Emergent Representations of Family, Its Members and Crises in Khaled Hosseini’s

*A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *And the Mountains Echoed*

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Family has long been a dominant subject matter in public discourse since it is the nucleus unit of the society and is responsible for the maintenance of a nation to a great degree. Thus, the representation of family, sometimes convoluted by diaspora, has become a central topic of discussion in literature. Motivated by the prominence of the theme, this thesis aims to examine and compare how family and its members are represented in the Afghan-American author Khaled Hosseini’s novels *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *And the Mountains Echoed*.

The analysis is constructed mainly on the basis of representation theory, along with a brief introduction of feminist criticism. By giving examples from Stuart Hall’s theory of representation, the thesis discusses the emergent portrayal of family and its affiliates in an era of transnationalism that values individuality and gender equity in the novels. Theories concerning exoticism are also employed in order to explore how the family in the novels is presented as both ordinary and exotic for the international audience.

The thesis proposes that the family representation in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *And the Mountains Echoed* is a mediated manifesto of ideals and reality, norm and exception, compliance and rebellion, conservativeness and subversiveness, all of which greatly contribute to the variegated picture that contemporary literature paints of families.

**Avainsanat – Keywords**

Khaled Hosseini, *And the Mountains Echoed*, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, family, representation
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1. Introduction

1.1. Aims and Structure of the Study

The aim of this research is to examine the representations of family, with a focus on women’s roles and accompanying family crises, in Khaled Hosseini’s novels *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007) and *And the Mountains Echoed* (2013). The study argues that families and family members represented in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *And the Mountains Echoed* both confront and affirm the established Western ideologies regarding families’ nature, function, the relationships among their members and gender roles.

The two novels narrate stories of various families influencing each other and affecting generations. Throughout the novels, familial bonds are constructed and destroyed, which results from different cultural, political and social dilemmas. The two texts offer alternative ways to represent families, their members and accompanying crises. In particular, normative patriarchal ideals of families are challenged, and emergent representative images of families as non-biological, non-conventional and non-heterosexual are produced. Such features can be seen as emergent patterns in contemporary literature. Generally, cultural, political and social currents are considered to be the main factors in constituting family concepts. According to Tucker and Gamble, families have been shifting towards “more liberal attitudes and subversions of traditional values” (1). Moreover, the family crisis is a discourse that always emerges when society is changing for it is linked with sociocultural values. It discusses cultural issues, what the society feels and what is under threat. Different representations, thus, can be seen as indications of a crisis that challenges family values to a great degree.

Despite the fact that all of the novels’ characters are Afghan, they cater for international readers, and the author is an Afghan-born American. Hence, a westernized filter
is applied on the way the Afghan families in the novels are represented, making them exotic yet not so different from the Western world. In other words, the non-Western model is simplified and presented to the international audience so that it is palatable and easy to approach.

The theoretical background of this research consists of studies concerning family structures, family crises as well as women’s roles in families. Various aspects of the family will be studied using representation theory, and feminist criticism will be employed in order to examine women’s roles in the organization of Afghan families. In Tincknell’s view, the effects of feminism on “representations of gender and familial relations” are undeniably remarkable (35). Exoticism in the margins, or in other words, the extent to which cultural differences in postcolonial works are commoditized and assimilated, will also be considered to examine the authenticity of the representations in the two novels.

This thesis consists of four chapters, starting with an introduction of the author, his two novels as well as the methods applied to examine them. In the second chapter, the theoretical framework including popular Western family ideologies and representation theory will be discussed, along with the modern social development of family and its rights in the United Kingdom and the United States. Furthermore, the contemporary portraits of family, its members and its crises as both conservative and incendiary are also presented using existing examples from both cinema and literature. Based on this framework, Chapter Three analyzes how both novels represent the family and its members. The first section looks at how family representations in both A Thousand Splendid Suns and And the Mountains Echoed are in conformity with the established ideals while the second section argues how the family and its members in the novels confront customary beliefs in the definition of family and how its members should behave. Finally, the thesis ends with a conclusion and suggestions for future research.
1.2. Author and the Novels

Khaled Hosseini, the author of the novels under study, is a prominent Afghan American novelist and physician who moved from Kabul, Afghanistan to California, the United States of America, at the age of fifteen, after being granted political asylum with his parents. He is often endorsed as an important figure in contemporary literature who “bridge[s] the gap between Western literary audience and the culture of the Middle East” (Chitra 1). In 2003, while practicing medicine, he became a publishing phenomenon with his debut novel The Kite Runner which was on The New York Times bestseller list for two years. The theme of family is dominant and pervasive in all three of his novels, although each novel deals with the subject in distinctive ways. Hosseini’s second and third novel A Thousand Splendid Suns and And the Mountains Echoed, respectively, are also his most acclaimed works.

A Thousand Splendid Suns arrests its readers’ attention primarily towards the lives of two very different Afghan women Laila and Mariam who by fate became wives of the same husband Rasheed, in the oppressive and patriarchal Afghan society:

Laila is the great beauty, with a doting father and a protective boyfriend — a lucky girl whose luck abruptly runs out. Mariam is the illegitimate daughter of a bitter woman and a disloyal father — an unlucky girl whose luck turns from bad to worse. (The New York Times n. page)

Nonetheless, that is not the way they regard themselves as a family, but there is rather a powerful bond that develops between these two women makes them function like mother and daughter. Their relationship is so vigorous that one even sacrifices her life for the other despite their non-biological affiliation. In this novel, the cruelty and malice of the Taliban reign adds more emphasis to Laila and Mariam’s plights, especially by virtue of their gender.
Hosseini calls *A Thousand Splendid Suns* “at once an incredible chronicle of thirty years of Afghan history and a deeply moving story of family” (qtd. in KhaledHosseini.com n. page).

The compilation of narratives in *And the Mountains Echoed*, in contrast, spans across multiple families, generations, decades and continents, showing its audience various broad aspects of family life: the inseparable bond between a brother and sister; the pretentious marriage between two people who can never love each other; the discordant relationship between mothers and daughters; the ruthless act from one sister to her twin; the secretive homosexual love of a master for his servant; and many more. It is in this novel that one finds a deep look into the nature of families and “the many ways in which family nurture, wound, betray, honor and sacrifice one another” (*ATME* back cover). Therefore, it can be seen that the two novels provide insight into various family types and their accompanying characteristics, rather than focusing solely on the conventional family paradigms. As Chambers puts it, “the marketing of difference is just as useful to global capital as the marketing of the ideal white nuclearized family” (168). Specifically, family types, family crises, and the ways in which family secrets and disclosure affect their members will be investigated thoroughly.

Complementing their literary appeal, the two novels have gained phenomenal commercial successes. *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *And the Mountains Echoed* are revered by international readers, making their way to being the New York Times bestsellers, with dozens of millions of copies sold worldwide. More notably, *A Thousands Splendid Suns* has been adapted and made into a theatrical performance by San Francisco’s American Conservatory Theater and Canada’s Theatre Calgary. *People* calls *And the Mountains Echoed* “a moving saga about sacrifice, betrayal, and the power of family” while *The New York Times* extols how Hosseini “has taken the last 33 years of that country’s tumultuous
history of war and oppression and told it on an intimate scale, through the lives of two women” in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (n. page).

Nonetheless, the two novels have not been studied extensively in academia, especially regarding the theme of family. The available studies on *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, including the research papers by Sindhu, Shameem, Netto, Singh, and Shihada, mostly focus on the issue of gender discrimination and the representations of victimized Afghan women amidst social and political enmity. The women in the novel, as Netto observes, “have no freedom, aren’t allowed to work and are not permitted to travel without male chaperone, to list a few. They repeatedly become victims of male rage. The marginalization of the female biological body is an everyday reality” (58). This finding also resonates with Rudhra’s conclusion that women are a “salable commodity in the Afghan society” as phrased in her article on *And the Mountains Echoed* (9). One of the few notable works that provides a comparative analysis between the two novels is Qamar and Shakeel’s study “Representation of Afghan Institution of Marriage in Khaled Hosseini’s *And The Mountains Echoed* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns*: A Cultural Study” which examines the representation of marriage in Afghan culture using textual analysis. They assert that there are contradictions between Hosseini’s second and third novels in representing the social institution of marriage in Afghanistan:

Hosseini has exaggerated the details to a very great extent in favour of the Western world. His misrepresentation is also not always unpleasant. In *Mountains* his misrepresentation of the institution of marriage seems more soothing, consoling and pleasant than the representation in *Suns*. (Qamar and Shakeel 63; emphasis original)

The aforementioned research works are of great value for this study as they perform an in-depth analysis of family representations with particular reference to the representation of women as mothers, wives and daughters in the two novels.
In an era full of social, cultural and political turmoil, partially fueled by the global migration trend, the role of the family as a foundational institution for both individuals and the society is appreciated more than ever before. On top of that, the family is deemed to be the only mechanism that can make fiction meaningful again, as suggested by Jonathan Franzen the author of the salient post-9/11 family novel *The Corrections*:

It seems […] to me that in a particularly disillusioned age, with hardly a semblance of hope that our critical apparatus can make even a minor dent in the machinery of the technocracy and the consumer state, we’re left with the death of certain kinds of hope or idealism, and also the death of religion as a sufficient provider of meaning (as opposed to an occasional momentary provider of meaning). By default, family rises up. […] It’s not surprising to see in my own work, looking back, and in the work of some of my peers, an attention to family. It’s nice to write a book that does tend toward significance and meaning, and where else are you sure of finding it […]? (“Jonathan Franzen Uncorrected” n. page)

On the basis of this, I hope to contribute to the current intriguing discourse on the trend of family representations in literature, especially so-called ethnic literature, to show what the family means in the works of a celebrated author like Hosseini — who is also a participant in global migration. The study also aims to explore how the representations of families and their members are modified diachronically by providing a comparative analysis between the *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *And the Mountains Echoed*, considering their six-year publication gap.

1.3. Methods

This study will analyze *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *And the Mountains Echoed* using representation theory. Representations, as defined by Stuart Hall, are “images, descriptions,
explanations and frames for understanding what the world is and why and how it works in particular ways” (qtd. in Orgad 17; emphasis original). Therefore, by recognizing the function of representation in media, one might be able to comprehend “the ways in which literary works participate in the formation and critique of domestic ideology, and, in turn, how the very form of the novel gradually came to be adapted by the modified ideological assumptions” (Kilroy 5).

The study will also employ feminist criticism in the analysis of women’s changing roles in families based on the fact that female characters and authors increasingly “take on life and energy and are conceived of as heroic, passionate, subversive” (Mary Eagleton 110). Starting to ‘properly’ emerge as a subdivision of the American women’s political movement in the 1960s, feminist criticism—a type of literary analysis is presumed to exercise three main functions: to analyze the “image of women” in literature written “by male authors”, to analyze existing “criticism of female authors” and to define what is “good” literature from a feminist perspective (Register 2). On this account, it aims to dismiss the male dominance mentality and solicit “a new and different order founded on freedom and love” (Donovan xx).

