



**“The most painful goodbyes are the ones that are never said and never explained.”**

*A qualitative research into the narratives of family members of Afghan victims of the communist regime (1978-1992) residing in the Netherlands*

**Master's thesis Victimology and Criminal Justice**

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## Voorwoord

Voor u ziet u mijn masterscriptie van 'Victimology and Criminal Justice'. Aangezien ik een achtergrond heb in de Geestelijke Gezondheidszorg en nu deze opleiding heb gevolgd wilde ik graag een onderzoek doen waarin ik in direct contact kon komen met slachtoffers en met hen kon praten over de ervaringen die zij hebben met misdadigers. Verder wilde ik dat mijn scriptie van toevoegende waarde kon zijn voor de onderzoekswereld en voor de mensen die mee zouden doen aan mijn onderzoek. Zodra ik een oproep zag om onderzoek te doen naar de familieleden van directe slachtoffer van het Communistisch regime in Afghanistan wist ik dat dit het onderwerp moest zijn voor mijn onderzoek. Ik wist zelf niks van deze periode en na navraag te doen in mijn omgeving kwam ik tot de conclusie dat eigenlijk niemand echt wist wat er was gebeurd. Dat was het moment dat ik wist dat ik met dit onderzoek een vergeten groep slachtoffers van dienst kon zijn. Hoewel ik op het begin moeite had met alle gebeurtenissen uit elkaar te houden, kan ik nu vol overtuiging zeggen dat ik een goed overzicht heb gekregen in de misdaden van het Communistisch regime en ik zal ook zeker niet schromen om dit met zoveel mogelijk mensen te delen, zodat de verhalen van de slachtoffers voort blijven leven. Het was een lang en vermoeiend proces en het heeft veel van mijn tijd in beslag genomen. Echter heb ik hier ontzettend veel dankbaarheid voor terug gekregen en ik heb zoveel geleerd van het hele proces dat het alle tijd 100% waard was. Natuurlijk had ik dit nooit alleen gekund.

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Tot slot hoop ik dat u na het lezen van mijn scriptie meer inzicht heeft gekregen in het slachtofferschap van de familieleden van directe slachtoffers van het Communistisch regime.

Anouk Ponjee

## Abstract

**Background:** Between 1979 and 1992 the Democratic Party of Afghanistan and the former Soviet Union ruled Afghanistan as a communist regime. The regime was oppressive and cruel. They prosecuted, punished and murdered their opponents without any form of process. Many of the Afghans have fled to other countries, including the Netherlands. In 2010, there were approximately 38 thousand Afghans residing in the Netherlands. Many of these 38 thousand Afghans have lost at least one family member to the communist regime. Therefore this study examines the way in which family members give the loss of a family member a place in their life narrative.

**Methodology:** For this research, narratives were collected from indirect victims of the communist regime in Afghanistan, residing in the Netherlands. The total data collection consists of 11 narrative interviews. The family members that were interviewed in this study were sons, grandsons, brothers, sisters, fathers, cousins and spouses.

**Results:** There were two main themes within the life narratives of indirect victims of the communist regime: 'Lack of Justice' and 'Search for Answers'. Furthermore, three corresponding plots were found: 'Overcoming the Monster', 'Quest' and 'Tragedy'. The umbrella plot was found to be 'Overcoming the Monster'

**Conclusion:** The life narratives of the indirect victims of the communist regime residing in the Netherlands were characterized by two different wishes. The wish to be recognized as victims and the wish to combat the impunity regarding the communist regime. These two wishes coincide with the plotlines. The monster that needs to be overcome is the communist regime and the injustice that it brings with it. This is the reason that 'Overcoming the Monster' is the umbrella plot. The 'Quest' plotline needs to be fulfilled to overcome this monster and the victims need to learn to live with the 'Tragedy' plotline. Because of their victimhood the respondents are stuck in their sense and meaning-making. They do not understand how and why the communist regime did what they did. The experience of the victimization altered their beliefs in the world as a safe and just place. Because they are still trying to make sense of their victimization, they have difficulties with formulating a future perspective.

**Key words:** Afghanistan, victimhood, life narratives, redemption, contamination, plotlines, the narrative identity, family members, indirect victims, communist regime

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# 1. Introduction

## *Civil war in Afghanistan*

Afghanistan is a country that many people automatically associate with war. Civil wars, Russian involvement, American involvement, Afghanistan has seen many soldiers come and go. But it all started when the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), with help of the Soviet Union, took over Afghanistan in 1978 (Halliday and Tanin, 1998). This was the start of a very conflicted period, with many different leaders in a relatively short time: Nur Muhammad Taraki (1978-1979), Hafizullah Amin (who only ruled for 100 days), Babrak Karmal (1979-1986) and Mohammad Najibullah (1986-1991). However, when the Soviet Union cut their financial support he had to cede power in 1992. This was the end of the communist regime. However, these four leaders all left their mark on the population of Afghanistan. People were imprisoned and never returned, they were killed or tortured and many more had to flee the country, leaving many victims in its wake. However, in the Western world, not much is known about this period and its victims. The real extent of victims that the regime has made is still not clear, since there are hardly any reports of their deaths. Their bodies are never found and their families have never gotten confirmation of what has happened to their loved ones. The only indication of the amount of deaths, caused by the regime, is the death list that was published online by the Dutch Public Prosecution Office in 2013 (Openbaar Ministerie, 2013). Furthermore, according to the interviews conducted in this study, many of the wrongdoers live in European countries, without paying for their crimes. This makes many victims of the regime very angry and sad, for they want justice for the victims.

## *Family narratives*

The background story that was given above is just a tip of the iceberg of what has happened between 1978 and 1992. The consequences of living in Afghanistan during this time can be grave, for the direct victims but for their family members, the indirect victims, as well. While research has begun to focus on the direct victims, the family members should not be forgotten. Traumatic events often have severe negative consequences for those directly exposed to them, as well as for family members, who were not directly exposed to that event. Every family has a

family story. These family stories are created by reminiscing of the family members of certain events. These stories do not only focus on the parents and the children, but on other family members as well and are called family or intergenerational narratives. Family narratives allow children to compare their own lives with the lives of their parents or grandparents. Furthermore, they reflect and preserve family identity from generation to generation (Fiese & Bickham, 2004).

### *Victims' Narratives*

In his book *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds* (1986), Bruner distinguished two modes of human cognition functioning: the logico-paradigmatic mode and the narrative mode. The logico-paradigmatic mode deals in general causes and their establishment and uses procedures to assure verifiable reference and to test for empirical truth (Pemberton, Aarten & Mulder, forthcoming). The narrative mode focuses on human or human-like intention and action (Pemberton, Aarten & Mulder, forthcoming). In contrast to the logico-paradigmatic mode of thinking, which operates by recognizing elements as members of a category, a narrative combines elements into an emplotted story. Victims often have a narrative mode of thinking, for their victimization cannot be described in a questionnaire, it needs a story to make sense of their victimization. Therefore, it is important in this research to look at the narratives of the family members of victims of the communist regime in Afghanistan.

A narrative is the life story that characterizes every aspect of a human's life. Every human being has its own story, which includes important experiences, dates and events. A life narrative is not necessarily made up of factual accounts of an event, rather it reflects the personal, subjective experience of a certain event or individual. These narratives can influence one's future behavior (Sandberg, 2010). Ultimately, people construct and internalize the important aspects of their life story into an integrative story of their lives and this is called the narrative identity. This narrative identity gives people the opportunity to show who they are, how they came to be this way and how they see themselves in the future (McAdams & McLean, 2013). However, once an individual is victimized, their life narrative becomes affected. The experience of grave victimization often forms a central part of a life story. Furthermore, the

experience of victimization makes people doubt their beliefs about how the world works and it affects one's perception of safety, justice and predictability (Pemberton, 2015). They need to make sense and give meaning to their experience and they have to try to place their experience of victimization in their life story (Pemberton, 2015). In this thesis, narratives are the chosen form of interview, for the experiences of victims cannot be recorded in a questionnaire. The respondents of this thesis became (indirect) victims, because of the loss of their family member(s). This was a negative experience for them and they need to give this experience a place in their life story.

Once a victimization occurs, two types of victims can be distinguished. The direct victims, who have experienced the victimization directly, and the indirect victims who became a victim because of the experience of the direct victim. An important example of an indirect victim is family. Once a family member has been victimized, this will impact the rest of the family as well. These indirect victims are the main focus of this thesis. Therefore, the aim of this study is to look at the way that family members place the loss of a family member in their life stories.

### 1.1 Research question

#### *Main question*

How do family members place the death or loss of a loved one during the communist regime (1978-1992) in Afghanistan in their life story?

#### *Sub questions*

1. What themes are common in their stories?
2. Which plots of Booker can be applied to these stories?

### 1.2 Aim of the study

In this study the life stories of family members of victims who experienced the communist regime (1978-1992) in Afghanistan are central. So far, no research has been conducted in this area. Previous research has focused on the narratives of the direct victims of the communist regime (Mandersloot, 2016). However, there is still a lack of attention towards the Afghan victims residing in the Netherlands and this is painful for the Afghanistan Victims' Rights



foundation (AVR), who requested this thesis. The AVR is a foundation which was established by victims of the communist regime for victims of the communist regime in the Netherlands. They aim to give a voice to all the victims of the communist regime. A step towards recognition has been made with the thesis of Nienke Mandersloot (2016). Hopefully, this thesis, with its focus on the family members of victims of the communist regime, can make further progress regarding the recognition of the victims of the communist regime of Afghanistan.

Stories of victims are emotional and cannot be reported in an abstract way. The narrative perspective is still a relatively new way of research, with which the impact of losing a loved one on someone's life can be understood better. To gain a better understanding of what the victims of Afghanistan have been through, and to gain an insight into what the experience of victimization and the loss of a family member has done and still does to the (indirect) Afghan victims' narratives and their narrative identity, it is important to not only focus on their victimization, but on their life story as a whole.

The family members that were interviewed in this study were sons, grandsons, brothers, sisters, fathers, cousins and spouses. All the victims that participate in this research have fled their home country and are now residing in the Netherlands. Another important notion is that many of the perpetrators of the communist regime are residing in Europe still, without retribution for their crimes. This makes many of the victims and their family members angry, sad and also scared. For if the perpetrators of the communist regime are not brought to justice, there is no lesson for them and therefore there is no lesson for future generations. If the perpetrators are not brought to justice, history might repeat itself. Therefore, it is important for the family members of Afghan victims that their stories and those of their families are shared. The rest of the world needs to recognize their suffering and the perpetrators need to be brought to justice. It is therefore the aim of this study to give a voice to the family members of victims of the communist regime (1978-1992) in Afghanistan.

### 1.3 Thesis outline

Chapter 1 of this thesis gives an introduction to the topic and clarifies the aim and the research question. Chapter 2 focuses on the theoretical background of the topic. The history of Afghanistan will be explained, as well as the importance of narratives in relation to victimization

will be discussed. In chapter 3 the research method of this thesis will be explained. Chapter 4 will discuss the results and finally, in chapter 5 there will be a discussion.

## 2. Theoretical framework

In the theoretical framework the history of Afghanistan will be explained. This will be followed by an overview of the Afghan population residing in the Netherlands and an explanation of the goals of the Afghanistan Victim Rights Foundation. Then there will be a more in depth explanation of narratives. Lastly, the theory of family narratives and its relevance to the thesis topic will be discussed.

