The Genre of Bildungsroman in Contemporary Anglophone Literature

Mrkalj, Mia

Sveučilište Josipa Jurja Strossmayera u Osijeku

Filozofski fakultet

Sveučilišni diplomski dvopredmetni studij engleskog jezika i književnosti – nastavnički smjer i njemačkog jezika i književnosti – nastavnički smjer

Mia Mrkalj

Žanr Bildungsromana u suvremenoj anglofonoj književnosti

Diplomski rad

Mentorica: prof. dr. sc. Biljana Oklopčić

Osijek, 2023.

Sveučilište Josipa Jurja Strossmayera u Osijeku

Filozofski fakultet

Odsjek za engleski jezik i književnost

Sveučilišni diplomski dvopredmetni studij engleskog jezika i književnosti – nastavnički smjer i njemačkog jezika i književnosti – nastavnički smjer

Mia Mrkalj

Žanr Bildungsromana u suvremenoj anglofonoj književnosti

Diplomski rad

Znanstveno područje: humanističke znanosti

Znanstveno polje: filologija

Znanstvena grana: anglistika

Mentorica: prof. dr. sc. Biljana Oklopčić

Osijek, 2023.

Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

Double Major MA Study Programme in English Language and Literature and German Language and Literature – Teaching Studies

Mia Mrkalj

The Genre of Bildungsroman in Contemporary Anglophone Literature

Master's Thesis

Supervisor: Dr. Biljana Oklopčić, Full Professor

Osijek, 2023

Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

Department of English

Double Major MA Study Programme in English Language and Literature and

German Language and Literature – Teaching Studies

Mia Mrkalj

The Genre of Bildungsroman in Contemporary Anglophone Literature

Master's Thesis

Scientific area: humanities

Scientific field: philology

Scientific branch: English Studies

Supervisor: Dr. Biljana Oklopčić, Full Professor

Osijek, 2023

IZJAVA

Izjavljujem s punom materijalnom i moralnom odgovornošću da sam ovaj rad samostalno napisala te da u njemu nema kopiranih ili prepisanih dijelova teksta tuđih radova, a da nisu označeni kao citati s navođenjem izvora odakle su preneseni.

Svojim vlastoručnim potpisom potvrđujem da sam suglasna da Filozofski fakultet u Osijeku trajno pohrani i javno objavi ovaj moj rad u internetskoj bazi završnih i diplomskih radova knjižnice Filozofskog fakulteta u Osijeku, knjižnice Sveučilišta Josipa Jurja Strossmayera u Osijeku i Nacionalne i sveučilišne knjižnice u Zagrebu.

U Osijeku, 25.8. 2023.

0122229748
Mia Mrkalj

Ime i prezime studenta, JMBAG

Table of Contents

Abstract

The maturation and psychological development of a protagonist is a common theme, frequently explored in many contemporary novels due to the complexity of the topic and the various potential ways how the topic could be approached. As a result, the genre of the *Bildungsroman,* centered around this concept, is particularly popular for both readers and authors. The genre deals with the maturation process of the protagonist, who is exposed to many influences, whether it be culture, religion, family, friendships, gender roles, oppression, trauma, sexuality, education, and others. In his novel *The Kite Runner*, Khaled Hosseini explores the development of the main character Amir from his childhood in Afghanistan to his adolescence in the United States. In the novel, Amir's maturation is shaped primarily by the people in his life, the sense of guilt, and his desire for redemption. Similarly, Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street* follows the journey of Esperanza, a young girl of Mexican descent living in Chicago. The formation of her personality is affected by her surroundings, poverty, marginalization, and gender roles. The aim of this thesis is to present *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini and *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros as the examples of the *Bildungsroman* novels, where the main protagonists display a transformed character by the end of the novel, challenged by many obstacles along their journey, and shaped by many external and internal influences like family relationships, culture, friendship, trauma, and marginalization.

Keywords: *Bildungsroman*, coming of age, maturation, Khaled Hosseini, Sandra Cisneros, *The Kite Runner, The House on Mango Street*

Introduction

The psychology behind human development is a complicated concept to grasp. Consequently, numerous authors have attempted to write literary works where they focus on this very issue: the gradual development of the main protagonist, influenced by many factors, both external and internal. Among different literary genres, none encapsulates this thematic issue as the genre of the *Bildungsroman*. In the history of literature, there is a plethora of novels that could be placed within this category. Although each of them possesses its own specific differences, as long as they explore the main hero's transformative journey, the novel rightfully earns its classification as the *Bildungsroman*. The first chapter of this thesis will center on defining the genre itself, the second chapter portrays the long history of the *Bildungsroman*, while the third focuses specifically on the American version of the genre, a pivotal aspect for the subsequent analysis of the novels. The following chapter analyzes the character development of Amir in the novel *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini. In the subsequent four chapters, the influence factors on his maturation are analyzed, namely the distant father, the unlimited loyalty and betrayal, the desire for atonement of sin, and the diverse values of Afghanistan and the United States. Then, the maturation of Esperanza, the main protagonist of Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street* is explored. The following chapter compares the elements of the traditional *Bildungsroman* in the novel with the elements of the modified *Bildungsroman*. Furthermore, the influence factors that shaped Esperanza as an adolescent are described in three chapters, namely the influence of culture, marginalization and diversity, the feeling of not-belonging and the desire for a satisfying home, as well as gender differences and female oppression.

The aim of this thesis is to present *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini and *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros as the examples of the *Bildungsroman*, where the main protagonists display a transformed character by the end of the novel, are challenged by many obstacles along their journey, and are shaped by many external and internal influences like family relationships, culture, friendship, trauma, and marginalization.

1. The *Bildungsroman* and Its Characteristics

In the beginning, the most important task is to define the term *Bildungsroman* itself and to state what the most significant characteristics of this literary genre are. Many theorists have come up with different definitions of the genre and considered different aspects to be of most significance. In this thesis, only a few definitions will be listed but it should be kept in mind that this term is not easy to define or summarize in a few sentences.

First of all, to understand the term *Bildungsroman*, it is necessary to translate it into English. The expression comes from the German language and consists of two words: *Bildung*, which means "education," and *Roman*, meaning "novel." The origins of the word and other English variations of this expression will be described in more detail later.

As Golban (18) states, the *Bildungsroman* is most commonly defined as a novel of identity formation. It is a term for the literary genre that observes the maturation process of the protagonist, his/her process of growth, education, and upbringing within a certain time span, in most cases beginning in childhood and finishing in early adulthood. This process includes not only physical development, but more importantly intellectual – spiritual, psychological, and moral – development of the character. The term "formation" necessarily implies some kind of inner and/or external change of the protagonist. In the process of maturation, the protagonists free themselves of their static and readymade features and become more dynamic. The formation can either end in completion and happiness or failure. This process includes various aspects of the realization of the self, such as "the sense of who one is, gender distinction, family and professional perspectives, social and interhuman status and role, modes of thinking, communication and behaviour, personal discernment and assimilation of views, belief and values" (Golban 18).

To some literary critics, individuality and the individual change of the characters is of the most importance, whereas to others, the protagonist must be actively involved in his "milieu," or his community to reach a complete formation (Golban 10-11). Campbell compares this journey to maturation with a "journey to the rites of passage from childhood to adulthood" where the protagonist

sets on an adventure, consisting of three elements: separation – initiation – return. The protagonist leaves their native environment, experiences an adventure in an unfamiliar setting, and returns home with "a new awareness of the world" (qtd. in Golban 12). In this unfamiliar environment, the hero comes across a larger society that tests him in various ways and eventually motivates him to change and adapt to new challenges, making him mature and grow (Thamarana 24). As Graham explains, these protagonists "venture out into the world to encounter experiences, often with members of different social classes, which leaves a lasting mark on their evolving sense of self" (11).

There are many prominent themes and motifs in the genre of the *Bildungsroman*. Some of the most common ones are identity, coming of age, education, love, and the search for the meaning of life. Education is an essential component of the *Bildungsroman*, whether it be an academic education or education in other areas of life (Thamarana 24). Graham emphasizes some other crucial themes, such as "individual psychological development, changing gender roles, the value of labor . . ., the importance of religion" (10). Bakhtin states that the genre of the *Bildungsroman* is quite thematically diverse: some are more biographical or autobiographical, some focus more on the "pedagogical notion of man's education," others follow the "main hero's educational development" strictly in chronological order, and some focus on the adventure of the plot (qtd. in Golban 14). Also, more recent manifestations of the *Bildungsromans* often deal with themes of "nostalgia, loss, home and community, and the generation gap" and the "nostalgic bereavement of loss" (Lazzaro-Weis 24).

There are many variations of the term *Bildungsroman* such as *Entwicklungsroman* (novel of development), *Erziehungsroman* (novel of upbringing), *Künstlerroman* (novel of artistic development), and others (Thamarana 22). The *Bildungsroman* can also be associated with many English translations that serve as synonyms, such as a novel of youth, a novel of education, a novel of apprenticeship, a novel of adolescence, a novel of initiation, the coming-of-age novel, or the life-novel (Golban 8). The *Bildungsroman* is also often compared to the picaresque novel and the confessional novel. Hirsch Gottfried and Miles differentiate between these three genres by comparing their characteristics: the picaresque hero is presented as an outcast, the confessional hero is a "spiritual outsider," whereas the hero of the *Bildungsroman*, also known as the *Bildungsheld*, is considered to be a representative member of society. Furthermore, the picaresque novel is compiled from many episodes loosely strung together, the confessional novel does not follow a chronological pattern, while the *Bildungsroman* "represents a progression of connected events that lead up to a definite

denouement" (Hirsch Gottfried and Miles 122). The picaresque novel focuses on the material side of life, on the hero's adventures and actions. The confessional novel emphasizes thoughts and reflections, whereas the *Bildungsroman* concentrates on both actions as well as reflections and thoughts, trying to portray a whole personality, including physical, emotional, intellectual, and moral aspects. Lastly, the picaresque novel encompasses the whole society, the confessional novel focuses on consciousness, while the *Bildungsroman* balances both the social and personal aspects (Hirsch Gottfried and Miles 122).

To conclude, as J. A. Cuddon simply explains, the *Bildungsroman* is "literally an 'upbringing' or 'education' novel' which observes 'the youthful development of a hero or heroine' achieved through 'various ups and downs of life'" (77).

1.1. The History of the *Bildungsroman*

Firstly, it is important to explain the origins of the term *Bildungsroman*. As already mentioned, the term is of German origin, coined by Karl Morgenstern, a professor of aesthetics at the University of Dorpat, modern-day Estonia. He used this expression for the first time in a lecture called "On the Nature of the *Bildungsroman*" in 1819 (Morgenstern and Boes 647). The term was not used from around 1820 to 1870. It gained popularity later when it was reintroduced by Wilhelm Dilthey in his study "Poetry and Experience" (1906). Some critics claim that Dilthey first applied this term in 1913, or even earlier in 1870 in a biography of Friedrich Schleiermacher. The earliest use of the term in English dates back to 1910 when it was introduced in *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (Golban 10).

Many consider Wieland's *Agathon* (1765/66) to be the earliest example of the *Bildungsroman*. The most famous examples, which are also often imitated by other authors, are Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* (1774) and *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (1795/96). Different authors have defined *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* as a prime example of the *Bildungsroman*. Golban labels it as "the first canonical *Bildungsroman*" (3) and as "a turning point in the history of the *Bildungsroman*" (4). The history of the genre is quite long and interesting, having started in antiquity and reaching its climax with Goethe's novels. He consolidated the *Bildungsroman* in German and world literature with his *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* and *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, by providing the prototype for the form. He established the term *Bildung* – formation, becoming.

According to Goethe, *Bildung* is "the organic unfolding of a totality of human capacities by the contact with worldly experiential powers, a process which results in an accommodation to those powers" (qtd. in Hirsch Gottfried and Miles 123). Shortly, Goethe introduced the essential element of this literary genre – "the development of his hero as a process of identity formation" (Golban 4). As Freese states, the *Bildungsroman* was long considered to be an "exclusively German genre" (256) because *Bildung* was a genuinely German concept. Other popular German examples of the *Bildungsroman* are the following: Gottfried Keller's *Der Grüne Heinrich* (1854/55), Adalbert Stifter's *Nachsommer* (1857), Hermann Hesse's *Das Glasperlenspiel* (1943), Thomas Mann's *Doktor Faustus* (1947), *Königliche Hoheit* (1904), *Der Zauberberg* (1924), and *Joseph und seine Brüder* (1933-42).[1]

The genre then flourished in British literature in the Victorian era, peaking in popularity among the realists. Some of the most admired British authors like William Makepeace Thackeray, Charles Dickens, Charlotte Brontë, and George Eliot used the pattern of character formation, especially the aspect of character development in relation to society, which is characteristic of the *Bildungsroman*, because it offered the "necessary extension and complexity to the realist literary concern with individual experience and the social background" (Golban 3). The Victorian realists were not as concerned with the individual subject. On the contrary, they emphasized the "social, professional, moral and family fulfilment" more than the individuality of the protagonist (Golban 6).

Realism shows a certain shift from Romanticism. In general, characters in realism are heavily defined by social factors. The key terms characteristic of this literary period are "la race, le milieu et le moment" or "determinism, environment, heredity" (Golban 6). Charles Dickens, one of the greatest British writers, was a Victorian realist who incorporated the characteristics of the *Bildungsroman* into some of his most famous works – *David Copperfield* and *Great Expectations*. Other important authors of this period of British literature are George Meredith's *The Adventures of Henry Richmond*, Samuel Butler's *The Way of All Flesh*, and Charlotte Brontë with her *Jane Eyre* (Thamarana 23).