In Walter Benjamin: Or, Towards a Revolutionary Criticism, Terry Eagleton describes feminist criticism as “revolutionary” because

[i]t would dismantle the ruling concepts of “literature”, reinserting ‘literary’ texts into the whole field of cultural practices. It would strive to relate such ‘cultural’ practices to other forms of social activity, and to transform the cultural apparatuses themselves. It would articulate its ‘cultural’ analyses with a consistent political intervention. It would deconstruct the received hierarchies of ‘literature’ and transvaluate received judgments and assumptions; […] to reveal their role in the ideological construction of the subject; […] in a struggle to transform those subjects within a wider political context. (Eagleton 98)
Since literature, media and politics are inevitably interwoven, the recent Me Too movement that reflects the world’s collective effort to fight against maltreatment towards women using the power of social media deserves to be mentioned. Initiated in 2006 by civil right activist Tarana Burke, in 2017 the Me Too movement owes its spike in global recognition to the burgeoning awareness and resistance to sexual harassment. The movement encourages women who have experienced sexual abuse to share about their experiences on social media using the hashtag #MeToo and undertake legal actions against even the most powerful male giants, for example Harvey Weinsteins and Brett Kavanaugh, instead of keeping quiet. In December 2018, a breakthrough in the United States legislation is seen with the Me Too Congress Act serving as an update to the Congressional Accountability Act of 1995 in the procedure of investigating and resolving sexual misbehavior claims in Congress (The Telegraph n. page). However, the problem prevails. Many women around the globe are still facing gender discrimination, victimization and oppression, peculiarly within their own home. The 2018 United Nations’s report Global Study on Homicide reveals that the family is the most dangerous place for women as 58 percent of all female homicide victims were murdered by their intimate partners or family members (3). On this basis, this thesis aims to endorse Hosseini’s fair treatment towards his female characters and his confrontation with the sad reality concerning sexual harassment and domestic abuse women are facing.

Considered as postcolonial works, A Thousand Splendid Suns and And the Mountains Echoed will also be examined based on the notion of postcolonial exoticism since Hosseini was absent from Afghanistan during one of its most historically important period, the Taliban reign. Huggan defines exoticism as a “particular mode of aesthetic perception” by which people, objects and places are estranged (13). In other words, it can be regarded as “a semiotic circuit in which the strange and the familiar, as well as their relation, can be decoded
to serve different, even contradictory, political needs and ends” (Huggan 13). He also remarks that

while exoticism describes the systematic assimilation of cultural difference, ascribing familiar meanings and associations to unfamiliar things, it also denotes an expanded, if inevitably distorted, comprehension of diversity which effectively limits assimilation since the exotic is [...] kept at arm’s length rather than taken as one’s own.” (Huggan 14)

This means exoticism contains erratic content yet still operates along predictable lines: “its political dimensions are similarly unstable, for the ideology it implies always stops short of an exhaustive representation” (Huggan 14).

Consequently, the postcolonial exotic, in Huggan’s view, signifies the intersection between “postcolonialism” and “postcoloniality” (28). He notes that while the former operates toward “the dissolution of imperial epistemologies and institutional structures”, the latter is “tied to the global market and capitalizes both on the widespread circulation of ideas about cultural “otherness” and the worldwide trafficking of culturally “othered” artifacts and goods” (28). Therefore, seen as cultural commodities, postcolonial works partly operate within an economy determined greatly by the exigencies of the Western world (Huggan 30). Most of all, literary audiences are by nature “plural and heterogeneous”, therefore, it is almost impossible to distinguish a single reading public (Huggan 30). It is, as a consequence, arrogant to gauge postcolonial literatures in English only to Western metropolitan response, he notes (30).

Considering the fact that he “had been gone for more than a quarter of a century”, Khaled Hosseini remarks that he feels like “a tourist” in his own country, or in other words, “an outsider” (Penguin Random House n. page). As a consequence, the “tourist gaze” is believed to play an important role in mediating the representation of families and their crises
in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *And the Mountains Echoed*. According to Huggan, “tourist gazes” are filters of touristic perception – they “provide a medium for what tourists see, but also a guideline as to how they ought to see” (180). The exotic and dangerous settings of both novels help to evoke readers’ interest in reading about what happens in Afghanistan during and after the Taliban war. Ethnicity is then converted into a commodity by multiculturalism, fostering a view of culture as “a thing that can be displaced, performed, admired, bought, sold or forgotten” (Huggan 140). This thesis sets out to discuss whether *And the Mountains Echoed* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* confirm this view.
2. Theoretical Framework

This section focuses on construing ‘the family’ or, in other words, ‘families’, as the term is “multifaceted and capable of multiple identifications” (MacKinnon 83). Chambers further asserts that “it is no longer possible to discuss the subject without framing the word in inverted commas, signifying the ambiguity surrounding it” (1-2). Firstly, family ideologies and its historic milestones in the last one hundred years will be presented. Consequently, the chapter moves on with an outline of representation concept; and lastly, common representations of family, its members and crises in contemporary media and literature are introduced.

In particular, ideologies and representations of families are crucial in depicting the intricate picture of families. Family ideologies are believed as “ideal ways of living” (Cheal 72); and family representations reflect how individuals view their family based on “existing and culturally understood signs and images” (Hartley 202), thus present the varied reality. However, it is necessary to take into account the relativity of ideologies and representations since “some generalizations about the past are pure myth” (Coontz 4), and “representations inevitably involve a process of selection in which certain signs are privileged over others” (Hartley 202). Furthermore, the concept of family is constantly changing and its meaning differs from culture to culture, even from member to member in the same family. In other words, “family structures, values, and beliefs concerning marriage and family life are always culturally specific” (Han 8). Therefore, it is not feasible to provide a universally comprehensive picture of the term’s ideologies and representations; and this thesis will only focus on family ideologies, history and representations in Western Anglophone cultures.
2.1. Family Ideologies and Modern History

Ideologies are widely accepted sets of behaviors and concepts devised through socialization and bolstered “in our everyday interactions with significant others and social groups” (Straughan 63). Nonetheless, one should take careful consideration when analyzing ideologies and not let “the actual complexity of our history — even of our personal experiences — [get] buried under the weight of the ideal image” (Coontz, Introduction) because there are multiple attitudes that exist simultaneously “at a given time in any culture or subculture” (Tucker and Gamble 2). The role of literature in reflecting ideologies is therefore, complicated. According to Kilroy, “the novel does not simply reflect ideologies; in fact, rarely does it do so. Instead, it engages the reader in a process of inquiry” (18). The relationship between ideology and literature are intertwined as ideology provides the basis for literature yet at the same time is developed by literature. Specifically, at various phases of literature: “the period and process of its creation; the time and place for which it as calculated to be read, and the various times and places when it is read and reread— and responded to critically” (Kilroy 16-7), ideology is viewed differently. Thus, the reader’s role is not as “passive recipients of information” but as the one who mediate and interpret the meaning of the presented ideology (Hartley 82).

Family ideologies offer “collective definitions of what a ‘normal’ family is thought to be, what is a ‘proper’ marriage and what it means to be a ‘good mother’ or a ‘good father’” (Cheal 72). This means that everyone has “two families, one that we live with and another we live by” (Gillis xv). For most Americans, the optimal family includes “one man and one woman, two children, a house, a picket fence and a dog”, Busch observes (2-3). Typically, the father is the wage earner and the mother takes care of the household. This is illustrated by “the advertising images of the 1950s — picturing father in an armchair reading a newspaper,
mother setting the table for the family meal, and two children, conveniently one girl, one boy, playing quietly with suitable gender-oriented toys” (Tucker and Gamble 23). Another commonly appraised family ideology that permeated “England during the period extending from the French Revolution to the end of nineteenth century” is one showing the family as “a prime social unit, a model of order and an essential instrument for educating the young” (Kilroy 5). Conventionally, the family is also viewed as “a haven” (Kilroy 14) and a place replete with “innocence and sanctity” (Chambers 175). For example, American novelist Louisa May Alcott, considered a pioneer in writing about family life, often portrays the idyllic and happy family scene in her works, particularly at the end of Good Wives:

Everybody was there; everybody laughed and sang, climbed up and tumbled down; everybody declared that there never had been such a perfect day or such a jolly set to enjoy it and everybody gave themselves up to the simple pleasures of the hour as freely as if there were no such things as care or sorrow in the world. (343)

Regarding its structure, the family is “a social group characterized by common residence, economic cooperation, and reproduction”, that consists of “adults of both sexes, at least two of whom maintain a socially approved sexual relationship, and one or more children, own or adopted, of the sexually cohabiting adults” (Murdock 1). Family organizations can be characterized into three main types: nuclear family, polygamous family and extended family. Furthermore, “the model family for policy design has been a coresident nuclear unit with the husband or father as the main breadwinner and death as a prominent reason for losing the main breadwinner” (Murdock 1). According to Gittins, the four fundamental functions that the family performs are “common residence, economic cooperation, reproduction, and sexuality” (60).

Apart from its members, the family is also interconnected with the nation. The relationship between the family and the state has long been deemed indivisible: “[t]he good
prince ought to have the same attitude toward his subjects, as a good paterfamilias toward his household— for what else is a kingdom but a great family? What is the king if not the father to a great multitude” (Erasmus 33-4; emphasis added). In modern times, “moral practices and modes for familial existence” such as “marriage and family life are, in the first place shaped, and to some extent determined by state policy” (Han 22). Conversely, as “the very foundation of society” (Weeks et al. 9), the family determines and reflect social structures and values within the country. By sharing “substantial ties” with the nation (Hegel 124), the family provides formative models of social behavior: mutually benevolent relations among parents and children; responsive and responsible authority, evidenced in parental rule; civility, in the precious ties among siblings; benevolence, in familial care for the infirm and elderly; and proper socialization, seen in the education and moral guidance. (Kilroy 8)

This explains the reason the family is considered as an “ethical root of the state” (Hegel 124). For instance, mothers are characterized “as the nation’s and the family’s moral guardians” (Kathryn Woodward qtd. in Chambers 62). Consequently, for a nation to function accordingly, families must be “well-governed” (Rowe 378); otherwise, it is a sign that the state is at stake.