### 2.1 The Communist Regime in Afghanistan (1978-1991)

#### *2.1.1 The beginning*

The problems started in 1978, when the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), with help of the Soviet, took control over Afghanistan (Halliday and Tanin, 1998). On April 27, 1978, the PDPA killed Daoud Khan, the first president of Afghanistan, in a violent coup, and seized control of the capital Kabul (Bearak, 2007). The revolution was required, according to the PDPA, because they thought that Afghanistan was falling behind in comparison to other regional and third world countries. Before 1978, the Afghan state was weak and this was a consequence of its history. The Afghan state was confined to the major cities and lines of communication, for it lacked consolidation of state power associated with colonial rule. The state ensured a minimal order in the cities and for the rest of the country it relied on various alliances with tribal, ethnic and religious leaders. It was dependent on an international balance of power. There was no effective control of population or territory, its frontiers were open and there was no monopoly on the means of violence. According to the PDPA, the Afghan state was too weak and therefore, after 1978, they tried to compensate for its weakness by aspiring to be a 'fierce' state. In doing so, they provoked an ultimately catastrophic response, internally and from without. The seizure of power by the PDPA was designed to change this situation. However, with this very process of attempted alteration, it provoked even greater resistance from within and, via Pakistan and the USA, from without. In 1979, the Soviet forces were introduced and this redoubled the conflict. It provided greater means for the state to protect itself, however, it simultaneously exacerbated its opposition (Halliday and Tanin, 1998).

### *2.1.2 The Khalqi regime (1978-1979)*

But what exactly happened in the period between 1978 and 1992? It started when in April 1978 the PDPA took over Afghanistan with the help of the Soviet, under the leadership of Nur Muhammad Taraki. The PDPA consisted of three distinct organized groups with individual links to the Soviet State: the Khalqi faction, the Parcham faction and a separate military faction. From the beginning the Khalqi leadership was the dominant leadership of the regime: they claimed that they were the ruling party because they had a leading role in the revolution. This argument was used to legitimize the marginalization of Parcham, who claimed that without the participation of its officers, there wouldn't have been a victory (Halliday and Tanin, 1998). The Khalqi believed that it was their right to seize complete power: they rejected any coalition with existing political parties, and denied them their right to carry out political activities. To remain in control, the Khalqi faction committed horrible acts. The intelligentsia (political figures from previous regimes), local notables and religious leaders were repressed in a harsh and violent manner. The regime justified the elimination of enemies as a necessary step toward the protection of the people and the success of the revolution (Halliday and Tanin, 1998). The PDPA used torture to punish suspected opponents of the regime and to interrogate their suspects. Suspected detainees were treated in an inhumane way and the circumstances within prison were terrible. They were humiliated, threatened and tortured daily. Treatment of suspected detainees consisted of sleep deprivation, tearing out fingernails, burning and electrical torture (War Crimes Research Office, 2014).

From 1978 till 1979 the regime continued to weaken. There was a great loss of personnel, due to defections to the opposition or individual decisions to go into exile, accentuated by heavy rates of arrest and execution. Different purges took place, the first victims were the Parchamis and they ended with the elimination of Taraki (September 14, 1979) and the ousting and arrest of his supporters (Halliday and Tanin, 1998). This reign of terror was directed by Hafizullah Amin, who was initially number two in the regime, and later became the general secretary of the PDPA and president of the Revolutionary Council. In the face of growing opposition, the Khalqi regime came to rely more and more on repression, attacking those it considered to be enemies of the people and imperialist agents. The regime

made the purge of the army, police and security one of its priorities. First of all, the remaining generals and high-ranking officers of the old regime were dismissed or arrested. Soon after the expulsion of Babrak Karmal and other Parchami leaders, the Parcham military officers became the target. Furthermore, the regime began to track down officers suspected of sympathy for the Islamist opposition. After April 1978 the influence of the Islamist groups increased, seemingly as a reaction to the scale of the terror and the impact of the regime's reforms. After the elimination of all non-Khalqi elements, Amin began his last, and fatal, struggle, this time against those Khalqi officers whom he suspected of not supporting him (Halliday and Tanin, 1998). This led to opposition by a group of Soviet-educated officers, who were encouraged by Moscow's concern at Amin's 'adventurism'. This group was loyal to Taraki. However, Amin killed Taraki in September 1979. Even with all these conflicts, Amin's regime still standing when Soviet forces invaded in December 1979: it retained the loyalty of the Khalqi military and had cowed the civilian population in the major cities (Halliday and Tanin, 1998).

### *2.1.3 Babrak Karmal's rule (1980-1987)*

The 20 months of Khalqi rule had, far from strengthening state-society relations, provoked a violent and extensive reaction that had further imperiled, as well as divided the state; the 100 days of Amin's presidency ended with his removal and death. Amin's leadership was followed by Karmal's leadership, which was dedicated to strengthening the civilian and military apparatuses (Halliday and Tanin, 1998). On the civilian side, PDPA membership was greatly expanded: the party's organizational department was responsible for this policy. This was done in two ways. On the one hand, by inclusion of large numbers of civilians from Kabul and to a lesser extent other cities in the party, a process assisted by offers of material privileges and employment; on the other hand, by the inclusion of virtually all ranking members of the armed forces and of related security forces in the party. As a result, PDPA membership expanded to 40.000 at the end of 1980, 90.000 at the end of 1983 and up to 140.000 by the end of 1986. On the military side, the main focus was on developing the military and security forces. The army was expanded by the extension of terms of military service. This led to several acts of resistance in the cities and promoted flight of young men to the opposition or into the countryside. In January 1981 conscription was introduced, which meant that it was compulsory for all males

over eighteen years of age to join the military (Halliday and Tanin, 1998).

There was a permanent conflict for control of the army, resulting from the uneven balance of Khalqis and Parchamis (with the Khalqis in the majority amongst army officers). Animosity continued throughout the 1980s and in the end it was the Khalqis who prevailed: Karmal and his Parcham associates were inhibited from challenging Khalqi control of the army by the involvement of Soviet personnel in the high command. Once the regime of Babrak Karmal was stabilized, and dissident officers had left, defections by members of the officer corps virtually ceased, and a force capable of playing some independent and aggressive military role developed (Halliday and Tanin, 1998).

In 1986 the KhaD became a Ministry of State Security. It became the most effective instrument of the regime, a center of political influence and economic privilege, as well as the major instrument for controlling cities and conducting counter-guerilla operations. KhaD was modelled on the KGB (Russia) and closely advised by it. It was first divided into two sections: surveillance and investigation. Later it was divided into many more subsections. Eventually, it became one of the more important players within the politics of Afghanistan (Halliday and Tanin, 1998). With the greater importance of the KhaD came more torture. The KhaD used multiple prisons in Afghanistan to torture their suspects and the Ministry of the Interior was used as well. However, their main location for their torture practices was their headquarters at Sedarat. This building consisted of a central interrogation office, eight detention centers and approximately 200 individual houses used for torture (War Crimes Research Office, 2014). Each person that was arrested was interrogated. This interrogation included multiple acts of torture: being beaten with several different instruments, sleep deprivation, being forced to stand for prolonged periods, being forced to eat or drink until they threw up, electrical shocks, insertion of bottles into the rectum or having a chair placed on the stomach or hands and then sat upon. And this is still a small selection of the grave ways in which the KhaD tortured their prisoners (War Crimes Research Office, 2014).

During the period of 1985 -1986 the power of the regime remained stable, in part because they were backed by the Soviet. However, the oppositions' influence kept growing, they received increased external support. The PDPA remained in control of the major cities and

kept the lines of communication open. However, the Soviet wasn't satisfied with the control of the regime. They found that only a minority of the people of Afghanistan supported the regime. It became evident that the rural population (80% of Afghanistan) gained nothing of the revolution. Only 5 million of 18 million of the people were under control of the regime and only 2 million of those were from outside of the city. In many cases, peasants in the rebel-controlled area were better off than those under governmental control. Because the Soviet thought Babrak Karmal's new course failed, they withdrew their forces and Kabul was left to fend for itself. Karmal lasted a few more months, but in 1986 he was replaced as PDPA General Secretary by Najibullah (by KGB instigation). Later that year, Najibullah replaced him as president as well. Najibullah was from early 1987 both General Secretary of the PDPA and President of the Revolutionary Council. Therefore, the third phase of the PDPA regime, which lasted until 1992, started with the new control of Najibullah (Halliday and Tanin, 1998).

#### *2.1.4 Najibullah's rule (1987-1992)*

With a new period came new changes. Najibullah developed new military units, in particular the 'special guard', drawn from members of the PDPA youth organization and the armed forces (under command of KhAD). Najibullah's period was marked by contradictory processes within the PDPA: on the one hand the marginalization of the old guard who enjoyed high position and factional support and on the other hand of some of the younger generation. Najibullah's tenure was marked by the systematic removal of all other significant people of influence within the PDPA. Instead, he organized the promotion of KhAD personnel, and at the same time, made some short-lived attempts to lessen the identification of the PDPA with the regime by bringing in independent non-party elements. The regime of Najibullah led to a lot of tension in the Khalqis, because many Karmal supporters were arrested. In an attempt to give a new, acceptable face to the regime, Najibullah tried to establish a new democratic system. After election in those areas that were controlled by the regime, a parliament of two chambers was founded. A new constitution, which allowed a multi-party system and freedom of the press, was started. Three years later, another constitution was promulgated, which no longer stipulated the role of the PDPA. The regime, under Soviet and UN pressure, continued the

incorporation of non-party figures into the government: by that time, only a third of the government were PDPA members. These were largely involved in security matters. However, these measures were not successful: the new assemblies, the new legitimized parties and the new non-party press generated no significant support from opposition groups. It appeared that the Afghan population were not prepared to accept anything less than the departure of the regime. For his part, Najibullah concentrated power in his own hands, in effect discouraging any prospect of a substantive sharing of power within the context of national reconciliation. Najibullah had to cope with rivals who eventually split up his party into nine different groups. After a failed coup in Moscow in August 1991, the Soviet cut off financial support. Najibullah was forced to cede power on 18 March 1992, which marked the collapse of the regime in April 1992 (Halliday and Tanin, 1998).

## 2.2 Afghans in the Netherlands

### *2.2.1 Demographics of the refugees*

According to a report of the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) (2004), more than 34 thousand Afghans resided in the Netherlands in 2003. Especially in the second half of the nineties their numbers increased vastly. According to the CBS the increase of Afghan residents has a direct link with the civil war that has tormented the country since 1979 (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2004). Of all the member states of the European Union Germany received the most asylum applications, around 58 thousand. Germany was closely followed by the Netherlands, who had gotten more than 36 thousand asylum applications (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2004). In 2010, there were around 38 thousand Afghans residing in the Netherlands (Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, 2011). The immigration of Afghans to the Netherlands had two peaks, in the second half of the nineties and between 2000 and 2001. After 2001 the amount of Afghans in the Netherlands barely increased (Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, 2011). The Afghans that sought refuge in the second half of the nineties, meaning the victims of the communist regime (1978-1992) of Afghanistan, were mostly highly educated. According to The Netherlands Institute for Social Research (2011), their educational level is similar to that of natives of the Netherlands. In 1993, the amount of asylum seekers from Afghanistan increased vastly and the Netherlands Institute for Social Research (2011) states that this was probably the



consequence of the fall of the communist regime (1978-1992) in Afghanistan. Many Afghans that had a leading position in the communist regime had to flee the country (Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, 2011).

