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The Portrayal of an Iranian Queer Muslim Teenager in Arvin Ahmadi's *How It All Blew Up*

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ABSTRACT

This research examines the representation of an Iranian queer Muslim teenager in Arvin Ahmadi's *How It All Blew Up*. It also evaluates how the novel describes the sufferings of an Iranian queer Muslim teenager through symbolism, which Ahmadi uses as his aesthetic strategies. This research is descriptive qualitative, which examines the primary text by using close textual analysis. This research engages with Stuart Hall's theory of representation and Chris Barker's queer theory. The research investigates the symbolism representing the sufferings of an Iranian queer Muslim teenager and what aesthetic strategies the author uses to question mainstream society, which tends to exclude a queer teenager from "normal" belonging. Indeed, the analysis is engaged with Stuart Hall's theory of representation and Chris Barker's queer theory. This research discovered five representations of the protagonist character in the novel, namely Amir is represented as an Iranian queer Muslim that was born to an Iranian Muslim immigrant family, an Iranian queer Muslim that grew up in a Muslim family that did not strictly implement Islamic teachings, an irreligious Iranian queer Muslim, an Iranian queer Muslim that was attracted to people of the same sex, and an Iranian queer Muslim that struggled with his family's acceptance of his queerness. Indeed, this research discovers four symbols that are used to represent the suffering of an Iranian queer Muslim teenager, including the symbol of fortress, tunnel, tattoo, and wall. Thus, Ahmadi's novel reveals how a queer Muslim teenager struggles to fight for his rights to be acknowledged and appreciated in the ideas of "normality" and social belonging.

Keywords: *Arvin Ahmadi, Iranian, Muslim, Queer, US-Iranian Fiction*

INTRODUCTION

Literary works contain values and the reflection on society (Apristia). The reflection of society appears in literary works such as a novel. The values of life are represented through literary works to entertain and influence the readers' viewpoints (Suryaningrum et al). As stated by Taufik & B (32), literary works aim to pleasure the readers. Jacob mentioned that literature is the media to represent human life (Irawan and Andriani 38). It is also said that literature is used as the media to deliver the message to people (Irawan and Andriani). The reflection in literary work is portrayed based on the aspects of human life. One of the aspects of human life that are represented through literary works is sexual orientation. Sexual orientation in literature is represented through the characters of the story. Human character is one of the most important elements in literary works (Annisa, et al 110)

Sexual orientation refers to someone's sexual attraction, whether to the opposite gender, the same gender, or both genders (Cook 2). People who are attracted to the same

gender are homosexuals. Other terms that refer to homosexuals are lesbian and gay (Moleiro and Pinto). People who are attracted to both genders are bisexuals. The term that is used to describe people who identify their gender and sex differently is transgender (Ikawati 110). In other words, transgender people are people whose gender identities differ from the sex label attached at birth. The acronym used to refer to people with the terms above is LGBT, known as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender. The acronym of LGBT is also interchangeable with the term queer as both refer to people who identify themselves as non-heterosexuals.

Queer is an umbrella term that describes someone's sexual orientation or gender identity (American Psychological Association). Being queer means adopting a non-heterosexual lifestyle (Barker 169). The term queer was used in the United States to refer to the distinction between heterosexual and non-heterosexual men (Maimunah 44). Many authors carry the issues of queer in their works within the past decade. The authors use the narratives to influence people's attitudes toward queer individuals (Madzarevic and Soto-Sanfiel). For example, there are *Call Me by Your Name* (Aciman), *Simon vs the Homo Sapiens Agenda* (Albertalli), and *As Far as You'll Take Me* (Stamper). *Call Me by Your Name* is a queer-themed novel by American author Andre Aciman, first published in 2007. This novel represents the journey of self-sexual discovery and a romantic relationship between a seventeen-year-old Elio and a doctoral student intern who works on his research manuscript with Elio's professor's father. *Simon vs the Homo Sapiens Agenda* is a queer-themed novel by American author Becky Albertalli published in 2015. This novel tells the story of a sixteen-year-old Simon Sniper who is depicted as a closeted gay character. The story represents the journey of self-acceptance as a gay and coming out story through Simon's character. This novel has been adapted into a movie titled *Love, Simon* released in 2018. *As Far as You'll Take Me* is another queer-themed novel written by American author Phil Stamper, published in 2021. This novel tells the story of Marty's character as a teenager who flees home to London in fear of his Catholic family's rejection of his sexual orientation.

