

Interpersonal Character of Sardunya in the Novel al-Bint Allatī Lā Tuḥibbu Ismahā by Elif Şafak

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Received:
22-12-2025

Revised:
30-6-2026

Accepted:
03-07-2026

Abstract: Personality development in children exposed to bullying is often described in general or moralistic terms, leaving the underlying interpersonal mechanisms unexamined. This study addresses that gap by using Harry Stack Sullivan's Interpersonal Theory of Psychiatry as an analytical lens to trace how the personality of Sardunya, the bullied main character in Elif Şafak's novel al-Bint Allatī Lā Tuḥibbu Ismahā (The Girl Who Didn't Like Her Name), develops around a single stigmatized attribute: her name. Using a qualitative descriptive design, textual data were collected from the Arabic translation of the novel, coded deductively against Sullivan's four constructs — dynamism, personification, self-system, and cognitive process — and then purposively narrowed to the excerpts bearing directly on Sardunya's relationship to her name. The analysis shows that Sardunya's discomfort with her name predates the bullying itself, surfacing first as a quiet envy directed at the adults who named her; that repeated ridicule, especially during classroom roll call, fragments her self-image into Good Me, Bad Me, and Not Me, met chiefly by dissociation as a defense; and that her cognitive processing matures from parataxic impression to syntactic judgment, a shift that eventually allows a single compliment about her name to register as trustworthy rather than as an exception. Read this way, Sardunya's development is not a wound that heals but an identity gradually reclaimed: by the novel's end, the mockery is not erased, but it no longer settles the question of who she is. The study offers literary scholars and educators a concrete account of how a stigmatized identity can be reworked through accumulated interpersonal experience rather than through any single corrective moment.

Keywords: *interpersonal theory, self-system, personality development, bullying, identity, Elif Şafak*

INTRODUCTION

Bullying is not a marginal or occasional experience in childhood. UNESCO estimates that some 246 million children and adolescents are exposed to bullying and school violence every year, with roughly one in three reporting victimization most commonly in psychological or verbal form, not physical (Sinclair et al., 2022; UNESCO, 2019). Behind that number sits a harder question than prevalence alone can answer: what actually happens, over months and years, to a child's sense of self while this is occurring, and does it ever really stop happening, or does it simply change shape?

Large-scale surveys can establish that bullying is widespread and measure its short-term correlates anxiety, school avoidance, lower achievement, but they are poorly equipped to trace the slower, more private process by which a child's identity is damaged and, in some cases, gradually rebuilt around the very trait that was mocked. Sustained literary narrative is unusually well suited to that gap: unlike an instrument administered at a single point in time, a novel can follow one child's interior life across years of story-time, rendering the process of change itself rather than only its before-and-after. Elif Şafak's novel al-Bint allatī lā Tuḥibbu Ismahā (The Girl Who Didn't

Like Her Name) is one such text: it follows Sardunya, a child bullied over her name, from early ridicule toward an eventual, hard-won acceptance — not because the name or the mockery ever disappear, but because Sardunya comes to hold a different relationship to both. Personality psychology treats literary works precisely this way — as data through which a character's psychological condition can be reconstructed and interpreted (Minderop, 2011, pp. 54–55) which is the premise on which this study proceeds.

"Harry Stack Sullivan's Interpersonal Theory of Psychiatry has been applied productively across this kind of literary case. Kaune et al. (2023) showed that the character Kinan in the Indonesian novel *Layangan Putus* changes personality through the defense mechanisms he adopts under duress; Kurraz (2020) traced a similar shift in Nora's personality across Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* as her marriage becomes a source of chronic anxiety; and Haq & Ahmadi (2022) found a comparable pattern in Liu Qi in the film *The Wandering Earth*, whose personality structure shifts as he is forced to motivate himself under crisis. Across these studies, the theory's recurring value is its ability to explain personality not as a fixed trait but as a pattern that reorganizes itself around recurring interpersonal events (Haq & Ahmadi, 2022; Kaune et al., 2023; Kurraz, 2020).

Sullivan's central premise is that personality is not an internal, isolated trait but a relatively stable pattern of interpersonal situations, and that the only thing about a person that can actually be observed is their interpersonal behavior how they act, feel, and think in relation to others (Evans, F. Barton, 2024; Sullivan. Harry Stack, 1955). Applied to Sardunya, this premise reframes the analytical question: rather than asking what kind of child she "is," it asks how her repeated interactions with her parents, grandmother, and classmates over her name produce successive, observable shifts in how she relates to others and to herself. The four constructs Sullivan uses to describe this process dynamism, personification, self-system, and cognitive process — form the analytical framework for the remainder of this study.

