

# A Psychoanalytic Perspective of Suicidal Ideation in Anees Salim's *The Blind Lady's Descendants*

V. Yogeswari

Independent Researcher, Tiruchirappalli, Tamil Nadu, India

Email – [vyogeswari23@gmail.com](mailto:vyogeswari23@gmail.com)

**Abstract:** Anees Salim's family saga titled *The Blind Lady's Descendants* is an interesting plot, following the journey of twenty-six-year-old Amar. The story turns interestingly important when the protagonist, who is also the narrator, reveals at the end that this book is actually his disguised farewell to this world before he takes his own life. Salim has intricately weaved the theme of suicide in the life of this fictional and ordinary character. The research paper aims at painting the possible causes which might have influenced Amar's fateful choice, focusing largely on his inevitable isolation and inclination towards immediate gratification. This study is strongly grounded in Sigmund Freud's foundational theory of psychoanalysis.

**Key Words:** family, isolation, id, mind, repression, suicide.

## 1. INTRODUCTION:

Anees Salim's 2018 Sahitya Akademi award winning novel *The Blind Lady's Descendants* revolves around one prominent character's life story, narrated by himself. The book consists of five parts, namely Birth, Wedding, Love, Heartbreaks and Beginning. These part titles might project the book as being a bildungsroman, which is not true. The book is a record of the life of twenty-six-year-old Amar. In a way, Amar is the biographer of his autobiography, for his documentation titled *The Blind Lady's Descendants* includes, in his words, the "biography of small people" (Salim 2). However, the scope of this research paper is to scrutinise the psychology of Amar himself through his external and internal responses to the happenings in his life.

Though Amar takes one through the phases of his life, the scope of this paper does not revolve around his life, but around his mind. Mind is a manipulative organ, in the sense that it manipulates one's actions and at the same time can be subject to manipulation by actions. As a matter of fact, Amar's life is not the material for this paper, but his responses to his life happenings and his psychology impacting such responses is. The scope of this paper is to analyse what made Amar behave in the way he did. In other words, it aims to probe into the possible causes that drove him to his fatal end.

## 2. FREUD'S PSYCHOANALYTIC THEORY

The research paper performs a psychological autopsy on the protagonist with the aid of psychoanalytic theory as delineated by its founder, Sigmund Freud. He ascertains 'psychache' or 'intense psychological pain' as one of the major causes of self-harm. He identifies 'the talking cure' as an effective treatment. On the conscious level, the protagonist Amar did not suffer from psychache. Even if Amar suffered from an unknown psychache, he did not take up the talking cure; instead, he turned to what can be called as *the writing cure*, though this writing only acted as a mirror of his life and not as a means of solving his problems. He inevitably chooses to kill himself.

The theory deals with a careful investigation of the mind to release repressed fears and conflicts. Freud's theory stems from a clinical study of treating people suffering from hysteria. He had worked with the Austrian physician Josef Breuer in treating one of the latter's patients named Bertha Pappenheim alias Anna O. This treatment marked the beginning of the psychoanalysis with the formulation of the 'talking cure'. Further, the theory focuses on the interaction of the conscious and unconscious elements in the patient's mind. Director Pinchas Perry's movie titled *When Nietzsche Wept* accurately describes this as the 'integration of the unconscious with the conscious'.

The theory recognises the unconscious mind as a hamlet of buried desires. Yet, the presence of these is knowable to the conscious mind in the form of disguise or distortion. It may take the form of dreams, humour, slips of tongue and neurotic symptoms. However, the unconscious is not everything other than the conscious, but those that are actively repressed. Freud's personality structure is juxtaposed with the image of an iceberg, wherein most part of the iceberg is latent. His idea is that personality is made of three facets, namely the id, ego and super-ego. Freud opines that these three facets are in constant conflict with each other due to the difference in their primary goals.

### 3. THEORY OF PERSONALITY – THE TRIUMVIRATE

*Id* is the unconscious part which is driven by basic needs for survival as hunger, thirst and sexual pleasures. It runs on impulsive nature without any forethought of the consequences. It emphasises on immediate gratification. Moreover, two biological instincts work on this level, namely *Eros* or 'life-instinct' and *Thanatos* or 'death-instinct'. *Ego* literally stands for "I" in Latin. It is the rational or conscious part that works on the reality principle and balances the conflict between id and super-ego. It is the personality component that deals with reality. *Super-ego* is the element that works on the morality principle and acts as a judge of good and bad actions. It discourages any socially unacceptable idea and stands in direct contrast with id. For this reason, a constant conflict looms between id and super-ego.

