian concepts, the study uncovers a unique manifestation of the Oedipal complex and examines how the characters cope with the haunting effects of their past actions. Furthermore, the application of the Bowen family theory provides a theoretical framework for understanding how family relationships interact and influence one another and how these relationships can impact an individual's sense of self and relationships through the examination of the experiences of the protagonists, Amir and Mariam.

### **Justification of the Study**

The choice of the two literary texts for this thesis is based on the fact that they sit unquestionably well with each other and also situate well within the broader context of memory and trauma studies as well as the study of family dynamics. Both texts lend themselves to psychoanalysis. The study of family dynamics and childhood experiences and their impact on adult behaviour and characterisation is a crucial aspect of literary analysis. Both *Kite Runner* (2003) and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007) provide a rich and detailed depiction of the complex and nuanced relationships within families and the impact that these relationships can have on individuals. In the novels *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, the main characters, Amir and Mariam, are shaped by the traumatic experiences they face during their childhood. They grapple with issues such as guilt, loyalty, betrayal, and forgiveness, and how these issues play out within the context of their relationships with family members is a central theme of both texts. These experiences have a significant impact on their behaviour, relationships, and overall characterisation.



The primary focus of this thesis is to investigate the link between childhood experiences and adulthood, particularly the intricacies of family dynamics and the development of adult characters through the lens of memory. In exploring the childhood experiences of these characters and how they deal with them, the research contributes to the understanding of how traumatic experiences can shape an individual's personality, relationships, and worldview. The present study also sheds light on how these experiences can continue to impact a person's life long after they have occurred. Using the Bowen family theory, the present study provides a comprehensive understanding of the ways in which family dynamics and childhood experiences shape an individual's identity and relationships. This thesis also adds to the scholarship on the studies of trauma, memory, and subjectivity.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to examine the haunting memories of traumatic childhood experiences in Khaled Hosseini's novels, *The Kite Runner* (2003) and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007), and their impact on the growth and development of the characters. As a thematic study exploring family dynamics and traumatic childhood experiences as central themes through the psychoanalytic lens, this study aims to deepen our understanding of the intricate interplay between individual psychology and familial relationships. It seeks to highlight how trauma within family contexts reverberates through generations, shaping the characters' experiences and influencing their relationships. The research delves into the intricate ways in which these childhood memories shape the characters' identities, behaviours, and relationships throughout the narratives. By analysing the lasting effects of

childhood trauma, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the complexities of personal growth and development in the face of haunting past experiences.

### **Significance of the Study**

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to the fields of trauma studies and literary analysis. The research is based on a close reading and thorough analysis of the texts under study using relevant theories, such as the Bowen family theory, to understand the complex relationships and dynamics that exist within the families depicted in the novels. By exploring the family dynamics and childhood experiences, the research contributes to the broader field of English Literature by adding new insights and perspectives on the impact of family relationships on the development of characters in Literature. Examining trauma, family dynamics, and childhood experiences, through the psychoanalytic lens not only enhances our understanding of the psychological repercussions of trauma in fictional contexts but also provides insights into the broader human experience of trauma as well as an appreciation for the impact of family and its dynamics on the development and psychological growth of the child.

The study contributes to the plethora of scholarship on the works of Khaled Hosseini and the psychoanalysis theory. The study also provides a critical alternative perspective and new insights for literary scholars and researchers to the reading of these two novels by exploring trauma, family dynamics, memory, and subjectivity from a different perspective. Beyond academic scholarship, the study's exploration of family dynamics and childhood trauma has practical relevance for social welfare, psychological

(mental) health, and gender intervention sectors. It offers insights into frameworks that may inform the work of institutions like the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection and the psychiatry unit of the Ghana Health Service.

The research adopts an interdisciplinary approach, integrating theories from psychology and social sciences to enhance literary analysis. By using the Bowen theory, the study provides a unique perspective on how family and childhood experiences shape character development. The research also provides a useful framework for future studies that examine similar themes in Literature, further demonstrating the value of interdisciplinary approaches to literary scholarship.

### **Delimitations**

This study focuses on the theme of family dynamics and the childhood experiences of the main characters in Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* (2003) and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007). It also examines how these variables contribute to their characterisation. The research primarily focuses on the individual experiences and psychological impact of the main characters in the selected novels. It does not delve extensively into other aspects of the texts, such as social, cultural, or political contexts or dimensions. While these contexts may influence the characters' experiences, the primary focus will be on the characters' internal journeys, their relationships within the family, and their personal growth and development within the familial dynamics.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions will underpin the study:

1. How do the lingering echoes of a haunted past manifest, and influence the life trajectories of the central characters, Amir and Mariam?
2. What defense mechanisms and coping strategies do the protagonists employ to grapple with the enduring effects of their haunting childhood experiences?

### **Biography and Works of Khaled Hosseini**

Khaled Hosseini is an Afghan-American author and former physician who was born on March 4, 1965, in Kabul, Afghanistan, to a Hazara family of Tajik ethnicity of the illustrious Shia community. His father was an Afghan Foreign Ministry diplomat, and his mother was a high school teacher. He is the eldest of five children. His family moved to Paris in 1976 after his father secured a job in the city. When the Soviets invaded Afghanistan in 1980, Hosseini's family, like many Afghan families at the time, sought political asylum in the United States, where they settled in San Jose, California. Hosseini attended Independence High School in San Jose, graduating in 1984. He went on to study biology at Santa Clara University, where he earned a bachelor's degree in 1988. Hosseini earned his medical degree from the University of California, San Diego School of Medicine, in 1993 and completed his residency at Cedars-Sinai Medical Centre in Los Angeles in 1997. He went on to practise as a medical provider for over ten years, stopped his practice after the success of his first novel, *The Kite Runner*, and turned full-time to his writing passion in 2004.

Hosseini got married in 1993. On his official Facebook page on October 4, 2018, Hosseini announced his 25th marriage anniversary, celebrating his wife, Roya Hosseini, with whom he has two children, Farah and Harris Hosseini. He

is a Goodwill Envoy for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and has since been recognised for his humanitarian work. In 2006, Hosseini was awarded the Humanitarian Award by the American Immigration Law Foundation. He has also received several honorary doctorates for his literary achievements and humanitarian work. His novel, *The Kite Runner* emphasises the ongoing Afghan refugee situation which led to his nomination as the Goodwill Envoy for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in 2006. In 2008, he founded the Khaled Hosseini Foundation with his wife to support humanitarian projects in Afghanistan and vulnerable Afghans and refugees around the globe.

Khaled Hosseini has emerged as a prominent voice in contemporary literature, adeptly navigating the terrain of trauma in his novels. In addition to his novels, Hosseini has also written short stories and essays. His works have been translated into over 40 languages and have sold over 55 million copies worldwide. Hosseini's works, deeply entrenched in and inspired by his own experiences, generally depict Afghanistan: the grim realities and horrors of the Afghan culture and the sufferings of his own people, the tragic wars and their impact on families, and especially innocent children, who are mostly made the protagonists of his stories. With works like *The Kite Runner*, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, and *And the Mountains Echoed*, Hosseini captures the harsh realities of war-torn Afghanistan, weaving intricate tales of loss, resilience, and the enduring human spirit. His narratives explore the depths of trauma, illuminating its far-reaching effects on individual lives and the collective consciousness of a nation ravaged by decades of conflict.

It was in March 2001, while practising medicine, that Hosseini began writing his first novel, *The Kite Runner*. The novel was published by Riverhead Books in 2003, became an international bestseller, and was adapted into a successful film in 2007. The novel tells the story of two young boys in Kabul, Amir, the son of an elite businessman, and Hassan, a family servant's son, who form a deep friendship. The main focus of Amir's narrative is the breakup of his childhood friendship with Hassan. The novel examines themes of guilt, atonement, the influence of political events, and the effects of family dynamics on intimate relationships and children's development. "*This extraordinary novel locates the struggles of ordinary people in the terrible sweep of history,*" says People Magazine.

Hosseini's second novel, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, which is overtly similar in topical vein to the first, *The Kite Runner*, was published in 2007. The novel is set in Afghanistan and follows the lives of two women, Mariam and Laila, who are brought together by their unfortunate abandonment and orphaned situations, as well as the violent actions of their husband, Rasheed. Mariam and Laila's stories depict the sacrifices they make for their children and their determination to create a better future despite the adversities they encounter. Hosseini weaves a poignant and gripping tale that illuminates the resilience of women in the face of adversity. The novel explores themes of gender roles, family, sacrifice, and the impact of war on the lives of individuals. It portrays the oppressive treatment of women in Afghan society, highlighting the inequalities and injustices they face. The novel serves as a testament to the strength and endurance of the human spirit, even in the most challenging circumstances. The Oprah Magazine is right to say about the

novel that; “[Love] is the emotion—subterranean, powerful, beautiful, illicit, and infinitely patient—that suffuses the pages of Khaled Hosseini’s *A Thousand Splendid Suns*.”

In 2013, Hosseini published *And the Mountains Echoed*, a novel that spans several generations and continents. The novel explores the complex relationships between family members and the impact of personal choices on future generations. It follows the lives of two very young, motherless siblings, three-year-old Pari and ten-year-old Abdullah, and their heartwrenching, unparalleled bond in an Afghan village. Khaled Hosseini undertakes a nuanced examination of the intricate dimensions of familial relationships, delving into the complex interplay of love, injury, betrayal, honour, and sacrifice among family members. With a particular focus on critical junctures, the narrative highlights the impact of familial connections and elucidates the startling nature of the actions undertaken by those in close proximity during crucial moments.

Hosseini’s most recent novel, *Sea Prayer*, composed in the form of a letter, was published in 2018. The novel is a tribute to the refugees who have lost their lives attempting to flee their homes and find safety. It tells the story of a father and his son as they embark on a dangerous journey from Syria to Europe, the father reflecting on the dangerous sea voyage before them, the only thing between them and freedom. Kirkus Reviews references the story as “Powerful” saying about the book; “*Intensely moving... It is impossible to read without feeling intense compassion for those—and there are thousands—whose lives resemble those of the characters in the book. Powerful.*”

## **Methodology**

### **Research Design**

This study adopts a qualitative approach. The methodology for this thesis involves a critical content analysis or close textual analysis of the selected texts as well as a review of relevant literature since the focus of the study is to engage with the content of the selected primary texts. For the method of analysis, the discussion of the data has been thematised according to the research questions; in other words, they are thematic responses to each of the research questions. The study is explicitly framed as a literary psychoanalytic reading, which necessitates a psychological exploration of the characters within the selected texts as integral to understanding the thematic concerns, particularly family dynamics and childhood trauma. The study utilises the psychoanalytic theories and family dynamics as interrogative tools to help in the analysis.

As the study is thematic in nature, focusing on family dynamics and traumatic childhood experiences as central themes; to effectively develop these themes, the study explores the psychological growth and struggles of the characters, as these are pivotal in illustrating the impact of toxic family dynamics and unresolved trauma. While character and plot development serve as integral components of the text, they are utilised in this study primarily as tools that help to foreground the thematic concerns under investigation. Therefore, the study utilises the character(isation) and plot development elements to facilitate the psychological and thematic exploration of the text but not necessarily to provide a detailed critique or an exhaustive analysis of character development or plot structure in isolation.



This approach aligns with the aim of the research, which is to draw connections between the narrative's psychoanalytic underpinnings and its broader thematic resonance, centred on examining the interplay between trauma, family relationships, and psychological growth in the narrative, as illuminated by psychoanalytic theory. The qualitative research approach is essential for categorising the content of data into themes, hence its relevance to this study.

### **Data Source**

The primary texts for this study are Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* (2003) and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007) which are augmented by secondary texts that are relevant to this study. These secondary materials have been sourced from both manual and digital libraries.

### **Definition of Terms**

This study employs working definitions, which will serve as the standard by which this study is read, analysed, and understood.

### **Family**

In the context of the Bowen family theory, a family is defined as an emotional unit consisting of interconnected individuals who share a common history, emotional ties, and interdependent relationships. Murray Bowen emphasised that the family system functions as a complex network of interactions where the emotional experiences and dynamics of each member significantly impact the overall functioning and well-being of the family as a whole.

## **Family Dynamics**

Family dynamics refers to the intricate patterns of interactions among relatives, including parents, children, siblings, and extended family members. It encompasses the roles, relationships, and various factors that shape their interactions within the family unit (Jabbari & Rouster, 2020). Family dynamics are crucial as family members rely on one another for emotional, physical, and economic support, making the family one of the primary sources of both relationship security and stress. Secure and supportive family relationships provide love, advice, and care, whereas stressful family relationships are burdened with arguments, constant critical feedback, and onerous demands, leading to emotional strain and potential negative impacts on the overall family system (Jabbari & Rouster, 2020). This definition highlights the significance of family dynamics in shaping individual experiences within the family unit, emphasising both the positive and negative aspects of familial interactions.

## **Haunt**

Drawing from the concept of hauntology, “haunt” refers to the lingering presence of the past that continues to influence the present. It suggests the idea of unresolved or repressed experiences, memories, or emotions that persistently manifest in the present. Haunting can take the form of recurring themes, unresolved conflicts, or unresolved emotions that shape an individual's perception, behaviour, and overall well-being.

## **Daunting Past**

The word “daunting,” with synonyms such as: intimidating, alarming, frightening, discouraging, unnerving, disconcerting, demoralising, off-putting,

and disheartening, is an adjective that, according to the Collins Dictionary, refers to “Something that... makes you feel slightly afraid or worried about dealing with it.”. The “past,” with synonyms such as background, life, experience, and history, is a countable noun that “consists of all the things that you have done or that have happened to you.” (Collins Dictionary Online)

The term “Daunting Past” is defined as the central concept for this study. “Daunting past” is a noun phrase that combines the adjective “daunting” with the noun “past.” In this context, it refers to a past that is intimidating, overwhelming, or challenging in nature. The phrase conveys the idea that the past experiences or events being referred to evoke feelings of fear, anxiety, or difficulty. Thus, the “Daunting Past” represents the accumulation of unresolved experiences, traumas, or conflicts that exert a persistent influence on an individual’s present thoughts, emotions, and behaviours. It signifies the ongoing impact of past events that create emotional burdens, hinder personal growth, and impede the ability to fully engage with the present. It encompasses the burdensome aspects of one's personal history that may include traumatic events, unresolved conflicts, or adverse experiences that impact one's sense of self, relationships, and overall psychological well-being. The daunting past is characterised by the weight of unresolved issues that may require acknowledgement, processing, and resolution for individuals to move forward in their lives.

### **Organisation of the Study**

This study is segmented into five chapters. The opening chapter is an introduction to the background of the entire study and gives a detailed introduction to the research work by providing clarity to the research problem.

The chapter deals with the introduction, background to the study, thesis statement, justification of the study, purpose of the study, significance of the study, delimitations, methodology, as well as the definition of terms. This chapter sets the tone for the entire thesis. Chapter two discusses related literature and the theoretical framework for the study, that is, a critical review of the understanding of psychoanalysis in the broader term, the Bowen Family Theory, the concept of psychological trauma, and the concept of family as a key factor in this study. The chapter also reviews empirical studies on the selected texts. The third chapter answers the first research question, and the penultimate chapter responds to the second research question. The final chapter outlines the key findings and concludes the entire study. This section provides a summary of the whole work.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has provided an overview and highlighted the background and need for the study. The chapter projects the concerns of the study, outlines the research questions that the study attempts to address, and discusses its contributions to the scholarship of literary studies. In the following chapters, we delve into the theoretical underpinnings of the study, explore key moments of trauma within Hosseini's texts, and delve into how the characters navigate and reconstruct their subjectivity in response to their traumatic experiences. Through a detailed analysis of the characters' journeys, behaviours, and relationships, this study contributes to the field of literature and expands our knowledge of the influence of past experiences on character development.

## CHAPTER TWO

### REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

#### Introduction

The previous chapter served as the introduction to the thesis. The background to the study, thesis statement, justification for the study, research questions, methodology, biography of the author, definition of terms, and organisation of the study were discussed. This was to provide insight into the thesis before delving into the study. This chapter reviews existing scholarly literature, views and criticisms generated by Hosseini's works, some relevant concepts for the discussion, and the theoretical underpinnings of the study. It begins with a review of empirical studies on the primary texts with the primary purpose of demonstrating the uniqueness, similarities, or relation of the current research to previous studies. The chapter further provides a conceptual context for the analysis and discussion of the selected texts. The review focuses on criticisms that dwell on trauma, identity, gender, and familial relationships or dynamics. Directly following this is a discussion of the theoretical perspective and frameworks underpinning this study.

#### Empirical Review

##### Critical Reception of the Selected Texts

*The Kite Runner* (2003) and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007) are powerful literary works by Khaled Hosseini that have garnered widespread attention and acclaim for their portrayals of Afghan society, history, and human experiences. They are popular novels that have been widely studied by scholars in various disciplines, including literature, cultural studies, and

gender studies. There have been studies that have explored the theme of family dynamics, or the concept of family, in *Kite Runner* (2003) and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007). Studies on *The Kite Runner* (2003) have explored themes such as cultural identity, masculinity, guilt, and redemption. For example, several studies have explored the representation of Afghan culture and the portrayal of cultural identity in the novel, as well as trauma and survival (Ahmed, 2015; Alshathry, 2017; Jafari, 2011). Others have focused on the portrayal of masculinity and the relationship between father and son in the novel (Jaya, 2017), whereas others have also explored the themes of friendship and betrayal (Ansari, 2012) as well as the theme of childhood and oppression (Etebari, 2019). Studies on *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007) have explored themes such as gender, identity, oppression, the representation of women, and the portrayal of gender roles in Afghan society, as well as the impact of political and cultural oppression on the lives of women in Afghanistan (Ahmad, 2012; Shapiro, 2010; Zargar, 2013).

### **Scholarship on Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* (2003)**

In “To Be Good: The Kite Runner as Allegory of Global Ethics”, Jefferess (2009) examines Khaled Hosseini's novel with a specific focus on the ethical demand presented in the narrative: “there is a way to be good again.” Jefferess explores the novel's engagement with contemporary conceptions of humanitarianism and analyses the interplay between this ethical demand and the concepts put forth by scholars such as Mamdani, Appiah, and Butler. Drawing on Mamdan's distinction between the “good Muslim” and the “bad Muslim,” as well as Appiah's notion of cosmopolitanism and Butler's theory of human interdependence, Jefferess

argues that *The Kite Runner* signifies a shift in the primary markers of political community and identity. Rather than prioritising race, nation, and religion, *The Kite Runner* embraces the concept of the “modern” as the framework for defining the essence of being human and, consequently, the moral obligations towards others. Within this framework, Jefferess interprets *The Kite Runner* as an allegory of global ethics, suggesting that it offers insights into the complexities and challenges of navigating ethical responsibilities in a globalised world. By interpreting *The Kite Runner* as an allegory of global ethics, Jefferess emphasises how the novel tackles broader ethical concerns on a global scale. It explores the complexities of reconciling diverse perspectives and the challenges faced in determining what is morally acceptable when confronted with different cultural, social, and religious contexts. In doing so, Jefferess sheds light on the novel’s exploration of the tensions between understanding the *Other* and the limitations imposed by societal norms, contributing to a deeper comprehension of its thematic depth and relevance in the contemporary world. While Jefferess’ study provides a compelling ethical reading of the text, his interpretation risks oversimplifying the novel’s personal and psychological dimensions by framing it primarily within a global ethical discourse, thereby overlooking the intricacies of Amir’s internal struggles and the deep-seated familial and cultural influences shaping his redemption arc.

Tamara and Rafqi (2020) also explore Amir’s anxiety and motive in Khaled Hosseini’s *Kite Runner*. In their study, Tamara and Rafqi (2020) delve into the analysis of Amir’s anxiety and motive, employing a psychological approach to examine the protagonist’s character, psychological conflicts, and

the novel's setting and plot. They utilise personality theory in psychology to closely analyse the text and present their findings on Amir's character, describing him as a "caring, inferior, coward, optimistic, anxious, selfish, careless, sly, and patient person." However, as the present study will show, Tamara and Rafqi's (2020) portrayal of Amir as inferior, optimistic, careless, and sly seems to be taken out of context and does not align with his overall character. Characterisation involves observing traits or notable features of a character that serve to identify them within the text. In the case of Amir, it is important to consider the complexities and nuances of his character rather than isolating specific traits to define him. While Tamara and Rafqi's (2020) analysis aims to reveal distinct characteristics through isolated parts of the text, it overlooks the broader context and development of Amir's character.

Tamara and Rafqi (2020) argue that Amir in *The Kite Runner* can be characterised as a round, static character. They propose that although Amir possesses multifaceted traits, his underlying nature as a compassionate individual remains unchanged throughout the narrative. According to Tamara and Rafqi (2020), Amir's core sense of empathy and concern for others persists from the beginning to the end of the story, despite the evolution of his experiences and personal growth. This interpretation highlights the consistency of Amir's caring nature as a defining aspect of his character and also contradicts their characterisation of Amir as selfish. Although Amir's actions were cowardly and selfish, that does not define him as a person. They were shortfalls that haunted him throughout his life until he began his journey of redemption. Examining his anxiety and motive, Tamara and Rafqi (2020)



conclude that the character Amir suffers realistic, neurotic, and moral anxiety, which stem from his betrayal of Hassan and his fear of Assef.

Jaya (2017), on the other hand, examines the familial relationships portrayed in Khaled Hosseini's novel, *The Kite Runner*, providing a comprehensive and illuminating analysis of the intricate emotional bonds between fathers and sons. The scholar adeptly explores the thematic elements of guilt, friendship, oppression, and struggle, elucidating their profound influence on the characters' motivations and behaviours. By scrutinising the socio-economic disparities and political events embedded within the narrative, Jaya effectively underscores the broader societal backdrop within which these familial relationships unfold. Notably, the paper excels in its scrutiny of character development, particularly the protagonist's internal conflicts and evolving comprehension of his paternal connection. Jaya skillfully presents the protagonist's transformation and the consequential ramifications of guilt within the narrative. Furthermore, the scholar's contemplation of the novel's universal themes and its capacity to resonate with readers from diverse cultural backgrounds augments the depth of the analysis.

Just like Tamara and Rafqi (2020), Jaya points out that Amir developed a selfish and jealous tendency. In his adult stage, he recognises the negative attitude his younger self portrayed towards Hassan and his (Amir's) harsh treatment of him (Hassan). Both Jaya (2017) and Tamara and Rafqi (2020) acknowledge the complexity of Amir's character. They highlight the internal conflicts and struggles he faces, which contribute to his multidimensional portrayal. They both acknowledge the transformative journey of Amir's character throughout the novel. They recognise that Amir

undergoes significant personal growth, particularly in terms of his understanding of his relationship with his father and his moral development.

Kai-fu (2019), however, explores the psychological changes experienced by the protagonist, Amir, in the article “A Study of Amir’s Psychological Change in *The Kite Runner*”. Kai-fu argues that Amir’s behaviours, such as betrayal, guilt, and redemption, are intricately connected to his psychological development. The study utilises Erikson’s psycho-social development theory to offer insights into the underlying reasons behind Amir’s actions. The article examines Amir’s psychological changes, divided into distinct stages. The initial stage involves mistrust and doubt due to perceived neglect from his father, leading to self-doubt. The subsequent stage includes guilt, inferiority, and jealousy, as Amir feels remorse for not meeting his father’s expectations and develops feelings of inferiority, leading to betrayal. The third stage encompasses self-accusation and role confusion as Amir grapples with guilt and struggles to find his identity. The final stage showcases Amir’s transition from willingness to love to unwavering devotion as he develops self-awareness and maturity and commits to rescuing Hassan’s son. However, while Kai-fu (2019) effectively maps Amir’s psychological transformation, his study, like Jefferess (2009), overlooks the role of intergenerational trauma and family systems, treating Amir’s journey as an isolated psychological process rather than one deeply embedded in familial dysfunction and inherited emotional patterns. Unlike Kai-fu’s approach, which focuses solely on Amir’s individual development, the present study examines how toxic family dynamics and unresolved trauma contribute to his

psychological conflicts, offering a more comprehensive understanding of his character.

In the article “Khaled Hosseini’s *The Kite Runner*: A Psychoanalytic Analysis”, Rahim (2019) applies Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytic theory to analyse the novel, *The Kite Runner*. The main argument of the study is that the characters in the novel, particularly the protagonist, Amir, exhibit psychoanalytic characteristics as defined by Freud. Rahim (2019) utilises Freud’s concepts such as the id, superego, and Oedipus Complex to explore Amir’s psychological development and the influences of his familial and societal complexities. Through the application of psychoanalytic literary criticism, the scholar examines major incidents and minor characters in the novel to support his argument. The findings of the analysis demonstrate how Amir’s childhood desires transform under the influence of the reality principle, leading to the resolution of the Oedipus Complex. The paper provides valuable insights into the psychological motivations and conflicts within the narrative, showcasing the efficacy of applying psychoanalytic theory to understand the characters and themes in the novel. Moreover, Rahim (2019) explores how the protagonist, Amir, experiences the Oedipus Complex in relation to his family dynamics and social phenomena. Rahim (2019) examines Amir’s unconscious desires and conflicts that arise from his relationship with his father and other significant figures in his life. The paper delves into how these dynamics shape Amir’s behaviour, emotions, and identity development, reflecting the complex interplay of the Oedipus Complex within the narrative. With regards to the Oedipus Complex, Rahim’s analysis focuses on the significance of Amir’s narration of the molestation

scene and his reaction (his hesitancy to help Hassan) rather than the explicit physical description itself. With this, Rahim (2019) argues that the protagonist harbours some repressed homogenous desires, which render him helpless and in conflict with himself. Rahim further argues that Amir's delayed response to Hassan's molestation is driven by his unconscious desires, reminiscent of the Oedipus complex, as well as his adherence to societal and ethnic norms that contribute to his inaction. From his analysis, it can be inferred that Hassan is positioned as the mother, while Amir remains the son in the Oedipus Complex triad. While Rahim's (2019) study provides a compelling psychoanalytic interpretation of the Oedipus Complex in *The Kite Runner*, his analysis does not fully account for the broader familial structures influencing Amir's psychological conflict. His interpretation overlooks the role of trauma as a driving force behind Amir's actions, attributing his inner turmoil primarily to repressed desires rather than unresolved psychological pain. This study diverges by demonstrating how Amir's struggles and behaviour can be better understood through Bowen's concept of triangulation, which highlights how emotional legacies and entanglements within his family, rather than subconscious desire, shape his internal conflicts and moral reckoning. In doing so, this study also reveals a unique manifestation of the Oedipus Complex that departs from Rahim's interpretation.

Gampung (2009) as well examines the fragile relationship in the main character's family in Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*. This analysis of the fragile familial relationship sheds light on the causes of the family's strained dynamics, particularly the influence of misperception and the concealment of truth. Gampung employs a literary approach, specifically utilising the theories

of conflict and characterisation, to analyse the causes of the fragile family relationship and the strategies employed by the characters to address the problem. He argues that the cause of the fragility in Amir's family is two-fold; a misperception and a concealment. He suggests that misunderstandings and distorted perceptions among family members play a significant role in the strained dynamics. Indicating the second cause to be the concealment of the truth, he suggests that secrets and hidden information contribute to the tension within the family. Gampung argues that the family can regain their relationship and repair the damage through efforts to rectify perception and reveal the truth. However, a closer examination challenges Gampung's assertion that fractured familial bonds can be fully repaired through rectifying perceptions and revealing the truth, as the present study will show. This study argues that the family's fragmentation extends beyond misunderstandings and hidden truths, revealing a more complex interplay of trauma, grief, and unresolved emotional entanglements. The deaths of Baba and Hassan create an irrevocable void, reinforcing the idea that loss and psychological distress, rather than just secrecy, play a defining role in shaping family dynamics. These losses highlight the enduring consequences of their actions and the limited potential for complete restoration.

Existing scholarship on *The Kite Runner* offers insightful analyses but overlooks key psychological and familial dynamics. Jefferess (2009) focuses on global ethics, neglecting the novel's deeply personal struggles, while Kai-fu (2019) examines Amir's psychological transformation in isolation, ignoring intergenerational trauma. Rahim (2019) applies Freudian theory but attributes Amir's turmoil to repressed desires rather than unresolved trauma. Gampung

(2009) highlights secrecy in familial breakdown but underestimates the lasting impact of loss. This study fills a critical gap by integrating Bowen's Family Systems Theory and Derrida's Hauntology to reveal how inherited trauma and family dynamics shape Amir's internal conflicts and redemption.

### **Scholarship on Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007)**

In the paper, "Women in Prism: A Psychoanalysis of Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*", Sharma & Verma (2021) argue that the text depicts female characters in multifaceted and complex ways, and their behaviour can be understood through the lens of Maslow's theory of "Hierarchy of Needs." The authors assert that the novel challenges traditional gender roles in Afghan society and emphasises the significance of the love between Laila and Mariam, illustrating how women can find strength and mutual support. Furthermore, the paper highlights the sacrifices women make for their families and children, which contribute to their self-actualisation. By applying Maslow's theory, the analysis explores how the female characters in the novel strive to meet their physiological, safety, social, esteem, and self-actualisation needs. It also recognises the interconnections among these needs and their impact on the characters' behaviour. Additionally, the paper emphasises the influence of the women characters' relationships, both with each other and with their families, on their journey towards self-actualisation and the fulfilment of their needs. Essentially, by exploring the intricacies of family dynamics, the paper offers a comprehensive and nuanced analysis of how these relationships contribute to the female characters' struggles, aspirations, and eventual transformations within the narrative. It underscores the importance of familial love and support and the impact of these dynamics

on the female characters' journeys towards self-realisation and empowerment, while also shedding light on the pervasive gender inequalities that persist in Afghan society. The paper provides a thoughtful and insightful application of Maslow's theory, shedding light on the intricate portrayal of female characters in the novel. The paper concludes by emphasising the importance of understanding the experiences and struggles of women in patriarchal societies and how literature can provide a platform for their voices to be heard. While Sharma & Verma's (2021) application of Maslow's theory effectively underscores the crucial role of love, familial support, and parental guidance in the psychological and overall growth of the female protagonists, their study does not fully examine the structural dynamics of these relationships. Building upon their findings, the present study converges with their argument on the inherent human need for love and security but extends the discussion by applying Bowen's Family Systems Theory to explore how familial relationships—and the lack thereof—shape the protagonists' psychological trajectories, reinforcing the long-term impact of unresolved emotional entanglements on identity and resilience.

In the article "Subjugation: A Study of the Women Characters in Khaled Hosseini's and Arundhati Roy's Novels," Silima (2013) delves into the depiction of oppression in Khaled Hosseini's works, particularly in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007). The paper highlights the exploitation and discrimination faced by women within the patriarchal social systems of Afghan society and the Indian subcontinent, as depicted in the novels of Khaled Hosseini and Arundhati Roy, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, and *The God of Small Things* respectively. Both texts present a common plight of women,

who are treated as objects and subjected to extreme oppression by male figures. The article acknowledges the resistance shown by these women in their attempts to challenge the male-dominated order but ultimately underscores how their struggles are overshadowed by the prevailing ideology of the male-dominated social systems. Within the context of *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Silima focuses on the characters of Nana and Mariam, who represent the archetypes of sacrificing women. Despite their hardships, these women have learned to live for others and have never demanded anything for themselves. Mariam, although childless, finds solace and joy in her companionship with Laila and Aziza. She becomes a symbol of selfless motherhood and, driven by love, does not hesitate to commit the ultimate act of killing her husband. Silima notes that Mariam feels no remorse or regret for her action, except for the unintended consequence of depriving Zalmay of his father's affection. Silima argues that the stories of women like Nana and Mariam demonstrate that accepting subjugation without resistance only strengthens the tyrants and undermines humanity and gratitude. These characters serve as reminders that passive acceptance of oppression perpetuates a system that devalues and defeats the very essence of human existence. Through her analysis, Silima draws attention to the pervasive nature of women's oppression and the urgent need for women to assert their rights and challenge the systems that seek to subjugate them.

Al-Dagamsch & Golubeva (2017) also analyse Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* as a child-rescue narrative and its implications within the framework of neo-Orientalism. The paper explores how the novel reinforces specific discourses and ideologies surrounding Afghanistan and Western



intervention. Through a series of interconnected arguments and analyses, the authors present their perspectives on the novel's underlying themes and messages. At the core of their argument is the assertion that *A Thousand Splendid Suns* perpetuates a rescue discourse that supports Western intervention in Afghanistan. The authors contend that the novel portrays Afghanistan as a failed state in need of foreign supervision to address its perceived deficiencies. Furthermore, they argue that the novel positions the United States as a symbol of progress and prosperity, reinforcing neo-Orientalist ideologies. One significant aspect highlighted in the paper is the novel's emphasis on rescuing children affected by the horrors of war. According to the authors, this narrative reinforces the discourse employed to justify foreign intervention in Afghanistan. By presenting the plight of Afghan children as a moral obligation for Western intervention, the novel strengthens the perception of the West as saviours and perpetuates the belief that only external forces can bring about salvation and progress. The authors also shed light on the utilisation of universal values within *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. These elements contribute to a stereotypical discourse of a "progressive" West and an "underdeveloped" East. By aligning the West with notions of advancement and enlightenment while characterising Afghanistan as backward and destitute, the novel reinforces neo-Orientalist ideologies that perpetuate cultural and power hierarchies.

Although the main focus of the paper remains on the novel's portrayal of children affected by war and its role in perpetuating a neo-Orientalist discourse, Al-Dagamseh & Golubeva (2017) briefly touch upon the portrayal of family dynamics in the text. The authors acknowledge that the novel depicts

the impact of war on families in Afghanistan, with a particular emphasis on the experiences of women and children. They highlight the devastating effects of conflict on family structures and the challenges faced by individuals trying to navigate their roles and relationships within this context. One notable aspect mentioned in the paper is the portrayal of a positive family dynamic in the orphanage scene towards the end of the novel. This scene depicts the characters Laila and Aziza revisiting the orphanage together, functioning as a happy family unit. The inclusion of characters like Zalmai and Tariq in the life of the orphanage contributes to the creation of a family-like atmosphere, emphasising the importance of support and connection within the narrative. Al-Dagamseh and Golubeva's (2017) analysis highlights the complex ways *A Thousand Splendid Suns* perpetuates certain discourses and ideologies. By examining the novel through the lenses of child rescue and neo-Orientalism, the authors encourage readers to critically assess the underlying ideologies present in literary works and consider their broader socio-political contexts. However, while their study prioritises geopolitical implications, the intricacies of familial relationships remain underexplored, leaving room for further inquiry. The present study shifts the focus from external interventionist discourse to an internal exploration of familial structures and their psychological impact on character growth.

Moreover, Lindsay B. Shapiro's thesis, titled "Middle Eastern Women's Issues: An Analysis of *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *The New York Times*" (2010), offers a comprehensive examination of the challenges faced by women in the Middle East. The thesis argues that Khaled Hosseini's novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *The New York Times* provide valuable

insights into various issues affecting Middle Eastern women, including male supremacy, dehumanising atrocities, the implications of Islam, and the complexities of economic, familial, and social identities. Shapiro (2010) employs a combination of literary analysis and content analysis to delve into these issues and present recommendations for addressing them. Through a close examination of *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Shapiro uncovers the intricate dynamics of gender relationships and the oppressive structures that women navigate in Middle Eastern societies. Additionally, the study analyses The New York Times' coverage of women's issues in the Middle East, exploring potential connections between the novel and the newspaper's portrayal of these topics. The thesis offers several important insights and suggestions. It highlights the significance of further research to investigate whether the reading of novels, such as *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, influences the choices made by news writers in selecting topics and stories for coverage. Additionally, the thesis suggests exploring a direct link between *The New York Times* writers' familiarity with the novel and their decision-making process in selecting topics related to Middle Eastern women's issues.

In the study "The Role of Women in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hosseini," Nongmaithem's (2017) primary focus is on the representation of women in the novel, specifically examining the characters of Mariam, Laila, and Nana. Nongmaithem's analysis centres on the experiences, struggles, and relationships of these female characters to shed light on their roles and significance within the narrative. In her analysis, Nongmaithem delves into the significance of sisterhood as a potential solution to the myriad challenges faced by women in the novel. Through a careful examination of

key episodes, Nongmaithem explores how Mariam and Laila, the two central female characters, support and empower each other in their shared struggle against the tyranny of Rasheed. Nongmaithem explores how the characters of Mariam, Laila, and Nana are portrayed and the impact they have on the overall storyline. The study delves into their individual journeys, highlighting their personal challenges, sacrifices, and triumphs. By examining their interactions, Nongmaithem seeks to uncover the ways in which these women navigate their roles within a patriarchal society, finding strength and resilience despite the oppressive circumstances they face.