A person's personality can be viewed in terms of dynamism, self-system, personification, and cognitive processes. Dynamism can be defined as patterns of overt and covert energy transformation that identify a person. Personification is the formation of an image of "oneself or others" based on good and bad experiences. The aspect of personification can be seen from the good me, bad me, and not me. The aspect of the self system can be seen from consistent behavior patterns to maintain interpersonal security by avoiding or reducing anxiety. The self system is the most complex part of dynamism. Meanwhile, in the cognitive process, humans generally go through the processes of prototaxis, parataxis, and syntax (Evans, 2024).

Al-Bint Allātī Lā Tuḥibbu Ismāhā was selected for this study because of the tension it stages between Sardunya's family life, in which she is loved and indulged, and her school life, in which she is mocked for her name. This contrast makes the novel a productive site for interpersonal analysis: it isolates a single social wound a disliked name and follows its consequences across multiple relationships and years of the character's life, allowing dynamism, personification, self-system, and cognitive process to all be traced from a common origin point. The novel is also analytically interesting because Sardunya's eventual self-acceptance is not simply given by her favorable home environment; self-concept is generally built through accumulated social experience rather than fixed by circumstance (Fadilah et al., 2023), so her development has to be earned against the friction of her wider social world, precisely the kind of process Sullivan's theory is designed to trace.

Building on this framework, the study traces how Sardunya's personality develops across four interlocking dimensions: the envy and anxiety dynamisms that emerge from her negative social experiences; the Good Me, Bad Me, and Not Me personifications she internalizes from her family's and peers' treatment of her; the security operations — dissociation, inattention, apathy, and somnolent detachment — that constitute her self-system under bullying-induced anxiety; and the shift in her cognitive processing from prototaxic to syntactic modes as she matures. These four dimensions correspond to four research questions: (RQ1) What forms of dynamism does Sardunya display, and what social experiences produce them? (RQ2) How do her personifications of Good Me, Bad Me, and Not Me form in response to her environment? (RQ3) What self-system mechanisms does she rely on to manage the anxiety caused by bullying? and (RQ4) How does her

cognitive process develop as she moves from childhood toward a more integrated understanding of her experience?

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative descriptive design grounded in Sullivan's Interpersonal Theory of Psychiatry, chosen because the theory's central data observable interpersonal behavior, expressed through action, speech, and reported feeling is precisely what narrative fiction renders in the form of dialogue, description, and reported thought. A qualitative descriptive design is therefore appropriate: it allows the psychological patterns coded in the novel's language to be presented as they occur in the text, through narrative interpretation, rather than reduced to numerical categories (Creswell, 2009). The primary data source is *Al-Bint Allāti Lā Tuḥibbu Ismāhā*, Elif Şafak's 2016 Turkish original, in its 2019 Arabic translation by Noura Yamach (Beirut: Dār Al-Ādāb)(Shāfāk, 2019). The Arabic translation was used, rather than the Turkish original or an English edition, because it is the version in active academic circulation within Arabic literary studies in Indonesia and because the researcher's disciplinary training in Arabic language and literature enables direct engagement with the source text's lexical and rhetorical choices; where a translation choice appears to affect the interpersonal reading of a passage, this is noted in the analysis.

Data were collected in three steps. First, the researcher read the complete novel to identify episodes in which Sardunya's psychological state visibly shifts in response to interaction with another character. Second, each episode was recorded and coded deductively against Sullivan's four constructs — dynamism, personification, self-system, and cognitive process — using the indicators in Table 1; excerpts that could not be matched to any indicator were set aside. Third, the coded excerpts were narrowed through a purposive reduction stage, in which excerpts were retained on the basis of their direct relevance to the study's research questions (RQ1–RQ4), so that an excerpt could be a valid instance of a Sullivan category and still not be carried forward into the analysis if it fell outside the study's specific analytical focus. To support the credibility of this coding, excerpts and their construct labels were re-checked against the full surrounding context of the scene on a second pass, and interpretations that depended on a single ambiguous line without corroborating context elsewhere in the novel were dropped.

