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**Personal Identity at the Mercy of Emotional  
and Financial Abuse as Portrayed in *The  
Four Winds* by Kristin Hannah.**

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Master's Degree in Literature and Civilisation*

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## **Dedications**

*I dedicate this work to all my loved ones.*

*To my mother, who gifted me with her passion for literature and good stories;*

*To my father, who stood by my side so I could spread my wings;*

*To my soul sister, my person who stood behind me to push me forward, and was  
the biggest fan of my choice of topic.*

*Finally, to my friends who made my last years as a student enjoyable, I am  
grateful for your company.*

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## Abstract

The developmental stages and components of identity have been central in theoretical research, particularly social identity theory, which, while broad, emphasises the social elements that influence it. To better understand the external factors that affect identity formation, this research, conducted using a qualitative approach, aims to identify the effects of emotional and financial abuse on personal identity development. Additionally, this work seeks to clarify how social marginalisation and gender norms contribute to the damage of personal identity. The research will pursue these objectives from the perspective of Elsa Martinelli, as portrayed in Kristin Hannah's historical fiction, *The Four Winds*. This extended essay will utilise attachment theory to analyse the unhealthy anxious attachment style exhibited by the character. Additionally, Julia Kristeva's concepts of abjection and symbolic and semiotic orders will be employed to explore the character's self-esteem issues, as well as Dr. Bessel Van Der Kolk's somatic trauma theory, which explains dissociation as a coping mechanism and adds depth to the analysis. The likely outcome of this inquiry will confirm that the impact of society and the abusive neglect and marginalisation it perpetuates leads to a stunted development of personal identity. Additionally, social identity can yield positive outcomes in the absence of detrimental behaviours affecting mental health, especially concerning parental figures, as embodied by Elsa Martinelli.

**Key words:** Identity, Emotional and Financial Abuse, Marginalisation, Anxious Attachment Style, Self-Esteem, Dissociation.

## Résumé

Les étapes du développement et les composantes de l'identité sont au centre de la recherche théorique, en particulier la théorie de l'identité sociale qui, bien que vaste, met l'accent sur les éléments sociaux qui l'influencent. Afin de mieux comprendre les facteurs externes qui affectent la formation de l'identité, cette recherche, menée selon une approche qualitative, vise à identifier les effets de l'abus émotionnel et financier sur le développement de l'identité personnelle. En outre, ce travail vise à clarifier comment la marginalisation sociale et les normes de genre contribuent à la détérioration de l'identité personnelle. La recherche poursuivra ces objectifs du point de vue d'Elsa Martinelli, telle qu'elle est dépeinte dans la fiction historique de Kristin Hannah, *The Four Winds*. Cette dissertation s'appuiera sur la théorie de l'attachement pour analyser le style d'attachement anxieux et malsain dont fait preuve le personnage. De plus, les concepts d'abjection et d'ordre symbolique et sémiotique de Julia Kristeva seront utilisés pour explorer les problèmes d'estime de soi du personnage, ainsi que la théorie du traumatisme somatique du Dr Bessel Van Der Kolk, qui explique la dissociation comme mécanisme de protection pour approfondir l'analyse. Le résultat probable de cette enquête confirmera que l'impact de la société, la négligence abusive et la marginalisation qu'elle perpétue entraînent un retard dans le développement de l'identité personnelle. De surcroît, l'identité sociale peut avoir des aspects positifs en l'absence de comportements nocif à la santé mentale, en particulier en ce qui concerne les figures parentales, comme l'incarne Elsa Martinelli.

**Mots clés :** Identité, Abus Emotionnel et Financier, Marginalisation, Style D'attachement Anxieux, Estime de Soi, Dissociation.

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# **General introduction**

Although society's concern with defining identity issues is fairly recent, the concept is as old as time. As civilisations and societies were established and collapsed, identities were built and passed on. Identity is primarily based, on a personal level, on the elements that make up the genetic DNA of the larger community one is part of. Consequently, though defining identity is difficult, in modern times, the concept is seen as the understanding of who we are as individuals and as members of various social groups, encompassing a range of characteristics, beliefs, and affiliations that shape our self-concept and interactions with the world.

Thus, identity is made up of balanced parts, among which are social and personal. This means that social identity is the sum of external factors such as a person's peers, family, and the societal norms they have to adhere to in order to be part of a particular group depending on their ethnicity, race, gender, nationality, religion...etc., which leaves an imprint on the individual's experiences and interests that shape his/her personal identity.

In an attempt to study the trauma that stems from the emotionally abusive neglect that bruises personal identity, occurring during the early developmental stages, this research will study the development of the character Elsa Wallcot Martinelli in *The Four Winds* by Kristin Hannah. This is done to analyse the havoc wreaked in cases where an individual's personal plane of existence is wholly defined by the trauma left by a dismissive and overly critical upbringing. This trauma inflicted by Elsa's social sphere takes different shapes, ranging from self-esteem issues to unhealthy attachment patterns that make for strained relationships.

In addition, this study will look into Elsa Martinelli's marginalisation due to her unflattering physical appearance. Another form of emotional abuse that factors into the character's traumatic behaviours is that she is alienated from society for not living up to its standards of beauty, especially by her mother. This leads to another aspect of the story, which is Elsa's distant and one-sided relationship with her mother; thus, highlighting the critical role of maternal figures in building one's personal identity and self-esteem.

Furthermore, this research will explore how financial abuse can feed into an individual's self-esteem issues through the historical setting of the story. It takes place in the Texas panhandle in the south and later the west of the American continent, during The Great Depression and the Dust Bowl era. It was a time of economic struggle that further impoverished and chased out many inhabitants of the Great Plains to California in search of financial stability. Consequently, this research work will survey the spiral of financial abuse that migrants and, more specifically, Elsa's family are absorbed into and forced to remain in unsanitary encampments due to very low wages. This translates into a failed attempt to achieve the American dream.

This research will study some aspects of human nature, a journey towards the answers to the existential crisis of a mere cog in the machine, one of the many pieces that make up the puzzle of society. Through the familiar story of Elsa Walcott Martinelli, this work will strive to garner a better understanding of the various intricacies of balancing social and personal identity. To better understand oneself and other fellow humans, earn a place in the world, and learn how to better function within society. To understand and communicate with one another, people need to understand and know themselves first and foremost.

As an individual, I have interacted with different types of people from many generations. People who wore their hurts and scars like badges of honour, unaware of embodying victimhood in all its forms. Their whole existence revolved around finding their place, constantly plagued by the ignorance of where they belonged. Thus, when I started reading *The Four Winds* by Kristin Hannah, I found the character of Elsa Martinelli compelling. She lived her life as a stranger in her own home, rejected by her own family, never having been loved or understood the way she deserved to be. She has deep-seated self-confidence issues that manifest in her belief that she is unlovable. So, she strives to find her place, to please those she loves, to deserve their love; the very definition of a people-pleaser.

Additionally, as a character, she was deemed unworthy of her parents' love and affection. She was lacking in their eyes, and that judgment they passed on her defined her identity her whole life, like a book with one title, no matter how many revisions it undergoes. Consequently, she is more of a mother, a wife, and a daughter than she is herself, a woman with wants, needs, and desires; a woman who craves freedom to be truly herself, but still belongs somewhere she is loved.

In a sense, Elsa is a mirror of many individuals I know, people who display traumatic behaviours. This motivates me to look into how unseen emotional and financial abuse impacts identity and attachment, to find maybe a balm to heal these wounds and understand or empathize with the tragic protagonists of everyday life.

Consequently, this research will aim to answer several research questions based on the main ideas mentioned in the introduction above, which are as follows:

**RQ1**

What are the symptoms of damage inflicted by abusive neglect during the formative years of personal identity in *The Four Winds*?

**RQ2**

How does Elsa's unappealing physique contribute to her marginalisation in *The Four Winds*?

**RQ3**

How does financial abuse lead to lower self-esteem and a feeling of inadequacy in Elsa Martinelli's personal identity in *The Four Winds*?

As a medium to answer the central questions of this research work, and reach a deeper level of understanding of the damage caused by abuse on identity, the following hypotheses were formulated:

## **Hypothesis 1**

It is hypothesised that a person having low self-esteem, anxiety, and unhealthy attachment in adulthood may have experienced abusive neglect in their formative years. This hypothesis is grounded in the idea that a negative self-perception stems from experiencing emotional abuse during childhood, as discussed in various sources addressing childhood trauma and identity.

## **Hypothesis 2**

It is hypothesised that Elsa's perceived lesser appearance as a woman led to her marginalisation in a society that upholds strict beauty standards. This exclusion might have intensified her low self-esteem and feelings of unworthiness, which are evident signs of emotional abuse.

## **Hypothesis 3**

It is hypothesised that financial abuse undermines a person's autonomy and self-worth, leading to feelings of inadequacy. In Elsa's situation, the control exerted over her income and living conditions may have intensified her self-esteem issues, ultimately causing more significant harm to her personal identity.

This research aims to puzzle out the factors that create unhealthy attachments and low self-confidence. As such, the following objectives have been set:

1. To identify the symptoms of abusive neglect among other forms of emotional abuse, particularly focusing on Elsa Martinelli's character as a case study.
2. To explore the social marginalisation of women as a form of emotional abuse based on their physical appearance.
3. To assess the link between childhood trauma and mental health issues of anxiety and self-esteem in adults.

4. To analyse the role of financial abuse in creating low self-worth and damaging mental health.

This research work will be divided into three chapters to study the topic at hand in depth. Chapter One will expand on the historical contexts, namely the events of the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl era and their impact on individual and social identity. Additionally, it will delve into the definition, developmental stages and the factors that impact identity formation. Chapter One will also establish the theoretical basis of Julia Kristeva's abjection, the symbolic and semiotic orders, as well as somatic trauma theory by Dr. Bessel Van Der Kolk. As for chapter Two, it will answer research questions one and two by tackling the instances of emotional abuse present in the novel and the anxiety and self-esteem issues that manifest into an anxious attachment style and dissociative tendencies. Furthermore, to answer the third research question, Chapter Three will examine financial abuse as a structural phenomenon following the move to California.