#### *2.2.2 Article 1 f*

In 1951, the Convention of Genève relating to the Status of Refugees, or the UN Refugee Convention, was established and in 1956 the Netherlands signed this Convention. A state that has signed this Convention is obliged to keep to the treaty. The UN Refugee Convention states that refugees and asylum seekers are not to be sent back to a country in which they are in danger (Amnesty International, n.d.). As can be read in the section above, perpetrators of the communist regime sought refuge in the Netherlands after their regime fell. However, the Netherlands are actively trying to exclude possible perpetrators of international crimes from the asylum procedure and to start a criminal prosecution against them where possible (Van Wijk, 2011). Article 1F, the refugee treaty, which is one of the “exclusion clauses” of the UN Refugee Convention, helps to achieve this goal.

*“Article 1F of the 1951 Convention states that the provisions of that Convention “shall not apply to any person with respect to whom there are serious reasons for considering” that:*

- (a) He [or she] has committed a crime against peace, a war crime, or a crime against humanity, as defined in the international instruments drawn up to make provision in respect of such crimes;*
- (b) He [or she] has committed a serious non-political crime outside the country of refuge prior to his [or her] admission to that country as a refugee; or*
- (c) He [or she] has been guilty of acts contrary to the purposes and principles of the United Nations.” (UNHCR, 2003, p.2).*

With this article, perpetrators of the communist regime in Afghanistan can be refused. However, in 1992, at least 35 persons with a leading function during the communist regime, gained access to the Netherlands (Zuidervaart, 2007). They were ministers, vice-ministers, generals and agents of the KhaD, which was famous for its gruesome torture methods to get confessions out of their enemies. Where it was possible, granted statuses were withdrawn. However, it is unclear how many perpetrators are still living in the Netherlands. Victims of the

communist regime might still be confronted with their perpetrators to this day (Zuidervaart, 2007). For this reason, it is important that the crimes committed by the communist regime become known to the Western countries, so more perpetrators can be prosecuted for their crimes against humanity.

### *2.2.3 Afghanistan Victims' right foundation*

One of the initiatives that tries to combat the impunity of the suspects of war crimes during the communist regime is the Afghan Victims' Rights Foundation (AVR). This is an organization for the victims of Afghanistan, by the victims of Afghanistan. Their main goals are: combatting impunity and giving a voice to the victims and their relatives (AVR, n.d.). It is important for them that the stories of the victims are shared and known. They aim to be a platform for contact, awareness, actions and structured collaboration between the victims. Furthermore, they want to support the legal preparation of criminal prosecution of suspects of crimes against humanity in Afghanistan from 27 April 1979 until now. Additionally, they want to document the crimes against humanity in Afghanistan from 27 April until now, and the testimonies, evidence and literature about the crimes against humanity in Afghanistan. Ultimately, all the information gathered can contribute to the combat against impunity.

## 2.3 Victim narratives

### *2.3.1. Narrative identity*

Every human being has its own life story. People construct and share stories about themselves, detailing particular episodes and periods in their lives and what those experiences mean to them (McAdams & McLean, 2013). Out of these particular episodes of the autobiographical memory, a person may construct and internalize an evolving and integrative story for life, called a narrative identity. A narrative identity reconstructs the autobiographical past and imagines the future in a way that provides a person's life with some degree of unity, purpose, and meaning. This means that the life story of a person synthesizes episodic memories with envisioned goals, which creates a coherent account of identity in time. Through a narrative identity, people can convey to themselves and to others who they are now, how they came to be, and where they think their lives may be going in the future (McAdams & McLean, 2013).

A narrative identity is important to a person's well-being (McAdams & McLean, 2013).

The narrative identity emerges in the late-adolescent and early-adult years and is a function of societal expectations regarding identity and the maturation of formal operational thinking. Constructing and internalizing a life story provides an answer to key identity questions such as: Who am I? How did I come to be? Where is my life going? Therefore, it is not until adolescence that people can construct stories about their lives that exhibit causal coherence (how early events cause later events) and thematic coherence (organizing themes or trends in a full life) (McAdams & McLean, 2013).

According to McAdams (2013) the psychological self consists of a subjective “I” and the constructed “Me”, which evolves and expands over the course of a human life. At first the psychological self is a social actor, construed in terms of performance traits and social roles. By the end of childhood, the self has become a motivated agent as well, as personal goals, motives, values and envisioned projects for the future become central features of how the I conceives of the Me. During the adolescent and emerging adulthood years, a third layer of selfhood begins to form, when the self as autobiographical author aims to construct a story of the Me, to provide adult life with broad purpose and a dynamic sense of temporal continuity. One’s life narrative can influence all three of these developmental layers of psychological selfhood (McAdams, 2013).

### *2.3.2 Sense and meaning making*

Meaning-making is in the nature of human beings; they try to make sense of their life experiences. According to Bauer, McAdams & Pals (2008) adults living in modern societies make sense of their lives in terms of stories. Happiness is dependent on a sense of meaningfulness in life, therefore a narrative identity plays a key role in personal interpretations of whether one is happy. People use narratives to try to derive some measure of unity and purpose out of what may otherwise seem to be an incomprehensible array of life events and experiences. Life stories, like all stories, make use of characters, plots, themes, tones and other narrative elements to convey meaning. Themes, or goal-directed sequences in life narratives, go a long way in establishing meaning. Agency and communion are two extensively examined themes of narratives. Life stories with themes of agency express personal concern for things like power, achievement, personal mastery, impact on others, status and dependence. Themes of

communion express personal concern for things like love, intimacy, friendship, dialog, affiliation, and nurturance (Bauer, McAdams & Pals, 2008). Victimization affect and change an individual's assumption about meaning-making; it challenges an individual to re-establish a sense of meaning within life (Janoff-Bulman, 2004).

According to Janoff-Bulman (2004), there are two types of meaning-making. The first type is 'meaning as comprehensibility': in the immediate aftermath of victimization, victims are mainly concerned with questions of comprehensibility; they have trouble making sense of the traumatic event. The second type is 'meaning of significance': because of the problems with comprehensibility, victims become stuck in the question of value or significance in their lives (Janoff-Bulman, 2004).

Severe forms of victimization challenge this process of sense and meaning making. The difficulties are likely caused because victimization experiences play a major part in the life stories of individuals. A consequence of an experience of victimization is a narrative challenge. People have assumptions and beliefs about the world as an honest place. However, when a person is confronted with victimization, these main assumptions are damaged and are therefore altered. This might result in a rupture between the experience of self before, during and after the victimization (Pemberton, Aarten & Mulder, forthcoming).

Life stories or narratives can reveal structures or meanings of events in life that were implicit or unrecognized before (Crossley, 2000). The narratives of the family members of the direct victims of the communist regime can show us how they construct their life story, why they construct it this way and how they give meaning to certain life events and the experience of victimization. It is likely that the victimization plays a major part in the narratives of the respondents as well.

### *2.3.3 Redemption and contamination*

McAdams, Reynolds, Lewis, Patten & Bowman (2001) identified two distinctive narrative forms or strategies that people employ in constructing their life stories. The two strategies concern how people make narrative sense of personal experiences that entail significant transformation in affect. Furthermore, they help individuals to make sense of the suffering and traumatic experiences in their life. The first theme, is the theme of redemption. According to McAdams &

McLean (2013), the theme of redemption shows how human beings make narrative sense of suffering in their lives. When there is a theme of redemption, a person emerges strengthened or enhanced from negative life experiences. The bad is redeemed, salvaged and mitigated, or made better in the light of the ensuing good (McAdams et al., 2001). McAdams & McLean (2013), state that a person who gets stronger from a negative life experience often engages in a two-step process. In the first step, the person explores the negative experience in depth, they think of what the experience felt like, how it came to be, what it may lead to, and what role the negative event may play in the person's overall life story. In the second step, the person finds a positive resolution of the event. The first step is suggested to be associated with personal growth, while the second is associated with happiness (McAdams & McLean, 2013). Self-exploration often produces lessons learned and insights gained, which can enrich a person's life in the long run. Nonetheless, narrators should not go on so long and so obsessively as to slide into rumination, for good stories need to have satisfactory endings (McAdams & McLean, 2013).

The second theme is the theme of contamination. In this theme, there is a move from a good, affectively positive life scene to a bad, affectively negative life scene. The good is spoiled, ruined, contaminated and undermined by what follows it (McAdams et al., 2001).

It is likely that the themes of redemption and contamination can be found in the narratives of the victims of the communist regime in Afghanistan as well. Since the communist regime seized power in Afghanistan, life became tough for the Afghans. Not much can be found about Afghanistan in the time before the communist regime, but there was a shift of ambiance. It went from relatively peaceful to distrustful and dangerous (Halliday and Tanin, 1998). In other words, it went from something good, to something bad, which can be represented in the theme contamination. However, the respondents have fled Afghanistan and now live in the Netherlands. Even though this does not mean that their situation is automatically good or happy, it does mean that they went from a dangerous situation to a safe situation. This might be placed in the theme redemption.

#### *2.3.4 Plots of Booker*

In a life story, life experiences and events are merged by certain plots. Many stories, all over the world, seem to follow similar plots. According to Booker (2004), there are seven basic, universal stories or plotlines that every individual uses to tell their story. With help of these plots, people make sense of their world by framing events and sentences in a larger whole. Through a plot, people try to make sense of the relation between events and choices of their lives (Polkinghorne, 1995). According to Polkinghorne (1995), a plot has several functions within a story. First, it provides a temporal range; a plot determines the beginning and the end of a story. Second, it establishes criteria for which events and choices should be included in the story. Third, a plot temporally orders different events of which a conclusion can be drawn. Fourth and final, a plot gives clarity as to the meaning of the different experiences in life and it explains in which way these experiences contribute to the life story (Polkinghorne, 1995).

The first plotline that Booker (2004) describes is 'overcoming the monster'. In this plot, the hero is called upon to face and overcome a terrible and deadly personification of evil. The evil in this story can take any form and often possesses something the hero wants to have or save. In the end, the hero conquers the evil and gets a valuable reward.

The second plotline that Booker (2004) describes is 'rags to riches'. In this plot, some young, unrecognized hero is eventually lifted out of obscurity or poverty to a state of great splendor and happiness. But their upward progress is not a continuous climb. The main character has to overcome several obstacles in life in order to achieve the riches.

The third plotline that Booker (2004) describes is 'the quest'. In this plot, the hero is pulled towards some distant all-important goal. There are side-trips that get resolved along the way. But the story is not complete until our hero achieves the overarching goal. Reaching this goal is the number one objective in life and the main character will do anything to achieve his goal.

The fourth plotline that Booker (2004) describes is 'voyage and return'. In this plot, the hero is abruptly transported out their 'ordinary world' into an 'abnormal world' and eventually back to where they began. The journey to this other world changes the hero or heroine in a positive way: he gains a deeper understanding of the world.