Acknowledged as a “historical institution”, the family has been affected by some of the most major social and political processes “in historically significant ways” (Maynes and Waltner ix) for the last one hundred years. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Victorian nuclear middle-class family image that “symbolizes stability, serenity, and even masculinity” (Barrett and Kukhareva 23) remains a dream to strive for by many. However, wars, specifically World War II, have tremendously deranged the traditional structure of family or even destroyed it. According to Barrett and Kukhareva, the wars have wreaked havoc on “the indissoluble character of marriage-based kin relationships in Britain and the
West”, along with the safety and stability they provide (27-28). Soon new types of families were formed and the once clear-cut roles among family members have changed for good. Particularly, women have been given a chance to acquire more social appreciation and visibility, as well as to “establish their equality to men: by caring for the wounded and dying in hospital and at the battle front, and by fighting the enemy in their own impromptu units” (Barrett and Kukhareva 31). The time of war also saw an increase in “the number of working American women by over 40 percent between 1940 and 1944” in industrial fields (qtd. in Maynes and Waltner 106), as epitomized by Rosie the Riveter.

Later during the 1960s, families and their members experienced major changes influenced by consequential legislative reforms including the United Kingdom’s Family Provision Act in 1966, the Sexual Offences Act in 1967, and the Abortion Act in 1967. Two years later in 1969, the Divorce Reform Act was passed “to amend the grounds for divorce and judicial separation; [and] to facilitate reconciliation in matrimonial causes” (n. page), which signifies a momentous breakthrough in family history. Since then, legal familial reforms have continued to be enacted, some of which “greatly improved the status of women as members of society and as members of their families” (Barrett and Kukhareva 25-6). For example, Roe v. Wade, 410 U.S. 113 in 1973, is a revolutionary decision by the United States Supreme Court allowing women to legally have an abortion under certain conditions. Legislative advancement is also made to make family life better for all of its members. In particular, the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980 enacted by Congress aims to “improve the child welfare”, institute a “program of adoption assistance” as well as “strengthen the program of foster care assistance for needy and dependent children” (n. page). As the new century approaches, family history also witnesses a period of significant landmarks regarding its diversity. On May 17, 2004, the first same-sex couple is married in Massachusetts, making it the first U.S. state to legalize same-sex marriage. Ever since, non-
heterosexual marriage continued to gain tremendous support; notably by Barack Obama in an interview with ABC in May 2012, which makes him the first sitting president to publicly endorse same-sex marriage (CNN n. page). Later on June 26, 2015, same-sex couples attain the right to marry in all states in the United States, as governed by the Supreme Court.

Besides state policy, there are other factors that convolute and regulate contemporary families such as “the relationship of marriage to the family; socioeconomic influences; culture; the economy; domestic issues and pressures” (Wiseman 5). Chambers suggests that the “modern nuclear family is no longer the norm” and that the public has increasingly come to accept family diversity as a fundamental characteristic of modern society (140). Owing to the impact of social changes, families today increasingly follow different patterns such as consisting of “individuals who are not married but cohabiting; these could be individuals of the same or opposite sex” or being comprised of “households of biological children, adopted children, or both, from a single race, multiple races, or mixed races” (Wiseman 3). The ways in which the idea of family has been mediated continue to diversify, and the family itself has been “reworked, recast and renegotiated” (Tincknell 159).

In sum, family ideologies provide “powerful reference points” (Gillis qtd. in McIntosh et al. 177), given the unsettled and varied nature of families. Particularly, with the increasing number of contemporary novels portraying families as dysfunctional and upsetting, ideologies are further accentuated and valued. At the same time, ideologies will continue to problematize the concept of family, its structures and values, as most people are incapable of understanding “what the ideology of appropriate behavior for men, women and children within families has been” (Gittins 70).
2.2. Representation Theory

The aim of this section is to present a discursive definition of representations and their usages in mass media and literature. It also seeks to emphasize the complexities of those representations in reflecting the genuine reality or whether they are merely a tool for those who possess the power to control what should be represented and what should not.

According to Hartley, representations “are words, pictures, sounds, sequences, stories, etc., that ‘stand for’ ideas, emotions, facts, etc” (202). This aligns with Hall’s definition that “[r]epresentation is the production of meaning through language” which is constituted by different signs and images (Hall, “Representation, Meaning, and Language” 28). By “making present of something which is nevertheless not literally present” (Pitkin 144), representations allow members of a culture to see not only real objects and events but also conceptual ones (Hall, “Representation, Meaning, and Language” 28). They reflect our true selves and how we “understand” ourselves, others and the world around us (Webb 2). In other words, representations are a “substitute for the ‘real thing’” (Webb 3). Thus, language becomes a representational system through which cultural and social ideologies, values, thoughts and emotions are conveyed (Hall, “Introduction” 1). Since “existing and culturally understood signs and images” (Hartley 202) are essential in the making of representations, the reader, by the experience of reading, can grasp the “reality”:

Reality is in the eye of the beholder; or rather, what is regarded as real depends on how reality is defined by a particular social group. […] reality may be in the eye of the beholder, but the eye has had a cultural training, and is located in a social setting and a history. (Kress and van Leeuwen 163)

However, it is impossible that “all people read all representations in the same way” (Hartley 203), despite the fact that members of the same culture “interpret the world in
roughly similar ways” (Hall, “The Work of Representation” 4). It is also important to note that one’s understanding of representations changes over time, similar to Andrew Jarecki’s notion of memory: “[w]e think we can put our memories away in a box and we can go check on them later and they will be the same, but they are never the same; they are these electrochemical bubbles that continue to bubble over time” (qtd. in Dijck 39). Thus, the meanings of representations will be always multiple and fluid, regardless of when and by whom they are perceived.

Concerning the media and literature in particular, representation in Ermath’s view “seem[…] to belong to that world on the other side of the looking-glass where words mean whatever you say they mean” (3). This is echoed in Hall’s “intentional approach” to representation: “words means what the author intends they should mean” (Hall, “The Work of Representation” 10). The author’s role in representing and producing the meanings of real and imaginary concepts is therefore pivotal. Nonetheless, “bias” within the media representations (Hartley 17) is ubiquitous and determined by the “privileged position of power” (Hunt 13). Consequently, it “[betrays] a number of choices and emphases which have implications to how we experience and understand ourselves and the world around us” (Isomaa x). One prominent example is the representational treatment of “marginalized groups” whose individual stories are “charged with allegorical significance and taken to represent the entire group” (Ella Shohat qtd. in Hunt 14). This issue of “popular images” was accentuated as “dangerous” in the Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s TED Talk “The Danger of a Single Story”:

[I]f all I knew about Africa were from popular images, I too would think that Africa was a place of beautiful landscapes, beautiful animals, and incomprehensible people, fighting senseless wars, dying of poverty and AIDS, unable to speak for themselves and waiting to be saved by a kind, white foreigner. (n. page)
In sum, representations are of great importance in depicting the reality but also subject to bias and inaccuracies. Therefore, it is necessary for readers to acquire relevant knowledge of social history and cultural trends so as to equitably interpret representations in media and literature.

2.3. Family Representations

This section aims to explore the current trend of family representations in literature and cinema, particularly regarding its structure, members and crises.

As a “mediator of a larger culture” (Handel and Whitchurch 174) and “[product] of social forces within societies” (Ruspini 4), the family both creates changes in the society and evolves to fit social changes. For example, recent trends of transnational migration and globalization have had a great impact on families. As Han observes, “the displacement of cultural identity has greatly influenced the family structures and destabilized family values” (Han 8). Moreover, Chambers remarks that during a time when these nations are engaged in struggles over local, national and international identities, the family […] fixity is being questioned and, seemingly, subverted and transcended. Increases in divorce, remarriage, post-divorce families, blended families, single parenthood, joint custody, abortion, cohabitation, two-career families, gay and lesbian partnerships and parent-hood all contribute to a rising postmodern family diversity that is undermining the orthodoxy of traditional family values. (1)

Instead of blood ties, Giddens denotes that families can also be formed on “chosen relationships” which are seen as “pure” since they were negotiated and based on personal values; these ties are at times more close-knit than the established biological bonds (qtd. in
Tincknell, 134). For instance, *Bohemian Rhapsody* (2018), a movie about Freddie Mercury and his relationship with other members of Queen, gained exceptional success, becoming the highest grossing musical biopic in history (*The Independent* n. page). In this movie, the theory that one’s family can be purposely chosen is solidified with Mercury calling the band his “family” and confessing having AIDS to the band members even before his parents. Similar representations of families formed on powerful friendships can also be seen in television sitcoms *Friends* (NBC, 1994–2004) and *How I Met Your Mother* (CBS, 2005–2014). In literature, Hosseini once compares the adamantine beauty of friendship between Amir and Hassan in his first novel *The Kite Runner* to “a kinship that even time could not break” (2). These emerging alternative family types fit Chambers’s description that they are “clearly founded more on choice than on tradition or inherited moralities” (164).

Other family types represented in the novel are stepfamilies and single-parent families. Stacey remarks that stepfamilies and single-parent families are condemned by social scientists, emphasizing that children are being harmed in households and intimate relationships that fail to comply with that of a heterosexual marriage of the biological or adoptive parents (193). According to Cheal, there are two ways of viewing stepfamilies. In detail, they are either regarded as “incomplete institutions because they lack institutionalized guidelines and support to help them solve their problems” or considered “less functional and more problematic than nuclear families, possessing mostly negative traits and characteristics, and interactions within stepfamilies are thought to be generally harmful and unpleasant” (143). Likewise, single motherhood and fatherless families were all identified as “the enemy” that was eroding modern family values (Chambers 142).

As an emergent type of family, lesbian and gay “pretended families” that raise moral panics, according to Chambers, are “constructing and mobilizing the idealization of families” (142). A notable contemporary novel that focuses on a gay pretended family is Manil Suri’s
The City of Devi (2013). The story deals with an unusual love triangle among a wife, her husband and his boyfriend in the chaotic and collapsing Mumbai. The awkward intimacy between the husband and wife who hug more than kiss and whose “lovemaking remained restricted to above the waist” (Suri 74) bears certain similarity to that of Nila and Suleiman Wahdati in A Thousand Splendid Suns. Another example could be the television series Grace and Frankie (Netflix, 2015-). The show revolves around the lives two families and their members before and after it is revealed that the husbands are in love with each other and want to get married. However, The City of Devi and Grace and Frankie contain numerous comedic elements to mitigate the gravity of the matter, as according to Herrera, alternative types of families that are “not heterosexual, patriarchal, and/or nuclear” are still considered “aberrant, unacceptable, and inferior” in popular culture because they countervail the habitual civic practices (2).