To conclude, this qualitative research adopts a thematic analysis approach, utilising deductive reasoning to explore how emotional and financial abuse affect identity formation. The methodology involves applying theoretical frameworks related to emotional and financial abuse and identity formation and development to specific contexts. This research adheres to the seventh edition of the MLA handbook for writers of research works in the works cited list, methods of writing, and the research's format.



# **Chapter One: Historical and Theoretical Framework**

## **Introduction**

During the The Great Depression and the Dust Bowl, the United States faced severe economic and social hardships that profoundly transformed individual identities. This highlights the complex nature of identity in *The Four Winds*; the characters embody deep emotions that engage the reader. An example is Elsa Martinelli, who often grapples with the judgments of her community while carrying the weight of painful trauma. As a result, this chapter will examine the historical backdrop of the novel and establish theoretical frameworks to deepen the understanding of identity, concentrating on its development and elements. Additionally, it will aim to identify the factors influencing identity and the various theories that can help unravel its complex knots.

### **1.1. The Great Depression**

This section of the work aims to examine the trauma that afflicts Elsa Martinelli as one of the individuals who fought against financial abuse in their pursuit of the American dream. Kristin Hannah sets the world of the selected historical fiction against the backdrop of 1930s America, a country fighting against what historians call The Great Depression and the Dust Bowl era. Thus, within this part, we will examine the real-life events and how they relate to the novel and Elsa's journey to highlight her struggles through the following explanation.

Before The Great Depression, the people still enjoyed peace, as Elsa in the beginning of the novel says, "The flat great plains stretched forever, a sea of prosperous farmland" (Hannah 5), to paint a picture of the vast Texas panhandle. Hannah also describes Dalhart, the country seat of Texas, as "... a town--- fast becoming a city--- of box suppers and square dances and Sunday morning services. Hard work and like-minded people creating good lives from the soil" (6). Through these passages, the author shows the prosperous everyday life of people whose most significant asset was the land that fed and clothed them. They were not rich but had enough

to live successful, happy lives. Unfortunately, those lives were ravaged by the country's economic downfall and a drought, a poison that spread slowly. The Great Depression is the precursor to many events in Elsa Martinelli's journey. It is one of the two most prominent hardships she encounters, one that creates a butterfly effect. Thus, this research will examine it more closely to understand its context better.

### **1.1.1. The Great Depression as Backdrop to Abuse**

Nicholas Crafts and Peter Fearon, in their article "Lessons from the 1930s Great Depression," define The Great Depression as "the economic crisis that began in 1929 [and] soon engulfed virtually every manufacturing country and all food and raw materials producers," (1) marked by unprecedented economic contraction and high unemployment rates until the onset of World War 2. A raw hardship is painted vividly in *The Four Winds*, depicting the fall from grace of many American citizens, particularly people from the middle and lower classes, like Elsa after her marriage.

### **1.1.2. Causes and Consequences of The Great Depression**

Several causes contributed to the onset of this crisis, starting with the stock market crash of 1929, which resulted in enormous financial losses for investors and, consequently, a loss of trust from customers and businesses alike. This eroded consumer spending as investors and consumers curtailed their expenditures, leading to a banking crisis as banks faced withdrawals of loans. In the early 1930s, over 9000 banks failed to remain operational, losing people's savings accounts. This situation created many issues, including deflation in the prices of goods, a contraction of the money supply, and a collapse of international trade relations, among other problems (Crafts and Fearon 2).

Consequently, trapped in this vicious cycle, the American population endured the lasting effects of The Great Depression. As they faced poverty and relied on charitable organisations,

many became homeless and unemployed, suffering from both physical and mental health issues (Crafts and Fearon 8). This context relates to the plot setting of *The Four Winds*, as part of Elsa Martinelli's journey unfolds during The Great Depression in southern America, in Dalhart, Texas. In these areas, people relied on cotton and wheat harvesting, and the collapse of agriculture due to falling crop prices drove many farmers into debt and bankruptcy. This phenomenon was compounded by the arrival of the Dust Storms, making living conditions harder (Crafts & Fearon).

## **1.2. The Dust Bowl Era**

Joining right on the heels of the economic crisis, a drought started slowly killing the rich soil of the Great Plains and the people's spirit. Kristin Hannah explained in the novel, "Years of drought, combined with economic ravages of The Great Depression, had brought the Great Plains to its knees" (45). She added that the events of 1929 overshadowed the southern dry spell in the news outlets, and the farmers were too proud to participate in the dole queues. The farms were becoming cemeteries of what once was paradise, and to make things worse, Dust Storms entered the scene.

### **1.2.1. Dust Storms Definition**

R. Louis Baumhardt describes the dust storms as wind-driven soil erosion that affected the Great Plains. The soil was left vulnerable due to agricultural practices that weakened the topsoil and loosened it between the 1930s and 1940s (2). The government did nothing about these wind-swept crimson dust clouds until after a storm in May 1934 blew the remnants of the Great Plains to the north and blanketed cities such as Chicago with twelve million tons of dust (Egan 20). Only then did they suggest new agricultural methods.

To paint a vivid picture of the horror of the Dust Bowl, a closer look at the description of a storm through the eyes of Elsa Martinelli is needed. She looks up at the sky, taking a hellish

red hue and the waking wind barreling across her farm from the south, coating the surroundings in static electricity and assaulting her as she reaches the shelter of her house. She tries to cover the house in newspapers and rags; the dust rains on her and sneaks through the cracks in the window frames and walls (Hannah 69).

### **1.2.2. Consequences of the Dust Bowl**

At the same time, the constantly floating dust particles invaded the lungs, leading to Dust Pneumonia. The symptoms were coughing, difficulty breathing, and chest pains that mainly afflicted the children and the elderly, as they were most vulnerable. These health conditions were exacerbated by malnutrition and dehydration (Baumhardt 2). The sum of these issues was deteriorating mental health, as Elsa clearly states that the key to surviving the astronomical heat was the preservation of food, water, and the most challenging of all emotions (Hannah 67). Furthermore, the farmers were experiencing an identity crisis, caused by their loss of faith in the land they had worshipped for so long. They started leaving towards the West Coast, most commonly California. The drought did not harm cotton farms and other agricultural fields, giving the migrants hope to begin anew in better conditions.

### **1.3. Definition of Identity**

The concept of identity is the core of all human experiences, and it is the one constant truth of the individual. A truth that is subject to change, as a person's companion through the seasons of life, identity changes as it interacts with the social environment that surrounds said person. However, identity is as fragile as it is malleable, like a flower that needs sunlight and water to bloom; identity encompasses both personal and social planes of existence that are codependent, meaning that their influence on one another is mutual.

In his book *Personal Identity and Literature*, Patrick Colm Hogan emphasises the paradox of each person's self-perception, underlining the fluidity of identity shaped by

numerous factors, such as personal experiences, social interactions, and the stories we construct. Additionally, he points out that understanding identity requires an awareness of its many facets in different contexts, as identity is inherently an amalgamation of who we are and how our surroundings perceive us (31).

In an article entitled “Beyond Identity” published in *Theory and Society*, Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper explain that in social theory, to “identify” refers to the process of individual and collective categorisation based on attributes such as race or gender. This concept thus underscores that “Identification is intrinsic to social life; ‘identity’ in the strong sense is not” (15), meaning that through sociological studies, the term identity was discovered to fall short in truly describing the dynamic nature of the social construct that it is. Identity is at the core of human nature and society, underscoring its significance in studying dynamic social interactions. Consequently, it relies on several key elements of identity.

## **1.4. Components of Identity**

Identity is constructed like a machine, composed of several components; each piece plays a role in navigating an individual’s relationships and experiences. These components are interconnected, differing from one another yet linked together, functioning as a team that shapes, adapts, and influences as it evolves with the individual. The components are as follows:

### **1.4.1. Personal Identity**

Personal identity encompasses all the characteristics, traits, and experiences that distinguish individuals from their peers. It is rooted in self-perception and shaped by the values and beliefs held by the individual. This perception evolves and changes depending on the social contexts and roles represented. Furthermore, according to Cote and Schwartz, personal identity is not isolated; it is influenced by social and cultural interactions (4). That is why when someone

travels to another country, for example, and learns about their culture, they broaden their mindset and thus modify their self-perception.

Another key element of personal identity is personal narratives, which people construct to tell life stories about themselves. These include challenges faced, accomplishments, and significant life events that shape their understanding of who they are. This means that personal identity is a fundamental factor in self-awareness and mental and emotional well-being; it clarifies how individuals face different experiences and set goals for a sense of agency in navigating life (Hogan 26).

### **1.4.2. Social Identity**

Social identity refers to the social aspect of self-perception; it is the groups, communities, and social categories that individuals relate to, that shape the outer layer of their image in the social context. It emphasises the collective aspect of identity based on group membership, race, ethnicity, religion, social class affiliations, and shifting worldviews. Furthermore, the roles people play in society define their intergroup relations. Under the labels of being a friend or family, or any other role in the group ecosystem, people are influenced by the prejudices and biases born of their groups to view themselves a certain way (Hogan 27).

Social identity plays a vital role in fostering a sense of belonging and loyalty among the members of a group, as well as defining hierarchy and power dynamics. However, the outcome is not always positive. In *The Four Winds*, Elsa Martinelli's social standing as a member of one of the wealthiest families in the county puts her on a pedestal, so she is respected but kept at a distance as a lady. On the other hand, as a daughter and sister, she occupies the lowest position in the social hierarchy, creating a situation where she fits nowhere, isolated in the middle and defined by her social roles, yet with a status that lacks significance.

### **1.4.3. Cultural Identity**

Cultural identity encompasses shared values, beliefs, languages, customs, and practices of a group of people. It reflects the shared heritage and traditions that shape an individual's thoughts and perspectives. Cultural identity provides a sense of belonging and contextualises their experiences within larger cultural narratives (Hogan 26). Elsa Martinelli's experience illustrates this clearly; upon joining her husband's community, she embraces their religion and lifestyle to become one of them. She also adapts their speech and cuisine, incorporating these elements into her new community life (41).

## **1.5. Developmental Stages of Identity**

The connection between identity components and their developmental stages highlights how psychological development theories emphasise the complexities of identity formation. As developmental stages of identity have been extensively studied in psychology, theories such as James Marcia's identity status dominate the field. Marcia proposed a model solely focused on identity that categorises its formation process based on two key dimensions: exploration and commitment. A model that explicitly addresses the periods of adolescence and young adulthood. It also provides a nuanced view of the adolescence vs identity confusion stage and centres around exploration and commitment, which are crucial to understanding how individuals navigate their identities (Cote and Shwartz 3).