The fifth plotline that Booker (2004) describes is 'comedy'. This plotline is not necessary

a funny plot, but one where the characters get what they want in the end. There is a transition between two states. The first state, which persists through most of the story, is one where nothing is seen clearly; people's true nature or identity may be obscured and there is uncertainty as to who ends up with whom. The second state arrives with the 'recognition' and 'unknotting' when, at the climax of the story, the dark figure is in some way caught out, and all is at last seen clearly.

The sixth plotline that Booker (2004) describes is 'tragedy'. In this plotline, the hero does not get what he desires and often ends up dead. The stories are often sad and have no happy ending.

The seventh plotline that Booker (2004) describes is 'rebirth'. In this plotline, a young hero falls under the shadow of the dark power. For a while, all seems to go well, the threat may even seem to have receded. Eventually it approaches again in full force, until the hero is imprisoned in the state of living death. This continues for a long time, when it seems the dark power has completely triumphed. But in the end there is a miraculous redemption by some other hero/heroine.

All individuals make use of a certain plotline while telling their stories. The plotline that they choose can show how victims perceive their life story, as well as their role within this life story and how they deal with their experiences. All plotlines, except for comedy, include a victim role. Since plots are inherently narrative by nature, this thesis will examine whether these plots can also be identified in the narratives of the family members of Afghan victims. What should be noted, though, is that real life stories rarely fit perfectly into one specific plotline and often includes multiple plotlines. This should be taken into account while examining narratives (Polkinghorne, 1995).

#### 2.4 Family narratives

To form a narrative, an individual needs an autobiographical memory. This autobiographical memory is a uniquely human form of memory that goes beyond merely recalling the who, what, where and when of an event; it also includes memory of how this event occurred as it did, what it means and why it is important (Fivush, 2010). It is rich with thoughts, emotions, and evaluations about what happened. Furthermore, it provides an explanatory framework that is

full of human intentions and motivations. Autobiographical memories comprise the story of our lives, rich in interactions and relationships, and in a very deep sense, provide a sense of self through a narrative identity (Habermas & Bluck, 2000). Therefore, it comes as no wonder that autobiographical memory is socially and culturally mediated in at least two ways. First, autobiographical memory is used in social interactions that focus on the telling and retelling of significant life events (Nelson & Fivush, 2004). Second, autobiographical memory is influenced by the sociocultural models that are available for organizing and understanding a human life, including narrative genres and life scripts (Berntsen & Rubin, 2004). According to Fivush, Habermas, Waters & Zaman (2011) :

*"[...] narratives are the process by which we share and create autobiographical memories, and through shared narration we create individual identities"* (Fivush, Habermas, Waters & Zaman, 2011, p. 322).

Furthermore, they propose that autobiographical narratives enable individuals to structure their experiences in a way that facilitates subjective reflection, thus helping individuals to make sense of life, which is critical to identity development (Fivush, Habermas, Waters & Zaman, 2011).

Culture can provide an evaluative and organizational framework for narrating lives, including cultural biographies, life scripts and master narratives. These cultural tools can inform individuals how to narrate their own personal experiences within local social interactions. These interactions begin very early in development between parents and children and within families. They facilitate the development of autobiographical narratives that help define memory, self and identity (Fivush, Habermas, Waters & Zaman, 2011). According to Fivush, Habermas, Waters & Zaman (2011), autobiographical narratives are the point at which the individual and culture intersect.

The link between the narrative identity and the culture that an individual lives in appears to be reciprocal. Culture provides the narrative scripts that individuals use to structure their own life story. However, through culture individuals can incorporate their own experience within the wider society or culture as well (McAdams and Pals, 2006). In other words, culture is an important factor in life narratives. In the Afghan culture, family is very important. According



to Merrill, Paxson & Tobey (2006), Afghans have strong values, beliefs and rules surrounding the family and its member's behavior. Furthermore, families highly depend on each other to meet many aspects of everyday life. Therefore, the family is the most important institution in Afghan society. Authority is mostly vested in male elder (Merrill, Paxson & Tobey, 2006). Therefore, once male family members are taken from a family, it will likely cause a big rupture for the whole family. For instance, the oldest sons suddenly need to be the head of the family if the father is taken away. Or, once older brothers are taken away, younger brothers need to take over that role. In other words: the roles within a family will completely change. It is likely that this will be reflected in the life stories of the respondents. Furthermore, because family is so important in the Afghan culture, the loss of a family member will likely play a major role in the narratives of the respondents.

The stories we know about others may also influence individual personal narratives, and this may especially be true for family stories (Bohanek et al., 2009). Children and adolescents are immersed in families, and these families often engage in reminiscing. For instance, parents often tell children stories of themselves, which they can't remember themselves, such as birth stories. These stories are often told to show them that certain personality traits were already apparent in early life, and these stories may become incorporated in the child's own life story (Habermas, Ehlert-Lerche & Silveira, 2009). However, these stories are not always about the events of the child's life; they are just as frequently about the experiences of other family members, and the stories are about both recent events and past exploits. For instance, parents tell family history stories, which are called intergenerational narratives (Fivush, Habermas, Waters & Zaman, 2011). Intergenerational narratives can provide an insight into the generational changes that occur within families. This allows children to compare their parents' and grandparents' days of growing up with their own (Fiese & Bickham, 2004). Therefore, these stories may reflect and preserve family identity from generation to generation. Children often organize their experiences into narrative form using the model provided by their parents. For instance, mothers who narrate more dramatic and negative personal experiences to their children have children who emphasize negative content and dramatic expressions when

narrating their own personal experiences (Fivush, Habermas, Waters & Zaman, 2011).

According to Marin, Bohanek & Fivush (2008):

*“After experiencing a negative event it is important to be able to discuss one’s feelings and thoughts in an open manner. Families who discuss more specific negative emotion are creating a narrative atmosphere for all members to share their individual perspective on the negative experience in a safe and supportive context in which emotions are acknowledged and regulated through explanations.”* (Marin, Bohanek & Fivush, 2008, p. 587).

Furthermore, they found results that support the notion that parent-child narratives that place negative emotion within causal and explanatory frameworks is beneficial for children. It also supported the idea that individuals who create emotionally explanatory narratives surrounding negative emotions subsequently do better physically and psychologically. Because children learn emotional understanding in familial interactions, family narratives provide the context in which children gain an understanding of negative experiences as well as the skills necessary to cope with such experiences (Marin, Bohanek & Fivush, 2008).

Story telling is one of the primary ways in which families and family members make sense of everyday, as well as difficult events, create a sense of individual and group identity, remember, connect generations and establish guidelines for family behavior (Koenig Kellas, 2010). These stories are central to create, maintain, understand and communicate personal relationships. Interaction of family members is essential to the process of sense-making through storytelling. Sense-making, in turn is important when individuals are confronted with loss:

*“When major loss occurs, both persons in a confiding situation may be telling stories of loss and comforting one another. People usually take turns discussing perceptions of what is happening, sometimes asking for input, sometimes asking the other person if he or she sees matters the same way, and sometimes asking if he or she has had similar experiences. It is the reciprocal communicative act that makes this experience a powerfully social event.”* (Harvey and Fine in Koenig Kells, 2010, p. 3).

Most of the narratives gathered in this thesis focused on the loss of one or more families. Therefore the quote above was chosen to illustrate how a narrative can be formed by

an individual by discussing the loss.

### 3. Methodological framework

The data of this thesis will be collected by using victim narratives. The data collection will consist of eleven narrative interviews with family members of people who experienced the communist regime in Afghanistan who are currently residing in the Netherlands. The family members were sons, grandsons, brothers, sisters, fathers, cousins and spouses.

#### 3.1 Victim narratives analyses

According to Polkinghorne (1995), there are two ways to analyze narratives. The first type is called ‘analysis of narratives’. This type of analysis aims to find the common elements in different stories. This paradigmatic analysis of narrative searches for common themes of conceptual manifestations among the stories collected as data. As such, this approach often requires a database consisting of several stories (rather than a single story). It is the task of the researcher to inspect the different stories to discover which notions appear across them. In this approach, the researcher develops concepts from the data rather than imposing previous theoretically derived concepts (Polkinghorne, 1995). By using this technique, general knowledge can be generated from a set of particular instances.

The second way, according to Polkinghorne (1995), to analyze narratives is called ‘narrative analysis’.

“The narrative analysis is the procedure through which the researcher organizes the data elements into a coherent developmental account” (Polkinghorne, 1995).

This type of analysis relates events and actions to one another by configuring them as contributors to the advancement of a plot. The story constituted by narrative integration can incorporate the notions of human purpose and choice as well as chance happenings, dispositions, and environmental presses. The ultimate goal of a narrative analysis is an explanation that is retrospective, it links past events together to account for how a final outcome might have come about. The researcher is tasked with developing or discovering a plot that represents the connection among the different data elements. This plot needs to fit the data, however it should also show new elements and meanings that cannot be seen directly in the data themselves.

This twofold analysis as described above can be used to fully understand the narratives of the family members of the Afghan victims. Therefore, as derived from the ideas of Polkinghorne (1995), the main themes in the narratives of the family members of Afghan victims will be described first. This will then be followed by a discussion of the different plotlines found in the narratives of family members of Afghan victims.

### 3.2 The respondents

The Afghanistan Victims' Rights foundation provided a list of respondents for this thesis. The respondents were all either members of the AVR or had family members who are members of the AVR.

## 4. Results

It was the objective of this research to interview family members of the direct victims of the communist regime in Afghanistan (1978-1992) residing in the Netherlands, to gain a deeper insight in how they place the loss of their loved ones in their life stories.

First, the respondents will be introduced. Then, the analysis of narratives will be discussed. In this part the major themes in the life narratives of the family members will be highlighted and explained. In the last part the narrative analysis will be discussed, in which the major plotlines that are apparent in the narratives of the family members will be highlighted.

### 4.1 The victims

It is important to introduce the respondents first. This will help to put their stories in perspective and to understand them in the right context. The life stories are described below. All the names have been changed for privacy reasons. Furthermore, some of the respondents were not just indirect victims, but direct victims of the communist regime as well. For the analysis the choice has been made to not focus on their direct victimization but solely on the victimization of their family members.

The first respondent is **Mehsam**, a man of about 47 years old who lived in the south of Kabul. He lived with his father, his mother, two older brothers and two younger sisters. His father worked as an Ear, Nose and Throat specialist in the army. One evening, his father didn't come home from work. This marked the beginning of the search for his father. When the government forced students who were in their last year to join the military, his oldest brother fled to join an active resistance against the government. A few years later, his other older brother was almost arrested as well, but a classmate helped him escape. It was a very hard time for the family, and Mehсам was suddenly the eldest son, the one who had to take care of the family. When Mehсам was of age to go to college, he wasn't allowed to do the study he wanted, because only sympathizers of the regime were allowed to do those studies. Life became harder for Mehсам, until eventually he had to flee as well in 1995. When he was gone, his two little sisters died in Afghanistan, but he didn't want to talk about how they died. Mehсам had to get his mother to the Netherlands through an illegal way. The stress became too much for her and she had a heart attack. A week later she died. Mehсам worked at a construction site for 4 or 5

years. Eventually, he started college, for four years he went to Amsterdam to school. Working by day, studying by night, until he graduated his bachelor in engineering. He now works as an engineer in the Netherlands.