Table 1: The Instrument of Research

Category	Indicator	Instrument
Dynamism	Envy Dynamism	An individual displays hostility, suspicion, and distrust toward others.
	Anxiety Dynamism	An individual activates defense mechanisms to avoid situations that may provoke anxiety.
Personification	Good Me	Pleasant social experiences that generate a positive self-image.
	Bad Me	Anxiety-related experiences that generate a negative self-image.
	Not Me	Extremely frightening anxiety experiences that cause an individual to dissociate from their sense of self.
Self-System	Dissociation	An individual unconsciously separates painful or shameful experiences from awareness in order to prevent anxiety.
	Inattention	An individual feels no need to engage with matters considered unimportant or useless.
	Apathy	An individual suppresses emotional responses to the surrounding environment.
	Somnolent Detachment	An individual withdraws or diverts attention away from frightening experiences or realities.

Cognitive Processes	Prototaxic	The infant does not think logically and has not yet perceived events as connected through time or cause-and-effect relationships.
	Parataxic	The child begins to observe personal experiences and forms conclusions that may be unique or deviate from general logic.
	Syntactic	The child experiences and understands the world through socially agreed symbols, such as language (words and gestures).

The resulting excerpts were then analyzed through close reading, situating each construct within Sardunya's broader trajectory across the novel and in dialogue with the theoretical and empirical literature reviewed in the Introduction.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Data reduction proceeded in two passes. The first coded the full set of episodes involving Sardunya's psychological responses against Sullivan's four constructs — dynamism, personification, self-system, and cognitive process — using the indicators in Table 1. Of these, dynamism, personification, and self-system operate concurrently, as overlapping lenses on the same interpersonal material, rather than as sequential stages; only the cognitive-process categories (prototaxic, parataxic, syntactic) describe a genuine developmental progression, and even this is cumulative, since earlier modes remain available under stress rather than being left behind.

The second pass narrowed this coded set to Sardunya's development not merely as an instance of Sullivan's categories, but as a character whose stigmatized name moves, over the novel, from a source of injury to an accepted part of who she is. Excerpts were retained where they bore directly on this trajectory, and set aside where their triggering event lay outside it — even where still valid instances of a Sullivan category in their own right. The analysis below accordingly presents a small, purposively selected set: two tracing the formation of the wound (envy and anxiety dynamism, Bad Me), one marking its most acute point (Not Me and dissociation, read as a single episode), one registering its earliest premonition (a paratactic excerpt from early childhood), two tracing its resolution (Good Me), and one illustrating the syntactic capacity that lets Sardunya recognize that resolution when it arrives.

Dynamism

Sullivan's psychology treats dynamism as a distinguishing feature of interpersonal life, not a trait located in the body: it is the recurring pattern in how a person reacts to others, whether through feeling, attitude, or overt behavior (Alwisol, 2025). Two forms of dynamism appear among the excerpts most closely tied to Sardunya's name — envy dynamism and anxiety dynamism — and read together, they trace the very beginning of the wound this study follows.

Envy Dynamism

Envy dynamism is a form of dynamism that develops as a result of negative social experience, such as rejection or the feeling of being unappreciated; it inclines a person toward hostility, suspicion, or distrust — especially toward authority figures or adults (Sullivan, 1953).

"لم تُردْ ساردونيا أن تُحزنَ اسمها. ولم تكن لتكسر قلب أي شخص كان لأنها طيبة القلب ورفيقة. لكنها لا تحب اسمها، فماذا تفعل؟ لا تُحب. لماذا يُثقل الكبار على تسمية أولادهم باسم كل ما يخطر في بالهم؟ كانت تتعجب من تصرفات الكبار." (Shāfāk, 2019, p. 21)

"Sardunya did not want to make her name feel sad. And she would never break anyone's heart, because she was kind and gentle. But she did not love her name — so what could she do about it? She simply did not love it. Why do adults rush to

name their children after whatever crosses their mind? She wondered at the way adults behaved."

The excerpt was coded on the closing phrase "she wondered at the way adults behaved" — read as the earliest, mildest indicator of envy dynamism: not yet resentment, but a first note of puzzled reproach directed at adult decision-making. Seen through this lens, what stands out about Sardunya here is not hostility but restraint. She does not want to hurt anyone — the passage is emphatic about her gentleness — and yet she cannot make herself like her own name. What she allows herself instead is this quieter form of protest: wondering, almost innocently, why adults name their children after whatever crosses their mind. It is a small question, but it is the first moment in the novel where Sardunya locates her discomfort outside herself, in a decision someone else made for her without asking. That shift is where envy dynamism begins.