Additionally, Nongmaithem's (2017) study provides a nuanced exploration of the role of women and the bond of sisterhood in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. Through their thickened bond of unwavering support and shared resilience, Mariam and Laila demonstrate the transformative potential of sisterhood in overcoming oppressive circumstances. By killing Rasheed and securing a new life for Laila, Mariam epitomises the power of selflessness and sacrifice that can arise from the bond of sisterhood. The analysis serves as a poignant reminder of the significance of female solidarity and the potential it holds for empowering women and resolving their struggles.

The central argument of the paper "Sisterhood as a Saviour of Afghan Women: An Analysis of Khaled Hosseini's Ideology" by Asif, Rashid, Ismail, Al-Smadi, & Yassin, (2020) is that sisterhood, characterised by love, cooperation, and solidarity among women, serves as a means to fight against individual and collective oppression by patriarchy. The study utilises a textual analysis approach to examine Khaled Hosseini's novels *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *And the Mountains Echoed*. The theoretical framework of the

research is based on the theories of Sisterhood proposed by bell hooks in her essays *Sisterhood: Political Solidarity between Women* (1986) and *Sisterhood is Still Powerful* (2000). The study contributes a unique perspective to the scholarship on Hosseini's novels by examining the interplay between sisterhood and envy in Khaled Hosseini's selected novels. By focusing on Afghan women, the authors shed light on the complexities of their experiences within the context of patriarchy and oppression. The findings of the study demonstrate that the solidarity among female characters in the novels allows them to break free from the oppression imposed by patriarchy. However, the presence of envy and non-cooperation among the female characters leads to their subjugation under male domination. In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, the bond of sisterhood between Mariam and Laila emerges from their shared experiences of oppression under Rasheed. However, their relationship is also affected by barriers of class and race, leading to moments of non-cooperation. Nonetheless, sisterhood plays a pivotal role in their survival and resistance against patriarchy.

In the study, "Matrix of Violence, Love, and Sacrifice: A Critical Study of Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*," Maurya (2015) examines the themes of violence, oppression, and women's relationships within the confines of a suffocating atmosphere. Maurya draws parallels between the distorted familial relationships of father-daughter and husband-wife, which ultimately take a bitter turn, highlighting the pervasive nature of oppression. Additionally, Maurya emphasises the transformative power of sisterhood, exploring how the bond between Mariam and Laila provides them with inner insights and strength. Maurya offers a critical examination of the

complex dynamics at play, particularly within the familial and gendered structures. The study underscores how violence and oppression permeate the characters' lives, shaping their interactions and experiences. Maurya's exploration of the bond between Mariam and Laila highlights the importance of solidarity and mutual support in the face of adversity. Through their shared experiences, the two characters find solace, resilience, and a source of empowerment. Maurya's study contributes to a deeper understanding of the novel by uncovering the underlying themes of violence, love, sacrifice, and the intricate relationships between the female characters. By shedding light on the oppressive atmosphere in which the characters exist as well as the transformative potential of sisterhood, Maurya offers valuable insights into the intricacies of gender dynamics and the endurance of women in the face of adversity.

From a different thematic perspective, Hamid & Tiwari (2019) explore three key themes in the novel: women's suffering and perseverance, motherhood and sacrifice, and power and love. The authors argue that these themes are intricately woven into the narrative, shaping the experiences of the main characters and providing a lens through which broader social, cultural, and political issues are examined. Through their analysis, the authors conclude that the novel portrays the immense challenges faced by women in Afghan society and their remarkable resilience in the face of adversity. Women's suffering and perseverance are depicted in the novel through the experiences of characters like Mariam and Laila, who endure hardships and oppression but find inner strength to overcome their circumstances. They point out how females are viewed as inferior, subjected to subjugation, abuse, and sexual

brutality, and then disgraced and shamed. The theme of motherhood and sacrifice is explored through the sacrifices made by the female characters for the well-being and future of their children. The authors note that motherhood becomes a driving force that empowers women and allows them to find purpose and meaning amidst turmoil. The theme of power and love is highlighted through various relationships in the novel, examining how power dynamics shape human interactions and affect the lives of the characters. The authors explore the complexities of love in the face of oppression and demonstrate how love can both empower and endanger individuals in a society dominated by patriarchal norms.

Vemaiah (2018) further explores the various dimensions of early father-daughter relationships in the novel. Vemaiah (2018) delves into the influence fathers have on their daughters' lives, particularly in terms of self-esteem, self-image, and confidence, with a focal view on the characters Mariam, Laila, and Aziza and their relationships with their respective fathers. The paper highlights the significance of a father's presence in a daughter's life and how it shapes her development. The study highlights both positive and negative father-daughter relationships and their consequences. The positive relationship between Laila and her father is emphasised, showcasing the support and encouragement she receives from him, which in turn contributes to her positive relationship with society. Similarly, Mariam's bond with her father is depicted as a source of companionship until her mother's death. On the other hand, Rasheed's problematic attitude towards his daughter Aziza, driven by gender bias, hinders their close relationship. Vemaiah (2018) concludes by emphasising the long-lasting impact of father-daughter

relationships on various aspects of a girl's life, including her interactions with others. Vemaiah underscores the importance of a positive father's involvement in fostering a daughter's self-assurance and confidence. The analysis of father-daughter relationships in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* offers insights into the struggles faced by the characters in seeking parental approval, a recurring theme in Hosseini's novels. Overall, Vemaiah's study contributes to the understanding of the significance of early father-daughter relationships and their effects on the development of female characters. By examining the portrayal of these relationships in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, the paper provides valuable insights into the impact fathers have on their daughters' lives, highlighting both the positive and negative aspects. The study underscores the importance of positive father-daughter bonds in nurturing self-esteem and confidence in girls, shedding light on the complexities of familial relationships depicted in the novel.

The existing scholarship on *A Thousand Splendid Suns* predominantly explores themes of female oppression, resilience, and external socio-political factors such as neo-Orientalism and Western intervention. While these studies provide crucial insights into the broader struggles of Afghan women, they often leave the intricacies of familial relationships and their psychological effects underexplored. Vemaiah (2018) contributes to this gap by applying a psychoanalytic approach, focusing on father-daughter relationships and the significance of paternal influence on female development. However, while Vemaiah highlights familial support, the present study expands this discourse by examining childhood trauma more broadly. This includes not only Mariam's relationship with her father but also the impact of her mother on her



psychological development and her later interactions with figures such as Rasheed and Laila. By shifting the focus to her psychological growth, this study offers a more comprehensive exploration of how early family dynamics shape identity, resilience, and emotional coping mechanisms.

### **Conclusion of Empirical Review**

The existing scholarship on *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* provides valuable insights into themes of morality, trauma, oppression, and socio-political discourse, with each study contributing to different dimensions of analysis. While Jefferess (2009) and Kai-fu (2019) emphasise ethical and psychological perspectives, their focus does not extend to childhood trauma and the intricacies of familial dynamics. Similarly, Rahim's (2019) Freudian analysis explores Amir's struggles through the lens of repressed desires, while Gampung (2009) examines secrecy in familial breakdown but does not fully consider the lasting impact of loss. On *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, much of the scholarship examines external oppression, with Vemaiah (2018) offering a notable psychoanalytic approach to father-daughter relationships. However, while various studies acknowledge family dynamics, their psychological impact on character development, life trajectories, and relationships remains an area open for further inquiry, which this study seeks to undertake. This study builds upon these existing discussions by integrating Bowen's Family Systems Theory and Derrida's Hauntology to examine how childhood trauma and family dynamics influence psychological development, emotional resilience, and identity formation in both novels, thus offering a deeper understanding of how the lingering echoes

of a haunted past influence Amir's and Mariam's life choices, relationships, and quest for redemption.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This section explains the theoretical approach that underpins this research. The study is situated within the broader theoretical context of psychoanalysis. Attention is paid to Bowen (1976; 1978), Freud (1959; 1961), Freud (1936), and Raul Hartke (2016). The analytical frameworks for the study are the Bowen family theory (1993), the family romance concept (Freud, 1959), the psychoanalysis Oedipal complex (Harke, 2016), and defence mechanisms (Freud, 1936). The theory and concepts will be employed to allow a broader and more in-depth analysis of the texts using Bowen's family theory, Freud's concept of family romance and the Oedipal complex, and Freud's defence mechanisms.

The aim is not to religiously follow the theories but to show how they help to analyse the texts showing how the author subverts/manipulates some concepts of these theories in his works. The theories are used as tools for analysis and the reading of the selected texts show that while these theories are useful in the analysis, the study challenges the theoretical perspectives in some subversions.

### **Psychoanalytic Approach**

Psychoanalysis is a theory propounded by Sigmund Freud that explores the nature of the unconscious mind in relation to one's desires, conscience, and personality. It considers the repressed unconscious desires of the characters in the text. These repressed unconscious desires may be the result of past experiences. Freud believes that the subconscious is a crucial

aspect of human mental functioning. The subconscious is the part of the mind—the facet of consciousness—that observes and retains information without conscious effort, subtly shaping actions and behaviour even though awareness of its influence is absent as one does not realise it. Freud (1899) views the subconscious as a vast and largely unconscious repository of thoughts, feelings, and desires that influence our conscious thoughts, emotions, and behaviours, even though we may not be aware of them.

Freud, in his 1909 ‘Family Romances’ paper (as cited in Freud, 1959), discusses the authorial influence of the parent on a child. Freud shares the view that parents are at first “the only authority and the source of all belief” (p. 237) for a small child. During the early years of the child, his “most intense and most momentous wish” (p. 237) is to be like his parents, to be big like his father or mother, who is usually the parent of the same sex. Westerink & Haute (2020) argue that “‘Family Romances’, together with the closely related essay on infantile sexual theories (1908), paves the way for new theories of sexuality defined in terms of object relations informed by knowledge of sexual difference.” Westerink & Haute (2020), among many other scholars, are of the view that Freud’s ‘Family Romances’ prelude the beginning of the Oedipus complex.

Sigmund Freud first proposed the concept of defense mechanisms as psychological strategies that individuals use to protect themselves from anxiety, emotional distress, and threatening thoughts and feelings. Sigmund Freud contended that when individuals find themselves in psychologically perilous or menacing circumstances, they often turn to defense mechanisms as a means of safeguarding their psychological well-being. In psychoanalysis, a

perilous threat refers to anything that poses a challenge to the individual's self-concept or self-esteem (Baumeister, Dale, & Sommer, 1998). When individuals face situations or thoughts that challenge their self-concept or self-esteem, they may unconsciously employ these defense mechanisms as a way to cope and alleviate the associated psychological discomfort. Initially, Freud's theory emphasised that these threats primarily stemmed from basic drives, particularly sexual and aggressive ones, which often clashed with the ego (Baumeister et al., 1998). An example of this conflict could be experiencing sexual attraction to one's child. However, as Freud's theory evolved, it shifted its focus towards the preservation of self-esteem. More precisely, he proposed that when a patient's self-esteem and self-image faced challenges or threats, they would resort to specific cognitive or mental strategies aimed at safeguarding their self-esteem (Baumeister et al., 1998). In other words, to maintain their self-esteem, clients develop defense mechanisms, and these mechanisms can operate on a subconscious level, often with the client being unaware of their use or the underlying reasons. The presence of a defense mechanism, nevertheless, indicates that the client perceives a threat to their self-esteem and self-concept, prompting the need for protection.

The idea that defense mechanisms are activated in response to threats to self-concept or self-esteem aligns with Freud's broader psychoanalytic theory. Freud believed that the mind is composed of three key components: the id (the instinctual, pleasure-seeking part), the ego (the rational, decision-making part), and the superego (the moral and societal part). Conflict between these components can lead to anxiety, and defense mechanisms arise to

manage this anxiety. For example, if an individual faces a situation that threatens their self-esteem or self-concept, they might employ defense mechanisms such as denial (refusing to acknowledge the threat), repression (pushing the threatening thoughts into the unconscious), or rationalisation (creating a rational explanation for the threat) to alleviate the resulting anxiety. Anna Freud, the daughter of Sigmund Freud and a prominent psychoanalyst in her own right, made significant contributions to the understanding of defense mechanisms in psychoanalysis. Like her father, she believed that defense mechanisms are psychological processes that individuals use unconsciously to protect themselves from anxiety, emotional distress, and threatening thoughts and feelings. Anna Freud's work expanded upon her father's theories while introducing novel insights. Notably, she made adjustments to some of his concepts concerning defense mechanisms. One significant alteration was her heightened focus on the ego, augmenting its significance, which is the responsibility for rational thinking and decision-making, and its adaptability to various circumstances. Anna stressed the ego's pivotal role in reconciling conflicts between the id and the superego, positing that it utilises defense mechanisms for this purpose (Freud, 1936).

Anna Freud recognised that defense mechanisms could be adaptive and necessary for mental health. For example, some level of repression or denial might be needed to function in daily life. However, she also noted that when defense mechanisms are overused or become too rigid, they can lead to psychological problems. Anna Freud proposed a classification system for defense mechanisms in which she categorised them into groups based on their level of maturity and adaptiveness. For instance, she considered mature

defenses (like humour and sublimation) to be healthier than immature defenses (like denial and projection). She suggested that the use of defense mechanisms changes over the course of an individual's development. Young children may rely more on primitive defenses, while adults should ideally develop more mature defense mechanisms.

It is important to note that Anna Freud's work on defense mechanisms contributed to the evolution of psychoanalytic theory. While her ideas shared some similarities with her father's, she also introduced her own perspectives and refinements to these concepts. Her insights continue to influence the field of psychoanalysis and our understanding of how individuals cope with psychological conflicts and stress.

### **Bowen Family Theory**

Clinical professor and psychiatrist Dr. Murray Bowen, trained in traditional psychoanalytical approaches, originated the theory. The Bowen Family Systems Theory offers a comprehensive framework for understanding family dynamics and their influence on individual behaviour and functioning. This theory emphasises the interconnectedness and interdependence of family members, focusing on the patterns of interaction and emotional processes within the family unit. Although studies on families have been done mostly by sociologists and anthropologists who contributed to the scholarship on family research, even before the family movement began in the 1950s, these sociological and anthropological contributions observed and focused on cultural differences rather than accounts of predictable patterns of interaction in families (Hall, 1981; p. 3). Hall posits that the family movement is a more direct development of psychoanalysis, "which introduced concepts describing

the actual and potential influences of one human life on another” (p. 3). Psychoanalysis’ focus was thus on a single patient and on personal retroactive memories about the patient’s family life (Hall, 1981).

The eight major concepts developed by Bowen that make up his theory interrelate with each other. His theory is founded on the concepts of self-differentiation, triangles, the nuclear family emotional system, the family projection process, emotional cut-off, the multigenerational transmission process, sibling position, and the emotional process in society. Bowen’s concept of differentiation of self emphasises the individual’s ability to separate their own thoughts, feelings, and goals from those of their family system (Skowron & Friedlander, 1998). It involves developing a sense of self that is distinct from one’s family of origin and being able to maintain emotional autonomy even in the face of intense familial dynamics. According to Kerr and Bowen (1988), individuals with a higher level of differentiation are better equipped to handle relationship conflicts and emotional pressures without becoming overwhelmed or reactive. They can maintain a clear sense of self and make independent decisions based on their own values and principles (Papero, 2006). Differentiation of self refers to the ability of individuals to maintain a sense of self while remaining emotionally connected to their family.

Differentiation of self is a lifelong process that can be influenced by both nature and nurture factors (Papero, 2006). It involves striking a balance between the need for emotional connection and the need for individuality and self-expression. Higher levels of differentiation have been associated with better mental health outcomes, stronger interpersonal relationships, and greater

overall life satisfaction (Knudson-Martin & Mahoney, 2009; Skowron & Friedlander, 1998). Developing a higher level of differentiation often requires self-reflection, introspection, and a willingness to examine one's own emotional reactivity and patterns of behaviour (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). It involves taking responsibility for one's own emotions and choices rather than being controlled by the emotional climate of the family system (Papero, 2006). Through therapy and self-work, individuals can enhance their level of differentiation and achieve greater emotional resilience, healthier boundaries, and more fulfilling relationships (Skowron & Friedlander, 1998). Bowen argues that individuals who are highly differentiated can better manage their own emotions and reactions, leading to healthier relationships and more effective problem-solving within the family system.

Bowen described triangles as the smallest stable relationship unit (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p. 135). Bowen posits that the stability of all close relationships is inherently precarious and necessitates the presence of a third party to uphold it. The triangle is explained as a three-person relationship, usually considered a building block for larger family systems. This three-person relationship is most stable as compared to a two-person relationship because it is too small and easily builds tension. As Brown (1999) posits, "Triangling is said to occur when the inevitable anxiety in a dyad is relieved by involving a vulnerable third party who either takes sides or provides a detour for the anxiety" (p. 95). With a third person, the tension can be shifted around between all three in order to maintain some form of equilibrium, so none of the relationships become too volatile. Should tension arise between the insiders, one of them will choose to draw away and instead draw closer to



the outsider. The relationship dynamics of a three-person relationship or triangle tend to shift frequently based on conflict or tension that arises between any two persons in the triangle. Though the triangle dynamic is seen as stable, it can be a catalyst for many familial problems. “Triangling can become problematic when a third party’s involvement distracts the members of a dyad from resolving their relationship impasse.” (Brown, 1999, p. 96). Brown shares the view that the focus shifts to criticising or worrying about the third party, which in turn prevents the inner parties from resolving the tension. Bowen suggests that triangulation can create an imbalance within the family system and perpetuate unhealthy patterns of communication and behaviour.

According to Bowen’s family systems theory, the nuclear family emotional system refers to the patterns of interaction and emotional dynamics within a nuclear family unit (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). This system encompasses the relationships and emotional processes between spouses or partners and their children. The nuclear family emotional system refers to the emotional patterns that are commonly found within families. In the nuclear family emotional system, various patterns of interaction can emerge, such as marital conflict, parental favouritism, overprotectiveness, or emotional distance (Papero, 2006). These patterns are often interconnected and can be passed down across generations. For example, unresolved issues between parents may lead to increased anxiety and tension, which can be absorbed by the children, potentially affecting their emotional well-being (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Such patterns also include anxiety, emotional cutoff, overfunctioning/underfunctioning, and unresolved emotional attachments. In concurrence,

Bowen posits that the emotional functioning of the nuclear family influences individual behaviour and impacts the overall family system (Papero, 2006).

Understanding the nuclear family emotional system can shed light on how family members influence and react to one another's emotions. High levels of emotional fusion, where individuals are overly involved and enmeshed with each other's feelings, can lead to emotional reactivity and difficulties in establishing healthy boundaries (Skowron & Friedlander, 1998). On the other hand, individuals with higher levels of differentiation in the nuclear family emotional system are better able to manage their own emotions, maintain autonomy, and respond to others in a more calm and balanced manner (Papero, 2006). By increasing awareness of emotional patterns and promoting differentiation, individuals can develop healthier ways of relating to each other, reduce emotional reactivity, and foster more open and authentic communication (Skowron & Friedlander, 1998).

The Family Projection Process is another concept of Bowen's family systems that suggests that parents' unresolved emotional issues can be projected onto their children, impacting their emotional well-being and behaviour. It is a concept within Bowen's family systems theory that refers to the process in which parents unconsciously transfer their own emotional issues onto their children (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). The term "projection" signifies the psychological mechanism of attributing one's own emotions, fears, and unresolved conflicts onto others, particularly family members. In the context of family projection, parents may project their anxieties, insecurities, and unfulfilled aspirations onto their children, shaping the children's behaviour and self-perception. For instance, a parent who struggles with low self-esteem

may place excessive pressure on their child to achieve in order to compensate for their own feelings of inadequacy. Conversely, a parent's unresolved conflicts, such as marital discord or career dissatisfaction, can be projected onto a child, resulting in the child carrying the emotional burden and potentially manifesting similar struggles later in life (Papero, 2006).

Family projection, as described within Bowen's family systems theory, has significant implications for the emotional dynamics and functioning of the entire family system. It can lead to cascading effects on individual family members and contribute to patterns of emotional reactivity, enmeshment, and limited differentiation (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). This phenomenon is often perpetuated across generations, as the projected issues continue to impact subsequent family members in similar ways. By recognising and addressing these projection processes, individuals can break the cycle of negative and destructive patterns to foster and promote greater emotional autonomy and healthier relationships within the family.

Emotional cut-off is a concept in Bowen's family systems theory that refers to the psychological distancing or disconnection individuals may employ to manage unresolved emotional issues within their family of origin (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). It involves creating emotional distance from family members while still maintaining some level of contact or relationship. It is the act of distancing oneself emotionally from family members in an attempt to avoid conflict or emotional pain. Emotional cut-off often stems from unresolved conflicts or intense emotional fusion within the family system. It can have negative consequences on individual well-being and family dynamics, as it may hinder the development of healthy, authentic

relationships. It can lead to feelings of isolation, unresolved emotional issues, and difficulties in forming and maintaining healthy relationships outside of the family context. Unresolved conflicts and emotional tensions may continue to impact individuals even when they are physically separated from their family of origin. While cutoffs may provide temporary relief, they can hinder meaningful connections and contribute to unresolved issues. Recognising the presence of emotional cut-off and its effects is important in promoting personal growth and healthier relationships. Through self-reflection, therapy, and open communication, individuals can work towards resolving past issues, fostering emotional connections, and achieving greater emotional maturity within their family systems. Developing healthier ways to manage conflicts and maintain emotional connections is essential for family functioning.

The Multigenerational Transmission Process, another concept, highlights how patterns of behaviour, emotions, and relationship dynamics are passed down from generation to generation. It refers to the transmission of emotional patterns and relationship dynamics from one generation to the next (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). It suggests that individuals are influenced by the emotional patterns, beliefs, and behaviors of their parents and ancestors, which shape their own functioning and relationships. Through the multigenerational transmission process, certain patterns and tendencies, such as anxiety, conflict, or resilience, can be passed down from one generation to another. This transmission occurs through a complex interplay of emotional connections and interactions within the family system. Family members may unconsciously adopt similar roles, engage in similar relationship dynamics, or display similar emotional reactions as their parents or other ancestors. Understanding this

process allows individuals to gain insight into their family history and make conscious choices to break destructive patterns and create healthier relationships.

Sibling position is another of Bowen's eight concepts which refers to the individual's birth order within the family and its potential influence on personality development. It explores the impact of birth order and sibling dynamics on individual development and family functioning. According to Bowen, the position an individual occupies within the sibling order can influence their personality traits, relationships, and life choices (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Birth order can shape individuals' roles, expectations, and interactions within the family system. Recognising the impact of sibling positions can enhance self-awareness and understanding of family dynamics.

The concept of emotional process in society, also known as societal emotional process, is an integral part of Bowen's family systems theory. It refers to the interplay between individual emotional functioning and the broader emotional patterns and dynamics present within a society or social group (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). The societal emotional process examines how larger social and cultural factors influence family systems. Societal emotional processes can influence individuals' thoughts, emotions, and behaviours, shaping their beliefs, values, and interactions with others. Societal norms, values, and expectations can shape family dynamics and affect individual well-being. These processes are transmitted across generations and can have a profound impact on family systems, relationships, and societal functioning as a whole. Understanding the societal context helps individuals navigate the interplay between personal and broader social influences. It highlights the

reciprocal relationship between individuals and their social contexts, emphasising the importance of considering both individual and societal factors in understanding human behaviour and well-being.

By employing the theoretical framework of Bowen Family Systems Theory and applying its key concepts in the analysis of Khaled Hosseini's texts, a novel perspective can be uncovered. This approach delves into the emotional and psychological development of the characters, recognising the significant role that the family plays in shaping the well-being and overall development of individuals, particularly in the context of childhood. The exploration of these concepts in the novels not only enhances the understanding of the characters' experiences but also provides valuable insights into the intricate dynamics of familial influences on emotional growth and development. Such an analysis contributes to the existing scholarly discourse by deepening the understanding of the emotional dimensions of characters' lives and their broader impact on their psychological well-being.

The goal of psychoanalysis is to help resolve psychological problems. Tyson (2006) concurs that "the focus is on patterns of behaviour that are destructive in some way" (p. 12). It must be noted that, though psychoanalysis looks beyond the surface of things to reveal the innermost thoughts, the unconscious, and bring them to the fore, the theory will be used to find the patterns of complex interactions between the characters (who have been classified/defined as a family unit in this study) that influence or drive the actions of the character. Employing the Bowen theory, the study would bring out behavioural and psychological patterns for analysis.

### **Bowen's Family Systems Theory in Interdisciplinary Research**

Bowen's Family Systems Theory (BFST) is a widely recognised psychological framework used to understand the emotional and relational dynamics within families. Although its application in literary studies remains limited, the theory has been extensively utilised in psychology, social work, psychiatry, and mental health disciplines to examine the influence of family relationships on individual behaviour and emotional well-being. This study innovatively integrates Bowen's Family Systems Theory into literary analysis to explore how unresolved trauma and toxic family dynamics shape the psychological development of the protagonists in *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns*.

In the field of mental health nursing, Haefner (2014) applies Bowen's theory to analyse how family emotional processes impact patient care. The study highlights how patterns of emotional dependence, unresolved trauma, and intergenerational transmission of dysfunction contribute to psychological distress. Similarly, in social work and child welfare research, Thompson, Wojciak, and Cooley (2019) employ Bowen's theory to advocate for a family-based approach in child welfare systems. Their study highlights how Bowenian concepts, such as differentiation of self, emotional cutoffs, and multigenerational family patterns, are crucial in understanding the long-term psychological effects of familial relationships on children.

These studies provide a strong foundation for applying Bowen's theoretical framework to literary texts, as they demonstrate how family structures and relational patterns influence psychological resilience, emotional distress, and coping mechanisms. By bringing Bowen's Family Systems

Theory into literary analysis, this study fills a critical gap in both literary and psychological scholarship by demonstrating how the protagonists, Amir and Mariam, struggle with emotional cutoffs, inherited family trauma, and the quest for self-differentiation within dysfunctional family environments.

Existing literary scholarship on *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* has largely focused on gender, oppression, trauma, and redemption, often using psychoanalytic, feminist, and postcolonial approaches. However, the impact of family systems and intergenerational trauma on the protagonists' psychological struggles remains underexplored. This study expands the current discourse by using Bowen's Family Systems Theory to analyse how Amir and Mariam's unresolved family conflicts shape their emotional responses, relationships, and coping strategies.

Furthermore, while previous studies have examined trauma and psychological conflict using Freudian and Eriksonian perspectives, this research bridges the gap between literature and psychology by offering a family-based psychoanalytic approach. Through the integration of Bowen's theory with Derrida's concept of Hauntology, this study uniquely explores how past familial relationships haunt the protagonists, influencing their actions and sense of self. In doing so, this research expands interdisciplinary scholarship, offering new insights into how family systems influence the long-term psychological well-being of literary characters.

### **Hauntology**

Hauntology, as conceptualised by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida, offers an understanding of the complex interplay between the past and the present. Derrida's seminal work, "Spectres of Marx: The State of the



Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International” (1994), explores the notion of hauntology as the lingering presence of repressed meanings and denied histories within texts (Harris, 2015). Jacques Derrida’s concept of “hauntology” presents a nuanced play on the words “haunting” and “ontology” within the framework of his deconstructionist philosophy. This notion challenges traditional notions of linear time by suggesting that the past, rather than being entirely absent, continues to exert a spectral presence in the present. It emphasises the continual reinterpretation and reimagining of the past in shaping the present.

Hauntology blurs the boundaries between past and present, disrupting conventional ideas of temporal distinctions. Derrida’s broader project of deconstruction is evident in hauntology, as it seeks to destabilise binary oppositions, particularly the opposition between past and present. The term has found applications in cultural studies and political theory, where it is used to analyse how past cultural forms persist in contemporary culture and how historical events or ideologies continue to shape the political landscape. Hauntology has also influenced music, giving rise to the genre of “hauntology music”, which nostalgically incorporates sounds from the past, creating an eerie sense of a ghostly presence. In cultural studies, Mark Fisher applies hauntology to contemporary culture and music in his work, *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures*. In political theory, the work of Judith Butler, particularly “Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence,” engages with Derrida’s ideas on mourning and spectrality. In the realm of music, hauntology finds an association with the UK record label Ghost Box, along with artists like the Caretaker, Burial, and Philip Jeck. The

musical genres of hypnagogic pop and chillwave are considered descendants of hauntology.

Hauntology has also found its application in literary studies, particularly in the analysis of texts that delve into themes of memory, trauma, and the uncanny. Scholars have employed the concept to examine works by diverse authors, including William Shakespeare, Toni Morrison, and J.M. Coetzee, among others (Harris, 2015). By engaging with hauntology, scholars explore how the past, with its spectral presence, influences narrative construction and meaning-making processes in literature. It allows for a deeper understanding of the complexities of memory, the lingering effects of trauma, and the uncanny manifestations that shape literary texts (Derrida, 1993). In essence, Derrida's hauntology prompts a reevaluation of our understanding of time, presence, and absence, challenging us to recognise the lingering influence of the past on the present.

Incorporating hauntology as a theoretical framework in literary analysis opens up new avenues for understanding the intricate relationship between past and present, shedding light on the transformative power of repressed histories and the enduring influence they exert on contemporary narratives. By considering the haunting spectres of the past, scholars can unearth hidden meanings and challenge conventional interpretations, enriching our understanding of literature and its engagement with the complexities of time and memory.

## Conclusion

This chapter has critically examined existing scholarship on *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, outlining key thematic discussions, theoretical frameworks, and areas of divergence and convergence with the present study. Previous research has predominantly focused on themes such as guilt, redemption, trauma, cultural identity, gender oppression, and resilience, often explored through psychoanalytic, sociocultural, and postcolonial lenses. While psychoanalytic approaches, particularly Freudian and Eriksonian theories, have been applied to the texts, no existing study has examined *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* through the combined lens of Bowen's Family Systems Theory and Derrida's concept of Hauntology. Unlike previous research, which has largely focused on character development, gender politics, and sociocultural contexts, this study uniquely interrogates the psychological impact of unresolved childhood trauma and toxic family dynamics on the protagonists' life trajectories. By integrating Bowen's Family Systems Theory and Hauntology, this research provides an innovative interdisciplinary perspective, bridging psychoanalysis, family studies, and literary criticism to offer a deeper understanding of how familial relationships, inherited trauma, and haunting memories shape identity, resilience, and coping mechanisms in Hosseini's novels.

This review underscores the impact of the family system on individuals' well-being, overall growth, character and psychological development. The distinctive integration of the Bowen Family Theory, Derrida's hauntology, and Freudian defense mechanisms in this thesis sets it

apart from the existing literature, providing a comprehensive and multifaceted lens for novel analysis. This interdisciplinary approach contrasts with the tendency in existing literature to focus on singular theoretical frameworks or thematic aspects. By concentrating on family dynamics and haunting memories, the thesis delves deeply into the psychological and emotional dimensions of the characters' pasts, offering a unique perspective on memory, family, identity, character and psychological development in these novels and contributing a fresh blend of theoretical frameworks or theoretical synthesis to the existing literature.

### CHAPTER THREE

## BROKEN BONDS AND A RECONCEPTUALISATION OF THE OEDIPAL COMPLEX IN HOSSEINI'S *KITE RUNNER* AND A *THOUSAND SPLENDID SUNS*

### Introduction

The previous chapter reviewed the existing literature on the two texts under study, Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* (2003) and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007). The primary aim was to place the present study in dialogue with previous studies and also indicate the scholarly gap. It also elaborated on the theoretical framework underpinning this study. As a thematic study, focusing on family dynamics and traumatic childhood experiences as central themes, this study adopts a literary psychoanalytic reading or approach. The present chapter seeks to answer the first research question: How do the lingering echoes of a haunted past manifest and influence the life trajectories of the protagonists, Amir and Mariam? This chapter, therefore, undertakes a psychological exploration of the protagonists in the selected texts, examining their personal growth and emotional struggles. Specifically, the chapter delves into the memories of the main characters, Amir and Mariam, examining how Hosseini represents the themes of complex family dynamics and childhood trauma in the lives of these characters as reflected in their haunting pasts and traumatic memories. It also explores the lasting psychological impact of these experiences on the characters. This chapter employs Derrida's concept of Hauntology and the Bowen Family (psychoanalytic) theory as interrogative tools to aid in the thematic exploration or analysis of this study.

This chapter is divided into two parts, analysing both novels separately. The first part covers the novel *The Kite Runner*, and the second explores the novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. This chapter seeks to unwind the blurry vision between the past and the present, in which the past, as noted by Derrida, is seen as a spectral presence in the present lives of the characters. This chapter responds to the research question by examining how the childhood experiences of the protagonists are represented as haunting pasts in both texts, and the ‘how’, as the study will show, is through unique manifestations of the Oedipal (both male and female) complex, which will be presented in two different forms; the Oedipus Complex and the Electra Complex. Thus, I begin the chapter analysis by attempting to explain the keyword ‘haunt’.

‘Haunt’ is a verb that, according to the Cambridge Dictionary, means “to cause repeated suffering or anxiety.” This dictionary explanation ties in with Derrida’s understanding of ‘hauntology’ which suggests that the past, rather than being entirely absent, continues to exert a spectral presence in the present and emphasises the continual reinterpretation and reimagining of the past in shaping the present. According to Derrida, hauntology blurs the boundaries between past and present, disrupting conventional ideas of temporal distinctions. As a theoretical lens for this study, the concept of hauntology is adopted to explore the lingering echoes of the past in the present lives of the characters, examining their childhood memories and how their pasts influence their present lives, or, in simpler terms, the impact on their lives’ trajectories.

A “haunting memory” is a memory that continues to persist in an individual’s mind and has a significant and lasting impact, often causing distress or discomfort. This type of memory is often associated with traumatic experiences or negative emotions, such as fear, guilt, or sadness. Haunting memories can also involve repetitive or intrusive thoughts and may interfere with an individual’s ability to live a normal life. The protagonists in the selected texts are haunted by memories of unpleasant events and experiences from their pasts that inhibit normalcy in their lives and personal growth. Memories they choose to forget or try to forget sneak back into their subconscious from time to time during the period of their growth.

### **Part 1|| *The Kite Runner* (2003)**

#### **Familial Bond**

The beginning chapters of the text set a tone of melancholy and guilt for the whole novel, reflecting the pensive mood of the narrator. In *The Kite Runner*, Amir is haunted by his past in several ways. Throughout the novel, Amir is consumed by feelings of guilt and shame for his past actions. This guilt and shame drive much of Amir’s behaviour and lead him to engage in self-destructive behaviours. Amir, the protagonist in his present adult stage, recounts his past in a flashback, recalling incidents and experiences he could not leave behind in Kabul, although he had moved from the place of the incidents. “*That was a long time ago, but it’s wrong what they say about the past, I’ve learned, about how you can bury it. **Because the past claws its way out***” (p. 3). This excerpt indicates how the past returns to haunt Amir. In Derrida’s terms, the excerpt encapsulates Amir’s understanding of hauntology. It further indicates his efforts to try to forget the past by burying the memories

of his childhood with the aid of distance from the said childhood environment and society. With the death of his father, making his new life away from Afghanistan was no longer difficult. The narrative is reflective. The narrator is the protagonist, and as he recounts his story and the events of his past, the reader relives the past experiences of the protagonist and also feels his present emotions and thoughts. As the narrative unfolds through the perspective of the protagonist, the deep-rooted sins of Amir's past come to light, laying bare his emotions and inner thoughts—a reimagining of the past (Derrida, 1994), which shapes Amir's life. A reinterpretation of this reimagining of his past also contributes to the present and continues to influence his actions. This exposure of his internal world provides a valuable opportunity for scrutiny in this study, enabling a more comprehensive understanding of the nature and implications of his guilt. Through a meticulous examination of Amir's introspections and emotional journey, this exploration of the character's experiences and psyche provides a valuable opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of the intricate dynamics of guilt and its impact on his character's development.

Amir never talked about his past life nor shared any of his childhood memories with his new family, his wife, that is, until his past came knocking on his door. Although he makes a life for himself in the United States of America, married with a family of his own, far from the Afghan wars and Taliban brutalities, his harrowing past catches up with him in the form of an old family friend, a very close friend of his father, Rahim Khan. Amir's thoughts go back to the past as the call reminds him that his past was never gone but lurking in the shadows of his mind, and he had neither forgotten it.