The second respondent was **Romal**, age unknown, who is born and raised in Kabul. Her husband was known for his political activities. She lived at a secret address with three other families, the families of her husband's friends. One night, during diner time, the Khad came into their house with weapons. They had come to arrest her husband and his friends, but they weren't home at that time. They waited for them inside the house. Her husband came home and he was arrested. Romal decided to leave the house, together with her children, her mother-in-law and the brother and sister of one of her husband's friends. The Islamic party had threatened her family to kill them were they ever to return home. After two years she came back to Kabul, her sister-in-law built her family a room so they could live there. Her nephew was also arrested, and when her brother-in-law went to visit him, he saw Romal's husband as well. That was when Romal found out that he was still alive. Five months later she visited him for the first time since he was arrested seven years ago. She brought him clothes and money every 15 days. Romal took care of her family by making clothes, sewing, they made tapestries. Starting from the age of 5, the children started to help with making tapestries as well. The first half of the day they went to school and the second half of the day they helped with the tapestries. However, their income was scarce. There were days in which they had nothing. When the regime fell, Romal's husband was released. His friends helped him out financially and her husband started selling goods. This way they were able to make a living. Her husband went to the Netherlands first in 2001 and the rest of the family came soon afterwards. They have lived in the Netherlands for 12 years now. Romal's husband has written a book about his experiences in prison and is now writing a book about family stories as well. Their three children are all starting their own families and they even have three grandchildren, already.

The third respondent was **Ramez**, a man of 53 years old. He lived with his father, three brothers and two sisters. He was in 9<sup>th</sup> grade when the Mujahideen came to his village and the war started. They burned his school down. After 5 or 6 months he had to flee to somewhere he could study, which was somewhere where the government was in control. He continued his

study in Leningrad in 1981 and stayed there for four years. He became a fire officer and executed this function for the years to come. Most of his family survived the regime, but unfortunately his uncle was killed by a bomb. It was the brother of his father. Ramez said that it was very hard for his family, but for him personally as well. When he went to another province by plane, a rocket was fired at them as well, the rocket hit the plane while it was already landed. They weren't in it anymore. Ramez took his aunt and his uncle's children to Kabul. Unfortunately, Ramez did not tell when he came to the Netherlands and what he is doing now.

The fourth respondent was **Sanjar**, a man in his mid-twenties. He did not experience the regime personally, but his grandfather and great grandfather did. He said that his great grandfather was a man who was loved by his whole village. He helped everyone and everyone looked up to him. He was against the regime and was not afraid to show it and he was arrested for it. His family never found out what has happened to him. Not even when the list of 5000 people who were killed by the regime, was published by the Dutch Public Prosecution Office in 2013. His name wasn't on the list. Unfortunately, since he didn't know his great grandfather, he could not tell me much more. But it was clear that he was proud of his great grandfather and he was and still is angry at the government for letting so many terrible things happen. Sanjar now lives in the Netherlands and he tries to help the victims of the communist regime as much as he can. He conducted some interviews with victims as well, in Dari, so they could tell him about their experiences. Furthermore, he and his friends made a tribute on YouTube to all the victims of the regime.

The fifth respondent was **Ahmed**, a man of 54 years old. He lived with his father, mother, brothers and sister. His mother was a housewife, she took care of the children and everything around the house. His father and brother were arrested by the regime. His father was a man who fought for the freedom of people, he tried to protect them from the regime. He helped people with problems in their area. His father was arrested at home. Policemen waited for him outside and once he came home they arrested him. He wasn't even allowed to say goodbye. Ahmed still tears up when telling this, it hit him hard to see his father like this, for what would be the last time. His grandmother, who was 90 years old at that time, wanted to say goodbye, but she wasn't allowed. She gave him his jacket and said to him: "God gave you to



me and now you are going back to God. We will see each other again.” Two months later, his grandmother died. Ahmed believed it was of grief. Ahmed’s older brother came home on holidays during that time and he started to search for his father. When his brother went back to college, he was arrested as well. He studied medicine and was arrested when he was 22 years old. During this time, Ahmed was the eldest of the family and he had to take care of everything. He studied and worked. In 1983, Ahmed was arrested himself. When he was forced to work as a soldier he fled to Iran. He worked together with a resistance for a while and then fled with his family. His mother died there of cancer. When the communist regime was gone, they moved back to Afghanistan, with his wife and his two children. Ahmed and his family fled Afghanistan in 2011 and they came to the Netherlands. He never got to finish his study and since he was tortured in prison, he is coping with loss of hearing and troubles with his knees. He cannot work and even though he is trying to learn Dutch, his hearing loss makes this very hard. He has four daughters now and he is very proud of them. When the death list was published in the Netherlands by IND (2013), it was finally confirmed that his father and brother had died.

The sixth respondent was **Hamid**, a man of about 42 years old. He was three years old when the communist regime took over Afghanistan. Hamid lost 11 family members in total, they were all between 18 and 36 years old. They were arrested and never heard of again, until the death list of 2013. Hamid’s uncle, the brother of his mother, was one of the person’s arrested. They never knew why. He left 3 children behind, one unborn and two of eight and two years old. When Hamid’s father went to the prison to look for his uncle he was arrested as well. His father was in prison for nine months, once he returned he was not the same. He never spoke to his children about what had happened to him and not even his wife knew everything that he had been through. When the Soviet came to Afghanistan, Hamid fled with his parents. However, the family of his uncle remained in Afghanistan, because they were hoping that his uncle would return as well. His cousin was shot by the Russians, because he was gathering food for his family. He was nine years old. Hamid’s mother tried to help his aunt as much as she could, for she had lost her husband and her eldest. In the period of the communist regime, Hamid wasn’t worried for himself, he was young and not a target. However, he felt that his family members weren’t safe. When he was 25 he fled to the Netherlands, he was in an asylum

center for 6 months and was then granted status. He studied for 4 years and worked in a sort of plantation for cucumber and tomatoes. Now he is a taxi chauffeur and he loves his job. He has 3 children, two daughters of 11 and 9 and one boy of 4,5. His mother died eight years ago, but his father is still alive.

The seventh respondent was **Salim**, age unknown. He lost his cousin, the son of the sister of his mother. He was a student in Kabul, but had to flee because Kabul was not safe. He was arrested on his way to a safer village. His family searched for him for years, but he was never found. In 1980, his 16-years-old brother was arrested as well. Salim had to go in hiding for years after this, chances were that the regime would arrest him as well. For six years his brother was imprisoned, after his release he had to join the military for three more years. They were not allowed to go outside in that time. It was not only his brother of 16 years old who suffered this fate, but also children between 12 and 18 years old. In 1984, a bus exploded in which his family was travelling, leaving 2 cousins disabled and one dead. The bus was attacked by a helicopter and the people that tried to flee were gunned down. Salim came to the Netherlands in 1998. Some of his siblings live in Germany, some live in Norway, some in France and two still live in Afghanistan. Salim has been back to Afghanistan as architectural consultant in 2006, 2007 and 2009. Furthermore, he has written a few study books for the university. He has two daughters, one of which is graduated and active in politics, the other does a lot of volunteering.

The eighth respondent is **Nesar**, a man of 51 years old. He grew up with a father and two mothers. His father had equal appreciation for both women and children and was very good for his family. From his biological mother he had five brothers and four sisters. From his other mother he had four brothers and one sisters. When Nesar was about 14 years old, four of his brothers were arrested at home at night. However, they only needed to arrest one of them, so days after their arrest, three of the brothers were released again. One of the brothers that was arrested later told Nesar how they were treated and how they had heard the sounds of the people that were tortured. The brother that was sent to prison was the youngest son of his other mother. His other mother and his half-brother went to the prison a couple of times. They never got to see him, but they did exchange small notes. After a couple of months, they

stopped receiving the notes and the prison guards told them that they didn't know why they were there, because her son was not there anymore. However, his name never appeared on the list of 12000 executed people that hang on the ministry of internal affairs. Furthermore, they couldn't find him on the death list of 5000 executed people either. However, during one of the meetings of the Afghan Victims' rights foundation, he heard a story of 163 people that were executed one night. They attacked one of the commanders of the Pul-i-Charkhie. His brother was one of them. Because they murdered so many people at the same time, their names were never reported. In 2000, Nesar came to the Netherlands. He has four children, one daughter of 19 and three sons of 18, 15 and 8 years old. In the Netherlands, he did his masters in economics in 2,5 years. He hopes to return to Afghanistan one day, once it is safe, but for now, he likes the Netherlands, because they have everything here.

The ninth respondent is **Fadwa**, a woman of 60 years old. Her family consisted of a father and two mothers. From her biological mother she had seven brothers, from her other mother she had six brothers. Everybody was educated and well taken care of. She lost half of her family: 6 brothers, 1 cousin and her brother in law. Three of her brothers were imprisoned. One for 2 years, one for 9 years and one for 5 years. Furthermore, one of her brothers was hanged and another one was murdered. Their family fled to Pakistan because Afghanistan wasn't safe, but Pakistan wasn't safe either. In 1986 a group of eight persons, three brothers, three cousins and 2 other family members were captured in Pakistan. One of her brothers that had already been to prison was one of her brothers that was captured in Pakistan as well. Later, her uncle was captured as well. Her brothers that were in prison for 5 and 9 years were killed in Pakistan, the brother who was in prison for 2 years is still alive. In 1983, another one of her brothers was killed, he was the only one who had a funeral. He was killed battling the Soviets. It was a very dangerous situation. Fadwa's husband came to the Netherlands in 1998, Fadwa stayed for six more years in Pakistan with her children, because the government didn't believe that her husband was a refugee. In 2004 she took 3 of them to the Netherlands. Her oldest son couldn't come, because he was 18 years old. 3 years later he followed them to the Netherlands. Her children have all finished their education. Fadwa does not have an official job, but she has founded an Afghan women foundation. She and her family feel very at home at the

Netherlands, she says that Dutch people are very warm and open.

The tenth respondent is **Imran**, age unknown. Imran was involved in politics before the communist regime took over. When the regime took over, he had to flee and has lived in hiding for over 2 years. These were very hard times for him. He could only go out at night, never during the day, because the risk of getting caught was too great. During a meeting of his political party, which was against the communist regime, all of the party members were arrested. Because all of his party members were arrested in the town where he was in hiding, the regime knew he was there as well so he had to flee again. He could never stay at the same place for more than two days, he had to flee every time. At some point, his daughter was sick and she was dying. She wanted to see her father one last time before she died. But the commander of the district was a family member of them, so he knew she was sick and he knew that Imran would come home eventually. He guarded their house day and night, so Imran couldn't come home. In the end, Imran did come home, she died soon after. Imran had to flee again soon after. Furthermore, Imran lost two brothers, they died fighting the Khalqi regime. They were on the run and a big convoy of the regime came after them, even with tanks and they were only with the two of them. They fought until their last bullet. Imran's parents' health decreased rapidly after the death of his brothers. Imran continued their battle from Pakistan, until he couldn't anymore due to sickness. When the communist regime was defeated, he returned to Afghanistan. But when the Taliban came he fled to the Netherlands. To this day, he still is not physically healthy. He has been operated twice for his back, one time in the Netherlands. Furthermore, his leg is paralyzed, he needs to wear a special shoe, that keeps him from falling over. He could not get back to working in the Netherlands, he came here at an older age and could not build a future for himself. He is still trying to build a better Afghanistan from here. He went back to Afghanistan for a few rebuilding projects. All his children have finished their education here in the Netherlands. Imran now spends his day studying, he spends approximately between 6 and 8 hours per day on reading. He would like to go back to Afghanistan someday, because in his head, he is still there, he thinks about it every day.