In the case of Amar as a patient, id plays a significant role. Though reserved in behaviour, Amar is often associated with his paternal aunt Suhuda. The surge in his sexual feelings is diverted onto his aunt and he develops sexual fantasies on her. Eventually, he quenches his thirst for pleasure through reveries. Abandoning his morale, he fulfils his fantasies by a secret admiration towards his aunt. Amar has foreshadowed this in the beginning as: "In their fantasies, people live the life they cannot live in flesh and blood . . ." (Salim 14). Furthermore, Freud makes a mention of dreams as being a gateway of repressed emotions and internal conflicts. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud defines dream as the psychic activity of the sleeper. He uses dream interpretation to study the thought process and trace the cause of behaviour change. To him, a dream is built up by a "highly complicated intellectual activity" (Freud 25). As 'intellectual' is related to the ability to think and understand, most of what one thinks is unravelled as a dream. Here, Amar presents his many dreams in the course of the narrative on his life. More often than not, he dreams about his aunt. He lives his fantasies through dreams of having a sexual relationship with her, thus comforting himself. His sexual desires were always within him that he cannot refrain from stalking her from the corner of his eye whenever she visits with her daughter who is of Amar's age.

Id works as a pleasure-seeking part of the personality and sexual fantasies are Amar's most fascinating pleasures. Amar develops such fantasies not only on his aunt, but also on another woman who befriends him named Barbara. She later marries his friend Sandip. Hearing the news, Amar is devastated and envious. He struggles to understand if what he feels is anger, as Barbara was snatching away his only friend or if that is jealousy, as he failed to attain her. Though he had not fallen in love with her or made any advances, he still felt betrayed. This can be a result of the insecurity developed in him due to the environment in which he grew up. Moreover, Amar's super-ego comes into play when he consciously refrains from spilling the beans about many incidents happening in the Bungalow. He is aware but does not reveal the truth behind his mother's forgery of presenting a letter as written by her brother and her plot of killing his grandmother. Besides this, he knows the what, when and why of happenings but keeps them for himself as he is aware that none would believe him.

Freud considers the conflict between the demands of id and super-ego as contributing to suicidal behaviour. As Amar's personality is scrutinised, it is clear that he yielded to that part of his mind which demanded instant fulfilment. These include sexual pleasures and displaying aggression. Amar had his way of satisfying his sexual needs through stalking and fantasising.

Having analysed Amar's id, one can now comfortably turn to id's rival, super-ego. Freud asserts that super-ego is greatly influenced by parental, social and religious factors. Unfortunately, Amar's relationship with all of these has been nothing but unpleasant. He is neglected in his family and feels alienated from society. In addition to this, he is an atheist. So, Amar's super-ego is not a well-formed facet of his personality. Where there is no scope of vent, there is an inevitable pent (up). When one cannot let go of the surging emotions within, it is accumulated. Unable to let them out, they are repressed. This brings one to the Freudian concept of "triumvirate concept of personality involving the id, ego and super-ego" (McLaughlin 106).

Another indication of Amar's yielding to this triumvirate conflict is seen in the use of humour. Amar sees humour in the contradictions of life around him. Amar points out the irony that Dr. Rose is a person who advises him against living in the past but Dr. Rose himself lives in it - an antique house and underdeveloped lifestyle. Another irony is seeing Jasira killing frogs and then aspiring to become a doctor to save lives. Also, once when he and his friend Sandip ran in the dark after committing a mistake, he deliberately called Sandip as Akmal so loudly to make him audible to

their chasers. This shows his opportunistic attitude of satisfying his frustration and anger on his sibling. Such a behaviour goes hand in hand with Nandini Murali's discovery of humour being an antidote to pain. Thus, these facets of personality form a vicious circle of conflicts, putting the life and peace of the individual at risk. Such conflicts result in self-harm or actual suicide.