In the present day, novels written by American authors with queer issues are on the top list among other themes of fiction novels. One of the authors that wrote a queer-themed novel is Arvin Ahmadi. Arvin Ahmadi is an Iranian American Muslim born to Iranian immigrant parents in the United States. Growing up in a heteronormative Muslim household as gay has never been easy for Ahmadi. His life experience of being a non-heterosexual inspires him to write a novel. He wrote a coming-of-age queer-themed novel titled *How It All Blew Up*, published in 2020.

Arvin Ahmadi's *How It All Blew Up* represents an Iranian queer Muslim teenager as a person that suffered from his queerness through symbolism as the aesthetic strategy of the novel. The novel tells the story of Amir Azadi, an Iranian queer Muslim teenager who was born to an Iranian immigrant family in the United States. The story depicts that Amir fled his home to Rome in fear of his family's rejection of his sexual orientation. Amir found himself attracted to Jackson, one of his male schoolmates. The story depicts that Amir and Jackson kissing in the car, and someone came from nowhere and took their kissing picture. Amir's schoolmates blackmailed him by either giving them money or outing the photo to Amir's heteronormative Muslim parents. The blackmailers knew that Amir's Muslim parents wouldn't accept his homosexuality, so they used that condition to blackmail him. Besides, they also knew that Amir earned money from creating the page on Wikipedia. Amir finally gave them the money they demanded to keep the secret from his parents. But soon after,

the blackmailers demanded Amir more money and threatened him to spill the photo to his parents. On graduation day, Amir decided to flee from home and not attend the graduation ceremony at school. He believed that fleeing home was the best decision to make, rather than giving more money to the blackmailers. Queer people tend to conceal their sexual orientation for fear of rejection (Ikawati 110). Newcomb et al. (1) explained that queer youths are likely to experience strained relationships with their families due to the stigma toward their sexual orientation. That is related to the action of Amir that chose to flee his home to Italy rather than experience such a strained relationship with his family at home because of his sexual orientation.

METHOD

The type of this research is descriptive qualitative, which examines the primary data with a qualitative approach and descriptive method. The qualitative approach describes and examines phenomena through data collection (Kriyantono 56). According to Creswell (Indriani), the qualitative method is the approach to collecting only the descriptive data and not the numerical. Descriptive research involves collecting data from various sources to obtain broader comprehensions of the object of analysis in explaining a phenomenon and its characteristics (Nassaji). The primary data of this research is a novel by Arvin Ahmadi titled *How It All Blew Up*.

The data analysis technique in this research employs several stages. First, I collected the data from the novel by Arvin Ahmadi titled *How it All Blew Up* in the form of words, phrases, and sentences. Second, I investigated the representation of an Iranian queer Muslim teenager and symbolism as the aesthetic strategy of the novel to represent the sufferings of an Iranian queer Muslim teenager. Third, I analyzed the data with the theory of representation and queer theory.

The significance of this research is to explore the representation of an Iranian queer Muslim teenager and the symbolism used as the novel's aesthetic strategy to represent the sufferings of an Iranian queer Muslim teenager. I hope that this research may provide a piece of comprehensive information to the reader about the Iranian queer Muslim teenager character in Arvin Ahmadi's *How It All Blew Up*. I also hope that the readers may receive insights about queer teenagers worldwide who struggle with their family's acceptance due to religious tenets and cultural norms.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Representation of an Iranian Queer Muslim Teenager

In this part of the discussion, I focused on exploring how the Iranian queer Muslim teenager character is represented in the novel. The character analyzed in this part of the research is Amir Azadi.

