

A Relational Dialectics Examination of Friendship and Conflict in Hanya Yanagihara's 'A Little Life'

¹Aiswarya Mathew, ²Dr. Richa Arora,

M.A. English, Lovely Professional University,

Associate Professor, Department of English,

Lovely Professional University,

Abstract

Using the Relational Dialectics Theory (RDT) as the basis of analysis, the research covers the friendship and conflict dynamics in Hanya Yanagihara's book *A Little Life*. The study brings forth significant discoveries of the complexities of human interaction with a focus on the relationships of the main characters - Malcolm, Jude, Willem, and JB, as they reflect on the dialectical tensions of autonomy vs connectedness, openness vs closedness, as well as stability vs change in their lives. It explores how the protagonists handle growing complexity of their friendship, that is accompanied by the questions of identity, intimacy, and personal responsibility with the help of the comprehensive analysis of some of the significant passages of the novel. Through its systemic approach, RDT, as a theory, offers the required help in understanding the workings of relationships portrayed in the book. The study contributes not only to the in-depth understanding of the stories and characters which the author communicates, but also emphasizes the hardships people experience during the establishment and maintenance of interpersonal relationships. It offers meaningful insights for both literary analysis and real-life interpersonal negotiations which bring into light the importance of empathy, communication, and mutual support in the resolution of conflicts within human relationships.

Key Words: relational dialectics, friendship, conflict, a little life, relationships

Introduction

A Little Life by Hanya Yanagihara, paints friendships as the inexhaustible spring of sufferings, comfort, and resilience, which revise the traditional image of families. Taking the angle of Relational Dialectics Theory (RDT), this research unveils the complexity of the depicted friendships in Yanagihara's literary genius. Through critically examining the varieties of dialectical tensions like Autonomy vs Connection, Openness vs Closedness, and Stability vs Change within the notion of friendship from *A Little Life*, we intend to clarify the mechanism of conflict resolution and self-transformation within the interpersonal relations. Such an examination not only contributes to a deeper understanding of the intricate dimensions of friendship in recent fiction, but also provides the implications for understanding human relations on a broader level. Through the rejection of conventional family storylines, the narrative depicts the remarkable echo of the endurance of friendship in the midst of extreme adversity, reminding the readers of the countless life lessons interwoven in the narration. The artistic skills and deep analysis of complex human situations which Yanagihara learned through her journalistic practice and cultural background, enter into the novel, to make it emotionally powerful and gripping. With the nuanced representation of Jude St. Francis, readers are plunged into a story that engage the themes like pain, trauma, love and resilience spanned over decades in New York. Despite all the trauma and adversity that the story is based on, there are small moments of feeling the love, honesty, and optimism in the flavor of the story, which makes a reader think about the effect of prior experiences on relationships and self-identity.

The objective of the study is a thorough evaluation of relational dialectics within friendships in *A Little Life*, examining the evolution of dialectical tensions, and their effect on personal improvement and conflict resolution in the narrative. The research gap lies within the shortage of studies making use of Relational Dialectics Theory (RDT) to literary evaluation, in particular in exploring friendship dynamics and conflict resolution in novels like *A Little Life*. "There is a lack of studies systematically inspecting these issues through the lens of RDT. Adapting RDT to research literary texts bridges verbal exchange studies and literary scholarship, providing insights into the complexities of human relationships depicted in literature. The scope of the study extends to a comprehensive examination of interpersonal relationships, exploring dialectical tensions, character evolution, and the resolution of these tensions within the novel. Through these examinations, the study attempts to provide novel insights into the portrayal of interpersonal relationships in present day literature and deepen the understanding of human connections in *A Little Life*."

Methodology

The study uses a qualitative research approach that couples literary analysis with the application of Relational Dialectics Theory (RDT). Here's a breakdown of the technique:

An extensive analysis of Hanya Yanagihara's *A Little Life* served as the starting point for the investigation. To do this, a close study of the text was necessary in order to pinpoint important themes, characters, and story points pertaining to conflict and friendship. Relevant dialogues, narrative arcs, and passages that highlight the intricacies of human interactions in the book were taken out through literary analysis.