In the end, when Amar pronounces: "By being in hiding, I am saving (mother) a lot" (Salim 301), it might seem that he has taken this decision of a permanent concealment solely for the sake of saving his mother. But, through the lens of psychoanalysis, it is evident that numerous factors have contributed without even Amar being aware of them.

#### 4. FAMILIAL RELATIONSHIP

The psychoanalytic theory works on the basic principle that childhood experiences immensely impact the development of the human personality. As for Amar, he did not have a happy childhood. He broods over his unlucky fate of not being able to enjoy the privileges as the youngest in the family. The privileges destined for him were cunningly confiscated by one of his elder sister Jasira thus intensifying his hatred towards her. Besides, Freud affirms that internalisation of such cauldrons of conflicting emotions is likely to result in directing aggression towards the self.

In addition to this, Amar's Thanatos dominates, in turn elevating his desire for death. This is because he has been in sustained contact with death because of his maternal uncle who died by suicide. His constant acquaintance with his dead uncle, having unpleasant sibling relationship and becoming complacent with fantasies only aggravated his negative view on life and living. Ultimately, fantasy can never be equated with reality and thus Amar isolated himself from mainstream reality. Additionally, seeing his parents in a loveless marriage made him lose his faith in marriage, thus reinforcing his life of fantasy.

#### 5. INEVITABLE ISOLATION

For most part of the narrative, one could find that the only that gives Amar company is his loneliness. He gets acquainted with loneliness, and symbolically to darkness, so much so that he instantly loathes the brightly – lit classrooms of his college. It is difficult to say whether his life is dark because he prefers darkness or whether he prefers darkness because his life is dark. But, as far as Amar's life is concerned, darkness is not only the absence of light but also life. Not having anyone to listen to him, Amar starts to have conversations with himself. After his parents' marriage as the disturbing truth of his life, the loss of his only comforting sibling accelerates his mental degeneration. He is certainly aware that this is not a family wherein one comforts another, because Amar knows that no one cares to comfort each other. This makes him a stoic observer and causes him more harm than good. He begins to keenly observe and witness every incident. Because of this, he is tangled in a web of secrets.

The truths which remain as secrets were regarding his mother. Amar knows that she had sold her blind mother's house without the knowledge of her London – based brother Kasim for the sake of her daughter's wedding. Amar knows that his mother had forged a letter of consent to sell the house as written by Kasim to his mother. In turn, Amar blurts all this into his uncle Kasim's answering machine and when a letter is received from Kasim cancelling his trip to the house, Amar immediately knew that his action was behind this. Also, Amar knows that his mother had killed Grandma with an overdose of sleeping pills. He knows everything and it weighs him down. It suggests that knowing much is as dangerous as knowing little.

Having parents who are no less than strangers and losing his only cordial sibling, Amar resigns to solitude. He does not have anyone by his side and is greatly disturbed by that reality. The gloom was so much so that when he telephoned his uncle in London to pass the message of Grandma's death, he felt the answering machine as a "sympathetic listener" (Salim 265) and he could not stop talking. The extent to which he is alienated is apparent from this heart-rending scene. Additionally, it can also be understood that even if people have been travelling together for a long time, they can hardly realise the pain that the other undergoes. Others can only sympathise with one and not empathise at all times. As to Amar, he lacked people's empathy and any good soul to share his feelings. Since he is alone and no thought escapes him, he continuously ponders over the happenings. It is then that realisation dawns upon him that he is unwell because he knows all truths. As Nandini Murali, in her non-fiction titled *Left Behind* points out: ". . . (suicide) is preceded by years of emotional agony and pain" (Murali 29). It is true that Amar suffered emotionally. Experiencing agony is one thing and being unable to share it is another.

An individual's immediate connection is one's family. But here, Amar is aloof from his family as far as he could, especially from his parents. He even reached a point in which he yearned to be given in adoption. However, when he loses his only cordial sibling, he becomes close with loneliness. Having been turned away from family, he is led to the thoughts of his maternal uncle Javi, which alters his psyche to follow a fatal end. Thus, complex familial relationships, loneliness, depression and psyche plays an important role in influencing Amar.