Unlike other literary works that emerged during the nineteenth century, where the protagonists were members of the aristocracy and/or lower classes or the industrial proletariat, the protagonists of the *Bildungsroman* are typically members of the middle class (Graham 11). They are "reading heroes" whose characters are shaped by the literature they read. They also influence the readers with their

[1] Günter *Grass' Die Blechtrommel* (1959) is a well-known example of the Anti-*Bildungsroman* (Freese 256).

experiences, which the readers can identify with. Therefore, they are different from the heroes of earlier adventure novels and epics. For example, Odysseus and Don Quixote are set on a voyage but return unchanged and untouched by their experienced adventures. In contrast, Wilhelm Meister, the protagonist of Goethe's novel *Wilhelm Meister's Lehrjahre*, "develops from a callow youth in the raptures of his first love to a young man on the cusp of marriage; his life experiences have left an indelible mark on his psyche" (Graham 12). In conclusion, the *Bildungsroman* genre explores the protagonist's subjectivity and adds various worldly experiences to influence the development of the main character (Graham 12).

All in all, the newly established genre of the Bildungsroman achieved great success within nineteenth-century realism. In the first half of the twentieth century, the popularity of the genre decreased, but it regained its original fame in contemporary literature, mostly in realism, postmodernism, postcolonialism, racial and magical realism, and metafiction. As Golban states, the main source of the vitality of this literary genre and the reason why it is still popular and fruitful today is its "permanence of the thematic perspective of individual growth, upbringing and formation of personality of a human subject, . . . as well as the openness of *Bildungsroman* to originality on both thematic and narrative levels," and its flexibility and adaptability to new literary periods and their movements and adjustments (5).

1.2. The American *Bildungsroman*

Graham compares the genre of the *Bildungsroman* with the United States by saying that "an adolescent on the journey to maturity is a perfect metaphor for the United States: young, adventurous and optimistic" (117). The protagonists of these novels embody the basic concepts that American society is based on, namely "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness," by overcoming obstacles and achieving a new level of self-realization. These heroes justify the validity of the "American Dream" through their victories – the "American Dream" assures the American citizens that everyone can improve their life conditions and positions, no matter what their origin is. These well-established American beliefs are frequently found in the American *Bildungsroman* (Graham 117). On the other hand, not everything in the American system should be praised. Many novelists on the American scene have used the *Bildungsroman* genre to criticize their society and expose the nation's weaknesses.

Many protagonists in this genre express dissatisfaction with the American system. Graham lists the "turbulent history of civil and international wars, slavery, migration, economic decline, and inequalities of class, race and gender" (117) as the weak points of American society. A common theme in the American *Bildungsromans* is the past, whether familial, individual, or national, which burdens the young protagonists. They also often find the adult world discouraging and see little chance for an optimistic future. Their concerns about growing up and the disappointment they often endure as a result of their journey to adulthood are a sign of "wider anxieties about the nation's prospects and principles" (Graham 118).

After gaining independence, the United States attempted to clear itself of European influence. During this period, the *Bildungsroman* gained major popularity because, as noted by Kenneth Millard, young protagonists symbolize the essence of this new emerging nation: they use the figurative language of adolescence to portray the growing independence of the New World, independent of the customs and habits of the Old World (qtd. in Graham 119). During the mid-twentieth century, the widespread interest in youth-oriented fiction – also referred to as the "cult of adolescence" – was commonly associated with America's commitment to break away from European influence, fueled by the nation's "extreme individualism" and a "spirit [that] has not been worn out and debased in a gigantic struggle against an old and overbearing cultural tradition" (Millard qtd. in Graham 119). Based on this determination to differ from their European ancestors, American novelists strive for originality and therefore, not surprisingly, attempt to create an American version of the *Bildungsroman* that contrasts the European *Bildungsroman* in many ways, for example in its inclination to criticize society. In his renowned study on the European *Bildungsroman* "The Way of the World" (1987), Franco Moretti argues that the portrayals of the development of young protagonists in the nineteenth-century help readers understand modernity (qtd. in Graham 120). By contrast, in the American *Bildungsroman*, the experiences of young protagonists intensify the anxieties of this modern age, rather than reduce them. They also lead the readers to question the aspirations of the new nation (qtd. in Graham 120).

The American *Bildungsroman* further deviates from the European form through its teleological drive – its purpose. As Graham states, "a classic novel of development charts the progress of its young protagonist through trials of various kinds and concludes with an epiphany that brings insight" (120). Moretti states that *Bildung* is truly fulfilled only if it can be concluded. Bakhtin also concludes that

the "evolution towards a definable point" is essential to the genre (qtd. in Graham 120). In the American version of the genre, this focus on conclusion and resolution is not as apparent as in the European *Bildungsroman*: the American *Bildungsroman* shows a preference for extended development rather than definitive endings.

Whereas the European *Bildungsroman* often portrays a clash between the desire for self-determination and the pressures of socialization, where the protagonist usually reluctantly accepts the social norms and enters adulthood, the American *Bildungsroman* often illustrates "the protagonist's resistance to the established order" by refusing to accept the rituals that denote the symbolic end of youth, such as marriage or employment (Graham 120). In the conventional *Bildungsroman*, the hero's obedience to social norms and standards is rewarded with social and material success. As Moretti explains, in the European *Bildungsroman*, the only alternative to conformity is death – literal or metaphorical, often symbolized by the exclusion from a community. Conformity is usually symbolized by marriage (qtd. in Graham 121). In comparison, in the American version, individualism is highlighted as an admirable quality not opposed to national ideals. Therefore, the protagonist commonly questions and dismisses social norms and chooses "marginality over convention, autonomy over accommodation" (Graham 121).

The European and American *Bildungsromans* still have something in common: they present a certain nostalgia that impacts the maturation of the characters. In the mid-nineteenth-century European *Bildungsroman*, adult protagonists strive to return to their idyllic childhoods. Likewise, in many American texts, young protagonists crave to return to their earlier life and reconnect with someone or something they lost during the process of maturation, instead of progressing and maturing (Graham 122).

Many studies on the American *Bildungsroman* concentrate on specific identity groups, showcasing the country's diversity (Graham 118). The genre is brought to life by "societal outsiders" – men and women of minority groups, not by males of the majority group. The *Bildungsroman* whose main protagonists are marginalized Americans women, African-Americans, Mexican-Americans, Native Americans, homosexuals, etc., illustrates particular identity and adjustment challenges faced by individuals whose gender, ethnicity, sexuality, or color of skin makes them undesirable in the dominant society. These novels depict their efforts to find their own place in a society that simultaneously offers them the American dream and denies it as well (Freese 260). The portrayal of

young white men is though present in both the European *Bildungsroman* as well as in the American version. The European form focuses on the middle-class man as the essence of the novel, whereas the American novels highlight a working-class man as its focal point. Despite their social classes, male protagonists criticize American society and question the promises given to its citizens. These novels portray young white men as "misguided in their commitment to the nation's ideals, let down by its hollow promises, or repelled by its values" (Graham 123). One of the most popular representatives of this category is J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (Graham 123).

Traditionally, the *Bildungsroman* is a male-dominated form, focusing less frequently on girls. Novels that do illustrate girls as the main protagonists reveal that the process of maturing is indeed influenced by gender. The sex of the characters reshapes every aspect of the *Bildungsroman*: "its narrative structure, its implied psychology, its representation of social pressures" (Graham 129). Class position is also an important factor that brings consequences to the maturation of girls. A common theme is the sexual exploitation experienced by girls who grow up in poor living conditions, in dysfunctional families, struggling with hunger, discrimination, and poverty. As Barbara White notes, female adolescence suggests a future of inferior status (qtd. in Graham 130). In many *Bildungsromans* centered around girls, they face extreme poverty, are an easy target for sexual violence, fight and struggle to reach the same amount of autonomy as boys, and are frequently denied the "liberty and happiness" promised to all Americans (White qtd. in Graham 130). These are also the main topics of Sandra Cisneros' novel *The House on Mango Street*, where the main protagonist Esperanza, a young girl of Mexican origins living in Chicago, questions her identity, gender roles, searches for a satisfying home, endures sexual violence, and struggles against discrimination. This novel with its crucial themes will be discussed in further chapters.

Many *Bildungsromans* that focus on minority groups and marginalized individuals highlight the connection between the person and the nation. For example, many African-American writers have utilized the *Bildungsroman* to show how a society where racial prejudice and discrimination are widespread, are a part of history, and are often supported by law, has influenced their maturation. The Native American *Bildungsromans* frequently explore the aftermath of violent colonization, resulting in the loss of land and life, forcing the Native Americans to live on reservations with limited resources and restricted prospects. Numerous Native American novels depict young protagonists navigating their positions between Native and Non-Native societies. Some novels portray the challenges and

opportunities arising from a dual identity, and some show how these protagonists embrace their Native society after spending some time outside of it (Graham 135-36).

Another common theme in the American *Bildungsroman* is becoming an American citizen and the struggles migrants and their descendants face by leaving their homeland and adjusting to a new culture. They often feel a "residual attachment to a place and culture outside the USA" (Graham 136). Migrants from various parts of the world, who settle in the United States, commonly experience a significant influence and attachment to their homeland and its traditions and customs. They often have a sense of connection to two countries and cultures but are not fully members of either of them. These protagonists accept their diverse identities and resist the homogeneous culture of the American "melting pot." A well-known novel, which can be classified into the category of the migrant *Bildungsromans*, is Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*, a story about an Afghan boy named Amir, who escapes his homeland and moves to America, leaving his past problems, regrets, and mistakes, and assimilates into American culture. This novel will be further discussed in later chapters as well.

"Coming out" stories, the stories about the revelation of the character's sexuality as a member of the LGBT+ community, also commonly integrate the motifs of character development. These *Bildungsromans* featuring non-heterosexual characters explore their pursuit for acceptance of non-conforming gender roles and sexuality in a heteronormative society. Equality and happiness are rarely achieved by those who disobey the conventional norms, and to achieve social integration, these characters are required to suppress the "fundamental aspects of the self" (Graham 139). The *Bildungsromans* that illustrate the LGBT+ community and non-normative sexualities and gender identities remain popular in the mainstream culture because they confirm the importance of sexuality in the formation of characters during adolescence but also question the American ideologies of freedom and equality (Graham 140).

The use of the first-person point of view allows the readers to connect to the protagonist and create a close intimate relationship with the character. This way, the reader finds it harder to see the character through the perspective of "Otherness" and it is easier to identify with him and condemn any kind of discrimination (Graham 140). In general, the ability of the *Bildungsroman* to represent these diverse ethnic groups and to illustrate diverse individuals on their way to maturation is a part of the reason why this genre has reached such success in American literature. Another important aspect of its popularity is the capability to present the entire nation with all of its flaws and virtues from the

perspective of youth (Graham 141). The readers get to experience different protagonists with diverse origins, social classes, genders, sexualities, and religions and go on a journey through their most critical years alongside them.

2. The Character Development in Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*

The Kite Runner, a novel published by Khaled Hosseini, an Afghan-American author, was first published in 2003. Soon after, the novel reached immense popularity, ranking as the number one *New York Times* bestseller. It was also translated into forty-two world languages, gaining popularity all around the globe (Wen 589). It tells a story of a young Afghan boy named Amir, the narrator, who lives in Kabul with his wealthy father, his servant Ali, and Ali's son Hassan – who is Amir's closest friend. Amir and his father, whom he calls Baba, are Pashtuns – the dominant ethnic group in Afghanistan. On the other hand, Ali and Hassan belong to the Hazaras, an underprivileged minority group. Amir feels a sense of disconnect from his father and uses every chance to win his affection. Hassan experiences much better treatment from Baba, making Amir jealous of their relationship. Even though Amir and Hassan are best friends, Amir fails to protect and save Hassan from the sexual assault he suffers right in front of Amir. In the time after the incident, Amir feels tremendous guilt but also develops a closer relationship with his father. As a consequence of trauma, Amir and Hassan grow apart and eventually, Hassan and Ali move from Kabul for good. In the following years, Afghanistan suffers under the Russian invasion, and Amir and Baba move to the United States. After some time, Amir marries another Afghan immigrant. Baba falls sick and dies of cancer. Years later, Amir receives a phone call from Rahim Khan, Baba's old friend, who asks him to return home and fix the problems from the past. When he returns to Pakistan to meet with Rahim Khan, he discovers that Hassan died at the hands of the Taliban, while defending their old home in Kabul. Hassan left behind his young son Sohrab, who should be saved and brought back to safety by Amir. He also learns that Hassan was his half-brother, Baba's illegitimate son. Hesitantly, Amir agrees to save Sohrab to make amends for his betrayal of Hassan. He manages to save Sohrab and brings him to California (Aubry 26).

The Kite Runner illustrates Amir's personal spiritual growth, and his journey from innocence to maturity, from betrayal to salvation, and shows his pursuit of redemption for the treason of Hassan. The novel also portrays a history of a suffering nation and the Afghan values that shaped the main protagonist. As Juan Du asserts, "[t]his journey can be viewed as going beyond religious, social and economic acceptance; it is a journey of self-discovery while accepting the past" (90). In this thesis, the circumstances that influenced the main protagonist's maturation and psychological development will be discussed in detail.