Using the principles of RDT, the study then employed a theoretical framework to examine conflict and friendship dynamics as outlined in the literature. According to RDT, relationships are defined by constant conflict between competing needs in areas such as autonomy vs connection, openness vs closedness, stability vs change. These dialectical tensions were observed in interpersonal communication between the characters of Jude, Malcolm, Willem and JB, and their role in friendship formation and conflict resolution.

In the end, the results were analyzed in light of the RDT theoretical framework. Their significance for comprehending conflict and friendship in literature was explored. This required combining the findings of the literary analysis with the RDT ideas, in order to provide insights into the intricacies of interpersonal interactions as they are shown in the novel.

Relational Dialectics and Friendship: A Review

For millennia, friendship has been a subject of interest for scholars from different fields. These experts note that though this relationship may seem simple, it operates within complex systems that are deeply rooted in diverse cultural contexts. From comradeship in childhood to close adult friends who provide emotional backing and foster self-esteem friendships make life worth living as they cut across time space and culture. Friendship is multifaceted hence drawing on various theoretical frameworks aimed at grasping its nature plus importance. Aristotle's categorization of friendship into three; utility pleasure and virtue in *Nicomachean Ethics* (1156a 10–1156b 30), underscores the need for shared values coupled with moral alignment which foster deep connections among people. Virtuous friendships on the other hand breed personal growth and excellence in terms of morality through genuine care for each other's welfare founded upon mutual respect as well as moral admiration. Scholars today use interdisciplinary methods when studying friendships so as to view them through different lenses like social exchange theory or attachment theory. Social exchange theory views all interpersonal relationships as transactional events where reciprocity must prevail if any kind of association is to occur (Karen and Cook, 53-54). Attachment theory indicates that the relationships people form in their early years greatly impact how they learn to understand and relate with others emotionally for life (Mikulincer and Shaver, 81-82). According to socioemotional selectivity theory, individuals prioritize relationships that hold emotional significance during the later stages of their lives as a way of promoting mental health (Carstensen et al., 1999). Moreover, sociological theories also put into consideration social structures along with norms when discussing friendship formation plus maintenance; these include but not limited to gender roles, race and social economic status among others. Friendship can be defined as voluntary mutual affectionate alliance between two or more individuals who offer

each other support frequently. It is through this association that people find happiness since it acts as foundation for all human interactions thereby enhancing their psychological welfare. Such a connection may take different shapes depending on its nature or setting ranging from casual acquaintanceship through intimate loyalty bonds up till solidarities within groups (Rawlins, 7-8). In addition, friendships are ever changing, thus meeting various needs which both parties involved have at heart, thereby impacting personal experiences and wider communities too.

The relational dialectics theory, which was developed in 1988 by Leslie Baxter and W. K. Rawlins, is a communication theory that tries to understand the complicated and ever-changing structure of interpersonal relationships. Essentially, the theory of relational dialectics claims that relationships are comprised of dialectical tensions; these are internal contradictions or opposing tendencies that shape communication patterns between partners. Such tensions produce what Baxter calls a “knot of contradictions” within personal connections and result in continual interaction between opposites. In order to explain the idea behind relational dialectics more clearly, Baxter and Montgomery (1996) used everyday sayings as metaphors showing how difficult it can be for us humans to get along with one another because we have so many conflicting desires when we interact together as friends or lovers or family members etcetera. For example, proverbs such as “opposites attract” or “birds of a feather flock together” express different sides of the same coin when it comes to understanding people’s behavior within relationships – on one hand they seem very true but on the other, both statements are also false. When making decisions in partnerships individuals may express conflicting views about what they want, which illustrates that this approach believes that change is constant, thus showing us how lively this thinking can be.

It is clear that in order to grasp the multifaceted essence of interpersonal connections, the relational dialectics theory borrows insights from theoretic and philosophical traditions. For example, the concept of Yin and Yang from Chinese philosophy, which indicates dynamic balance and interdependency, is thus applicable to the idea of relational dialectics. In this case, it is asserted by Griffin that Yin and Yang can be applied as a metaphor for the opposing forces between which a relationship oscillates. It needs to be said that according to the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus, opposing forces are the driving force behind harmony and change, and that the same is true of the paradigm of relational dialectics.