*“Looking back now, I realize **I have been peeking into that deserted alley for the last twenty---six years.** Standing in the kitchen with the receiver to my ear, I knew it wasn’t just Rahim Khan on the line. **It was my past of unatoned\*\* sins.**”* (p.3). The sentence, *“I have been peeking into that deserted alley for the last twenty---six years”* is an extended metaphor. In this excerpt, the metaphor is the comparison between the character’s experience of looking into the alley and the passage of time, which concurs with Derrida’s concept and challenges traditional notions of linear time. As Derrida suggests, the past continues to exert a spectral presence in the present, as is reflected in the life of Amir, rather than being entirely absent. The phrase “peeking into the deserted alley” is a metaphor for a continuous and unchanging experience, while “the last twenty-six years” connotes the long period of time past. ‘Peeking’ means a quick glance or look, and “the deserted alley” here refers to past memories that are supposed to be forgotten (deserted). The period of time suggests that the memories live in a distant past. This extended metaphor suggests that the character’s experience of looking into the alley has been a consistent one, continuing for a significant amount of time. Amir has been subconsciously revisiting his past memories—the memories of his sins he had hoped to forget [*It was my past of unatoned\*\* sins.*]. The words *“Looking back now, I realize...”* suggest that he was not actively aware of recalling or revisiting these memories.

Amir’s past impacts his relationships with others. His traumatic experiences lead him to repress his emotions, making it difficult for him to process and deal with them. This repressed emotional pain continues to haunt him and affects his ability to form healthy relationships. As he recalls his past,

it is revealed that although he never spoke about his childhood out loud to anyone, not even Baba, his father, before his death, nor to his wife, the memories never left him. The traumatic events of his childhood are constantly replaying in Amir's mind, making it difficult for him to move on and live a fulfilling life. They rather contribute to the journey of his growth and the shaping of his character. These memories continue to haunt him and impact his emotional state and behaviour. As much as he had thought getting rid of Hassan would unburden him of his guilt, he learned the hard and long way that he could never escape his past. There are always consequences for one's actions. Hassan's physical presence was not a mere representation of Amir's sins and would not just wash away with his absence, distance, or even his death. Amir's sense of guilt arises from his mistreatment and betrayal of Hassan, which is intricately tied to the dynamics of his familial relationships and immediate environment. The complex interplay between the members of his household and the broader social context shapes Amir's actions and contributes to the internal conflict he experiences, leading to his overwhelming guilt. He is haunted by his father's negative and unloving treatment of him and, most of all, by his (Amir's) betrayal of Hassan. In his efforts to free himself from the guilt, Amir entangles himself further through the actions he takes, treating Hassan worse and causing him more pain. All of these events add up to memories that Amir wishes to forget in order to ease himself of the guilt, but the ghosts of his memories impact his life as he grows.

To better understand the events of the past and why they haunt Amir, an understanding of the protagonist's family unit must be discussed to form a basis or foundation for this study, as the family is viewed as the reason or

cause for Amir's actions. Bowen defines a family as an emotional unit that is interdependent on each member of the family who is emotionally connected. The people in the immediate environment and life of Amir, who closely interact with him daily, form the close unit of Amir's family. These individuals or characters are Amir's father, Baba, the old manservant Ali who grew up with Baba, and Hassan, the servant boy and son of Ali (as is known at the beginning of the story). Bowen shares the view that every member of the family affects and is affected by each other. How does Amir's family affect him and impact/influence his actions, and how does it haunt him?

Amir's past impacts his relationships with the people around him as he struggles to reconcile his present with the events of his past. Amir, Hassan, and Amir's father, Baba, make up a three-person relationship, the triangle concept as grounded by Bowen. Amir's relationship with his father, for instance, has been strained since his birth. His relationship with Baba is strained by several factors relating to his interactions with his father; Baba's disappointment in Amir's nature and character, as well as his behaviour, which is a result of Amir's guilt and shame. This strain takes a great toll on Amir, and this tension is eased by the presence and company of Hassan. Due to the tensions between Amir and his father, Hassan becomes the detour for the strain and anxiety. Hassan becomes the vulnerable third party who provides Amir comfort and a diversion from the tension, but at the same time, Hassan seems to be taking Baba's attention and love. This is where the triangle dynamic becomes a catalyst for familial problems. Triangulation, or 'Triangling', can breed jealousy and hatred, as it does in the case of Amir and

Hassan. In the instance below, Amir lies to his father when he is asked to fetch him (Hassan) for them to go out together.

I remember the day before the orphanage opened, Baba took me to Ghargha Lake, a few miles north of Kabul. He asked me to fetch Hassan too, but I lied and told him Hassan had the runs. I wanted Baba all to myself. And besides, one time at Ghargha Lake, Hassan and I were skipping stones and Hassan made his stone skip eight times. The most I managed was five. Baba was there, watching, and he patted Hassan on the back. Even put his arm around his shoulder. (p.11)

Why does Amir feel the need to lie to his father? It is clear that he lied because he was jealous of the attention Hassan was receiving from his (Amir) father, so he just wanted to keep Hassan away and have Baba all to himself. This may seem harmless, but this action by Amir shows that something negative is breeding inside of him. It also demonstrates that, despite his young age, he is observing the small things his father does with Hassan that he (Amir), who is Baba's own son, does not experience, such as the pat on the back and encouragement or the proud, watchful looks. His father's subtle actions never go unnoticed by Amir, and they affect him greatly. He wants to make his father proud and earn the proud gazes that Hassan always received from Baba. His will, efforts, and zeal to impress his father are what Tamara and Rafqi (2020) characterise as optimistic. While Tamara and Rafqi's (2020) analysis aims to reveal distinct characteristics through isolated parts of the text, it overlooks the broader context and development of Amir's character. Tamara and Rafqi (2020) portray Amir as a "caring, inferior, coward, optimistic, anxious, selfish, careless, sly, and patient person". I find their characterisation of Amir as optimistic and inferior particularly challenging to accept. Throughout the novel, it is evident that Amir grapples with guilt, internal conflicts, and a sense of remorse, which may overshadow any inherent

optimism that could be attributed to his character. Tamara and Rafqi (2020) assert that Amir's optimism is evident in his belief that he can win the kite-fighting tournament to gain his father's recognition and respect. They support this claim with the following quotation: "I was going to win, and I was going to run the last kite... Show him once and for all that his son was worthy" (Hosseini, 2003, p. 49).

Optimistic, according to the Cambridge and Merriam Webster dictionaries, is an adjective that means to be hopeful and confident about the future. I argue that Amir suffered from an inferiority complex from his childhood, which was due to the way his father treated and related to him as compared to the relationship between Baba, his father, and Hassan. He was never sure or confident of the future with regards to his father's confidence in and validation of him. Yes, he was hopeful that his father would love him one day and be proud of him, but deep down in his heart, he felt Hassan had stolen his father's affection, and aside from that, he felt his father's disappointment in him with every look the father gave him and more so in his father ignoring him. The winning of the kite race was a small feat he hoped would win him his father's affection and validation. He felt neglected and not optimistic, but in this situation, the brief victory would be satisfactory. This concurs with Kai-fu's (2019) analysis of Amir's psychological change, where the scholar points out that the initial stage involves mistrust and doubt due to perceived neglect from his father, leading to self-doubt; and the subsequent stage includes guilt, inferiority, and jealousy, as Amir feels remorse for not meeting his father's expectations and develops feelings of inferiority, leading to his betrayal of Hassan.

Just like Tamara and Rafqi (2020), who examine Amir's anxiety, Jaya (2017), who explores familial relationships in the novel, points out that Amir developed a selfish and jealous tendency. Both Jaya (2017) and Tamara and Rafqi (2020) acknowledge the complexity of Amir's character. They highlight the internal conflicts and struggles he faces, which contribute to his multidimensional portrayal. In his jealous tendencies, Amir noticed a threat and immediately wanted to be rid of that threat so he could enjoy what is rightfully his as the son of Baba; his father's affection. That is why he felt the need to lie to his father about Hassan's whereabouts in order to have his father all to himself; as he recalls, "He asked me to fetch Hassan too, but I lied and told him Hassan had the runs. I wanted Baba all to myself." (p. 11). Tamara and Rafqi's characterisation of Amir as selfish and sly is evident here. The need to further justify his decision and action to lie to his father in his recollection of the past also highlights his jealousy of Hassan.

And besides, one time at Ghargha Lake, Hassan and I were skipping stones and Hassan made his stone skip eight times. The most I managed was five. Baba was there, watching, and he patted Hassan on the back. Even put his arm around his shoulder. (p.11)

This excerpt is an example of Bowen's (1978; Kerr & Bowen, 1988) nuclear family emotional system. Amir's justification of his action and self-expression has an underlying tone of envy or jealousy. He wishes to be the recipient of his father's looks of approval, pats on the back, hugs, and arms around his shoulder. His observation and acknowledgement of his father's affectionate and encouraging actions towards Hassan and his emotional reaction to them show that he lacks these kinds of interactions with his father. He lacks a positive, healthy nuclear family emotional system. These actions of

Baba reflect patterns of parental favouritism, which evidently affect Amir, who feels emotionally cut-off from his father, and in turn impact the overall family system. This reflects Bowen's view that the emotional functioning of the nuclear family influences individual behaviour and impacts the overall family system (Bowen, 1978; Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Amir's thoughts and actions in the excerpt and the entirety of the novel also show a sign of yearning for his only living parent, which further brews his jealousy towards Hassan. Freud's (1909; 1959) view of family romances, specifically the authorial influence of the parent on a child, is reflected here as well. As Freud (1909; 1959) notes, parents are "the only authority and source of all belief" for a child, and this is evident in the case of Amir and Baba. Amir's "most intense and momentous wish" is to be like his father, the parent of the same sex as Freud opines, and to be loved by him. Thus, the child seeks the validation and attention of the parent through his actions, which in this case, Amir aims to do and does by winning the kite race. This validates Freud's family romances concept.

Amir's experience of jealousy towards Hassan can be traced back to the underlying tension and strained relationship with his own father. Amir holds Hassan accountable for this strained dynamic, attributing his feelings of jealousy to their complicated father-son dynamics. Further analysing this as the narrative unfolds, it is revealed through the conversation between Baba and Rahim Khan that Amir's father is not satisfied with the son he got (Hosseini, p. 19).

Later that night, I was passing by my father's study when I overheard him speaking to Rahim Khan. I pressed my ear to the closed door.

"--grateful that he's healthy," Rahim Khan was saying.

"I know, I know. But he's always buried in those books or shuffling around the house like he's lost in some dream."

"And?"

"I wasn't like that." Baba sounded frustrated, almost angry.

Rahim Khan laughed. "Children aren't coloring books. You don't get to fill them with your favorite colors."

"I'm telling you," Baba said, "I wasn't like that at all, and neither were any of the kids I grew up with."

"You know, sometimes you are the most self-centered man I know," Rahim Khan said. He was the only person I knew who could get away with saying something like that to Baba.

"It has nothing to do with that."

I heard the leather of Baba's seat creaking as he shifted on it. I closed my eyes, pressed my ear even harder against the door, wanting to hear, not wanting to hear. "Sometimes I look out this window and I see him playing on the street with the neighborhood boys. I see how they push him around, take his toys from him, give him a shove here, a whack there. And, you know, he never fights back. Never. He just... drops his head and..." But something about Amir troubles me in a way that I can't express. It's like..." He lowered his voice, but I heard him anyway. "If I hadn't seen the doctor pull him out of my wife with my own eyes, I'd never believe he's my son." (pp. 17-19)

Amir, overhearing his father's words, is hurt that his father is disappointed in him for something he has no control over—his nature. In the novel, Baba clearly wishes Amir to be like him, but he sees Amir as a great disappointment and a source of frustration and this is clear in the excerpt especially when he says "'I wasn't like that.' Baba sounded frustrated, almost angry." (p. 17). Baba is proud of his lineage and has high expectations for his offspring, which Amir does not seem to meet. Speaking to Rahim Khan about Amir, Baba has a tone of disappointment and deep frustration. Baba's frustration is a typical example of Bowen's (1978; Kerr and Bowen, 1988) nuclear family emotional system and family projection process. His perception of Amir is shaped by his own experiences, values, and expectations, all of which he unconsciously projects onto Amir. The nuclear family emotional system refers to the patterns of interaction and emotional dynamics within a



nuclear family unit, which encompasses the relationships and emotional processes between spouses or partners and their children (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). The family projection process, another concept within Bowen's family systems theory, refers to the process in which parents unconsciously transfer their own emotional issues onto their children (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). The term "projection" signifies the psychological mechanism of attributing one's own emotions, fears, and unresolved conflicts onto others, particularly family members. In the context of family projection, parents may project their anxieties, insecurities, and unfulfilled aspirations onto their children, shaping the children's behaviour and self-perception. Baba is highly respected and adored in the community and is known to be strong and tough—all of these traits he wishes his legitimate son, Amir, to have. He has high expectations for his son and wants him to embody the traditional Afghan values of bravery and honour, to be just like him, but he feels that Amir falls short of these expectations. Claiming that he "wasn't like that" in his childhood, further insisting upon Rahim Khan's words of advice ["I'm telling you," Baba said, "I wasn't like that at all, and neither were any of the kids I grew up with."] reflects his projection of his fears, anxieties, and insecurities. The events that led to the conversation between Amir's father and Rahim Khan that he overhears reflect Baba's frustrations, projections, and disappointment. It is also a clear representation of Amir's emotional family system.

I watched him fill his glass at the bar and wondered how much time would pass before we talked again the way we just had. Because the truth of it was, I always felt like Baba hated me a little. And why not? After all, I 'had' killed his beloved wife, his beautiful princess, hadn't I? The least I could have done was to have had the decency to have turned out a little more like him. But I hadn't turned out like him. Not at all. (p. 16)

Clearly, Amir recognises his difference from the son his father wished for, assuming blame and internalising a guilt for something he had no control over—his mother’s death. Amir’s introspective acknowledgment of his perceived difference from the son his father desired is a poignant reflection on the complexities of parent-child relationships. Amir’s introspection reveals a perceived distance in their relationship, coupled with a haunting anticipation of potential resentment from Baba. There is an implicit desire for approval, underscored by Amir’s acknowledgment that he should have resembled Baba more closely. This desire for acceptance is juxtaposed against the painful recognition that, contrary to expectations, Amir has not turned out like Baba at all. This sentiment aligns with Freud’s (1909) concept of family romances, where the child constructs fantasies of their origin and parentage. In this case, Amir grapples with the burden of guilt, internalising responsibility for his mother’s death and feeling accountable for not meeting Baba’s expectations. Freud posits that the child’s perception of their place in the family is shaped by these fantasies, influencing their self-image and relationships. Amir’s sense of not turning out as desired by his father captures the intricate interplay of parental expectations, guilt, and the authorial influence parents have on shaping their children’s identities, mirroring Freud’s insights into the family dynamics and the child’s response to perceived parental wishes. The influence of parental expectations, as highlighted by Freud, adds a psychological layer to Amir’s reflections on identity and acceptance.

IN SCHOOL, we used to play a game called ‘Sherjangi’, or “Battle of the Poems.” The Farsi teacher moderated it and it went something like this: You recited a verse from a poem and your opponent had sixty seconds to reply with a verse that began with the same letter that ended yours. Everyone in my class wanted me on their team, because by the time I was

eleven, I could recite dozens of verses from Khayyam, Hāfez, or Rumi's famous 'Masnawi'.

One time, I took on the whole class and won. I told Baba about it later that night, but he just nodded, muttered, "Good." (p. 16)

Amir clearly has different interests and passions at which he evidently excels, which do not align with his father's. Baba's simple acknowledgment with a nod and a brief "Good" suggests a lack of enthusiasm and an evident mismatch in their interests or values. He seems to have inherited these passions from his mother, as reflected in the following excerpt; a woman he never met due to the fact that she died giving birth to him.

Of course, marrying a poet was one thing, but fathering a son who preferred burying his face in poetry books to hunting... well, that wasn't how Baba had envisioned it, I suppose. Real men didn't read poetry--and God forbid they should ever write it! Real men--real boys--played soccer just as Baba had when he had been young. Now 'that' was something to be passionate about. ... (p. 16)

Clearly, Baba believes that boys should be strong and interested in traditionally masculine activities, such as soccer, bull fights and wrestling, rather than engaging in pursuits perceived as feminine—traits Baba assumes Amir has inherited from the mother he never met. These gender stereotypes overshadow genuine talent and interests, creating a disconnect between parents like Baba and their children. This lack of connection fosters unstable and unhealthy emotional and psychological growth, leading children like Amir to harbor negative emotions such as envy and hatred toward innocent individuals like Hassan. Amir recalls an incident in the 1970s when Baba, determined to make him more "manly", signs him up for several soccer teams (p. 16), despite Amir's clear lack of interest and talent in the sport.

He signed me up for soccer teams to stir the same passion in me. But I was pathetic, a blundering liability to my own team, always in the way ... I shambled about the field on scraggy legs,

squalled for passes that never came my way. And the harder I tried, waving my arms over my head frantically and screeching, “I’m open! I’m open!” the more I went ignored. But Baba wouldn’t give up. *When it became abundantly clear that I hadn’t inherited a shred of his athletic talents, he settled for trying to turn me into a passionate spectator. Certainly I could manage that, couldn’t I? I faked interest for as long as possible. I cheered with him when Kabul’s team scored against Kandahar and yelped insults at the referee when he called a penalty against our team. But Baba sensed my lack of genuine interest and resigned himself to the bleak fact that his son was never going to either play or watch soccer.* (pp. 16-17; *Emphasis mine*)

This excerpt paints a vivid picture of the stark contrast between Baba’s expectations of his son, Amir, and Amir’s own interests and abilities. Baba, with his traditional views on masculinity, is disappointed that his son does not conform to his ideals of a “real man” or a “real boy”. The societal expectations of what constitutes masculinity are palpable, as Baba laments Amir’s preference for poetry over activities like hunting or soccer, which Baba considers more fitting for a boy. The unsuccessful attempts by Baba to instill a love for soccer in Amir underscore the disconnect between their interests. Despite Baba’s persistent efforts to encourage Amir to embrace soccer, Amir’s lack of athletic talent and disinterest in the sport become apparent. The humorously described scenes on the soccer field, where Amir is portrayed as a “blundering liability”, create a poignant contrast to Baba’s expectations. Amir’s attempts to fit into his father’s vision of masculinity reflect Freud’s (1909) assertion of the authorial influence of parents and also highlight the tension between parental expectations and a child’s individuality. The narrative also captures Baba’s gradual realisation of the irreconcilable differences between his expectations and Amir’s true inclinations. Although Amir feigns interest at Baba’s attempt to make him a passionate spectator after

his failed attempts at soccer, Baba, having resignedly accepted that his son would never “*either play or watch soccer*”, does not relent in trying to shape Amir to his liking, at least his interest in outdoor activities and events. Thus, he takes Amir to the yearly ‘Buzkashi’ tournament which was Afghanistan’s national passion that took place on the first day of spring, New Year’s Day (p. 17). Amir, the narrator, describes the tournament as a game where “...A ‘chapandaz’, a highly skilled horseman usually patronized by rich aficionados, has to snatch a goat or cattle carcass from the midst of a melee, carry that carcass with him around the stadium at full gallop, and drop it in a scoring circle while a team of other ‘chapandaz’ chases him and does everything in its power--kick, claw, whip, punch--to snatch the carcass from him.” (p. 17).

That day, the crowd roared with excitement as the horsemen on the field bellowed ... The earth trembled with the clatter of hooves. We watched from the upper bleachers as riders pounded past us at full gallop, yipping and yelling, foam flying from their horses’ mouths. (p. 17)

The setting of the Buzkashi tournament, a symbol of Afghanistan’s national passion, becomes a stage for the clash of values between father and son. Baba, engrossed in the spectacle of the brutal sport, points out Henry Kissinger, a significant figure in international politics.

“Amir, do you see that man sitting up there with those other men around him?” I did. “That’s Henry Kissinger.”

“Oh,” I said. I didn’t know who Henry Kissinger was, and I might have asked. But at the moment, I watched with horror as one of the ‘chapandaz’ fell off his saddle and was trampled under a score of hooves. His body was tossed and hurled in the stampede like a rag doll, finally rolling to a stop when the melee moved on. He twitched once and lay motionless, his legs bent at unnatural angles, a pool of his blood soaking through the sand.

I began to cry. || I cried all the way back home. I remember how Baba’s hands clenched around the steering wheel.

Clenched and unclenched. Mostly, I will never forget Baba's valiant efforts to conceal the disgusted look on his face as he drove in silence. (p. 17)

Amir, a child more attuned to human suffering than geopolitical significance, is horrified by the violent scene of the fallen chapandaz. The tragic incident becomes a turning point in the narrative, unravelling the emotional distance between father and son. Amir's tears, a manifestation of his empathy and vulnerability, stand in sharp contrast to the stoicism expected in Baba's world. Baba's attempt to conceal his disgust on the drive home accentuates the tension between them. The clenching and unclenching of Baba's hands suggest an internal struggle, perhaps between the harsh realities of the traditional Afghan values he upholds and wishes Amir embodies and the emotional response of his sensitive son. This scene also foreshadows the recurring theme of Amir seeking his father's approval, which remains a central element in the narrative. It captures the complexity of their relationship, where traditional expectations and individual sensitivities collide, setting the stage for the nuanced exploration of their bond throughout the story.

The novel delves into the intricate dynamics of parent-child relationships, navigating the clash of generational expectations and the challenges of harmonising individual identity with societal norms. This exploration is notably reflective of Bowen's family systems theory, encompassing the nuclear family emotional system, family projection concept, multigenerational transmission process concept, and societal emotional process concept evident in the excerpts. The nuclear family emotional system illuminates prevalent emotional patterns within families, encompassing various interactions such as marital conflict, parental favouritism,

overprotectiveness, or emotional distance. Multigenerational transmission processes propose that individuals are shaped by the emotional patterns, beliefs, and behaviors of their parents and ancestors, influencing their own functioning and relationships. Societal emotional processes scrutinise how broader social and cultural factors mould individuals' thoughts, emotions, and behaviours within family systems, thereby impacting beliefs, values, and interactions. These processes highlight the interplay between societal norms and family dynamics, exerting a profound influence on individual well-being. Amir's interactions within his family significantly contribute to his characterisation, shaped by the emotional patterns, behaviours, values, and beliefs of the society, notably influenced by his father's adherence to Afghan values. As Baba endeavours to instill specific values and traits into Amir, moulding him into his envisioned son, unintended consequences emerge. This study will further explore the dynamics, revealing that in the process of imparting desirable traits, undesirable ones like unhealthy competition and jealousy are inadvertently transferred to Amir.

Baba is confident and athletic, and he enjoys sporting events such as soccer, and arena games and events like the "Buzkashi". He is evidently the polar opposite of Amir, who is more reserved and enjoys solemn environments, reading, and writing. As he tries to mould Amir into the son he wishes to have, he fails to recognise or acknowledge Amir's own strengths and instead focuses on his weaknesses: [*"Mostly, I will never forget Baba's valiant efforts to conceal the disgusted look on his face as he drove in silence."*]. In his conversation with Rahim Khan, Baba expresses his frustrations about his son, Amir, being a weakling who always needs saving,

implicitly comparing him to Hassan. His anxieties, insecurities, and projections are even more clear in the excerpt below as Rahim Khan calls out Baba, pointing out his fears for the continuation of his business and legacy.

I see how they push him around, take his toys from him, give him a shove here, a whack there. And, you know, he never fights back. Never. He just... drops his head and..."

"So he's not violent," Rahim Khan said.

"That's not what I mean, Rahim, and you know it," Baba shot back. "There is something missing in that boy."

"Yes, a mean streak."

"Self-defense has nothing to do with meanness. You know what always happens **when the neighborhood boys tease him? Hassan steps in and fends them off. I've seen it with my own eyes. And when they come home, I say to him, 'How did Hassan get that scrape on his face?'** And he says, 'He fell down.' I'm telling you, Rahim, there is something missing in that boy."

"You just need to let him find his way," Rahim Khan said. (p. 18; Emphasis mine)

Baba, evidently concerned about other boys pushing and shoving Amir around, is blinded by societal stereotypes about masculinity. This compels him to be hard on Amir, further straining their already fragile relationship. He fails to recognise Amir's genuine efforts to connect with him. Despite Rahim Khan's encouragement to appreciate Amir's unique strengths and abilities, Baba remains entrenched in his rigid thinking, shaped by his own projections, insecurities, and societal expectations.

"And where is he headed?" Baba said. "A boy who won't stand up for himself becomes a man who can't stand up to anything."

"As usual you're oversimplifying."

"I don't think so."

"You're angry because you're afraid **he'll never take over the business for you.**"

"Now who's oversimplifying?" Baba said. "Look, I know there's a fondness between you and him and I'm happy about that. Envious, but happy. I mean that. He needs someone who...understands him, because God knows I don't. But something about Amir troubles me in a way that I can't express. (p. 18; Emphasis mine)



Seeing his desired traits and attributes in Hassan, Baba unconsciously pushes Amir away with his actions of affection towards Hassan alone, a sign of parental favouritism that breeds resentment within Amir towards Hassan. Baba is very critical of Amir's choices and actions and is unable to understand his son's perspective or connect with him on a deeper level. Despite this, Baba still loves Amir and wants the best for him. He works hard to provide for his family and does what he can to protect and care for Amir. However, the disconnect between Amir and his father remains significant throughout the novel, and their relationship is marked by misunderstandings and unspoken resentments. Family projection, as described within Bowen's family systems theory, has significant implications for the emotional dynamics and functioning of the entire family system. It can lead to cascading effects on individual family members and contribute to patterns of emotional reactivity, enmeshment, and limited differentiation (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Amir's father often compares Amir to Hassan whom Baba seems to be most proud of. This causes Amir to act up toward Hassan and treat him badly [*"THE NEXT MORNING, as he was preparing my breakfast, Hassan asked if something was bothering me. I snapped at him, told him to mind his own business."* (p. 19)]

The second experience or incident that haunts Amir in his present adult stage is his betrayal of Hassan. He stood by and watched Hassan being raped by Pashtun boys, the hooligans Assef and his friends, without intervening, calling for help, or even reporting it.

Assef knelt behind Hassan, put his hands on Hassan's hips and lifted his bare buttocks. He kept one on Hassan's back and undid his own belt buckle with his free hand. He unzipped his jeans. Dropped his underwear. He positioned himself behind Hassan. Hassan didn't struggle. Didn't even whimper. He moved his head slightly and I caught a glimpse of his face. Saw

the resignation in it. It was a look I had seen before. It was the look of the lamb. ... (p. 56)

Amir flashes back to the memory of the sacrificial killing of a lamb in the last month of the Muslim calendar, “Dhul-Hijjah” as he watches Hassan being sacrificed and molested by Assef. Amir recognises “the look” of “resignation” on Hassan’s face at that moment as that of the sacrificial lamb. This flashback is an indication of the guilt Amir feels. He recognises the helplessness of a lamb, which he associates with Hassan, at the mercy of the Mullah. He does nothing to help Hassan and instead flees from the scene. Hassan was always saving him from being bullied, and Amir knew that if he were to be in the situation Hassan found himself in and the tables were turned, Hassan would hurriedly come to his rescue. From that moment on, he could never face Hassan; instead of facing the issue, he began to avoid Hassan entirely. This particular experience haunted him from a young age and throughout his life. He tried several times and in different ways to get rid of Hassan, even by having his father send Hassan away, but he failed a number of times. It drove him to do something even more drastic—the next incident from his past that haunts him. He tries to have Hassan sent away a number of times, to the point that he frames Hassan for stealing his birthday gifts. Ali, Hassan’s father, is then forced to leave Baba’s house with Hassan (Hosseini, pp. 88-91).

Before I went to bed that night, I asked Baba if he’d seen my new watch anywhere.

THE NEXT MORNING, I waited in my room for Ali to clear the breakfast table in the kitchen... Waited for him to do the dishes... and waited until Ali and Hassan went grocery shopping...

Then I took a couple of envelopes of cash from the pile of gifts and my watch, and tiptoed out. I paused before Baba’s study and listened in... I went downstairs, crossed the yard, and

entered Ali and Hassan's living quarters by the loquat tree. I lifted Hassan's mattress and planted my new watch and a handful of Aghani bills under it. I waited another thirty minutes. Then I knocked on Baba's door and told what I hoped would be the last in the long line of shameful lies. (pp. 87-88)

Even until he leaves, Hassan remains loyal to Amir. He does not reveal the truth of Amir's actions when he is asked about the theft and accepts the blame and accusation to save Amir once again. "Hassan's reply was a single word, delivered in a thin, raspy voice: "Yes." / I flinched, like I'd been slapped. My heart sank and I almost blurted out the truth. Then I understood: This was Hassan's final sacrifice for me." (p. 88). Hassan's loyalty and kindness will be the greatest pain, and Amir's betrayal will be the greatest guilt he carries all through his life. Amir's relationship with Baba does not get better, as he hoped. He sees that his father misses Hassan, and Baba's disappointment in him only worsens, thus widening the strain on their relationship. Their relationship worsens, especially after the theft incident.

Despite Amir's efforts to escape his past and start anew, it seems to follow him, reminding him of his past wrongdoings and threatening to undermine his attempts at redemption. Kai-fu's (2019) third stage of Amir's psychological change encompasses self-accusation and role confusion as Amir grapples with guilt and struggles to find his identity. In his adult stage, he recognises the negative attitude his younger self portrayed towards Hassan and his (Amir's) harsh treatment of him (Hassan). Rahim Khan's call to Amir becomes his (Amir) way to redemption and a way to finally atone for his sins. Rahim Khan's words to Amir, "there is a way to be good again", propel Amir to take action and make a better decision by taking the steps to right the wrong by saving Sohrab, Hassan's son. In this way, he is not only righting his wrongs

but the wrongs (sins) of his father as well. As noted by Jefferess (2009), Amir's exposure to a different social and cultural setting in the United States helps him reconcile his perspectives with regard to his moral obligations and ethical responsibilities in a globalised world. During his childhood days living in a purely Afghan society, Amir was exposed to the cultural setting of classism, where Pashtuns like himself held the higher class, unlike Hassan, who was of Hazara lineage, the lesser class of people considered servants in the Afghan community. It was never in the place of Hazaras to mix or play with Pashtuns, and this is clear in the novel, as the likes of Assef and his hoodlum friends would always pick on Hassan and even Ali, Hassan's father, with his faulty leg, in the community, mocking and pelting him with sticks and stones, and no one would stop them. Amir and Hassan could never openly play together. Rahim Khan's confession of his young secret love interest and relationship with a Hazara servant girl in his home and his family's reaction during his young days confirm and heighten the gravity of this culturally accepted norm of classism.

Jefferess's (2009) interpretation of *The Kite Runner* as an allegory of global ethics is intriguing, suggesting that the novel positions the "modern" as the paradigm for understanding human essence and moral obligations, transcending traditional markers like race, nation, and religion. According to Jefferess, the novel provides a lens through which the complexities of ethical responsibilities in a globalised world are explored. Amir's relocation to the United States marks a transformative phase where he grapples with diverse cultural and social contexts, reshaping his perspectives on moral duties, particularly towards Hassan, even if driven primarily by self-redemption. The

disclosure of Hassan's authentic lineage, a revelation concealed until Baba's demise, heightens the enormity of the injustices committed against him. This revelation becomes a potent catalyst, propelling Amir to address not only his own transgressions but also those of his father. Upon discovering the tragic fate of Hassan and the long-hidden truth about his parentage, Amir embarks on a mission to rescue Sohrab, Hassan's son, from the clutches of the Taliban.

In Gampung's (2009) exploration of fragile relationships in the family of the main character, Amir, he argues that the fragility of Amir's family stems from a two-fold source: misperception and concealment. This aligns with the present study, emphasising the significant role that family dynamics play in individual lives. Gampung contends that misunderstandings and distorted perceptions among family members contribute to strained dynamics. Additionally, he suggests that secrets and hidden information heighten tension within the family. Despite Gampung's (2009) view that the family can repair and regain their relationships through efforts to rectify perception and reveal the truth, a closer examination challenges this assertion, especially considering the significant impact of tragedy and the passage of time within the narrative. It is essential to acknowledge the role of death in the story. Notably, the deaths of characters such as Baba and Hassan create an irrevocable void within the family, emphasising the enduring consequences of their actions and the limited potential for complete restoration.

As Amir, the surviving member, bears the weight of guilt and embarks on a redemptive journey, particularly in his endeavour to save Sohrab, Hassan's son, these individual acts of atonement, while representing Amir's personal growth and reconciliation with his past, fall short of guaranteeing a

comprehensive repair of the damaged familial bonds. Consequently, the notion of the family fully regaining their relationship is called into question. Instead, the narrative underscores the nuanced nature of healing and resolution, where personal growth and individual acts of redemption play a prominent role. The story portrays the lasting impact of past actions on familial dynamics, even in the absence of a complete reunification of the family unit. By critically engaging with Gampung's analysis and considering the implications of tragedy and the passing of time, a more nuanced understanding of the familial complexities in *The Kite Runner* emerges. This perspective highlights the intricacies of the characters' journeys, the irreparable losses they face, and the ongoing quest for personal redemption within the context of a fragmented family structure.

Amir once again faces strain or difficulty in another relationship, that is, with Sohrab, due to many factors, including Sohrab's trauma and especially Amir's guilt. Amir's complex and strained relationship with Sohrab, the son of his childhood friend Hassan, can be attributed to Amir's profound sense of guilt regarding the past events involving Hassan. In this regard, it can be argued that Amir bears a certain degree of responsibility for the unfortunate circumstances affecting Sohrab. If he had not had Hassan sent away, perhaps Hassan would have been alive and safe. Sohrab would not be an orphan left at the mercy of the Taliban and the man who abused his father from childhood and murdered him. Neither would Sohrab have had to experience the same treatment, the same abuse, or the same rape at the hands of the same man from his father's past. Assef, a reminder of Amir's ghostly past, had been a tyrant from their young days. Amir's journey of redemption was not going to be easy

until he faced all his demons, which include Assef, who turns out to be one of the cruellest and most feared dangerous Taliban leaders who had taken Sohrab.

Building on Jefferess' (2009) argument, it prompts contemplation that if Amir had stayed in Afghanistan without exposure to the socially and culturally diverse world of the West, he might not have been able to treat Hassan as a true brother or family member. In the societal framework of Afghanistan, Hassan would always be perceived as a Hazara, a low-class servant. Even with Baba's considerable power, respect, and influence in society, he could not change Hassan's social status or restore his rightful standing as the son of a true Pashtun. In the eyes of society, all that is apparent is that Hassan was born to a Hazara woman. The reality, if revealed, could have jeopardised Baba's integrity, along with the power, respect, and social standing he enjoyed. In fact, disclosing the truth might have not only tarnished his reputation but also posed severe consequences, potentially risking his life. The best Amir could do is to continue to treat and relate well to Hassan, just as his father did. However, the same resolve might not have extended to saving Hassan's son due to the deep-seated division and intense culture of classism. Sohrab, being of the Hazara lineage, faces a perilous fate in the heart of Afghanistan during the Taliban war, and against the strict rule of Pashtuns and Hazaras mingling or coupling, the truth of his lineage, much like Hassan's, might have remained a buried secret. Amir, being a timid young Pashtun in a strict cultural environment with rigid social codes, might not have summoned the courage to try to rescue Sohrab. This, akin to Hassan's assault, would have

been another conflict laden with guilt that Amir might have had to face and carry to the grave due to the societal and cultural norms of Afghanistan.

Amir's move to the West provides a measure of security, sheltering him from Afghan and Taliban violence. In a more diverse and flexible social and cultural environment, devoid of classism and governed by democratic laws and human rights protections, Sohrab would not be relegated to a position of inferiority as a servant or slave, and Amir could shower him with the kindness and love that Hassan truly and rightfully deserved as family. Just as Kai-fu's (2019) final stage of psychological change showcases Amir's transition from willingness to love to unwavering devotion, he develops self-awareness and maturity and commits to rescuing Hassan's son. Thus, Amir's exposure to a different cultural milieu allows for a nuanced understanding of relationships that transcend societal prejudices. It does not necessarily suggest that Amir's exposure to the Western culture makes the Western culture superior to Afghan culture, a point Al-Dagamesh & Golubeva (2017) seem to hint at, critiquing the novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007) and the portrayal of the United States of America as a symbol of progress and prosperity and Afghanistan as a failed state in need of foreign supervision. It is important to note the parallel arguments made by Al-Dagamesh & Golubeva (2017), who interpret *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007) as a narrative of child rescue and neo-orientalism. Although their analysis pertains to the second primary text in this study, the cultural background remains the same — Afghanistan. Their viewpoint, which critiques the portrayal of the United States as saviours, is also reflected in *The Kite Runner* (2003). This echoes a recurring thematic issue in Hosseini's writing, portraying the United States as



agents of salvation and progress and Afghanistan as a failed state in need of foreign supervision (Al-Dagamesh & Golubeva, 2017).