2.1. The Influence of a Distant Father on Amir's Development

Amir's father, whom he calls "Baba" throughout the whole story, is portrayed as a typical Pashtun, physically strong, charismatic, a handsome man, impossible to ignore in the crowd. Being one of the richest merchants in Kabul, he enjoys donating money to people in need and building orphanages and schools for local children (Wen 591). This is why he remains a popular figure in Kabul, being recognized as a man with authority and a good reputation even when he moves to America. He is a brave man, often standing up to social injustices. He is often described as "the true face of Afghanistan" (Shaalan 367).

Baba is the sole guardian of Amir. His mother, Sofia Akrami, died while giving birth to Amir, making him lack maternal affection (Wen 590). Baba hires a nurse to take care of his son, while he focuses on business, failing to connect with Amir and provide him the affection he desires. This lack of closeness causes Amir to blame himself for his mother's death in his early years. As Amir himself notes, "[b]ecause 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?" (Hosseini 14). Baba never describes his wife in detail, always giving very vague descriptions. Amir yearns to know more about his late mother, to feel a sense of connection to the other half of him, and to recognize himself in her image.

Amir feels a great sense of pride for having a father who serves as an example to others. At the opening ceremony for the orphanage his father built, the wind blows Baba's hat off and Amir gets to hold it for the rest of the ceremony. He highlights how important he felt at that moment: "[h]e motioned to me to hold his hat for him and I was glad to, because then everyone would see that he was my father, my Baba" (Hosseini 11). Amir often mentions that these instances of closeness are rare, even though he craves them. He mentions that "Baba hardly ever used the term of endearment 'jan'[2] when he addressed [him]" (Hosseini 25) and that "it wasn't often Baba talked to [him], let alone on his lap – and [he'd] been a fool to waste it" (Hosseini 13). Amir feels immense jealousy towards Baba's work and the children at the orphanage for taking away all of Baba's attention. At this stage of life, children are strongly influenced by the attention they receive from their caregivers. Amir is eager for his father's love and affection but Baba's indifference towards him makes him feel a sense of inferiority. Additionally, during childhood, gaining confidence is essential for children's future

[2] Word of endearment: dear (Hosseini 353).

development and the development of their interests. Children will feel the need to "accomplish their tasks and keep persistence" if they receive the necessary recognition and encouragement from their parents (Kai-fu 191). In Amir's case, at the age of ten, he spends most of his time reading and writing. He prefers to read poetry books rather than do sports. However, when he searches for approval from his father by reading him his stories, his father never seems to show interest. Baba's failure to support Amir in his interests leads Amir to feel shame for engaging in activities he enjoys. Amir feels as if he failed his father: "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 – real boys – played soccer just as Baba had when he had been young" (Hosseini 15). Amir feels guilty for not being able to adopt these desirable traits every son should have in order to conform to Baba's expectations. One time, Amir overhears the conversation between his father and his father's friend, Rahim Khan. This conversation only confirms Amir's fears of disappointing his father and not being what Baba expects him to be. Baba mentions how Amir always lets the neighborhood boys push him around and take his toys but he never fights back, a stark contrast to what Baba would do in this situation. In this conversation, Baba utters a statement that will have great meaning for Amir in the years to come: "[a] boy who won't stand up for himself becomes a man who can't stand up to anything" (Hosseini 18).

Whereas Amir never seems to live up to his father's expectations, his friend Hassan often wins Baba's praise and approval. His courageous character is the complete opposite of Amir, making Amir jealous of his friend for receiving much more affection from Baba (Wen 589). Hassan was born with a harelip. On one of his birthdays, Baba surprises him with surgery to fix his lip. This makes Amir very envious: "I wished I too had some kind of a scar that would beget Baba's sympathy. It wasn't fair. Hassan hadn't done anything to earn Baba's affections; he'd just been born with that stupid harelip" (Hosseini 38). Amir frequently hopes to be more special than Hassan and seeks ways to stand out. For example, when buying kites, Baba would always buy identical kites for Hassan and Amir. If Amir wanted to stand out and have a better kite, "Baba would buy it for [him] – but then he'd buy it for Hassan too. Sometimes [he] wished [Baba] wouldn't do that. Wished he'd let [Amir] be the favorite" (Hosseini 41). He also longs for quality time with Baba, without Hassan's company. He fabricates stories to keep Hassan away and have Baba all for himself.

Yet, there is one sphere of life that interests both Baba and Amir: kites. In the wintertime in Kabul, a traditional kite-fighting tournament is held, where children fly kites, and cut the strings of the opponents' kites, hoping to stay the last one in the air. When the last kite is cut, the winner and his helper run around the city, trying to find the last kite and bring it home as a souvenir of victory. At the age of twelve, after a conversation with his father, Amir sets on a mission: to be the winner of that winter's kite-fighting tournament. In his mind, this was the only key to Baba's heart, the only way to make him proud and deserve his affection: "Then I'd bring [the last kite] home and show it to Baba. Show him once and for all that his son was worthy" (Hosseini 45). His determination is shown in the statement, "I had a mission now. And I wasn't going to fail Baba. Not this time" (Hosseini 46). As expected, Amir wins the tournament. Seeing his father's pride is the greatest moment of his life, making him feel accomplished and happy. Yet, in the moments following this great success, a traumatic event would unfold, changing the course of everybody's lives. Namely, Hassan as Amir's assistant searches for the last kite, so Amir could bring it home as a symbol of his victory. While searching for the kite, Hassan gets sexually assaulted by Assef, a local bully. Amir stumbles upon this scene and does not interfere, being a coward and not wanting to get the same punishment. During the incident, Amir hides and waits for Hassan to bring him his kite. They go home together, not commenting on the events that took place moments before. Amir hopes that Hassan did not notice him while getting assaulted and that he is not aware of Amir's betrayal. When Amir comes home, his father embraces him, proving to Amir that he is worthy of love now that he is the winner:

> It happened just the way I'd imagined. I opened the door to the smoky study and stepped in. Baba and Rahim Khan were drinking tea and listening to the news crackling on the radio. Their heads turned. Then a smile played on my father's lips. He opened his arms. I put the kite down and walked into his thick hairy arms. I buried my face in the warmth of his chest and wept. Baba held me close to him, rocking me back and forth. In his arms, I forgot what I'd done. And that was good. (Hosseini 66)

By purposely failing to protect Hassan, Amir not only avoids assault but also fulfills his father's desire to win the tournament, making Hassan a necessary sacrifice to achieve his goal. For the next couple of months, Baba and Amir's relationship seems to mend. Despite accomplishing his dreams and obtaining everything he desired all those years, Amir is tormented by a sense of guilt. Every time Baba boasts of Amir's success, he feels "as empty as this unkempt pool [he] was dangling

[his] legs into" and like someone was "sticking a knife in [his] eye" (Hosseini 71). He comes to a realization that the discrepancy between his father and him is too large to be fixed. This situation is a temporary illusion that the void between them could be filled:

> For at least a few months after the kite tournament, Baba and I immersed ourselves in a sweet illusion, saw each other in a way that we never had before. We'd actually deceived ourselves into thinking that a toy made of tissue paper, glue, and bamboo could somehow close the chasm between us. (Hosseini 73)

As expected, this closeness is short-lived. Amir and Hassan grow apart due to the shame and guilt Amir feels after the incident. One day, while working in the garden, Amir asks Baba whether he ever considered employing new servants. Baba is a man of unwavering loyalty. Having grown up with Ali, Baba considers him family. Dismissing Ali and Hassan would be the same as disowning family members for him. Amir is aware that he made a mistake by proposing this idea to his father and realizes that their relationship is not superior to the relationship Baba has with Ali and Hassan.

Still, Amir contrives a plan that would end all of the suffering in their home. Instead of confronting his old friend Hassan and solving their problems together, Amir decides on a permanent solution that would change the course of everyone's lives. He is aware that, for Baba, the only sin in the world is theft. As Baba himself explains, "no matter what the mullah teaches, there is only one sin, only one. And that is theft. Every other sin is a variation of theft" (Hosseini 13). Amir, easily influenced by his father, completely agrees with this statement and believes it from the depth of his heart (Wen 591). Therefore, he fakes the theft of his valuables and makes it look like Hassan had stolen them, hoping that Baba would drive Ali and Hassan away and that they would finally live in peace. Yet, his plan does not quite go as he imagined. Baba forgives Hassan for theft, something that is unimaginable to Amir. This makes Amir jealous and mad, wondering how Baba could forgive Hassan for an unforgivable sin but could never forgive Amir for not being able to live up to his expectations (Aruta et al. 93). Regardless of this forgiveness, Ali and Hassan leave Kabul for good. Amir sacrifices Hassan once again for his own comfort and happiness.

In the years to come, Afghanistan would become occupied by Russian forces. Therefore, Baba and Amir decide to leave Kabul and search for a safer home. While escaping from Afghanistan in the back of a truck, Amir feels sick and vomits multiple times. To him, car sickness is also a sign of his weakness and a reason to make his father embarrassed. When reaching the border with Pakistan, a

Russian soldier asks to spend some time with a woman from the truck as a price for crossing the border. The passengers in the truck already paid a fair amount of money to enter the country, so nobody thinks this sacrifice is necessary. The only person who confronts the soldier is Baba. In this scene, it becomes obvious that Amir values safety and conforming to the rules, whereas Baba values justice: "Do you have to always be the hero? I thought, my heart fluttering. Can't you just let it go for once? But I knew he couldn't – it wasn't in his nature" (Hosseini 96). At this moment, Amir displays a sense of shame, realizing that his father is willing to die to bring an unknown woman justice, whereas Amir was willing to sacrifice his best friend for his own gain. Baba also shows disappointment in Amir for conforming to rules and not being able to stand up for injustice (Aruta et al. 88). Still, Baba survives and the woman is not sacrificed. After some time spent in Pakistan, Baba and Amir flee to America to start life over.

Upon arriving in the United States, Amir realizes they needed to start from the beginning, having lost everything his father fought for back in Kabul: "My eyes returned to our suitcases. They made me sad for Baba. After everything he'd built, planned, fought for, fretted over, dreamed of, this was the summation of his life: one disappointing son and two suitcases" (Hosseini 104). In America, Baba is a regular and anonymous citizen, working regular jobs and being equal to other members of the community. Baba only feels the glory of his previous status in the presence of other Afghans, who migrated to America. He works hard to provide Amir with a good education. Here, Baba has more opportunities to show Amir the affection he desired his whole life. Their relationship improves because they only have each other to rely on. When Amir graduates high school, his father invests his hard-earned money and buys Amir a car. This is a rare occasion where Baba expresses how proud of Amir he is: "He walked to me, curled his arm around my neck and gave my brow a single kiss. 'I am Moftakhir, Amir,' he said. Proud. His eyes gleamed when he said that and I liked being on the receiving end of that look" (Hosseini 110). By that time, Amir is maturing into an adult and knows how to appreciate everything his father sacrificed for him, even though they still experience some discomfort around each other: "'Tashakor,[3] Baba jan,' I said. I wanted to say more, tell him how touched I was by his act of kindness, how much I appreciated all that he had done for me, all that he was still doing. But I knew I'd embarrass him" (Hosseini 111).

[3] Thank you (Hosseini 372).

In the years to come, their lives change in many ways. Amir attends university and gets married to Soraya Taheri, another Afghan immigrant. Baba's intense work and turbulent life lead him to fall sick of cancer. Consequently, he dies, only a month after Amir's wedding. Amir concludes his father's life with a powerful quote, summarizing him completely as a person:

> Baba had wrestled bears his whole life. Losing his young wife. Raising a son by himself. Leaving his beloved homeland, his watan[4] . Poverty. Indignity. In the end, a bear had come that he couldn't best. But even then, he had lost on his own terms. (Hosseini 149)

For the first time in his life, Amir is left alone to fight. He realizes how much of his existence was defined by Baba as he considered himself his whole life as nothing more than "Baba's son." Now, Baba could not lead him on his way; he has to find a way of his own. In the following years, Amir works low-wage jobs to support his studies and his wife. Struggling to achieve his dreams, Amir sends query letters to dozens of agencies, until he finally gets accepted and becomes a published novelist. Even after Baba's death, it is obvious that Amir is still trying to live up to his expectations: "thinking of Baba, wishing he could have seen me" (Hosseini 158). He finally becomes something and Baba is not there to witness his success. As Amir and Soraya struggle to become parents, Amir often thinks of fatherhood and how frightening he found this concept. Wondering what type of a father he would be, Amir starts to perceive his father as a regular person, rather than the flawless image of a father he had envisioned for all those years: "What sort of father would I make, I wondered. I wanted to be just like Baba and I wanted to be nothing like him" (Hosseini 158).

However, Baba passed away with a secret that would reach Amir in his adult years. At the age of thirty-eight, Amir receives a phone call from Rahim Khan, his father's old friend. Rahim Khan persuades Amir to return to Pakistan, in order to fix some old sins and "be good again" (Hosseini 166). Amir returns and reunites with Rahim. There, deathly sick Rahim explains that Ali died by stepping on a land mine a few years prior. Rahim returned to Kabul to live in Baba's old house, bringing Hassan, his wife Farzana, and their son Sohrab along. After the war was declared over, Rahim Khan moved back to Pakistan, leaving Hassan and his family behind. A rumor spread in Kabul that a Hazara family lived in a Pashtun home all on their own. Talib officials came to investigate and assassinated Hassan and Farzana, leaving Sohrab as an orphan. All of this information deeply affects Amir but the most disturbing secret is yet to be revealed: his Baba was Hassan's biological father, making Hassan

[4] Native country, home (Hosseini 373).