The eleventh and last respondent was **Mahdia**, a woman of 33 years old who was born in Iran. Mahdia tells the story of her mother, because it is too hard for her mother to tell the

story herself. Mahdia's uncle, the brother of her mother, was arrested and was never heard of again. Only years later, when they were in Iran, they heard that he was shipped off to the Soviet to work at a factory. They were told that he was pushed of a building there. Furthermore, Mahdia's grandfather, the father of her mother, was arrested during the communist regime as well, he was in prison for 15 years. He got out, but was poisoned by the regime. They had send all the doctors away so he could not be saved. In 2002, Mahdia and her parents came to the Netherlands. Her mother is now volunteering at a health center and her father works there as well. Mahdia herself has just opened her own practice.

#### 4.2 Narrative analysis

In this section the themes and sub-themes which are most apparent in the life narratives of the respondents will be discussed, elaborated and linked to theoretical notions. It shows what the family members of the victims experienced while their loved ones were victimized, how they gave meaning to this loss and how it has influenced their stories.

##### **Lack of justice**

The period of the communist regime (1978-1992) was one characterized by a lack of justice. This became clear in the stories of the family members of the victims as well. This theme contains the following subthemes: lack of justice during the regime and lack of justice now.

##### Lack of justice during the regime

To the outside world, not much is known about the crimes committed by the communist regime in Afghanistan. Many of the documents containing the thousands or maybe millions of names of the people that the regime had killed have disappeared. When the regime came to power they made sure that they were the only party to control Afghanistan.

*"Their party wanted to be the sole ruler, no other parties were allowed to be active anymore."*

Mehsam

Their general rule was: if you are not with us, you are against us. As Salim noted:

*"The government had one explanation: if someone wasn't with us, then they are the enemy."*

Salim

The regime came up with many rules. For instance, as many of the respondents told, it was prohibited to listen to BBC radio.

*“People [agents] walked outside your house in the evening. If they heard you listening to BBC, they came to arrest you the following morning. Why were you listening to BBC? It was outrageous. So reading books, listening to the radio... you could only listen to Soviet Union radio, or read books that came from the Soviet Union. Books or radio from other countries, or calling to other countries was all forbidden, it could cost you your head.”*

Mehsam

Even being in contact with acquaintances in foreign countries was forbidden.

*“We had family in Germany. We were not allowed to get letters from him. If you received a letter from Western countries, you were interrogated, what is this letter? Why are you getting it?”*

Mehsam

Furthermore, it was prohibited to have the lights on at night. Having visitors over was also problematic, since everything had to be checked.

*“You were not allowed to listen to the radio. BBC was forbidden. And you couldn’t turn on the lights in your house at night, because the guards would immediately check it out: what are you doing? Who are you? And having visitors over, that also had to be controlled.”*

Imran

The regime continued to find more ways to suppress the people of Afghanistan.

*“If you were a member of the party, you were allowed to study architecture or engineering. If not, you had to study for making roads, which wasn’t and still isn’t interesting in Afghanistan. It made no sense, but that was the way they suppressed their population and benefited their own party.”*

Mehsam

Furthermore, in 1981, the regime introduced conscription.

*“At some point, the government said that all last years of school were not allowed to go to higher education, they had to go to the front. They had to serve as a soldier. While the children of the high ranks of the regime got a scholarship to Poland, Czech or Russia to study. But all the other people had to go to the front to fight their own people.”*

Mehsam

However, besides suppressing the population of Afghanistan by prohibiting anything regarding the Western countries and conscription for young students, they arrested many people as well. Often without a reason and without any kind of process.

*“The communist regime would ask you, how you... and where you... what have you done? You had no rights, no lawyer, you were sent to prison immediately.”*

Hamid

The way the victims were arrested was often inhumane. It was clear from the interviews that this part of their narrative was the hardest to talk about and more than once led to tears.

*“When he came home, they arrested him. He wanted to grab some clothes, he had to change. But they didn’t allow him to. They didn’t even allow him to go inside the house. They didn’t even allow him to say goodbye.”*

Ahmed

The reasons for arrest were often not clear, as can be read in the theme: *search for answers*, which will be discussed later. Sometimes, people were arrested solely because they were asking around, to find out where their family members have gone.

*“I have seen... an 18 year old boy, had to go to prison. He was arrested by a soldier and sent to prison. He went looking for his father. He asked: why have you arrested my father? And they said: you can come as well.”*

Hamid

The fact that there almost never was a legit reason to arrest someone is something that still frustrates the family members. In each interview it was mentioned that so many prisoners were innocent. That they had never done anything against the regime.

*“Every day and in every city students, teachers, civil servants, employees, farmers... all people were arrested. These were innocent people.”*

Salim

Most victims, once they were arrested, were on their way to be tortured for information. Via this torture it was decided who would go to prison and who would be executed. The persons who were arrested could hear people being tortured once they arrived at the ministry.

*“And my brother told me how the vehicles stopped at a building of the ministry and they could hear the sounds of people being tortured. And the people were electrocuted at different levels, they were tortured in a very nasty way. And beaten.”*

Nesar

Once imprisoned, not many of the prisoners made it out alive. It was hard to distinguish who could be trusted and who could not. Even in the prison, there were spies from the regime.

*“My father said: we prisoners were all in one room. It was a room made to inhabit 4 persons, but we were there with more than 20 people. But if you would ask someone: where are you from? Why are you here? That’s another problem, because between those 20 people, there were to agents of the secret services. You had to keep your mouth shut, you shouldn’t talk.”*

Hamid

Some people were executed for a reason; because the regime decided that they had wronged them in some way. However, many were also randomly picked to be executed.

*“Some people got a death sentence. But sometimes they came in the night and they pointed at people: you, you and you come with us, you are free. And then they took them outside, but they didn’t let them go. They murdered them and they disappeared in a mass grave.”*

Salim



Killing all these people seemed to be the easy way out for the communist regime. According to Imran: *“2 million people have been killed by this regime. Which, if you divide this, makes up for more than two hundred thousand people per leader.”* Furthermore, according to Mehsam, *“The party killed about twelve thousand people in just the first year, while they were just normal people: teachers, students, doctors, engineers, officers. But these people never did anything. It was just the beginning of a change and just because they no members, or had no sympathy for the party.”*

*“The Khalqi regime, they killed immediately. They thought that sending their opposers to prison was too long of a story. You just had to kill your enemies. As many as you can.”*

Imran

#### Lack of justice now

As can be concluded from the above section is that the crimes of the communist regime and its mental scars left on the victims are still very fresh. The regime did terrible things to the country, and to the frustration of most of the victims, there is no justice for them yet.

*“But still, there has never been a point of justice for Afghanistan. The government was not brought to justice.”*

Mehsam

The frustration is mainly that many of the members of the communist regime fled to Europe after the fall of the regime, and were granted permission to settle in European countries.

*“There were two people who were the head of everything that happened, those who were arrested and executed. One of them is dead now, but the other one is still living in Germany.”*

Ahmed

But not only Germany is housing one of the war criminals of the communist regime, according to the respondents, one of them is also living in the Netherlands right now.

*“Someone, he was one function lower than the president. He’s still living in the Netherlands. His family has been granted status and they are living in the Netherlands. He is still in an asylum center.”*

Ahmed

What furthermore frustrates the respondents about this whole ordeal is that they get to enjoy human rights, even when it is known that they were members of the communist regime.

*“This is just... and now these people come here to the Western countries and are still talking about human rights, while they did such things to their own people.”*

Mehsam

Furthermore, there are two sides to the wish for justice. For some it means that the perpetrators should be brought to justice, that they should be punished for their crimes. However, some respondents expressed a wish for acknowledgement from the perpetrators. These respondents want to hear from the perpetrators what they have done, and they want to hear an apology for it.

*“But I’ve heard that he lives in the Netherlands, maybe I can go visit him and interview him myself. I would say; please, what have you done? Where have you buried the executed prisoners? And what have you done to these people. Could you tell me about it, so my heart can be a bit more at ease?”*

Hamid

One of the main reasons for this is that the victims still cannot understand why this has happened. They wonder why the government did what they did.

*“I don’t understand how... why... How can you do this to people?”*

Sanjar

However, the most important things for the respondents is that such a civil war can never happen again. This is why they want the perpetrators to be brought to justice.

*“In the end, history will decide that the people who were on the side of the traitors, that they were wrong. And I’m convinced of this. I just think it is a pity that there has never been a lesson for the perpetrators, who destroyed the lives of so many people. In Afghanistan, weird things still happen daily. And I think that this is in part because there has never been justice. No one has had to answer for his crimes. If there would have been justice, it would have been a lesson for the perpetrators. And a lesson for the next generations. That this should never happen again. This has not happened yet and this is very painful for the victims.”* Mehsam

Afghanistan is still not safe, it is a corrupt country. As Mehsam said, this could have been different if there would have been justice for the victims. Warlords are still living in Afghanistan and are now multimillionaires.

*“Those people, who had nothing 30 years ago, without doing any business, this or that. But that they have become multimillionaires. They are the businessmen of the war. Then you know what is going on...”*

Imran

The lack of justice, both during the communist regime and now, challenged the meaning-making of the respondents. According to Janoff-Bulman (2004), this change in assumptions about meaning-making challenges an individual to re-establish a sense of meaning within life. This could be seen in most of the narratives of the respondents as well, especially when asked about the future. It appeared that no-one really had any plans for the future. They had plans for their children, for them to graduate and live a happy life, but they often did not know what they wanted to do for themselves. They had no real meaning in life anymore, except for making their families happy. For those who did have future plans, the future plans all involved Afghanistan. To help make Afghanistan a better place again and to bring justice to all the victims of the communist regime.

What is also apparent when looking at the respondents regarding the communist regime, is that they are stuck in the meaning-making phase. According to Janoff-Bulman (2004), there are two types of meaning-making. These two types were already described in the theoretical framework, but a short overview will now be given. The first type was ‘meaning as comprehensibility’, in this phase the victims have trouble making sense of a traumatic event. They don’t understand why it has happened. The second type was ‘meaning of significance’, in this phase victims lose sight of the significance or value of their lives, because of the problems with comprehensibility. Since there is still a lot that is unclear regarding the victims of the communist regime, the family members get stuck in the comprehension of their victimization. Since they still have trouble making sense of the traumatic event, asking themselves questions like: why did it happen or how could it happen, they can question their purpose in life. This can be seen in their future goals as well. All future goals revolve around their family and

Afghanistan. Afghanistan is still a big part of their lives and especially the reconstruction of Afghanistan. Returning Afghanistan to the way it was before the communist regime and before the corruption that is now a big part of the country.

#### Search for answers

Many of the victims that were arrested disappeared, never to be heard of again. For their families, this meant that they had no idea what happened to their loved ones and where they went. Thus, they had to search for answers to their questions: where are they? What happened to them? Why are they arrested? Therefore, this theme is divided into two sub-themes: search for answers: dead or alive, and search for answers: reason of arrest.

#### Search for answers: dead or alive?

Many of the family members did not hear from their family members once they were arrested. Therefore they did not know whether their family members were dead or alive. Thus, they had to start a search for their family members. This search was often long, tiresome and sometimes even humiliating.