Furthermore, Bakhtin’s concepts of centripetal and centrifugal forces are equally illustrative in explaining RDT. Particularly, they refer to centripetal forces that represent the strengths and encourage movement towards cohesion, connectedness, and interaction, and those that include traces of dynamics that push entities apart (Bakhtin, 1981). The contemporary interpretation of these forces exists not only in physical processes, pointing to social dynamics as well as phenomena, hence the centrality to relational figures. As such, these principles are also found in RDT where centripetal forces promote the impulse toward connection, unity, and intimacy, while centrifugal forces promote the impulse towards separation and differentiation. The inherent struggle among these dualling impulses in a relationship is central. Individuals are perpetually and involuntarily helpless in balancing desires for autonomy vs connection, openness vs closedness, or even stability vs change.

Baxter and Montgomery 1996 asserted four core concepts of RDT, namely contradiction, totality, process, and praxis. Firstly, “contradiction” is a central phenomenon of relational dialectical theory. It is a process that captures the dynamic interplay between opposing forces. Secondly, “totality”, which suggests that relational contradictions are not in isolation but part of the same system. Thirdly, “process”, which is a change of relationships over time. Fourthly, “praxis”, which is a practical activity by which a theory is realized. As for the types of dialectical tensions, Baxter and Montgomery asserted that the central dialectical tensions inherent to relationships are autonomy and connectedness, favoritism and impartiality, openness and closedness, novelty and predictability, as well as instrumentality and affection. They further exert on how this list is not limited as dialectical tensions cannot be categorized into an exhaustive list.

In conclusion, the overviews of relational dialectics theory and friendship theories sheds light on the relationships’ nature and the intricacies involved in interpersonal encounters. Understanding the dialectical conflicts helps individuals to maintain their relations and promote closer understanding and relationships with

friends and family members. This knowledge served as a background for analysis of dialectical conflicts in friendships portrayed in *A Little Life*.

Analysis and Discussion

The chosen relationship for this discussion is the friendship of Jude, JB, Malcolm, and Willem in the novel *A Little Life*. Each of the men have different personalities, are from different backgrounds, and face personal struggles, but consciously create a bond to support one another. Relational dialectics theory sees friendships as dynamic relationships characterized by permanent tension and negotiation. In this friendship, three dialectical trends can be identified: autonomy vs connection, openness vs closedness, and stability vs change.

The character of Jude St. Francis grapples with the dialectical tension of autonomy/connection, as he looks to operate in independence with regards to his daily life. As the aftermath of his past trauma with relation to sexual abuse, as well as a broken childhood, Jude is seen as a character who fears to completely trust others. Due to his prevalent disability, the more his friends empathized with him and took care of him, the greater his desire for autonomy became. The conflict of this tension is represented in the following lines:

Always, he wonders why and how he has let four months—months increasingly distant from him—so affect him, so alter his life. But then, he might as well ask—as he often does—why he has let the first fifteen years of his life so dictate the past twenty-eight. He has been lucky beyond measure; he has an adulthood that people dream about: Why, then, does he insist on revisiting and replaying events that happened so long ago? Why can he not simply take pleasure in his present? Why must he so honor his past? Why does it become more vivid, not less, the further he moves from it? (461)

Jude further exhibits the dialectical tension of openness/closedness in various instances from the narrative. He is constantly guarded and mysterious about his past with his friends. He refuses to open up about his trauma related to sexual intimacy with Willem, and his friends are always seen to be hesitant about openly confronting him with regards to his actions of self-harm. One such instance is seen in Willem's reluctance to talk to Jude about his history with self-harm: "But this was part of the deal when you were friends with Jude: he knew it, Andy knew it, they all knew it. You let things slide that your instincts told you not to, you scooted around the edges of your suspicions. You understood that proof of your friendship lay in keeping your distance, in accepting what was told you, in turning and walking away when the door was shut in your face instead of trying to force it open again" (73).