Amir's half-brother. Upon learning this, Amir reacts with aggression, realizing his whole life was a lie. Amir is left confused about his own identity because he based his whole selfhood on the values his father set for him. For the first time, he realizes why Baba always had a preference for Hassan over him. He feels sorry for himself for being fooled by the person he looked up to the most (Aruta et al. 89). For Baba, the unforgivable sin was theft. Now Amir considers him to be the thief:

> How could he have lied to me all those years? To Hassan? He had sat me on his lap when I was little, looked me straight in the eyes, and said, There is only one sin. And that is theft… When you tell a lie, you steal someone's right to the truth. Hadn't he said those words to me? And now, fifteen years after I'd buried him, I was learning that Baba had been a thief. And a thief of the worst kind, because the things he'd stolen had been sacred: from me the right to know I had a brother, from Hassan his identity, and from Ali his honor. (Hosseini 191-92)

During his childhood, Baba was a positive image and a guide through life. Now he realizes that Baba was a negative influence as well. He now understands that he and Baba were actually quite alike, having both betrayed people closest to them. Rahim Khan explains why Baba has always been so distant and unaffectionate toward Amir:

> I saw how you suffered and yearned for his affections, and my heart bled for you. But your father was a man torn between two halves, Amir jan: you and Hassan. He loved you both, but he could not love Hassan the way he longed to, openly, and as a father. So he took it out on you instead. (Hosseini 259)

He starts to question various situations throughout his life, trying to settle with this new vision of his father: "And how was I going to reconcile this new image of Baba with the one that had been imprinted on my mind for so long, that of him in his old brown suit, hobbling up the Taheri's driveway to ask for Soraya's hand?" (Hosseini 192). In his opinion, the reason why Baba and he were on such good terms in America was that they lived an underprivileged life – selling junk, living in a small apartment, and working low-wage jobs, which reminded Baba of the way Hassan lived. Amir, encouraged by Rahim Khan's opinion, starts to realize that all the good that his father did – building orphanages and giving money to ones in need – was a way to redeem himself. After being reluctant about saving Sohrab, Amir remembers his father's words that encourage him to straighten out past mistakes: "I remember Baba saying that my problem was that someone had always done my fighting

for me" (Hosseini 193). Amir, Baba's socially accepted and legitimate son, the half of him "that represented the riches he had inherited and the sin-with-impunity privileges that came with them" (Hosseini 260), needed to take accountability for his own and his father's actions. Instead of living in desperation, being submissive, and wanting to escape, Amir decides to man up and straighten out the past by saving Sohrab (Aruta et al. 91). This way he would end the cycle of lies, betrayals, and secrets, which by now defined him as an individual (Aruta et al. 95).

2.2. The Influence of Unlimited Loyalty and Betrayal on Amir's Development

Another significant relationship in Amir's life, which influenced the most his change in his adult years, is his friendship with Hassan. The two boys grew up in the same household with their fathers. Amir's mother died at birth, whereas Hassan's mother "ran off with a clan of traveling singers and dancers" (Hosseini 5). Both of them were raised by the same nursing woman. As Amir notes, Baba reminds the boys often that "there was a brotherhood between people who had fed from the same breast, a kinship that not even time could break" (Hosseini 8). The magnitude of their closeness can be observed in the following quote: "We took our first steps on the same lawn in the same yard. And, under the same roof, we spoke our first words. Mine was Baba. His was Amir. My name" (Hosseini 8). All his childhood memories consist of days spent with Hassan, everything he experienced during childhood was somehow connected to him, and to Amir, Hassan's thin frame, shaved head, low-set ears, Chinese doll face, and a harelipped smile are the face of Afghanistan (Hosseini 19-20).

Despite this, Amir never considers Hassan to be his friend. No matter how intertwined their lives are, there is a difference between them: Amir is a Pashtun, and Hassan is a Hazara. In Afghan society, this is an insurmountable difference between them, defining them for life, and both are aware of it. Because of this difference, Amir is the one who attends school, and Hassan is the one who stays at home and helps his father with chores. Aware of his position, Amir often plays tricks on Hassan, sometimes even mocking him. He reads to him, finds words that were unknown to Hassan, and exposes his ignorance by asking him to define these words. He feels amused but then feels guilty later on. As a sign of remorse, he gives Hassan his old clothes or broken toys. When Amir writes his first story, he is eager to read it to Hassan, reading being one of their favorite activities to do together. After

finishing the story, Hassan politely points out a loophole in the story Amir is oblivious to. Amir did not take this criticism lightly, feeling offended that the illiterate Hassan could have a legitimate argument against his work. Amir's lack of self-esteem and self-awareness is obvious:

> I was stunned. That particular point, so obvious it was utterly stupid, hadn't even occurred to me. I moved my lips soundlessly. It appeared that on the same night I had learned about one of writing's objectives, irony, I would also be introduced to one of its pitfalls: the Plot Hole. Taught by Hassan, of all people. Hassan who couldn't read and had never written a single word in his entire life. A voice, cold and dark, suddenly whispered in my ear, "What does he know, that illiterate Hazara? He'll never be anything but a cook. How dare he criticize you?" (Hosseini 27)

This thought is evidence of Amir's crumbling pride. In his mind, he should be superior to Hassan, a Hazara incapable of anything except being a slave to a Pashtun. Amir obviously has a superiority complex that is being questioned at this moment, causing damage to his self-esteem. Amir was raised to believe that Hassan could never be anything more than a cook due to his social status, proving that Amir values people only through their social status. Even though he sees Hassan as a brother and is aware that he likes the story, Amir still expresses an extreme attitude when being criticized by someone of lower status (Aruta et al. 83).

Growing up with the belief that his circumstances would forever remain unaltered and that he would forever be just a servant, Hassan learns to accept his destiny. Still, he is drawn to similar activities as Amir, such as literature and riddles. Amir finds pleasure in reading to Hassan and trying to make Hassan happy. Yet, Hassan's way of life and a sense of inevitability of fate make Amir sorrowful: "His saying that made me kind of sad. Sad for who Hassan was, where he lived. For how he'd accepted the fact that he'd grow old in that mud shack in the yard, the way his father had" (Hosseini 47). Because of his status, Hassan is frequently bullied by other Pashtun children for his looks and his origins, often even getting physically abused. Hassan endures these insults bravely and respectfully. Amir envies his courageous spirit and his willingness to stand up and protect Amir: "I thought of the street fights we'd get into when we were kids, all the times Hassan used to take them on for me, two against one, sometimes three against one" (Hosseini 218). Amir feels the urge to help him but is held back by something, often calling himself a coward. In one instance, they are having a quarrel with some neighborhood boys. One of them calls Hassan Amir's friend. This triggers a similar

feeling of superiority in Amir as he does not want to be called Hassan's friend in front of other boys. This way, Amir uses denial as a means to avoid the prejudice of being friends with someone of a lower status (Aruta et al. 83). Amir often contemplates his actions toward Hassan and why he feels as if Hassan were inferior to him, regardless of their brotherly relationship, especially when other children were around. As Shaalan explains, "the intense sympathy Amir feels for Hassan whose ethnicity makes him a tragic hero in Afghan society is . . . a kind of sympathy felt by a person who must be of a position of privilege and superiority, and who may feel for the victim but not be one" (370). Amir is deeply perplexed and deals with an inner struggle as he navigates two contrasting scenarios: Hassan being treated like family in his household, and society treating Hassan as an inferior person. Amir acknowledges both classifications of Hassan, making his brotherly treatment of Hassan somewhat insincere and artificial (Aruta et al. 83).

This insincerity in their relationship leads to the culmination of the novel. Hassan knows how much Amir struggles to gain his father's affection and he knows how important the kite-fighting tournament is for him. Therefore, Hassan provides his unwavering loyalty once again and encourages Amir during the tournament. After the victory, as Amir's assistant, Hassan pledges to chase and find the last kite. He expresses his dedication to Amir with the words, "For you a thousand times over!" (Hosseini 55). This is a sentence that haunts Amir many years later. While searching for the kite, Hassan stumbles upon Assef, a local bully with whom Amir and Hassan have unresolved issues. Assef uses strong intimidation against Hassan and the only means for Hassan to be released is to surrender the last kite to him. Hassan is aware of how important the kite is for Amir and therefore decides to sacrifice himself, be beaten, and be humiliated rather than give up the kite (Du 92). Hassan is then sexually assaulted by Assef.

Amir goes searching for Hassan. He locates Hassan and the bullies in an alley. At that moment, a fierce struggle transpires inside Amir: whether to help his friend or stay silent and betray him. Confronted with danger, Amir decides to stay away and let Hassan be sacrificed for his own benefit:

> 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. (Hosseini 65)

The ability to make the right decision is impossible for a twelve-year-old. Amir is caught between "choosing to abandon the desire of having father's affection or abandon Hassan instead, who needs saving" (Aruta et al. 93). He still conveys concern for Hassan but also a concern for himself if he gets involved. He is aware that Assef has two helpers with him as well, making victory unattainable in this fight (Aruta et al. 93). Amir justifies the situation by confirming that nothing is free and that Hassan is the necessary sacrifice to mend his relationship with Baba. As in many previous situations, Amir turns out to be a self-centered coward driven by his sense of superiority (Wen 590). He introduces another thought that solidifies his genuine perception of what Hassan represents to him: "The answer floated to my conscious mind before I could thwart it: He was just a Hazara, wasn't he?" (Hosseini 65). In Amir's eyes, he and his desires should be prioritized based on his social position as he believes a person's worth is dictated by the group they belong to (Aruta et al. 84).

Hassan's submission and dedication to his friend are obvious in his description during the incident: "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" (Hosseini 64). This description also determines how much Hassan valued the kite and what it represented to Amir (Aruta et al. 86). He is willing to sacrifice himself and suffer dehumanization in order for Amir to gain Baba's affection. Amir experiences empathy for him, yet struggles with unease, viewing himself as both someone who understands Hassan's feelings and as someone who has harmed him. Ultimately, what preserves Amir's humanity after the incident is his immense sense of guilt (Aubry 33).

In the aftermath of this traumatic event, Amir begins to avoid Hassan as much as possible, claiming that "every time Hassan was around, [he] was getting a headache" (Hosseini 73). He has a desire to prevent recalling his previous mistakes; therefore, he feels an urge to be by himself most of the time. However, even without Hassan in sight, a sense of guilt torments his conscience and the thought of Hassan starts to suffocate him (Aruta et al. 93). On the other hand, Hassan remains loyal and continues to perform his duties as if nothing had happened. Amir preoccupies himself with school

to keep his mind from going back to the alley where Hassan was assaulted. One afternoon, he decides to go up the hill with Hassan to read him a story. In desperate need of reprimand from Hassan, he throws pomegranates at him, begging Hassan to hit him back. As Amir explains, “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” (Hosseini 78). Amir anticipates some form of punishment from Hassan, hoping it would provide him with a sense of relief about the situation. After not receiving the desired punishment, Amir decides to take things into his own hands. There is only one way to end everybody’s suffering: one of them had to go (Hosseini 86).

As previously mentioned, Amir frames Hassan for theft, placing his new watch and a handful of Afghani bills underneath his mattress, in order to solve his unresolved inner struggles by avoiding external conflict (Aruta et al. 87). Still, Hassan confesses to the stealing, accepting responsibility for an act he did not commit. Amir is startled by this confession:

> My heart sank and I almost blurted out the truth. Then I understood: This was Hassan’s final sacrifice for me. If he’d said no, Baba would have believed him because we all knew Hassan never lied. And if Baba believed him, then I’d be the accused; I would have to explain and I would be revealed for what I really was. Baba would never, ever forgive me. (Hosseini 88)

At that moment, Amir realizes that Hassan was aware of his betrayal, yet was still coming to his aid proving once more that loyalty was his most valuable quality. Amir loves him and wants to admit to his guilt and settle things once and for all. Still, his desire for peace and a fresh start is larger than his bond with Hassan. He believes that their departure would offer everyone the opportunity to move on. Amir perceives himself as unworthy of this unlimited loyalty, yet he also experiences a sense of relief, as if he were being freed from the confinement of guilt (Aruta et al. 88). Instantly, Amir understands that “the life [he] had known since [he’d] been born was over” (Hosseini 92). No matter how much he desires to intervene and resolve the conflict with Hassan, he allows him to leave, never seeing him alive again.

During his adult years in America, Amir frequently finds himself reflecting on his life with Hassan as he is a symbol of everything joyful that happened during his childhood: “I only knew the memory lived in me, a perfectly encapsulated morsel of a good past, a brushstroke of color on the gray, barren canvas that our lives had become” (Hosseini 103). Yet, every time someone mentions

Hassan, he feels as if he were struggling for air, even many years after their parting. While going through significant life milestones, like his wedding, he wonders whether Hassan had also married and what kind of life he had led. He continues to anticipate a form of punishment for his sins and finds a sense of justice in his and Soraya's inability to conceive children.