Consequently, this research will use Marcia's model of identity stages as they are relevant to the psychoanalysis of the character studied. As in *The Four Winds*, this work will analyse the symptoms of Elsa Martinelli's identity malformation as they manifest themselves throughout the story. In this regard, the need to study the vulnerable stages of formation arises, and these stages are:

### **1.5.1. Identity Foreclosure**

Individuals commit to specific values and beliefs at this stage without exploring alternative options. They often adopt the perspective of their parents and other authority figures. Consequently, they do not question or analyse the beliefs imposed on them and firmly adhere to external expectations as they identify strongly with family traditions and societal norms (Cote and Schwartz 7). This behaviour can lead to individuals adopting a rigid worldview and a reluctance to accept differing perspectives, which can become an identity crisis in adulthood (Cote and Schwartz 6). Elsa has moved past this stage in the novel, but it is still part of her character. Elsa has internalised her parents' and community's beliefs as her own, a source of internal struggle when she becomes an adult.

### **1.5.2. Identity Diffusion**

This stage is characterised by confusion and apathy regarding one's identity and a lack of commitment and direction. People in this stage are indecisive due to the sheer number of choices and are too overwhelmed to decide; they are emotionally detached and aimless, leading to low motivation and difficulty forming deep, meaningful relationships (Cote and Schwartz 8). This stage can challenge life satisfaction and fulfilment, something apparent in Elsa Martinelli's experience, who is trapped as an underdeveloped individual at this stage when the reader makes her acquaintance. She knows that although she possesses the choices necessary to evolve in theory, she has no practical means of pursuing them. As a result, she finds herself stuck in limbo, apathetic toward her situation at the novel's start.

### **1.5.3. Identity Moratorium**

This stage involves exploring different roles and belief systems without commitment. Individuals seek answers to personal questions, leading to anxiety and uncertainty, as critical thinking is necessary to grasp any growth opportunity. Despite its challenges, this stage is

vital for personal development since it presents growth opportunities (Cote and Schwartz 12). This stage is relevant to the study of Elsa's experiences, as she evolves throughout the story to be more self-aware and embraces change in her beliefs through hardships.

#### **1.5.4. Identity Achievement**

This is the stage where an individual's identity stabilises as they commit to a set of values and beliefs. Individuals develop a strong, coherent self-concept as they express their goals and values. Demonstrating a strong sense of who they are. This creates emotional well-being by reaching fulfilment and developing better decision-making skills, as the individual can make informed decisions that bring satisfaction (Cote and Schwartz 9). Identity achievement is associated with solid mental health and resilience (Cote and Schwartz 4). A result that appears evident in Elsa as she reaches her full potential of resilience and adaptability. By the end of her novel, she unlocked the strength within her and is finally a complete individual.

### **1.6. Factors that Affect Identity Formation**

The relationship between developmental stages and identity formation factors is complex and ever-changing. Cognitive, emotional, and social growth, cultural contexts and emotional challenges shape how individuals examine, commit to, and comprehend their identities. Numerous elements contribute to identity formation, including:

#### **1.6.1. Familial Relationships**

The nature of relationships with parents and family members is crucial. Supportive family dynamics promote a healthy process of identity formation. In contrast, distant, neglectful, and conflictual family ties obstruct this development and lead to unhealthy

attachment patterns, as Elsa depicts in the novel. Furthermore, supportive relationships foster conversations about beliefs, values, and goals, enabling individuals to express their experiences and aspirations. This familial backing typically appears as encouragement for autonomy, facilitation of exploration, and modelling of coherent identities (Branje et al. 14).

### **1.6.2. Life Events and Transitions**

Major life events and transitions, such as moving to a new city, which Elsa experiences twice with somewhat positive results, entering a new community through school, for example, and experiencing loss, can prompt reevaluation and exploration of the self (Branje et al. 13). The reader can see this through Elsa's experience of becoming part of her husband's family and learning a new way of life, as well as her resilience after losing him, which influenced the development of her identity.

### **1.6.3. Character Traits**

Individual characteristics, such as temperament and resilience, impact how one faces challenges and navigates identity exploration. Higher openness and adaptability are often considered positive traits in identity development (Branje et al. 13), some of the few positive aspects of Elsa Martinelli's character, as she survives many hurdles. Though they have tragic origins, her capacities for adaptability and strength are cultivated to their highest potential.

### **1.6.4. Mental Health**

Individuals facing mental health challenges may struggle with clarity of identity and commitment, whereas those in better mental health tend to engage more positively in exploring roles. This includes the impact of various dynamics, such as experiences of abuse. There are

several types of abuse, each having unique consequences on the individuals' view of themselves and their relationship with others (Branje et al. 13). Here are the rudimentary types of abuse:

- **Physical Abuse:** This entails employing physical force that may lead to injury or harm. It can include kicking, hitting, burning, or any violence that can cause bodily harm that heals with time. However, the emotional impact is lasting and can create fear or low self-esteem (Mikolajczuk 15). This is only briefly depicted in *The Four Winds* when Elsa's father gives her a black eye, though it is not an important part of her story.
- **Emotional Abuse:** This form of abuse involves the use of words and actions to undermine an individual's self-esteem. It can include constant criticism, rejection, neglect, marginalisation, and manipulation. It can create deep-seated feelings of inadequacy as the victim struggles to reconcile their self-image with the opposing views imposed by the abuser (Mikolajczuk 7). This is seen in Elsa Martinelli's negative self-image because her entourage growing up taught her that she was unworthy of love and of no use.
- **Financial Abuse:** This abuse occurs when a superior individual in the power hierarchy controls another's income sources, thus limiting their financial independence (Branje et al. 12). This is present in *The Four Winds*, when Elsa and her family migrate to California to start anew but are instead sucked into an economic spiral perpetrated by the wealthy landowners.

## 1.7. Theoretical Studies on Identity

The idea of identity, encompassing numerous elements, has long been a focus of academic inquiry. Scholars investigate its complex characteristics and the various influences that shape it. As discussed in the following sections, this fascination crosses different fields, including psychology, sociology, and literature.

### **1.7.1. Psychological and Theoretical Studies on Identity**

Identity has been a focus in psychology and sociology, attracting scholars who explore its development and definition. Psychological theories frequently emphasise the internal mechanisms in creating a cohesive sense of self, underlining ideas like self-concept, self-esteem, and personal agency. An example is Erikson's identity development model, a conflict-based set of stages in the lifespan of individuals from infancy to adulthood, each stage presenting its challenge (Cote and Schwartz 5).

However, this model was set aside in favour of James Marcia's model, which serves as the theoretical foundation for this research work. This is because while Erikson's model addresses identity development, it only tackles it during the fifth stage of adolescence. In contrast, Marcia's model focuses solely on identity development, as stated earlier in the part dedicated to the development stages. This is relevant to Elsa Martinelli's journey, as she begins at the novel's outset with an incomplete identity, which evolves as she makes different choices and overcomes challenges. By the time the story concludes, she finally becomes a complete individual, and using Marcia's model makes understanding the process easier. Besides, Erikson's model is based on the lifespan of the individual, which could not be used as Elsa is an adult during the novel's run.

Additionally, social identity theory, developed by Henri Tajfel and Turner, further explores how individuals form part of their identity from group membership, underscoring the importance of social categorisation and the desire for positive distinctiveness (3). From a

sociological perspective, George Herbert Mead's symbolic interactionism emphasises how the self is constructed through social interaction and internalising others' perspectives (135).

Recent theories explore the ongoing tension between the ability to make independent choices and societal expectations, indicating that social contexts constantly shape identity (Archer 19; Burke and Stets 15). These theories collectively suggest that identity formation is a dynamic process influenced by both internal psychological changes and external social factors. This discussion is relevant to this paper, as Elsa Martinelli's identity in *The Four Winds* combines social and personal influences. Therefore, the following theories will be elaborated upon to form the primary framework of exploration in this paper:

#### **1.7.1.1. Attachment Theory**

Initially formulated by John Bowlby, attachment theory argues that the emotional connections between infants and their primary caregivers are vital for psychological growth and overall well-being throughout life. Ainsworth later expanded on this research by identifying attachment styles divided into secure, anxious, and avoidant categories, revealing how individuals perceive and engage in emotional relationships (Riggs 5). Such patterns affect emotional regulation, interpersonal interactions, and mental health during developmental phases (Riggs 17). The attachment system is thought to function behaviorally, influencing how individuals engage with caregivers, and cognitively, impacting the internal working models that shape expectations about oneself and others in relationships (Riggs).

Therefore, attachment theory offers an extensive framework for comprehending normative and maladaptive relational dynamics, emphasising how early caregiving experiences influence individual emotional and social functioning differences (Riggs 17). These points are relevant to studying a character such as Elsa, who has stunted and dysfunctional relationships,

first with her parents, particularly her mother, with whom she has the most contact, and later with her husband.

### **1.7.1.2. Kristeva's Theories**

Julia Kristeva's work provides a basis for understanding how societal norms shape identity. Her concept of abjection refers to the rejection of parts of one's self deemed unacceptable by societal expectations, leading to feelings of being less desirable. The symbolic order, another one of her concepts, is a structured system of language and guidelines governing human interaction. A subsequent concept, the semiotic, is associated with emotions and preverbal experiences linked to the body. The conflict between these orders creates a divide between an individual's authentic self and the image they portray to society, leading to feelings of abjection and internalised shame. Societal expectations frequently compel people to comply to prevent being labelled as "other," thus strengthening the supremacy of the symbolic order over the semiotic. An issue that casts a shadow of emotional trauma over Elsa Martinelli, a trauma that manifests physically as well, as is explained in the following theory.

### **1.7.1.3. The Somatic Aspects of Trauma**

Bessel Van Der Kolk's *The Body Keeps the Score* offers profound insights into how trauma affects both the body and the mind. He posits that trauma manifests as a somatic experience, with the body retaining memories of traumatic incidents. This idea is particularly significant in understanding Elsa's experiences of emotional neglect and societal marginalisation in *The Four Winds*. Van Der Kolk emphasises that trauma can result in dissociation, a coping strategy where individuals distance themselves from their thoughts, emotions, or physical sensations to mitigate distress (64). Elsa's inclination to recede into the background exemplifies this dissociative reaction as a physical response to trauma.