*“My mother started to look for him. She had to go to different instances of the government, write letters to the secret services, to ask where he is. If they know anything. Sometimes we went to the Ministry of Internal Affairs, or the Departments of Defense. [...] Every day that we went there, we would have to wait for hours and no one took your letter. Once they did take your letter, you would have to wait for hours as well.”*

Mehsam

Ahmed and his family had the same troubles searching for his father.

*“My brother has been to many places, but he never received an answer of where he was. Why he was arrested.”*

Ahmed

For some respondents, the search ended once they found their family members in de Pul-I-Charkhie. They knew where they were and often they knew they were alive, at least for some time. The Pul-I-Charkhie was hard to reach for the people of Afghanistan. It was far away from

Kabul and it was very hard during that time to get to and from the city. Furthermore, the Pul-I-Charkhie was a 30 minute walk from the main road, and many of the Afghans had no car to transport them back to Kabul. What made this journey even harder was the fact that they had no way of knowing whether they were allowed to see their family members or not. The guards would find new ways to pressure their prisoners, and one of the ways to do that was to make their family members believe that they were dead.

*“They wanted to pressure my husband even more. That is why they wouldn’t take his clothes every week, but only every two weeks. One day, my husband had put a note inside his pants. In this letter he wrote: if you visit me ten times and the guards don’t take my clothes, don’t be sad, don’t worry, because I’m safe. It doesn’t mean anything.”*

Romal

However, for other respondents, the questions and the search started again at some point. They would not hear from their family members anymore or the guards would not take the clothes brought for the prisoner anymore. The family members were not notified when something happened to their family members and the guards would not tell them either. There was no way of knowing for certain what had happened.

*“But after a couple of months, we received no notes back. They said, he is not here anymore. Why are you here?”*

Nesar

Even when the government published a list of twelve thousand names on the walls of the Ministry of Internal affairs, the question of whether a family member was dead or alive for some remained unanswered.

*“And when the list was published on the walls of the ministry of Internal Affairs. [...] my brother and father went to Kabul very quickly, to see the list. But the name of my brother wasn’t there. We still had hope, because of that, because he wasn’t executed. This list, these people had gotten the death penalty. [...] and he wasn’t on this list.”*

Nesar

For Mahdia's mother it would remain a mystery what had happened to her brother for years. She only heard about what happened when she fled to Iran.

*"Years later, when she fled to Iran, she heard that her brother was shipped off to the Soviet to work at a factory. She was told that he was pushed off a building there and that is how he died."*

Mahdia

Many of the respondents that were uncertain of the fate of their family members never knew what happened until four years ago. In 2013, the Dutch Public Prosecution Office published a death list, consisting of 5000 individuals who were killed by the communist regime. For many of the respondents, this was the first time they learned about the fate of their family members.

*"So... until now, when we arrived in the Netherlands... IND published a list of all the people that were killed. And on that list were the name of my father and my brother and of many others I knew and who were at that party of 60 people. So I only just found out in the Netherlands."*

Ahmed

For Hamid, it was the same.

*"I downloaded it immediately. Opened it immediately. And search, search, search. And then I found him. I found his name."*

Hamid.

For some respondents, the confirmation of the death of the family members only brought forward more questions. This was the case for Mehsam.

*"And still I think about the moment that my father was arrested. How can I ever find closure for that? How was he killed? There were many ways of execution. Some people were buried alive, some were executed, sometimes they dropped people from a plane. [...] And all those questions are brought forward. How did they kill him? What were his last thoughts on that moment?"*

Mehsam

However, not all victims are known. There were many more victims than these 5000. According to Imran: *"There are still families that don't know where their parents are."*

Search for answers: reason of arrest

What made the arrests of the family members so painful is the fact that often the reason for the arrest was unknown, or not given. So while searching for their family members, it was also important to search for the reason why the family member was arrested.

*“After my father was arrested, I went to many places to find out why he was arrested. After a few times, I was told that they thought my father was a traitor and that the government shall deal with traitors. When I asked: What has he done to be deemed a traitor? They cursed at me and kicked me out of the office.”*

Ahmed

The lack of cooperation of the government made the search very hard for the family members.

*“It always went this way, with a lot of trouble, a lot of humiliation, suppression, you name it. It was very hard to ask where he was. And always a very bad... they treated family members very bad. That you were asking for relatives, or acquaintances, or friends, family members, fathers...”*

Mehsam

Thus, after a while, the search became harder. The humiliation and suppression was tiring and took its toll on the family members.

*“Gradually, the search become slower and slower, because you only get negative answer, or nothing, or humiliation.”*

Mehsam

For many of the respondents the search for their loved ones ended without results. They lost their loved ones and had no means to find out where they went. This meant that they had to deal with their loss; they had to make sense of it. Sense-making is important when confronted with loss. For families, story-telling is one of the primary ways to make sense of difficult events (Koenig Kellas, 2010). When families tell each other stories about the loss or the person who is lost, they can comfort one another. They can discuss perceptions of what happened and how they experienced it. However, many of the respondents explained that they barely talked about their experiences. Their families, and especially their children, know what happened to the family member that was lost, but they are not told all the details. Since the respondents do not

tell their story often, it was hard for them to share their story with the interviewer.

Furthermore, because they don't speak about their experiences often, they cannot profit from the advantages that sharing a story with family members can bring. This, in turn, results in a lesser sense-making of the victimization. The lesser sense-making of the victimization in turn might lead to a lesser processing of the loss (Koenig Kellas, 2010).

### Redemption and contamination

As was mentioned in the theoretical framework, redemption and contamination are both themes that are frequently used in the narratives of all human beings. In summary: the theme of redemption shows how a person comes from a bad life scene and turns it into something good, while the theme of contamination shows how someone comes from a good life scene, and moves into a negative life scene.

For the narratives of the family members of the victims of the communist regime, both themes are applicable. For their lives consist out of two periods. The period before the communist regime was generally described as good and positive. Imran stated this about the time before the regime:

*"During that time, before the regime, we had a very normal.. very good life, all basic needs were covered. [...] There was no depression. No fear of tomorrow: what is going to happen tomorrow? Do I have to pay this, do I have to pay that? That wasn't there. [...] When you graduated, you immediately had a job. [...] Afghanistan was a developing country, they had nothing. So for everyone that graduated there was a job: the government worked hard on that. If you wanted to work, you could work. [...] You didn't need to worry about not having money to study, or to live on your own. You went to Kabul to study, medicine, you came there and got study funding, plus a room and food 3 times a day. [...] Furthermore, women had the same rights as man did."*

Imran

What is clear from the interviews was that before the regime, Afghanistan wasn't a wealthy country, but it was very happy. Fadwa said:

*"Afghanistan was a very poor country, but very happy. My youth was very happy. Money doesn't make you happy. School... university... the world was very nice, very beautiful."* Fadwa



However, this beautiful and happy Afghanistan was gone once the regime took control. Thus, a positive life scene was turned into a negative life scene. The good was spoiled, or in other words: contaminated.

The second phase of the narratives of the family members of the victims of the communist regime was the period of the communist regime. This phase marks the contamination phase of the contamination theme. However, it can also be seen as the at first negative life scene, that eventually will make the narrator stronger. In this case it will be part of the redemption theme.

#### 4.3 Analysis of narratives

This last section of the results will sketch a more broad picture of the life narratives. Using the plotlines that Booker established, the plotlines that appeared to be most important for the Afghan victims' narratives will be discussed.

It is important to note that all narratives that are gathered for this thesis are different in many ways. However, three general plotlines can be distinguished within their stories: Quest, Tragedy and Overcoming the monster. These three plots are all intertwined. The Quest plot is filled with parts of Tragedy and Overcoming the monster. The Overcoming the monster plot consists of parts of the Quest and parts of the Tragedy plot as well. First, the three different plots will be described separately. This will be followed by an explanation of how the plots are intertwined.

##### Quest

In the Quest plotline the main character is working towards some distant all-important goal. Reaching this goal his main task in life and the main character will do anything to achieve this goal. The quest can also be found in the theme *search for answers*. The main goal of most of the respondents was to find their family members, to find out what happened to them and to find out whether they were still alive. Many of the respondents spend a lot of time and effort on this search.

*“One day, we went to the prison of the Pul-I-Charkhie, which is far away from the centre of Kabul and even further away from our house. It was very hard during that time to get to the city and back to the other side. But we made effort to do this every time. [...] At some point, it was the*

*afternoon, close to the evening, when the soldier came with a letter that my father wasn't there. So we had to walk from the prison to the main road, because no cars were allowed there. It was about an half an hour walk to the prison."*

Mehsam

Respondents had to go on with their lives, while not knowing what happened to their family members.

*"Five months after this I visited my husband. I found him and met him. But this visit was 7 years after his arrest. So for 7 years I had no idea if he was alive."*

Romal

As is characteristic of the plotline Quest, the narrators had to overcome many different obstacles before they could reach their goal. For the family members of Afghan victims, one of these obstacles was disappointment. Their search was often fruitless, no answers were given to them about the whereabouts of their family members. This disappointment sometimes led to despair, making it hard to continue to search. For instance, in the case of Ahmed, the government promised to set free the political prisoners. He went there, hoping to see his father and brother, but was only met with disappointment.

*"One year after the new government... the new government came.. a new one came. They said that all prisoners, all political prisoners, would be released. They went there and said: we are looking for our father and our brother. They were sent to the main office and they were hit like: we are not going to tell you anything about your father, go look where they are killed. So they still had no answer to what had happened. Even after a year, when they said and promised to release the prisoners, they still didn't know anything."*

Ahmed

Many of the respondents had hoped that their family members would come back to them when the political prisoners were released. However, for none of the respondents this was the case.

*"And then... I heard that all prisoners were released. The new regime came. And my mother had made meat. She bought this for her brother. She made a table full of food. 'My brother will come*

*home! I will go to his wife and our mother together with my brother.’ My mother kept an eye on the door, every time she would check if it was her brother. She peeped through the door to see who was coming to the door. As soon as her brother would come in, she would grab him and it would be a big party. But no one came.”*

Hamid

But it wasn’t just the disappointment that the family members faced that made their quest hard. They had to survive as well, for most of the time, the money makers of the family were arrested. The one’s left behind needed to find a way to get food on the table.

*“I worked, after my father was gone. I worked and I studied. I went to school at the same time. We had a... how do you call it... an atelier for making carpets. We also had people working for us. And that’s how we got money.”*

Ahmed

This is one example of how the plots are intertwined. To fulfil their Quest (to find answers), the respondents had to Overcome certain monsters (or obstacles) as well. In this instance the monster that needs to be overcome is the loss of the cost winner of the family. An obstacle that needs to be overcome to survive and to continue the Quest. More will be explained on the cohesion of the plots later.

However, besides needing to get food on the table, there were other obstacles as well. For instance, many of respondents were threatened by the regime and they had to go into hiding themselves. Some stayed in Afghanistan and some went to Pakistan. But Pakistan wasn’t safe either.