An Iranian Queer Muslim that was born to an Iranian Muslim Immigrant Family

Amir is the main male character of this queer-themed novel. He is represented as a person born to an Iranian Muslim immigrant family in the United States of America. Amir's Iranian identity is found in the quotation: "*But I assure you, I'm real. I'm here. I'm Iranian. And I'm gay.*" (Ahmadi 1). The sentence "*I'm Iranian*" indicates that Amir, as the protagonist, recognized his identity of Iranian descent. Another quotation that reveals his Iranian identity is: "*When I finally started driving, I felt the clash of my two identities stronger than ever.*"

Iranian. Gay" (Ahmadi 17). The context of the quotation above is when Amir decided to leave to avoid the trouble that he would make if his parents figured out about his queerness. On his escapade, he says *"...I felt the clash of my two identities stronger than ever. Iranian. Gay."* (Ahmadi 17). From this quotation, I argue that the novel explicitly reveals Amir's Iranian identity through the repetition of the word *"Iranian"* multiple times.

The proof that Amir was born to Iranian parents that migrated to the United States is found in the quotation: *"We're Iranian. Family comes first. Sure, our parents immigrated over with certain values, but they immigrated over for you to be happy, first and foremost."* (Ahmadi 189). The context of this quotation is when Amir declined his mother's phone calls when he was in Rome. One of his Iranian queer friends, Jahan, whom he met on his escapade, asked who was calling, and Amir said it was his mother. Amir declined his mother's calls because he knew neither his mother nor father would accept his queerness. Everything would not be the same after they knew that Amir was sexually attracted to people of the same sex. Seeing Amir kept ignoring the calls, Jahan said that Amir should have picked up the calls. He also convinced Amir that although his parents could not deal with their son's queerness at that moment, deep down in their hearts they loved him so much. And Jahan said the proof that they loved Amir is their effort to migrate from Iran to the United States of America. Leaving their home country to a foreign land required much effort and hard work; that is why Jahan believed Amir's parents would still love their son regardless of his queerness. The quotation supports this notion: *"...Family comes first. Sure, our parents immigrated over with certain values, but they immigrated over for you to be happy, first and foremost."* (Ahmadi 189). The sentence *"...our parents immigrated over with certain values."* indicates that there was a big dream of a brighter future that they intended to achieve by leaving their home country for the United States of America. The sentence *"...but they immigrated over for you to be happy, first and foremost."* From this quotation, Jahan was trying to convince Amir that his parents sacrificed many things just to get Amir and his sister to live a better life in the United States of America. The land that many people across the globe believe offers a great opportunity to continue their lives compared to their homelands.

To prove Amir as a person that was born to an Iranian Muslim immigrant family, I discovered that the novel also represents the Islamophobia experienced by Amir and his family as Iranian Muslim immigrants in the United States of America. The novel depicts Amir's father as a scientist. He often travels around the United States for a convention and mostly carries chemical substances. The proof that his father was a scientist is found in the quotation: *"Remember thinking he was going to be a doctor himself one day. Maybe a scientist like his dad."* (Ahmadi 221). The sentence *"Maybe a scientist like his dad."* shows Amir's father's occupation as a scientist. One day on his trip to Texas, he had an unpleasant experience with the airport officer that inspected his belongings. Amir's father has an Iranian appearance with beard on his face, similar to how Middle Eastern terrorists look like. And then he was detained at the airport because the airport officer suspected that he was a terrorist that carried chemical substance for a bomb-making. It is found in the quotation: *"The whole experience frightened me. When you people went through my things and made me feel like a bad guy. I was merely traveling for a work trip. I was carrying a briefcase with chemicals I needed for a convention in Texas, and I believe the intention of my trip was simply . . . misinterpreted."* (Ahmadi 43). A Muslim immigrant like Amir's father that has a middle eastern appearance often experiences prejudice or discrimination in public space