Anxiety Dynamism

Anxiety dynamism, in Sullivan's account, is a pattern of behavior that develops in response to social experiences carrying the threat of rejection or humiliation; it functions as a defense against situations expected to provoke that threat (Sullivan, 1953).

"كانت ساردونيا تريد أن تنظم حملة في المدرسة للمحافظة على الخُضرة. كان هذا حلمًا كبيرًا بالنسبة إليها. إلا أنها كانت تتردد خوفًا من استهزاء الأولاد منها. قد تتساءلون: ولماذا هذا الخوف؟! طبعًا بسبب اسمها. فمن الصعوبة أن يقوم شخص اسمه «زهرة الساردونيا»، بحملة لحماية الأشجار والنباتات. كانت متأكدة من سخرية الأولاد المشاكسين من هذا الأمر، وسيضحكون قائلين... " (Shāfāk, 2019, p. 25)

"Sardunya wanted to organize a campaign at school to protect the greenery. This was a big dream for her. But she hesitated, afraid of being mocked by the other children. You might ask: why this fear? Of course, because of her name. It is difficult for someone named 'Sardunya flower' to lead a campaign to protect trees and plants. She was certain the mischievous boys would mock her for it, and would laugh, saying...."

The coded phrase here is "she hesitated, afraid of being mocked by the other children" — a direct indicator of anxiety dynamism, since the hesitation is explicitly anticipatory, built on a fear of ridicule rather than any doubt about the campaign itself. Here, the same discomfort that surfaced quietly in the first excerpt has grown into something Sardunya has to actively manage. She wants, genuinely, to lead this campaign — the novel calls it a real dream of hers — but she hesitates, and the text is precise about why: not because she doubts the cause, but because she already knows what the other children will say once they notice that the campaign's flag-bearer shares her name with the very flower she is trying to protect. She rehearses their mockery before it happens. Her anxiety, in other words, is no longer a private, unfocused discomfort but something with a specific trigger and a specific audience: she is not afraid of the world in general, only of being seen, once again, through the name she cannot change.

Read side by side, these two moments show something easy to miss if each excerpt is read on its own: Sardunya's discomfort about her name does not stay still. In the first excerpt it is barely a feeling at all — more a puzzled question aimed at the adults who named her. By the second, it has become something she anticipates, rehearses, and lets shape her decisions, even a decision as outwardly unrelated to her name as whether to volunteer for a school campaign. What both moments share is who Sardunya's discomfort is really directed at: not the other children who will eventually tease her, but the adults who gave her the name in the first place and who, from where she stands, never asked whether she wanted it. That detail matters for what follows in this study, because it means the wound this article traces does not begin with peer bullying at all — it begins

earlier and closer to home, in a quiet sense that her identity was decided for her before she ever had a say.

Personification

Within Sullivan's framework, personification is a mental image a person builds of themselves and others out of early social experience, especially interactions with significant people such as parents (Hall et al., 1998). Because these images form out of experience rather than being fixed in advance, personality is never static — it keeps being remade by whatever happens next (Hall et al., 1998). Sardunya's excerpts trace all three of Sullivan's categories, and, read in sequence, they form something closer to a short story of their own: an early wish to be recognized, a painful mockery of the recognition she does receive, a crisis at the most public moment possible, and finally a recognition that lands the way she had always hoped it would.

Good Me

Good Me is the self-image that forms out of experiences of being liked, appreciated, and accepted (Evans, 2024).

"... (هي، أنت، انظري). وسيلتفت الجميع حينئذ وينظرون لأنه ليس هناك شخص مخاطب

إلاكِ مسمى بـ (أنت)، ولا أحد يتحدث عن نفسه إلا ويقول: (أنا) " (Shāfāk, 2019, p. 18)

"...('her,' 'you,' 'look'). Everyone turns and looks then, because there is no one else meant by the word 'you' — and no one speaks of themselves except by saying 'I.'"

The coded phrase is "there is no one else meant but you." Sardunya notices, with something close to envy, how easily the words "you" and "I" land on a person, compared to a name that can be mocked. Before anything happens to her name in this novel, this excerpt shows what Sardunya already wants: simply to be addressed and meant, without the risk her own name carries.