His recognition of the somatic nature of trauma offers insight into how it shapes identity and can be a contributor to social alienation. As human beings are naturally and instinctively drawn to their social identity, fragmentation occurs when traumatised individuals in constant high alert distance themselves from that aspect of their persona (64). People thrive in society and in contact with their peers. When they distance themselves from others who have hurt and rejected them, they also reject those who could heal them, as society is both the toxin and the cure. This perspective is exemplified by Elsa Martinelli's interactions with the outside world, a perspective that enhances the theoretical understanding of identity, as seen in the following explanation of literary works.

#### **1.7.1.4. Structural Violence as Systemic Exploitation**

Structural violence, a concept introduced by Johan Galtung in his 1969 article "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research" in the *Journal of Peace Research*, describes how social structures systematically harm individuals by limiting their basic needs and potential (4). Unlike direct personal violence, structural violence is embedded in institutions and normalised, making its effects visible but difficult to challenge. Galtung explains that this form of violence occurs when people's actual conditions fall below their potential due to avoidable social arrangements (4-5).

It is evident in *The Four Winds* in the financial abuse of migrants like Elsa Martinelli. They face oppression due to low wages, debt, and harsh living conditions, actions not of personal cruelty but of institutionalised injustice that benefits land owners at the expense of the workers. This maintains Galtung's idea that structural violence is perpetuated by social systems that maintain unequal power and prevent marginalised groups from reaching their full potential of well-being (5). Thus, this work will touch upon how structural violence in the primary source operates through economic exploitation.

### 1.7.2. Literary Dimension of Identity Theory

In literature, examining identity through fictional narratives reveals insights into human experiences and the interplay between individual choices and societal expectations. The existing literature on identity and its representation in fiction offers rich insights to inform the analysis of this concept in *The Four Winds*. For instance, some studies have conducted corpus analyses on other novels exploring identity, such as the article written by Manpreet Kaur and Dr. Priyamvada Singh on *The Metamorphosis* by Frantz Kafka, entitled “Metamorphosis: A Psychological Exploration of Identity and Isolation”, which focuses on the psychological aspect of identity and isolation in cases of metamorphosis. Another example would be “Expression of Social Identity in Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go*”, a research paper published in 2020 by Jeni Kukkonen, tackling the social nature of the identity formation process. Moreover, other articles on British literary works, such as “Identity and Self Discovery in The Novels of Jane Austen” by Dabarati Saha and “Monstrosity and The Search for Identity in Frankenstein” by Akram Shalghin, both explore the fight against identity loss.

Furthermore, research examining identity in postcolonial fiction provides a valuable framework for understanding the complex nature of identity, particularly in the context of societal upheaval and marginalisation. To illustrate this point, Cherki Karkaba’s article “Deconstructing Identity in Postcolonial Fiction” examines different postcolonial texts, such as Hanif Kureishi’s *The Buddha of Suburbia*, Anita Desai’s *Fire on the Mountain*, and Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, as well as many more prominent works.

While the wealth of scholarship on identity and its literary representation provides a solid enough foundation to grasp its nuances, the existing literature has yet to capture the specific challenges and experiences of the character under scrutiny in Kristin Hannah’s *The Four Winds*. Thus, this study delves into the complex tapestry of identity that the author skillfully weaves in the story, the emotional and financial abuse she endures, together with the

traumatic behaviours that shape her identity throughout the narrative. This gap in the literature creates a chance to enhance the scholarly understanding of identity formation amid adversity. The novel has yet to be examined from this perspective, presenting a valuable case study to broaden knowledge about identity and trauma in literature.

Although this research's theoretical framework is rich and well developed, only a few theories will be applied to expand it. Social identity theory and the influence of society on the development of a complete identity are relevant and important information in puzzling out the problematic presented. Rather than focusing on societal influence on identity, the emphasis will be on entangling the issues affecting personal identity. In other words, this research work will focus on the outcome, an imbalanced and fragmented identity, not its origin.

Thus, in chapters two and three, attachment theory and semiotic trauma will be employed to explore concretely the psychological ramifications of emotional and financial abuse, as Julia Kristeva's concepts of abjection and symbolic order will be used to explain how the abuse affects Elsa Martinelli's personal identity. Additionally, the concept of structural violence will be skimmed over in the study of systemic exploitation as financial abuse at the level of Elsa's community.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter introduces the historical context in which and when *The Four Winds* takes place, primarily during the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl era, calling attention to their tragic consequences. To learn the effects of emotional and financial abuse, and outline the theory this work will focus on and better understand the concept of identity itself, a few essential points have been mentioned, such as the definition of identity, as well as its components and development stages, along with the external factors that affect it. Furthermore, a literature review has been included to explore the various psychological and sociological theories

explaining the relationship between external societal pressures and how they interact with the internal flora and fauna of the psyche, to form a complete identity, from a literary perspective. This groundwork paves the way for a more thorough investigation of emotional and financial abuse, along with their effects on identity in the upcoming chapters.

## **Chapter Two: The Effects of Emotional Abuse on Identity Formation.**

## **Introduction**

Emotional abuse has a profound impact on well-being, fostering an environment in which unhealthy attachment styles can develop over time. Consequently, this frequently results in low self-esteem and strained relationships with family, friends, and romantic partners. Such traumatic experiences shape how individuals respond to various situations, leaving a lasting impact on their worldviews, beliefs, and perceptions. Emotional abuse manifests in numerous ways, each with profound implications for mental health and relationships, complicating the lives of its victims further. Analysing the emotional neglect and isolation faced by Elsa Martinelli in *The Four Winds* provides vital insights into the insecure, unhealthy attachment patterns that characterise her, alongside the troubled nature of her relationships with her parents and spouse. Consequently, this chapter will explore the psychological repercussions of the neglect that resonates throughout Elsa's narrative in the novel.

### **2.1. Forms of Emotional Abuse**

In Kristin Hannah's *The Four Winds*, Elsa Martinelli struggles between two conflicting influences: emotional neglect from her family and gender-based marginalisation imposed by societal expectations. These forces undermine Elsa's self-worth, restrict her opportunities, and nurture feelings of inadequacy. The emotional neglect stems from her parents' failure to offer the validation, support, and closeness she seeks. At the same time, societal marginalisation arises from the rigid expectations tied to her role as a woman in a patriarchal society. These experiences create a relentless cycle of shame and rejection that shapes Elsa's early years.

Essentially, the emotional and mental health of the character is overlooked by her parents, who are supposed to care for her, resulting in feelings of rejection. This sense of rejection is intensified by society's scrutiny of her perceived failures as a woman, further deepening her feelings of inadequacy and limiting her ability to assert herself. As a result, Elsa

experiences abjection, a condition where society and those around her depict her as “other,” profoundly shaping her self-view in the world according to Kristeva (Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* 18).

Through examining these dynamics using Julia Kristeva’s theories of abjection and its symbiotic and symbolic dimensions, it becomes evident how closely familial rejection and societal pressures interact to form individual identity. This detailed study underscores how emotional neglect within the family reflects societal marginalisation in its impact on self-perception. It highlights how both contribute to a pattern of rejection for women like Elsa during that era. By investigating the societal pressures that brand Elsa as a “spinster,” the familial dynamics that heighten her sense of alienation, and the physical manifestations of her emotional pain, this analysis illustrates how systems of power, both societal and familial, enforce conformity through acts of rejection.

### **2.1.1. Emotional Neglect at the Level of the Familial Unit**

A key element of identity development in Marcia’s model is the identity moratorium during adolescence and early adulthood (Cote and Schwartz 13). This stage is essential as it provides opportunities to explore different contexts and redefine values and principles, contributing to a healthy, balanced identity, a chance that Elsa Martinelli missed out on. It becomes evident in the novel's first chapters that Elsa is never granted much freedom. She lives in a highly restricted environment and is punished when she strays from it. Elsa exhibits stunted development; she does not evolve beyond embracing the values and beliefs imposed on her, which is a detrimental flaw in developing any identity.

The narrative of *The Four Winds* illustrates forms of emotional abuse, particularly neglect and emotional coldness, control and dominance, and isolation. According to Mikołajczuk in the article “Different Forms of Violence”, neglect and emotional coldness refer

to a lack of emotional support and affection essential for healthy development (8); the missing element in Elsa's life. Together with the iron grip her parents have over it, this results in a seclusion that cultivates loneliness. The novel's opening sentence reads, "Elsa Walcott had spent years in enforced solitude,... In her lonely bedroom,... she sometimes dared to dream of an adventure of her own, but not often" (8). Here, the author hints at the abuse, describing her solitude as "enforced" rather than chosen, and her dreams of a better life as transgressions that are only permitted in her mind, where she "dares" to express them.

In the following pages, the reader meets a woman who belonged to no one, facing disapproval and rejection as the norm because she was perceived as lacking beauty and was therefore shown no affection. A woman who, at 25, learned to cope with the pain by blending into the background and playing the part she was given. The role of the outsider, the caged bird who must not seek attention, lest it shames its owners. A woman who, since childhood, was denied the right to seek meaning in her life, to test her resilience, to live, because she had to be hidden like a shameful secret under the guise of illness (8).

Her parents assign her a role and provide very little education on matters they deem unnecessary for fulfilling her obligations. When she is 14, she becomes sick, and that defines her for a long time, the sickly, withdrawn child who is only noticed when her parents need to put her in her place. The truth is, however, that the parents in the story care more about their reputation than anything else, and Elsa being the "ugly" daughter tarnishes their image of the perfect high-class family that society looks up to (9). They use her sickness to force her to withdraw from the public eye as much as possible. It is revealed when the thought that her parents wanted her sick crosses her mind (14).

Additionally, whenever she expresses her desire to explore the outside world and step outside her designated role, she is met with contempt and verbal abuse. She is told that wearing

a pretty dress would not make her beautiful (24), and they take away the fabric she loved to give to her sisters (27). Another instance of verbal abuse is when her mother reprimands her to face reality after she tries to go to a speakeasy. She says that no man would want an unattractive woman who “towers over him”, even more so since she has tarnished her reputation (24). When she asks to be sent to university, to do something with her life, maybe become a writer, her father mocks her, asking if she has any talent, and treats her as if she were hysterical (10).