because of the media that constructed Islam as something synonymous with terrorism (Nazhifah 77). Being a person with Persian-middle eastern look makes Amir's father struggle with the stigma and stereotypes toward Muslim individuals that are always associated with terrorism. According to Djohar (149), the prejudice toward American Muslims was increased after the tragedy of 9/11, that Muslims are perceived as threats that triggered non-Muslim Americans' suspicion and fear.

An Iranian Queer Muslim that Grew Up in a Muslim Family that did not Strictly Implement Islamic Teachings

I argue that Amir grew up in a Muslim family that did not strictly implement Islamic teachings. This argument is supported by the depiction of Amir's mother, who only wore the hijab while teaching at a Farsi school and took it off when the class was over as found in the quotation: *"I teach at a Farsi school, and when I teach, I wear the hijab. You see, I'm not wearing it now, but the class takes place at a mosque, so I wear it then."* (Ahmadi 29-30). From the quotation above, I argue that the hijab worn by Amir's mother during her teaching hours in a Farsi school and her preference to not wear one after the class reflects that the family did not strictly implement the religious teachings of Islam.

According to Islamic teaching, the hijab is a Muslim women's dress code that reflects their obedience and submission to God's command in the holy scripture of the Quran. According to Sheen et al (2), the hijab is a visible expression of faith and identity as a Muslim woman. The word 'hijab' means 'cover' or 'partition', while khimar refers to the veil covering the head (Sulaiman and Raifu). The Quranic chapter of An-Nur verse 31 mentions the situations that Muslim women should wear the hijab: *"And tell the believing women to lower their gaze, and protect their private parts and not to show off their adornment except that which is apparent, and to draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty and ornaments except to their husbands, or their fathers, or their husband's fathers, or their sons, or their husband's sons, or their brother's or their brother's son, or their sister's son, or their women, or their slaves whom their right hands possess, or male servants who have no desire (to women), or children who are not aware of the nakedness of women..."*. Another Quranic verse that talks about women's dress code in the religion are found in Surah Al-Ahzab verse 59: *"O Prophet! Tell your wives, your daughters, and the believing women that they should cast out their outer garments so that they will be recognized as such and not be molested. And Allah is the Most Forgiving, the Most Merciful."* With the theory and Quranic verses above, I argue that Amir's family did not strictly implement Islamic teachings by depicting his mother's preference not to cover herself with a hijab while it was obligated in her religion.

An Irreligious Iranian Queer Muslim

I argue that Amir is represented as an Irreligious Muslim person. This argument is supported by quotations revealing Amir's behavior of consuming alcoholic beverages representing his irreligiousness. As a Muslim, Amir is obligated to obey God's command in the holy scripture of the Quran, such as the prohibition of alcoholic beverage consumption. Islam, the religion that Amir embraces, prohibits humankind from consuming alcoholic beverages (Moghadam and Moradi). Islam is a religion that arranges the food, beverages, and daily necessities of Muslims (MZ). The novel depicts Amir consuming wine and beer multiple times throughout the story. The quotations that show Amir's alcoholic beverage consumption are:

- 1) *"Water didn't seem to be an option at this party, so I poured myself a glass of red wine."* (Ahmadi 71)

The context of the quotation above is when Amir was invited to attend a dinner party at Giovanni's gigantic apartment in Rome. At that party, the only available beverage was red wine. Although Amir was not getting used to drinking red wine because he grew up in an Iranian Muslim family, he eventually decided to get a red wine. The sentence "...so I poured myself a glass of red wine" indicates that drinking that red wine was his will, not forced or influenced by anyone. He drank it even if it was prohibited in the religion he embraced. With that being the case, I argue that Amir was an irreligious individual.