However, although the present study draws some similarities between Al-Dagamesh & Golubeva's (2017) argument/analysis of Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and the narrative of Hosseini's first novel, *The Kite Runner*, it is crucial to revisit Jefferees' (2009) argument, emphasising that "*The Kite Runner* reflects a shift from the supremacy of race and nation as primary markers of political community and identity to the idea of the "modern" as the framework for determining the "human"" (p. 389). This not only reinforces the notion that no one society is inherently superior to another but also aligns with Achebe's position on the dynamism of states and societies, which underscores the idea that societies change, grow, and evolve. Falola (2003) echoes Achebe's view; "No society remains static, nor can any society afford to remain static, but many changes are necessary," noting that "the culture of an inferiority complex in relation to the West" is "fostered by the slave trade" and a colonial mentality (p. 93). Falola (2003) goes on to argue that overcoming neocolonial obstacles is vital, echoing the sentiment that a culture of equality should replace the historical inferiority complex. This interconnectedness of ideas highlights the evolving nature of societies, challenging any notion of static superiority. While the exposure to Western culture in the narrative does not imply superiority, a point highlighted by Al-Dagamesh & Golubeva (2017), it does emphasise a transformation in Amir's understanding of societal structures and cultural diversity. This shift challenges the notion that salvation and progress can only be achieved through external forces, a theme recurrent in both novels by Khaled Hosseini.

### **Oedipus Unbound: A Father-Son Dynamic, a Sacrificial Lamb Motif and an Oedipal Cowardice**

The triangle concept reflected in Hosseini's novel represents a unique manifestation of the Oedipal complex. Rahim (2019) shares a similar view with a different conclusion on how the complex manifests in the novel. Oedipus complex is a psychosexual theory first proposed by Sigmund Freud in 1899. This theory delves into the intricate emotions experienced by children during the phallic stage of development. It involves a dual dynamic: the child developing competitive feelings towards the same-sex parent and a possessive attraction to the opposite-sex parent. The theory describes the experience of children having rival feelings towards the parent of the same sex and a possessive fixation or desire towards the parent of the opposite sex (Gillette, 2021). All children go through an Oedipus phase as part of normal sexual development, and these feelings may have an impact on a child's development and adulthood if they are unable to move past this phase and parental fixation persists (Freud Museum London, 2015). Navigating the Oedipus complex is a crucial aspect of normal sexual development. Successful resolution involves the child identifying with the same-sex parent and internalising societal norms. If this phase is not adequately resolved, it may potentially influence an individual's psychological development and relationships in adulthood (Strachey et al., 1961).

Rahim's (2019) findings demonstrate how Amir's childhood desires transform under the influence of the reality principle, leading to the resolution of the Oedipus Complex. While Rahim's analysis centres on the significance of Amir's narration of the molestation scene and his hesitancy to help Hassan,

particularly emphasising repressed homogeneous desires, this study takes note of a different angle. Rahim argues that Amir's delayed response is driven by unconscious desires reminiscent of the Oedipus complex, as well as adherence to societal and ethnic norms that contribute to his inaction. From his analysis, it can be inferred that Hassan is positioned as the mother, while Amir remains the son in the Oedipus Complex triad. It is important to note, however, that Rahim's argument primarily focuses on the estimated pleasure of sex, a perspective this study acknowledges but does not believe to be the sole basis of Amir's decision to stay put and not try to help Hassan.

Amir is thrust back into the memory of a sacrificial ritual involving a lamb, a poignant event that occurs in the last month of the Muslim calendar, known as "Dhul-Hijjah". This recollection unfolds as Amir bears witness to the horrifying spectacle of Hassan being sacrificed and subjected to Assef's brutality. In this distressing moment, Amir discerns a haunting resemblance between the resigned expression on Hassan's face and that of the sacrificial lamb. This flashback becomes a powerful manifestation of Amir's overwhelming guilt as he grasps the profound helplessness embodied by the lamb, a symbolism he attributes to Hassan in the clutches of the merciless Assef and the complicit silence of the Mullah. Amid Amir's internal struggle for justification, he implicitly outlines a concealed motive—the sacrificial symbolism of Hassan aimed at securing a closer and more favourable relationship with Baba. This introspective revelation exposes the complex layers of Amir's emotions, combining guilt, remorse, and a hidden agenda in the aftermath of this traumatic event.

I had one last chance to make a decision. One final opportunity to decide who I was going to be. I could step into that alley,

stand up for Hassan--the way he'd stood up for me all those times in the past--and accept whatever would happen to me. Or I could run.

In the end, I ran.

I ran because I was a coward. I was afraid of Assef and what he would do to me. I was afraid of getting hurt. That's what I told myself as I turned my back to the alley, to Hassan. That's what I made myself believe. I actually aspired to cowardice, because the alternative, the real reason I was running, was that Assef was right: Nothing was free in this world. *Maybe Hassan was the price I had to pay, the lamb I had to slay, to win Baba. Was it a fair price?* The answer floated to my conscious mind before I could thwart it: He was just a Hazara, wasn't he? (Hosseini, 2003, p. 56) [**Emphasis mine**]

Amir yearns for the love, attention, and approval of Baba, whereas Baba's heart and interest seem to be with Hassan, who in turn gives all his attention and adoration to Amir. Amir is jealous of the relationship between Baba and Hassan to the extent that he is shocked and hurt when his father decides to forgive Hassan for what is known to him (Baba) as the greatest sin he can never ever forgive: theft (Hosseini, pp. 88-91). He may have harboured bitterness, resentment, and even ill intentions to harm Hassan, but he did not have the edge to go through with any of it. Thus, seeing Hassan being mistreated in some way may have been a consolation price for Amir, which he will come to sorely regret and that will haunt him for the rest of his life. In Hosseini's novel, the complex is manifested in a unique form. All parties involved are of the same sex; male. The son, Amir, yearns for his father's attention and love and has a strong urge to please him. Amir's jealousy and envious aggressive feelings are towards Hassan, a third party whom Amir sees as a threat in the fight for Baba's love and attention. Meanwhile, Hassan's love and adoration are directed towards Amir, who is blind to it. The Oedipal Complex reflected in the novel would thus make Amir, still, the son; Baba represents the mother in this complex, and Hassan becomes the father who

faces the aggressive envy of the son, Amir, in the complex relationship of the triad. However, the Bowen family theory in this context complexifies the Oedipal complex; in other words, it makes complex the Oedipus Complex. While what we see in the novel may appear as a sign of the Oedipal complex, the fact that Hosseini modifies it suggests a critique of Freud's simplification of the family dynamic. The Bowen family theory suggests that Freud's Oedipus Complex may be a rather simplified way of looking at the dynamics of the family complex. The Bowen family theory in this context offers a nuanced understanding of the family dynamics at play in the novel. Thus, one way the novel can be read is in terms of the Oedipus Complex; but if also read critically, it can be read as a critique of Freud's. As the analysis of the present study has shown, Bowen's theory suggests that the Family Romances and Dynamics are more complex than Freud offers.

## **Part 2|| *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007)**

### **A dawning: Hope's bitter truth**

In contrast to *The Kite Runner* (2003), which employs an autodiegetic narrator, Amir, and initiates the narrative from his adult stage, embarking on a reflective journey down memory lane, culminating in catharsis, and echoing Derrida's hauntology with its intricate blend of past and present narratives, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007) takes a different narrative approach. With an auctorial narrator, the novel commences from Mariam's tender age of fourteen. At this juncture, Mariam, old enough to comprehend societal judgements, grapples with the term *harami*, realising the stigma of being deemed an illegitimate child. This structural variance underscores the distinct narrative perspectives between the two novels, shedding light on how the

chosen narrator and narrative starting point influence thematic elements such as identity and societal perceptions. *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007) introduces and takes the reader through the scenes of the life of the outcast Mariam, a *harami* (abomination), which the author, in the voice of the omniscient narrator, explains as “*an unwanted thing; that she, Mariam, was an illegitimate person who would never have legitimate claim to the things other people had, things such as love, family, home, acceptance*” (p. 4). All her life, Mariam experienced loneliness being cast away in a *kolba*, a small shack built by her wealthy businessman father Jalil, outside the town of Herat where he lives, only having a taste of tender love and care from her father whenever he showed up with gifts and stories. From the very beginning, from the moment Mariam loses her mother, she will never be free of the guilt and the harsh truth of the reality of the outside world that her mother always warned her about. Unlike Amir in *The Kite Runner*, who fruitlessly tries to escape his past by not accepting and dealing with the truth but rather entangling himself more and deeper into the ropes of his own guilt, Mariam accepts her guilt and deals with it by embracing her fate and every other cruelty she experiences further. The things of her past that haunt Mariam and leave her ridden with guilt that she has to live with are; the shame of her identity; being born a *harami*, an illegitimate child, as she has been taunted her whole life; and her mother’s death.

Sharma and Verma (2021) underscore the significance of family dynamics and the need for love and affection for the well-being and growth of the characters. They emphasise that the familial relationships portrayed in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* play a crucial role in shaping the female characters’

experiences. The authors argue that the relationships between the women characters and their families are crucial to understanding their behaviour and actions. They contend that these familial connections shape not only the characters' sense of self-worth and identity but also their aspirations and agency within the confines of Afghan society. Mariam's complex relationship with her father, Jalil, and her fraught upbringing with her mother, Nana, profoundly influence her yearning for love, acceptance, and a sense of belonging. The authors highlight how Mariam's longing for her father's affection and validation drives her actions and decisions throughout the novel. Additionally, Laila's relationship with her parents, particularly her father, plays a pivotal role in shaping her aspirations and her belief in her own capabilities. The supportive and encouraging environment provided by her father instills in Laila a strong sense of agency and the belief that she can defy societal expectations. Thus, to gain a deeper comprehension of the haunting memories that linger within Mariam, an exploration of the protagonist's family unit and her childhood experiences is essential.

At this point, it is essential to reiterate Bowen's definition of a family as an emotional unit characterised by interdependence among its members, who are intricately connected on an emotional level. In Mariam's immediate environment, those who consistently interact with her constitute the close-knit unit of her family. Principally, Mariam's parents, Nana and Jalil, play pivotal roles in shaping her emotional landscape. Bowen's insight emphasises the reciprocal influence among family members. The dynamics within Mariam's family significantly impact her life and developmental trajectory. As this study unfolds, it becomes apparent that key memories from her unhappy, dejected,

and traumatic childhood are deeply imprinted, profoundly affecting her character development. Mariam's childhood experiences, marked by loneliness and occasional tender moments with her father, set the stage for her adult life. At the age of fifteen, when she is married off, the haunting shadows of her past become more pronounced. The exploration will further illuminate how Mariam's haunting memories are intricately tied to the emotional nuances within her family, particularly the emotional neglect and abandonment by her father, Jalil; the strained relationship with her mother, Nana; and her abandonment and consequential death of her mother.

Mariam's family triangle, comprising her parents, Nana and Jalil, and herself, constitutes an unstable relationship unit (Kerr & Bowen, 1988), characterised by its inherent dysfunction. This family structure is notably unhealthy as Mariam primarily resides with her mother, Nana, effectively experiencing a form of single motherhood due to Jalil's sporadic visits, limited to once a week on Thursdays and occasionally irregular. There are instances when Jalil fails to appear on scheduled visiting days, with excuses of emergencies and business trips. Born as a *harami*, an illegitimate child resulting from the illicit affair of a wealthy master and a servant, Mariam assumes the role of anxiety/tension-reliever or absorber between her parents. Bowen's nuclear family emotional system concept, which can shed light on how family members influence and react to one another's emotions, is reflected here. The emotional strain on Mariam is palpable, especially considering Nana's embitterment. Nana's embitterment and emotional reactivity exemplify what Bowen terms the family projection concept, wherein Nana projects her unresolved issues onto Mariam. Mariam becomes the



vulnerable third party entangled in their polarised strife, who both takes sides and provides a detour in an attempt to mediate the anxiety between her parents (Brown, 1999), albeit with limited success. This is a clear indication of Bowen's triangle dynamic being a catalyst for familial complications. Triangulation, as suggested by Bowen, can create imbalance within the family system and perpetuate unhealthy patterns of communication and behaviour.

Mariam's triangle family dynamics reflect the view that the focus shifts to criticising or worrying about the third party (Brown, 1999; Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Mariam finds herself caught in the crossfire of her parents' conflicts, where her mother, Nana, appears to be the sole aggressor. Nana consistently reinforces Mariam's illegitimacy from as early as the age of five, using derogatory terms like "shame" and "harami", channelling her bitterness towards Jalil through Mariam. Although Nana refrains from expressing her resentment directly to Jalil, Mariam becomes the receptacle for her mother's negativity. The constant barrage of criticism and bitterness from Nana takes a toll on Mariam, leading to insecurities and low self-esteem. Consequently, Mariam nurtures a fervent desire for a life with her father, whom she perceives as flawless, wholeheartedly loves, and more desperately craves acceptance from. As Mariam listens to her mother's embittered tirades, she unwittingly absorbs and internalises the anxiety present in her familial environment.

**Mariam would listen dutifully to this** [*she absorbs the anxiety and tension*]. She never dared say to Nana how much she disliked her talking this way about Jalil. **The truth was that around Jalil, Mariam did not feel at all like a harami.** For an hour or two every Thursday, when Jalil came to see her, all smiles and gifts and endearments, Mariam felt deserving of all the beauty and bounty that life had to give. And, for this, Mariam loved Jalil. (p. 5) [**Emphasis mine**]

Enveloped in a world of gifts, enchanting stories, and enticing promises, Mariam finds herself irresistibly drawn to her seemingly flawless and knowledgeable father. In this narrative of contrasts, Mariam chooses to align with Jalil, embracing his version of the story surrounding her birth and childhood, even in the face of her mother's vehement warnings that these are nothing but "rich lies" (p. 5). The question arises: why does Mariam place her trust in her father's narrative over her mother's? The answer lies in the stark disparity between Nana's constant negativity and Jalil's expressions of love and compassion. Jalil's acts of kindness, endearing gestures, captivating tales of the town and festivals, along with promises of a cinematic celebration on her fifteenth birthday, create a stark contrast to Nana's embittered bickering. In Mariam's eyes, her mother appears as a bitterly resentful woman, seemingly determined to tarnish Jalil's image, making Mariam the unwitting target of her animosity. The allure of Jalil's affectionate gestures and the promise of a brighter future eclipse Nana's bitter narrative, leading Mariam to prefer the warmth of her father's love over the shadows of her mother's discontent.

"What rich lies!" Nana said after Jalil left. "Rich man telling rich lies. He never took you to any tree. And don't let him charm you. He betrayed us, your beloved father. He cast us out. He cast us out of his big fancy house like we were nothing to him. He did it happily." (p. 5)

It is also clear that this family suffers a very low level of self-differentiation. Differentiation of self is a lifelong process that can be influenced by both nature and nurture factors (Kerr and Bowen, 1988). The interplay of nature and nurture factors, compounded by societal judgements, encapsulates Mariam's poignant journey of self-discovery and differentiation

in the face of adversity. Her status as a *harami* significantly shapes her identity and influences her role within the family. The nurture factor in Mariam's case is literally non-existent due to the unfortunate factors surrounding the nature of her birth—being born a *harami*, thus rendering the nature factor problematic in itself. Mariam's life being an accident—a mistake borne from an illicit affair between a servant and a master—shadows her life with uncertainties and misfortunes. Her internal struggles with her identity can be traced back to the societal norms surrounding her birth and dictating her worth. Just as Bowen's concept of emotional process in society captures, Mariam's life and emotional functioning, just like her mother, Nana, are deeply entwined in the broader emotional patterns and dynamics present within the Afghan society. Born outside the conventional bounds of legitimacy, Mariam faces societal prejudices and biases that contribute to the dysfunctional nature of her family. Her birth becomes a symbol of shame and unworthiness in the eyes of society, leading to mistreatment and rejection by those who should be family. By nature, innocent Mariam faces the challenge of a life she did not choose to be born into and had no control over whatsoever. Her mother, Nana continues to taunt Mariam everyday and knowing the wealth of Jalil, having overheard him tell Mariam stories about his cinema and ice cream parlour, she snickers to Mariam waiting until Jalil left the kolba; *"The children of strangers get ice cream. What do you get, Mariam? Stories of ice cream."* (p.6)

Jalil was a very wealthy and well respected man in the town of Herat and beyond [ *"In addition to the cinema, Jalil owned land in Karokh, land in Farah, three carpet stores, a clothing shop, and a black 1956 Buick*

*Roadmaster. He was one of Herat's best-connected men, friend of the mayor and the provincial governor. He had a cook, a driver, and three housekeepers."* p. 6]. Mariam's mother, Nana had been one of the housekeepers in Jalil's home until she got pregnant with Mariam and the society turned against her.

**Until her belly began to swell. || When that happened, Nana said, the collective gasp of Jalil's family sucked the air out of Herat. His in-laws swore blood would flow. The wives demanded that he throw her out. (p. 6)**

The narrative unfolds Nana's bitter reflection on the lack of honour and courage displayed by both her father and Jalil, reinforcing the societal norms that dictate Mariam's identity.

Nana's own father, who was a lowly stone carver in the nearby village of Gul Daman, disowned her. Disgraced, he packed his things and boarded a bus to Iran, never to be seen or heard from again. || "Sometimes," Nana said early one morning, as she was feeding the chickens outside the *kolba*, "I wish my father had had the stomach to sharpen one of his knives and do the honorable thing. It might have been better for me." She tossed another handful of seeds into the coop, paused, and looked at Mariam. **"Better for you too, maybe. It would have spared you the grief of knowing that you are what you are.** But he was a coward, my father. He didn't have the dil, the heart, for it." || Jalil didn't have the dil either, Nana said, to do the honorable thing. || To stand up to his family, to his wives and in-laws, and accept responsibility for what he had done. Instead, behind closed doors, a face-saving deal had quickly been struck. The next day, he had made her gather her few things from the servants' quarters, where she'd been living, and sent her off. || "You know what he told his wives by way of defense? That I forced myself on him. That it was my fault. Didi? You see? This is what it means to be a woman in this world." (pp. 6-7) **[Emphasis mine]**

Mariam's family unit, as portrayed in the novel, notably lacks essential elements such as emotional connection, individuality, and avenues for self-expression. According to the principles of good differentiation of self, it is imperative to strike a delicate balance among these crucial factors. In

Mariam's family, the absence of emotional connections is evident in the strained relationships between family members (between Nana and Jalil and between Nana and Mariam), where communication is often marked by tension rather than understanding. Nana is so deeply traumatised by her own unfortunate experiences and traumas that she does not and is not willing to take responsibility for her own emotions, allowing herself to be controlled by the emotional climate of the family system and, in turn, taking it out on Mariam. Individuality is stifled as Mariam, caught in the crossfire of her parents' conflicts, struggles to assert her own identity within the familial dynamics. Furthermore, the family setting offers limited opportunities for self-expression, hindering the development of healthy, well-differentiated individuals within this household.

Mariam's yearning for the dream of a life with her father grows daily, and she asks her father to take her to the cinema on her fifteenth birthday, to which both parents initially refuse, but Jalil later agrees upon Mariam's persistent insistence (pp. 24-26). She wishes to walk proudly in town, be seen with her father, and be united with her step-siblings. She will soon face the harsh truth that her identity as a *harami* goes way beyond just the words of her mother, Nana, back at the kolba. Mariam's world of hopes and dreams begins to crack when her father does not show up to take her to the cinema on her fifteenth birthday, as he promised. Holding on to some bit of hope and determination, she walks into Herat to find her father and fulfil his promise, but is crashed when he turns away from her, leaving her on the streets like a homeless beggar, "*a stray dog*" (p. 35), and crumbling her world of hopes and dreams. His betrayal makes her see the truth that her mother always warned

her of Jalil, as she finally realises that her mother's bitterness had solid grounding.

THE DRIVER TALKED in a muted, consoling tone as he drove. Mariam did not hear him. All during the ride, as she bounced in the backseat, she cried. They were tears of grief, of anger, of disillusionment. But mainly tears of a deep, deep shame at **how foolishly she had given herself over to Jalil**, how she had fretted over what dress to wear, over the mismatching hijab, walking all the way here, refusing to leave, sleeping on the street like a stray dog. **And she was ashamed of how she had dismissed her mother's stricken looks, her puffy eyes. Nana, who had warned her, who had been right all along.**

\*\*\*Mariam kept thinking of his face in the upstairs window. **He let her sleep on the street. On the street.** Mariam cried lying down. She didn't sit up, didn't want to be seen. She imagined all of Herat knew this morning how she'd disgraced herself. (p. 35) **[Emphasis mine]**

The death of Mariam's mother becomes an indelible stain on her conscience, a haunting incident intertwined with various threads from her past. Returning to the *kolba* after the profound betrayal by her father, Mariam discovers a harrowing scene—her mother's lifeless body. This discovery marks the inception of Mariam's self-blame, a burden she carries as the spectre of her mother's tragic end.

"Go back! No. Don't look now. Turn around! Go back!"  
But he wasn't fast enough. Mariam saw. A gust of wind blew and parted the drooping branches of the weeping willow like a curtain, and Mariam caught a glimpse of what was beneath the tree: the straightbacked chair, overturned. The rope dropping from a high branch. Nana dangling at the end of it. (p. 36)

The emotional weight of this event is compounded by the heartbreaking plea from Nana, who, in the throes of despair, implored Mariam not to abandon her. In the excerpt below, Nana's words echo with bitterness and desperation, accusing Mariam of ingratitude and predicting a bleak future without her. The emotional turmoil is palpable as Nana shifts from anger to

mockery, highlighting Mariam's perceived insignificance in the eyes of her mostly absent father.

AT FIRST, Nana paced around the *kolba*, clenching and unclenching her fists.

"Of all the daughters I could have had, why did God give me an ungrateful one like you? Everything I endured for you! How dare you! **How dare you abandon me like this**, you treacherous little *harami*!"

Then she mocked.

"What a stupid girl you are! You think you matter to him, that you're wanted in his house? You think you're a daughter to him? That he's going to take you in? Let me tell you something. A man's heart is a wretched, wretched thing, Mariam. It isn't like a mother's womb. It won't bleed, it won't stretch to make room for you. I'm the only one who loves you. I'm all you have in this world, Mariam, and when I'm gone you'll have nothing. You'll have nothing. You *are* nothing!"

Then she tried guilt.

**"I'll die if you go. The *jinn* will come, and I'll have one of my fits. You'll see, I'll swallow my tongue and die. Don't leave me, Mariam jo. Please stay. I'll die if you go."** (p. 27, **Emphasis mine**)

The above scene is etched in guilt as Nana resorts to emotional manipulation, emphasising her own vulnerability and threatening self-harm if Mariam leaves. This intricate portrayal captures the complex dynamics of a mother-daughter relationship marred by abandonment, bitterness, and a profound sense of isolation. Mariam, burdened by her mother's pleas and haunted by the choice she made to go find her father, grapples with the weight of her mother's death as an inextricable part of her haunting past. The huge burden and the blood of her mother are the only things Mariam has left to her name, aside from the shame of being a *harami*. What haunts her most is the circumstances of Nana's death and the pleas that fell on deaf ears. "All she could hear was Nana saying, *I'll die if you go. I'll just die.*" (p.38). Haunted by her mother's pleas, she cries to Mullah Faizullah, mourning Nana's death.

Mariam's orientation of her identity as a *harami* haunts her even after she has been married off. Although she finds herself in a community where she is not known, nor is her history, her past experiences, including her mother's taunts, her visit to Jalil in the city, and her brief stay in Jalil's house after the death of her mother, make her fear society, especially about her identity. Since her mother's death, she has accepted every blame, even when no one gives her any. In the excerpt below, we see a clear indication of how deeply her mother's taunts about her being born a *harami* affect her even after Nana's death.

In the tandoor line, Mariam caught sideways glances shot at her, heard whispers. Her hands began to sweat. She imagined they all knew that she'd been born a *harami*, a source of shame to her father and his family. They all knew that she'd betrayed her mother and disgraced herself.

With the corner of her *hijab*, she dabbed at the moisture above her upper lip and tried to gather her nerves. (p. 66)

Every other experience she goes through is connected to Nana's death. For Mariam, these memories haunting her are only reminders of her betrayal of her mother just to satisfy a yearning for her father's love, who only showed her what part of him he wanted her to see. She realises that her mother's bitter words are hauntingly true. She sees clearly what her mother saw in Jalil and realises that her mother's tough love was true love and not her father's partial love.

For the first time, Mariam could hear him with Nana's ears. She could hear so clearly now the insincerity that had always lurked beneath, the hollow, false assurances. She could not bring herself to look at him. (p. 38)

If she had listened to her mother and not gone into the city to find Jalil, her mother would still be alive, and she would not find herself in the predicament of having to deal with her ingenuine father and his unloving and



uncaring wives, who want her gone as quickly as possible, nor would she have been forced into any marriage with any old widower.

### **A Female Oedipal twist, Echoes of the Past, and A Life of Lingering Shadows**

Like *The Kite Runner*, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* revolves around a unique manifestation of the Oedipal complex. Unlike *The Kite Runner*, this complex is a female Oedipal complex, also known as the Electra complex, which is reflected in this text with a slight twist. In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Mariam has strong emotions towards her father, Jalil. She loves him wholeheartedly and has a trace of bitterness/hatred towards her mother, Nana. Although she is not happy about the tension in the triangle of her family, her mother is no competition for her, thus she feels no envy or jealousy towards Nana. Rather, she is frustrated with her mother and feels Nana is jealous of the attention she gets from her father and his promise to take her to the city.

*You're afraid, Nana, she might have said. You're afraid that I might find the happiness you never had. And you don't want me to be happy. You don't want a good life for me. You're the one with the wretched heart. (p.26)*

Despite her mother's pleas to stay, her strong attachment to her father drives her to go into the city to find him, even though he does not show up at the rendezvous point. Mariam's heart is broken by her father when he does not honour his promise to take her to his cinema and also abandons her on the street. Mariam then sees through Jalil's falsehood and gains an understanding of her mother's loathsome feelings for him. Heartbroken, she returns home to Nana, whom she finds hanged on a tree. Hating herself for leaving, her love and strong affection for her father turn into a strong disappointment and hatred for him. Jalil breaks Mariam further by confirming the wives' talks about

marrying Mariam off to the widowed shoemaker Rasheed. After her marriage ceremony, she expresses her disappointment in her father to Jalil, saying, “I used to worship you...” (pp. 55–56). In the end, Mariam, just like her mother, who was her least favourite, develops bitterness towards her father.

The Oedipal Complex states that the son will develop hatred and envy towards the father, as well as a strong attachment to the mother, leading the son to murder the mother (American Psychological Association dictionary, n.d.). The Electra Complex, on the other hand, states that the daughter will develop a strong attachment to the father and grow increasingly hostile towards the mother, leading the daughter to murder the mother (American Psychological Association dictionary, n.d.). Carl Jung is recognised for having expanded the Oedipus Complex theory in 1913 and dividing the complex between boys and girls. Jung proposed that his Electra complex was a means of distinctly defining a female child’s feelings of desire towards her father (Gillette, 2021). As reflected in the novel, one can say that the daughter, Mariam, did kill the mother—both emotionally and physically, although she did not physically put the rope around Nana’s neck—to be with the father. Mariam herself strongly believes she did kill Nana, as she feels Nana would still be alive if she had listened to her and not left to find her father in the city. The twist, in this case, is that the daughter does not get to be with the father and is rejected because his love for her was a façade. Her mother, who, regardless of the ill-treatment, was the only person in the world who would have Mariam the way she is and keep her from the wicked world, happens to be dead, killed by the actions of Mariam.

The spectral presence of the past, as highlighted by Derrida, permeates Mariam's present and adult life, creating a blurred vision where her haunted past intertwines with the current reality. This complex web of societal rejection, familial strife, and personal loss shapes Mariam's identity. The label of "harami", an unwanted individual with no legitimate claims to love, family, or acceptance, becomes a constant struggle from her early years, contributing to a deep sense of alienation. Mariam's journey towards self-discovery is deeply influenced by this struggle, laying the foundation for her character and significantly impacting her choices, relationships, and the trajectory of her life. Her childhood, fraught with negativity, toxicity, rejection, death, and loneliness, casts a long and haunting shadow over her entire existence. The events of her childhood, including her status as a *harami*, her mother's persistent taunts branding her as a societal outcast, her father's rejection, and her mother's death, collectively leave indelible marks, creating a lasting and haunting imprint on Mariam's life. Her emotional journey intricately unravels the complexities of her actions, behaviour, and coping mechanisms, unveiling a sense of resignation and self-blame in the face of life's harsh experiences. Following her father's betrayal and her mother's death, Mariam embraces her fate, navigating each cruelty with a resolute acceptance of her perceived guilt. The haunting memories of her past, intertwined with the shame of being labelled a *harami*, an illegitimate child, persistently linger. In stark contrast to Amir in *The Kite Runner*, who fruitlessly attempts to escape his past, Mariam grapples with her guilt in a different manner. Instead of confronting it directly, she carries the burden as an unresolved trauma, believing she deserves punishment for her mother's death. This unresolved guilt becomes a weight

that she bears, eating away at her, yet she resiliently attempts to move forward, accepting every cruelty that befalls her without questioning, driven by an intense sense of guilt and self-punishment.

The complex interplay of factors underscores the depth of Mariam's emotional struggles, emphasising the impact of her traumatic experiences on her self-worth and life perspective. The anguish stemming from her father's rejection, and particularly her mother's death, renders her desolate and lonely. The haunting echoes and spectral hands of her traumatic childhood begin to haunt her through her mother's haunting words and taunts, especially after the funeral. In the excerpt below, seated in Jalil's home post-funeral, she questions her life and her place in the world.

And as Mariam watched Jalil shake these strangers' hands, as she saw him cross his palms on his chest and nod to their wives, she knew that Nana had spoken the truth. She did not belong here.

*But where do I belong? What am I going to do now?*

*I'm all you have in this world, Mariam, and when I'm gone you'll have nothing. You'll have nothing. You are nothing!*

Like the wind through the willows around the *kolba*, gusts of an inexpressible blackness kept passing through Mariam. (p. 40)

The novel's tone carries a pervasive melancholy from the outset. These emotions are heightened by Mariam's mother's haunting taunts, which plant deep-seated insecurities and feelings of inadequacy within her. The emotional neglect and strained relationships within Mariam's family unit, compounded by her illegitimate status, impair her ability to form healthy connections. Her past, defined by the label of being a *harami* or illegitimate child, coupled with the taunting negativity from her mother, Nana, leaves enduring scars on her self-esteem and sense of worth. These wounds set the stage for a hauntingly

forlorn life marked by dependency, a relentless quest for validation, and pervasive fears.

We see how the wounds from Mariam's troubled childhood continue to shape her destiny, particularly in her forced marriage to Rasheed. Mariam's forced marriage to Rasheed, an older and abusive man, adds another intricate layer to her haunted past. Immediately following her mother's burial, Mariam's disappointment in her father deepens as she grapples with the societal implications of her status as a *harami* in conventional Afghan society. Her forced entry into an arranged marriage stands as a stark manifestation of societal influence on Mariam's life. This forced marriage, a consequence of societal norms and Mariam's illegitimate status, reflects broader cultural expectations. Fearing gossip, damning rumours, and societal backlash, her father, in agreement with his wives, arranges her marriage as a means of disposing her off. Subsequently, Mariam finds herself playing the role of a dutiful wife in an exceedingly abusive marriage, convinced that there is no other alternative for her. This conviction is underlined by Afghan societal norms that disempower women, portraying them as weak and vulnerable. The implication is that a woman has no voice and needs a man for protection, and without one, she becomes exposed to various forms of torment and abuse and all kinds of dangers. This is evidenced throughout the novel and is especially prominent from the thirty-seventh chapter, where the Taliban announce their new rules that further undermine and oppress women: "*Our watan is now known as the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. These are the laws that we will enforce and you will obey:*" (p. 277). Women could not walk in public, whether in town or on the streets, without being accompanied by a man. Any

woman or girl found alone in such situations risked being attacked, captured, or even claimed by Taliban men.

*Attention women:*

*You will stay inside your homes at all times. It is not proper for women to wander aimlessly about the streets. If you go outside, you must be accompanied by a mahram, a male relative. If you are caught alone on the street, you will be beaten and sent home.*

*You will not, under any circumstance, show your face. You will cover with burqa when outside. If you do not, you will be severely beaten. (p. 278)*

In this oppressive environment, the excerpt illustrates the dehumanising rules imposed on women in Afghan society under Taliban control. The Taliban ban the use of cosmetics, jewelry, “*charming clothes*”, painting of nails, while also prescribing and dictating how women must dress, speak, and interact with others. Most alarming is the ban on education for girls and work for women, stripping them of autonomy, control, and opportunities, effectively reducing them to lives of servitude under male dominance. This extreme misogyny is enforced with threats of violence and even death.

*Cosmetics are forbidden.*

*Jewelry is forbidden.*

*You will not wear charming clothes.*

*You will not speak unless spoken to.*

*You will not make eye contact with men.*

*You will not laugh in public. If you do, you will be beaten.*

*You will not paint your nails. If you do, you will lose a finger.*

*Girls are forbidden from attending school. All schools for girls will be closed immediately.*

*Women are forbidden from working.*

*If you are found guilty of adultery, you will be stoned to death.*

(p. 278)

The severe consequences, including beatings, disfigurement, and death by stoning, highlight the brutality women face for transgressing these imposed norms. These rules are not only disempowering but also inflict physical and psychological harm on women like Mariam. The restrictions on freedom,

mobility, appearance, and basic expressions of joy underscore the deeply entrenched gender inequality and the systematic suppression of women's rights, reinforcing the idea that Mariam's forced marriage and subsequent mistreatment are reflections of a larger societal issue. While the Taliban's draconian rules, as illustrated in the above excerpt, lay bare the systemic oppression faced by Afghan women, Silima's (2013) exploration of characters like Nana and Mariam delves deeper into the ramifications of such oppression. Silima (2013), focusing on the characters of Nana and Mariam, explores the archetype of sacrificing women. Despite their hardships, these women have learned to live for others and have never demanded anything for themselves. These women, who lead lives of deprivation and suffering, are trapped in a cycle of subservience and exploitation, which deprives them of respect, dignity, and autonomy. Silima (2013) argues that the stories of women like Nana and Mariam demonstrate that accepting subjugation without resistance only strengthens the tyrants and undermines humanity and gratitude, a sentiment echoed in Maurya's (2015) exploration of themes of violence, oppression, and women's relationships within the confines of a suffocating atmosphere. In her study, Maurya (2015) draws parallels between the distorted familial relationships of father-daughter and husband-wife, which ultimately take a bitter turn as the narrative unfolds, highlighting the pervasive nature of oppression and abuse within the home. The selflessness of these women becomes a tool for perpetuating a system that devalues and defeats the very essence of human existence. These characters serve as reminders that passive acceptance of oppression perpetuates such a system.

Furthermore, the influence of Mariam's father's rejection and betrayal shapes her self-perception. The insights offered by Vemaiah (2018) align seamlessly with the intricate web of Mariam's struggles, particularly the impact of her father's rejection and betrayal. Vemaiah's (2018) exploration of the relationships between Mariam, Laila, and Aziza and their respective fathers, drawing on Freud's theories, highlights the significance of a father's presence in a daughter's life and how it shapes her development, emphasising the crucial role fathers play in their daughters' self-esteem, self-image, and overall confidence. For Mariam, her father's betrayal and the realisation of her mother's taunts about her father and their society intensify her feelings of insignificance, worthlessness, and undesirability, undermining her sense of self-worth. This deep-seated insecurity prompts her to seek security and validation, ultimately leading to her dependent relationship with Rasheed in an enforced, loveless marriage. Throughout this coerced marriage, Mariam grapples with fear, emotional distress, and a lack of autonomy, echoing the haunting memories of her past. Every aspect of her new life, from the loss of her mother to her entry into the marital home, serves as a poignant reminder of her traumatic past, persistently echoing through her experiences.