Despite Jude's efforts at distancing himself, it is Willem's strong inclination towards openness and care, that in time helps Jude in opening up to Willem about his past experiences. One such example is from the night where Willem's presence helps Jude get through the night without harming himself: "When he wakes the next morning, Willem is no longer on top of him but beside him, but they are still intertwined, and he feels slightly drugged, and relieved, for he has not only not cut himself but he has slept, deeply, two things he hasn't done in months. That morning he feels fresh-scrubbed and cleansed, as if he is being given yet another opportunity to live his life correctly" (496). The connection further deepens their relationship, letting Jude experience the joy of emotional dependence. It is further proved in the lines where he tells Willem: "'You've made me happier than I've ever been in my life'" (493).

Jean Baptiste or JB's character in the novel, is one that goes through many ups and downs in his friendship with the other three. As an ambitious artist with immense creativity, he is seen misusing almost everyone and everything (including himself) for the sake of his art. He grapples with the dialect of autonomy/connection, openness/closedness, as well as stability/change, within the friend circle, because of his desire to become more successful than Jude, Malcolm, and Willem. As JB tells Willem: "'Ambition is my only religion'" (42). Despite being guarded about things, he still understood the need for opening up, and was at constant odds between the dialectical tension of openness/closedness. It affected him so much so that, he envied Jude for his ability to be aloof about his emotions and past. This is depicted in the lines: "'Some part of him had always been insulted by Jude's unwillingness to divulge anything of himself to them, by his furtiveness and secretiveness'" (275). His need to be recognized as a man of importance within the circle was seen by his friend's

as well, who despite all his selfish actions, forgave him time and again. They at times gave him the benefit of acting out as the leader in planning stuff, so as to satisfy his need for autonomy in decisions within the friend group. They recognize this need in him to be their guiding force at times of vulnerability, just like he used to be in college. This is evident through the lines:

It also provided them an excuse to pretend that everything was fine with JB, when they all three knew that something wasn't. Willem couldn't quite identify what was wrong with him—JB could be, in his way, almost as evasive as Jude when it came to certain conversations—but he knew that JB was lonely, and unhappy, and uncertain, and that none of those sensations were familiar ones to him. He sensed that JB—who had so loved college, its structures and hierarchies and microsocieties that he had known how to navigate so well—was trying with every party to re-create the easy, thoughtless companionship they had once had, when their professional identities were still foggy to them and they were united by their aspirations instead of divided by their daily realities. So he organized these outings, and they all obediently followed as they had always done, giving him the small kindness of letting him be the leader, the one who decided for them, always. (221-222)

While the novel doesn't offer a definitive resolution to JB's dialectical tensions, there's a gradual shift towards acceptance and appreciation within the friend group.

Malcolm, the architect, is a force within the group who is diligent with his work, and always tries to create a comfortable environment for Jude to exist amidst the struggles with his disability. There are constant dialectical tensions between openness and closedness in his relationship with his friends. As realized by Jude after Malcolm's death: "Malcolm, he realized, had been the first among them to recognize that he was disabled; Malcolm had known this even before he did. He had always been conscious of it, but he had never made him feel self-conscious. Malcolm had sought, only, to make his life easier, and he had once resented him for this" (661). Malcolm's life is depicted as one shrouded in dissatisfaction. He is misunderstood and unseen by his critical father, despite his professional success. His character is seen to be grappling with questions about his own sexuality, which ends up in a marriage of 'convenience,' as his friend's doubted.

Malcolm shows a steadfast commitment to his friends in spite of facing many challenges. In addition to being Jude's pillar of support during the upheaval of his past, he is essential to Willem's acting career. Seemingly sensible, his marriage to Sophie might also be a way for him to escape his painful past and a yearning for normalcy. But although Malcolm fights to face his past and ask for help, his own destructive habits pose a serious threat to his relationships. His friends must decide how to encourage him while still holding him responsible for his behavior because of this predicament. Through a series of collective struggles, Malcolm's adventure demonstrates the resilience and constraints of friendship in the face of extreme hardship.