The prohibition of alcohol consumption is mentioned in the holy Quran multiple times. The Quranic verses that mentioned this prohibition namely Surah Al-Baqarah verse 219, Surah An-Nisa verse 43, and Surah Al-Maidah verse 90. The prohibition of alcoholic beverages consumption is mentioned in Surah Al-Baqarah verse 219: *"They ask you concerning wine and gambling. Say: 'In them is a great sin, and some profit, for men; but the sin is greater than the profit...'"*. Thus, I argue that Amir's irreligiousness is represented through the seven quotations from the novel that show his alcoholic beverage consumption is prohibited in his religion.

An Iranian Queer Muslim that was Attracted to People of the Same-Sex

The novel represented Amir as a person attracted to people of the same sex. In other words, Amir is represented as a queer person. Being queer means adopting a non-heterosexual lifestyle (Barker 169). The proof that Amir was attracted to the same sex is found in the quotation that shows Amir was mesmerized when he saw Jackson's eyes: *"When I walked him over to his car, he put a hand on my shoulder and squeezed tight. 'remember that thing you were telling me when we met,' he said softly, 'about not really fitting in anywhere?' My eyes grew wide. I stared right at him, his green eyes, and he was staring back at me. 'I feel that way, too.'"* (Ahmadi 9). The sentence *"My eyes grew wide."* indicates his excitement of being touched by Jackson that he put his hand on Amir's shoulder and then squeezed it. It can also indicate Amir's excitement that he and Jackson were staring at each other, as the text depicts Amir observing the color of Jackson's eyes: *"...I stared at him, his green eyes, and he was staring back at me."*

An Iranian Queer Muslim that Struggled with His Family's Acceptance of His Queerness

I argue that Amir struggled with his family's acceptance of his queerness. The novel depicts that Amir was born to an Iranian Muslim immigrant family in the United States, and his circumstance made it impossible for him to embrace his queerness. The laws within Islamic teachings prohibit Muslims from venting their sexual desires to people of the same sex (Khoir). Queer Muslims find it difficult to express their sexualities publicly as their feelings, emotions, and desires are considered aberrant (Khoir). The novel represents Amir as a person that struggled with his family's acceptance of his queerness as found in the quotation: *"That's what my parents said about gay people, the one time the topic came up at the dinner table: 'It's an American thing. It's part of their culture. Not ours.'" I remember sitting there quietly as Soraya argued with them, my heart sinking in my chest."* (Ahmadi 55-56). From this quotation, it is clear that Amir struggled with his family's acceptance because

his parents thought that queerness did not fit in their Iranian culture and it was an American thing. Besides their Iranian culture which is against the practice of same-sex relationships, the religion they embraced also could not accept Amir's queerness. Because of that, Amir thought his family would not be able to deal with it. Because all he knew was his parents perceived same-sex romantic relationships as something that is too western for their Iranian culture and unacceptable in the religion they embraced.

With that on his mind, Amir kept the secret of his queerness from his family. Amir recognized that he had two identities: his Iranian identity and his queer identity. It is found in the quotations: *"But I assure you, I'm real. I'm here. I'm Iranian. And I'm gay"* and *"When I finally started driving, I felt the clash of my two identities stronger than ever. Iranian. Gay. There had always been a wall separating those two sides of me, so they would never touch. On one side, there was Jackson. On the other, my family. Soon, that wall would come crashing down."* (Ahmadi 17). His heterosexual Iranian identity was only visible when Amir was around his family. He acted as if he was heterosexual just like a teenager his age who soon graduated, went to university, got a job, and married afterward. While his queer identity was only visible between him and his lover.

Symbolism as the Aesthetic Strategy of the Novel to Represent the Sufferings of an Iranian Queer Muslim Teenager

In this part of the discussion, I focused on exploring the symbols in the novel as its aesthetic strategy to represent queer sufferings in Arvin Ahmadi's *How it All Blew Up*.