Despite attempts to find contentment and a semblance of normalcy in her new life with Rasheed, the ghostly fingers of her past, her insecurities, and her fears remain tightly intertwined, preventing her from questioning the adversities that befall her. At the core of Mariam's internal struggle is a self-imposed belief that she bears responsibility for her mother's tragic end. This attribution of blame becomes a mechanism for Mariam to exert a semblance of control over the chaos and trauma that have defined her life. However, this



control takes a heavy toll, burdening her with overwhelming guilt that permeates her self-esteem and self-concept. Every misfortune around her becomes internalised as her own fault, deepening her emotional turmoil. In her relationship with Rasheed, Mariam assumes the role of a submissive wife not out of genuine affection but as a means of self-preservation, driven by a deep-seated desire for recognition, validation, and a semblance of normalcy in the wake of her tumultuous past. This is particularly noteworthy given the arranged nature of their marriage. In the initial stages of their marriage, Mariam mourns and isolates herself, causing tension with Rasheed, who imposes expectations of immediate conformity to traditional marital roles.

“Are you ever going to unpack that thing?” he said, motioning with his head toward her suitcase. He crossed his arms. “I figured you might need some time. But this is absurd. A week’s gone and... Well, then, as of tomorrow morning I expect you to start behaving like a wife. *Fahmidi*? Is that understood?” || Mariam’s teeth began to chatter.

“I need an answer.”

“Yes.”

“Good,” he said. “What did you think? That this is a hotel? That I’m some kind of hotelkeeper? Well, it . . . Oh. Oh. *La illah u ilillah*. What did I say about the crying, Mariam? What did I say to you about the crying?” (p. 64)

At the stern warnings of Rasheed, Mariam embarks on her life as a dutiful wife, with pleasing her husband swiftly becoming her primary objective.

THE NEXT MORNING, after Rasheed left for work, Mariam unpacked her clothes and put them in the dresser. She drew a pail of water from the well and, with a rag, washed the windows of her room and the windows to the living room downstairs. She swept the floors, beat the cobwebs fluttering in the corners of the ceiling. She opened the windows to air the house. (pp. 64-65)

Mariam’s acceptance of her life as a form of self-punishment for perceived sins, including her birth as a harami and her mother’s tragic death,

propel her into the role of a dutiful and submissive wife to Rasheed. This role, seemingly devoid of choice, is more a result of necessity due to the lack of viable alternatives and her entrapment within an oppressive environment that has been her reality for as long as she can remember. Given her circumstances, Mariam has no viable alternative but to stay with Rasheed, contributing to her growing reliance on him. Early interactions with Rasheed, marked by acts of kindness, initially create a sense of safety, evoking feelings of loyalty and dependence within Mariam. Gestures such as sightseeing, gifts, and shared meals foster a sense of being cared for and valued (Chapters 10 & 11, pp. 69-76). However, Rasheed's initial acts of kindness foreshadow the controlling nature of his character, setting the stage for the power dynamic and limitations that will define their marriage.

The haunting echoes of Mariam's past reverberate in her attempts to navigate this new life, evident in her struggles with self-perception, guilt, and the relentless pursuit of fragile stability. Mariam's yearning for acceptance and love leads her to accept the fate of an arranged marriage with Rasheed, the widower, and be a dutiful wife, both as an attempt to escape her haunted past and to maintain her only security. These choices, however, often lead to further entanglements in oppressive and abusive relationships. Mariam's deep-seated insecurities intensify, particularly with Rasheed's escalating narcissistic and abusive behaviour. Fearing her perceived inadequacy, exacerbated by her inability to bear him a child, Rasheed consistently reminds her of her *harami* status. Driven by a yearning for acceptance and a desire for a different life, Mariam hopes for positive change, yet Rasheed's oppressive behaviour, violence, and emotional cruelty become new realities. Her marriage becomes a

continuation of the rejection and mistreatment she endured in her family of origin. Mariam's dependency and submissiveness are manifestations of her insecurities and the enduring echoes of her past. These traits, originating from her history, serve as a means of preserving tranquillity and a semblance of sanity in her home. They represent her sole remaining source of security, enabling her to navigate the turbulent waters of her life and find a fragile sense of stability amidst the chaos and brutality she endures.

One other significant incident that reflects the impact or influence of a haunting past or its lingering echoes on Mariam's trajectory is the incident at the communal tandoor, where her insecurities and fears resurface, leaving her hyperventilating and in a frenzied effort to get away from the women of her new community who were bombarding her with questions, suggestions, and talks of children. As Mariam stands in the tandoor line, the rich aroma of baking bread and the lively chatter of the women around her envelop the communal setting. Yet, this seemingly ordinary moment becomes a crucible of judgement and anxiety for Mariam.

In the tandoor line, Mariam caught sideways glances shot at her, heard whispers. Her hands began to sweat. She imagined they all knew that she'd been born a harami, a source of shame to her father and his family. They all knew that she'd betrayed her mother and disgraced herself. || With a corner of her hijab, she dabbed at the moisture above her upper lip and tried to gather her nerves. || ... || Mariam backed away. She was hyperventilating. Her ears buzzed, her pulse fluttered, her eyes darted from one face to another. She backed away again, but there was nowhere to go to—she was in the center of a circle. (pp. 66-68)

This incident at the communal tandoor illustrates the enduring impact of Mariam's haunted past on her present experiences. As she stands in the tandoor line, Mariam is subjected to the judgmental glances and whispers of

the women around her. The glances and whispers of the women, exchanged like clandestine messages, pierce through her, triggering intense anxiety, a cascade of emotions, and hyperventilation. The communal tandoor, beyond its role in baking bread, transforms into a theatre where Mariam's haunted past takes centre stage. As the tension thickens in this communal setting, Mariam's internalised insecurities come to the forefront, creating a mental battleground where she feels exposed and vulnerable, casting shadows over her present experiences. The imagined scrutiny from others, rooted in her deep-seated fears of her past and her status as a harami, intensifies her distress, creating a sense of betrayal and disgrace. The physical symptoms of her hyperventilation, sweating hands, and buzzing ears reflect the overwhelming emotional toll of this internal struggle. The imagery of Mariam backing away, trapped in the centre of a circle with no escape, symbolises her isolation and the inescapable nature of her haunted past. This incident serves as a poignant moment that highlights how Mariam's own perceptions and fears continue to shape her interactions and exacerbate her deep-seated insecurities, perpetuating the haunting echoes of her past.

Mariam, moving through her role as a submissive wife with mechanical precision, finds a glimmer of hope in her dark existence when she discovers she is pregnant, which brings her joy. This fleeting moment of happiness, a rare occurrence in her chronicle of misfortunes, is vividly depicted in Chapter thirteen (13). During a bus ride home with an excited Rasheed after a visit to the doctor, Mariam's joy manifests in a peculiar way.

On the bus ride home from the doctor, the strangest thing was happening to Mariam. Everywhere she looked, she saw bright colors: on the drab, gray concrete apartments, on the tin-roofed,

open-fronted stores, in the muddy water flowing in the gutters. It was as though a rainbow had melted into her eyes. (p. 87)

Mariam's genuine joy in anticipating motherhood reflects her resilience amid life's challenges. In the same chapter, she strokes her belly, symbolising her deep maternal connection and emphasising the significance of impending parenthood, while recalling the words of the doctor; "*No bigger than a fingernail*, the doctor had said". Repeatedly uttering, "I'm going to be a mother," she internalises this newfound identity, laughing and relishing the words;

*"I'm going to be a mother*, she thought. || I'm going to be a mother," she said. Then she was laughing to herself and saying it over and over, relishing the words. When Mariam thought of this baby, her heart swelled inside of her. It swelled and swelled until all the loss, all the grief, all the loneliness and self-abasement of her life washed away" (p. 89).

And then, with reference to a verse in the Koran taught to her by Mullah Faizullah, she says a prayer ("*namaz*"). This fleeting joy, highlighted by a Koran verse and an earnest prayer, gains poignant significance in retrospect, adding complexity to Mariam's character amidst the challenges ahead. The pregnancy not only brings hope but also a new sense of purpose and meaning to Mariam's life. Regrettably, Mariam's happiness proves fleeting as she faces the heartbreaking loss of her unborn child. In the aftermath, her mother's negative words become a haunting refrain in her mind, especially during moments of adversity, reinforcing the notion that life is an unrelenting endurance test for women like her. Consumed by the internalised belief that she is undeserving of happiness and should be punished for her mother's death, Mariam grapples with profound self-doubt and feelings of inadequacy. In response to this internal turmoil, Mariam adopts coping

strategies, a subject that will be delved into in the present study, as a means to navigate the painful memories of her past and the burden of guilt she carries. The depth of her struggle becomes unmistakable, particularly when confronted with the loss of her baby. This internal conflict is further amplified by Mariam's recurring nightmares, where her mother's jinn, symbolising her unresolved guilt and self-blame, cruelly steals her baby.

But Mariam's grief wasn't aimless or unspecific. Mariam grieved for this baby, this particular child, who **had made her so happy for a while.**

Some days, she believed that the baby had been **an undeserved blessing**, that she was being punished for what she had done to Nana. **Wasn't it true that she might as well have slipped that noose around her mother's neck herself?** Treacherous daughters did not deserve to be mothers, and this was just punishment. She had fitful dreams, of Nana's jinn sneaking into her room at night, burrowing its claws into her womb, and stealing her baby. In these dreams, Nana cackled with delight and vindication. (p. 93) **[Emphasis mine]**

Mariam's grief following the loss of her child is neither aimless nor vague; it is a specific and poignant lamentation for the baby that briefly brought joy into her tumultuous life. On certain days, she contemplates the child as an undeserved blessing, interpreting the loss as a form of punishment for her perceived sins, particularly for what she believes she did to Nana. Mariam grapples with the notion that, metaphorically, she might as well have placed the noose around her mother's neck—an act of treachery that, in her view, disqualifies her from the joys of motherhood. These nightmares intensify these feelings of undeserved motherhood, portraying Nana's jinn infiltrating her room at night, viciously penetrating her womb, and stealing her baby. In these haunting dreams, Nana cackles with delight and vindication, deepening Mariam's internal conflict. The nightmares serve as a potent reminder of Mariam's unresolved conflicts, her perceived role in her mother's

death, and the emotional turmoil she grapples with. They add intricate layers of complexity to Mariam's character, revealing the depth of her internal struggles and the profound impact of her haunted past on her psyche.

Rasheed's transformation into an abusive figure becomes starkly evident following Mariam's series of miscarriages. His relentless reminders of her *harami* status, coupled with abusive treatment, coerce Mariam into a state of conformity as a survival strategy, particularly in the aftermath of a traumatic incident in a public bathhouse where she lost her first baby. Initially, Rasheed's suggestion to visit the *hamam* was not merely a gesture of shared experience; it was a thoughtful gift, a manifestation of praise, pride, and kindness towards Mariam, celebrating her pregnancy. The tragic events at the bathhouse, poignantly captured in the text, mark a turning point in their relationship: "Mariam sat in the far corner by herself, working on her heels with a pumice stone, insulated by a wall of steam from the passing shapes. Then there was blood, and she was screaming" (pp. 89-90). This traumatic incident, coupled with Mariam's subsequent miscarriages, serves as a catalyst for Rasheed's unsettling transformation.

Subsequent to the incident, Rasheed undergoes a palpable change in demeanour. His nightly routine becomes marked by silence, with minimal communication upon returning home. He withdraws into himself, displaying a newfound roughness during intimate encounters. His interactions with Mariam become increasingly strained, characterised by sulking, fault-finding, and a notable lack of affection. The Fridays that were once an occasion for shared outings lose their warmth, with Rasheed walking ahead in silence, indifferent to Mariam's attempts to keep pace. His diminished interest in laughter, gifts,

and sweet gestures signals a growing emotional distance. Mariam's inquiries now seem to irritate him, reflecting a shift from the camaraderie that once defined their relationship. The *hamam*, initially a symbol of kindness and celebration, paradoxically becomes a precursor to the erosion of Mariam's happiness, marking the beginning of a period of emotional and physical abuse that shapes the trajectory of her already tumultuous life.

Over the course of four years following the traumatic bathhouse incident, Mariam endures six cycles of hope and despair, each miscarriage widening the emotional chasm between her and Rasheed. Her attempts to please him, whether through maintaining the household or adorning herself with makeup, prove futile, as even the simplest gestures are met with his distaste. Rasheed's emotional withdrawal takes a toll on Mariam, deepening her sense of shame and contributing to a decline in self-esteem, fostering an overwhelming sense of isolation. Coping with this emotional distance, Mariam leans into her role as a submissive wife, seeking validation from Rasheed and avoiding the painful memories of her childhood and family's past. However, these memories resurface during challenging times, particularly in the face of repeated miscarriages. Simultaneously, Mariam's acceptance of her situation and internalisation of her mother's disparaging words reveal entrenched self-esteem issues, underscoring the enduring emotional burden of her past. The haunting echoes of her mother's comments reinforce Mariam's belief in the inevitability of suffering for women like her. This struggle is echoed in her mother's metaphorical words about snowflakes, encapsulating the quiet endurance of women's collective suffering across generations.

She remembered Nana saying once that each snowflake was a sigh heaved by an aggrieved woman somewhere in the world.



That all the sighs drifted up the sky, gathered into clouds, then broke into tiny pieces that fell silently on the people below. ||  
*As a reminder of how women like us suffer, she'd said. How quietly we endure all that falls upon us.* (p. 91)

Mariam's journey into motherhood becomes a pivotal point of departure from her haunted past. The echoes of her history propel her towards a form of protective motherhood that transcends biological ties. Her resolute determination to break the cycle of pain and abandonment signifies a conscious effort to redefine the narrative for her own children, even though she remains childless. Silima (2013) sheds light on Mariam's distinctive form of motherhood, finding solace and joy in her companionship with Laila and her children, Aziza and Zalmai. This connection, despite the initial apprehension towards Laila, who is her rival and the second wife to Rasheed, brings Mariam the long-yearned-for identity of a mother. An illustrative moment occurs in the thirty-ninth chapter, where Laila is in labour. Mariam's protective instincts come to the forefront as she bravely navigates a chaotic crowd to secure medical attention and treatment for Laila, which they finally receive after a long wait, and Mariam supportively stays with Laila throughout the delivery process (285-292).

Mariam waded in. She dug in her heels and burrowed against the elbows, hips, and shoulder blades of strangers. Someone elbowed her in the ribs, and she elbowed back. A hand made a desperate grab at her face. She swatted it away. To propel herself forward, Mariam clawed at necks, at arms and elbows, at hair, and, when a woman nearby hissed, Mariam hissed back. Mariam saw now the sacrifices a mother made. Decency was but one. She thought ruefully of Nana, of the sacrifices that she too had made. Nana, who could have given her away, or tossed her in a ditch somewhere and run. But she hadn't. Instead, Nana had endured the shame of bearing a harami, had shaped her life around the thankless task of raising Mariam and, in her own way, of loving her. And, in the end, Mariam had chosen Jalil over her. As she fought her way with impudent resolve to the front of the melee, Mariam wished she had been

a better daughter to Nana. She wished she'd understood then what she understood now about motherhood. (p. 287)

This challenging experience opens Mariam's eyes to the sacrifices mothers make. She contemplates the sacrifices of her own mother, Nana, acknowledging the enduring struggles Nana faced while raising her. In this intense moment, Mariam grapples with the complexities of motherhood, realising the depth of Nana's sacrifices and lamenting that she had not been a better daughter. Unfortunately, Mariam's newfound understanding of motherhood comes too late, as Nana is no longer alive to witness her transformative revelation. The reflection on motherhood triggered by the labour scene becomes a backdrop for another instance that showcases Mariam's selflessness and protective motherliness. Another scene where Mariam's protective instincts are triggered is when:

Aziza pushed the TV's POWER button. Rasheed scowled, snatched her wrist and set it on the table, not gently at all.

"This is Zalmi's TV," he said.

**Aziza went over to Mariam and climbed in her lap. The two of them were inseparable now.** Of late, with Laila's blessing, Mariam had started teaching Aziza verses from the Koran. Aziza could already recite by heart the surah of ikhlas, the surah of fatiha, and already knew how to perform the four ruqats of morning prayer. || *It's all I have to give her*, Mariam had said to Laila, *this knowledge, these prayers. They're the only true possession I've ever had.* (p. 298)

Mariam's protective motherhood instinct is rekindled here as she provides solace and comfort to Aziza in the aftermath of Rasheed's scolding. As Aziza climbs into Mariam's lap, their inseparable bond is evident, emphasising the emotional refuge that Mariam provides. The contrast between Rasheed's stern actions and Mariam's comforting presence highlights the dichotomy of influences on Aziza's life. With Laila's support, Mariam imparts valuable teachings to Aziza, fostering her intellectual and spiritual

development. Despite the weight of Rasheed's displeasure, within Mariam's lap, Aziza finds not only comfort but also a conduit for spiritual and intellectual nourishment. This act becomes a profound expression of Mariam's protective instincts and her desire to provide Aziza with something meaningful in the absence of material possessions. Mariam's acknowledgment that imparting knowledge and prayers is her only true possession reflects her selflessness and underscores the depth of her commitment to Aziza's well-being. Her statement crystallises the essence of Mariam's motherhood—a selfless offering of intangible but invaluable gifts, a testimony to her enduring commitment to Aziza's holistic well-being. This moment encapsulates Mariam's unique and selfless form of motherhood, grounded in the nurturing of the mind and spirit when material resources are scarce. Hamid & Tiwari (2019) align with the narrative of motherhood and sacrifice, emphasising these as empowering forces that enable women to discover purpose and meaning amid challenging circumstances. Silima's (2013) observations further illuminate that women, despite enduring hardships, learn to live selflessly for others without seeking personal gain. In Mariam's case, her childlessness does not limit her capacity for solace and joy, as found in her relationships with Laila and Aziza. Mariam emerges as a symbol of selfless motherhood, showcasing profound love that extends to committing the drastic act of killing her husband.

But then his upper lip curled back into a spiteful sneer, and Mariam knew then the futility, maybe even the irresponsibility, of not finishing this. If she let him walk now, how long before he fetched the key from his pocket and went for that gun of his upstairs in the room where he'd locked Zalmi? Had Mariam been certain that he would be satisfied with shooting only her, that there was a chance he would spare Laila, she might have dropped the shovel. But in Rasheed's eyes she saw murder for

them both. || And so Mariam raised the shovel high, raised it as high as she could, arching it so it touched the small of her back. She turned it so the sharp edge was vertical, and, as she did, it occurred to her that this was the first time that she was deciding the course of her own life. || And, with that, Mariam brought down the shovel. This time, she gave it everything she had. (pp. 348-349)

Mariam's journey into motherhood continues to stand as a testament to the enduring echoes of her haunted past, resonating through the choices she makes until the very end. Mariam's protective instincts towards Laila and her children provide a nuanced exploration of resilience and transformation. Silima (2013) points out that Mariam harbours no remorse for this action, except for the unintended consequence affecting Zalmai, Rasheed's favoured son. Again, the scene following Rasheed's murder, where Mariam contemplates escape with Laila, seeking refuge for themselves and the children (pp.353-359), is the culmination of her transformative narrative. Her protective instincts, forged through a lifetime scarred by abandonment and societal condemnation, shine through. As she comforts Laila, Mariam not only provides solace but also reassures her about the possibility of a better life beyond this harrowing incident. In an act of maternal guidance, Mariam encourages Laila to embrace her role as a mother and take decisive actions for the well-being of her children, Aziza and Zalmai. Knowing that this plan of escape marks the end for her, Mariam selflessly imparts crucial directions, embodying a sacrificial determination that underscores the depth of her maternal love and the enduring impact of her haunted past on her choices.

"Don't walk. Take the bus, you'll blend in. Taxis are too conspicuous. You're sure to get stopped for riding alone." || "What you promised last night . . ." || Laila could not finish. The trees, the lake, the nameless village. A delusion, she saw. A lovely lie meant to soothe. Like cooing to a distressed child. || "I meant it," Mariam said. "I meant it for you, Laila jo." || ...

|| Mariam twiddled a strand of Laila's hair, untangled a stubborn curl. || "For me, it ends here. There's nothing more I want. || Everything I'd ever wished for as a little girl you've already given me. You and your children have made me so very happy. It's all right, Laila jo. This is all right. Don't be sad." (p. 356-358)

The sacrifice she contemplates is not merely an escape from a vengeful husband but a relinquishing of her own chance at freedom. Mariam's haunted past, marked by the stigma of being a harami, guides her decisions. She recognises that even in fleeing, the spectre of guilt and grief would persist, particularly for Laila's son, whom she unintentionally deprives of a father. This echoes Mariam's overarching narrative, where the haunting echoes of her past dictate her actions. Mariam's tenderness is also revealed as she twiddles a strand of Laila's hair. Her declaration, "For me, it ends here. There's nothing more I want," (p. 357) resonates with a sense of resolution and fulfilment. The acknowledgment that Laila and her children have fulfilled all her childhood wishes reflects the transformative power of their relationship. Mariam's reassurance to Laila, "It's all right, Laila jo. This is all right. Don't be sad," (p. 357) showcases her selflessness and acceptance of the impending tragedy. This brief but potent excerpt encapsulates Mariam's journey into contentment and the unexpected joy found in her later years. Her selfless choice to face the consequences, driven by an understanding of maternal responsibility, reflects a protective motherhood that transcends biological ties. Mariam's journey, intertwined with echoes of her history, exemplifies how the trauma of her past continues to shape her, propelling her towards a motherhood defined by love, sacrifice, and an unwavering commitment to those she holds dear.

## Conclusion

This chapter examines the lingering echoes of haunted pasts that shape the trajectories of the central characters, Amir and Mariam, in Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. Employing psychoanalytic theory, Bowen's family systems theory, and Derrida's hauntology, the chapter delves into the childhood experiences of the protagonists and their influence on the unfolding narratives of their lives through memories represented as haunting pasts. Through a psychological exploration of Amir and Mariam, the chapter highlights their emotional struggles, psychological growth, and the ways in which unresolved trauma shapes their identities and life choices. Examining the themes of family dynamics and childhood trauma, this chapter emphasises these themes as crucial to understanding the experiences of the protagonists.

The exploration of Amir and Mariam's lives reveals haunting childhood experiences shaping emotional and behavioural impacts. Both characters bear the burden of self-blame for the tragic deaths of loved ones, with Amir haunted by the fates of Hassan and Sohrab, while Mariam grapples with her mother's suicide. The pursuit of paternal love, which turns to tragic rejection, propels them towards regrettable actions and shapes the trajectories of their lives with enduring consequences. Amir reacts impulsively, haunted by Baba's reminders, while Mariam resigns to internalised guilt in an abusive marriage. Both adopt a punitive silence; Mariam's is robotic, fulfilling duties and seeking validation, and Amir's is contemplative, haunted by Baba. These responses show the impact of their pasts, turning the pursuit of love into rejection, shaping divergent coping mechanisms. The chapter also unravels

distinctive manifestations of the Oedipal (male and female) complex in the novels through Bowen's triangle concept, focusing on the characters' quest for paternal love.

In essence, the protagonists' Amir and Mariam's haunted pasts are tapestries woven with intricate threads that shape their identity, influence their relationships, dictate their coping mechanisms, and frame their aspirations for the future. From the struggles of alienation to the transformative power of love, sacrifice, duty and moral obligation, and motherhood, Amir and Mariam's journeys are a reflection of the indomitable human spirit. Despite the haunting memories and societal stigma, the characters Amir and Mariam emerge as a testament to resilience and inner strength. The exploration of coping mechanisms in the next chapter reveals the nuanced ways in which the echoes of Mariam's past reverberate through her life, delving into how she responds to and deals with the impact of her traumatic past. Their ability to endure, adapt, and find purpose in the face of adversity encapsulates the complexity of their narrative. Through the stories of Amir and Mariam, we witness the enduring power of the human spirit to transcend the shadows of the past and forge a path towards self-discovery, resilience, and the pursuit of a meaningful existence.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### A HOLLOW EXISTENCE: SURVIVING THE PAST IN HOSSEINI'S

#### *KITE RUNNER AND A THOUSAND SPLENDID SUNS*

##### Introduction

The previous chapter provided the first analysis, a response to the first research question of this thesis, delving into the memories that haunt the protagonists [the Daunting Past] in the two primary texts for this study. The chapter first covered the first primary text, *The Kite Runner*, examining the memories and family dynamics of the protagonist, Amir, who is also the narrator, through his narration, utilising Derrida's concept of Hauntology and the Bowen Family (psychoanalytic) theory. Utilising the same theory and concept, the next part of the chapter covered the second primary text, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, also examining the memories and family dynamics of the protagonist, Mariam (not the narrator in this case). This chapter, also in two parts, responds to the second research question of this study: What defense mechanisms and coping strategies do the protagonists employ to grapple with the enduring effects of their haunting childhood experiences? In this chapter, we delve into the psychological coping mechanisms employed by the characters Amir and Mariam in Hosseini's novels as protective shields against emotional distress.

This chapter highlights the lasting impact of childhood trauma and the toxicity of complex family dynamics on the trajectories of the protagonists and their relationships. In literary scholarship, characters serve as focal points for thematic exploration, allowing scholars to analyse recurring patterns in plot, character development, symbolism, setting, and dialogue. These elements



contribute to the central message of a narrative by reflecting the author's perspective and reinforcing key themes. In this study, the motivations, flaws, and transformations of Amir and Mariam are examined to understand how their experiences shape their psychological responses. While this study is explicitly framed as a thematic study and a literary psychoanalytic reading, it inherently follows the personal, emotional, and psychological growth of the characters. Thus, rather than a character development study, the focus remains on the thematic exploration of childhood trauma and complex family dynamics. Accordingly, this chapter examines the defense mechanisms and coping strategies that Amir and Mariam employ to navigate their haunted pasts.

Defense mechanisms are integral to understanding the psychological depth of characters. Examining how characters employ these mechanisms reveals how they process past experiences and trauma. Sigmund Freud contends that when individuals find themselves in psychologically perilous or menacing circumstances, they often turn to defense mechanisms to safeguard their psychological well-being. In the field of psychoanalysis, a perilous threat refers to anything that poses a challenge to the individual's self-concept or self-esteem (Baumeister, Dale, & Sommer, 1998). When individuals face situations or thoughts that challenge their self-concept or self-esteem, they may unconsciously employ these defense mechanisms as a way to cope and alleviate the associated psychological discomfort. Understanding the role of these defence mechanisms in the characters' lives enriches the analysis of their psychological coping strategies and resilience throughout the novel. Freud's theory of defence mechanisms offers valuable insights into the ways

individuals manage and process distressing experiences, illuminating the complexities of human behaviour and coping strategies in the face of adversity. By delving into the coping strategies or mechanisms of the characters, we can gain a deeper understanding of their psychological journey and the ways in which they grapple with their past and strive for personal growth and redemption.

To understand the coping strategies or mechanisms the characters employ to shield themselves, we must first try to grasp the extent of the impact of the traumatic experiences that haunt them. When an individual consciously and forcefully tries to push memories aside permanently but finds that these memories keep resurfacing involuntarily, it can be a complex psychological process that can also be an indication of unresolved psychological issues (Freud, 1936; Freud, 1892). The purpose is to try to minimise feelings of guilt and anxiety. This may involve elements of both suppression and repression. Initially, the individual actively tries to suppress the memories, which is a conscious effort. They may believe that by pushing these memories away forcefully, they can avoid dealing with the associated emotions and distress. Over time, if these memories continue to resurface despite the individual's efforts to suppress them, it can become a form of repression. Repression operates at an unconscious level, where the mind pushes distressing thoughts, emotions, or memories into the subconscious to protect the individual from psychological pain (Freud, 1936; Freud, 1892). When the memories keep “sneaking up” on the person, it suggests that the mind is not fully successful in repressing them. Intrusive memories can manifest as flashbacks, nightmares, or unexpected thoughts and emotions that seem to come out of nowhere. This

pattern of memories resurfacing despite suppression and potential repression may indicate that there are unresolved psychological issues related to those memories (Freud, 1936; Freud, 1892). These issues may need to be addressed through therapy or other forms of psychological support. It is a common theme in literature and psychology, where characters or individuals grapple with the persistence of painful memories despite their attempts to move forward in life.

### **Part 1|| *The Kite Runner* (2003)**

#### **The Lingering Shadows of Past Sins & The Burden of Repression: Amir's Guilt-Ridden Journey**

In Hosseini's novel *The Kite Runner*, the protagonist Amir, grapples with the haunting memories of his past actions, particularly his failure to defend his childhood friend Hassan from a brutal assault. Examining his anxiety and motive, Tamara and Rafqi (2020) assert that the character Amir suffers from realistic, neurotic, and moral anxiety, which all stem from his betrayal of Hassan and his fear of Assef. Both Jaya (2017) and Tamara and Rafqi (2020) acknowledge the complexity of Amir's character. They highlight the internal conflicts and struggles he faces, which contribute to his multidimensional portrayal. Amir's actions are seen as more reactive. He was overwhelmed with emotions he could not control. He did not have, nor could he maintain, a clear sense of "self" and had no sense of emotional autonomy as he sought his father's validation. In his childhood, he had a very low level of differentiation of self (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Applying Bowen's position/view on the concept of differentiation of self, it is evident that Amir could not manage his own emotions and reactions, which led him to ruin his relationship and only

friendship with Hassan. His father's almost non-existent/lack of affection and good communication cannot be ignored as the major factor in Amir's emotional turmoil and wars, and most of all, his reactive behaviours and actions. In this nuclear family emotional system, Amir felt that he was the least favoured as he witnessed his father's affectionate praises, overprotectiveness, and easy forgiveness being showered upon the servant Hassan. Amir's father's secret, which is later revealed, catapults into the unresolved emotional issue that he projects onto his sons, which greatly contributes to Amir's destructive behaviour. Bowen's emotional cut-off concept is at play here, as Amir and his father's relationship reflects this concept. As Amir tries to gain his father's attention, affection, and a closer relationship, his father, Baba, maintains an emotional distance. Amir, having learned of the way his mother died—during his birth, believed that he was the cause. This, he thinks, is the reason for his father's hatred or dislike of him [Amir] and his emotional distance.

Baba is a character worth analysing in light of the Bowen theory. As a parent, being the adult and the main provider and carer in the home, he is responsible for the overall growth (physical and emotional) and well-being of his children. The death of his wife could not possibly be the only issue he grapples with. Amir and Hassan were of the same age; therefore, studying the timeline of Hassan's conception, Baba impregnated Hassan's mother while Amir's mother still lived. He has his own guilt and other unresolved issues. Where, then, did Baba's high expectations of Amir emanate from? Was it that Amir just reminded him so much of his wife and his sins against her (his wife, Amir's mother)? What other unresolved issues did he have? Although he was

well-respected in the community, it is apparent that he had many unresolved issues (cultural, social, and emotional factors), some of which he projected onto his own children, especially Amir, causing that emotional cut-off between them.

This emotional cut-off is copied by Amir, who already suffers from a very low level of differentiation of self and struggles to manage his emotions. This is reflective of Bowen's Multigenerational Transmission Process concept, which highlights how patterns of behaviour, emotions, and relationship dynamics are passed down from generation to generation (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). It suggests that individuals are influenced by the emotional patterns, beliefs, and behaviours of their parents and ancestors, which shape their own functioning and relationships. Evidently, Amir is greatly influenced by the emotional patterns, beliefs, and behaviours he witnesses and experiences from his father, which inadvertently shape his own functioning and relationships, particularly with Hassan. As a defense mechanism, Amir mistreats and pushes Hassan away, not realising he is adopting the same emotional patterns as his father. He metes out to Hassan the same emotional cut-off he experiences with his father, falling into a state of denial, displacing or redirecting his unresolved emotions, and trying to forget the painful experiences, particularly his part in the ill-treatment of Hassan—his guilt. He represses his memories until he is confronted by the past. As Kai-fu (2009) argues, Amir's behaviours, such as betrayal, guilt, and redemption, are intricately connected to his psychological development.

With the foundation laid for the profound impact of Amir's traumatic experiences, the focus of this study now shifts to the defense mechanisms that

this central character employs to grapple with his haunting past. The novel provides clear indications and unmistakable cues of the psychological defense mechanisms the protagonist, Amir, employs to manage the emotional burdens tied to his traumatic past. The story's opening chapter exposes the narrator's thoughts, revealing the inner workings of the narrator's mind, where we witness the shadow of repressed memories (Hosseini, 2003; p. 6). This repression, as described by Freudian psychology, is a defense mechanism characterised by the act of suppressing distressing or traumatic memories and emotions deep within the unconscious, thus avoiding their direct confrontation (Freud, 1936; Freud, 1892).

ONE

'December 2001'

I became what I am today at the age of twelve, on a frigid overcast day in the winter of 1975. I remember the precise moment, crouching behind a crumbling mud wall, peeking into the alley near the frozen creek. That was a long time ago, but it's wrong what they say about the past, I've learned, about how you can bury it. Because the past claws its way out. Looking back now, I realize I have been peeking into that deserted alley for the last twenty-six years. (p. 6)

The excerpt masterfully foreshadows the central role that psychological defense mechanisms, especially repression, will play in Amir's life as he grapples with the haunting memories of his childhood. It highlights the notion that traumatic memories, once repressed, remain latent, ready to resurface and exert their influence on Amir's present and future. In this excerpt from Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*, we are offered a glimpse into the complex psychology of the protagonist, Amir. The story's opening chapter, titled 'December 2001', serves as a poignant entry point into Amir's inner world. Here, we find Amir as the narrator, reflecting on events that transpired in the winter of 1975 when he was a twelve-year-old boy. The crux of this passage lies in Amir's acknowledgment of repressed memories. As Amir

confides in the reader, he came to be what he is today through a pivotal event from his past. He takes the reader back to that moment of revelation, huddled behind a crumbling mud wall, peering into a desolate alley near a frozen creek. This glimpse into his past, which transpired many years ago, is a powerful testament to the enduring nature of traumatic memories. Amir's admission, "...that was a long time ago, but it's wrong what they say about the past, I've learned, about how you can bury it. Because the past claws its way out," (p. 1) unveils a profound psychological truth. It is here that we can identify the presence of the defense mechanism known as repression. Freudian in nature, repression is the act of pushing distressing or traumatic memories deep into the unconscious in an attempt to avoid confronting them directly. Amir's recognition of this past's persistent, clawing nature indicates that his attempts to repress these memories have not been entirely successful. This defense mechanism, while momentarily effective, ultimately fails to fully suppress the impact of his past experiences.

The turning point in Amir's life occurs when he witnesses Hassan being assaulted by Assef, an event that profoundly influences his emotions and actions throughout the novel. As a young boy, Amir is paralysed by fear and fails to intervene, leading to years of guilt and shame. This traumatic incident becomes a haunting memory that Amir desperately tries to suppress through repression. Repression acts as a protective shield for Amir, enabling him to distance himself from the overwhelming emotions tied to the assault. By burying these painful memories deep within his subconscious, Amir attempts to maintain a semblance of normalcy and protect his self-image. Amir employs various coping mechanisms, including repression, denial, deflection,

and displacement, which significantly shape his psychological response to distressing experiences. However, the predominant defense mechanism at play in the novel, used by Amir to bury his guilt and painful memories, is repression. Repression, initially conceptualised by Sigmund Freud, is the mechanism through which one unconsciously suppresses distressing emotions, urges, memories, and thoughts, preventing them from entering the conscious mind (Freud, 1936; Freud, 1892). The fundamental objective of this defense mechanism is to mitigate the sensations of guilt and anxiety associated with these repressed elements. These grave secrets have resurfaced in his consciousness over the course of twenty-six years. A close analysis of pivotal moments in the novel reveals how repression functions both as a shield and a burden for Amir, influencing his emotional struggles and character development.

The tone of the novel is reflective and somewhat melancholic. As explained in chapter three (3) of this thesis, the narrator, Amir, is looking back on a pivotal moment from his past and expressing a sense of realisation about the enduring impact of that moment on his life.

I became what I am today at the age of twelve, on a frigid overcast day in the winter of 1975. I remember the precise moment, crouching behind a crumbling mud wall, peeking into the alley near the frozen creek. That was a long time ago, but it's wrong what they say about the past, I've learned, about how you can bury it. Because the past claws its way out. Looking back now, I realize I have been peeking into that deserted alley for the last twenty-six years. (p. 1)

The adjectives “frigid” and “overcast,” describing a grave, cold, unfriendly setting, portray how grave the situation of the said memory is and the tremendous impact it has had on him over many years— since he was twelve in 1975 till date, 2001. There is a hint of regret or nostalgia in the tone



as the protagonist and narrator, Amir, acknowledges that the past cannot be easily buried or forgotten. In Kai-fu's (2009) study, Amir reaches a third stage of psychosocial development, which encompasses self-accusation and role confusion as he grapples with his guilt and struggles to find his identity.