The parents in Elsa’s story are abusive and isolate her from a society that only looks at her with pity. She is unwelcome and unloved by her family, who treat her as an afterthought. Every aspect of her life is under her parents' control, and whenever she tries to leave the cocoon created to entrap her under the guise of protection, they break her spirit. The former examples illustrate emotional abuse through behaviours like manipulation, emotional unavailability, blaming, and a lack of empathy towards the victim. Such actions can lead to long-term consequences, including diminished self-esteem, difficulty forming healthy relationships characterised by unhealthy attachment styles, and anxiety (Mikolajczuk 8).

### **2.1.2. Gendered Marginalisation in Society**

In *The Four Winds*, Kristin Hannah vividly portrays Elsa’s life shackled by the stringent gender roles of early 20th-century Texas. She lives in a society that enforces women’s adherence to conventional domestic responsibilities, marriage, and motherhood. Elsa’s departure from these norms is evident in her being unmarried at 25 and her intellectual pursuits, especially her passion for reading novels, which makes her an outsider and marginalised within her community. This study explores how Elsa’s experience of gender-based marginalisation is interpreted through Kristeva’s theories, particularly the interplay of symbolic and semiotic systems in relation to her idea of abjection.

The first few chapters of *The Four Winds* depict Elsa's life before marriage, revealing the stifling restrictions placed on her as a woman and the expectations she struggled to meet, weighing heavily on her. If she had been a successful conformist woman of her time, she would have been married with children, participating in the beautification committee, and bringing food to parties she could enjoy. Instead, when the reader meets her, Elsa is celebrating her 25th birthday as a confirmed wallflower and spinster, watching from the margins as her sisters thrive in society.

She reflects in the story that a man her age would still be enjoying his youth and looked upon indulgently (8). However, as a woman, she was silently scorned as the object of pity. A woman's hope began to die at the age of 20. Over the next five years, it would slowly dwindle to nothingness as the whispers in town and church grew louder until "the die was cast" (9), at 25. By that point, Elsa was 'on the shelf', subjected to constant, deafening scrutiny. Furthermore, to illustrate her perceived failure, people did not wonder why she was a spinster or why an ordinary young lady from a well-off family was unmarried; they only had to look at her to know, and she knew it. From a young age, Elsa struggled with comparisons to her pretty sisters because she did not fit into the beauty standards of her time (9).

In this instance, the intersection of abjection and the symbolic is clarified through the rejection Elsa faces. Elsa is labelled as the "other" because she does not meet the requirements of the symbolic order, the framework that dictates the norms and values of 20th-century Texas. An order that privileges women who conform to the moulds of marriage and motherhood, roles for which Elsa is unqualified. As a 25-year-old spinster, she exists outside this framework, rendering her an "abject" figure: someone society deems unworthy or improper, as explained in the article entitled "Julia Kristeva's the Semiotic and the Symbolic Reading of Adrienne Rich's '*Planetarium*' and Carol Ann Duffy's '*Havisham*'" (Al-Hemeedawi and Saadoon 6). Kristeva argues that abjection occurs when individuals or traits disrupt the symbolic order,

threatening its stability (Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* 18). Elsa's inability to marry and have children labels her as a disruptive influence, straying from the ideal feminine archetype. The murmurs and criticisms from her society point to this exile, portraying her as a warning of missed or nonexistent potential (9).

Elsa's sense of abjection is deepened by her family, especially her mother, who upholds and reinforces the symbolic order. Her mother's obsession with Elsa's physical frailty diminishes her value to the flaws of her body, overlooking her intelligence and ambitions. This mirrors Kristeva's assertion that the maternal figure often mediates societal norms, policing the limits of acceptability (Kristeva, *Desire in Language* 137; Al-Hemeedawi and Saadoon 4). By dismissing Elsa's desire for independence, her mother becomes an agent of the symbolic order, suppressing her semiotic desires- the raw emotional undercurrents of self-expression that Kristeva associates with the maternal body (Al-Hemeedawi and Saadoon 4-6).

Elsa's internalised shame, her belief that she is lacking in every way, particularly in beauty, stems from this abjection. She absorbs society's disgust, perceiving herself as inherently flawed and unworthy of love or agency, as Kristeva explains that abjection is an individual's inability to recognize any likeness to their peers (Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* 17). She reflects on how the shame of feeling unattractive had been a constant presence in her life (38). Additionally, her struggles are intensified by the comparison with her sisters, who effortlessly embody the ideals of the symbolic order, making it hard for her to step out of their shadow.

She missed out on the opportunities offered to her sisters because she felt unworthy of them, despite her desires and aspirations matching societal expectations for women. Elsa spent her life under the watchful eyes of a code of conduct that limited her movements without giving anything in return, even when she met the admission requirements. She was treated like a commodity, heavy to bear and easy to discard. Discarded she was, at the first occasion, her

parents, to whom “image was everything” (9), disowned her (38). Because she was finally so soiled, they were free of contending with an investment that brought no profit.

Nevertheless, her secret rebellion, such as reading risqué novels like *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* or even classics like *The Age of Innocence*, and the life-changing decision of illicitly meeting her future husband, suggests a latent defiance against the imposed order. Kristeva’s framework reveals how societal norms and expectations weaponise abjection, even within the family unit, to enforce conformity while exposing the fragile cracks in such a system (Al-Hemeedawi and Saadon 6). These spaces allow marginalised individuals like Elsa to retain their humanity. As beings rejected by the system, they are overlooked, granting them the freedom to be more themselves than anyone else. That advantage, however, is toxic because the closer someone is to their true self, the further they are pushed away (Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* 17).

In this sense, *The Four Winds* can be seen as a vivid illustration of how societal expectations act as a cage for Elsa Martinelli. These societal norms cultivate her self-loathing and shame, undermining her self-esteem and limiting her opportunities. However, the seeds of a growing rebellion are sown in her yearning for a different life, hinting at her potential for resilience, bravery, and the empowerment to claim what she is owed against all odds, as she thinks she has to believe there was grit in her, that she could be brave (12). So, she was at the end of her life, as will be discussed below in more detail.

## **2.2. The Role of the Maternal Figure in Creating Trauma**

Kristin Hannah portrays Elsa Martinelli’s emotional abuse and alienation during her early years, with her maternal figure acting as a central figure in her life. Elsa’s mother in the novel embodies Julia Kristeva’s concept of abjection, which describes the rejection of parts of the self considered unacceptable by societal norms or family expectations (Arya 16). Due to

unmet expectations, her rejection by those she views as family fosters feelings of abjection and internalised shame.

Internalised shame directly arises from the abject, as individuals confront negative messages about themselves, they absorb harmful perceptions of their identity (Arya 16). By perceiving certain aspects of themselves as unsightly and abject, individuals reject these features, deepening their sense of worthlessness and inadequacy (Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* 17-18). This struggle is evident at the beginning of Elsa's journey, with her mother playing a prominent role. She imposes societal norms that suppress Elsa's individuality and personal ambitions.

This is evident in her lack of support for Elsa's educational goals and her fixation on her daughter's physical appearance and health. For example, Elsa was prohibited from strenuous activity (12). By ignoring Elsa's exceptional intelligence and the traits that highlight her inner beauty, like her resilience and adaptability, while continually pointing out perceived flaws such as her unattractive appearance and fragile health, her mother manipulates her into viewing herself as the lesser one, a belief she internalises. When Elsa meets a friend later in California who asks her why she has such a negative image of herself, she answers: "...The things your parents say and the things your husband doesn't say become a mirror, don't they? You see yourself the way they see you, and no matter how far you come, you bring that mirror with you" (315).

When Elsa expresses a desire to further her education, her mother, in support of her father, deems her unworthy of it (10), perpetuating the notion that her accomplishments are limited to being beautiful and marriageable, which she is not; thus, killing her potential. This rejection contributes to her abjection as she is compelled to suppress all parts of herself deemed useless by familial expectations, as is made clear in the article "Abjection Interrogated:

Uncovering the Relation Between Abjection and Disgust” by Rina Arya (3). The mother’s constant emphasis on Elsa’s appearance and lack of attractiveness positions her below her sisters, who are paragons of beauty, overlooking intellectual qualities and exacerbating her shame (9).

Consequently, as Elsa internalises this negative image of herself as truth, her shame takes root in her soul. Elsa sees herself as “too everything--too pale, too thin, too tall, too unsure of herself” (9), a direct consequence of her mother expressing negative opinions about her and comparing her to her sisters. Thus, as a coping mechanism for these hurt feelings and self-loathing, Elsa learned to be quiet, neither seeking nor demanding attention, and to fade into the background to avoid rejection and invalidation (8).

Elsa suppresses her desires in her quest for conformity to societal norms, which is evident in her longing to live “a life, not merely an existence, where she is judged on more than her appearance” (9). She also represses her emotions: her frustration at being excluded from the family dynamic, the pain of rejection, and the humiliation of witnessing her failure in their eyes (10). Such feelings only amplify her sense of rejection, as her mother asserts that a lady does not wear her heart on her sleeve, thereby perpetuating the vicious cycle (33).

The prior background suggests that Elsa’s relationship with her mother in *The Four Winds* reflects how abjection and internalised shame can influence personal identity (Arya 16; Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* 18). Elsa adopts a negative view of herself through her mother’s behaviour and words, resulting in a fragmented self-image and profound fear of rejection. Ultimately, Elsa’s admiration and love for her mother, the ideal lady, amplify the woman’s toxic voice, adding a tragic dimension to her life. This character bears the trauma from the emotional abuse she suffered, a repercussion that manifests in various ways, which will be examined further in the following sections.

## **2.3. Trauma Responses to Emotional Abuse**

In *The Four Winds*, Elsa's physical symptoms demonstrate the effects of emotional trauma on her body. Her heightened awareness and moments of dissociation extend beyond psychological responses, manifesting physically due to her attachment trauma. These physical symptoms highlight how early relational dynamics influence her emotional and physical health (Van Der Kolk). This trauma contributes to the formation of an anxious-preoccupied attachment style, which deepens her internalised shame and limits her perspective on life beyond societal norms. Therefore, by examining these traumatic reactions and insecure attachments, the upcoming discussions seek to illuminate how early relational dynamics shape identity, self-worth, and resilience.