The notion of family crisis, thus, also becomes a key theme that prevails in public discourse. Struggles within a family do not only harm its members but also exert ripple effects on many other families and generations. As Umana and McConville describe, “in a family crisis, […] the interactional patterns are in a temporary state of disequilibrium, or flux, caused by the introduction of a stimulus that is novel to the family” (1). One of the most popular crises that are considered “the foundational plot mechanism upon which so many sentimental texts depend” is abandonment or separation of parents and children (Weinstein 26). A typical example of this is the classic German fairy tale Hansel and Gretel. Another type of crisis is changes in family which signals a decline in family values within a current discourse of family crisis by “Church leaders and pro-family campaigners”, according to Chambers (1). She also remarks that determinants such as gender and race in particular social groups are to blame for the “family-values crisis” (141). Furthermore, Judith Stacey notes that the discourse of family crisis is becoming more “urgent, fractious and ubiquitous than
ever before” (185). For example, Geogre R. R. Martin’s renowned novel *A Game of Thrones* is an archetype meant to render family conflicts and dilemmas:

“Sometimes I’d imagine my father burning. At other times, my sister.” Jon Snow was staring at him, a look equal parts horror and fascination. Tyrion guffawed. “Don't look at me that way, bastard. I know your secret. You've dreamt the same kind of dreams.” (38)

This fictional work is an echo of Chambers’s suggestion that “[p]opular media representations of the family confirm the deep struggle between the innocence and sanctity of the ideal family versus the guilty, perverse individualism of family members” (175).

No longer normal and safe, the modern Western family has become rather threatening and unpredictable. This is strengthened by Valerie Smith’s view on the American family in the last decade of the twentieth century as “a universe of euphemism, allusion, and displacement” (250). Similarly, the obliteration of the family is described by Philip Brophy as a thriving trend in contemporary horror films (qtd. in MacKinnon 82). In popular media, dysfunctional families speak to audiences more powerfully (Tincknell 150). Or as Farrell puts it, “in popular culture, as in real life, stories of families beset by jealousy, envy, lust, and hatred rather than by the ideals of love, loyalty, and commitment provide an endless source of titillation and fascination” (5). For instance, the cartoon series *The Simpsons* (Fox, 1989-) gained huge commercial popularity by testing out the new versions of the family, changing familial relations and shifts in the power dynamics involved (Tincknell 151). Likewise, in her view, reality shows often “intensify and extend the discourse of pathological dysfunctionality”, thus, the troubled family appear to be much more captivating than nuclear harmony (156).

Regarding family members, the immemorial roles of fathers as breadwinners and disciplinarians who morally counsel their children (Tincknell 55) are popularly employed in
fiction. As they often spend time in the public sphere, fathers lack emotional connection with the rest of the family thus, seen to be harsh or even similar to “something of a devil” (Steinbeck 14). Notwithstanding, their love and care for the family is undeniable, and the only problem is that they have their own eccentric way of expressing it, such as Cyrus Trask towards his son in *East of Eden* (1952): “I love you better. I always have. This may be a bad thing to tell you, but it’s true. I love you better. *Else why would I have given myself the trouble of hurting you?*” (Steinbeck 27; emphasis added) Correspondingly, *The Penguin Dictionary of Symbols* compares the father to “God and Heaven, he is an image of regular, wise and righteous transcendence” (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 372). These admirable qualities can be seen in *The Daisy Chain*’s Dr. May who is forced to raise eleven children alone after his wife’s death:

Dr. May was a parent who could not fail to be loved and honoured; but, as a busy man, trusting all at home to his wife, he had only appeared to his children either as a merry playfellow, or as a stern paternal authority, not often in the intermediate light of guiding friend, or gentle guardian; and it affected Norman exceedingly to find himself, a tall schoolboy, watched and soothed with motherly tenderness and affection; with complete comprehension of his feelings, and delicate care of them. His father’s solicitude and sympathy were round him day and night. (Yonge 120)

Therefore, besides being a figure of rigid authority and little flexibility, it is possible for the father to appear endearing by the unconditional love for his children along with the determination and hard work to secure them financially.

Contrary to men, women are traditionally believed to belong to the private sphere where “the family” is located (Tincknell 2). In the patriarchal society that glorifies male authority and demands female subordination, daughters in the family are “forced to accept marriages they do not desire, wives become submissive to their husbands and many mothers
have to quit their dream careers to take care of their homes and children” (Shihada 25). Moreover, according to Villani, they are usually the target of intense public scrutiny and the way in which their behaviors are regarded as culturally acceptable is narrowly defined. Almost all women are victims of discriminatory cultural mandates and are “judged by [their] husband, [their] neighbors, and [their] society” (Welter 151). To illustrate, the phrases “Loyal Wife”, “Good Mother”, “Sex Kitten” and “Old Maid” are commonly used to describe the principal roles of women in the family (Villani 8). Thus, the female characters are often represented as those “of passivity” (Tucker and Gamble 12). Additionally, women are mainly characterized and confined by their ability to give birth to a child because “the childless […] woman was a figure to be pitied” (Abrams n. page). In Gittins’s view, only when one becomes a mother is she a woman since “bearing a child brings a dramatic change in status” (95). In other words, the ability to bear a child is even more powerful than marriage in helping a woman earn the social recognition of being a “real” woman (Gittins 95).

Traditionally, mothers are described as “anchors of shelter, warmth, love and nourishment” (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 677). They are also expected to be saintly and sacrificing towards their children with “constant attention day and night, seven days a week and 365 in the year” (Bowlby 67). Particularly, the motherly love mythology is considered “above reason; it is a holy passion, in which all others are absorbed and lost. It is a sacred flame on the altar of the heart, which is never quenched” (Halliday 157). This archetype of the benign and selfless mother that is devout until her last breath is exemplified by Ellen O’Hara in Gone with the Wind:

her mother had always been the same, her voice soft and sweet whether in praising or in reproving, her manner efficient and unruffled despite the daily emergencies of Gerald’s turbulent household, her spirit always calm and her back unbowed […] at other times her hands were occupied with Gerald’s ruffled shirts, the girls’ dresses or
garments for the slaves. [...] Ellen moved about the house superintending the cooking, the cleaning and the wholesale clothes-making for the plantation. (55)

Despite remaining domestic goddesses, since the 1920s, mothers have transformed from the Victorian elderly and old-fashioned model to the more “‘modern mother,’ a youthful, sexual being”, as a result of the consumer culture (Addison 63). Actress Doris Kenyon observes this new type of mother represented by Hollywood:

There are no mothers any more. That is . . . no mothers of the kind there used to be. Dear souls, with knitting-needles, scarfs about their shoulders and delicate inhibitions. There are certainly no more grandmothers. No “elders” as you call them. You cant [sic] expect the sensible modern girl to bend obeisant knee, rise from her chair and otherwise genuflect every time the modern mother enters the room. For that same mother looks as young as her daughter, frequently acts younger and spends most of her time having as good a time as she can manage to achieve. . . . I believe that a very fine comradeship between the generations, chiefly between mothers and daughters, is going to result from the attitude of this particular generation. Youth will meet youth. (qtd. in Service 25, 86)

Later during the 1970s and the 1990s, the motherhood myth “Supermom” emerged and reflected society’s attempt to “reconcile the dual roles of working mother while maintaining the patriarchal status quo” (Villani 118). It is a woman who does everything from work to “pay, keep the house” and “raise the kids” (Villani 118).

Due to the oppressive social stigmas surrounding non-angelic women, “cultural representations of bad mothers are often rendered problematic” (Seidel 8). As Chesser asserts, “[t]he degradation of motherhood is the degradation of society” (4). Specifically, mainstream media often diabolize the bad mother as a distortion of the traditional mother (Seidel 8). If a mother fails to sacrifice and dedicate everything to her children, she is
castigated for being narcissistic, and thus “does not fit into the ‘Good Mother’ persona”, Villani notes (117-8). Only when “their failures descend to the level of the criminal” do the struggles that mothers face when they have to devote all their time to their children attract attention from outsiders (Seidel 9). Moreover, owing to “a patriarchal ideology where women as mothers continue to be categorised, idealised and demonised, and where deviant mothers are understood as ‘monstrous’”, mothers are only portrayed as either “Madonnas or Medeas” in the media (Goc 149). For example, the snake-like descriptions of East of Eden’s Kate Albey who has attempted to kill her unborn children accentuate her satanic behavior: “when [Kate] swallowed, her tongue flicked around her lips […] the eyes were flat and the mouth with its small up-curve at the corners was carven” (Steinbeck 507, 509). Consequently, the representation of women in the media is problematized as “[a]nything in between these extremes holds little or no news value”; and “regular” mothers are almost excluded from the “media motherhood discourse” (Goc 160-1)

However, as we enter the millennium, the society progressively becomes a celebrant of individualism where everyone, regardless of gender and age, are encouraged to decide their own life path. Wifehood and motherhood remain important elements in women’s lives, yet they are reconstructing these duties “without giving up their self-identities” (Kohen 576). This is echoed in Glenn Close’s speech at the 76th Golden Globe Awards as the best actress for her role in The Wife, which emphasizes the importance of the family carers enjoying their lives:

women, we are nurturers, that’s what’s expected of us. We have our children, we have our husband, […], and we have our partners, whoever. But we have to find personal fulfillment. We have to follow our dreams. We have to say ‘I can do that, and I should be allowed to do that’. (n. page; emphasis added)
Correspondingly, the Netflix political drama series *House of Cards* (2013-2018) asserts its repudiation of the saintly mother paradigm. In the last episode, when the pregnant Claire Underwood, also the first female president of the United States, is accused of being vicious and thoughtless to plan a nuclear war, she responds: “I don’t believe motherhood automatically makes a woman a saint” (n. page).

Another belief that still persists in many cultures is that all women “need” to have babies and regardless of what those women accomplish in their life, “it amounts to little or nothing next to motherhood” (Agonito, 3). However, this is slowly changing. In recent cultural representations of women, motherhood is no longer portrayed as a must or a dream. For example, the movie *Roma* (2018) suggests that motherhood is never a woman’s only “mission” in life, and she is still welcomed and loved as a “real” woman even if she does not produce babies. In the politically unstable Mexico during the 1970s, Cleo, an indigenous maid, is disposed by her boyfriend and gives birth to a stillborn child. Later Cleo confesses to her boss that she does not want “the baby to be born”, to which her boss responds “we love you so, so much” (n. page).

In addition to parents, multiple fictional works centralize on children, especially the illegitimate ones. The theme of illegitimacy has been extensively explored in literature from Shakepears’s *Richard III* (1593) to Dickens’s *Oliver Twist* (1839) and Dorothy Allison’s *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992). According to Teichman, an illegitimate child is “one whose conception and birth did not take place according to the rules which, in its parents’ community, govern reproduction” (54). Due to their illegal and repressive status, the bastard child “always signifies some kind of societal or familial collapse or trauma” which foreshadows the “mental breakdowns which the bastards undergo as the result of cultural and community pressure” (Shutt 3). In other words, the birth of an illegitimate child is a result of familial crises that stems from larger societal failures, and their adulthood is bound to endure
further loathing from the merciless society that incites their illegitimate beginning. Therefore in literature, societal pressure becomes the main villain and every author has a distinctive way of creating a path for their bastard child to either overturn their fate or fall victim to it.