When the narrator mentions becoming "what I am today" at the age of twelve, he implies that something significant happened during that time, which indicates that he is reflecting on a pivotal childhood event that he may have repressed. The narrator vividly remembers the "*precise moment*" from his past when he was "*crouching behind a crumbling mud wall, peeking into the alley near the frozen creek.*" (p. 1). The clarity of this memory suggests that it was deeply ingrained in his mind despite the passage of time, which is characteristic of repressed traumatic memories resurfacing. The narrator acknowledges a lesson learned: the past cannot be easily buried. Saying that "*it's wrong what they say about the past*" (p. 1) suggests awareness, an acknowledgement that he has attempted to bury or repress certain memories or experiences. The narrator uses the metaphor "the past claws its way out" (p. 1) to describe how the past resurfaces, which also implies that there has been an ongoing effort to keep the past suppressed, but it still manages to resurface, a common characteristic of repressed memories.

One day last summer, my friend Rahim Khan called from Pakistan. He asked me to come see him. Standing in the kitchen with the receiver to my ear, I knew it wasn't just Rahim Khan on the line. It was my past of unatoned sins. After I hung up, I went for a walk along Spreckels Lake on the northern edge of Golden Gate Park. The early-afternoon sun sparkled on the water where dozens of miniature boats sailed, propelled by a crisp breeze. Then I glanced up and saw a pair of kites, red with long blue tails, soaring in the sky. They danced high above the trees on the west end of the park, over the windmills, floating side by side like a pair of eyes looking down on San Francisco, the city I now call home. **And suddenly Hassan's voice**

**whispered in my head: ‘For you, a thousand times over’.**  
**Hassan the harelippped kite runner. (p. 1)**

When the narrator receives a call from Rahim Khan, they mention that it is not just Rahim Khan on the line but also their “past of unatoned sins,” (p. 1) suggesting that the memories from their past are associated with guilt or wrongdoing, which can be a reason for repression.

I sat on a park bench near a willow tree. I thought about something Rahim Khan said just before he hung up, almost as an after thought. **‘There is a way to be good again’.** I looked up at those twin kites. I thought about Hassan. Thought about Baba. Ali. Kabul. I thought of the life I had lived until the winter of 1975 came and changed everything. And made me what I am today. (p. 1)

The sight of kites in the sky triggers a specific memory of Hassan, a figure from the past, and a phrase he used to say. It is noteworthy that Amir’s adult self acknowledges the negative attitudes and harsh treatment he exhibited towards Hassan during his youth, which aligns with the researches conducted by Jaya (2019) and Tamara and Rafqi (2020). This moment serves as a prime example of how repressed memories have a way of resurfacing when confronted with related stimuli. The sight of kites in the sky, a recurring motif throughout the narrative, acts as a powerful trigger for Amir, bringing to the forefront not only his fond memories of Hassan but also the guilt and jealousy he had long suppressed. This self-realisation mirrors the findings of the studies of Jaya (2019) and Tamara and Rafqi (2020) and offers another example of repressed memories resurfacing when confronted with stimuli related to his past. Jaya (2019), in particular, emphasises the internal conflicts and struggles within Amir’s character, shedding light on the multidimensional nature of his portrayal. Tamara and Rafqi’s (2020) study similarly underscores the complexity of Amir’s character, highlighting how his past actions and

emotions continue to exert an influence on his present self. The convergence of these scholarly insights reveals a narrative that masterfully explores the intricacies of the human psyche as Amir's character grapples with repressed memories and their profound impact on his adult life. In this context, Amir's recognition of his past behaviour towards Hassan serves as a powerful testament to the enduring consequences of unresolved emotions and past actions.

The excerpt exhibits a reflective and introspective tone, which is often observed in individuals as they begin to grapple with repressed memories resurfacing in their conscious awareness. This introspection aligns with the findings of Jaya (2017) and Tamara and Rafqi (2020) in their analyses of Amir's character development. Both studies emphasise the significance of internal conflict and self-reflection in Amir's journey, which is precisely the elements we observe in this passage. Amir's vivid recollection of a past event, his acknowledgement of the past persistently resurfacing despite attempts to bury it, and the strong association of these memories with feelings of guilt collectively hint at the narrator's ongoing struggle with repressed memories and emotions from his childhood. This not only resonates with the concept of repression but also underscores the depth of Amir's psychological complexity. These elements, as illuminated by Jaya's (2017) and Tamara and Rafqi's (2020) works, reinforce the idea that Amir's character is intricately entwined with his past, laden with repressed memories and unresolved emotions. The process of confronting these repressed memories, as depicted in this passage, is a pivotal turning point in Amir's character arc as he begins to grapple with the emotional baggage that has lingered from his youth.

Confronting the consequences of his betrayal is a distressing prospect for Amir, prompting him to resort to denial and deflection as coping strategies. He avoids acknowledging his past mistakes, especially his failure to defend Hassan, in order to protect his self-image and avoid feelings of shame and remorse. Amir, who witnessed the distressing event of Hassan's rape, avoids acknowledging it directly. Instead, he turns away from the alley, bites his fist hard enough to draw blood, and starts weeping (p. 42). Amir tries to convince himself that he ran because he was afraid of Assef and getting hurt, rather than facing the guilt or shame associated with not standing up for Hassan.

I had one last chance to make a decision. One final opportunity to decide who I was going to be. I could step into that alley, stand up for Hassan--the way he'd stood up for me all those times in the past--and accept whatever would happen to me. Or I could run. In the end, I ran. I ran because I was a coward. I was afraid of Assef and what he would do to me. I was afraid of getting hurt. That's what I told myself as I turned my back to the alley, to Hassan. That's what I made myself believe. I actually aspired to cowardice, because the alternative, the real reason I was running, was that Assef was right: Nothing was free in this world. Maybe Hassan was the price I had to pay, the lamb I had to slay, to win Baba. Was it a fair price? The answer floated to my conscious mind before I could thwart it: He was just a Hazara, wasn't he? (p. 61)

This self-deception is a classic trait of denial and deflection, as it involves rationalising actions to avoid confronting uncomfortable truths. Amir's internal dialogue reflects his attempt to deny the true reasons for his actions, downplaying the significance of his betrayal. Even in his acknowledgement of the truth—the real reason why he ran—he rationalises his truth by saying that Hassan could be the sacrifice to gain his true desire, the sacrificial lamb to be slain to win his father's love and affection. He minimises Hassan's importance by stating, "He was just a Hazara, wasn't he?" (p. 61) This demonstrates his effort to deny the emotional weight of his

actions. In a study analysing the character's psychosocial development through the lens of Erik Erikson's theory, Kai-fu, (2019) identified that the character's stages of psychosocial development were characterised by a complex interplay of emotions, including guilt, remorse, inferiority, jealousy, and self-accusation, which is reflected *The Kite Runner*. When Amir and Hassan meet again, they avoid discussing the incident in the alley.

“Where were you? I looked for you,” I said. Speaking those words was like chewing on a rock. Hassan dragged a sleeve across his face, wiped snot and tears. I waited for him to say something, but we just stood there in silence, in the fading light. I was grateful for the early-evening shadows that fell on Hassan's face and concealed mine. I was glad I didn't have to return his gaze. Did he know I knew? And if he knew, then what would I see if I did look in his eyes? Blame? Indignation? Or, God forbid, what I feared most: guileless devotion? That, most of all, I couldn't bear to see. He began to say something and his voice cracked. He closed his mouth, opened it, and closed it again. Took a step back. Wiped his face. And that was as close as Hassan and I ever came to discussing what had happened in the alley. I thought he might burst into tears, but, to my relief, he didn't, and I pretended I hadn't heard the crack in his voice. Just like I pretended I hadn't seen the dark stain in the seat of his pants. Or those tiny drops that fell from between his legs and stained the snow black. (pp. 61-62)

Amir suspects and fears that Hassan may be aware that he witnessed the incident. This suggests a form of projection, where Amir's own guilt and awareness of his betrayal are projected onto Hassan as if Hassan possesses knowledge and judgement. Projection is a defense mechanism where individuals attribute their own unwanted thoughts, feelings, or motives to another person. Amir's guilt is evident when, instead of showing concern for Hassan, who appears battered, he deflects by simply asking, ‘Where were you?’ Their reluctance to discuss the incident further indicates Amir's denial, manifested through deflection. His adult self acknowledges how he intentionally ignored the bloodied stain on Hassan's pants, confirming his refusal to acknowledge or confront the traumatic experience he witnessed.

Amir's avoidance of discussing the incident when they meet again is a clear example of deflection, as he diverts the conversation away from the uncomfortable truth. His fear of Hassan's possible awareness and his apprehension about what he might see in Hassan's eyes further illustrate his use of deflection to avoid facing the reality of the situation. Amir's lack of interest in Hassan's well-being after the incident, and his dismissal of Ali's concerns when he asks if something has happened to Hassan indicate a form of denial.

One overcast morning, as I was pushing the boiled egg around on my plate, Ali walked in cradling a pile of chopped wood. I asked him where Hassan was. "He went back to sleep," Ali said, kneeling before the stove. He pulled the little square door open. Ali paused with a log in his hand. A worried look crossed his face. "Lately, it seems all he wants to do is sleep. He does his chores--I see to that--but then he just wants to crawl under his blanket. Can I ask you something?" "If you have to." "After that kite tournament, he came home a little bloodied and his shirt was torn. I asked him what had happened and he said it was nothing, that he'd gotten into a little scuffle with some kids over the kite." I didn't say anything. Just kept pushing the egg around on my plate. "Did something happen to him, Amir agha? Something he's not telling me?" I shrugged. "How should I know?" "You would tell me, nay? Inshallah, you would tell me if something had happened?" "Like I said, how should I know what's wrong with him?" I snapped. "Maybe he's sick. People get sick all the time, Ali. Now, am I going to freeze to death or are you planning on lighting the stove today?" (p. 63)

Amir appears unwilling to acknowledge or confront any potential issues with Hassan. Denial is evident when Amir repeatedly denies any knowledge of what might be happening with Hassan. He deflects Ali's questions and avoids addressing any concerns about Hassan's well-being. When Ali asks if something happened to Hassan, Amir responds, "Like I said, how should I know what's wrong with him?" (p. 63). This response indicates Amir's reluctance to acknowledge or discuss any potential issues related to Hassan. His abrupt shift in the conversation from Ali's questions about Hassan

to complaining about the stove can be seen as a deflection. Instead of addressing the concerns raised about Hassan, he redirects the conversation to an unrelated topic (the stove) to avoid further discussion. Amir avoids Ali's questions by saying, "Now, am I going to freeze to death or are you planning on lighting the stove today?" (p. 44). This is a classic deflection tactic, as he changes the subject to something unrelated to avoid addressing the issue at hand. These defense mechanisms suggest that Amir might be avoiding a deeper emotional issue or conflict related to Hassan. His denial and deflection serve as ways to distance himself from uncomfortable feelings or responsibilities.

There is an indication of projection in Amir's response. Projection, in Freudian psychology (1936), is a defense mechanism where individuals unconsciously ascribe their own undesirable qualities or feelings to another person, enabling them to avoid confronting these emotions within themselves. This process can help protect their self-esteem and reduce anxiety by displacing responsibility for these emotions onto someone else. It is crucial to understand that projection typically operates on an unconscious level, and individuals might not be conscious of the fact that they are projecting their own emotions and characteristics onto others. Amir might be projecting his own reluctance to confront or acknowledge certain issues onto Hassan. Instead of admitting his own emotional struggles or concerns about Hassan, Amir deflects and acts as though he has no knowledge, potentially projecting his own avoidance onto Hassan.

Rationalisation and minimisation may both be observed in Amir's response. Rationalisation, as described by Freud (1936), is a defense

mechanism where individuals justify or explain an unacceptable feeling or behaviour through the use of logical, rational explanations. Essentially, they create seemingly reasonable excuses or justifications to make their actions or emotions appear more socially acceptable or less problematic than they actually are. This defense mechanism helps individuals maintain their self-esteem and reduce cognitive dissonance by making their behaviour seem more in line with their ideal self-image. Minimisation is a related concept, although it is not always classified as a defense mechanism in traditional psychoanalytic theory. Minimisation involves downplaying or underestimating the significance of an event, feeling, or behaviour. According to [renewalcenter.org](http://renewalcenter.org), “it is trying to reduce the apparent size of a sin or trauma, which is usually done through logical distortions.” The Berkeley Well-Being Institute adds that it “allows a person to decrease the intensity of a situation, which in turn reduces the emotional response to that situation” ([www.berkeleywellbeing.com](http://www.berkeleywellbeing.com)). Individuals may use minimisation to make something appear less important or less harmful than it truly is, which can also serve to protect their self-esteem or reduce feelings of guilt or shame. Both rationalisation and minimisation can be strategies for avoiding the emotional discomfort associated with acknowledging unacceptable behaviour or feelings. When Amir suggests that Hassan might be sick, he is engaging in rationalisation by providing a seemingly logical explanation for Hassan’s behaviour, making it more acceptable and emotionally manageable for himself. Additionally, his dismissive attitude towards Ali’s concerns can be seen as a form of minimisation, as he downplays the situation by implying that sickness is a



common occurrence. In doing so, Amir attempts to reduce the emotional complexity and discomfort associated with confronting the situation.

Amir's tendency to redirect his unresolved emotions and discomfort towards other endeavours while simultaneously sidelining Hassan is a recurring pattern in the novel. He uses various activities and distractions to escape from the haunting memories and inner turmoil resulting from the traumatic incident with Hassan and his own feelings of guilt. Displacement serves as a form of escapism, providing temporary relief from the emotional burden of his past. Displacement is the act of transferring or redirecting an emotion, often a negative or unacceptable one, from its original target or object to a safer and more acceptable substitute (Freud, 1936). This mechanism allows individuals to cope with their emotions in a way that is less threatening or harmful. In the scene immediately following his interaction with Ali, Amir suggests to his father that they should go to Jalalabad on Friday. Baba agrees, but he also suggests bringing Hassan along which goes against Amir's aim and effort to displace his guilt. This suggestion displeases and discomforts Amir because he prefers to avoid Hassan and the emotional complexities associated with their shared experience. Amir often resorts to such tactics, like lying about Hassan's health, to create distance and avoid confronting the uncomfortable truths tied to their relationship and the traumatic events they both experienced. Amir's behaviour in these situations reflects his ongoing struggle with his past actions, guilt, and shame. He uses external activities and distractions as a way to cope with his inner turmoil and to maintain a sense of normalcy, even if it means sidelining Hassan, who serves as a constant reminder of his unresolved guilt. This pattern of

avoidance and diversion is a key aspect of Amir's character development throughout the novel. As Jaya (2019) and Tamara and Rafqi (2020) astutely observe, Amir's character development reveals the emergence of a latent selfish and jealous tendency. This is reflected in the passage below when asked to invite Hassan.

THAT NIGHT I asked Baba if we could go to Jalalabad on Friday. ... "Why not!" he said. ... "Do you want to ask Hassan to come along to Jalalabad?" Why did Baba have to spoil it like that? "He's mazreez," I said. Not feeling well. "Really?" Baba stopped rocking in his chair. "What's wrong with him?" I gave a shrug and sank in the sofa by the fireplace. "He's got a cold or something. Ali says he's sleeping it off." "I haven't seen much of Hassan the last few days," Baba said. "That's all it is, then, a cold?" I couldn't help hating the way his brow furrowed with worry. "Just a cold. So are we going Friday, Baba?" "Yes, yes," Baba said, pushing away from the desk. "Too bad about Hassan. I thought you might have had more fun if he came." "Well, the two of us can have fun together," I said. Baba smiled. Winked. "Dress warm," IT SHOULD HAVE BEEN just the two of us--that was the way, I wanted it-- (p. 64)

In this scene, Amir employs a combination of defense mechanisms to cope with his feelings of guilt and shame regarding the traumatic incident involving Hassan. Amir is in denial about the true reason Hassan is not accompanying them to Jalalabad. He attributes Hassan's absence to a simple cold and dismisses it as a minor ailment. He displaces his guilt, which is closely tied to Hassan's pain, onto the physical ailment of a cold. By doing this, he separates his emotions from the traumatic event and transfers his feelings of guilt and responsibility onto the idea of a mere illness. This allows him to distance himself from the true source of his discomfort. This is also a form of denial because Amir refuses to acknowledge or admit the deeper issues at play, such as his own guilt and shame regarding the incident with Assef in the alley. He downplays the situation and refrains from discussing the actual trauma Hassan is experiencing, even though he knows the real reason

for Hassan's condition. Amir uses rationalisation to create a seemingly logical explanation for Hassan's absence, allowing him to avoid confronting the uncomfortable truth. Amir deflects the conversation away from Hassan's true state by immediately trying to steer the discussion towards their plans for the trip. He avoids addressing the emotionally charged issue of Hassan's suffering, which would require confronting his own guilt. Instead, he redirects the conversation towards a more comfortable and superficial topic. Amir's interactions with Baba in this scene illustrate his ongoing use of these defense mechanisms to avoid confronting the painful truths related to Hassan and the traumatic events they both experienced.

Despite having convinced his father to go on a trip without Hassan in order to avoid or escape his guilt and shame, Amir is still haunted. In the emotionally charged excerpt below, Amir's profound inner turmoil is evident as he grapples with the guilt of doing nothing to help Hassan. His efforts to evade his guilt and seek refuge in everyday distractions prove futile as the memory of his betrayal continues to torment him, highlighting the enduring impact of his past on his present life.

I closed my eyes, turned my face to the sun. Little shapes formed behind my eyelids, like hands playing shadows on the wall. They twisted, merged, formed a single image: Hassan's brown corduroy pants discarded on a pile of old bricks in the alley. (p. 46)

With Amir's futile effort to find solace in the warmth of the sun and the fleeting images that dance behind his closed eyelids, initially innocent and reminiscent of childhood play, these "little shapes" quickly transform into a distressing and visceral image: Hassan's brown corduroy pants abandoned amid a pile of weathered bricks in the alley. This image serves as a relentless

reminder of Amir's betrayal and the traumatic event he witnessed but chose not to prevent.

An hour later, I still couldn't sleep. I kept tossing and turning as my relatives grunted, sighed, and snored in their sleep. I sat up. A wedge of moonlight streamed in through the window. "I watched Hassan get raped," I said to no one. Baba stirred in his sleep. Kaka Homayoun grunted. A part of me was hoping someone would wake up and hear, so I wouldn't have to live with this lie anymore. But no one woke up and in the silence that followed, I understood the nature of my new curse: I was going to get away with it. I thought about Hassan's dream, the one about us swimming in the lake. There is no monster, he'd said, just water. Except he'd been wrong about that. There was a monster in the lake. It had grabbed Hassan by the ankles, dragged him to the murky bottom. I was that monster. That was the night I became an insomniac. (p. 67)

Amir's physical restlessness, in stark contrast to the peaceful slumber of his relatives, highlights the depth of his inner turmoil. The wedge of moonlight that infiltrates the room accentuates the isolation and starkness of his guilt. In an act of desperation, Amir verbalises the unspeakable truth: "I watched Hassan get raped." This whispered confession represents Amir's yearning for acknowledgement and release from the suffocating guilt he bears. The absence of any response from those around him amplifies Amir's isolation and intensifies his suffering. He hopes against hope that someone might awaken and hear his admission, relieving him of the crushing weight of his guilt. However, the profound silence that ensues only deepens his sense of isolation and the heaviness of his secret. Hassan's dream, which once symbolised innocence and purity, takes on a new, darker meaning for Amir in this passage. He reinterprets the dream, casting himself as the monstrous figure lurking beneath the water's surface. This revelation marks a pivotal moment in Amir's journey, as he fully embraces his guilt and self-condemnation. With Amir's realisation that he has become an insomniac,

unable to find rest or peace, this insomnia is not merely a physical ailment but a manifestation of his tortured conscience, a self-imposed punishment for his betrayal. This also marks the beginning of Amir's nightmare, flipping him into survival mode, where he falls deeper into the rabbit hole, deeper into a bottomless pit, and into an unending maze of torturous guilt and shame.

Upon returning from the family trip, Amir consciously distances himself from Hassan, redirecting his emotions into various creative endeavours like reading, writing, and drawing. These activities serve as an escape from his haunting memories and inner turmoil. Amir's pursuit of creative expression is driven by a desire for validation and approval from his emotionally distant father, further impacting his self-esteem. He acknowledges falling into an illusion during the winter of 1975, a brief period when he felt a sense of closeness and happiness with his father, Baba (Hosseini, 2003; p. 68). They engaged in shared activities and even bonded over Amir's stories. However, Amir recognises that this closeness was fleeting and illusory, representing a temporary respite from their strained father-son relationship. This reflection underscores the complexities of their dynamic and Amir's deep longing for a deeper connection with his father, even if only for a brief moment. Amir's isolation and inner turmoil become apparent as he retreats to his room whenever his father is absent, wholeheartedly engaging in his chosen solitary activities of reading, crafting stories, and honing his skill in drawing horses. He isolates himself from Hassan, only coming out to eat after he's sure Hassan has left. Also, despite his efforts to distance himself from Hassan, Hassan keeps trying to rebuild their relationship.

To my dismay, Hassan kept trying to rekindle things between us. I remember the last time. I was in my room, reading an abbreviated Farsi translation of *Ivanhoe*, when he knocked on my door.

"What is it?"

"I'm going to the baker to buy naan," he said from the other side. "I was wondering if you... if you wanted to come along."

"I think I'm just going to read," I said, rubbing my temples. Lately, every time Hassan was around, I was getting a headache.

"It's a sunny day," he said.

"I can see that"

"Might be fun to go for a walk."

"You go."

"I wish you'd come along," he said. Paused. Something thumped against the door, maybe his forehead. "I don't know what I've done, Amir agha. I wish you'd tell me. I don't know why we don't play anymore."

"You haven't done anything, Hassan. Just go."

"You can tell me, I'll stop doing it."

I buried my head in my lap, squeezed my temples with my knees, like a vice. "I'll tell you what I want you to stop doing," I said, eyes pressed shut.

"Anything."

"I want you to stop harassing me. I want you to go away," I snapped. I wished he would give it right back to me, break the door open and tell me off --it would have made things easier, better. But he didn't do anything like that, and when I opened the door minutes later, he wasn't there. I fell on my bed, buried my head under the pillow, and cried. (p. 68)

This illustrates Amir's growing emotional distance and reluctance to reconnect with Hassan after the traumatic events they both experienced (the rape incident that Hassan experienced and that Amir witnessed). The dialogue between them reveals Amir's growing frustration and desire for Hassan to leave him alone, even though he wishes Hassan would push back or confront him. Ultimately, Amir's emotional turmoil and guilt are palpable as he cries alone in his room, highlighting the strain in his relationship with Hassan and the weight of his unresolved feelings.

HASSAN MILLED ABOUT the periphery of my life after that. I made sure our paths crossed as little as possible, planned my day that way. Because when he was around, the oxygen seeped out of the room. My chest tightened and I couldn't draw enough air; I'd stand there, gasping in my own little airless bubble of atmosphere. But even when he

wasn't around, he was. He was there in the hand-washed and ironed clothes on the cane-seat chair, in the warm slippers left outside my door, in the wood already burning in the stove when I came down for breakfast. Everywhere I turned, I saw signs of his loyalty, his goddamn unwavering loyalty. (p. 69)

In this excerpt, Amir employs several defense mechanisms and strategies to cope with his guilt and inner turmoil. He intentionally minimises his interactions with Hassan, making sure their paths cross as little as possible. He plans his day to keep his distance from Hassan, physically avoiding him as a way to avoid confronting the guilt and discomfort he feels when Hassan is around. Although not explicitly stated, Amir's feelings of discomfort and suffocation when Hassan is present can be seen as a form of projection. He might be projecting his own guilt and shame onto Hassan, making him feel like Hassan is the source of his discomfort when, in reality, it stems from his own actions. Amir denies the emotional impact of Hassan's loyalty and devotion to him. He acknowledges the signs of Hassan's loyalty, such as the hand-washed clothes and burning wood, but he does not fully confront or accept the depth of Hassan's commitment to their friendship. This denial allows him to distance himself from the emotional weight of their past and his guilt. These defense mechanisms collectively help Amir maintain a certain level of emotional distance from Hassan and avoid directly facing the guilt and shame associated with his past actions.

Amir's behaviour reflects a complex interplay of emotions and defense mechanisms. Clearly, avoiding Hassan is not enough for Amir. Notably, there is an element of "displacement" in his actions. Displacement, as previously noted, is a defense strategy where an individual redirects their negative emotions or impulses from one target to another less threatening target (Freud,

1936). In this case, Amir is displacing his anger, guilt, and frustration onto Hassan. He feels that Hassan's mere existence and lingering presence in the house are a major source of his guilt and shame, to the point that he begins to devise means of getting rid of Hassan. Amir's suggestion to his father to get new servants (p. 69) was a way for him to distance himself from Hassan and, in turn, escape the guilt and shame he feels about his past actions. Amir tried to create emotional and physical distance between himself and Hassan as a means of coping with his unresolved guilt and shame. It was a way for him to avoid facing the painful memories and emotions associated with the traumatic events of their childhood. Amir's attempt to get rid of Hassan in order to escape his guilt and shame can be seen as a form of projection. Hassan becomes the target of Amir's negative emotions and the source of his discomfort. By trying to remove Hassan from his life, Amir may have believed that he could distance himself from the reminders of his guilt and shame, essentially projecting those emotions onto Hassan and making him the scapegoat for his inner turmoil.

Amir's growing frustration, conflicting feelings, and guilt toward Hassan—avoiding him yet secretly wishing Hassan would push back or confront him—become increasingly evident as the story unfolds. One poignant example arises when Amir finally agrees to spend time with Hassan after days of deliberate avoidance, having promised to read him one of his written stories as Hassan loved to listen to Amir read out his stories. What begins as a potential moment of bonding and an opportunity to mend their friendship quickly devolves into a tense and hostile encounter:

I unfolded the story I'd brought along, turned to the first page, then put it down. I stood up and picked up an overripe pomegranate that had



fallen to the ground. “What would you do if I hit you with this?” I said, tossing the fruit up and down. Hassan’s smile wilted. He looked older than I’d remembered. No, not older, old. Was that possible? Lines had etched into his tanned face and creases framed his eyes, his mouth. I might as well have taken a knife and carved those lines myself. “What would you do?” I repeated. The color fell from his face. Next to him, the stapled pages of the story I’d promised to read him fluttered in the breeze. (p. 71)

Amir’s actions being driven by a complex mix of emotions, including guilt, anger, and a desire for redemption, manifest through the defense mechanisms of displacement and projection. Amir takes out his pent-up emotions on Hassan by pelting him with pomegranates.

I hurled the pomegranate at him. It struck him in the chest, exploded in a spray of red pulp. Hassan’s cry was pregnant with surprise and pain. “Hit me back!” I snapped. Hassan looked from the stain on his chest to me. “Get up! Hit me!” I said. Hassan did get up, but he just stood there, looking dazed like a man dragged into the ocean by a riptide when, just a moment ago, he was enjoying a nice stroll on the beach. I hit him with another pomegranate, in the shoulder this time. The juice splattered his face. “Hit me back!” I spat. “Hit me back, goddamn you!” I wished he would. I wished he’d give me the punishment I craved, so maybe I’d finally sleep at night. Maybe then things could return to how they used to be between us. (p. 71-72)

As previously noted, projection involves attributing one’s own negative feelings or qualities to another person. Here, Amir seems to project his own guilt and desire for punishment onto Hassan. He wishes Hassan would retaliate, essentially punishing Amir for his past wrongdoings. Amir hopes that by receiving punishment, he might alleviate his guilt and achieve some form of catharsis. However, a hopeful moment for mending their friendship and bonding again quickly escalates into an intense and hostile scene. Amir’s hope and desperate attempt to provoke Hassan into retaliating fails miserably, and Hassan’s refusal to fight back only deepens Amir’s guilt, further solidifying his resolve to drive Hassan away.

But Hassan did nothing as I pelted him again and again. “You’re a coward!” I said. “Nothing but a goddamn coward!” I don’t know how many times I hit him. All I know is that, when I finally stopped, exhausted and panting, Hassan was smeared in red like he’d been shot by a firing squad. I fell to my knees, tired, spent, frustrated. Then Hassan did pick up a pomegranate. He walked toward me. He opened it and crushed it against his own forehead. “There,” he croaked, red dripping down his face like blood. “Are you satisfied? Do you feel better?” He turned around and started down the hill. I let the tears break free, rocked back and forth on my knees. “What am I going to do with you, Hassan? What am I going to do with you?” But by the time the tears dried up and I trudged down the hill, I knew the answer to that question. (pp. 71-72)

Scheming another way to get rid of Hassan, Amir rationalises his intention with this self-deceptive thought; “Lessen his suffering. And mine too. Either way, this much had become clear: One of us had to go.”, an idea he borrows from Rahim Khan’s love story (p. 79). Amir’s rationalisation and cognitive process, as depicted in this excerpt (his thought) from the text, embodies a cognitive mechanism known as “splitting.” According to Freud (1940), ego splitting is defined by the presence of two opposing and autonomous attitudes. In this dynamic, one of these conflicting attitudes is attributed to the conscious ego, while the opposing attitude is subjected to repression. This psychological defense mechanism entails a cognitive distortion where an individual perceives themselves and others in overly polarised, dichotomous terms, typically as entirely virtuous or entirely malevolent, devoid of intermediate states (Burton, 2012). In other words, splitting is a psychological defense mechanism in which a person tends to view themselves and others in a black-and-white manner, as either all good or all bad, with no middle ground. In this instance, Amir engages in a stark simplification of a multifaceted emotional context, fragmenting it into two extremities: the retention of Hassan, which entails continued suffering for

both, or the removal of Hassan, offering a potential respite from Amir's internal suffering. This exemplifies a reductionist approach, neglecting the intricate emotional dynamics inherent in human relationships. It is pivotal to recognise that splitting, due to its inherent binary nature, can distort perceptions and lead to suboptimal decision-making (Burton, 2012). In Amir's case, this cognitive manoeuvre serves as a psychological defence mechanism, allowing him to sidestep confronting the intricate facets of his guilt and the multifarious nature of his association with Hassan. Burton (2012) states;

Splitting diffuses the anxiety that arises from our inability to grasp the nuances and complexities of a given situation or state of affairs by simplifying and schematizing it [*as Amir does- my emphasis*]. In addition, it reinforces our idea of ourselves as good and virtuous by effectively discounting and even demonizing all those who do not share in our views and values. On the other hand, such a compartmentalization of opposites leaves us with a distinctly distorted picture of reality, and a restricted range of thoughts and emotions. It also affects our ability to attract and maintain relationships, first, because it is tedious and unbecoming, and, second, because it can easily flip, with friends and lovers being thought of as personified virtue and then, whenever it becomes more convenient, personified vice. (psychologytoday.com)

In a classic displacement trait, Amir goes ahead with his manipulative and devious plan to have Hassan sent away. He would rather have his father hate innocent Hassan just to covet his father's affection than deal directly with the main issue of confronting his guilt. Amir chooses to manipulate the situation, setting in motion a chain of events where his innocent childhood friend, Hassan, is wrongly accused. He plants some money and a wristwatch gift from his father from the pile of gifts he receives on his thirteenth birthday in Hassan's belongings, believing that theft, being the gravest sin his father could not forgive, would finally set the motion to have Hassan sent away. This way, he kills two birds with one stone, achieving a dual objective: relieving

himself of the burden of guilt and positioning himself as the sole recipient of his father's long yearned-for love and affection, which, to Amir, Hassan had been stealing from him. Regrettably for Amir, Hassan shoulders the blame with a heavy heart, further tightening the noose of guilt and shame around Amir's conscience. Amir also comes to the realisation that Hassan had been aware of his betrayal from the very moment of the incident in the alley. Despite this, Hassan chose to protect Amir by accepting the false accusations. However, even as Amir experiences a pang of remorse for his actions, he stubbornly convinces himself that these events offer the best way forward for both of them, albeit more beneficially for himself. He clings to the hope that the passage of time will somehow alleviate his burdens.

These defense mechanisms collectively illuminate the intricate web of Amir's psychological response to his past actions and the resultant guilt and shame that have remained with him. These mechanisms underscore the multifaceted nature of Amir's psychological reaction to trauma. Repression, acting as a protective shield, enables him to avoid directly confronting the overwhelming guilt and shame stemming from his past deeds. Meanwhile, denial and deflection allow him to sidestep the agonising reality of his actions, providing a temporary escape from their emotional weight. In contrast, displacement offers a form of momentary respite, granting him a brief escape from the emotional burdens of his past.

Together, these coping mechanisms significantly contribute to Amir's internal struggles, acting as formidable barriers to his emotional growth and affecting his relationships with others, including his family, friends, and even his own self. While repression may seem to shield Amir from the immediate

pain associated with his guilt, it engenders an internal conflict that permeates every facet of his existence. The burden of repressed emotions exerts immense pressure on Amir's psyche, giving rise to persistent inner turmoil and psychological struggles. His recurring nightmares and enduring feelings of inadequacy stand as stark manifestations of the unresolved trauma that he carries deep within. In essence, Amir's employment of these defense mechanisms, though initially serving as mechanisms of self-preservation, ultimately lead to internal conflicts and hinders his personal growth and healing journey. His experiences underscore the enduring impact of unresolved guilt and the intricate interplay between psychological defense mechanisms and the human psyche. The complex interplay of defense mechanisms employed by Amir to avoid addressing or acknowledging his past actions and the emotional complexities he undergoes, particularly regarding Hassan's well-being, and his harsh treatment of Hassan showcase a profound psychological battle. These mechanisms serve as protective strategies to shield Amir from facing uncomfortable truths or confronting his own emotions and responsibilities.

## **Part 2|| *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007)**

### **The Lingering Shadows of Trauma & A Life of Silence & Endurance:**

#### **Mariam's Heart-Wrenching Journey**

The novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is a compelling narrative that sheds light on the lives of Afghan women against the backdrop of a tumultuous socio-political landscape. Central to this narrative is Mariam, a character whose life is marred by tragedy and hardship from her early years. Mariam's character emerges as an illustration of the lasting impact of

traumatic experiences. The focus of this analysis is Mariam, one of the central characters, and her use of defense mechanisms to cope with a lifetime of adversity and trauma. I examine Mariam's utilisation of these mechanisms as a response to her traumatic experiences. Through a careful examination of the text, I explore how Mariam employs a range of coping mechanisms, including idealisation, rationalisation, emotional distance (cut-off), sublimation, avoidance and denial, projection, and displacement, as her psychological tools to navigate the complexities of her tumultuous life. It is worth noting that these mechanisms discussed in this analysis are not presented in any particular order of significance; instead, each of them holds equal relevance within the analysis. Also, it is important to note that silence is considered in this thesis as the main coping strategy, which does not stand alone as one of Mariam's defense mechanisms but rather acts as an overarching umbrella that encompasses a range of other coping strategies, such as avoidance, denial, emotional distance, and even repression. This analysis provides a summary of Mariam's tumultuous life and delves into the consequences of familial projection and betrayal, which cast enduring shadows over her existence.