### **2.3.1. Somatic Symptoms as The Embodiment of Emotional Trauma**

Bessel Van Der Kolk's seminal work, *The Body Keeps the Score*, reveals how trauma is woven into our physiology, influencing both the mind and body. In *The Four Winds*, Elsa Martinelli's experiences of emotional neglect and societal rejection illustrate Van Der Kolk's argument: trauma transcends a psychological injury and manifests as a physical reality. Her mother's dismissive attitude and constant criticism create a cycle of stress and shame that manifests in three key ways: heightened anxiety, internalised trauma, and dissociation, all of which reflect Van Der Kolk's framework of embodied trauma.

Van Der Kolk explains that prolonged exposure to stress, such as Elsa's relentless pursuit of approval and fear of rejection, activates the body's fight-or-flight response, keeping the individual in hyperarousal (47). Elsa's mother perpetuates this dynamic of hypervigilance by constantly focusing on her perceived flaws. She never lets Elsa forget the disappointing inferiority of her nature as the unloved, sickly, unattractive spinster daughter. This constant scrutiny wires Elsa's nervous system to anticipate judgment, leaving her in a state of perpetual

anxiety. Consequently, she made sure to go unnoticed as a “defense mechanism”, so people would “forget she was there and left her alone” (26).

Her alertness in monitoring her health, appearance, and behaviour to avoid further rejection parallels Van Der Kolk’s observation that trauma survivors often feel “unsafe inside their bodies” (89), their senses so attuned to threat even in non-threatening environments. This occurs because their minds, and consequently their bodies, are trapped in the traumatic experience. When individuals are subjected to dangers and hurts from which they cannot escape for prolonged periods, as in Elsa’s case of exposure to neglect and criticism until the age of 25, their neurological systems are reprogrammed never to let their guard down (Van Der Kolk 252).

As humans, we are naturally geared to protect ourselves, but our minds discern when to let our guards down (Van Der Kolk 75). This is something Elsa never learned. She was never taught to care for herself or distinguish between friend and foe. As a social creature, she adapted to her hostile environment and learned to keep her people at arm’s length (Van Der Kolk 83). Throughout her life, she never crossed a fixed line in any of her relationships. To protect herself, Elsa never truly gets to know people, nor do they know her; she never communicates with her husband and children beyond the surface, even though she loves them, because she fears rejection. This phenomenon relates to the maternal figure and community that Elsa emulates. She would have become a balanced individual if she had been loved and shown how to form healthy relationships (Van Der Kolk 79).

Additionally, as Van Der Kolk notes, when emotional pain overwhelms the psyche, dissociation, a detachment from one’s body or surroundings, becomes a survival mechanism (64). Elsa’s reaction to her family’s rejection illustrates this, as she systematically diminishes her presence and detaches from her environment. Elsa lives in her mind and novels rather than reality to avoid facing the pain that awaits her. This dissociation allows her to escape situations

where she feels powerless, in other words, when she is in direct contact with her family members or participating in social engagements. However, as Van Der Kolk warns, while dissociation offers temporary relief, it fractures one's sense of self and impedes emotional processing in the long run (Van Der Kolk 64). Elsa's "dissolving" reflects a body and mind numbed to pain- a coping strategy that ultimately isolates her from her own agency and loved ones.

### **2.3.2. Insecure Attachment Styles as a Trauma Response**

Attachment theory, formulated by John Bowlby and later elaborated by Mary Ainsworth, categorises insecure attachment styles as behaviours stemming from inconsistent or neglectful caregiving during childhood (Holmes 39). These attachment styles affect how individuals view themselves, their relationships, and others, frequently resulting in emotional dysregulation, fear of intimacy, or difficulty trusting people (Galvano and Castiglione 8). In Kristin Hannah's novel *The Four Winds*, Elsa Martinelli's upbringing, marked by emotional neglect and gendered marginalisation, exemplifies the development of an anxious-preoccupied attachment style, one of the three primary attachment types.

Elsa's attachment style stems from her childhood experiences with inconsistent caregiving (Galvano and Castiglione 3-4). Her mother fluctuated between being overly protective and emotionally neglectful, which made Elsa perceive love as conditional and unreliable. This dynamic instilled in her a profound fear of abandonment and an ongoing need for reassurance. Her fear of rejection is a pervasive theme throughout her life. She worries that she will be left by those she loves, a feeling that stems from her mother's emotional unavailability and casual cruelty in the name of protection. This anxiety is evident in her interactions with her family, mainly her mother and father, and later her husband Rafe and children, especially her daughter Loreida.

Elsa often seeks reassurance from Rafe because she loves him and desires his acceptance, which can overwhelm him. However, no matter how much she needs his approval, she is not overtly aggressive, suggesting a non-confrontational approach that is typical of insecure attachment styles (Zahra 6). She caters to his emotional and physical needs, striving to meet his expectations of a wife to the best of her ability (Hannah 47). She learns to cook and clean, becomes a farmer, and works hard to earn his parents' approval. However, she makes no demands of him and does not ask for what he is unwilling to give. During her marriage to Rafe, Elsa treats him like a porcelain vase, which is easily breakable and capable of inflicting harm on her with its shards.

She does not force him to love her; she knows he resents their marriage, viewing it as a prison that has trapped him on his parents' farm. She gratefully receives whatever affection he offers her, akin to scraps tossed to a dog. Their marital relationship is shallow and unfulfilling for Elsa, but as she seeks his positive opinion, she settles for the minimum, hoping to receive more in time. This behaviour suggests a pattern of individuals with insecure anxious attachment who tolerate superficial emotional support due to a fear of abandonment and rejection (Zahra 4-6). By meeting Rafe's expectations and not imposing her own, Elsa becomes a victim of the vicious cycle of her anxious attachment.

The one truth in their relationship is that their dreams were not so different, but Elsa lived in reality and cherished what she had, while Rafe only wanted what was best for himself. He was so focused on his misery that he did not see everyone else's. He did not notice that Elsa was withering too, buried under the dust, because he was a narcissist, and she was anxious to make him happy for their connection to grow. Moreover, sadly, he left her to deal with the aftermath of his departure as a single parent, while he pursued pointless, unattainable dreams and roamed.

While Elsa's tendency to seek external reassurance to soothe her inner insecurities heavily influences her relationships, it often hints at avoidance (Zahra 5). While she doesn't completely exhibit a dismissive-avoidant style, Elsa shows some avoidant traits, especially in her stress coping mechanisms. When overwhelmed, she often dissociates, which reveals her learned response to emotional pain. This dissociation serves as a temporary refuge from distressing situations, resembling the emotional detachment frequently seen in the behaviour of avoidant individuals (Zahra 5).

For example, in her relationship with her teenage daughter Loreida, Elsa creates distance whenever she feels rejected, effectively protecting herself. Though she is physically present as a mother, the emotional warmth in their interactions tends to be less pronounced (57). Nevertheless, Elsa's predominant anxious attachment style compels her to seek validation and connection instead of consistently avoiding emotional engagement. Still, her avoidant behaviours highlight the intricate interplay between her attachment style and coping strategies.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, the examination of *The Four Winds* focuses on how emotional neglect and societal influences shape personal identity. Elsa's narrative uncovers the underlying reasons for identity crises, drawing on Kristeva's theories and Van Der Kolk's findings regarding the physical impacts of trauma. This analysis enhances understanding of how challenges in attachment and societal expectations converge to shape personal identity, particularly concerning emotional abuse and gender dynamics. Emotional neglect can inflict harm as severe as physical violence, or even greater. As social beings, humans rely on caregivers and interpersonal interactions to learn self-care and how to care for others, which in turn leads to attachment trauma. Ultimately, this chapter seeks to clarify the connections among various factors leading to identity crises and to uncover possibly overlooked elements.

## **Chapter Three: Financial Abuse as an Amplifier of Traumatic Behaviours.**

## **Introduction**

Elsa faces hardships as a single parent after her husband left her with their children, prompting her to move to California when her son developed Dust Pneumonia. While the Golden State is viewed as a land of opportunity, it also reveals its grim side through the experiences of migrant workers like her. Despite hopes for a better future, Elsa becomes trapped in financial abuse and marginalisation, with low wages, limited opportunities, and exploitation threatening her independence and self-esteem. This chapter examines how Elsa's time in California reflects broader themes of financial abuse and economic exploitation. Exploring the influence of societal expectations and economic systems on her unstable financial condition enables us to grasp the intricate relationship between economic hardship and personal identity. Elsa's story emphasises key aspects of financial abuse and systemic marginalisation associated with the American dream, highlighting the need for a more profound understanding of the challenges individuals face striving for a better life during The Great Depression and the pervasive dust storms.

### **3.1. Financial Exploitation as a Form of Abuse**

Financial exploitation and abuse are widespread issues that affect individuals across various settings, often worsening their economic vulnerability and marginalisation. In *The Four Winds*, Elsa Martinelli's experiences in California illustrate these concerns. Low wages, limited opportunities, and systemic marginalisation contribute to her financial difficulties. The novel exposes how these harsh economic realities transform into financial exploitation when people are forced to work for inadequate pay and minimal advancement opportunities. This exploitation extends beyond economic matters, influencing self-worth and individuals' sense of identity as they seek financial security and autonomy in a system that strips them of their rights.

The systemic nature of financial abuse in *The Four Winds* emphasises how economic exploitation is deeply embedded within social, political, and legal frameworks that sustain inequality and exert control over marginalised groups, especially migrant workers like Elsa Martinelli. Unlike isolated or interpersonal incidents, the financial abuse portrayed in the novel arises as a systemic issue, reinforced by legislation, societal norms, and power discrepancies that rob labourers of crucial rights and protections.

During the Great Depression, many Southern migrants came to California for jobs and economic stability. Kristin Hannah points out that these individuals were neither vagrants nor criminals; instead, they were mostly families attempting to recover from the devastation caused by dust storms (190). These were hard-working people who only wanted fair treatment and opportunities. Unfortunately, they encountered discrimination from locals who regarded them as nuisances.