Symbol of Fortress

The symbol of a fortress in Arvin Ahmadi's *How it All Blew Up* is found in the quotation: *"Ben and Jake bulldozed right through the fortress I'd spent years building around my secret."* (Ahmadi 12). This quotation showed Amir's circumstance when his schoolmates blackmailed him into giving them money or out his secret that he kissed his male lover the other night in a car. The word "fortress" in the quotation above represents something sturdy and strong to keep his secret safe, especially from his Iranian Muslim parents against same-sex relationships. He needed to conceal his secret because he feared his Iranian Muslim parents' response if they knew their son was queer. He could have experienced abusive behavior from his Iranian Muslim parents because they could not deal with the fact that their son is sexually attracted to people of the same sex, which is neither acceptable in their Iranian culture and Islamic teachings. The sentence *"Ben and Jake bulldozed right through the fortress I'd spent years building around my secret."* implies that Amir had concealed his queerness from his parents for years. It was a pity that he had no courage and could not be able to be himself around his family. A family that should have been his place to feel safe became a thread to him when it came to the matter of his queerness.

The word "fortress" in the quotation above is also synonymous with Amir's effort to conceal his queerness as a secret from his Iranian Muslim family. His secret in the novel is depicted as his queerness that he was afraid to reveal to his Iranian Muslim family. Besides representing a haven for a queer individual like Amir, his effort to conceal his identity, and his persistence to be recognized as a strong person that fights for acceptance, the symbol of the fortress also represents the protection and defense that Amir made to keep himself safe from any rejection and the possibility of abusive behavior that he would receive from his

family if they could not deal with the fact that Amir was sexually attracted to people of the same sex.

Symbol of Tunnel

In order to represent the sufferings of an Iranian queer Muslim, the novel uses the symbol of the tunnel to represent Amir's life which was tough and dark while dealing with his queer identity and acceptance from his Iranian Muslim parents. A tunnel is where people inside have to find a way out to get rid of the darkness. This is how the novel represents the darkness and the suffering of Amir's life through the symbol of the tunnel, as a queer teenager that grew up in an Iranian Muslim family where he had to deal with the fear of rejection and abusive behavior from his family if they knew that he was queer. As Stuart Hall explains, this novel uses language as the medium to generate meaning through symbolsepresented in the text (Hall 1). The symbol of the tunnel in Arvin Ahmadi's *How it All Blew Up* is found in the quotation: "*College was supposed to be my light at the end of the tunnel—when I would be able to come out to my parents safely, with some distance between us. I was counting on one of those schools to be my escape. With the exception of my two safety schools, they all turned me away.*" (Ahmadi 14). The context in the quotation above is Amir as a queer person that was born to Iranian Muslim immigrant parents wanted to pursue his higher education after high school at any college or university in another city, so he could have some distance from his parents when revealing his queerness. If they were to reject him that was queer, then he would still be safe from any possibility of persecution or abusive behavior from his parents that was against the practice of same-sex relationships, given that he was far away from them.

The novel represents Amir's suffering and misery as a queer teenager that dealt with the struggle of embracing his own sexual orientation and dealing with his family's acceptance. Coming out to his Muslim family was not easy for him as the religion that they embraced was strongly against the practice of homosexuality. Thus, being queer would be something that his parents could not be able to accept. This attitude of not accepting queer family members is constructed by religious tenets prohibiting same-sex romantic relationships.

The thing that Amir feared the most was his Muslim parents' reaction if they found out their son was queer. Most parents might respond to a coming-out episode of their children with abusive behavior and rejection to dissuade their other children from coming out as queer (Ghosh). This attitude is influenced by the assumption that homosexuality or queerness is genetic. If one of their children is queer, the other child might also have the same sexual orientation (Ghosh).