Hoping to atone for his childhood sins, Amir travels to Pakistan. For the first time in twenty-six years, he sees a photograph of Hassan. Despite being a grown man, his physical features remain unchanged: “Rahim Khan was right: I would have recognized him if I had bumped into him on the street” (Hosseini 183). While talking to Rahim Khan about Hassan, Amir also acknowledges Hassan's gentle nature and steadfast loyalty to Amir's family, a quality that remained unchanged throughout the years. After moving into Baba’s house in Kabul, Hassan refused to live in the rooms upstairs, worried about what Amir would think if he were to return. He kept the rooms clean, even though nobody lived in them, acting as if he were expecting Amir to return. He taught his son Sohrab to read and write, not wanting him to grow up illiterate. Yet, his inexhaustible loyalty is most evident in his letter to Amir: “And I dream that someday you will return to Kabul to revisit the land of our childhood. If you do, you will find an old faithful friend waiting for you” (Hosseini 185). After reading this letter, Amir realizes that Hassan forgave him for his wrongdoings and remained a friend even after his betrayal. In spite of that, after learning about Hassan’s death, Amir is bothered by a feeling of guilt for his death. As he explained himself, because of his ill-judged actions, everybody in his life suffered greatly:

> Rahim Khan said I’d always been too hard on myself. But I wondered. True, I hadn’t made Ali step on the land mine, and I hadn’t brought the Taliban to the house to shoot Hassan. But I had driven Hassan and Ali out of the house. Was it too farfetched to imagine that things might have turned out differently if I hadn’t? Maybe Baba would have brought them along to America. Maybe Hassan would have had a home of his own now, a job, a family, a life in a country where no one cared that he was a Hazara, where most people didn’t even know what a Hazara was. (Hosseini 192)

He is aware that his deeds cost Hassan a chance of living a fulfilled and long life. Driven by his internal guilt over the harm he inflicted on Hassan and also influenced by his father's sins, he resolves to rescue Sohrab from a similar fate.

2.3. The Atonement of Sin and Transformation of Personality

In the opening pages of the novel, Amir accentuates that he became what he is today in 1975, at the age of twelve. Yet, a great transformation of his character unfolded many years later. As he explains, "[l]ong before the Roussi army marched into Afghanistan, long before villages were burned and schools destroyed, long before mines were planted like seeds of death and children buried in rock-piled graves, Kabul had become a city of ghosts for me. A city of harelipped ghosts" (Hosseini 114). At the age of twelve, his life veered off course when he witnessed the assault of Hassan, yet at thirty-eight, he finds redemption for his transgressions and steers his life back on course by rescuing Hassan's son, Sohrab.

After the conversation with Rahim Khan, Amir learns of Sohrab's fate and that Rahim expected him to rescue the boy. Amir hesitates, aware of his prosperous life in America, not wanting to risk it for anything. Rahim persuades him by saying: "Children are fragile, Amir jan. Kabul is already full of broken children and I don't want Sohrab to become another" (Hosseini 187) and assuring him that he is the right person to do this. Knowing how sensitive Amir is to his father, Rahim tells him: "I remember he [Baba] said to me, 'Rahim, a boy who won't stand up for himself becomes a man who can't stand up to anything.' I wonder, is that what you've become?" (Hosseini 188), knowing that it will push him to change his mind. As always, Baba's opinion matters to him the most and he wants to make Baba proud. He remembers how Baba mentioned that his biggest problem was everyone else fighting for him – now, at the age of thirty-eight – it is time for him to do his own fighting (Hosseini 193). Still, he is aware that he should take action as soon as possible, otherwise, he would rationalize himself into changing his mind:

> I was afraid the appeal of my life in America would draw me back, that I would wade back into that great, big river and let myself forget, let the things I had learned these last few days sink to the bottom. I was afraid that I'd let the waters carry me away from what I had to do. From Hassan. From the past that had come calling. And from this one last chance at redemption. (Hosseini 196)

The thought of Hassan's needless death, unfolding as a consequence of Amir's actions, motivates him and assures him that he was brought back to his homeland for a good reason. Still being

Baba's son, even after learning of his mistakes, he wishes Baba was alongside him now, offering him his support. He repeatedly calls himself gutless and a coward, assuring himself that he is unable of this mission. Yet, seeing Sohrab's face, Amir understands the purpose behind his struggle. He identifies Hassan in him, with a rush of memories from their childhood flooding back to him upon setting his eyes on Sohrab. This element of familiarity in Sohrab's face solidifies Amir's will to carry out his moral duties. By rescuing Sohrab from the hands of the Talib, Amir helps restore justice and "exorcise [his] old demons of the past" (Shaalan 372).

Sohrab is captured by Talib officials, making Amir's mission of saving him life-threatening. In an unusual set of circumstances, the main Talib official is Assef, the boy responsible for Hassan's assault many years prior. In order to free Sohrab, Amir and Assef engage in a battle. The one who emerges from the room alive will be granted custody of Sohrab. Although his chances are very slim, Amir, with the help of Sohrab, manages to win and leaves the building, leaving a badly injured Assef behind. For the first time since he was twelve, Amir feels at peace: "My body was broken – just how badly I wouldn't find out until later – but I felt healed. Healed at last. I laughed" (Hosseini 248). At this point, he experiences a sense of comfort upon receiving the punishment he had sought throughout his adulthood. He is finally able to unburden himself from the weight of guilt as he has at last undertaken a good deed (Aruta et al. 78). This chapter ends with Sohrab's escape from the life of physical and sexual abuse, leaving Afghanistan together with Amir. When coming to Pakistan, Amir attempts to find an American couple who own an orphanage. Rahim Khan mentioned this couple to Amir and suggested that he leaves Sohrab in their safe hands. Upon arriving, Amir comes to the realization that the mentioned couple does not exist, and it becomes apparent that the responsibility of bringing Sohrab to America rests upon his shoulders. Amir is very hesitant about this decision, showing that he never had an intention of being permanently involved with Sohrab. Still, he must justify his role as an uncle, even after feeling apprehensive. He understands the multitude of people he let down in his lifetime and is determined not to repeat this pattern, particularly for the sake of Baba and Rahim Khan, by abandoning Sohrab without proper care (Aruta et al. 79). After being unable to find Sohrab in their hotel room, Amir searches for him on the streets of Peshawar. He finds him at a mosque, confesses his previous sins, and decides to ask him whether he would like to move to California with him. Amir comforts the boy who is crying in his arms, and starts to understand that they have formed a bond, "[a] kinship exists between people who've fed from the same breast. Now, as the boy's pain soaked through my shirt, I saw that a kinship had taken root between us too. What

had happened in that room with Assef had irrevocably bound us" (Hosseini 278). Amir's previous need for comfort and avoidance of change comes into question. He realizes that with Sohrab's arrival in America, his life would never be the same again. This is one of the rare situations when Amir puts other people's needs before his own and tries to please Sohrab, aware of their inevitable connection.

After deciding to adopt Sohrab, Amir calls Soraya and confesses to her all his past actions and the real reason why he was in Pakistan. Soraya agrees with the adoption and they proceed with the process. Of course, he deals with many paperwork problems, making it almost impossible to bring Sohrab along to the United States. Amir is determined, assuring Sohrab he will not abandon him. He needs to keep this promise, avoiding letting someone down again. He fights for Sohrab's rights, finally making decisions based on what is morally right (Aruta et al. 80). Amir's determination and commitment to Sohrab is evident in his plea for Sohrab to come with him to America:

> As I waited for his reply, my mind flashed back to a winter day from long ago, Hassan and I sitting on the snow beneath a leafless sour cherry tree. I had played a cruel game with Hassan that day, toyed with him, asked him if he would chew dirt to prove his loyalty to me. Now I was the one under the microscope, the one who had to prove my worthiness. I deserved this. (Hosseini 314)

His change of thought is evident in these lines, growing from a boy who was suffering from a superiority complex to a man begging a Hazara child for an answer. After many complications along the way, and even after Sohrab's suicide attempt, Soraya and Amir find a loophole in the law and successfully adopt Sohrab into their family.

Even though he is a Hazara orphan, Amir welcomes Sohrab into his American home. He is aware that Sohrab was surrendering to him, not really wanting to go to America, but wishing for his old life in Afghanistan. After all the trauma Sohrab suffered during his young life, after suffering many disappointments and betrayals, his defense mechanism is silence. Amir and Soraya are agonized by his silence, not imagining their life with a child like that, but they learn to accept him and not force him to talk. Amir's change of thought is also evident in his struggle against belittling Sohrab because of his origins. Being a traditional man, Soraya's father General Taheri battles with accepting Sohrab into his family, given that they were of Pashtun origin and the boy was Hazara. Amir, much more open-minded, not limited by class divisions, clashes with General Taheri and comes to the defense of Sohrab: "' And one more thing, General Sahib,' I said. 'You will never again refer to him as 'Hazara

boy' in my presence. He has a name and it's Sohrab'" (Hosseini 319). Amir takes charge and shares Sohrab's story with his in-laws, openly admitting his and Baba's past mistakes. For him, Sohrab's well-being and happiness matter more than the opinions and judgment of other members of their society. He is unbothered by the constraints society sets for them and reacts according to his moral compass. This scenario highlights that a person can transform, indicating that as an adult, Amir values his sense of right and wrong, unlike his younger days when he mostly followed the society's norms and his father's expectations (Aruta et al. 81).

The novel ends with Sohrab and Amir chasing kites in California, Amir recalling his Kabul childhood, sparking old memories, and experiencing a renewed sense of being a child once more. Feeling as if his redemption was complete, Amir feels at peace for the first time since his childhood. His voyage from Kabul to America and then back to Kabul can be regarded as a journey from sin to redemption (Shaalan 372). As Aruta et al. explain, "[f]rom a child afraid of the consequences of guilt to a man fully admitting that one is but a victim of circumstances, fully understanding the effects of guilt on one's personhood. With this, Amir completes the character arc and becomes a changed man" (79).

2.4. The Influence of the Diverse Values of Afghanistan and the United States

As Rahim Khan states at the beginning of the novel, "[c]hildren aren't coloring books. You don't get to fill them with your favorite colors" (Hosseini 17). Nevertheless, the values parents instill in their children, often determined by culture and religion, impact them and shape their personalities. As discussed in the previous chapters, the racial prejudice present in Afghan society has a significant influence on Amir's personality development. The concept of Pashtuns and Hazaras, and the belief that Hazaras should be mistreated and marginalized, makes it inevitable for Amir to have prejudice against Hazaras even though they are his closest friends, considered even as family (Wen 592). As a minority group in Afghanistan, Hazara are discriminated against because of their different religious practice, a detail that Amir learns from reading one of his mother's old history books (Shaalan 366). In the novel, Hosseini uses the characters of Baba, Amir, Hassan, and Ali as the symbols to depict the ethnic divides within Afghanistan. For example, Baba and Amir live in a wealthy neighborhood, in a large house. Despite considering Hassan and Ali as family, both of them live in a mud shack in Baba's

garden. Amir and Baba are both physically fit and healthy, whereas Ali and Hassan have physical imperfections: Hassan was born with a harelip, and Ali with an atrophied leg (Malik et al. 21).

Another important aspect of Afghan values pertains to religion or the absence of it. As Amir mentions, "[c]aught between Baba and the mullahs at school, I still hadn't made up my mind about God" (Hosseini 52). Baba, as a liberal Afghan, has opposite beliefs to the Islamic fundamentalists that teach Islam at schools. These teachers impose the necessity of the five daily prayers, charity giving, the duty of pilgrimage to Mecca, and memorizing verses from the Koran. On the other hand, Baba calls them "bearded idiots" and dreads the possibility of these teachers governing Afghanistan one day (Hosseini 12). He is the proof that not all Pashtuns support this Islamic ideology (Shaalan 367). As Amir mentions, "Baba mocks the story behind this Eid, like he mocks everything religious" (Hosseini 64). Primarily influenced by Baba, Amir remains uncertain about the matters of religion, torn between Baba's beliefs and the teachings he receives in school. Still, throughout his life, Amir questions his father's beliefs. During the kite-fighting tournament, Amir relies on his faith in God to secure his victory. During some crucial traumatic moments of his life, Amir resorts to prayer to find inner strength. When Baba becomes ill with cancer, Amir prays to God, hoping for his father's recovery: "[b]owing my head to the ground, I recited half-forgotten verses from the Koran – verses the mullah had made us commit to memory in Kabul – and asked for kindness from a God I wasn't sure existed" (Hosseini 131). The next time Amir reaches for prayer to solve his problems is after Sohrab's suicide attempt, praying for his recovery. In that instance, he comes to understand that his father's beliefs were false: he realizes God is everywhere around him, and that He was always there. To him, the House of God are not glamorous mosques, but rather the hallways of that hospital, filled with people in despair. Consequently, he chooses to seek forgiveness for having disregarded God for all those years. Upon returning to America, he devotes his life to God, praying every morning, even memorizing the words of the prayers by heart.

Throughout the novel, Amir reminisces about numerous Afghan values instilled in him by his father, along with various portrayals of Afghan people, which he frequently uses to make comparisons with himself. He is aware that his father's wealth and prominence spared him many times: "my father was rich and everyone knew him, so I was spared the metal rod treatment" (Hosseini 77). At his thirteenth birthday party, Amir knows he needed to be polite and greet every single guest, ensuring that no one could gossip about Baba not teaching him proper etiquette. He also knows that in Afghan

culture, “it was better to be miserable than rude” (Hosseini 132), many times suffering instead of complaining about the situation. Baba often mentions how hardheaded and proud Pashtuns are, but they could always rely on each other in times of need. Amir could not relate to this statement for most of his life, aware that he betrayed his best friend when he needed him the most. Other nations often describe Afghani people as reckless, exerting extraordinary efforts to accomplish their intentions. This quality is visible in Amir as he pushes himself past his own boundaries to rescue Sohrab and bring him to America.