By examining Elsa's experiences, we can better understand the connection between financial abuse, personal identity, and resilience. Consequently, financial abuse and exploitation are not merely economic problems; they also carry significant psychological and social consequences. These challenges reflect broader societal inequalities, where certain groups consistently lack access to essential resources and opportunities. Through Elsa's story, one can witness how these dynamics impact the lives of California's migrants, hindering their quest for economic stability and personal fulfilment.

### **3.1.1. The Economic Dimensions of Financial Abuse in the Novel**

In *The Four Winds*, financial abuse functions as a formidable force stemming from economic exploitation, significantly affecting Elsa's identity and autonomy. Unlike financial control often seen in domestic relationships, the novel places financial abuse within more significant economic and social structures that take advantage of migrant workers on various

levels. Central to the financial abuse Elsa faces are the shockingly low wages. The narrative reveals that migrant labourers are not compensated with a fair hourly rate but through piecework, earning based on the amount harvested. This framework ensured that employers minimise payouts while maximising labour exploitation. Additionally, in that period, migrant workers faced competition with native Californian workers who resented them, leading to discrimination and barriers to employment (Hornbeck 21). This led to the migrants' accepting wages below what was necessary for a decent livelihood, as Elsa's situation clarifies.

Elsa's reflection, that she worked until her hands bled and the sun went down, but the money was always less than she needed (Hannah 224), highlights the brutal physical and monetary toll exacted for the minimal returns. This wage system is designed to entrap workers like Elsa in a cycle of need, poverty, and exhaustion, reinforcing an economic precarity that prevents victims from saving funds or seeking stability elsewhere. These circumstances further solidified the socio-economic position of migrants in situations similar to Elsa Martinelli's, as outsiders, and exacerbated their hardships (Hornbeck 23).

The physical abuse of labouring ten hours straight to pick cotton in the heat of summer, the dehydration (Hannah 229), and the blisters caused by the thorns on cotton flowers that felt like darning needles, as Elsa's daughter expressed (Hannah 228), becomes inseparable from the financial abuse. As the body becomes just another tool to be used and discarded at whim, it serves as an expandable resource, given that the number of migrants needing work exceeds the available jobs. Elsa's fellow migrants arrived daily, putting them at a more considerable disadvantage as it meant "More workers, less work" (Hannah 225).

In addition to wage injustices, Elsa endures further mistreatment through the exploitation of her basic needs, like housing. Upon arriving in California, she lives in a camp constructed from a jumble of old cars, tents, and shacks on muddy ground. The foul air and

contaminated water posed serious health risks, and the living space was cramped (Hannah 189). Essentially, the migrants were subjected to squalid conditions with no alternatives, as they needed to conserve money for food.

Historically, these camps were called “Little Oklahomas” or “Okieville” by Californians who resented their squalid, disorganised appearance (Gregory 72). Furthermore, the migratory nature of the work available meant that people had to move from fruit orchards in winter to cotton fields in summer, prioritising mobility over stable housing (Hornbeck 25). This was due to the need to earn money continually to survive, leaving them no time to pursue stability. Additionally, during that era, the government was not involved in infrastructure development to accommodate displaced populations and provided no assistance, leading to the proliferation of these camps (Hornbeck 25).

This manipulation of essential living conditions, such as food and shelter, serves as a means of control that perpetuates economic dependence and vulnerability. More importantly, it represents a deliberate form of structural violence enacted on a significant scale by the system. Specifically, it hinders migrant workers like Elsa from reaching their potential economic stability (Galtung 5). Furthermore, these workers experience violence because their dire situations are preventable; with fair wages and less hostility, they could become stable, successful members of society. Instead, they face violence that is “built into the structure,” thus intensifying the “social injustice” highlighted by Galtung (7).

The combination of low wages and inadequate housing keeps Elsa trapped in a cycle of struggle, diminishing her opportunities for advancement. With scarce resources, she endures difficult decisions such as skipping meals to feed her children and extending the life of tattered clothing. These conditions highlight how financial abuse operates on a systemic level, depriving

individuals of essential autonomy, dignity, and economic security. Her story uncovers the harsh reality of poverty, often seen as a type of economic violence and oppression.

### **3.1.2. The Systemic Dimensions of Financial Abuse in the Novel**

The broader societal context of the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl adds complexity to Elsa's circumstances, as economic difficulties and shortages shape her challenges. The novel illustrates how societal norms and economic systems sustain these conditions, continuing cycles of poverty and marginalisation. Particularly for migrant workers like Elsa, who start over at the bottom of the social ladder, "adrift," and are treated like trash (Eagon 166). These people were met with disdain and blatant discrimination in all aspects of their lives in California.

They were viewed as inferior to humans and treated with a condescending attitude, akin to dogs that did not know how to behave or live better lives, as they faced refusals for services everywhere and were told to go where they belonged. A clear example of this unjust treatment is evident in Elsa's experiences. Upon arriving in California, she attempts to rent a cottage. However, she is turned away, with the response, "We don't rent to Okies" (Hannah 188), with "Okies" being a derogatory term for her group. Additionally, when a friend of hers gives birth to a stillborn, Elsa is denied assistance at the local hospital due to their non-Californian status, even in life-threatening situations (Hannah 246). During her first job cleaning a house, the owner warns her daughter, "Don't get too close, dear. They carry disease" (Hannah 197).

Migrant workers like Elsa were systematically denied employment opportunities outside of agriculture, particularly in cotton and fruit picking. Their seasonal wages were so low that even their children were compelled to work, yet they still struggled to achieve stability. Additionally, they were repeatedly denied the right to collective bargaining, union assistance, and legal safeguards that could help improve exploitative labour conditions. This lack of

protection renders these workers susceptible to the growers and landowners, who have direct control over job opportunities, significantly influencing the migrants' livelihoods. This was because the lack of protection for workers during the Dust Bowl era significantly contributed to their vulnerability. In other words, the migrant workers had no labour rights and no legal safeguards concerning wages, working conditions, and job security; they were also excluded from receiving healthcare, insurance, and welfare programs, as they were not official residents.

To make things worse, employers had no incentive to treat their workers better as the state did not enforce labour laws (Hornbeck 2). These circumstances are evident in the novel. The growers and government officials mutually benefit from each other and thus have no reason to enforce stricter regulations, particularly not for people who do not have citizenship, no legal foothold, and cannot retaliate. Consequently, the working conditions can only worsen for migrants like Elsa, because even if complaints were raised, nothing would be done as it would not be beneficial to those in power.

Additionally, refugees were considered cultural outsiders. Thus, their protection was not considered, so their profession as mobile agricultural labourers was not recognised in the legalities of labour (Hornbeck 2). These are some of the factors that permitted the growers to exploit their workers, as previously mentioned. Besides, the workers were not permitted to unionise and protect their rights, which would have attacked the landowners' pockets. This is relevant to the novel, as Elsa meets her end at a strike organised to gain that right and attain fair wages. However, this was made impossible by the cooperation of the growers and the trade union officials to keep the farms labelled as non-industrial despite the logical equation (McWilliams 267).

This systemic oppression is conducted both overtly and covertly to stop the workers' unionisation. Efforts by the migrants to organise for fair wages and better working conditions

are met with violent crackdowns and intimidation tactics that silence dissent and create an atmosphere of fear. For instance, in the novel, a wealthy, tyrannical plantation owner, Mr. Welty, builds wire fences so the workers who work his land cannot go to meetings. He builds a rifle tower (330), hires vigilantes to make rounds at night, and violently punishes anyone who expresses dissatisfaction and disbands any gatherings (331). Mr. Welty also ensures that anyone working for him stops receiving monetary relief from the state to corner them into needing him more (334).

During the second day of the strike that ends the story, strikers are beaten and shot and hit with bats and smoke bombs, leading to Elsa's death, one of the many lives lost, ending the strike (Hannah 367). Restrictions on collective bargaining significantly hinder migrants' capacity to enhance their circumstances, reinforcing a cycle of poverty and dependency. It is painfully ironic to face a hierarchy reminiscent of a past feudal system while striving for a better future. Elsa's experience as just a tiny part of a larger system highlights the importance of acknowledging financial abuse as a form of capitalist injustice.

### **3.2. The Psychological Repercussions of Financial Abuse in *The Four***

#### ***Winds***

The psychological impact of financial abuse in *The Four Winds* is deeply bound to Elsa's lack of economic stability. As financial abuse hits directly at the unstable core of Elsa's identity, it threatens her already damaged self-esteem and imposes chronic anxiety that takes a toll on her body. Elsa's inability to secure the bare necessities for her children's well-being erodes her identity as a provider, and it introduces a deep sense of shame and self-blame (Mikolajczyk 8). Her children's hunger constitutes a vivid reminder that she failed as a mother. Elsa often laments at the scarcity of food and its mediocre quality. This emotional turmoil can be deeply rooted, as victims may internalise feelings of shame and failure for not being able to

fulfil their perceived responsibilities, which can further perpetuate a cycle of emotional distress. Elsa admits to her daughter that she has failed at her parental duties because Loreida is working, underfed, and dirty (Hannah 327).

When they first get to California, Elsa remarks on how perceptions are deceptive, as she genuinely notices how meagre and bony her daughter has become for the first time. Furthermore, from then on, a cloak of worry envelopes her; she does not sleep properly or even for long, she leaves before dawn to seek employment, no matter how measly the pay is, and registers for relief pension from the state (Hannah 209). An action that poisons her self-worth further, and when Loreida and Antony, her children, have to work with her picking fruit and cotton instead of pursuing an education, something inside of her dies (Hannah 225).

These circumstances leave Elsa vulnerable to the demons that possess her heart, the self-loathing, and the internalised shame become amplified. She feels once again like an object being unworthy of love (Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* 18), left at the mercy of a system that promotes marginalisation, one that would rob her and millions of people of their dignity and humanity. The only difference between Elsa's situation in California and her life before marriage is that the abjection process is tangible. The residents show disgust at the sight of her, at the dirt and smell she carries like an identification badge (Hannah 310). When Elsa attends a parent-teacher meeting at her children's school, the other mothers flee from her presence (Hannah 219).