In sum, as Leo Tolstoy put it in his unparalleled novel *Anna Karenina* “[h]appy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way” (1), literary works about the family will become rather unappealing without any sensational secrets or crises among members. Therefore, it is natural for the contemporary media to show deviations away from the previous emphasis on portraying an “ideal, white nuclearized family” (Chambers 168) towards diverse, barbarous and even destructible family types.
3. Family Representations in Hosseini’s works

This section performs an analysis of different representations of family and its members in Khaled Hosseini’s *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *And the Mountains Echoed*. Particularly, family organizations and the role of men and women in families are closely examined. The first section will focus on representations of families that align with the traditional familial values, while the second section analyzes how the families in the two novels also demythologize long-established beliefs and reveal a more honest picture of contemporary families.

According to Visser, families in contemporary postcolonial literatures reflect not only how “the core values of the preceding generations and the ancestors are transmitted and lived” but also social changes (5). Complementing the traditional customs, “the political and economic factors that are influenced by the processes of decolonization, and increasingly by modern-day Western trends due to the influences of globalization and transculturalism” also influence the family organizations, Visser remarks (9). Thus, “the cultural heritage of the postcolonial nation is in disharmony with the pressures of modern-day Western society, sometimes reinforcing the image of the nuclear family, but also challenging and revaluating it” (Visser 9). The aim of this section is to demonstrate that although the represented families and their crises in the two texts are seemingly in line with those often observed in contemporary universal discourses, there is much defiance to the normative ideals. This can be explained by Ryn’s remark that “[u]nique particularity is potentially a manifestation of universality itself, a source of its richness, strength, and adaptability” (1).
3.1. Norm-complying Representations of Family

Most families in the two texts are structurally similar to the normative conventional ideals of family which, according to Murdock, is “a social group” that shares “common residence, economic cooperation and reproduction” (1). Furthermore, the family organization can be categorized into two most basic types: the nuclear family and the polygamous family (Murdock 1). The most prevalent family structure in the two novels is that of the nuclear family, consisting of parents and (a) child(ren). Moreover, Busch describes that an ideal American family should include “one man and one woman, two children, a house, a picket fence and a dog” (2–3). In And the Mountains Echoed, Abdullah’s family consists of him, his father, his stepmother, his sister Pari, and her dog Shuja (ATME 46). Nonetheless, A Thousand Splendid Suns also features polygamy as “a common thing” in both of its central families (ATSS 228). In particular, Mariam’s father Jalil “had three wives and nine children, nine legitimate children” while she is an illegitimate one, a harami (ATSS 6). Later on, Mariam also becomes the first wife in Rasheed’s polygamous family, with Laila being the second one.

In addition bearing similarities in size and structure to normative Western family ideals, the families represented in the two novels further consolidate the Western belief that family is what everyone should aim for as it is “the ultimate home”, “the haven in hard times”, and on top of all, “a dream” (Agonito 1, 9). In details, this notion of marriage as an ultimate goal in one’s life is often part of the enculturation and influence of parents on daughters. In A Thousand Splendid Suns, to discard Mariam from the house, her father and his wives arrange a marriage for her. When Mariam expresses her opposition, they reassure her that she “might not get another opportunity this good” (ATSS 52; emphasis original). This
resembles what *Little Women*’s Mrs March suggests to her daughters: “to be loved and chosen by a good man is the best and sweetest thing which can happen to a woman” (Alcott 134). As Rasheed who is “sixty or more” sees it, he is “downright charitable” to offer marrying Laila who is fourteen for he would give her: “[a] home and a husband. These days, times being what they are, a woman needs a husband. […] all the widows sleeping on the streets? They would kill for this chance” (*ATSS* 229). As for Laila, when Tariq finally proposes to her, she becomes emotionally fragile and asks herself: “How long had she waited to her those words from him? How many times had she *dreamed* them uttered” (*ATSS* 195; emphasis added). Marriage or having a family is also perceived as a must for everyone when they reach “the prime” (*ATME* 87). In the novel, Nabi — Abdullah and Pari’s uncle — is constantly questioned and urged to find himself a wife, not only by his sisters but also by his parents (66).

Notwithstanding, love is not deemed an important element in marriage. For instance, it is clearly seen from the outside that Nila and Suleiman’s marriage “[is] an unhappy one. Rarely […] a tender look pass between the couple or […] an affectionate word uttered. They are two people occupying the same house whose paths rarely seemed to intersect at all” (*ATME* 90). The unhappy marriage, in this case, is “an escape from even greater unhappiness” for both (*ATME* 98). As for others, especially women, marriage is an assurance that guarantees financial security and life stability. In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Mariam has an “opportunity this good” when marrying Rasheed because “he has a home and a job” which is “all that *really* matters” (*ATSS* 52; emphasis mine). In Parwana’s case, love can start from one side first as her sister suggests:

“Then marry Saboor. Look after his children. Have your own.”

“He loved you. He doesn’t love me.”

“He will, given time.” (*ATME* 75)
Another type of family called blended is also present in both novels. According to Park, struggles created by a broken family can be resolved through remarriages which form a “blended” family (111). However, the “blended” family generates another distressing obstacle, namely “feelings of divided loyalties and belonging among stepparents, stepchildren and step-siblings” (Park 111). Even at a young age, Abdullah understands that “[t]hey weren’t [Parwana]’s children, he and Pari. Most people loved their own. It couldn’t be helped that he and his sister didn’t belong to her. They were another woman’s leftovers” (ATME 24). Consequently, he comes to a bitter conclusion that Parwana can never replace his mother nor he can be her son: “[i]f one night their house caught fire, Abdullah knew without doubt which child Parwana would grab rushing out. She would not think twice” (ATME 24). On the other hand, Laila’s blended family in _A Thousand Splendid Suns_ seems to be in harmony despite the initial obstacles. It is suggested at the end of the story that Zalmai is slowly accepting his stepfather Tariq by leaning his head over Tariq’s shoulder (ATSS 413).

Forming a family is not an easy task, yet maintaining it seems to be more challenging. Interestingly, both novels start with parents and children separation scene, which aligns with the perspective outlined by Weinstein that it is a popular plot mechanism for fiction (26). At the beginning of _A Thousand Splendid Suns_, Mariam excitedly embarks on a lone journey to visit her father at his place, only to get rejected and find her mother hang herself upon returning home. This separation has changed Mariam’s life forever, forcing her to marry Rasheed, endure him, kill him and in the end, be killed by the Taliban. In _And the Mountains Echoed_, Pari is separated from her family, especially from her dearest brother Abdullah, and sold to a wealthier family by her father at the age of four. The narration then leads the audience through Pari’s and Abdullah’s phases of life and ends with their reunion fifty eight years later. Unfortunately, due to dementia, Abdullah is unable to recognize his sister yet his daughter, also named Pari, immediately bonds with her aunt.
Parent and children relationship is often regarded as the most powerful bond yet illegitimate children are not included. *A Thousand Splendid Suns* features the abhorred illegitimate child Mariam who bears certain resemblance to the paradigmatic “imp of evil, emblem and product of sin” as Pearl is characterized in *The Scarlet Letter* (Hawthorne 85). They are the incarnation of a life steeped in misery and abhorrence. Ever since birth, Mariam is painfully cursed and reminded of her status by her own mother: “[y]ou are a little clumsy harami. [...] An heirloom-breaking, clumsy little harami. [...] like an insect, like the scurrying cockroaches” (*ATSS* 4). Eventually, she becomes attuned to her predetermined life path which means quiet endurance and the deprivation of common “things other people had, things such as love, family, home, acceptance” (*ATSS* 4, 20). Education, therefore, becomes even more unimaginable for Mariam for it will only grant her more “rejection and heartache” (*ATSS* 21). Throughout her life, Mariam suffers more oppression and hatred from her father, his family, and her husband, and in the end is murdered by the Taliban. Amidst the war, the miseries, the atrocities imposed by her husband and the society, Mariam, in her last moments of life, chooses not to become a resentful victim but a gracious mother:

She thought of her entry into this world, the harami child of a lowly villager, an intended thing, a pitiable, a regrettable accident. A weed. And yet she was leaving the world as a woman who had loved and been loved back. She was leaving it as a friend, a companion, a guardian. A mother. A person of consequence at last. No. It was not so bad, Mariam thought, that she should die this way. Not so bad. This was a legitimate end to a life of illegitimate beginnings. (*ATSS* 396; emphasis original)

To a harami like Mariam, the malevolent society has made life more difficult and agonizing than death.

In the two novels, not only children are discriminated due to their illegitimacy but also gender because “[I]ike a compass needle that points north, a man’s accusing finger
always finds a woman” (ATME 7). In A Thousand Splendid Suns, whenever Rasheed learns that his wives are pregnant, he instantly assumes that the baby will be a boy with high hope:

“I think it’s a boy. Yes. A boy.” (ATSS 92)

“It’s going to be a big boy. […] Like his father.” (ATSS 247)

Therefore, when Laila gives birth to a girl Aziza, her “sin is even less forgivable” than not giving birth to any child (ATSS 268). Aziza, correspondingly, instantly becomes a “thing” or a “warlord” whose slightest acts disgust Rasheed (ATSS 252). To him, only boys can carry the family’s name, thus, a daughter means nothing but more burdens and shame. This explains why when the family faces hunger, Rasheed decides to dispose of Aziza at an orphanage so that they have more money to take care of Zalmai — his son. This bears certain resemblance to England’s Henry VIII and his annulment of the marriage with Catherine of Aragon for she did not give birth to a son — the heir to the throne. In And the Mountains Echoed, Nila’s father condemns her for “damage[ing] his family name beyond repair” (ATME 229). He expects Nila to be submissive, and when she refuses to do so, he uses violence and isolation to silence her (ATME 227).

Softer kinds of oppression against daughters are manifested in Laila’s mother’s and Parii II’s father’s treatment of their daughters. Contrary to Laila’s father’s being attentive and caring, her mother has “already given away all [her] love” to her deceased sons, thus neglects, and even ignores Laila. She often forgets to pick Laila up from school and only unenthusiastically performs “pretending” conversations with her (ATSS 127, 131). This leads to Laila achingly questions if her mother is so devastated after her brothers’ deaths why she “even bothered having her” (ATSS 126). In her mother’s mind, Laila presence is completely overshadowed by her brothers’ death. On the other hand, in And the Mountains Echoed, Parii II has “always been contained, hemmed in, by the hard, unyielding confines of the existence” that her overprotective father establishes since her childhood (ATME 428). Expected to be
“the daughter who has heroically forgone some glittering life of ease and privilege”, Pari II is pressured to painfully abandon art school and her husband-to-be to take care of her ailing parents and their business which she detests (ATME 392). In this case, it is her father’s overwhelming love and fear of “losing” his daughter that mightily oppresses Pari II (ATME 403).