I argue that the tunnel symbol is used in the novel to represent the suffering of Amir as an Iranian queer Muslim person. He could not express and embrace his queer identity because he was afraid of his parents' rejection and the possibility of the worst thing that could happen after he came out to them. The tunnel symbol truly represents how dark and tough Amir's journey as a queer Muslim teenager was.

Symbol of Tattoo

This novel represents the suffering of an Iranian queer Muslim who had to keep their queer identity untold to fit in the heterosexual-dominated society with the symbol of a tattoo. I argue that a tattoo represents something that has a deep meaning to a person that they cannot express through its color and shape. As explained by Stuart Hall, this novel uses

language as the medium to generate meaning through symbols represented in the text (Hall 1), which is the symbol of a tattoo. The art of tattoos also represents the unspoken thoughts and feelings of a human being (Belkin). According to Atkinson in Rokib and Sodiq (50), tattoos in the human body relate to their self-identity. It is also explained that tattoos are a personal expression that appears in the human body (Roggenkamp, et al 148). With these theories, I argue that the symbol of tattoo is used in the novel to represent Amir's unspoken thoughts and feelings of his hidden queer identity because he was afraid to reveal it to his Iranian Muslim parents.

Although the same-sex relationship was legal in the United States of America and was protected by the law of the country, Amir still felt worried about his family's attitude and acceptance. His parents are depicted as Iranians from Tehran that migrated to the United States of America for a better future. Miresghi and Matsumoto (375) in their research found that Iranian culture is more homophobic than American. Because of that, Amir did not feel safe revealing his queerness to his parents. The symbol of tattoo in Arvin Ahmadi's *How it All Blew Up* is found in the quotation: *"It is such a privilege, you know? To get to be yourself, all of yourself, in this great big world. To wear it like a tattoo, like all of Jahan's tattoos: permanent and out there for the whole world to see."* (Ahmadi 260). The context of this quotation is Amir was detained in an airport interrogation room after the incident on the plane with his father, and he told the officer about his journey with his queer found family in Rome. The person he mentioned in the quotation above is Jahan, a queer Iranian living in Rome. He also offered Amir a place to stay while he was on his escapade in Rome. Jahan in the novel is depicted as an out closeted queer Iranian who bravely embraced his two identities all at once, namely his Iranian identity and his queer identity. Jahan is also depicted as a person with tattoo art on his skin. Besides referring to Jahan's appearance, the tattoos in the context of the quotation above also represent queer identity that most of queer individuals keep it concealed. The art of tattoos represents the unspoken thoughts and feelings of human being (Belkin). Although a tattoo is visible, it symbolizes something hidden from a tattooed person through its shape and color. Thus, if we put our viewpoint on the protagonist, Amir, I argue that the tattoo symbol in the novel represents Amir's hidden queer identity.

I argue that the tattoo symbol represents Amir's unspoken thoughts and feelings as found in the quotation: *"I thought about coming out to my parents. I kept pulling up that mental scoreboard, but I just couldn't find a way to make the numbers work. Every time I opened my mouth and tried, I failed. Every time I thought about pushing it just an inch—testing the waters with a what if I liked boys?—type comment—I chickened out. It's hard enough tiptoeing around your entire life with a secret like that. It's draining, constantly feeling that you might not be safe around your own family."* (Ahmadi 15). The quotation above is the proof that Amir's thoughts and feelings are reflected through his behavior that he was anxious and afraid to come out to his Iranian Muslim parents. The sentence *"Every time I opened my mouth, I failed."* represents his negative thought about the possibility of rejection that he may receive from his family. Because all he knew was the religion that he and his family embraced did not accept the practice of homosexuality. The sentence above also reflects that Amir had attempted multiple times to come out to his parents but always failed because he was afraid to do so.