...اسمي زهرة الساردونيا. هنا، قالت الفتاة زهرة: - "ما أجمل اسمك" هز أصواتي رأسه بأن

«نعم. لم تصدق ساردونيا ما سمعته أذناها، أول مرة يقال لها إن اسمها جميل». (Shāfāk, 2019,)

(p. 83

"...my name is Sardunya, the flower. Here the girl Zahra said, 'How beautiful your name is!' Aşvitay nodded, 'Yes.' Sardunya could not believe what her ears heard it was the first time anyone had told her that her name was beautiful."

The coded phrase is "the first time anyone had told her that her name was beautiful," and the word first is doing real work here. It means that by this point in the story, Sardunya has already absorbed years of the opposite message, so thoroughly that a simple compliment registers as something she can barely believe. This is the exact moment the recognition she wanted in the previous excerpt finally arrives, and it arrives attached to the one thing she had always assumed could never earn it: her name.

كان الجلاء المدرسي ممتازاً في تلك السنة. فقد ارتفعت درجاتها عندما لم تعد تخاف من مادة

الحساب. صار لديها أصدقاء جدد. والأهم من هذا وذاك أنها بدأت تحب نفسها. (Shāfāk,)

(2019, p. 158

"Her results at school were excellent that year. Her grades rose once she was no longer afraid of mathematics. She had new friends now. And most important of all, she had begun to love herself."

The coded phrase is "she had begun to love herself". What is worth noticing is the order the novel gives these changes: better grades and new friends are mentioned first, self-love last, as

the thing "most important of all." Sardunya's self-acceptance is not presented as the cause of her improving life, but as its quiet, hard-won outcome — proof that the earlier compliment about her name was not a lucky exception but the start of a pattern she could finally trust.

Bad Me

Bad Me is the self-image formed by shame, ridicule, or rejection — negative judgment from others, absorbed into how a person sees themselves (Hall et al., 1998).

"خير، يا ساردونيا! نراك قد بدأت بحملة لحماية شبيهتك من النباتات" (Shāfāk, 2019, p. 25)

"Well then, Sardunya! We see you've started a campaign to protect your plant look-alike."

The coded phrase is "your plant look-alike," a remark dressed up as praise for her environmental campaign, but built entirely around the joke that has followed her name for years. What makes this Bad Me rather than simply another mocking moment is what Sardunya does with it: she does not answer back or defend the campaign. The insult about her name quietly becomes an insult about her, and she appears to accept it as accurate rather than unfair, which is the mechanism Sullivan describes as most damaging about Bad Me: it is not the ridicule itself, but the moment a person starts treating someone else's mockery as a verdict on who they are.

Not Me

Not Me is made up of the parts of the self so bound up with intense anxiety that they cannot be integrated into ordinary self-awareness at all, and are instead kept apart as a separate, unacknowledged system (Alwisol, 2025; Hall et al., 1998).

"وكان التلاميذ يسخرون منها في المدرسة. فكلما تقرأ المعلمة اسمها في أثناء التفقد اليومي، كانت

الفتاة المسكينة تذوب خجلاً." (Shāfāk, 2019, p. 13)

"The other students used to mock her at school. Every time the teacher read her name during daily roll call, the poor girl would melt with shame."

The coded phrase is "would melt with shame," a description that goes past ordinary embarrassment into something closer to disappearing. Roll call is a moment Sardunya cannot avoid, cannot prepare for differently each day, and cannot opt out of: her name will be said aloud, publicly, on a schedule she does not control. It is worth noticing that this is the one moment in the whole set of excerpts where Sardunya's name causes her to want to vanish rather than to argue, deflect, or simply feel bad — which is exactly the register Not Me describes: not a bad feeling about herself, but a feeling too intense to stay integrated into the self she otherwise knows how to be.

Read in order, these five moments are less a portrait of five separate reactions than a single moment replayed with the volume turned up and then, finally, down. The wish to be simply addressed (Good Me, first excerpt) becomes, under mockery, a wish to disappear entirely (Not Me) by way of a joke that turns her environmental campaign into an insult about herself (Bad Me) — and then, without any dramatic turning point, someone simply tells her the truth she had stopped expecting to hear: that her name is beautiful. What changes across these excerpts is not the name itself, and not really the people around her either, since both kind and unkind remarks about her name continue throughout the novel. What changes is what Sardunya lets a remark about her name mean about her — and that is precisely the pattern this study is built to trace.