Most fathers and mothers in the two novels mirror typical American images. According to Tincknell, men traditionally appear in the media as breadwinners and disciplinarians of the family (35). In A Thousand Splendid Suns, Rasheed is a shoemaker who works everyday so that “he will have no trouble providing for” his wives while they are taking care of the household (ATSS 51). Similarly, throughout the story, Abdullah and Pari’s father cultivates an image of the dedicated father who works hard like “a mule” to take care of his own family and who would deny any help from an outsider even that is his brother-in-law (ATME 29). As the head of the family, Saboor has “misbegotten and unshakable” pride that refuses to appear indigent in front of others, and

he died doing just that, when he was not yet forty, collapsing one day while he was out harvesting a field of sugar beets somewhere near Baghlan […] he died with the beet hook still in his blistered, bleeding hands. (ATME 110)

Not only hard-working, Saboor is also affectionate towards his children, occasionally telling them tales that “[unmask] a capacity for imagination and dream” (34). Caring and loving as he is, Saboor made an unthinkable decision to sell his dearest daughter Pari to an affluent yet childless couple in order to protect her from the ruthless winter and famine that once took his son. This is Saboor’s peculiar way of loving his child, by letting her go and giving her a better life, just as the man in one of the tales he tells his children:

If he took him home, what sort of life awaited Quais […]? The hard life of a peasant at best […]. Could you forgive yourself, then, Baba Ayub asked himself, knowing
that you plucked him, for your own selfish reasons, from a life of luxury and opportunity? \textit{(ATME 13)}

On this basis, Saboor in \textit{And the Mountains Echoed} seems to possess both Dr. May’s honorable qualities and Cyrus Trask’s paradoxical manifestation of the love for his children.

Among multiple male characters in \textit{A Thousand Splendid Suns}, Jalil, Mariam’s father appears to be actively involved in the “public sphere” where “politics, history and economics are supposedly made” (Tincknell 2). Because of his concern of “losing face” and “staining so-called good name”, Jalil does not really acknowledge the illegitimate Mariam as his daughter for years, and then indirectly causes the death of her mother \textit{(ATSS 433)}. Furthermore, Jalil forcing Mariam to marry Rasheed has ultimately changed her course of life, which leads to her being executed by the Taliban in the end \textit{(ATSS 433)}. Nonetheless, during his final days of life, Jalil becomes remorseful of for exchanging the love of his daughter for reputation and societal respect:

\textit{Regret … When it comes to you, Mariam jo, I have oceans of it. I regret that I did not see you the day you came to Herat. I regret that I did not open the door and take you in. I regret that I did not make you a daughter to me, that I let you live in that place for all those years. And for what? Fear of losing face? Of staining my so-called good name? How little those things matter to me now after all the loss, all the terrible things I have seen in this cursed war. […] Now all I can do is say that you were a good daughter, Mariam jo, and that I never deserved you.} \textit{(ATSS 433; emphasis original)}

Unfortunately, those words do not find their way to Mariam. However, through Jalil, Hosseini once again emphasizes the incalculable preciousness of family— the private sphere over everything else in the world— the public sphere, and implies that those who choose to discard their family will be tortured by repentance all their lives.

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“Hegemonic masculinity”, as defined by Connell, is “the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (77). This is manifested in Rasheed’s abusive behavior, including shoving the barrel of his gun into his wives’ mouth or forcing them to chew pebbles when his orders are not properly executed (ATSS 321). More notably, he claims control over their faces and obliges them to wear burqa because in the Afghan society where Rasheed comes from, “a woman’s face is her husband’s business only” (75). However, these horrific acts markedly reveal his insecurities, as de Beauvoir suggests: “no one is more arrogant toward women, more aggressive or more disdainful, than the man who is anxious about his virility” (34).

For a long time, “[th]e family was increasingly represented as the primary ideological center of women’s lives”, as Tincknell observes (12). The mothers represented in A Thousand Splendid Suns and And the Mountains Echoed bear similarities to the popular image of mother as it has been established in the Western society. Since the beginning of humanity, being a mother has been considered the most primitive yet principal duty and a status-defining role of women. In other words, motherhood is a woman’s ultimate certification of identity and “greatest happiness” (ATSS 100). In A Thousand Splendid Suns, Mariam becomes devastated after multiple miscarriages and is jealous of other women’s “wealth of children” because “some had seven or eight and didn’t understand how fortunate they were, how blessed that their children and flourished in their wombs, lived to squirm in their arms and take the milk from their breasts” (ATSS 98-9). Consequently, she is treated as less of a woman and more of an animal—a “house cat” by her husband (ATSS 104).

Furthermore, mothers are willing to experience extreme pain in order to give birth to their offspring. Despite the dearth of anesthetic, Laila asks the doctor to cut her open and save the baby (ATSS 311). In Nana’s account, she is forced to give birth to Mariam alone while
Jalil is “horseback riding with his friends” (ATSS 11). Without any support, food, water or sleep, Nana lies on the cold floor for two days until Mariam comes out, and then cuts the cord between them herself with a knife. More tragically, in *And the Mountains Echoed*, Pari’s biological mother bleeds “to death” giving birth to her (ATME 22). Apart from giving birth, another essential responsibility that most women in the novels perform is child rearing. According to Villani, “[a]ll women with children work hard every single day of their lives” and “[a]ll mothers are working moms” (171). Unlike fathers whose “role as playmates was confined to specific times”, mothers are expected to nurse their children all the time (Tincknell, 31). In other words, “[m]om never gets a day off” (Villani 171). When she was a child, “Pari consumed Nila’s time” with “[l]essons, games, naps, walks, more games” (ATME 114). Not only do mothers work for the children but they are also dependent on their children. Tincknell has noted that “[m]others are offered as physically fragile and emotionally dependent on their children” (25). “Most days, Laila was deprived of her son”, and when Zalmai is more affectionate towards his father, Laila was seen deeply hurt (ATSS 316-7).

In the patriarchal society, not only are women expected to be “Good Mother” but they also have to fulfill the discriminatory roles of “Loyal Wife”, “Sex Kitten” and “Old Maid” (Villani, 8). Nonetheless, Mariam, in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, perfectly fulfills all of these roles, and still suffers. Despite Rasheed’s abominable and womanizing manners, tricking Laila into marrying him after eighteen years living with Mariam, Mariam still chooses to stay with him and obediently follow his orders. However, she can never please him and is always a target of his heinous abuse:

Had she been a deceitful wife? She asked herself. A complacent wife? A dishonorable woman? Discreditable? Vulgar? What harmful thing had she willfully done to this man to warrant his malice, his continual assaults, the relish with which he tormented
her? Had she not looked after him when he was ill? Fed him, and his friends, cleaned up after him dutifully?

Had she not given this man her youth?

Had she ever justly deserved his meanness? \(ATSS\ 372\)

In the first days of their arranged marriage, despite Mariam’s terror, Rasheed still ignores her pleading and forces himself on her:

That night, Rasheed visited her room […] Mariam began shivering […] His hand was on her right breast now, squeezing it hard […] Her own hands clenched the sheets in fistfuls. He rolled on top of her, wriggled and shifted, and she let out a whimper. Mariam closed her eyes, gritted her teeth. The pain was sudden and astonishing. Her eyes sprang open. She sucked air through her teeth and bit on the knuckle of her thumb. She slung her free arm over Rasheed’s back and her fingers dug at his shirt […] Stared, wide-eyed […] Smelled of tobacco […] Leaving her to wait out the pain down below. \(82\)

Similar to Mariam, Laila is traumatized by Rasheed violently defiling her during their wedding night: “[s]he was shaking even before his fingers worked her shirt buttons, tugged at the drawstring of her trousers. He was agitated” \(233\).

Owing to the excessive amount of work inside the house, women in the novels are naturally excluded from the public sphere. Mariam obediently lets her husband “pass on to her things he had heard on the streets, like how the American president Richard Nixon had resigned over a scandal” and says nothing as she “had never heard of Nixon, or the scandal that forced him to resign” \(ATSS\ 68\). Furthermore, women are habitually looked down by men and pondered as “intellectually inferior” \(Tincknell\ 17\). For example, when there was a demonstration in the neighborhood against the murder of a communist, Mariam asks her husband: “What’s a communist?”, “Who’s Karl Marxist?”, and “These communists, what is
it that they believe?” (*ATSS* 104). Exasperated by his wife’s lack of knowledge, Rasheed excoriates her: “You know nothing, do you? You’re like a child. Your brain is empty. There is no information in it” (*ATSS* 104).

Both *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *And the Mountains Echoed* can be considered as family sagas. As explained by Tincknell, the family saga focuses on “family life, struggles over inheritance and the complexities of kinship relations”, and what usually makes a family saga popular is the “cyclical repetition of narrative incident, suggesting continuity through its focus on births, marriages and deaths” (41). On the one hand, a saga is a matter of the continuing cycle of birth, reproduction and death, in which the feminine arena of the family and familialism are the “real stuff”; on the other, the past becomes a pageant of political and social events in which “history” takes place wholly outside the domestic realm (Tincknell 41). Thus, it can be said that the saga is an effective way to present women’s struggles and misery, and to show how they are naturally ostracized from the public sphere.

### 3.2. Norm-defying Family Representations

In the previous section, the universality of the represented families in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *And the Mountains Echoed* was discussed. Nonetheless, there are moments in the two texts where the families resist popular family ideals because postcolonial literature “sets out in one way or another to resist colonial perspectives”, as Boehmer describes (3). Moreover, “[a]ny effort to establish universality as transcendent cultural norms seems to be impossible” (Butler et al. 20). Undeniably, culture is an essential marrow in the analysis of contemporary families. According to Nyman, “the recent trend both post-colonial literary studies and transnational American Studies share is that emphasis is put on the mobility of people, ideas and cultures, suggesting that culture is an ongoing and dynamic process rather
than a static product” (13). Therefore, the two novels provide examples of multiple alternative types of families that are unsettled and do not conform to well-established ideals.

Although the family is the fundamental institution of a society and provide the concept of home for everybody, there are multiple characters in the novels who are not interested in having a family. Mariam protests against marrying Rasheed: “I don’t want this. Don’t make me” despite him being viewed as a valuable opportunity for her (ATSS 52). In And the Mountains Echoed, Mr Wahdati has never possessed “a sliver of paternal instinct” and he chooses to marry Nila on account of her “inability to bear children” (ATME 111). Similarly, Nabi has a different view on marriage and family from others. He realized that he “already had what people sought in marriage. [He] had comfort, and companionship, and a home where [he] was always welcomed, loved and needed” by taking care of his master, and that he “ha[s] never felt a tug of paternal impulse” (ATME 132).