## 6. DUAL-INSTINCT THEORY: THE INTERPLAY

Sigmund Freud claims that the aim of all life is death. Perhaps, the emergence of a concept as *Thanatos* following the conceptualisation of *Eros* or the 'life-instinct' implies that life is incomplete without death. This may be ironic, yet it is the truth. Death is a part of life; in a way, it is the final part. They are interrelated in the sense that death happens only when there is life. The death instinct, Freud asserts, is channelled outwards in the form of aggression towards others. However, when it is directed inwards, it results in hurting the self, and sometimes fatally. Amar, who holds within him all truths, finds no escape to vent them out. As a person present at all major events in his family, he knows all truths and is capable of connecting the dots. Revealing the facts will only cause harm to others, for instance, to his mother if he reveals that it was none other than his mother who poisoned his Grandma. Thus, all such truths remain within him only to be repressed. Making them escape will only bring doom to his already collapsing family. So, he locks everything within him which piles up and results in self-harm.

A Freudian analyst, who believes that they know better of Amar than the latter himself, can find various factors of Amar's life that had consciously or unconsciously driven him to end his role as a sojourner in life. Perry's movie highlights Nietzsche's idea of the presence of healing in unburdening. This could have been a great solace to Amar, provided he had someone in his life, like Nietzsche had Breuer.

In his book *The Power of your Subconscious Mind*, Joseph Murphy maintains that the tendency of the subconscious mind is always lifeward. One inference from this statement is that in people who die by suicide, their thoughts about death has been more powerful so as to work against the lifeward tendency. It is like working against gravity: when the subconscious mind is trying hard to root them down to earth, their death instinct breaks the shackles and flies away from the grip. As the subconscious is known for its power to heal the body and mind that it created, it is of utmost importance to analyse the enormous strength that surpasses this power to break away from the world.

## 7. SUICIDAL IDEATION

Susan Blauer in her guide on suicide prevention states: "Suicidal thoughts are products of experience, history, and genetics" (Blauer 252). As for Amar's life, it had revolved around gloom and isolation. When on one hand, Susan reflects on the idea that suicide is a family challenge, on the other hand, one can find that for Amar, there is a complete breakdown of affection, communication and support even within the family. Being a victim of such breakdown, Amar feels lonely and unhappy. He does not have any happy thing in life to wake up to or any blessing to thank for. At a time when his friend gets married, Amar worriedly thinks about a life without his friend. He feels that his friend's world has gotten bigger while his has shrunk. Growing up in such a catastrophic environment makes Amar socially and emotionally vulnerable.

In an article, Ashley Crossman quotes French sociologist David Durkheim's view on suicide as: "suicide is not only the result of psychological or emotional factors, but also of social factors". In his seminal work *Le Suicide*, Durkheim gives a proportionality between social integration and suicide. His work illustrates that the more an individual is socially integrated, the lesser the chances of suicide. In the case of Amar, seclusion is prominent, thus making him socially inactive to an extent. Amar's isolation from the social realm contributes to his already deteriorating relationship with the society. One might see Amar's suicide as an individual act, but in reality, it is not. Even Javi would also have perceived his decision as concerning only himself, but it unknowingly motivated a sequel. Durkheim rightly puts this misconceived notion of suicide being a highly individual act as a socially patterned deed.

## REFERENCES :

1. Salim, Anees. *the blind lady's descendants*. Penguin Books, 2015.
2. *When Nietzsche Wept*. Directed by Pinchas Perry, Millennium Films, 7 July 2007.
3. Freud, Sigmund. *The Interpretation of Dreams*. IAP, 2010.
4. McLaughlin, Columba. *Suicide-Related Behaviour: Understanding, Caring and Therapeutic Responses*. John Wiley & Sons, 2007.
5. Murali, Nandini. *Left Behind: Surviving Suicide Loss*. Westland Publications, 2021.
6. Murphy, Joseph. *The Power of Your Subconscious Mind*. Edited and revised by Arthur R. Pell, Simon & Schuster, U.K., 2018.
7. Blauer, Susan Rose. *How I Stayed Alive When My Brain Was Trying to Kill Me: One Person's Guide to Suicide Prevention*. Harper Paperbacks, 2002.
8. Crossman, Ashley. "The Study of Suicide by Emile Durkheim: A Brief Overview." *ThoughtCo*, 06 Jan. 2020, [thoughtco.com/study-of-suicide-by-emile-durkheim-3026758](https://www.thoughtco.com/study-of-suicide-by-emile-durkheim-3026758).