Symbol of Wall

In order to represent Amir as an Iranian queer Muslim teenager that had to choose either to be a Muslim or a queer person, the novel uses the symbol of the wall as the form of separation between his queer identity and his faked heterosexual identity. I argue that the symbol of wall is used in the novel to represent the boundaries of Amir's identity, which are his queer identity and his faked Iranian heterosexual Muslim identity. As explained by Stuart Hall, this novel uses language as the medium to generate meaning through symbols that are represented in the text (Hall 1), which is the symbol of wall. The symbol of wall is found in the quotation: *"When I finally started driving, I felt the clash of my two identities stronger than ever. Iranian. Gay. There had always been a wall separating those two sides of me, so they would never touch. On one side, there was Jackson. On the other, my family. Soon, that wall would come crashing down."* (Ahmadi 17). The context of this quotation is when Amir was leaving his home and driving to the airport, he felt his identity as an Iranian queer became stronger. There was no longer fear of rejection or judgment from his surroundings because of his sexual orientation. The further he was from home, the greater freedom of being queer he could have.

From the quotation above, I argue that the novel uses the wall symbol to represent the barrier separating his queer identity and his faked Iranian heterosexual Muslim identity. The quotation supports this argument *"There had always been a wall separating those two sides of me, so they would never touch. On one side, there was Jackson. On the other, my family."* (Ahmadi 17). The two sides of his identity in this context are his queer and faked Iranian heterosexual identity. The text implies the two identities which one of them he always tried to conceal. The first identity is his queerness that he could only show to his lover. In this quotation, Amir's lover is mentioned as Jackson. Jackson is the male schoolmate he kissed one night, which became a huge secret that the blackmailers used to demand a big amount of money. This argument is supported by the sentence, *"On one side, there was Jackson"*. The second identity of Amir was his Iranian heterosexual Muslim identity that was only visible to his family, which is found in the quotation: *"On the other, my family"*. The Iranian identity in this context is the opposite of his queer identity, which was the identity of a heterosexual Iranian Muslim. I argue that Amir pretended to be an Iranian heterosexual Muslim in front of his family. The quotation supports this argument: *"...a wall separating those two sides of me, so they would never touch"*. From the quotation above, it is very clear that Amir attempted to hide one of his two identities. There was the queer identity that he could express in front of his lover, Jackson, and his Iranian heterosexual Muslim identity that he expressed in front of his family. The sentence *"so they would never touch"* indicates that the wall symbol is used as a barrier that separates his two identities, so his Iranian Muslim family would never find out his queerness. I also argue that the wall symbol in this context also represents Amir's effort to conceal his queerness, such as pretending to be heterosexual in front of his Iranian Muslim parents.

CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis of representation, I found the protagonist character named Amir is represented in five representations in the novel: an Iranian queer Muslim that was born to Iranian Muslim immigrant family, an Iranian queer Muslim that grew up in a Muslim family that did not strictly implement Islamic teachings, an irreligious Iranian queer Muslim, an Iranian queer Muslim that was attracted to people of the same sex, and an Iranian queer Muslim that struggled with his family's acceptance of his queerness. Based on the analysis

of symbolism with the constructionist approach in representation, I discovered that the novel uses symbolism to represent the sufferings of an Iranian queer Muslim as an aesthetic strategy of the novel. The symbols that I discovered are the symbol of a fortress, the symbol of a tunnel, symbol of a tattoo, and the symbol of a wall.

The fortress symbol represents the suffering of an Iranian queer Muslim teenager who had no place to express his sexual orientation. The symbol of the tunnel is used to represent the suffering of an Iranian queer Muslim teenager in the novel whose life was tough and dark while dealing with his queer identity and acceptance from his Iranian Muslim parents. The tattoo symbol represents the suffering of an Iranian queer Muslim teenager who had to keep his queer identity untold to fit in the heterosexual dominated society. And the wall symbol represents Amir as an Iranian queer Muslim teenager who had to choose either to be a Muslim or a queer person. This indicates that the novel confirms queer Muslims cannot embrace their sexual orientation and religion simultaneously as the two things oppose each other.

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