Self-System

The Self-System, in Sullivan's account as developed by Ewen (2010), is the part of personality organized specifically around avoiding anxiety, and it works through several possible security operations — among them dissociation, inattention, apathy, and somnolent detachment. Of these, only dissociation appears in the excerpts tied to Sardunya's name; the other three operations are evidenced elsewhere in the novel, but in episodes unrelated to her name, and so fall outside this study's focus. The single excerpt examined here is worth reading closely, because

it is not a new episode — it is the same roll-call scene introduced under Not Me in the previous section, continued one page further.

Dissociation

Dissociation is a security operation in which a painful or embarrassing experience is separated from ordinary awareness, without the person consciously choosing to do so, so that it does not have to be faced directly (Feist & Feist, 2008).

"..ساردونيا؟ عندما يأتي دورها، وتذكر المعلمة اسمها، يصيح الأولاد جميعاً، وبصوت واحد: «في الأضيض!!». في هذه الأوقات، تشرف ساردونيا على البكاء فتحبس دموعها، وكم تتمنى لو تباعد عن المكان كل البعد. وطبعاً، لم تكن تفعل هذا لأنها كانت فتاة مهذبة. وبدلاً من ذلك، تطأ رأسها وتجلس في مقعدها بهدوء." (Shāfāk, 2019, p. 14).

"'Sardunya?' When her turn comes, and the teacher says her name, all the boys shout together, in one voice: 'In the flowerpot!!' At these moments, Sardunya is on the verge of crying and holds back her tears, and how she wishes she could get as far away from that place as possible. Of course, she does not do this, because she is a well-mannered girl. Instead, she lowers her head and sits quietly in her seat."

The coded phrase is "Sardunya is on the verge of crying and holds back her tears" the exact moment where what the previous section described only as "melting with shame" turns into something Sardunya has to physically manage. What is striking here is the gap between what she feels and what she does: she wants to cry, wants to run, and does neither — she lowers her head and sits still, precisely because, the text insists, she is "a well-mannered girl." Her good manners, in other words, are doing the work of hiding her, standing in for a reaction she cannot allow herself to have in front of the class. This is dissociation exactly as Sullivan describes it: not the absence of pain, but pain kept carefully out of view, filed under composure instead of expressed as what it is.

Taken together with the Not Me excerpt it extends, this episode shows the same roll call producing two things in Sardunya at once — a self she cannot bear to acknowledge (Not Me) and a set of quiet, practiced behaviors that let her get through the moment without anyone seeing that self at all (dissociation). The two are not separate reactions so much as two halves of a single defense: one hidden inward, one performed outward, both organized around the same three-second interval in which her name is said aloud and a room full of children turns it into a joke about a flowerpot.

Cognitive Process

Sullivan describes cognitive experience as developing through three modes — prototaxic, parataxic, and syntactic — and unlike the other three constructs discussed so far, this one genuinely is developmental: each mode reflects a more mature way of making sense of the world than the one before it (Alwisol, 2025; Feist & Feist, 2008). The novel's prototaxic moments — Sardunya collecting earthworms after the rain, naming a childhood dessert "milk candy," playing hide-and-seek at her grandmother's house, wandering into the neighborhood stationery shop — are vivid, but none of them touch her name; they establish, simply, that she begins the story the way any child does, encountering the world in fragments of pure sensation before she has the tools to interpret it symbolically. It is once she starts trying to make sense of people rather than things that her name starts to enter her thinking.

Parataxic

In the parataxic mode, a person has begun to form explanations for what happens around them, but the explanations are still private and emotional rather than logical or socially validated (Sullivan, 1953).

"سالت ساردونيا أمها قبل سنوات، عندما كان عمرها أربع أو خمس سنوات، ولم تكن تذهب إلى المدرسة بعد آنذاك، إلا أنها شعرت بأن اسمها سيسبب لها مشكلة في المستقبل." (Shāfāk, 2019, p. 17)

"Sardunya had asked her mother about this years before, when she was four or five and not yet even attending school — and even then, she had felt that her name would cause her a problem in the future."