More tragically, in both novels, the characters decide to run away from their family hoping to find safety and happiness elsewhere. With Laila’s encouragement, Mariam’s realization of her long life full of intolerable grief inflames her desire to escape and wish for “kinder years” (ATSS 272). Together, they plan a perilous trip to Pakistan knowing the dire consequences they would face if they are caught. Despite the prospect of dreadful punishment, both Laila and Mariam are excited about fleeing their home and husband that they are willing to risk it all. The family, in this case, is the source of extreme terror. In And the Mountains Echoed, after Pari’s exit, Abdullah decides to walk away from his father and his stepmother as far as he can for “[t]here was nothing left for him [there]. He had no home [there] (ATME 54). To Abdullah, family means his only sister, and in order to find her, he is willing to “walk as far […] as his feet would take him” (ATME 54).

Instead of biological affiliation, multiple families in the novels are formed on chosen emotional attachments, which can be read by the perspective outlined by David H. J. Morgan
that contemporary families are more about ‘doing’ than ‘being’ (qtd. in Finch 66). In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Mariam initially despises Laila for being “a thieving whore”: “I have no use for your company. I don’t want it. What I want is to be alone. You will leave me be, and I will return the favor” (*ATSS* 248, 239). However, as they spend more time together tolerating Rasheed’s abuse, Mariam eventually forms a close-knit relationship and alliance with Laila and considers herself Laila’s mother because “[e]verything I’d ever wished for as a little girl you’ve already given me. You and your children have made me so very happy” (*ATSS* 384). She also unhesitatingly admits to be Laila’s mother when the doctor asks (*ATSS* 309). More notably, Mariam is willing to sacrifice herself and kills her husband for Laila’s sake. In this case, from an estranged person, Mariam becomes a manifestation of a devoted “mother” who is willing to die in exchange for her child’s safety (*ATSS* 396). In cinema, a similar mother-daughter relationship formed between a woman and a neighbor girl, who is abused by her birth parents, is recently represented in Hirokazu Kore-edo’s film *Shoplifters* (2018). The movie affirms the fortitude of families built on choice and explicitly questions the traditional idea of blood-affiliated families, for example, by asking whether “[g]iving birth automatically makes you a mother?” (n. page)

In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, not only is a mother-and-daughter relationship formed through love but also a father-and-son one. At the end of the novel, despite Zalmai’s initial hatred and his father being Tariq’s enemy, Tariq still loves and takes care of his stepson like his own biological child:

That night, Zalmai wakes up coughing. Before Laila can move, Tariq swings his legs over the side of the bed. He straps on his prosthesis and walks over to Zalmai, lifts him up into his arms. From the bed, Laila watches Tariq’s shape moving back and forth in the darkness. She sees the outline of Zalmai’s head on his shoulder, the knot of his hands at Tariq’s neck, his small feet bouncing by Tariq’s hip. When Tariq
comes back to bed, neither of them says anything. […] Tariq’s cheeks are wet. (ATSS 413)

As in *And the Mountains Echoed*, a chosen relationship is formed by adoption. Pari was given for adoption due to “a calculated personal decision” by her father (Park 64). “It had to be her. I am sorry, Abdullah. She had to be the one. The finger cut, to save the hand” (ATME 52). Eventually, her adoptive parents become her family — “Nila became ‘Maman’, and Mr. Wahdati ‘Papa’” (112). Furthermore, “Pari’s entrance” has made “for the first time the Wahdati household resemble a proper family” (113). In contrast to Pari being welcomed by the Wahdatis, Azia is treated with disgust by her purported father on account of her gender. This can be explained by Chambers’s notion that race and gender can be the root of the “family-values crisis” (141). Particularly, Mariam who suffers multiple miscarriages tells Laila bitterly: “[a]nd you gave him a daughter. So, you see, your sin is even less forgivable than mine” (ATSS 265; emphasis added).

In contemporary society, the nuclear family is no longer the norm compared to the great number of “households, relationships and domestic arrangements that do not conform to a hetero-normative ideal” (Tincknell 3). In particular, Mr. Wahdati is depicted as a “decent man” who has a nice family with his wife Nila and his adopted daughter Pari. This family seems to be a reflect a perfect American nuclear family living in harmony. However, it is later revealed by Nila that Suleiman Wahdati is a homosexual and in love with his chauffeur Nabi (ATSS 234). In this case, masculinity becomes “a construct specific to historical time and place. They are categories continually being forged, contested, reworked and reaffirmed in social institutions and practices as well as a range of ideologies” (Davidoff and Hall 29). Surprised as he is when he finds out, Nabi neither pathologizes nor abandons Suleiman for the same-sex attraction; instead he chooses to stay with Suleiman as a companion and refuses to “give one damn what the neighbors think or say” (ATME 126). Through these two
characters, Hosseini has foregrounded the futility of viewing love and familial construct based only on what is socially accepted by the emphasis on personal instincts and choices.

As Hall puts it, “[m]embers of the same culture must share sets of concepts, images and ideas which enable them to think and feel about the world, and thus to interpret the world, in roughly similar ways” (“The Work of Representation” 4). Nila, on the other hand, runs away from her homeland with her daughter Pari regardless of a promised comfortable life with a house and her “husband’s wealth” because:

I didn’t want her turned, against both her will and nature, into one of those diligent, sad women who are bent on a lifelong course of quiet servitude, forever in fear of showing, saying, or doing the wrong thing. Women who are admired by some in the West — here in France, for instance — turned to heroines for their hard lives, admired from a distance by those who couldn’t bear even one day walking in their shoes. Women who see their desires doused and their dreams renounced, and yet — and this is the worst of it, Monsieur Boustouler — if you meet them, they smile and they pretend they have no misgivings at all. As though they lead enviable lives. But you look closely and you see the helpless look, the desperation, and how it belies all their show of good humor. It is quite pathetic, Monsieur Boustouler. I did not want this for my daughter. (ATME 198)

Families and individuals’ identities in the two novels are not fixed but rather fluid and change through time and space. This is because they are under the influence of “a continual process of verification that takes place over the course of an individual’s life through her interaction with the society she lives in”, as Moya argues (41). In And the Mountains Echoed, Pari no longer feels the need to go back to her homeland and find out what happened in her childhood that changed the course of her life because of her current situation in Paris, with her husband and children. In other words, because Pari is forming a new identity, a new home
and a new family of her own, she “no longer feels the piercing urge to search for answers and roots” \(\text{ATME} \ 244\). Another transformation can be noticed in Nila. At first, it is Nila who wants to have a child of her own and adopts Pari as a daughter, but as time passes by, when the two of them are in Paris, and Pari turns into a young woman, Nila bitterly comes to a conclusion that “children are never everything you’d hoped for” \(\text{ATME} \ 198\).

Contrary to the popular authoritative male paradigm that often occupies the public sphere, Nila’s husband Suleiman Wahdati and Laila’s father Babi in the two texts frequently display passivity and submission towards their female partners. In \textit{And the Mountains Echoed}, Suleiman appears to be “the rare breed of man” who prefers art and solitude over social interactions \(\text{ATME} \ 83\). He does not know how to drive a car; and always lets his wife decide on things, including adopting a daughter. Mr. Wahdati spends most of his time “reading in his upstairs study, doing his sketches” \(\text{ATME} \ 91\); and during the parties that his wife organizes, he “made limited effort to engage his guests. […] mostly he occupies a corner, swirling a glass of soda, smiling a courteous, closemouthed smile when someone talked to him” \(\text{ATME} \ 106\). Equivalently, Laila’s father Babi, as described by her friends, is “a sissy” and always looks “shaken, reduced” and “sheepish” next to his “indomitable” wife \(\text{ATSS} \ 126, \ 117, \ 116\). Babi spends too much time “burrowing” into books that even the simplest chore troubles him:

> If Laila needed the lid of a candy jar forced open, she had to go to Mammy, which felt like a betrayal. Ordinary tools befuddled Babi. On his watch, squeaky door hinges never got oiled. Ceiling went on leaking after he plugged them. Mold thrived defiantly in kitchen cabinets. \(\text{ATSS} \ 117\)

Moreover, it is later revealed that Laila’s mother proposes to him, which is a rare scene in Afghanistan at the time. Nonetheless, Babi is the most “wise and righteous” figure (Chevalier
and Gheerbrant 372) in the story who progressively understands the triviality of patriarchy and the importance of education for his daughter:

*Marriage can wait, education cannot. [...] You can be anything you want, Laila. [...] when this war is over, Afghanistan is going to need you as much as its men, maybe even more. Because a society has no chance of success if its women are uneducated, Laila. No chance.* (ATSS 123; emphasis original)

Hosseini’s child characters are also paradoxical and problematize the emblematic image of the “[r]omantic child” (Tincknell 79). As the novels show, these children can commit inimical and even catastrophic acts against their beloved ones. In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, it is Mariam who indirectly causes her mother suicide by running away from home to her father’s place. Nonetheless, her action can be justified because if she knew her mother would kill herself, Mariam would not “have left her” (ATSS 48). On the other hand, Parwana in *And the Mountains Echoed* has planned her act:

While her sister was facing away, searching her pocket, Parwana planted the heels of her hands on the branch, lifted her bottom, and let it drop. The branch shook. Masooma gasped and lost her balance. Her arms flailed wildly. She tipped forward. Parwana watched her own hands move. What they did was not really push, but there was contact between Masooma’s back and the pads of Parwana’s fingertips and there was a brief moment of subtle shoving. (ATME 73)

Although Parwana immediately regrets her decision and spends years taking care of her paralyzed twin sister, it is still her initial intention to hurt Masooma. In the end, she also leaves Parwana alone in the wood to pursue a new life by marrying Saboor. Another child who is seen as demonic is Nila. During her childhood, Nila and her father becomes “natural opponents” because of her presumably poor character (ATME 226). Particularly, Nila is told that she humiliates her father by letting herself “ridden all over town” (ATME 88). Moreover,
she talks back to him and even writes “long, scandalous poems dripping with adolescent passion” (*ATME* 227). Correspondingly, Nila’s adopted child Pari is seen as her disappointment for being “breathtakingly thoughtless” (*ATME* 235). Specifically, Pari has a secret relationship with her mother’s boyfriend and becomes her rival. In short, Mariam, Parwana, Nila and Pari have constructed different ideas of children in the family from the traditionally perceived “romantic child”.