The importance of education is also a matter of value divergence. While discussing his preference for literature, Amir declares to Baba that he would like to major in English. Baba is not pleased to hear this, doubting Amir’s ability to earn a decent living and support himself by writing. He considers medical school and law school to be “real education,” deserving of approval. Amir feels immense guilt, believing he is to blame for Baba sacrificing himself for his education, and yet still not managing to make him proud of his chosen major. Still, he disregards Baba’s criticism and decides to listen to himself for the first time (Hosseini 113). General Taheri shares a similar outlook. When Soraya decides to become a schoolteacher, he claims that an intelligent girl should become a lawyer or a scientist, hoping for her to reach higher positions in Afghan society. By becoming a schoolteacher, she is wasting her talents. Soraya is aware that the only reason why he pushes her to become a lawyer or a scientist is solely to showcase her success to his friends, rather than genuinely desiring what is best for her (Hosseini 156).

Having grown up surrounded by men, Amir does not encounter gender discrimination until he meets Soraya. As he inquires Baba about her, Amir learns that Soraya had no suitors because of a past mistake. Only after their engagement, Soraya admits to Amir that at the age of eighteen, she had run off with an Afghan man, making her undesirable to any other Afghan men. Amir’s pride is hurt by learning this fact, and after reflecting on it, he comes to the realization that he, too, had his own past mistakes and was not the right person to pass judgment on others for their errors (Hosseini 142). He relieves Soraya’s mother of the greatest fear for an Afghan mother – that her daughter would remain alone and childless – by asking Soraya to marry him. Even after marriage, Soraya is often judged by other Afghani women. To them, she is impure and unworthy. Furious at such comments, Soraya compares the unequal standards in Afghan society:

> Their sons go out to nightclubs looking for meat and get their girlfriends pregnant, they have kids out of wedlock and no one says a . . . thing. Oh, they're just men having fun! I make one mistake and suddenly everyone is talking nang and namoos[5] , and I have to have my face rubbed in it for the rest of my life. (Hosseini 153)

Aware of these gender differences, Amir perceives himself as different from other Afghans. As he explains, having grown up in a men-dominated household, he never had an opportunity to witness the double standards connected to women and see the treatment they suffered. He also appreciates the fact that Baba was an unusual Afghan as well, "a liberal who had lived by his own rules," disregarding many rules society was imposing (Hosseini 155). Amir is also conscious of his privileged position, just because he was born as a man (Hosseini 125).

For Afghans, blood and ancestry is an important concept. Therefore, when Soraya and Amir are considering adoption, being unable to conceive children of their own, General Taheri and his wife are strongly opposed to this idea. General Taheri claims that adopted children grow up and search for their biological parents, disregarding their adoptive family. For him, family history and status are of most importance:

> Take Amir jan, here. We all knew his father, I know who his grandfather was in Kabul and his great-grandfather before him, I could sit here and trace generations of his ancestors for you if you asked. That's why when his father – God give him peace – came khastegari[6] , I didn't hesitate. And believe me, his father wouldn't have agreed to ask for your hand if he didn't know whose descendant you were. (Hosseini 162)

Afghans consider it obligatory to know someone's background and how worthy someone is to be in their family. Hence, when Amir and Soraya decide to adopt Sohrab, General Taheri opposes the idea initially, unaware of Sohrab's family background until Amir clarifies that they are related.

Being forced to leave his abundant life in Kabul, Amir moves to America, far away from the ethnic prejudice he experienced his whole life in Afghanistan (Wen 592). He remarks that the United States is a quite hospitable place for Muslims (Aubry 35). In California, Baba works at a gas station and sells antiques in a flea market together with other Afghans. Even outside their homeland, Afghan

---

[5] Honor and pride (Hosseini 121).
[6] A suitor's official visitation to a prospective mate's family – usually accompanied by his mother, sister, or khala – to propose marriage (Hosseini 355).

men keep their values of honor and pride, despite their poverty (Shaalan 367). Baba never fully assimilates into American culture, rejecting to learn English and often complaining about the smog in the air, the traffic, the pollen, the fruit, which was not as sweet as he wanted, and the water that was never clean enough (Hosseini 106). Forever yearning for his old home, he "was like the widower who remarries but can't let go of his dead wife" (Hosseini 108). He learns to live with these new circumstances but always remains hopeful that he would return to Afghanistan. All that he worked for in Kabul, all of his money, privilege, honor, and pride is left at home. For him, America is a place where he grieves for his old life.

On the other hand, Amir finds solace in America as the place where he buries his memories and mistakes. He describes his new home by saying:

> America was different. America was a river, roaring along, unmindful of the past. I could wade into this river, let my sins drown to the bottom, let the waters carry me someplace far. Someplace with no ghosts, no memories, and no sins. If for nothing else, for that, I embraced America. (Hosseini 114)

There he could start over and free himself from the burden of his past (Aruta et al. 76). He observes America as a place free from injustice, cruelty, and ethnicity, as opposed to Afghanistan (Malik et al. 23). By moving to California, his horizons open up and he learns about a different society outside of his own. There he gains an education, marries the woman he loves, and becomes a published writer. Therefore, America brings him opportunities he might have never had if he stayed in war-stricken Afghanistan. In contrast to Baba, he tries to adapt to his new society. With time, he becomes an Americanized Afghan, adopting many American habits and perspectives while still keeping his own. He also realizes that in America, every individual is entitled to equal treatment, no matter their social status. Even though he is an Afghan immigrant, Amir has equal chances at success, no matter his background or position in society.

Upon returning to Afghanistan, Amir feels like a tourist in his own homeland. Having been destroyed by war, Kabul was not a place from Amir's memories anymore. To him, Afghanistan was never defined by poverty, which is currently the sole distinguishing feature of the country. While discussing his previous life in Afghanistan with his driver Farid, Amir realizes that he has been privileged in his societal status, never having to undergo the genuine hardships that define the lives of most Afghans. Farid mentions that Amir has "always been a tourist here, [he] just didn't know it"

(Hosseini 197). Having spent most of his adult life in America, it was natural that those who remained in Afghanistan would question whether Amir, who was originally from Afghanistan and had grown up there, still retains his Afghan identity after becoming accustomed to American culture (Aruta et al. 84). Amir questions whether he still has the right to call Afghanistan his home, given that the country seemed more unfamiliar than familiar to him (Aruta et al. 85): “I stood outside the gates of my father’s house, feeling like a stranger. I set my hands on the rusty bars, remembering how I’d run through these same gates thousands of times as a child, for things that mattered not at all now and yet had seemed so important then” (Hosseini 224). To summarize his complete impression upon returning to Kabul, Amir describes Baba’s house as “the picture of fallen splendor” (Hosseini 224). This sentence could also encapsulate his entire grown-up life: a progression from a privileged upbringing to a challenging adulthood devoid of those privileges.

3. The Character Development in Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street*

The House on Mango Street, published in 1984 by Sandra Cisneros, is a collection of 44 short stories or prose poems centered around Esperanza Cordero, a young Chicana[7] girl, as she navigates her coming of age in the city of Chicago. Her community is a blend of different cultures, where families and generations are in the process of transitioning between cultures (Nash 326). The protagonist undergoes a transformation from her later childhood to early adulthood throughout the story. As Esperanza matures, she gains a deeper understanding of her environment and becomes aware of the instances of discrimination related to her gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status – these three factors significantly impact her growth and journey (Marek 173). Each story is unique and tells a tale of different characters passing through Esperanza's life, whether they are family members, friends, neighbors, cousins, or random people she encounters. The individuals who enter Esperanza's life reflect the experiences of numerous immigrant families, and Esperanza herself symbolizes many young immigrants coming to America to achieve their American dream (Nash 326). The protagonist starts the novel frustrated with her identity and life conditions influenced by many experiences that expose the significant pressures placed upon her, from gender-role expectations to racism, and class discrimination. Due to these factors, the main themes of Esperanza's maturation are the following: "desire for a satisfying home, questioning about personal identity and gender role, and especially the search for a good friend who can provide acceptance and understanding" (Marek 179). Her house on Mango Street is the central metaphor for her coming of age, a symbol of "ethnic segregation, economic disenfranchisement, and gender oppression" (Mujcinovic 106). Witnessing the economic hardships of her community, the tensions between ethnicities, the significance of faith, and limited opportunities enables Esperanza to be conscious of her own identity as an adolescent, especially being a woman in a marginalized group. Cisneros also includes many cliches and stereotypes connected to Latina/o people, making the stories quite humorous (Marek 179). The central message of the novel is the struggle of the Chicano people to discover their true identities without betraying their culture and beliefs (Klein 21).

[7] A person of Mexican origin or descent living in the United States. (Oxford English Dictionary, https://www.oed.com/search/dictionary/?scope=Entries&q=Chicano, accessed on 2 Aug 2023).

3.1. The Elements of the Traditional *Bildungsroman* and the Modified *Bildungsroman*

The House on Mango Street is a coming-of-age story, incorporating many elements of the traditional *Bildungsroman*. The protagonist goes through challenging transitions, undergoes significant tests, and attains a new level of self-awareness, moving from innocence to knowledge and from childhood to adolescence (Klein 22). On the other hand, Cisneros rejects some of the standard and traditional elements of the *Bildungsroman*, questioning some of its core values. The emphasis on "sameness" in many European or American *Bildungsromans* is an aspect that is absent in Cisneros' work. She has shifted her focus from the dominant Anglo-American value system that should be adopted by the protagonist and encourages a value system that is "defined by the outsiders themselves or by their cultures" (Karafilis 65). In *The House on Mango Street*, the readers follow the growth of a young woman of non-Caucasian descent who matures in harmony with her surrounding culture, finding appreciation and understanding for her society (Karafilis 65). The author focuses on the community and the significant role the Chicano community displays in Esperanza's development to harmonize between the dominant American culture, usually present in the *Bildungsromans*, and the submissive Mexican culture, rarely depicted in these novels (Karafilis 66). Instead of using the traditional, linear narration to present the development of the protagonist in chronological order, Cisneros writes the novel in an episodic form. She uses many anecdotes and snippets to illustrate Esperanza's experiences, which propose a sense of orality to the novel, typical of Mexican tradition. As Karafilis explains, "Cisneros forces the reader to do what Esperanza must do to make sense of these disjointed parts and fragments and construct them into a life, and experience, a narrative" (67). Rather than following a linear trajectory, the novel employs a circular structure. The traditional *Bildungsroman* usually begins with the birth or early childhood of the protagonist and chronologically follows their journey through maturation. *The House on Mango Street* begins and ends with the same sentence: "We didn't always live on Mango Street. Before that we lived on Loomis on the third floor, and before that we lived on Keeler. Before Keeler it was Paulina, and before that I can't remember" (Cisneros 3), concluding Esperanza's journey right where she started it off. By commencing and concluding her novel in the same location, Cisneros challenges the American idealization of mobility and freedom to journey while underlining the significance of community and the act of revisiting one's roots and the community that played a role in shaping one's identity (Karafilis 68).

3.2. The Influence of Culture, Marginalization, and Diversity on Esperanza's Development

As previously mentioned, Cisneros employs a range of significant themes to mold Esperanza's sense of self within her community. The prevalent theme of the novel is how Mexican culture shapes Esperanza's growth, particularly considering the impact of being marginalized in a predominantly white society. Esperanza's community, and generally other marginalized groups, frequently prioritize unity over individuality. These groups typically demonstrate their resistance to institutions and traditional values, not having had equal economic or educational opportunities, or generally receiving unequal treatment compared to the dominant ethnic groups within the nation. Consequently, an individual within the community might encounter challenges when contemplating to distance themselves from the community to pursue individual goals because of the group's strong focus on collectivity. Still, Esperanza Cordero regularly highlights the imbalance within the community, mostly concerning discrepancies within genders, generations of the same family, and groups of different ethnic backgrounds (Cruz 918).

The majority of the novel revolves around Esperanza's attempts to connect with her Chicana community and to understand it, despite her intentions of breaking free from it to pursue her own dreams. She is seeking refuge because of the constant prejudice within the community, whether it be gender or racial discrimination, or the hopelessness she experiences from early childhood (Marek 183). These divisions based on social class and ethnicity are depicted in many vignettes through the sketches of the inhabitants of Mango Street. The descriptions of the residents of the street symbolize the challenging circumstances of minority citizens as they strive for a better future. For example, Esperanza's father has a tradition: every Sunday, he takes his family for a drive around wealthy neighborhoods so they can admire the houses and indulge in fantasies about them. These drives trigger Esperanza's sense of shame and diminished self-worth, reminding her of the poverty awaiting them at home: "People who live on hills sleep so close to the stars they forget those of us who live too much on earth. They don't look down at all except to be content to live on hills. They have nothing to do with last week's garbage or fear of rats" (Cisneros 87).

