

The lasting effects of abuse in miriam's life



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Miriam, a main character in the novel *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, experiences extreme physical, mental, and sexual abuse from virtually every authority figure in her life. Using Hosseini's book and Erik Erickson's Psychosocial stages of development, this essay will explore not only the acts of abuse but their lasting effect on her behavior and definition of self.

Miriam's mother, having given birth to her and spending the most consecutive time with her, effected Miriam the most and established the damaging patterns of thought and behavior that would haunt her for the rest of her life. According to Erikson, her mother damaged two major developmental stages of her life. The first begins at eighteen months, where the child attempts to establish self confidence and begins to experience shame. On the first page of the story, Nana expresses disdain, contempt, and a borderline hatred of her own daughter by calling her a "clumsy little harami (bastard)..." as if she were saying a cuss word." (Hosseini, 4) She then repeatedly told her daughter that being a harami was so horrible that people would view her as nonhuman or a shameful person who should hide from society. This instilled in Miriam an inferiority complex, sense of shame, and anxiety about something she had no control over, her birth. Nana even states that it would have been better if Miriam's grandfather had killed them while Nana was pregnant so that Miriam wouldn't have to bare the shame and Nana wouldn't have to live with the bitterness and emotional pain caused by illegitimate pregnancy. Nana's words become negative scripts that replay in her head later in life, as she leaves Herat for her new home, making it difficult for her to interact with others in public or enjoy time spent outside of the house. The second stage occurs from age six, as Miriam begins establishing her ego and a sense of purpose, according to Erikson.

However, Nana mocked her child's existence, belief in her father and his stories, and her dreams of joining Jahlil's family. Nana reinforces these assaults against Miriam's ego by repeatedly discounting her father's stories and replacing them with a darker reality that is aimed at destroying her father's place in her heart. Moreover, she threatens her child's attempts at change, advancement, and purpose by threatening suicide if Miriam were to leave her in search of a life with Jahlil. However, when her threat of suicide turns to morbid action, Miriam is left with an emotional scar and sense of responsibility that traumatically effects her self esteem, throws her into a deep depression, and cements her mother's rampage of abuse into her mind permanently. After all, it would be difficult to develop of a sense of self, purpose, and ego if you believed that your family thought you were a " a pokeroot, a mugworm'...'and you weren't even born yet"(Hosseini, 8)Although Nana was extremely abusive, Jahlil's lies, childish disregard for his daughter's physical and emotional welfare, and lack of ownership and pride for his own daughter would prove truly damaging to Miriam's growth and emotional development. According to Erikson, Jahlil is guilty of damaging two different stages in Miriam's life: Identity and Role Confusion and Intimacy and Solidarity. Despite the fact that Jahlil only visited once a week, Miriam's identity revolved around being her father's child and regaining her rightful place in her father's home. She even created a rock game to allow her to visually depict everyone's place in her father's heart, so that she could physically place herself with them. Due to Jahlil's stories, Miriam believed that he had once taken her to spectacular place and treated her with love, pride, and belonging; therefore, this fueled her belief that she would once again re-attain her place in his family and heart. However, by refusing to see

Miriam when she came to visit and allowing her to sleep outside like a dog, he broke her heart and sense of self. Disregarding her emotions and physical safety, he shattered her identity as a beloved daughter or welcomed member of his family. This enabled Nana's abusive labels and depictions of Miriam's existence to take root and form her new sense of self. Thus, Miriam learned to define herself by the abusive statements of others. On a deeper level, Jahlil's betrayal and lies forever mar Miriam's ability to experience intimacy and trust with men. Repeatedly, Jahlil makes promises that he had no intention of keeping. Although the lies are meant to raise his daughter's spirits and gain favor with her, their lack of action proves damaging to her self esteem, as promises made to his legitimate children are kept. She had bought into his illusions and lies; therefore, she questioned how she could ever trust a man's kindness or words again. As a result, she hides from Rasheed during the first small portion of their marriage, avoiding contact as much as possible. Furthermore, she gave her father all the trust and love in her heart; therefore, when he married her off to an abusive man against her will and with no consideration for her feelings or well being, he broke her ability to freely give that type of intimate love to others. This immortalizes her mother's threat that men are cold hearted, dangerous, and cannot be trusted, thus causing Miriam a great deal of anxiety throughout her life. One might even argue that she loses the ability to love herself, after her mother showed continuing contempt for her and her father showed a lack of regard for her well being, so one could easily see how she comes to mistrust her own thoughts and self love. Perhaps this is the reason why she eventually agrees to marry Rasheed and does not run away despite his horrific acts of abuse. Resheed was the most disappointing and abusive person in Miriam's

life, as his abuse was sexual, mental, and definitely physical. Going into their marriage, Miriam was guarded and mistrustful. But, through kindness and patience, Resheed gained Miriam's trust, respect, and admiration. However, at the first test of honor, Miriam's miscarriage, he dropped all pretences and revealed himself as a truly abusive man whose behavior spirals out of control. He is the second man in Miriam's life that spoke of kindness and made great promises but in the end showed her only pain and heartache. Because she was still struggling with Erikson's stage of Intimacy, she kept trying to making excuses for his behavior and constantly trying to please him. Unfortunately, her efforts result in horrific acts of violence such as making her chew rocks until her teeth break and bleed to simply telling her how unsatisfied he was with her meal and life in general. Furthermore, Rasheed damaged her ability to enjoy intimacy during their first sexual encounter and all that followed. He didn't ask her if she wanted to have intercourse. He didn't ask if he was hurting her. He just forced himself on her, despite the fact that she clearly stated that she didn't want to have sex. She even describes her later sexual experiences as violent and painful. Had her first sexual experience been more like Laila's, she might have enjoyed the pleasure that comes from "coup" as Hosseini puts it. Early in Miriam's marriage, Rasheed informs her that she is to be covered by traditional clothing at all times, thus hidden from the world. Just like her father hid her mother and her away in a remote Kalba, her own husband hides her away by ensuring that the world never looks upon her face. Although his intention is to control her and prevent any outside influences on their marriage or life, this action only further damages Miriam's already fragile ego and sense of self. Despite all of the abuse Miriam experiences, she is still able to master

her final life stage with grace and dignity. Not surprisingly, it's the only stage that one must internally establish and requires no outside confirmation to achieve. Erikson's final stage is Despair vs. Integrity. In short, Miriam could have chosen to give up and live her days with no purpose, sense of self, or ability to function amidst her despair, but she didn't. Rather, she chose to overcome her own tragedies and sadness and help Laila raise her children. This meant giving unconditional love that was never shown to her. Although the negative scripts and impressions followed her throughout her life, in the end, they didn't define her. She was thus able to break the chain of abuse and find love. Laila did love Miriam and would cherish her memories always. In conclusion, Miriam, like many abused children, experienced hardship and heartache throughout many of the stages of her life. Although she was damaged and experienced a great deal of anxiety, shame, and emotional/physical pain, she never allowed her hardship to define her. She didn't find love from a male or an authority figure - rather, she healed and found love within herself and from a friend. Work Cited Hosseini, Khaleo. 2007. *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. Penguin Group Inc. NY: NY. Pg. 1-415 Erickson, Eric. 1930. *The Eric Erickson Reader*. edited. Robert Cole. Abris Publishing. NY: NY. Online Charts