Conclusion

The application of the relational dialectics theory to the analysis of the friendships and conflicts between Malcolm, Jude, Willem, and JB in *A Little Life* shows complicated dynamics between them. Autonomy versus connection, openness and closedness, stability and change can be identified among the major axes of RDT and provide an insight into how these dilemmas are solved within. Their friendships are riddled with conflict between autonomy and connection. Each character has a longing to be free from others but also a desire for emotional intimacy with them. For example, Malcolm cherishes autonomy even as he leans on his friends for help in times of need. Jude cannot totally open up because of his past traumas, yet craves for connection. Willem is torn between being true to himself and showing allegiance, while JB tries hard at keeping friendships alive besides his desire for compelling excellence at the cost of others, within his artistic pursuits.

Openness and closedness also play a significant role within their friendship. The characters' ability to share vulnerabilities fluctuates, influenced by trust and past experiences. Secrets and insecurities create moments of emotional distance despite their deep bond. Jude's reluctance to reveal his trauma and JB's struggles with addiction create barriers to openness. The dialectical tensions of stability and change on the other hand, shape the trajectory of their friendships over time. External forces and internal conflicts challenge their sense of stability.

Jude's ongoing struggles and JB's addiction threaten the group's stability, yet their friendships endure, evolving through adversity.

As the narrative concludes, Jude dies by suicide, due to the immense emotional pain left by the death of Willem in a car accident. Malcolm, along with Sophie, pass away in the same accident as Willem. As the only one left alive, JB continues to live as a living memoir of the journey and struggles that the friends went through, in order to live amongst whatever little joy they could extract from their relationships amidst the chaos of life.

The research acknowledges various limitations and suggests areas for future exploration. While Relational Dialectics Theory (RDT) provides a useful framework for understanding interpersonal relationships in *A Little Life*, it has its constraints. RDT primarily focuses on relationship tensions but might not fully capture the unique nuances in each character's interactions. Furthermore, the analysis is confined to this novel, and future studies could broaden insights through comparative studies or real-life contexts. Additionally, aspects like individual growth trajectories and external influences warrant further exploration. Interdisciplinary approaches involving psychology, sociology, or cultural studies could enhance understanding of the novel's themes and dynamics. Although the research contributes to understanding friendship and conflict in *A Little Life* through RDT, there are still avenues for deeper exploration into the complexities of human relationships depicted in the novel.

These conflicts are a reflection of common issues that people encounter: such as balancing their needs and the need of the relationships, navigating the complexities of emotional intimacy and self-disclosure, and adapting to the challenges and changes that come with getting older in a relationship. Through the lens of RDT, readers can get insight into the intricacies of human connection and learn how to negotiate the complexities of their own relationships. All the while encouraging empathy, understanding, and communication between individuals. Ultimately, an understanding of the relational dialectics between the characters in *A Little Life*, offers a perceptive understanding of the dynamics that impact our relationships with others, and the challenges we face in maintaining meaningful ones. This comprehension serves as a window into actual interpersonal relationships.

Works Cited

- [1] Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*. H. Rackham, Ed. ed., vol. 19 23, Harvard University Press, 1934, <http://data.perseus.org/citations/urn:cts:greekLit:tlg0086.tlg010.perseus-eng1:1156a>, Accessed 14 Apr. 2024.
- [2] Bakhtin, MikhailMikhailovich. "Discourse and Novel. I Holquist, M.(red.)." *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (1981).
- [3] Baxter, Leslie A., and Barbara M. Montgomery. *Relating: Dialogues and dialectics*. Guilford Press, 1996.
- [4] Baxter, Leslie A., and Kristina M. Scharp. "Dialectical tensions in relationships." *The international encyclopedia of interpersonal communication* (2015): 1-6.
- [5] Carstensen, Laura L., Derek M. Isaacowitz, and Susan T. Charles. "Taking time seriously: A theory of socioemotional selectivity." *American psychologist* 54.3 (1999): 165.
- [6] Cook, Karen S., et al. "Social exchange theory." *Handbook of social psychology* (2013): 61-88.
- [7] Mikulincer, Mario, and Phillip R. Shaver. "The role of attachment security in adolescent and adult close." *The Oxford handbook of close relationships* (2013): 66-89.
- [8] Rawlins, William. *Friendship matters: Communication, dialectics and the life course*. Routledge, 2017.
- [9] Yanagihara, Hanya. *A Little Life*. Picador, 2015.