Esperanza's advanced perception of racial segregation is conveyed in the story "Those Who Don't." She explains that many people outside the community are afraid to enter their neighborhood due to ignorance: "Those who don't know any better come into our neighborhood scared. They think we're dangerous. They think we will attack them with shiny knives. They are stupid people who are lost and got here by mistake" (Cisneros 28). Aware of the violence usually bound to her community, Esperanza identifies the people outside of her community as foolish, due to their racial preconceptions. Knowing everyone in her community, she feels a sense of security in their presence. Yet, stepping out of the community, she also experiences discomfort around other ethnic groups: "All brown all around, we are safe. But watch us drive into a neighborhood of another color and our knees go shakity-shake and our car windows get rolled up tight and our eyes look straight" (Cisneros 28). Even though she states this at the beginning of the novel, still early into her maturation, Esperanza displays a strong awareness of interracial distrust and fear. The idea of social segregation is highlighted in her stories, despite being prohibited by law, the division of social space is ever present in these multicultural communities (Mujcinovic 107). In the novel, Esperanza emphasizes these divisions, without offering a possible solution. She internalizes mixed feelings, feeling as if people outside of the community were ignorant for having prejudices, but also shows prejudice about other groups herself. This indicates her lack of maturity at the beginning of the novel, but as the novel progresses, she learns to refrain from judging people based on their ethnic backgrounds (Marek 180). In the initial pages of the novel, she also shows that she absorbed the viewpoints of her parents, her peers, and her culture about the people around her. While getting familiar with the people in her new neighborhood on Mango Street, she uses her predetermined ideas of someone's personality, instilled in her by her surroundings, for example saying that her sister "can't play with those Varga kids or she'll turn out just like them" (Cisneros 8) or that "you don't want to know" the two girls who live nearby (Cisneros 12). Although she judges other people for their preconceived ideas about her and her community, Esperanza initially criticizes other people even though she has no real basis for it (Marek 180).

The dangers of her living conditions and the lack of concern for the children of her community are described in the story of Meme Oritz. Meme lives close to Esperanza and owns a dog with two names, "one in English and one in Spanish" (Cisneros 21), displaying the influences of both cultures on the children of the community. During a children's game, Meme jumps from a tree, resulting in a fall that leads to the breaking of both his arms. This story symbolizes the callous conditions of overcrowded urban neighborhoods, where numerous children, often neglected by their parents or left

unattended, reside (Marek 182). Another similar story is the story of the Varga children, abandoned by their father and neglected by their overwhelmed mother. Esperanza describes them as reckless: "[t]he kids bend trees and bounce between cars and dangle upside down from knees and almost break like fancy museum vases you can't replace. They think it's funny. They are without respect for all things living, including themselves" (Cisneros 29). Esperanza summarizes this story by saying: "[b]ut after a while you get tired of being worried about kids who aren't even yours" (30), once more internalizing the voices of her parents but also expressing the helplessness of the situation. She is aware of the lack of worry for the impoverished children of marginalized groups, even within the community (Marek 182).

The most notable instance of ethnic discrimination is the story of "Geraldo No Last Name," the story of an immigrant who is killed in a hit-and-run after partying. The authorities show a lack of concern for Geraldo, perceiving him as just another casualty in the city, underscoring the inability of the city to provide equitable justice to all of its citizens (Marek 183). This chapter concludes with Esperanza expressing empathy for Geraldo, but there is also a feeling of warning in his story, reminding her that her desired escape from the community leads to many life-threatening situations: "[h]is name was Geraldo. And his home is in another country. The ones he left behind are far away, will wonder, shrug, remember. Geraldo – he went north… we never heard from him again" (Cisneros 66).

Esperanza finds the limitations imposed by her community unhealthy since they prevent personal development and encourage ignorance. Her mission is to change the perception of people outside the community but also people inside the community. Her departure should motivate other oppressed women within the community to follow her steps and pursue their aspirations (Betz 22). Yet, instead of pursuing her dream of leaving herself, as protagonists in the traditional *Bildungsromans* usually do, she leaves the conclusion of the story open-ended, refraining from clarifying whether she will truly depart or eventually come back. As Karafilis asserts,

> [i]n many ways, the Chicano community in her Chicago barrio serves as an extended family, and Esperanza learns about herself and her complex position as a working-class Chicana in the urban United States through the stories of her neighbors. Many chapters in the novel narrate incidents in the lives of others and constitute some of the "experiences" that shape Esperanza and her maturation. (66)

She gains an understanding of the values of her community, but also of herself as a person, not solely based on experiencing everything by herself, but by observing other people close to her and learning based on their experiences.

3.3. The Sense of Not-Belonging and the Search for a Satisfying Home

The novel begins with Esperanza's description of her previous living conditions, highlighting the uncertainty of her family's living situation: "[w]e didn't always live on Mango Street. Before that we lived on Loomis on the third floor, and before that we lived on Keeler. Before Keeler it was Paulina, and before that I can't remember. But what I remember most is moving a lot" (Cisneros 3). In her opinion, all of these houses offer inadequate conditions for her family and are a source of extreme embarrassment for her (Mujcinovic 106). Besides describing the problematic low-income areas where her family has lived, this chapter also depicts Esperanza's shame about her neighborhoods. Recognizing society's disapproving perspective of her community and associating her identity with the neighborhood she lives in, she finds a solution to her misfortune in leaving Mango Street. Trusting in overcoming the boundaries of her ethnic group, Esperanza dreams of having a house of her own, far away from her community (Mujcinovic 107). For her, the idea of a house of her own is critical for her development (Klein 23).

Once, while playing outside, a nun asks Esperanza where she lives. After showing her, the nun pities and ridicules Esperanza for her living conditions. Esperanza's sense of shame and not-belonging triggers at this point. On the other hand, by the end of the novel, Esperanza portrays herself as someone who has become "too strong for her to keep me here forever" (Cisneros 110), demonstrating that her sense of worth has grown from its initial state. In the beginning, Esperanza describes herself as "a red balloon, a balloon tied to an anchor" (Cisneros 9). In other words, her mission to fly away from her community is restricted by the burden of familial responsibilities, as well as gender and racial challenges (Betz 20). Throughout the novel, Esperanza questions her belonging to her origins, as well as the ways in which she differs from her community. In the chapter "My Name," Esperanza explains that she inherited her name from her great-grandmother, a "wild horse of a woman," whose spirit was completely restricted by marriage, having spent her life looking through a window (Cisneros 10). Esperanza rejects the future of a passive observer, refusing to be subdued by patriarchy, unlike many

women in her community. She also expresses a desire to change her name to something like ”Lisandra or Maritza or Zeze the X” (Cisneros 11), in an attempt to assume individuality and avoid social labeling by “defining herself on her own terms” (Mujcinovic 108).

Esperanza grasps the significance of her community, making her realization of her belongingness to Mango Street and her Chicano community crucial for her development. This realization is symbolized through the story of “Four Skinny Trees.” She narrates about four trees in front of her window, which she observes every time she feels sad. Described as the “only ones who understand me. I am the only one who understands them. Four skinny trees with skinny necks and pointy elbows like mine. Four who do not belong here but are here” (Cisneros 74), these trees survive in the unhospitable environment due to their interdependence and their “ferocious roots.” As well as these trees, without her roots, Esperanza would not survive and develop her character. This chapter epitomizes the importance of community for all ethnic Americans (Karafilis 67).

A pivotal moment in Esperanza’s decision to find a home of her own is found in the chapter “The Three Sisters.” She is confronted by three older women who ask her to make a wish and then read her fortune from her hands. They advise her: “When you leave you must remember to come back for the others. A circle, understand? You will always be Esperanza. You will always be Mango Street. You can’t erase what you know. You can’t forget who you are” (Cisneros 105). Esperanza's sense of duty toward her community and her obligations toward her family is brought to her attention once again (Klein 24). In the following chapter, she engages in a conversation with her friend Alicia, during which Alicia tries to convince her that she does belong to Mango Street and will always belong there. Esperanza is opposed to this idea, ashamed of her house and ashamed of the unalterable state of the community. She then describes a house that would satisfy all of her desires, a place that would provide her with a sense of fulfillment and belonging:

> Not a flat. Not an apartment in back. Not a man’s house. Not a daddy’s. A house all my own. With my porch and my pillow, my pretty purple petunias. My books and my stories. My two shoes waiting beside the bed. Nobody to shake a stick at. Nobody’s garbage to pick up after. Only a house quiet as snow, a space for myself to go, clean as paper before the poem. (Cisneros 108)

Rather than conforming to the typical male-dominated dynamics found in many American and Chicano households, Esperanza searches for a space where she will have complete authority. As

previously discussed, she aims to avoid the oppression many women in her society endure and strives to escape being imprisoned in her home. Another crucial aspect of her development is her understanding that the desired house is not a physical location but a symbolic space, free of any prejudice or limitations, where she could discover fulfillment and nurture her writing (Karafilis 70). She concludes the novel by saying that, when she finally leaves one day, the people in her community "will not know I have gone away to come back. For the ones I left behind. For the ones who cannot out" (Cisneros 110). Consequently, one can presume that Esperanza will likely leave her community, yet will also return to it due to her responsibilities to her parents, as well as to her community where she holds the role of the "daughter" of the community. She holds an eternal obligation to Mango Street; the idea of her "forgetting" Mango Street is as unlikely as her attempts to "disown" her parents (Cruz 934).

3.4. The Influence of Gender Differences and Female Oppression

Another crucial aspect of Esperanza's journey to self-discovery are the unequal social standards imposed on women, as well as the oppression and violence many women suffer in their own homes. Cisneros explains that "[t]he boys and the girls live in separate worlds. The boys in their universe and we in ours. My brothers for example. They've got plenty to say to me and Nenny inside the house. But outside they can't be seen talking to girls" (8). Even from the earliest age, a gender-based division is evident in their community, showing that not even brothers will acknowledge their sisters beyond their households (Mayock 224). All of the women in the community have the potential to become "window sitters," just like Esperanza's great-grandmother, confined within the walls of their own residences. If they conform to the imposed cultural norms, they adopt their houses as their entire worlds, limiting their possibilities outside of their communities or even their households and diminishing their roles to passive ones (Mayock 224-25).

At the beginning of the novel, the character of Marin is introduced. She is a young attractive girl from the neighborhood who always has to babysit her cousins while her aunt is at work. Esperanza describes her as a girl who "is older and knows lots of things" (Cisneros 27), mostly sharing beauty advice or telling romantic tales. She is restrained by her aunt and prohibited to leave the house; her freedoms are limited to prevent her from getting in trouble (Betz 24). Marin and Esperanza have

similar intentions: to live outside of Mango Street. Yet, Marin has different methods of pursuing this goal. She believes that an escape is possible only with the support of a man. She is an attractive young woman who utilizes her physical attractiveness to meet someone who would marry her and take her away from Mango Street. Despite her repeated references to her secret boyfriend in Puerto Rico, she is eager to be rescued by any man that would offer her the opportunity to escape. Esperanza finds it problematic that Marin's sense of self is strictly shaped by the opinions of men (Betz 24). The idea of relying on someone else to completely transform your life is unacceptable and unrealistic to Esperanza. She acknowledges that a woman should strive to achieve success through her own efforts (Betz 25).

A positive role model for Esperanza is Alicia, a young woman who studies at a university outside of the community and also takes care of her father within the community. Her outbreak from the community is brief, yet she develops a newfound disrespect for her ethnic group while away (Betz 26). She personifies both concepts of antipatriarchy and the social duty to reconnect with her ethnic community, challenging the predetermined expectations of the patriarchy but also taking responsibility for her father (Klein 24). Esperanza defines her as stuck up after returning from university, longing to communicate with Alicia but being turned down. Esperanza finds inspiration in Alicia, who has left her Chicana community and achieved Esperanza's dreams. Yet, Alicia distances herself from her shameful past and the residents of Mango Street due to the disparity in their educational levels (Betz 27). She is adamant to achieve higher education because she "doesn't want to spend her whole life in a factory or behind a rolling pin," something that would be expected from a woman in this community (Cisneros 31-32). Esperanza admires her and aspires to follow in her footsteps, despite the constraints imposed by Alicia's father. Like many other women in the novel, she is another victim of a man's needs, left helpless due to her circumstances. As Betz explains, "Alicia's new intellectual environment offers boundless opportunities for her to leave her community, but her allegiance to her father will hold her back from any success" (27).

The role of Ruthie also holds significance in Esperanza's journey of self-esteem exploration. Ruthie is an older friend of Esperanza, who is married but still escapes to her mother's house on Mango Street when she fights with her husband. Both she and Esperanza share a similar fondness for reading and Ruthie encourages Esperanza's interest in literature. Esperanza mentions that "there were many things Ruthie could have been if she wanted to," but instead she turned down job offers, got

married, and moved into a house outside the city (Cisneros 69). As in other cases, Ruthie's ambitions are limited and reliant on a man. Because a man lets her down, she is forced to return to her initial community. In the story, she is portrayed as wild, lacking a sense of belonging to anyone or any place. She is yet another example of someone who relied on another individual to rescue her from Mango Street, only to be let down, which serves as a warning to Esperanza never to depend on anyone except herself. Ruthie's role is to inspire Esperanza; she knows that a developing girl can achieve great significance in her life and acknowledges that she will eventually leave Mango Street as a self-reliant woman (Betz 23).

A character that elicits sincere pity from Esperanza is Mamacita, an obese woman who moved to their neighborhood and remains confined to her apartment. Nobody knows why she never leaves but they have their guesses: "[s]omebody said because she's too fat, somebody because of the three flights of stairs, but I believe she doesn't come out because she is afraid to speak English, and maybe this is so since she only knows eight words" (Cisneros 77). Esperanza mentions that the woman longs for her old home and cries as a child at the thought of it. In order to retain the connection to her home, Mamacita rejects the dominant language. She finds it difficult to connect to her husband and her son who both speak English. As Betz argues, "[r]ather than assimilating or accepting her newfound double-identity, Mamacita denies the English language and views America as the distant road away from the home where she belongs" (24). Another woman in the novel is locked up inside the walls of her home although this imprisonment is a result of her husband's beliefs rather than her own – "Rafaela, who is still young but getting old from leaning out the window so much, gets locked indoors because her husband is afraid Rafaela will run away since she is too beautiful to look at" (Cisneros 79). Rafaela's husband protects "his possession" by keeping her away from society and making her a typical representation of a married woman in the Chicana community, something that Esperanza observes with pity and disgust.