Before delving into the complexities of Mariam's inner struggles and coping strategies, it is essential to first comprehend the full extent of the impact that her traumatic childhood experiences have on her. Mariam's early life is marked by a relentless bombardment of emotional turmoil that propels her into a life of grim silence. In the current study, the researcher emphasises that Mariam's life of silence is not merely a solitary coping strategy but a pervasive existence that envelops her. This life of silence becomes Mariam's way of navigating the world, which she enters following her mother's tragic

death, her father's rejection, and the disappointments that shape her growth. Silence serves both as a protective mechanism, safeguarding her from her own emotions and responsibilities, and as a means of shielding others from her. Within this life of silence, Mariam adopts various other coping and defense mechanisms in different situations to protect herself and handle her traumatic past. Her experiences in her formative years, especially the rejection by her father and her mother's manipulation, render her vulnerable to the manipulations she encounters in her future, particularly within her forced marriage. These aspects will be highlighted in this study. Mariam's mother, Nana, unable to maintain a high level of self-differentiation and control of her own emotions, subjects Mariam to a toxic environment filled with negativity and emotional reactivity. Added to this, in her desperate pursuit of love, is the rejection she faces from her father, Jalil, and his family for the "crime" of her birth, a result of Jalil's illegitimate affair. Tired of her mother's manipulation and the stifling environment of her childhood, Mariam embarks on a journey to seek her father's love and affection, despite Nana's vehement opposition. This quest for her father's warmth, the hope and dreams of a better life, and his reluctant promise to take her to see his cinema is a desperate attempt to escape her mother's world of negativity. In her quest for her father's love and a brighter future, Mariam's journey reflects a poignant exploration of her innate human needs, as articulated in Maslow's hierarchy of needs. As Sharma & Verma (2021) astutely observed, the female characters in the novel, including Mariam, grapple with a complex interplay of physiological, safety, social, esteem, and self-actualisation needs. Mariam's yearning for her father's warmth and the promise of visiting his cinema exemplify her pursuit of

higher-level needs, driven by a desire to escape the stifling environment of her childhood, marked by her mother's manipulation and negativity. However, Mariam's hopes are mercilessly dashed when she is not only rejected by her father but cast out of his life entirely. Mariam, an innocent soul, bears the brunt of her parents' unresolved conflicts, leaving her emotionally scarred.

The pivotal moment in Mariam's life comes when she returns to her kolba on the outskirts of Herat, only to find her mother, Nana, dead by suicide. Hauntingly, Nana's last words of desperation—pleading with Mariam not to leave her—echo in Mariam's mind. This devastating discovery engulfs Mariam in profound and lasting guilt. She believes that seeking her father's love indirectly caused her mother's death, a burden she will carry for the rest of her life. Nana's character is indeed noteworthy when viewed through the lens of the psychoanalytic theory. Her life takes a dramatic turn due to a significant event—an illness known as “the jinn” that would seize control of her body, causing debilitating fits. This ailment plays a pivotal role in shaping her life's trajectory, blocking potential marriage offers, and ultimately leading her to become a servant in Jalil's household. When she conceives Mariam, the illegitimate child of Jalil—a well-respected, wealthy man in the town of Herat—Nana faces rejection not only from Jalil and her father but also from society at large. She is cast aside and lives in constant fear of being mocked and stigmatised, projecting this fear and her unresolved emotional conflict onto Mariam. All of these experiences definitely take a psychological toll on Nana, which manifests in her emotional reactivity.

Examining Nana's role in Mariam's traumatic upbringing reveals a reversal of the typical parent-child dynamic. Despite being the adult and the



primary provider and caregiver in the home, Nana appears to be more dependent on Mariam. This unexpected dynamic leads to Mariam taking on a caregiving role for Nana. In this role reversal, Mariam ends up providing emotional care and support to her mother. Nana's inability to cope with her own life's hardships results in her projecting her fears, dissatisfaction, and unresolved conflicts onto Mariam, branding her as the "harami", the abomination responsible for her misery. This projection becomes a pervasive theme in Mariam's life, significantly affecting her self-esteem and emotional well-being (Bowen, 1978). Nana's emotional reactivity and manipulation further distance Mariam emotionally from her mother, compelling her to seek solace elsewhere, typically from her father, which only brings her more disappointment and heartbreak. With her idealised dreams of her father shattered by his rejection, Mariam's life takes a stark turn. She is forced into a loveless and abusive marriage with Rasheed, marked by suffering, silence, and endurance. The emotional burden she carries, compounded by years of familial projection and betrayal, remains a constant companion throughout her life. Mariam's existence becomes one of silent mourning and acceptance of the cruelty that fate has dealt her with, echoing the bitter sentiments of her mother.

Having established the foundation for comprehending the profound impact of the traumatic experiences that Mariam grapples with, in what follows, I delve into the defense mechanisms that Mariam employs as she deals with and copes with the haunting memories of her childhood. In the tapestry of *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Mariam's life unfolds as a testament to the enduring and haunting nature of trauma. Her experiences, marred by

familial projection and betrayal, cast profound and lasting shadows over her existence. Repression, denial, guilt, and the weight of projection serve as mechanisms that perpetuate her suffering. Through Mariam's narrative, Hosseini underscores the importance of acknowledging and confronting one's past, as well as the devastating consequences of unresolved trauma that can haunt an individual throughout a lifetime.

In the context of Mariam's character, her experience of distressing and intrusive memories and emotions related to her past, despite her efforts to move on with her life in resignation and acceptance of the life dealt to her, highlights the complexity of her psychological state. It suggests that there are deeper emotional wounds that require healing and resolution. During her formative years, Mariam employs idealisation as a defense mechanism to navigate the emotional turmoil in her life. Tired of her mother's antics of negativity, manipulation, and emotional reactivity, Mariam hopes for and looks forward to a better life with her father, Jalil.

If she could articulate it, she might have said to Nana that she was tired of being an instrument, of being lied to, laid claim to, used. That she was sick of Nana twisting the truths of their life and making her, Mariam, another of her grievances against the world.

*You're afraid, Nana, she might have said. You're afraid that I might find the happiness you never had. And you don't want me to be happy. You don't want a good life for me. You're the one with the wretched heart.* (Chapter 5, p. 28)

The above excerpt presents a significant moment in Mariam's emotional development and her growing awareness of her relationship with her mother, Nana. It reflects Mariam's evolving understanding of her own emotions and her need for independence and happiness. In this passage, Mariam confronts the suffocating role she has played in Nana's life and asserts her own desires and need for independence. Mariam is no longer content with

the role she has been assigned in her relationship with Nana. She feels used and manipulated, recognising that Nana twists the truth of their lives to suit her own grievances. Mariam, in her own way, confronts her mother's fears and insecurities. Mariam suspects that Nana's fear is that she (Mariam) would experience a better life and find the happiness that Nana never had, and she also suggests [mainly to herself] that her mother's fears are the root of her actions. In this moment of assertion, Mariam stands up against her mother's control and manipulation, realising and expressing her own desires for a good life. Recognising her mother's manipulation and negativity, which she no longer wants to entertain, is what leads her to seek the utopia of her father's love and affection, which is contrary to her mother's view of Jalil.

Mariam's decision to defy her mother's orders and seek her father's affection represents a pivotal shift in her character, from a passive, obedient daughter to an individual who recognises her own desires and the need to escape the constraints placed upon her. This moment becomes one of only two instances in Mariam's entire life, in all of her forty-two (42) years of living, where she attempts to—and eventually does—take control of her destiny, contributing to her characterisation and her journey of self-discovery. In the first instance, her determination to find happiness with her father in her formative years is a testament to her growing self-awareness and courage by expressing her wish and her adamant insistence to visit his cinema with him/have him take her to his cinema for her birthday as a gift, and then going ahead to try to find her father in the town of Herat against her mother's wishes and pleas (Chapter 5, pp. 25-35). This, her first bold decision and action, signifies her rejection of the constraints and the role that society, and

particularly her mother, has assigned to her (Chapter 5, pp. 25-35). The second instance is Mariam's split second act of saving Laila by killing Rasheed, their husband, which underscores her transformation (Chapter 45, p. 346–349).

Mariam lost count of how many times the belt cracked, how many pleading words she cried out to Rasheed, how many times she circled around the incoherent tangle of teeth and fists and belt, before she saw fingers clawing at Rasheed's face, chipped nails digging into his jowls and pulling at his hair and scratching his forehead. **How long before she realized, with both shock and relish, that the fingers were hers.** || ... Mariam clawed at him. ... She struggled to uncurl his fingers from Laila's neck. Mariam backed away and left the room. || ... || In the toolshed, Mariam grabbed the shovel. || Rasheed didn't notice her coming back into the room. He was still on top of Laila, his eyes wide and crazy, his hands wrapped around her neck. Laila's face was turning blue now, and her eyes had rolled back. Mariam saw that she was no longer struggling. *He's going to kill her*, she thought. *He really means to*. And Mariam could not, would not, allow that to happen. He'd taken so much from her in twenty-seven years of marriage. She would not watch him take Laila too. (pp. 346– 349)

In this split-second act, she undergoes a process of self-reflection, which makes the stark reality of her life hit her with such great impact that it contributes to her final resolution to end it all and give “it everything she had”.

Mariam remembered the first time she had seen his eyes, under the wedding veil, in the mirror, with Jalil looking on, how their gazes had slid across the glass and met, his indifferent, hers docile, conceding, almost apologetic. || *Apologetic*. || Mariam saw now in those same eyes what a fool she had been. (p. 346) || ... || Mariam clawed at him. She beat at his chest. She hurled herself against him. She struggled to uncurl his fingers from Laila's neck. She bit them. But they remained tightly clamped around Laila's windpipe, and Mariam saw that he meant to carry this through. || He meant to suffocate her, and there was nothing either of them could do about it. (pp. 346– 349)

It is a pivotal moment in her life that signifies her first unshackled/unbound sigh of freedom, not only for herself but also for Laila and her children, for whom she (Mariam) had taken on a motherly obligation to protect, albeit not having any biological children of her own. With the resolve to save and protect Laila, “*Mariam steadied her feet and tightened her grip around the*

*shovel's handle. She raised it. She said his name. She wanted him to see. // "Rasheed." // He looked up. // Mariam swung. // She hit him across the temple. The blow knocked him off Laila."* (p. 348). Knowing that Rasheed would never let them go, especially after this incident, seeing the pure evil of murder in his eyes, solidified Mariam's resolve to end Rasheed's tirades by ending his life.

Rasheed touched his head with the palm of his hand. He looked at the blood on his fingertips, then at Mariam. ||... || But then his upper lip curled back into a spiteful sneer, and Mariam knew then the futility, maybe even the irresponsibility, of not finishing this. If she let him walk now, how long before he fetched the key from his pocket and went for that gun of his upstairs in the room where he'd locked Zalmai? Had Mariam been certain that he would be satisfied with shooting only her, that there was a chance he would spare Laila, she might have dropped the shovel. But in Rasheed's eyes she saw murder for them both. || And so Mariam raised the shovel high, raised it as high as she could, arching it so it touched the small of her back. She turned it so the sharp edge was vertical, and, **as she did, it occurred to her that this was the first time that she was deciding the course of her own life.** || And, with that, Mariam brought down the shovel. This time, she gave it everything she had. (pp. 346– 349)

This moment of realisation marks the inception of her redemption and mental liberation. Both moments are characterised by Mariam's agency and her willingness to challenge societal norms and expectations. They stand as powerful reminders of the strength that can be found in self-realisation and the pursuit of one's own happiness. These moments are indeed turning points in Mariam's life, marking her journey towards freedom and redemption.

Mariam idealises her father, Jalil, as a source of love, happiness, and the promise of a better life. This idealisation allows her to temporarily escape the harsh realities of her existence and maintain a sense of hope. Idealisation, as a defense mechanism, involves perceiving or portraying someone or something as perfect, ideal, or infallible, often as a means of escaping from the

harsh realities of one's circumstances. In Mariam's case, she idealises her father despite her mother's manipulative, embittered attitude and her own *illegitimate* status.

At night, Mariam lay in her cot and wondered what his house in Herat was like. She wondered what it would be like to live with him, to see him every day. She pictured herself handing him a towel as he shaved, telling him when he nicked himself. She would brew tea for him. She would sew on his missing buttons. They would take walks in Herat together, in the vaulted bazaar where Jalil said you could find anything you wanted. They would ride in his car, and people would point and say, "There goes Jalil Khan with his daughter." He would show her the famed tree that had a poet buried beneath it.

One day soon, Mariam decided, she would tell Jalil these things. And when he heard, when he saw how much she missed him when he was gone, he would surely take her with him. He would bring her to Herat, to live in his house, just like his other children. (Chapter 4, p. 24)

In this excerpt, Mariam's daydreams and desires are depicted, highlighting her strong emotional attachment to Jalil and her longing for a more loving and connected relationship with him. This excerpt serves as a powerful illustration of her use of idealisation as a coping mechanism. Mariam clings to the belief that her father's occasional visits, birthday treats, and promises of a brighter future are genuine expressions of love. This idealised image of Jalil provides Mariam with a psychological refuge from the emotional torment inflicted upon her by her mother and the isolation she experiences due to her birth circumstances. However, Mariam's coping strategy of idealisation ultimately leads to profound disappointment and emotional turmoil when Jalil fails to fulfil his promises and, in fact, rejects her. This shattered idealisation becomes a pivotal moment in Mariam's life, forcing her to confront the painful reality of her father's abandonment and the harshness of her situation.

Hardly coming to terms with her father's betrayal and abandonment, Mariam returns home to find her mother hanging dead on a tree. Her mother's last words echo in her head—pleading with her not to go or else she (Nana) “will die”. “All she could hear was Nana saying, *I'll die if you go. I'll just die.* All she could do was cry and cry and let her tears fall on the spotted, paper-thin skin of Mullah Faizullah's hands.” (p. 38). The weight of her mother's passing, coupled with the haunting memory of her final words, which were emotionally manipulative, inflicts profound emotional turmoil on Mariam. The imagery of her tears falling onto Mullah Faizullah's frail hands conveys the depth of her shock and grief. This drives her to the edge and spirals her into shock with guilt. Mariam's world crumbles as she grapples with the bitter truth about her father's betrayal and his true character. The profound realisation of her mother's words becomes painfully evident as Mariam sees her father, Jalil, through a new lens, one that mirrors Nana's perspective.

For the first time, Mariam could hear him with Nana's ears. She could hear so clearly now the insincerity that had always lurked beneath, the hollow, false assurances. She could not bring herself to look at him.

And as Mariam watched Jalil shake these strangers' hands, as she saw him cross his palms on his chest and nod to their wives, she knew that Nana had spoken the truth. She did not belong here.

*But where do I belong? What am I going to do now?*

*I'm all you have in this world, Mariam, and when I'm gone you'll have nothing. You'll have nothing. You are nothing!*

Like the wind through the willows around the kolba, gusts of an inexpressible blackness kept passing through Mariam. (p. 40)

For the first time, Mariam perceives Jalil's words with the same scepticism that had always resided in Nana's heart and words. The once-upon-a-time soothing assurances now sounds hollow and insincere. Overwhelmed by a sense of disillusionment, Mariam cannot bring herself to look at her

father. As she observes Jalil's interactions with the strangers in his life, performing the customary gestures of politeness, Mariam's sense of not belonging intensifies as she finally realises that her father will never accept her. The truth in Nana's words becomes undeniable. Mariam finds herself grappling with profound questions about her place in the world and her identity. Her mother's haunting words echo in Mariam's mind, serving as a harsh reminder of the isolation she faces. She is left with a profound sense of loss and loneliness. The yearning for a semblance of normalcy in her family dynamics, love, and a better life has led her to this moment of painful reckoning, where she begins to grasp the gravity of her mother's bitter truth. With the one person in the world who might have remained loyal to her despite the toxicity now gone, Mariam's feelings of loss and guilt intensify, casting a long shadow over her fragile existence. This, coupled with her father and his wives' decision to marry her off against her will to an elderly shoemaker widower, becomes the final blow that propels Mariam into a shocking life of silence and submission. Mariam falls into a state of shock and a very long life of resignation and silence. These words, uttered to her father in a moment of raw honesty and vulnerability, serve as Mariam's last true expression as a young girl and devoted daughter: "I used to worship you" (p. 54).

Mariam's emotional journey reflects her complex coping mechanisms and her profound sense of resignation and self-blame in the face of her harsh life experiences. Her emotional state after her father's betrayal, her mother's death, and the realisation that she was truly alone in the world can be characterised as resignation. Mariam's surrender to her circumstances, giving



up on her aspirations for a better life, is profoundly shaped by the words of her mother and her own low self-esteem. Her mother's emotionally reactive, negative, and manipulative behaviour, along with the recognition of her status as a "harami" (illegitimate child), significantly contribute to her low self-esteem. However, it is the culmination of these factors, compounded by her father's betrayal and the burden of self-blame for her mother's suicide, that intensifies her feelings of resignation. In response to this emotional turmoil, Mariam engages in self-punishment and internalises her mother's harsh judgements. Nana's bitterness, emotional reactivity, and resentment towards Mariam's father, Jalil, are often directed at Mariam as well, frequently referring to Mariam as a "harami". This complex interplay of factors underscores the depth of Mariam's emotional struggles and highlights the profound impact of her traumatic experiences on her self-worth and outlook on life.

Another defense mechanism Mariam engages in, in an attempt to come to terms with her mother's tragic death and the mistreatment she endures in her marriage, is the process of rationalisation. Rationalisation is the psychological defense mechanism of justifying an unacceptable feeling or behaviour with seemingly logical or reasonable explanations (Freud, 1936). This mechanism allows individuals to make their actions or emotions more palatable to themselves or others by providing apparently sensible reasons for them. It is a way of providing a "rational" explanation for something that might otherwise be considered irrational or unacceptable. Central to Mariam's rationalisation is her internalised belief that she is responsible for her mother's suicide. This self-imposed blame has profound consequences for Mariam, as it

provides her with a semblance of control over the chaotic and traumatic events that have unfolded in her life. However, this control comes at a steep price, burdening her with overwhelming guilt. Mariam's rationalisation profoundly impacts her self-esteem and self-concept. She begins to internalise every misfortune around her as her own fault, further eroding her sense of self-worth and exacerbating her emotional turmoil.

Indeed, Mariam's experiences in the story lead her to not only resign herself to her fate but also to emotionally distance herself from others and engage in self-isolation. This emotional distancing is what Bowen (1976) and Kerr & Bowen (1988) refer to as the concept of Emotional cut-off. This process involves the individual creating emotional distance from members of their family while still maintaining some level of contact. The combination of her father's rejection, her mother's bitterness and negativity, her arranged marriage to a man she does not know, let alone love, and her internalised guilt over her mother's death all contribute to Mariam's emotional withdrawal from the world and the people around her. This emotional distance and self-isolation become coping mechanisms for Mariam. She believes that by keeping herself emotionally detached, she can shield herself from further pain, disappointment, and shame. However, these coping mechanisms also contribute to her sense of loneliness and the feeling that she does not belong anywhere. Mariam's character undergoes significant development throughout the novel as she grapples with these complex emotions and coping strategies. As she enters an arranged marriage with Rasheed, Mariam, already burdened with trauma and guilt from her family in her early years, adopts the strategy of silencing her own desires and emotions.

It is paramount to note that “Silence” here serves as a complex and pervasive coping strategy in Mariam’s journey, one that envelops her from the tragic moment of her mother’s death and continues to shape her psychological and emotional responses throughout her life. This silence is not a stand-alone defense mechanism as previously noted, but rather an umbrella that encompasses various other coping strategies. Even before her mother’s death, Mariam never speaks up for herself nor bark at anyone, not even in her formative years, when her mother hurls negative words, insults, and name calling at her or her father’s rejection. She always endures however she is treated, and she accepts whatever comes her way without a word of complaint with every heartbreak, disappointment, and rejection. She goes on to endure abuse in her marriage, remaining silent on her pain throughout her life, never once voicing out any opinion. Living a life of silence and endurance, Mariam remains a voiceless character, not brave, guilt-ridden, and very lonely. Her silence acts as a shield, concealing her pain, suppressing her emotions, and, at times, preventing her from directly confronting the traumatic experiences she endures.

Mariam’s marriage to Rasheed marks another profound turning point in her life. Within the context of her forced marriage to Rasheed, Mariam’s psychological defense mechanisms, including sublimation and withdrawal, play a crucial role in her transformation and adaptation to her new role as a dutiful wife. Her primary objective becomes pleasing her husband, who quickly emerges as her new master. This decision to assume her role as the dutiful submissive wife, in an attempt to move forward despite carrying guilt, can be viewed as sublimation. Sublimation is a defense mechanism or coping

strategy where one redirects their unacceptable impulses or emotions into socially acceptable and constructive activities (Freud, 1936). Initially, she responds to this significant change—her forced marriage—with withdrawal, a lack of enthusiasm, and a sense of detachment, a state that persists and lingers for several days, the entire initial week following her marriage (p. 62–66). However, Rasheed’s stern warning serves as a catalyst, compelling her to assume the role of a dutiful wife (pp. 65–71).

“Are you ever going to unpack that thing?” he said, motioning with his head toward her suitcase. He crossed his arms. “I figured you might need some time. But this is absurd. A week’s gone and ... Well, then, as of tomorrow morning I expect you to start behaving like a wife. Fahmidi? Is that understood?” || Mariam’s teeth began to chatter. || “I need an answer.” || “Yes.” || “Good,” he said. “What did you think? That this is a hotel? That I’m some kind of hotelkeeper? (pp. 64–65)

This decision to assume her designated role is rooted more in self-preservation and a deep-seated desire for recognition, validation, and a semblance of some normalcy than genuine affection borne out of love. This is particularly notable considering the arranged nature of their marriage.

WHEN RASHEED CAME HOME that night, he brought with him a brown paper bag. Mariam was disappointed that he did not notice the clean windows, the swept floors, the missing cobwebs. But he did look pleased that she had already set his dinner plate, on a clean sofrah spread on the living-room floor. (p. 69).

The above excerpt illustrates Mariam’s longing for acknowledgement as she prepares for Rasheed’s arrival. She meticulously cleans the house and sets the dinner table, hoping for acknowledgement and a word of appreciation. Her disappointment at his failure to notice these efforts reflects her yearning for validation.

Mariam’s early interactions with Rasheed are characterised by his acts of kindness, which initially create a sense of safety and evoke feelings of

loyalty and dependence within her. Gestures like taking her sightseeing, giving her gifts, and sharing meals make her feel cared for and valued (Chapters 10 & 11, pp. 69-76). Given her circumstances, Mariam has no viable alternative but to stay with him, which contributes to her growing reliance on him. However, these initial acts of kindness foreshadow the controlling nature of Rasheed's character, setting the stage for the power dynamic and the limitations that will define their marriage. Hosseini presents a scene in chapter ten (pp. 70-71) where Mariam frets over preparing her first meal for Rasheed, underscoring her efforts to become a dutiful wife.

This was the first meal she had cooked for him, and Mariam wished she had been in a better state when she made it. She'd still been shaken from the incident at the tandoor as she'd cooked, and all day she had fretted about the *daal's* consistency, its color, worried that he would think she'd stirred in too much ginger or not enough turmeric. (p. 69)

Her emotions are a mix of anticipation and nervousness as she serves Rasheed. She is preoccupied with concerns about the taste and presentation of the food and is visibly relieved when Rasheed eventually compliments her cooking. This moment signifies the beginning of her submission and her acknowledgement of Rasheed as her new master, thereby highlighting the complex power dynamics within their relationship. It also foreshadows the struggles and emotional complexities that Mariam will navigate throughout her marriage to Rasheed.

Chapter 10 effectively conveys Mariam's inner turmoil and Rasheed's traditional values and control over her. Rasheed's request to show her around Kabul and his subsequent revelation about the burqa demonstrate his conservative views and his desire for Mariam to conform to traditional gender

roles. He expresses disapproval of the behaviour of women in more modern households who do not cover themselves and interact freely with men.

“It embarrasses me, frankly, to see a man who’s **lost control of his wife.**”|| He fixed **Mariam with a hard glare.**|| “But I’m a different breed of man, Mariam. Where I come from, one wrong look, one improper word, and blood is spilled. Where I come from, a woman’s face is her husband’s business only. **I want you** to remember that. Do you understand?”” The earlier pleasure over his approval of her cooking had evaporated.|| **In its stead, a sensation of shrinking. This man’s will felt** to Mariam as **imposing and immovable** as the Safid-koh **mountains looming over** Gul Daman.|| Rasheed passed the paper bag to her. “**We have an understanding, then.** Now, let me have some more of that *daal.*” (pp. 70-71) [**Emphasis mine**]

This sets the tone for his expectations of Mariam. The highlighted words and phrases emphasise the power dynamics and toxic masculinity exhibited by Rasheed. They convey a sense of dominance, control, intimidation, and an imposing presence. These words and phrases paint a picture of Rasheed as a character who firmly believes in his authority over women and is willing to exert control through intimidation and dominance. Rasheed’s stern warning about a woman’s face being her husband’s business only reveals his possessiveness and desire for control. The phrase “lost control of his wife” reflects his belief in the need to dominate and control women in a relationship. The words “fixed Mariam with a hard glare” imply a stern, unyielding gaze directed at Mariam, which signifies his attempt to intimidate or assert authority over her through his stare. The words “imposing and immovable” describe the nature of Rasheed’s will and presence towards Mariam. “Imposing” indicates that he exerts a significant, intimidating influence, while “immovable” suggests that he cannot be easily swayed or challenged. Rasheed’s will is metaphorically compared to the mountains, suggesting a sense of imposing and unyielding power, with the words

“looming over Gul Daman” highlighting the vast and overwhelming nature of his authority. Mountains are a symbol of permanence and power, further emphasising his dominance. With a sudden shift in mood, Mariam’s earlier pleasure over Rasheed’s approval of her cooking dissipates, replaced by a sensation of “shrinking” and discomfort. Her initial sense of pride at Rasheed’s compliment turns to apprehension as she realises the extent of his expectations and the strict rules he intends to impose on her. This change in atmosphere underscores the complexities and tensions that define their relationship.

Rasheed’s concluding statement, “We have an understanding, then,” while seemingly polite, carries an underlying tone of finality and authority. His statement reflects his expectation of obedience and submission from Mariam, which aligns with the themes of gender inequality and toxic masculinity. It implies that Mariam is expected to unquestionably comply with his expectations and that their understanding is non-negotiable. This theme is strikingly similar to the Duke’s possessiveness and desire for control over his wife in the poem “My Last Duchess” by Robert Browning. The Duke in Browning’s poem seeks control over his wife, objectifying her. The Duke treats his wife as an object, an artwork to be controlled, displayed, and ultimately silenced. His domineering attitude is emblematic of male authority and entitlement, which is seen throughout the poem. Rasheed’s non-negotiable statement with the underlying tone of finality and authority is similarly reflected in the Duke’s words.

**I gave commands;  
Then all smiles stopped together.** There she stands  
As if alive. Will’t please you rise? We’ll meet  
The company below, then. I repeat,

The Count your master's known munificence  
Is ample warrant that no just pretense  
Of mine for dowry will be disallowed;  
Though his fair daughter's self, as I avowed  
At starting, is my object. Nay, we'll go  
Together down, sir. Notice Neptune, though,  
Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity,  
Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!  
(**Emphasis mine**)

The above excerpt encapsulates the Duke's character as domineering, controlling, and obsessed with possessions, particularly his ability to control and silence his wife. The Duke's calm demeanour and polite language contrast sharply with the sinister themes of control and objectification that underlie the poem, making it a powerful example of dramatic irony. The line "I gave commands; Then all smiles stopped together." reveals the depth of the Duke's sense of entitlement and insatiable desire for control. The tone of authority underlying his words signifies that he considers himself the ultimate authority, capable of dictating not only the Duchess's emotions but also other aspects of life. His bragging of his control over not only the Duchess, but over affairs of governance and ruling is evidence of his toxic masculinity, showcasing his belief that he can exercise complete dominion. As the Duke invites the visitor to join him to meet the other guests; "**Will't please you rise?** We'll meet The company below, then." he appears courteous on the surface but retains control over the situation, indicating that he alone decides when to move on. The Duke does not fail to mention the dowry as he hints at his expectations of generosity from the Count, the father of the Duchess, his new and soon-to-be bride, while also clarifying that the daughter (the Duchess) herself, rather than the dowry, is his primary interest or "object", further reducing her to a mere



possession. This also proves his desire for and exertion of power and control with no respect for boundaries.

Furthermore, aligning himself with gods, the Duke draws his audience, the servant of the household of his soon-to-be bride, away from the painting of his deceased wife to another piece of art he possesses, the sculpture of Neptune taming a sea-horse, which he seems to take pride in, much like he took pride in controlling his late wife. This move he makes is an “alpha move”, a gesture that serves as a symbol of his dominance, asserting himself as the ultimate authority figure, not only over his deceased wife, but also over his visitor and the visitor’s masters. The Duke conveys a clear message to the servant: he is the one master above all who tames and subdues, commanding unwavering obedience and control, and like Rasheed, implies that he brooks no defiance and cannot be trifled with. There is a clear similarity between the Duke’s tone and demeanour and Rasheed’s. Just as Rasheed’s words imply a non-negotiable understanding, so does the Duke in his words to his guest. This portrayal contributes to the depiction of toxic masculinity and gender inequality in the novel. Sharma & Verma (2020) delve into the complexities of the women’s relationships with their husbands, particularly focusing on Mariam’s relationship with Rasheed. Through an analysis of the power dynamics at play, the authors reveal how these relationships serve as reflections of the deeply ingrained gender inequalities and patriarchal norms prevailing in Afghan society. Mariam’s submissive position within her marriage and her struggle for autonomy underscore the oppressive nature of her relationship with Rasheed, highlighting the limited choices available to women in such contexts.

Mariam's silence and submission to Rasheed's directives indicate her lack of self-autonomy and independence. Her idealised image of Rasheed as a righteous and respectable man begins to crack when she discovers a gun and explicit magazines in his possession. Mariam's reaction to finding these items is complex. She tries to rationalise and justify Rasheed's possession of them, partly to preserve her idealised image of him. *"It was disquieting to her that Rasheed owned something whose sole purpose was to kill another person. But surely he kept it for their safety. Her safety."*; she rationalises again in order to preserve her idealised image of him as a respectable and honourable man who only seeks to protect his family. She struggles with conflicting emotions of disgust, disappointment, and empathy. This inner turmoil reflects her vulnerability and the power dynamics in their relationship.

Her stomach revolted with distaste. Was this what he did then, those nights that he did not visit her room? Had she been a disappointment to him in this particular regard? And what about all his talk of honour and propriety, his disapproval of the female customers, who, after all, were only showing him their feet to get fitted for shoes? *A woman's face*, he'd said, *is her husband's business only*. Surely the women on these pages had husbands, some of them must. At the least, they had brothers. If so, why did Rasheed insist that *she* cover when he thought nothing of looking at the private areas of other men's wives and sisters?

Mariam sat on his bed, embarrassed and confused. She cupped her face with her hands and closed her eyes. She breathed and breathed until she felt calmer. (p. 82)

The excerpt demonstrates Mariam's inner conflict and her attempts to make sense of Rasheed's behaviour. She questions the women in the explicit magazines and their consent, while also grappling with the dissonance between Rasheed's actions and his supposed moral standards. In her attempt to understand and find excuses for his behaviour, Mariam shows how she is gradually falling into a self-imposed illusion to cope with the reality of her marriage.

Slowly, an explanation presented itself. He was a man, after all, living alone for years before she had moved in. His needs differed from hers. For her, all these months later, their coupling was still an exercise in tolerating pain. His appetite, on the other hand, was fierce, sometimes bordering on the violent. The way he pinned her down, his hard squeezes at her breasts, how furiously his hips worked. He was a man. All those years without a woman. Could she fault him for being the way God had created him?

Mariam knew that she could never talk to him about this. It was unmentionable. But was it unforgivable? She only had to think of the other man in her life. Jalil, a husband of three and father of nine at the time, having relations with Nana out of wedlock. Which was worse, Rasheed's magazine or what Jalil had done? And what entitled her anyway, a villager, a harami, to pass judgment? (pp. 82–83)

The excerpt highlights Mariam's complex emotions and her efforts to navigate a challenging and controlling relationship. It also underscores the role of rationalisation as a defense mechanism to protect her psychological well-being in an otherwise difficult situation.

Hosseini masterfully delves into the intricate workings of Mariam's psyche, revealing how the defense mechanism of projection serves as a window into her feelings of insecurity and low self-esteem. Projection is a psychological defense mechanism where individuals attribute their unacceptable feelings, thoughts, or qualities to others rather than acknowledging them within themselves (Freud, 1936). This mechanism, illuminated through Mariam's interpretation of a photograph in Rasheed's possession, not only highlights her emotional complexities but also hints at the potentially abusive dynamic in her marriage. It is a testament to Hosseini's skill in portraying the emotional depth and psychological intricacies of his characters in the novel. The defense mechanism of projection is evident as Mariam's feelings of jealousy and inadequacy lead her to interpret a photograph in Rasheed's belongings with insecurity in chapter twelve, projecting her own emotions onto the image. Towards the end of the chapter,

Hosseini hints at the possibility of Rasheed's abusive behaviour while portraying Mariam's self-esteem issues and her evolving feelings of empathy. Hosseini describes a black-and-white photo of Rasheed with a seated woman, whom Mariam, in her insecurities and low self-esteem, feels is more attractive than her. Mariam's projection is evident as she attributes her own insecurities and feelings of undesirability to the woman in the photo, whom she perceives as more attractive. The author provides details of the woman's beauty, highlighting her delicate features, long black hair, and high cheekbones. Mariam's jealousy and self-comparison to the woman highlight her low self-esteem and feelings of inadequacy, which she projects onto the woman in the image. While describing the photo, the author subtly hints at Rasheed's potentially abusive behaviour. The way Rasheed seems to "loom over" the woman, his hands on her shoulders, and the woman's unsmiling and sullen expression allude to a power dynamic that may involve control and dominance, which visibly unsettles Mariam. Mariam's observation of the woman's body posture, as if she were trying to "wiggle free of his hands" (p. 84), further hints at a troubling aspect of their relationship.

Even after seeing the photo, Mariam wrestles with her feelings and actions, experiencing self-doubt and attempting to rationalise her actions. She regrets snooping in Rasheed's room and questions the significance of what she has discovered. Her low self-esteem is evident as she doubts the significance of her discoveries and dismisses her own interpretations of the photo as mere "random body posture captured in a single moment of time." This suggests that Mariam tends to downplay her own intuition and perceptions, possibly due to her lack of self-confidence. As Mariam reflects on Rasheed's difficult

life and the loss of his son, Yunus, she experiences a shift in her emotions. She begins to feel sorrow for Rasheed, recognising that he too has faced hardships and tragedies. This newfound empathy leads Mariam to believe that they could be companions, implying a potential change in her attitude towards him.

In order to navigate the profound challenges and traumas in her life, Mariam employs a range of coping mechanisms, including avoidance and denial, each serving as a vital tool in her struggle for emotional survival. Mariam's life is marked by a deliberate avoidance of her painful past and the harsh realities of her present circumstances. Instead of confronting her memories of her mother and father, she immerses herself in her duties as a wife. This strategic avoidance acts as a coping mechanism, enabling her to create emotional distance from the anguish associated with her past and the guilt she bears. In the face of the grim realities of her abusive marriage to Rasheed, Mariam employs several coping strategies. Denial is one of her primary defenses. Rather than fully acknowledging the severity of her situation, particularly Rasheed's stark contradictions between his proclaimed morals and his actual actions, she clings to optimistic illusions and rationalisations. This denial functions as a shield, protecting her from the overwhelmingly harsh truths that engulf her life. It allows her to construct a temporary mental refuge, offering a brief respite from the relentless brutality of her reality. Additionally, Mariam's acceptance of her life as a form of self-punishment for her perceived sins, such as her birth as a *harami* and her mother's tragic death, propel her into the role of a dutiful and submissive wife to Rasheed. This role, seemingly devoid of choice, is more a result of necessity due to her lack of viable alternatives and her entrapment within an

oppressive environment that has been her reality for as long as she can remember. Mariam's coping mechanisms are her means of navigating the turbulent waters of her life, providing her with a fragile sense of stability amidst the chaos and brutality she endures.

Rasheed's relentless reminders and abusive treatment compel Mariam into conformity as a means of survival, especially after the traumatic incident in the public bath where she loses her baby. The incident at the bathhouse marks a pivotal moment in their relationship. Prior to this event, Rasheed had introduced Mariam to a new experience, the *hamam*, which appeared as an opportunity for bonding. Yet, the tragedy that unfolded, with Mariam losing her baby and suffering severe emotional and physical trauma, initiated a significant shift in Rasheed's behaviour.

IT WAS RASHEED'S idea to go to the hamam. Mariam had never been to a bathhouse, but he said there was nothing finer than stepping out and taking that first breath of cold air, to feel the heat rising from the skin.||...||Mariam sat in the far corner by herself, working on her heels with a pumice stone, insulated by a wall of steam from the passing shapes. || Then there was blood and she was screaming. (pp. 89-90)

Rasheed's change in demeanour becomes evident as he grows increasingly distant, displaying irritability and an inclination to find fault with Mariam's actions. This shift has profound psychological and emotional implications for Mariam. Rasheed's change in demeanour is evident through his reticence, complaints, and emotional withdrawal. This newfound coldness and emotional distance deeply affect Mariam. She experiences a decline in self-esteem and an overwhelming sense of isolation. Rasheed's irritation in response to her questions and needs amplifies her emotional distress, leaving

her questioning her role as a wife and feeling trapped in their deteriorating relationship.