Notice how far ahead of the actual bullying this feeling sits: Sardunya is not yet in a classroom, has not yet heard the flowerpot joke, and still she senses trouble coming. There is no argument behind this sense, nothing she could point to and defend — which is precisely what makes it parataxic rather than a reasoned judgment. It suggests that whatever eventually happens to her at school does not create her unease about her name so much as confirm something she had already, wordlessly, expected.

"حتى ولو كان. فمع ترتيب المكان، والخروج للتسوق، لا وغيرهما، سرعان ما تجدين أن اليوم قد انتهى ريثما تُنهين كل هذه الأعمال. لا وقت لديك للتفرغ للقراءة. عندما تكبرين تُدركين ذلك. تلك الجملة من جديد : "عندما تكبرين تُدركين ذلك". كم يعشق الكبار هذه الجملة" (Shāfāk, 2019, p. 56).

"Even so. Between tidying the house, going out to shop, and everything else, you'll find the day is over before you finish it all. There's no time left for reading. When you grow up, you'll understand.' That sentence again: 'When you grow up, you'll understand.' How adults love that sentence."

The irritation in that last line, "how adults love that sentence," is doing more work than it looks like. Sardunya is not simply reporting what her mother said; she is drawing a private, unproven conclusion about adults in general, that they reach for this phrase whenever they would rather not explain themselves. It is the same dismissal she has met before over her name, now generalized into a pattern she believes she has spotted in how grown-ups talk to children; accurate or not, it is hers, formed alone, which is exactly the parataxic signature Sullivan describes.

Syntactic

Syntactic thinking is the most mature of the three, the point at which a person understands experience through symbols whose meaning is agreed upon socially — language, gesture, tone — rather than through private impression alone (Feist & Feist, 2008).

"ليست هذه هي الصداقة الحقيقية. هل من المعقول أن يسخر الشخص بصديقه ليقلد الآخرين؟! ثم تقول في نفسك : أَلعب بمفردتي خيرٌ لي من أن يكون لي صديق وصديقة مزيفان. وكانت تمر بأوقات تشعر كأنها وحيدة في العالم." (Shāfāk, 2019, p. 15).

"This isn't real friendship. Is it reasonable for someone to mock their friend just to imitate others? Then she said to herself: playing alone is better for me than having a fake friend and a fake friend. And there were times she felt as if she were alone in the world."

What separates this from the parataxic excerpts just before it is that Sardunya is no longer only reacting — she is evaluating, against a standard she can name: what does and does not count as real friendship. Mocking someone to fit in with others fails that standard, in her judgment, clearly enough that she would rather be alone than accept it. This is a small piece of reasoning, but it is reasoning she can defend to herself in words, not just a feeling she carries — which is what

makes it possible, later, for a compliment about her name to land as something she can actually trust rather than something she has to take on faith.

Across all three modes, what Sardunya is gaining is not really new information about her name the name itself never changes but a growing capacity to tell the difference between what a remark about her name actually says and what it merely feels like it says. At four or five, she can only sense trouble coming, with no way to argue herself out of it. By the time she is old enough to judge her classmates' mockery as a failure of friendship rather than a fact about herself, she has the tools to recognize genuine acceptance, too, when it eventually arrives which is exactly what happens a few pages later, when someone tells her, for the first time, that her name is beautiful.

Followed from beginning to end, what these four readings trace is not four separate developments in Sardunya, but one: the slow, uneven process by which a name she was given without being asked stops being a wound and becomes simply hers. It begins, before any classmate ever mocks her, with a quieter unease directed at the adults who named her and who, in one small moment after another, do not think to ask what she wants — a pattern that resurfaces later as a four- or five-year-old's wordless conviction that her name will someday be a problem. School turns that private unease into something public and repeated: a roll call she cannot avoid, a joke about a flowerpot shouted in one voice, a girl lowering her head and holding back tears because good manners are the only shield she has. None of this disappears on its own. What changes, gradually and without any single dramatic turn, is Sardunya's capacity to tell the difference between what is said about her name and what it actually means about her — a capacity built one small act of reasoning at a time, from a four-year-old's bare foreboding to a judgment, articulate enough to defend, about what does and does not count as real friendship. It is only once that capacity is in place that a compliment about her name can do what it does: not erase the roll call or the flowerpot joke, but sit beside them as evidence that the ridicule was never the only verdict available. By the novel's end, Sardunya has not forgotten what her name cost her, and nothing has removed the mockery from the record. What she has instead is the ability to hold that record alongside a newer one — better grades, real friends, someone telling her, for the first time, that her name is beautiful — and to let that second record settle the question. That, more than any single scene, is what her development amounts to: not a wound healed, but an identity slowly reclaimed from the people who first decided what it meant.