In this case, the financial abuse serves to exacerbate and empower recurring issues of anxiety and a lack of self-confidence. As per Kristeva's theories, the systemic dominance brainwashes her into internalising the belief that the abysmal living conditions and the low wages are all she deserves (*Powers of Horror* 17). Because she is a dime in a dozen, and if she refuses to comply, she is easily dispensable. These feelings of inadequacy translate into fatigue

and anxiety; in other words, this point leads back to Van Der Kolk's somatic trauma theory (47). As Elsa keeps bottling up her grief, sadness and anger over her situation in life, those feelings become embedded in her health condition.

The constant worry about her children, the malnutrition, and the exhaustion of working long hours under the sun caused harm to her body. According to Van Der Kolk, the psyche and the body are but one canvas; they both store trauma and paint a vivid image of its ravages (90). As Elsa's mind is constantly on high alert due to her anxiety, her body weakens over time until it can no longer function. This is made clear in her deathbed scene in the hospital, where her diagnosis is that, on top of her physical wounds, her heart is too tired to handle the damage she incurred (Van Der Kolk 370). This suggests that the accumulation of hardships and abuse she has endured in her life has made her heart a broken vessel beyond repair. A tragic reminder that individuals can only bear so much abuse and difficulty before reaching the point of no return.

### **3.3. Financial Exploitation in *The Four Winds* and the Dark Side of the American Dream**

*The Four Winds* is a powerful critique of the realities of the American dream. Through Elsa Martinelli's eyes, the reader can glimpse the darkness within the illusion of hope. The truth is that the dream is often unattainable for the unprivileged many, and equality is only given to the few deemed deserving of it. Elsa's journey is peppered with moments of hope, moments constantly overshadowed by the harsh, grim injustice of an economic and social hierarchy. The promise of the American dream, the premise of upward mobility based on equal opportunity, is revealed to be nothing more than a smokescreen.

Mitja Sardoč and Vladimir Prebilič, authors of an article entitled "Equality, Opportunity, And The American Dream" in the second volume of *The Routledge Handbook on the American Dream*, define the "standard" interpretation of the American dream as

encapsulating three main characteristics, the “freedom” to pursue personal goals, the guarantee of rewarded “hard work”, and the reasonable expectation of a brighter future (123). All of these factors are crucial to Elsa and her children's success. However, one characteristic in particular remains significant to her struggles, the promised reward, which suggests being allowed to reach her full potential and work hard.

This concept represents the principle of equal opportunity, meaning that individuals like Elsa should take responsibility for aspects of their journey to upward mobility that they can control. External factors outside their influence, such as gender, race, religion, and socio-economic status, are viewed as barriers to achieving the dream (Sardoč and Prebilič 125). This is relevant to Elsa’s struggle among the many migrants regarding financial difficulty, as none of them are genuinely allowed to move forward in the economic sphere. They were promised work and a chance to rebuild for the better, and when they moved to California, they were met with financial abuse. The jobs were scarce, the wages pitiful, and the living conditions dire. In other words, subpar offerings were given to people deserving of the full rewards.

Like many of her peers, Elsa was abandoned in her time of need, when millions were unemployed and even the land seemed to betray its closest companions. The migrants were paid exponentially less than needed for survival, never enough to save money or move to better living conditions. They were coerced into surviving on scraps. This is an instance of financial abuse and systemic exploitation on a large scale. Those at the top of the ladder take advantage of the desperation of people like Elsa, poor and helpless, to keep them under their thumbs, powerless and dependent. Elsa’s struggle illustrates the pain experienced by numerous families who, like her, had to abandon their homes and find safety elsewhere.

Furthermore, Kristin Hannah exposes the myth of the American dream in the story. She illuminates the glaring cracks in a belief that capitalism has long corrupted. As Elsa and

thousands like her migrate, they pursue the promise that hard work will lead to prosperity and that it is their right to expect such outcomes as Americans. Nevertheless, they encounter closed doors and broken promises, created by a rigged system intended to benefit the few at the expense of the many. Thus, the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl are backdrops for a narrative about how the American dream can be warped into a nightmare for those at the bottom of the food chain.

The American Dream is not merely broken but built on the Darwinian principle of survival of the fittest. However, most of all, the dream is just that, a dream, not a reflection of reality. Freud said that dreams are the individual's subconscious fulfilling their wants. Consequently, The American Dream is a form of escapism for people beaten by life, such as Elsa, who need hope to summon resilience and will to fight for a reality that does not exist and never will (Sardoč and Prebilič 130).

## **Conclusion**

In summary, this chapter demonstrates how financial abuse and systemic exploitation lie beneath the allure of the American Dream, as portrayed through the story of Elsa Martinelli in *The Four Winds*. It exposes how economic struggles and inequality can trap people in poverty. The chapter also investigates the ingrained nature of this exploitation, rooted in discriminatory social, political, and legal structures that strip migrant workers of essential rights and protections. Additionally, it reflects on how such abuse can erode self-esteem, induce anxiety, and lead to health issues for individuals like Elsa. Furthermore, it addresses the hidden structural obstacles that impede the pursuit of genuine equality, perpetuating injustice. Ultimately, it sheds light on how the dream can exploit rather than enrich, revealing the harsh realities faced by those who chase it.



# **General Conclusion**

The concept of identity has evolved and expanded to reflect the vast insights gained about the intricacies of human nature. Although identity is abstract and intangible, it is far from ephemeral. Instead, it acts as the dye that colours human societies, manifesting in every breath taken, leaving a lasting impression over time. Researchers sought to comprehend identity and reveal its true nature as scientific understanding advanced. Yet, with each new discovery, confusion intensified, deepening the mystery of how identity develops in individuals, how it changes, and how external factors influence it.

The only constant in identity is its inherently social nature, overshadowing the personal. A person's identity merely mirrors the society around them. As highlighted by the psychoanalytical subject of this research work, the words spoken by parental figures and romantic partners do not simply mirror one's self-image. Instead, they can be toxic arrows or soothing remedies, influenced by intent. In essence, personal identity emerges from various social, economic, and cultural influences. It is shaped by the environment in which an individual was raised and the context in which they developed their identity.

One form of abuse highlighted in this research work narrative is physical, emotional, or financial mistreatment. The story is filled with accounts of hardship, abuse, and marginalisation. Elsa Martinelli experienced isolation from those who should have cared for her, primarily because of her perceived lack of beauty and usefulness. In many ways, this character epitomises the broken and wounded individuals we encounter daily. These individuals should have been taught that being human is to receive love in exchange for giving it, that appreciation, care, and belonging are their inherent rights. Instead, they learned that being different often results in loneliness. The cost of being loved is high, as one's worth is measured by what they contribute.

The narrative explores in this work is well-known. It reflects the experiences of millions over generations who had no option but to hope for the best with the wretched cards they were dealt. It examines the inescapable conditions that foster broken, dysfunctional individuals within society. These individuals, hurt by abuse, neglect, and criticism, struggle to understand their identities beyond the perceptions of others. They, like Elsa, are diamonds hidden beneath layers of grime. Lacking healthy, meaningful connections with friends and partners, they exhibit trauma-induced responses that lead them to isolate themselves, often dissociating from their instincts of social engagement. Above all, they grapple with a profound sense of not belonging anywhere.

Additionally, the novel's historical, social, and economic context greatly intensifies the difficulties in human relationships. Set in 1930s America, a period marked by significant hardship, the story unveils the darker aspects of human behaviour. The Great Depression and the Dust Bowl devastated lives, leading many to lose their homes, land, and jobs and prompting migrations to northern areas like California. Their identities were crushed, and the government labelled them as vagrants, altering their value to align with its objectives. Additionally, while promoting The American Dream, individuals like Elsa faced further victimisation as essential funds for survival were withheld, keeping them submissive to landowners like dogs on a leash.

Consequently, during such chaotic times, mental health inevitably deteriorates. In a society already rigidly governed by codes of conduct and norms, challenging periods poison the attitudes of its members, tightening the social drawbridge. The repercussions are severe when individuals encounter hostility, rejection, and marginalisation, intensifying suffering for those like Elsa, who feel lost and bear fresh scars. Essentially, newcomers often face disdain and contempt as they disrupt the already fragile equilibrium of society. This recurring pattern is not unique; it has resonated throughout the history of America and many other nations.

This work examines the fragility of personal identity through the tragic story of *The Four Winds*, but this is just the tip of the iceberg. While the plot presents numerous challenges and sketches Elsa as an unloved outsider on the margins, the essence of the narrative is hope. The research on emotional and financial abuse reveals that strained relationships arise from unhealthy attachment styles and dissociative tendencies; however, this does not lead to a bleak outcome. The influence of social surroundings during formative years is crucial in shaping identity, and they can have a beneficial impact. Identity is a multifaceted and dynamic concept, and with the right influences, individuals can prosper at any point in their lives.

Elsa's journey effectively illustrates this theme. After relocating to California, despite still enduring abuse and belittlement, she gradually builds her self-confidence and becomes more assertive. She encounters people who reflect her true worth back to her. A friend recognises her value and appreciates her qualities, while a man sees the beauty of a woman and the warrior spirit in her striking blue eyes. Society first broke Elsa, but later aided in her reconstruction, representing a dual nature. Kristin Hannah crafted not a tragedy, but a compelling testament to the struggles millions face in different forms of poverty and violence. She wrote a tribute to human resilience.

In conclusion, this research work and its narrative act as reflections that present diverse images for each individual. Some may view it as a tragedy perpetuated across various places and among different people. Others might recognise a shared experience of isolation and sorrow that seeps through the pages. Furthermore, many will find that humans are inherently social beings despite the modern emphasis on individuality. It is crucial to grasp that one's choices shape life. Therefore, one should respond with strength to challenges and exercise personal agency to move forward.

No one is truly helpless and trapped unless they desire it, because they are paralysed by the fear of further damage being dealt. This is apparent in Elsa Martinelli's journey, from simply spectating her life, to making her own choices, even if it meant permanent alienation from her roots. Her choices allowed her to be fully alive, loved, and belong somewhere. They also opened her door to hardships, pain, and loss. The bittersweet outcome of Elsa's life is that she died happy because she had lived to the fullest and found herself in the bargain, no matter how hard it was. She may have lived more peacefully as her parents' daughter, but she found a treasured truth as a mother, friend and lover. She found that to live is not an empty but calm experience, it is to find one's meaning and identity.

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