MEANWHILE, a change had come over Rasheed ever since the day at the bathhouse. Most nights when he came home, he hardly talked anymore. He ate, smoked, went to bed, sometimes came back in the middle of the night for a brief and, of late, quite rough session of coupling. He was more apt to sulk these days, to fault her cooking, to complain about clutter around the yard or point out even minor uncleanliness in the house. Occasionally, he took her around town on Fridays, like he used to, but on the sidewalks he walked quickly and always a few steps ahead of her, without speaking, unmindful of Mariam who almost had to run to keep up with him. He wasn't so ready with a laugh on these outings anymore. He didn't buy her sweets or gifts, didn't stop and name places to her as he used to. Her questions seemed to irritate him. (p. 94)

She uses her duty as a submissive wife to try to please her husband and seek his validation as a way to avoid the painful memories of her family's past. However, these memories occasionally resurface, particularly during difficult times, such as when she experiences multiple failed attempts at bearing children.

In the four years since the day at the bathhouse, there had been six more cycles of hopes raised then dashed, each loss, each collapse, each trip to the doctor more crushing for Mariam than the last. With each disappointment, Rasheed had grown more remote and resentful. Now nothing she did pleased him. She cleaned the house, made sure he always had a supply of clean shirts, cooked him his favorite dishes. Once, disastrously, she even bought makeup and put it on for him. But when he came home, he took one look at her and winced with such distaste that she rushed to the bathroom and washed it all off, tears of shame mixing with soapy water, rouge, and mascara. (p. 99)

Simultaneously, Mariam's acceptance of her situation and her tendency to internalise her mother's words reveal her deep-rooted self-esteem issues and the emotional burden of her past. Her mother's disparaging comments persistently haunt her, reinforcing the belief that suffering is the inevitable path for women like her.

She remembered Nana saying once that each snowflake was a sigh heaved by an aggrieved woman somewhere in the world. That all the sighs drifted up the sky, gathered into clouds, then broke into tiny pieces that fell silently on the people below. || *As a reminder of how women like us suffer*, she'd said. *How quietly we endure all that falls upon us.* (p. 91)

Her mother's negative words continue to echo in her mind, especially when adversity strikes, further strengthening the idea that life is a constant endurance test for women like her. Mariam's self-doubt and sense of inadequacy lead her to employ denial and avoidance as coping strategies to evade the painful memories of her past and the guilt she carries. This internal struggle is further exacerbated by Mariam's recurring nightmares, in which her mother's jinn, a symbolic representation of her unresolved guilt and self-blame, steals her baby. These nightmares intensify her feelings of undeserved motherhood, as she believes that her past sins, including being born a harami and her perceived role in her mother's death, render her unworthy of the blessings of motherhood. These haunting dreams serve as a potent reminder of her unresolved conflicts and the emotional turmoil she faces, adding layers of complexity to her character.

Mariam's emotional complexity in her interactions with Laila is a fascinating aspect of the story. At thirty-three (33) years old, Mariam has endured a lifetime of emotional turmoil and abuse. Her past, marked by her status as a *harami* or illegitimate child and the taunting negativity of her mother, Nana, leaves deep scars on her self-esteem and sense of worth. Her father's rejection and betrayal further exacerbate her feelings of being nothing, useless, and unworthy of love or happiness. When Laila enters her life as Rasheed's second wife, it becomes a catalyst for Mariam's unresolved conflicts to resurface. She feels threatened by Laila's youth, intelligence, and



beauty, which stand in stark contrast to her own perceived inadequacies. Rasheed's degrading remarks about Mariam, comparing her to a Volga car, old and rickety, and reducing her to the status of an insect, implying that she is useless to him but still 'sturdy' and usable as "a good worker and without pretensions", in contrast to his praises of Laila, referring to her as the queen, the "*malaika*", and comparing her to a Benz, "a brand-new, first-class, shiny Benz" (p. 223), add fuel to Mariam's insecurities. Already trapped in a cycle of self-doubt and fear, she is unable to stand up to Rasheed's taunting and abuse. Silima (2013) argues that the stories of women like Nana and Mariam demonstrate that accepting subjugation without resistance only strengthens the tyrants and undermines humanity and gratitude. These characters serve as reminders that passive acceptance of oppression perpetuates a system that devalues and defeats the very essence of human existence. Through her analysis, Silima draws attention to the pervasive nature of women's oppression and the urgent need for women to assert their rights and challenge the systems that seek to subjugate them.

As observed by Sharma & Verma (2020), Mariam's relationship with Rasheed provides a compelling lens to explore the intricate power dynamics and gender inequalities deeply rooted in Afghan society. Through their study, Sharma & Verma unveil the complexities of women's relationships with their husbands in the novel, offering valuable insights into how these dynamics contribute to the characterisation of characters like Mariam. The deeply ingrained gender norms and patriarchal structures not only shape Mariam's experiences but also influence her actions and decisions throughout the narrative. This exploration underscores the broader societal context in which

the characters operate and the impact of these dynamics on their lives and development.

This study sheds light on the oppressive nature of Mariam's marriage and her ongoing battle for autonomy, even if it means taking it out on other vulnerable people like Laila instead of confronting the abusive partner. Mariam's coping mechanisms, such as displacement and projection, become particularly evident in the way she interacts with Laila. Her displacement of emotional distress onto Laila and the projection of her unresolved emotions serve as complex manifestations of her internal struggles. These defense mechanisms, though they temporarily offer Mariam a respite from the emotional burdens of her past, ultimately reinforce the oppressive dynamics within her marriage. They become instruments through which her husband, Rasheed, exercises control over her and further limits her agency. Within this context, Mariam's submissive role serves as a reflection of the limited choices and constrained agency that women often face in such patriarchal settings.

In Silima's (2013) insightful study, Mariam emerges as an embodiment of the archetype of sacrificing women. Her life's trajectory, marred by emotional and physical abuses and enduring unrelenting hardships, is a testament to her unwavering commitment to serving others without ever demanding anything for herself. From her early years living with her mother, marked by the absence of her father's love and acceptance, to the subsequent twenty-seven years of enduring an abusive marriage to Rasheed, Mariam's existence has been defined by selflessness, dependence, and the absence of choice. As Silma (2013) astutely points out, the lives of women like Mariam, and by extension, Nana, are ensnared in a relentless cycle of deprivation and

suffering. This harrowing existence denies them the basic human rights of respect, dignity, and autonomy. Mariam, an exemplar of the archetype of sacrificing women as outlined in Silima's (2013) study, tragically learns to exist solely for others, never asserting her own desires or demands. Her life journey, marked by enduring emotional and physical abuse, is a stark illustration of this selflessness.

What is intriguing is how Mariam projects again and displaces her pain onto Laila. Mariam, now aged and unable to conceive, finds herself disheartened when Rasheed takes a second wife, a woman barely of marriageable age, reminiscent of Mariam's age when she was married off to him. Laila, at just fourteen (14) years old, is innocent and unknowingly becomes the receptacle for Mariam's unresolved emotions. Mariam projects her own feelings of insecurity, jealousy, and inadequacy onto the young girl and displaces her anger and frustration onto her as well. She might see in Laila a reflection of her younger self, vulnerable and powerless in this tragic time of her life, and this intensifies her projection. She confronts Laila, snapping at her and accusing her of wanting to take her place and steal her husband, despite the girl's attempts to engage in a friendly conversation. The excerpts below demonstrates Mariam's attempt to maintain control and assert her authority, establishing rules and boundaries for their coexistence in the household. However, her emotions are complex, and her forceful expression of her will leaves her feeling somewhat unsatisfied and guilty. This interaction is a vivid example of the defense mechanisms of projection and displacement, highlighting Mariam's inner turmoil and the complexities of her character as she navigates her evolving relationship with Laila.

Mariam could see in the stiff way the girl clutched the cup, the tightened shoulders, that she was nervous. She imagined her sitting on the bed working up the nerve.

"The leaves are turning," the girl said companionably. "Have you seen? Autumn is my favorite. I like the smell of it, when people burn leaves in their gardens. My mother, she liked springtime the best. You knew my mother?"

"Not really."

The girl cupped a hand behind her ear. "I'm sorry?"

Mariam raised her voice. "I said no. I didn't know your mother."

"Oh."

"Is there something you want?"

"Mariam jan, I want to . . . About the things he said the other night—"

"I have been meaning to talk to you about it." Mariam broke in.

"Yes, please," the girl said earnestly, almost eagerly. She took a step forward. She looked relieved.

Outside, an oriole was warbling. Someone was pulling a cart; Mariam could hear the creaking of its hinges, the bouncing and rattling of its iron wheels. There was the sound of gunfire not so far away, a single shot followed by three more, then nothing.

"I won't be your servant," Mariam said. "I won't."

The girl flinched. "No. Of course not!"

"You may be the palace malika and me a dehati, but I won't take orders from you. You can complain to him and he can slit my throat, but I won't do it. Do you hear me? I won't be your servant."

"No! I don't expect—"

"And if you think you can use your looks to get rid of me, you're wrong. I was here first. I won't be thrown out. I won't have you cast me out."

"It's not what I want," the girl said weakly. (p. 225)

Although Mariam feels empathy for Laila's tragedy, she cannot allow herself to be kind to her, knowing that Laila's presence threatens her role as the 'madam' of the house—the only sense of security Mariam has ever known. Laila's ability to bear children further amplifies this threat, highlighting Mariam's own inability to do so. Mariam's hurt and insecurities, exacerbated by Rasheed's actions, manifest in her demeanor and attitude toward Laila, preventing her from recognising any good in Laila or the potential for a relationship between them. Rasheed's deliberate manipulation and efforts to drive a wedge between the two women further complicate their dynamic, as he seeks to maintain control over them both. Despite her resentment and the pain Mariam projects onto Laila, Laila, having been fortunate to receive an

education from her father, recognises the tense wedge Rasheed is trying to push between them and tries to connect with Mariam. In an attempt to secure what little authority she has left, Mariam sets almost hostile boundaries with Laila, splitting roles in the household and strongly asserting her displeasure with the new situation.

“And I see your wounds are healed up now. So you can start doing your share of the work in this house—”

The girl was nodding quickly. Some of her tea spilled, but she didn’t notice. “Yes, that’s the other reason I came down, to thank you for taking care of me—”

“Well, I wouldn’t have,” Mariam snapped. “I wouldn’t have fed you and washed you and nursed you if I’d known you were going to turn around and steal my husband.”

“Steal—”

“I will still cook and wash the dishes. You will do the laundry and the sweeping. The rest we will alternate daily. And one more thing. I have no use for your company. I don’t want it. What I want is to be alone. You will leave me be, and I will return the favor. That’s how we will get on. Those are the rules.”

When she was done speaking, her heart was hammering and her mouth felt parched. Mariam had never before spoken in this manner, had never stated her will so forcefully. It ought to have felt exhilarating, but the girl’s eyes had teared up and her face was drooping, and what satisfaction Mariam found from this outburst felt meager, somehow illicit.

She extended the shirts toward the girl.

“Put them in the almari, not the closet. He likes the whites in the top drawer, the rest in the middle, with the socks.”

The girl set the cup on the floor and put her hands out for the shirts, palms up. “I’m sorry about all of this,” she croaked.

“You should be,” Mariam said. “You should be sorry.” (pp. 225–226)

The burden of Mariam’s inability to carry a pregnancy to term weighs heavily on her. Her inability to provide Rasheed with children deepens her sense of inadequacy, fueling her fear that Rasheed might view her as dispensable and might replace her with Laila to fulfil his desire for offspring, as he ultimately does. This fear exacerbates the growing divide between them, particularly when Laila conceives.

That night, all during the meal, Laila watched Mariam push a cube of meat around her plate. Laila was there when Rasheed sprang the news on

Mariam in a high, dramatic voice—Laila had never before witnessed such cheerful cruelty. Mariam’s lashes fluttered when she heard. A flush spread across her face. She sat sulking, looking desolate.

After, Rasheed went upstairs to listen to his radio, and Laila helped Mariam clear the *sofrah*.

“I can’t imagine what you are now,” Mariam said, picking grains of rice and bread crumbs, “if you were a Benz before.”

Laila tried a more lighthearted tactic. “A train? Maybe a big jumbo jet.”

Mariam straightened up. “I hope you don’t think this excuses you from chores.”

Laila opened her mouth, thought better of it. She reminded herself that Mariam was the only innocent party in this arrangement. Mariam and the baby. (pp. 228–229)

Even as Laila tries to lighten the mood with her response to Mariam’s bitter sarcasm [*“I can’t imagine what you are now,”* Mariam said, picking grains of rice and bread crumbs, *“if you were a Benz before.”*], Mariam clearly does not give Laila an easy time. Coupled with her accumulated frustrations and unresolved conflicts, this situation leads to Mariam projecting her pent-up frustrations onto Laila. Her powerlessness and frustration drive her to displace her anger and emotional distress onto innocent people around her instead of confronting the cause of her frustration and anger—Rasheed, the husband. This becomes especially evident in her strained relationship with Laila, where Mariam grapples with overwhelming feelings of jealousy and inadequacy, resulting in moments of displacement. An example is the scene where Mariam and Laila argue about a missing wooden spoon.

She didn’t tell him that they’d had their first true fight. || It had happened a few days earlier. Laila had gone to the kitchen and found Mariam yanking drawers and slamming them shut. She was looking, Mariam said, for the long wooden spoon she used to stir rice.

“Where did you put it?” she said, wheeling around to face Laila.

“Me?” Laila said. “I didn’t take it. I hardly come in here.”

“I’ve noticed.”

“Is that an accusation? It’s how you wanted it, remember. You said you would make the meals. But if you want to switch—”

“So you’re saying it grew little legs and walked out. *Teep, teep, teep, teep*. Is that what happened, *degeh?*”

“I’m saying...” Laila said, trying to maintain control. Usually, she could will herself to absorb Mariam’s derision and finger-pointing. But

her ankles had swollen, her head hurt, and the heartburn was vicious that day. “I am saying that maybe you’ve misplaced it.”

“Misplaced it?” Mariam pulled a drawer. The spatulas and knives inside it clanked. “How long have you been here, a few months? I’ve lived in this house for nineteen years, *dokhtar jo*. I have kept *that* spoon in *this* drawer since you were shitting your diapers.”

“Still,” Laila said, on the brink now, teeth clenched, “it’s possible you put it somewhere and forgot.”

“And it’s possible *you* hid it somewhere, to aggravate me.”

“You’re a sad, miserable woman,” Laila said.

Mariam flinched, then recovered, pursed her lips. “And you’re a whore. A whore and a *dozd*. A thieving whore, that’s what you are!” (Chapter 32, pp. 233- 234)

In her strained relationship with Laila, Mariam transfers her own feelings of vulnerability onto the younger woman, almost as if she is reliving her own past through Laila.

Then there was shouting. Pots raised though not hurled. They’d called each other names, names that made Laila blush now. They hadn’t spoken since. Laila was still shocked at how easily she’d come unhinged, but, the truth was, part of her had liked it, had liked how it felt to scream at Mariam, to curse at her, to have a target at which to focus all her simmering anger, her grief. || Laila wondered, with something like insight, if it wasn’t the same for Mariam. || After, she had run upstairs and thrown herself on Rasheed’s bed. Downstairs, Mariam was still yelling, “Dirt on your head! Dirt on your head!” Laila had lain on the bed, groaning into the pillow, missing her parents suddenly and with an overpowering intensity she hadn’t felt since those terrible days just after the attack. (Chapter 32, pp. 233- 234)

By doing so, Mariam avoids directly confronting her own deeply rooted insecurities. This dynamics exemplifies how displacement also becomes a part of Mariam’s coping strategy in the face of her challenging circumstances. In essence, Mariam’s projection and displacement onto Laila is a complex interplay of past traumas, present insecurities, and the fear of losing the little sense of security she has left. It showcases the depth of character development in the novel and how Hosseini explores the intricate workings of the human psyche, particularly in the context of abusive relationships and the impact of societal norms on women’s self-worth.

Mariam's psychological defense mechanisms highlight her resilience and survival instincts in the face of significant adversity. They also reflect the complexity of her character and the multifaceted nature of her coping strategies as she navigates a life filled with trauma, loss, and hardship. In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Hosseini masterfully portrays the intricate web of defense mechanisms that the protagonist employs to cope with adversity and trauma. Through Mariam's character, this part of the chapter has explored the coping strategies of rationalisation, idealisation, emotional distancing, sublimation, denial, avoidance, projection, and displacement enveloped in a life of silence and acceptance as her mainly chosen psychological tools for navigating a life marked by abandonment, abuse, and powerlessness. These defense mechanisms serve as a testament to the resilience of the human spirit in the face of overwhelming odds, highlighting the multifaceted nature of coping mechanisms in the realms of literature and psychology.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has analysed the coping strategies employed by the protagonists, Amir and Mariam, in Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, respectively, in light of Freud's defense mechanisms. In the novels *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, the protagonists, Amir and Mariam, navigate their tumultuous lives while wrestling with the shadows of their pasts. Both characters employ a variety of defense mechanisms and coping strategies in their attempts to reconcile with the haunting memories and emotions that threaten to overwhelm them. In the exploration of the characters' coping mechanisms, I delved into the intricacies of how they deal with the effects of their childhood experiences. These



defense mechanisms not only offer a lens through which we understand their psychological strategies for managing distressing memories but also serve as a gateway to comprehending the profound impact of these childhood experiences on their characterisation.

Amir's journey in *The Kite Runner* unveils an exploration of Freudian defense mechanisms. Repression serves as his initial shield, allowing him to bury traumatic memories deep within his subconscious, supposedly sparing him from immediate anguish. However, the cost of this repression is an enduring internal conflict, manifesting as recurring nightmares and feelings of inadequacy. Denial and deflection offer Amir a temporary respite from the emotional weight of his past actions as he rationalises and diverts his thoughts to preserve his self-image. Yet, these tactics perpetuate his inner turmoil, with the past persistently resurfacing. Displacement, embodied in his distancing from Hassan, intensifies his guilt rather than alleviating it, revealing the complexity of his psychological response. Projection further complicates Amir's inner landscape, as he longs for Hassan to shoulder the blame, seeking a twisted form of catharsis.

In contrast, Mariam in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* crafts her own arsenal of defense mechanisms to endure a life marked by abandonment and abuse. From idealising her father to rationalising her mother's suicide and self-blame, Mariam's coping mechanisms offer insight into her inner turmoil. Acceptance of an oppressive marriage to Rasheed, rooted in self-imposed guilt, reflects the interplay between her past trauma and present circumstances. Rationalisation, denial, and avoidance become shields, providing temporary refuge from the brutal realities of her existence. Sublimation redirects her

emotions into the role of a submissive wife, allowing her to survive within societal norms. Mariam's projection of pain onto Laila serves as a mechanism for displacing her emotional distress, sparing her from direct confrontation with her insecurities.

As discussed, Amir and Mariam employ a range of defense mechanisms, such as repression, denial, and projection, among others, to shield themselves from the emotional turmoil stemming from their pasts. These coping strategies, while initially protective, ultimately shape the way they perceive themselves and interact with the world around them. Amir's persistent repression of traumatic memories, as well as Mariam's resignation and self-blame, not only affect their emotional well-being but also contribute to feelings of inadequacy and guilt that define their character. Both Amir and Mariam's coping mechanisms and defense strategies provide a window into their resilience and the complex nature of the human psyche. Their journeys highlight how family dynamics, trauma, guilt, and societal norms shape their self-worth and emotional responses. These characters' struggles underscore the multifaceted nature of defense mechanisms and the intricate workings of the human spirit. As we dissect their experiences, we gain deeper insights into the enduring impact of unresolved pasts and the ways individuals navigate their psychological landscapes while striving for healing and redemption.

Therefore, in this analysis of the characters' coping mechanisms, the chapter simultaneously unravels the complex web of their characterisation. These defense mechanisms act as both protective shields and formidable barriers, influencing their self-perception, relationships, and emotional landscapes. In essence, the coping mechanisms they employ are the key to

understanding how their childhood experiences continue to reverberate throughout their lives, moulding the very essence of their characters.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### CONCLUSION

#### Introduction

The previous chapter analysed the psychological defense mechanisms and coping strategies that the central characters, Amir and Mariam, employ in dealing with their traumatic past experiences and grappling with the enduring effects of their childhood experiences by examining the impact of the haunting memories of their experiences in their life trajectories, utilising Freud's (1936) [Ego and the] Mechanisms of Defense and the Bowen Family theory of Psychoanalysis. This chapter draws the curtain on the entire thesis. It presents a summary of the thesis, highlighting the objectives, methodology, and synthesis of all the key ideas, followed by highlights of the key findings and recommendations for further research.

#### Summary of Research

The present study was organised into five chapters. The opening chapter, serving as the introduction, established the background to the entire study, giving a detailed introduction to the research work by providing clarity to the research problem. To set the tone for the thesis, the chapter discussed the author's background, thesis statement, justification of the study, purpose of the study, significance of the study, delimitations, methodology, as well as the definition of terms. The study focused on traumatic childhood experiences influenced by toxic family dynamics in two novels by renowned Afghan-American writer and bestseller Khaled Hosseini: *The Kite Runner* (2003) and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007). The selection of the texts was informed by the target characteristics that drive the research, which are exclusive to these

two novels. The prime concern and aim of the study was to explore the impact of childhood experiences on the growth of the protagonists, Amir and Mariam, looking at how it affects or contributes to their characterisation.

To this end, the study employed the psychoanalytic theory specifically in line with the exploration of the theme of family dynamics and the impact on the child (character development), a theory developed by psychologist and psychoanalyst/therapist Murray Bowen (Bowen, 1976: 1978; Kerr & Bowen, 1988). The study also employed Derrida's concept of hauntology (1993), Freud's concepts of family romance (1959), and the Oedipal complex (Freud, 1961; Hartke, 2016), as well as the Freudian Mechanisms of Defense (1936), as the study's framework. This approach is found to be more appropriate in responding to the research questions. In so doing, the study also subtly highlights how these characters, as well as other characters, perceive them[selves] in self-constructing their identities in order to move on with their lives with the trauma of their past hanging like a noose around their necks.

Chapter two is dedicated to reviewing the literature related to the chosen primary texts, accompanied by a critical examination of the theoretical and analytical framework used in the study. This framework encompasses a broad understanding of psychoanalysis, including Freud's concepts of family romances and defense mechanisms. It is followed by an extensive discussion of the Bowen Family Theory, its concepts, and Derrida's hauntology. The chapter explores critical perspectives on the primary texts, revealing the multifaceted nature of Hosseini's works. It emerges that scholars who studied these texts often focused on other thematic concepts or applied different theories. While the psychological elements within both novels were

individually explored in the literature, there is a notable dearth in the thematic exploration of family dynamics and their interaction with psychological trauma, especially through the psychoanalytic lens. The study centres on the key concept of family dynamics, informed by Bowen's definition. Described as an emotional unit, the family is characterised by interconnectedness and emotional dependency among its members. This understanding shapes the analysis, capturing the influence of family dynamics on the development of characters and the concept of psychological trauma. The present study focuses on family dynamics as life-shaping/altering factors for the central characters. This emphasis on character development distinguishes this thesis as it delves into the long-term consequences of toxic family dynamics and interactions.

For the method of analysis, the discussion of the data was thematised according to the research questions. The analysis, captured in chapters three and four, was carried out by mainly looking into the narratives of both characters, their experiences, and their actions/reactions, particularly teasing out literary representations of childhood trauma and family dynamics in the texts. In pursuit of research question one, the third chapter employed Bowen's family theory and its concepts, together with Derrida's hauntology and Freud's family romances concept, through the exploration of memory to not only tease out the daunting pasts of the protagonists that haunt them in the present but also to establish the familial dynamics of the protagonists and their contribution to their characterisation. The chapter also reveals a unique manifestation of the Oedipal complex in both texts.

In addressing research question two, the fourth chapter employed Freud's defense mechanisms as the analytical framework for the analysis of

the protagonists coping strategies against their psychological struggles. The chapter established the psychological and emotional impact of and reactions to the daunting memories of their haunting childhood experiences. The thesis also considered the protagonists' monologues and dialogues (both verbal and non-verbal interactions) with other characters, highlighting the emotions (reactive and non-reactive/passive) embedded within them.

The novels are prominently endowed with psychological elements that attract studies, and although this work, like a few others discussed in the literature, explores these psychological elements, this thesis delves deeper into these psychological elements, tendencies, long-term impact, and the recurring theme of family and its dynamics as a factor, more so a determining one in the lives of the central character. In other words, this study establishes that family is the main factor that influences the characterisation of the central characters, Amir and Mariam, determining how they turn out to be, how they grow up, and their psychological/mental growth, which highly impacts their confidence and overall growth.

### **Key Research Findings**

In response to the research questions, I made some key findings. To facilitate my discussion, I shall re-state the research questions here:

1. How do the lingering echoes of a haunted past manifest and influence the trajectories of the central characters, Amir and Mariam?
2. What defense mechanisms and coping strategies do the protagonists employ to grapple with the enduring effects of their haunting childhood experiences?

The following findings emerged through a nuanced exploration of the research questions, which were framed within the context of psychoanalytic theory, focusing on the impacts of childhood trauma and family dynamics. These findings not only respond to the research questions but also reflect a deeper engagement with the complexities of the novels and the theoretical frameworks underpinning this study.

- **Reconceptualisation of the Oedipal Complex in a Non-Traditional**

**Gendered Context:** The research uncovers unique reconfigurations, distinctive variations of the manifestation of the Oedipal complex in the context of both *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, challenging the traditional Freudian interpretation. In *The Kite Runner*, Amir's jealousy and competition with Hassan for his father's affection illustrate an inversion of the typical Oedipal narrative in which the son seeks the love of the mother. Here, the complex takes on a predominantly male dynamic, positioning Baba as the mother figure, an insight not typically explored in psychoanalytic readings. This departure from Freudian conventions provides a new lens for understanding Amir's inner conflict and his deep psychological turmoil. Similarly, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* presents Mariam's relationship with her father, Jalil, as a variant of the Electra complex, but with its own unique distortions. Mariam undergoes a transformation of emotions from adoration to resentment and bitterness towards her father following his betrayal. Her desperate quest for her father's affection and her eventual disillusionment with him underscore



the shifting dynamics of the Oedipal/Electra complexes when framed within a specific cultural and familial context.

- **The Lingering Effects of a Traumatic Childhood:** Both Amir and Mariam's emotional development and psychological growth are profoundly shaped by their respective childhoods. The weight of their past actions, particularly in relation to their guilt over the deaths of loved ones, becomes a driving force in their adult lives. However, this research diverges from purely summarising their guilt to examine how these past traumas manifest as pervasive psychological burdens that structure their behaviours and decisions. The research shifts the focus from the events themselves to their psychological aftermath, showing how unresolved trauma manifests in both passive and active defense mechanisms.
- **Family Dynamics and the Lack of Parental Affection as Life-Altering Forces:** A key finding of this study is the critical role of family dynamics and the absence of parental affection in shaping the protagonists' psychological and life trajectories. While aligned with Freudian theory on the formative influence of parents, the study highlights how toxic family relationships exacerbate these effects. For both characters, the pursuit of paternal love and validation becomes a tragic endeavour, leading to rejection that leaves deep emotional and psychological scars. For Amir, paternal rejection manifests in impulsive decisions and enduring emotional turmoil. His father's critical remarks and overwhelming presence reinforce Amir's perceived inadequacies, culminating in his resignation to the belief that

he will never earn his father's approval. This resignation drives his detachment and fuels internal conflict. Conversely, Mariam's adoration for her father devolves into bitterness and resentment following his betrayal, illustrating the destabilising effects of unmet expectations and broken familial bonds. Her response is one of resignation and internalised guilt, evolving into acceptance and a form of silent endurance within an abusive marriage.

This finding expands on Freudian theory by demonstrating how toxic family dynamics not only define early identity formation but also create enduring emotional turmoil that influences lifelong behaviour and self-perception. The research highlights the broader psychoanalytic implication that the denial of parental affection is a life-altering force, distorting self-perception and disrupting emotional and psychological development.

- **Penitential Silence and Its Diverging Forms in Response to Trauma:** Both protagonists demonstrate a form of penitential silence as a coping mechanism. However, the study contends that this silence functions differently for each character. Mariam's silence is passive, shaped by resignation to an abusive marriage as deserved punishment for her sins, while Amir's silence is more active, driven by introspection and guilt. The nuanced differences in their responses, although similar, reflect the impact of their pasts on their lives and identities. This divergence challenges the idea that silence is solely a mechanism for repression, instead proposing that it can serve as a complex emotional process that reflects each character's psychological

development. By revisiting the work of theorists like Sigmund Freud and Anna Freud, the study explores how these silences point to a deeper longing for redemption and reconciliation with their pasts, an area less frequently examined in psychoanalytic readings.

- **Parental Influence and the Construction of Identity/Fractured Identities:**

Another significant finding of this study is the authorial influence of the parent on the child as reflected in the novels, framed through Freud's 'Family Romances' (1909). For both Amir and Mariam, their fathers represent the ultimate authority and source of all belief. Their identities are shaped not only through direct parental interactions but also by the symbolic and mythic roles their fathers occupy in their lives. This study extends traditional psychoanalytic perspectives by highlighting how the fathers' absent or insufficient love and approval profoundly shape the characters' internal worlds, fueling their emotional struggles and identity crises. The denial of paternal affection emerges as a critical factor not only in shaping their personal tragedies but also in destabilising their psychological foundation and hindering the development of a coherent sense of self. Amir's self-esteem and emotional turmoil are deeply tied to his father's perception of him, while Mariam's fractured sense of self stems from her mother's toxic influence, her idealisation of her father, and his eventual betrayal. Ultimately, the fathers' symbolic influence, extending beyond direct interaction, is central to understanding the characters' personal tragedies and highlights the broader

psychoanalytic theme that inadequate parental validation is a destabilising force in identity formation.

- **Coping Mechanisms and Their Psychological Limitations**

[temporary (but fragile) shields of refuge]: The study goes beyond simply identifying the characters' coping mechanisms to explore how these mechanisms—such as repression, denial, and displacement—serve as fragile shields that offer temporary relief but ultimately hinder their psychological healing. This aligns with psychoanalytic views on defense mechanisms but expands the discussion by illustrating how these mechanisms distort the characters' perceptions of self-worth and their relationships with others. By focusing on the limitations of these strategies, the study challenges the idea that coping mechanisms offer lasting solutions, highlighting their role as temporary and ultimately self-sabotaging responses to trauma.

- **Confronting the Past; Embracing Redemption (From guilt to acceptance)**

: This study does not merely summarise Amir's and Mariam's journeys of redemption but examines the psychological intricacies of their paths toward confronting guilt and trauma. Amir's quest for redemption through saving Sohrab becomes a symbolic act of healing, while Mariam's self-sacrifice for Laila represents a tragic but redemptive acknowledgment of her own worth. These moments are framed within the larger psychoanalytic discussion of redemption, yet they are critiqued for their limited scope in achieving full psychological healing. The research suggests that both characters' paths toward redemption, while pivotal, are incomplete and complex,

leaving room for future exploration of the limits of redemption within psychoanalytic frameworks.

- **The redemptive power of sacrificial love and penitential sacrifice:**

The transformative power of sacrificial love emerges as a key catalyst for redemption in the lives of Amir and Mariam, the central characters. Trapped in self-imposed psychological prisons, burdened by guilt and resigned to a joyless existence, they discover that selfless sacrifice becomes the gateway to liberation. Both Amir and Mariam, haunted by past traumas and convinced that happiness is elusive, undergo a confrontation with their histories. For Amir, the act of saving Sohrab, Hassan's son, becomes a symbolic journey towards healing and forgiveness, heralding a new chapter of personal redemption. Likewise, Mariam's courageous decision to save Laila and her children, despite the inevitable consequences for killing her abusive husband Rasheed, marks the conclusion of her own tragic tale. In these acts of sacrificial love, they break free from their psychological prisons, paving the way for a brighter, redeemed future. Although one leads to death and the other to a new life and a fresh start, both initiate a new chapter free of guilt. The study critically examines how these acts of love, while symbolically redemptive, do not completely eradicate the characters' psychological scars. This nuanced reading departs from a simplistic interpretation of love as a universal healing force, instead showing how it acts as a necessary but incomplete resolution to their internal struggles.

In summary, this thesis offers a profound exploration of the haunting nature of past actions and the enduring impact of complex family dynamics on the lives of the central characters. It underscores how the emotional journeys and realisations of these characters are intricately intertwined with toxic family environments, feelings of guilt and betrayal, and the absence of parental love and care. The burden of complex familial bonds and the harsh judgements of society further shape their narratives, resulting in compelling portrayals of human relationships and the enduring effects of the past. Throughout the analysis, this study reveals that coping mechanisms, initially offering a semblance of control, ultimately constrain the characters from leading fulfilling lives. The weight of guilt and self-blame remain their constant companions until they are compelled to confront their pasts. These pivotal moments of confrontation serve as catalysts for transformation and personal redemption, illuminating a glimmer of hope and the possibility of a fresh start in the midst of their otherwise tumultuous lives.

This research not only deepens our understanding of character development in literature but also speaks to the broader significance of how childhood experiences and family dynamics continue to shape individuals' identities and perceptions. It invites readers to contemplate the universality of these themes and encourages further exploration of similar topics in literary works, where the human spirit perseveres amid the shadows of the past.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

This study has considered the representation of family dynamics and haunting traumatic childhood experiences and its impact or influence on the present lives of the protagonists in Hosseini's novels, *The Kite Runner* and *A*

*Thousand Splendid Suns*, contributing to broader scope of trauma and literary studies. There are numerous opportunities for further research, not only within the scope of the analysed texts but also within the theoretical and analytical framework applied in this thesis.

A significant area of interest that has been generated from this research is conducting a microscopic study of characters such as Hassan, Baba, and Ali in *The Kite Runner*, which could shed light on their roles as protective figures within the psychoanalytic framework. Similarly, an examination of characters like Nana, Jalil, and Laila in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* from the same psychoanalytic lens can offer insights into their coping mechanisms and emotional journeys, as a development on this thesis research area, to underscore the impact of these characters as parents.

To further broaden the scope of trauma studies in literature, this researcher also recommends further studies on the portrayal of childhood trauma, looking at childhood experiences as reflections of the society. This is because, the exploration of childhood trauma, especially within the dynamics of the family gives insight into how society contributes to character development (the development of children). Furthermore, a gender-focused inquiry can delve into how male and female characters respond differently to similar traumas in literature, considering the influence of societal expectations and gender roles.

This study also punctuates the need for governmental bodies to reevaluate the role of literary research and provide support for writers and scholars. Funding literary projects and encouraging fiction writers to engage with real-world issues—especially those that unearth hidden, traumatic

societal challenges—can educate the society at large, raise awareness of emotional and psychological abuse of children and help protect them, foster positive cognitive and emotional growth, and propose solutions to societal problems. For instance, lessons from Khaled Hosseini's works, mirrored in Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*, provide a conceptual framework for addressing the psychological and emotional barriers impeding children's development. These narratives expose the harmful impact of toxic environments on children, where emotional and psychological abuse, often more insidious than physical harm, forces them into a state of pretense and identity loss, stifling their growth. Shakespeare's observation that "*all the world's a stage*" aptly captures the plight of children forced to play roles dictated by oppressive forces rather than living authentically. For these children, their worlds become a perpetual performance, devoid of happiness and true self-expression.

Moreover, attention could be directed toward the use of storytelling within these texts as a means of negotiating trauma and resistance. For instance, the act of storytelling in *The Kite Runner* reflects both an attempt to reconcile with the past and a critique of societal norms that perpetuate emotional repression. Similarly, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* employs intergenerational narratives to reveal the cyclical nature of trauma and the potential for growth through emotional resilience. By analysing these narrative strategies, scholars can explore how literature not only reflects but also interrogates societal attitudes toward parenting, identity, and emotional development.



Collectively, these recommendations form a robust foundation for future research, shedding further light on the intricate interplay of literature, psychology, and family dynamics. These recommendations aim to deepen the theoretical and comparative understanding of trauma and family dynamics in literature, fostering interdisciplinary dialogue between literary studies, psychology, and cultural analysis. By bridging literary and societal perspectives, future studies can continue to illuminate the transformative power of literature in understanding the human condition.

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