Compared with prior applications of Sullivan's framework to literary characters, this study is broader in scope but narrower in focus. Kaune et al. (2023) and Kurratz (2020) each trace dynamism and self-system operations in adult characters facing marital or domestic strain, while Haq and Ahmadi (2022) trace dynamism alone under external crisis; similarly, Hameed Panhwar et al. (2017) applies Sullivan's interpersonal relations to an adult protagonist in Chopin's *The Awakening*, yet remains confined to adult defense mechanisms. Meanwhile, studies on child protagonists, such as Sagimin & Damayanti (2019) analysis of *Wonder*, tend to focus on personality change without fully isolating the role of cognitive maturation. None applies all four of Sullivan's constructs dynamism, personification, self-system, and cognitive process to a single character's development. Doing so here, on a child rather than an adult, makes visible a dimension the other studies do not foreground: how cognitive maturation itself, not only defense or self-image, is what eventually allows an interpersonal wound to be reinterpreted rather than merely defended against.

It is worth pausing, too, on why Elif Şafak chose a name, specifically, as the target of Sardunya's stigma, rather than an appearance, a habit, or a possession. A name is unlike most other things children are teased about in one important respect: it cannot be set aside even briefly. It is spoken aloud at every roll call, printed on every school document, embedded in how she is addressed by everyone she meets, so that avoiding the trigger is never an option in the way it might be for a disliked piece of clothing or a hobby kept private. This is likely why the novel can use a name to trace something as gradual as interpersonal development in the first place: because the wound recurs on a schedule the character cannot control, it forces repeated engagement rather than one-off avoidance, giving the story room to show the same vulnerability meeting different responses over time, and Sardunya's relationship to it slowly changing as a result.

A caveat belongs here as well. Sullivan's framework was built from clinical observation of real patients, and applying it to a novelistic character carries a limitation worth naming plainly: Sardunya's development is not psychological data but a narrative choice made by an author, and the four constructs discussed above describe patterns in Şafak's storytelling as much as they describe a mind. What this analysis offers, then, is not evidence that Sullivan's theory is correct, but a demonstration of what the theory makes visible when used to read a character closely, which is a more modest and more defensible claim.

CONCLUSION

Read through Sullivan's interpersonal lens, Sardunya's development is best understood not as a wound that heals but as an identity slowly reclaimed. It begins earlier than the bullying itself, in a quiet unease toward the adults who named her without asking; intensifies through a roll call she cannot avoid; and resolves gradually, through a growing capacity to judge what a remark about her name actually means rather than simply absorbing how it feels — a capacity that finally lets a compliment about her name register as trustworthy rather than as an exception to doubt.

The theoretical contribution lies less in testing Sullivan's framework than in showing what it makes visible when applied closely to one character. Dynamism, personification, and self-system read together are not separate parts of Sardunya but three angles on the same recurring event her name spoken aloud in public while the cognitive-process constructs reveal the one dimension that genuinely develops: not whether she is hurt, but how precisely she can interpret being hurt. For a child bullied over a fixed trait, cognitive maturation may matter less as a separate achievement than as the mechanism that makes emotional resolution possible at all.

This carries a practical implication for parents, teachers, and other caregivers. Sardunya's turning point is undramatic — one sentence, from a peer, calling her name beautiful — and it works only because she had already spent years quietly building the capacity to trust it. The takeaway is modest but concrete: consistent, ordinary affirmation of a mocked trait may do more than any single corrective conversation held after the fact.

This study is limited to a single novel and character, examined through excerpts selected for relevance to one trajectory; it describes a pattern coherent within Şafak's storytelling, not a generalizable account of bullied children's development, since Sardunya's development is a narrative construction rather than empirical data. The excerpts were also drawn from an Arabic translation rather than the Turkish original, and a systematic comparison across language versions was beyond this study's scope.

Future research could extend this in two directions: applying the same framework comparatively across characters bullied over similarly fixed traits, to test whether this developmental pattern early premonition, public escalation, gradual reinterpretation, cumulative resolution recurs or varies by context; and examining how translation renders the linguistic markers (sarcasm, direct address, reported speech) this analysis depended on.

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