The story of Sally is a sorrowful story of domestic abuse that originates within the family and culminates in marriage. Sally is Esperanza's friend who often gets beaten by her father. Generally, she has many positive attributes but also has a negative reputation. Esperanza observes her patterns of behavior when she needs to return home and asks herself why she becomes a different Sally from the one she knows as soon as she enters her house. To escape the violence of her father's household, Sally marries before eighth grade. This marriage leads Sally into new confinement and gives her a husband

who also has violent tendencies. He prohibits her from talking on the phone or looking through the window, presenting another instance of a married Chicana woman submissive to her husband's wishes and beliefs (Doyle 22). Yet again, a woman's whole existence comes down to her household. Esperanza's statement, "She says she is in love, but I think she did it to escape," encapsulates the thought process many women in this community experience (Cisneros 101). They do not marry for genuine reasons but to escape the oppression they endure in their homes, as well as to fulfill the roles society imposed upon them.

Minerva is another young woman in a desperate situation. She is a little older than Esperanza but already has two children and a failing marriage. Esperanza describes a recurring argument between Minerva and her husband, which often leads to abuse and her husband leaving her. However, they eventually reconcile after each argument. Esperanza depicts the hopelessness of Minerva's situation by saying: "[n]ext week she comes over black and blue and asks what can she do? Minerva. I don't know which way she'll go. There is nothing I can do" (Cisneros 85). Esperanza, as well as the rest of the neighborhood, feels helpless in the situation, witnessing severe abuse around them but having no means to end it. She feels that the majority of women in her community will inevitably become pregnant and abandoned by their lovers, a destiny that many of them anticipate but do not actually wish for. She describes Minerva as constantly being "sad like a house on fire" (Cisneros 84), symbolically warning Esperanza of the potential destruction of her aspiration of owning a home if she relies on a man to provide it for her (Betz 23). The struggles of these women assure Esperanza of the uncertainty of marriage and strengthen her desire of having control over her own life (Betz 23). Minerva and Esperanza share poems but her lack of freedom teaches Esperanza that the purpose of writing is granting the artist liberation and altering their circumstances. Writing provides a space for poetic freedom, offering comfort, peace, a sense of accomplishment, a sense of empowerment, and independence (Mujcinovic 109).

Inspired by the misfortunes of the women around her, Esperanza vocalizes her rejection of the submissive role that women typically assume in society. Instead of conforming to the community's expectations, she begins her own quiet revolution towards independence, most evident in the following statement: "My mother says when I get older my dusty hair will settle and my blouse will learn to stay clean, but I have decided not to grow up tame like the others who lay their necks on the threshold waiting for the ball and chain" (Cisneros 88). Inspired by movies she watches; Esperanza

wants to embody a confident feminine energy and disregard the traditional expectations of being a submissive woman (Mujcinovic 109). Her determined attitude is evident in the following lines:

> In the movies there is always one with red lips who is beautiful and cruel. She is the one who drives the men crazy and laughs them all away. Her power is her own. She will not give it away. I have begun my own quiet war. Simple. Sure. I am one who leaves the table like a man, without putting back the chair or picking up the plate. (Cisneros 89)

This rebellion against traditional gender roles is not her attempt to form sisterly bonds with the women around her. Instead, it is an individualistic approach that enables Esperanza's survival in a world not designed by or for women (Mayock 225).

Esperanza's mother's encouragement also motivates her to break free and pursue an education. Her mother serves as another example of an unsuccessful attempt to escape the community due to the constraints of marriage and motherhood. Esperanza lists all the qualities her mother possesses that could have led her to great success: "[s]he can speak two languages. She can sing an opera. She knows how to fix a T.V." (Cisneros 90). Yet, despite being a capable young woman, she is trapped and must cater to the needs of others instead of pursuing her own aspirations (Betz 27). Her mother contemplates her whole life and tries to envision how it could have turned out if she followed her dreams. She motivates her daughter to pursue an education and warns her not to fixate on trivial things, recalling how the embarrassment of her unattractive clothing prevented her from receiving a formal education. Despite her many qualities, motherhood and marriage made her another example of unaccomplished dreams. Esperanza acknowledges that a husband and children could potentially lead to the deterioration of her aspirations as well (Betz 28).

Esperanza also experiences instances of sexual violence and the risks of being a woman through her own experience. In the chapter "The Family of Little Feet," Esperanza, accompanied by her friends Lucy and Rachel, wears high heels and parades through her neighborhood. Despite being quite young, the three of them get sexualized and objectified by men on the streets, receiving sexual comments and even being offered money in exchange for a kiss. Upon coming home, the girls abandon their high heels, never wanting to experience the same harassment again. In another instance, Esperanza experiences sexual misconduct at work where an older man tricks her into kissing him. Yet, the most prominent story of sexual violence and the story of Esperanza's loss of innocence is the story of "Red Clowns." While waiting for Sally at a carnival, Esperanza is raped by an unknown young

man. Even though the loss of innocence is painful for Esperanza, the moment is made even more agonizing by the betrayal of her best friend, who had gone with a boy and assured Esperanza of her return but failed to do so. The repetition of the phrase "I love you, Spanish girl" illustrates the assumption of Esperanza's sexual availability based on her ethnicity (Marek 184). Her disappointment at the loss of innocence in this manner is also evident because it did not align with the romantic portrayals she had seen on television. Unlike the protagonists in the traditional *Bildungsromans*, Esperanza emerges from this experience with the painful awareness of betrayal and physical violation, instead of the sense of regeneration and growth (Klein 25).

Esperanza acknowledges that the women in her community made a mistake by sacrificing their hopes and dreams for a marriage that often fails them. She seeks to escape these mistakes by leaving her community on her own terms, relying on her own efforts rather than relying on men to achieve her ambitions. Her dream is simple – "to liberate the women around her from the tyrannies of male house houses and male plots" (Doyle 19). Through her departure and success outside of Mango Street, she will give voice to all the women inside the community: the speechless, the ones confined to their rooms, the ones experiencing abuse, and the ones restricted by marriage (Doyle 27). Yet, most importantly, she will speak for herself through her literature, obtaining a deeper understanding of the world of unlimited possibilities, unaffected by the limitation of ethnicity or gender.

Conclusion

Adolescence is the most pivotal period of a person's life, filled with obstacles and challenges that guide an individual towards new realizations and the development of their character. Therefore, many authors find inspiration in this critical phase and write their own versions of the *Bildungsroman*. Khaled Hosseini and Sandra Cisneros have written their novels encapsulating the essence of human development that is influenced by many outside factors and tested through various situations. *The Kite Runner* by Hosseini and *The House on Mango Street* by Cisneros share similar themes such as culture, heritage, family relationships, social and economic challenges of a society, the importance of friendship, the exploration of identity, and most importantly the process of coming-of-age. While *The Kite Runner* focuses on Afghan values and culture and *The House on Mango Street* depicts Mexican heritage influenced by American ideals, both novels explore how the protagonists are shaped by their cultural heritage and values. Both novels explore the intricate nature of familial relationships and the permanent impact that parents have on their children. Friendship is a central theme for both Amir and Esperanza. For Amir, his brotherly relationship with Hassan and the subsequent act of betrayal profoundly shape his beliefs as an adult. Similarly, for Esperanza, the interactions with her friends in the community play a crucial role in her outlook on the world. Both communities struggle with economic hardships; Afghan society deals with war and ethnic divisions whereas the Chicana community on Mango Street suffers from poverty due to their limitation as a marginalized group. *The Kite Runner*'s prominent theme of the quest for redemption and the search for identity mirrors the themes of seeking individuality and liberating oneself from societal constraints depicted in *The House on Mango Street*. These novels serve as excellent examples of the American *Bildungsromans*, centering on the psychological, moral, and social maturation of the protagonists caused by the challenges and difficulties they encountered on their journeys through their formative years. Intended for the readers of diverse ethnic backgrounds, both novels resonate with their audiences because of the tragic stories of two young protagonists – a young man and a young woman, striving to find a place of their own and establish their individual identities whilst being immigrants in America.

Works Cited

Aruta, Mona Fe, et al. "*The Kite Runner*: A Psychological Analysis of Amir." *International Journal of Literature Studies*, vol. 2 no. 2, 2022, pp. 68-98. https://al-kindipublisher.com/index.php/ijls/article/view/4316/3671. Accessed 5 July 2023.

Aubry, Timothy. "Afghanistan Meets the *Amazon*: Reading *The Kite Runner* in America." *PMLA*, vol. 124, no. 1, 2009, pp. 25-43. https://www.jstor.org/stable/25614246. Accessed 5 July 2023.

Betz, Regina M. "Chicana 'Belonging' in Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street.*" *Rocky Mountain Review*, vol. 66, 2012, pp. 18-33. https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/rockmounrevi.66.18. Accessed 13 July 2023.

"Chicano, n. and adj. (1)" *Oxford English Dictionary*, https://www.oed.com/dictionary/chicano_n?tab=factsheet#9465230. Accessed 10 Aug. 2023.

Cisneros, Sandra. *The House on Mango Street*. Vintage Books, 1984.

Cruz, Felicia J. "On the 'Simplicity' of Sandra Cisneros's *House on Mango Street*." *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 47, no. 4, 2001, pp. 910-46.

Cuddon, John A. *A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*. Wiley-Blackwell, 2013.

Doyle, Jacqueline. "More Room of Her Own: Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*." *Melus*, vol. 19, no. 4, 1994, pp. 5-35. https://www.jstor.org/stable/468200. Accessed 13 July 2023.

Du, Juan. "A Journey of Self-Actualization of Amir in *The Kite Runner*." *English Language and Literature Studies*, vol. 7, no. 3, 2017, pp. 90-93. https://www.ccsenet.org/journal/index.php/ells/article/view/70290. Accessed 13 July 2023.

Freese, Peter. "The 'Journey of Life' in American Fiction." *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies*, vol. 19, no. 2, 2013, pp. 247-83.

Golban, Petru. *A History of the Bildungsroman: From Ancient Beginnings to Romanticism*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018.

Graham, Sarah. *A History of the Bildungsroman*. Cambridge UP, 2019.

Hirsch Gottfried, Marianne, and David H. Miles. *Defining Bildungsroman as a Genre*. Modern Language Association, 1976.

Hosseini, Khaled. *The Kite Runner*. Afghan Mellat Online Library, 2003.

Kai-fu, Chen. "A Study of Amir's Psychological Change in *The Kite Runner*." *English Language Teaching*, vol. 12, no. 5, 2019, pp. 190-93. https://ccsenet.org/journal/index.php/elt/article/view/0/39197. Accessed 13 July 2023.

Karafilis, Maria. "Crossing the Borders of Genre: Revisions of the *Bildungsroman* in Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* and Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John*." *Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, vol. 31, no. 2, 1998, pp. 63-78.

Klein, Dianne. "Coming of Age in Novels by Rudolfo Anaya and Sandra Cisneros." *English Journal*, vol. 81, no.5, 1992, pp. 21-26.

Lazzaro-Weis, Carol. "The Female *Bildungsroman*: Calling It into Question." *NWSA Journal*, vol. 2, no. 1, 1990, pp. 16-34.

Malik, Muhammad Asghar et al. "Representation of Power Relationships in *The Kite Runner*." *US-China Foreign Language*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2014, pp. 17-26, http://www.davidpublisher.com/Public/uploads/Contribute/551a01b2e4746.pdf. Accessed 5 July 2023.

Marek, Jayne E. "Difference, Identity, and Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*." *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies*, vol. 2, no. 1, 1996, pp. 173-187.

Mayock, Ellen C. "The Bicultural Construction of Self in Cisneros, Álvarez, and Santiago." *Bilingual Review / La Revista Bilingüe*, vol. 23, no. 3, 1998, pp. 223-29, https://www.jstor.org/stable/25745627. Accessed 13 July 2023.

Morgenstern, Karl, and Tobias Boes. "On the Nature of the Bildungsroman." *PMLA*, vol. 124, no. 2, 2009, pp. 647–49. https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/pmla/article/abs/on-the-nature-of-the-bildungsroman/CC793470FD03D7B9FEC10264E7836F71. Accessed 8 July 2023.

Mujcinovic, Fatima. "Self-Expression and World-Expression: Critical Multicultural Literacy in Maxine Hong Kingston and Sandra Cisneros." *CEA Critic*, vol. 76, no. 1, 2014, pp. 98-113.

Nash, Andrea. Review of *The House on Mango Street*, by Sandra Cisneros. Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, 1989.

Shaalan, Ban Salah. "*The Kite Runner:* A Journey of Growth." *Journal of Arts, Literature, Humanities, and Social Sciences*, vol. 52, 2020, pp. 361-73.

Thamarana, Simhachalam. "Origin and Development of *Bildungsroman* Novels in English Literature." *International Journal of English Language, Literature and Humanities*, vol. 3, no. 6, 2015, pp. 21-26, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/282876442_Origin_and_Development_of_Bildungsroman_Novels_in_English_Literature. Accessed 8 July 2023.

Wen, Ting. "On the Way to a Good Man Again—An Analysis of Amir in *The Kite Runner* from Perspective of Freud's Personality Structure Theory." *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, vol. 9, no. 5, 2019, pp. 589-93. http://www.academypublication.com/issues2/tpls/vol09/05/14.pdf. Accessed 8 July 2023.