In opposition to the image of obedient stay-at-home wives in *A Thousand Splendid Suns, And the Mountains Echoed* highlights several women whose place is not confined within the house. As Tincknell puts it, “[t]he idea of housewives in the kitchen, constantly planning, preparing and eventually producing an endless array of meals” is replaced by the prospect that these women also excel academically and professionally in the public sphere (21). Nila is narrated as a very accomplished poet whose writing power and refinement is “undeniable” (*ATME* 239). Her stepdaughter Pari is highly acclaimed among scholars for “[s]he will present a paper she has coauthored on the use of modular forms outside of number theory, specifically in topology and theoretical” (*ATME* 244). Pari also becomes the youngest professor and “one of only two women” at a prestigious university in Paris (*ATME* 247). As for Laila, after the end of the turmoil in Afghanistan, she persuades her husband to leave behind a life of comfort in Pakistan to return home and help rebuild the ravaged country (*ATSS* 416). Refusing to be “wasteful”, Laila renovates the orphanage where her daughter used to live and becomes a school teacher (*ATSS* 415, 439). These female characters who are not “intellectually inferior” (Tincknell 17) and their social achievements remind us of Sarah Wapshot in *The Wapshot Chronicle*, a classic novel about the post-war life of an American family:

It was she who had organized a committee to raise money for a new parish house for Christ Church. […] The new high school on the hill, the new firehouse, the new
traffic lights, the war memorial – yes, yes – even the clean public toilets in the railroad station by the river were the fruit of Mrs. Wapshot's genius. She must have been gratified as she traveled through the square. (5)

Both of Hosseini’s novels also challenge the idea of the “Loyal Wife”. Since a teenage girl, Laila has been in love with Tariq, and that never changes even after her forced marriage with Rasheed. Despite being dutiful and compliant, Laila lies to her husband about the illegitimate daughter and is willing to run away with Tariq when they meet again (ATSS 362). Laila, in this case, is loyal to her lover but unfaithful to her husband. Furthermore, for over twenty years of her youth, Mariam has been tolerant to all of her husband’s “scorn, his ridicule, his insults, his walking past her like she was nothing but a house cat” (ATSS 104; emphasis added). Notwithstanding, when her daughter’s life is threatened, Mariam is cornered by her husband’s utmost malevolence and kills him:

[...]

The scene marks the milestone of Mariam’s first decision without any control from her husband and other men, which “cleverly shows feminism and activism” (Singh 92). In And the Mountains Echoed, Nila decides to run away from “the mess that her husband had become” after his stroke by moving to Paris with their adopted daughter Pari rather than taking care of him (ATME 119).

The traditional role of women as mothers is also mediated and reconciled in the novels. Owing to the desire for a life “rich with achievement, grace respect”, Madeleine “calmly [draws] the map of her future and neatly excluding her burdensome daughter from its border. And she succeeded spectacularly, at least according to this obituary and its clipped
account of a mannered life” (ATME 358-9). In this case, she is not at all emotionally susceptible to her child. Correspondingly, Nila views her daughter and motherhood as her “punishment” which contradicts the usual representation of motherhood as a “mission” for women (Agonito 9). As for Pari, upon hearing her first child Isabelle potentially has lymphoma, she “cannot think of a more reckless, irrational thing than choosing to become a parent” (ATME 245). At that moment, Pari concedes that being a mother is a stupid decision because it exposes her to “a lifetime full of worry and anguish”; and she despises her daughter for “making her suffer” (ATME 245). These female characters further consolidate Seidel’s statement that “[m]arriage and motherhood are no longer compulsory” in the contemporary society (8).

As both a mother and a wife, Nila’s stylish appearance and rebellious acts fit the image of flappers in the Roaring Twenties. She continuously organizes parties where men and women can mingle, smoke, drink and listen to jazz (ATME 106). Unlike most women in her country and time, Nila dresses in a way that “showed the entire lengths of [her] arms and a good deal of [her] legs” (ATME 107). Her youthful beauty is appreciated by her daughter who is only twenty years younger: “[h]er long dark hair, her full chest, her startling eyes, and a face that glowed with the intimidating sheen of classic regal features” (ATME 204). Nila also possesses a great love for jazz and is able to discuss the topic enthusiastically from “Bud Powell, Sonny Stitt, Dizzy Gillespie” to how “she liked more the West Coast styles of Chet Baker and Miles Davis” (ATME 203). Although the portrayal of the youthful, modern and educated Nila fits the social contexts of the metropolitan Kabul of the 1950s, Hosseini seems to embellish Nila’s rebellion as her “outward expressions of female desire (both poetic and otherwise) remain somewhat controversial in the story—even in an era that was, historically, a progressive one in Kabul” (Fetters n. page).
Mothers in the two texts also affirm the problem with representing motherhood as multiple characters cannot be seen as either Madonnas or Medeas. Parwana, as a stepmother, has shown obvious biased love for her own biological son and been harsh towards her stepchildren. Nonetheless, Abdullah admits that Parwana does not receive any joy from beating him, and also understands that there are moments when she is caring and affectionate towards him and his sister: “[t]here was the time she had sewn Pari a silver-and-green dress from a roll of fabric Father had brought from Kabul” (*ATME* 24). However, Laila’s situation in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is much harder to justify. Since the beginning, Laila has proven to be a dedicated mother and caretaker who risks her own life to give birth to her son—Zalmai. At the same time, Laila was involved in the murder of Zalmai’s father and the disposal of his body. To make the matter worse,

at night, Laila holds Zalmai against her chest and recites the abaloo prayers with him. When he asks, she tells him the lie again, tells him his Baba jan has gone away and she doesn’t know when he would come back. She abhors this task, abhors herself for lying like this to a child. (*ATSS* 405)

Until the end of the story, it is unclear that Laila will ever be able to tell Zalmai the truth about his father and what happened to him.

Through the stories of pretentious marriages, lies, familial oppression and jealousy in *A Thousands Splendid Suns* and *And the Mountains Echoed*, Hosseini has provided harsh uncomplimentary insights into the nature of family life. Nonetheless, as Hansen and Garey point out, interests and positions vary by genders and generations within a family, thus, conflicts among its members are bound to happen (xviii), and what matters most is how this friction is resolved.
4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the represented families in Hosseini’s *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *And the Mountains Echoed* have both problematized and reinforced the Western family ideals because “no definition of family fits the reality of all cultural groups” (Gatzouras 64). Both novels offer a wide range of family settings from the traditional nuclear family, polygamous family, single-parent family, to the family formed on choice. In this way, Hosseini has emphasized that family is forged more on free will than kinship, with love being the most important factor in sustaining it. In addition, crisis in the family is presented as inescapable due to its members’ different interests, needs and perspectives. Therefore, Hosseini put less emphasis on how conflicts happen but rather the characters’ willingness to resolve these conflicts.

During the narratives, the family is often portrayed as the root of anguish and miseries, which is utterly opposite to the frequently mentioned “haven in hard times” in public discourse (Agonito 1). From a girl with a bright future, Masooma abruptly becomes a life-long sufferer of disability, and in the end, kills herself all because of her twin sister’s covetous jealousy (*ATME*). The close-knit siblings Abdullah and Pari are deliberately separated by their father, turning their whole lives into a long quest for each other. In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Mariam and Laila’s bodies are presented as their husband’s property that is always kept under surveillance and susceptible to violent animosity.

However, the endings of both *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *And the Mountains Echoed* present the joyful family gathering which everyone has worked so hard to achieve, thus, paying obeisance to it as one’s absolute aspiration in life. Simple as it might sound, Laila’s family’s nightly ritual is a naming game for her unborn baby, signifying the “innocence and sanctity” suggested by Chambers (75). Correspondingly, for Pari, Abdullah is her harbor and spending time with him is a transcendent bliss because she finds herself
“engulfed in a wave of absolute calm. […], untroubled, everything clear, and radiant, and all at once” (*ATME* 444). In Jalil’s case, it is his ultimate wish before dying to be united with his daughter Mariam although that fails to happen in the end

I dare allow myself the hope that […] you might find it in your heart to come and see your father. That you will knock on my door one more time and give me the chance to […] take you in my arms, my daughter, as I should have all those years ago. It is a hope as weak as my heart. This I know. But I will be waiting. […] I will be hoping. (*ATSS* 434)

Mariam, after years being denied because of her illegitimate status, becomes the only person that can re-inject purpose to Jalil’s last days of life.

Women in *And the Mountains Echoed* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* are resilient beings. Every female character in both novels is portrayed as having indomitable strength and persistence. As opposed to Tariq’s contentment of the peaceful life in Pakistan, Laila grieves for abandoning her country during its hardest time. Consequently, she insists on coming back to Afghanistan with a vision to rebuild her savaged home notwithstanding the awaiting dangers, confirming her father’s wise words that women might be of more help for their country than men. Furthermore, by carefully plan their escape from Rasheed, Laila and Mariam showcase a substantial degree of self-reliance and vigor; thus, challenge the popular representation of passive housewives (Tucker and Gamble 12). Even after her death, Mariam, seen by Laila, is an incarnation of courage and benevolence that lives on “in these walls they’ve repainted, in the trees they’ve planted, […] in the children’s laughter” and “shines with the bursting radiance of a thousand suns” (*ATSS* 442-3). A character that is more daring and defiant is Nila who flees her husband for a better life in Paris and who explicitly expresses sexual desires through poetry, an act that hardly seems possible in the conservative Afghanistan at the time. Similarly, Nila’s adopted daughter Pari is also successful outside the
private sphere. She is acclaimed for her contribution to the academic field, specifically “in topology and theoretical physics”, being the youngest professor at a reputable academy in Paris (*ATME* 244).

As can be seen, the female characters in *And the Mountains Echoed*, especially Nila and Pari, are given much more liberation to obliterate the boundaries between public and domestic spheres than the “suffering beings” Mariam and Laila in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (Shameem 63). Regarding the notion of motherhood, on the one hand, Laila and Mariam resemble the paradigmatic selfless mothers who are willing to sacrifice everything for their children. On the other hand, Nila and Pari are seen struggling with the relationship with their children, confirming the not-so-pretty side of child rearing. All female characters in both novels are flawed to some extent, yet Hosseini has presented them with respect by highlighting their accomplishments and other positive characteristics. Thus, the female characters in both texts appear more authentic, gainsaying the patriarchal pressure that women must have impeccable manners.

By employing different countries in the world as a backdrop for his stories, Hosseini has depicted various ambiguous and juxtapositional family types, whose values vary from sanctioned to fluid, aberrant and in-between so as to not only signal cultural changes but also firmly corroborate the well-established ideologies, thus, articulates the modern and traditional intertwinnements. Furthermore, *And the Mountains Echoed*, published 6 years after *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, portrays families in a more contemporary way in which women are given a greater deal of autonomy to resist conservative social expectations of motherhood, wifehood and daughterhood. This corresponds with Franzen’s prediction of the contemporary family novel trend: “the day comes when the truly subversive literature is in some measure conservative” (“I’ll Be Doing More of the Same” 38).
This thesis has looked into the nature of family, its members and their relationships with each other in Hosseini’s *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *And the Mountains Echoed*; however, there are certain limitations. How the characters’ views towards family change over time, especially before and after the Taliban reign might be worth analyzing in order to establish a more comprehensive view on the subject. A proposal for further research includes questions such as why the little Mariam risks everything to come and see her father yet refuses to open the door when he comes to her place thirty years later, or how Nila from desperately wanting a child later comes to the bitter conclusion that Pari is her retribution.
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