*“There was no peace either. In Pakistan, four of my brothers and my cousins were captured by the Islamic Party and they disappeared. Every day and every night it was unsafe, in Pakistan as well as Afghanistan. Every night, one of us would stay awake. We had nowhere to go, but we couldn’t stay in Pakistan or Afghanistan either.”*

Fadwa

Once on the run, the search for their family members had to be put on hold, for it was not safe for them to search for them. For this reason, for many of the respondents, the search didn't end until the publishing of the death list in 2013.

*"Only that list, that last list, in the Netherlands. I saw it then. Now they know, our father, or cousin, our uncle is dead."*

Hamid

However, for some the search is still not over.

*"One guy, my cousin, de son of my aunt from my mother's side. He was arrested and we still don't know where he is. The family went to the prison for years, to different secret services, but he was never found."*

Salim

And for others, knowing that their family member was killed only brought up more questions.

*"Now I said to family members of victims: Sorry, your father is dead. But this still didn't ease his mind. Where did my father die? When? Where?"*

Hamid

Booker (2004) describes certain stages that can be seen in the Quest plot. These stages can be seen in the stories of the respondents as well. The first stage is The call, in this stage life is oppressive and intolerable. The narrator needs to fix this situation. In the stories of the respondents The Call is often the phase in which they lost their loved ones. Either because they were arrested, or because they just did not come home one day. The second stage that Booker (2004) describes is The Journey, in which the narrator sets out across hostile terrain, where he will encounter monsters and temptations. For the respondents this is the search for their loved ones. During their search they are confronted with obstacles such as threats to their lives and hopelessness when they continue to end up empty handed. The third stage that Booker (2004) describes is the Arrival and Frustration, the hero arrives within sight of his goal, but is far from reaching the goal because there are a series of obstacles which need to be overcome to get to his goal. This is where the respondents are stuck at the moment. Some have found the names of their loved ones on the death list published by the Dutch Public Prosecution Office in 2013

(Openbaar Ministerie, 2013), however, a lot is still unknown about what has happened to their loved ones. There are a fourth and a fifth stage as well: The Final Ordeal and The Goal. These stages cannot be finished before the family members find out what exactly has happened to their loved ones and where they are buried.

It became clear from the interviews that not knowing where their family members went was the hardest part of the period of the communist regime for the family members of the victims. Their lives changed completely, they often had to take care of their family all of a sudden. Or they had to flee themselves because they were threatened. But the questions remained: where is my family member? Is he still alive? The narrators described how hard it was to search for their family members. How they had to walk for hours to go to the ministry, how they had to wait for hours for someone to pay attention to them once they were there and how they all received the same answer over and over again “we don’t know.”

What becomes clear as well is that their story, their quest is not over yet. Some still don’t know what has happened to their family member, they are still searching. Some do know, but still want to know more: where did it happen, why did it happen, how did it happen? Furthermore, a new quest was created as well: the quest for justice. However, the quest for justice goes together with the next plot that could be found in the narratives: overcoming the monster.

### **Overcoming the monster**

In the overcoming the monster plotline the narrator is faced with an evil that has to be overcome, the evil can take any form and often possesses something the hero wants to have or save. Overcoming the monster takes two different forms in two different phases of the lives of the narrators. The first phase is during the communist regime. The regime is in this case the evil that has to be overcome. This plotline can also be found in the theme *lack of justice during the regime*. The victims of the communist regime were against the regime, that was the reason they were arrested. They saw the regime as an evil that needed to be overcome. The family members were often against the regime as well. Some acted out against them.

*“With his party members he fought the regime in a different district. He couldn’t just sit at home, not active. Until the day he could he fought them. For years.”*

Imran

But it was also marked by pride for their family members. They were arrested because the regime viewed them as a threat. And often the families gained respect of the other families in their village or city because of this. This respect and pride made them strong.

*“But all this time, we were also proud. Proud that our father wasn’t on the side of the traitors. And that made us strong. And at the same time, it was also the reason that the people of the society respected us.”*

Mehsam

The second phase of overcoming the monster is right now. The evil they have to overcome is not in the form of a human, or an animal, or another living creature, it is figurative. It is overcoming the injustice that has played and still plays a big role in their narratives. The theme *lack of justice now* can be used to support this part of the overcoming the monster plotline. During the regime many innocent people were arrested.

*“He was serving, he was a ENT specialist and he didn’t do anything.”*

Mehsam

Furthermore, the families were confronted with a lot of unfairness from the regime as well. They often had to grit their teeth and keep going, showing the regime that they would not be broken.

*“And after the disappearance of my father, they punished my mother by sending her to the other side of the city to a different school. It was very hard for her to go from the village to the city and then to the other side. But she had no other way, she had to take care of us.”*

Mehsam

The regime and its secret services caused a lot of mistrust among the Afghans.

*“And my father said to me, keep your mouth shut, you can’t talk outside. Because if the regime hears you talking about it [torture of father], they say you have contact with traitors as well.”*

Hamid

Even now, and probably in the future as well, the victims of the communist regime in Afghanistan will be overcoming the monsters that is injustice. The family members want their suffering and the suffering of the victims of the regime to be known to the rest of the world. They want to give a voice to the victims. Furthermore, they want justice to prevail. They want the perpetrators of the communist regime to admit what they have done and they want retribution for their suffering. The retribution must serve as a warning, so something this terrible can never happen again.

*“And we hope that in the end, the voices of the victims will be heard. And at the same tie, maybe we can take a step towards justice, that it can be a lesson for perpetrators. To make an example out of it for the next generations.”*

Mehsam

Thus, injustice is an evil that the Afghan victims and their families need to overcome and they are still working on it. For instance by creating the Afghanistan Victims’ Rights Foundation, they are taking a step towards overcoming this evil. They are still trying to find answer to the unanswered question and they try to give victims a voice. By making their suffering known, a first step can be taken towards justice. There was not one respondent who didn’t mention the lack of justice and how important it is for them that justice will prevail in the end.

*“I would like to see that those people, who destroyed everyone, that justice will be done to them. This is very important for me. And not just for me, but for every Afghan.”*

Hamid

According to Booker (2004) there are 5 stages to the Overcoming the Monster plot. The first stage is the Anticipation Stage & ‘Call’. In this stage the hero becomes aware of a monster. Gradually, the hero learns of its reputation and this monster casts a shadow over the community. The Monster in this case is the Communist regime and the injustice that it brings with it. In this stage, the respondents notice that many people are arrested without any process

or reason. The second stage is the Dream stage, in which the hero makes preparations for battle. For a while all seems to be going well (Booker, 2004). This stage cannot be seen in the stories of the respondents. In their narratives, there was never a moment of peace or rest. They were constantly alert and afraid. The third stage is the Frustration Stage, in which the monster and its power become known and the hero seems tiny and alone (Booker, 2004). In the stories this stage is often very clear. The regime came up with more ways to suppress the people and these new suppressions led to a lot of frustrations. Examples are the prohibiting of turning lights on in the evening and conscription for boys in their last year of their study. The fourth stage is the Nightmare stage, in which the final ordeal begins (Booker, 2004). This stage cannot clearly be distinguished in the narratives of the respondents. However, for each respondent there was a moment that they had to flee from Afghanistan. So this can be seen as the end of the nightmare stage. Life became too hard in Afghanistan and therefore they had to go somewhere else. The fifth and last stage is the Thrilling escape from death & death of the monster (Booker, 2004). In the stories of the respondents, this is the end of the communist regime. Many of the respondents moved back to Afghanistan once the regime was gone. However, unfortunately, the monster (the injustice) was not really overcome. The direct injustice of the regime was. However, a new sort of injustice became apparent: a lack of recognition for the victims and a lack of retribution of the perpetrators. It seems that the respondents are now at the third stage, the frustration stage, in the overcoming the monster plot. They are aware of the injustice, the monster, they have made preparations for 'battle'. Which in this case means that they are trying to be recognized and they are trying to get justice for all the victims of the communist regime. They are now faced with the difficult task of getting justice for all the victims and therefore they are stuck in the frustration stage for now.

### Tragedy

The last plotline that can be found in the narratives is tragedy. Tragedies are characterised by a tragic and sad theme and have no happy ending. In the narratives of the respondents, tragedy comes in the form of loss of family member. As can be seen in the themes, many of the losses happened because of the arrests of family members.



*"My youngest brother, from my other mother, my brother, he became a victim. He was killed in the Pul-I-Charkhie prison in Kabul in Afghanistan, without any trial or process."*

Nesar

However, the loss of family members did not just happen through arrest. A civil war was going on in Afghanistan between 1978 and 1992. The Soviet army and the Afghan army were walking around and camping out in Afghanistan, and they shot people. This is for instance how Hamid lost a cousin.

*"But when he went to look for mushrooms, near the mountain, where a big military base was situated, they shot him. And this is very painful. He got a bullet in his head. [...] He was 6 years old."*

Hamid

Because of the many parties trying to take control of Afghanistan, there were fights, explosions and air attacks throughout all of Afghanistan. This cost many people their lives as well.

*"The family came from Kabul and their bus exploded. The son of my uncle got injured and handicapped. One of his daughters died."*

Salim

*"My uncle was hit by a missile and died because of that."*

Ramez

Furthermore, because many of the respondents were on the run for the regime, they sometimes were not able to say goodbye to their loved ones. For instance, Imran's daughter was terminally ill, but she wouldn't die before seeing her father. Imran risked his life by going back home, so he could say goodbye to his daughter for the last time.

*"I had a daughter, she was very sick. We were very close. But I couldn't come home, for years. [...] But my daughter, she was dying. She had to see me. So she stayed alive for as long as she could, until she saw her father. Once she saw me she died."*

Imran

However, some family members were killed in combat as well. Fighting against the regime until they no longer could. Imran had experience with this as well.

*"I lost two brothers to the war with the Khalqi regime. They were killed, both very young. But they were fighting against the regime and they were killed in combat. [...] They were on the run and a big convoy of the regime came after them, with tanks and everything and they were with just the two of them. My brothers fought until their last bullet."*

Imran

Furthermore, moving to Pakistan also brought a lot of danger to the family members. Pakistan was not a safe place either. For instance, Fadwa lost almost half of her family in Pakistan.

*"I have lost a lot of family members, about half of my family. Six brothers, 4 cousins and my brother in law."*

Fadwa

The loss caused the respondents a lot of pain. Some even say that the pain of the loss caused other family members so much pain that they died because of it.

*"It was very deep, that is what I know from my wife and the rest of the family. Because they were very well respected, my brothers... they were young and the favourites of my parents. So the cause of the death of my parents was also the death of my two brothers. Because they had such deep pain."*

Imran

The suffering of loss is a very frequent subject in the narratives of the family members of victims of the communist regime in Afghanistan. The war in Afghanistan caused many innocent people to lose their lives and for the survivors to lose their loved ones. This pain will never go away, even though they will learn to live with it. The plotline tragedy will always be a part of their life narratives.

Booker describes five stages of the Tragedy plot (Booker, 2004). However, these five stages cannot be distinguished in the stories of the respondents. Their tragedy is focused on the loss of family members and the hard times this brought with it. However, in the typical Tragedy plot, the first stage is the Anticipation stage, in which a hero is incomplete or unfulfilled and

looks for some sort of unusual gratification (Booker, 2004). This first stage is not apparent in the stories of the respondents, for their loss did not happen to them because they were looking for a form of gratification. Their family members were just taken from them, and no good reason was given for that. The second stage is the Dream stage, in which the hero becomes committed to his course of action. Things go well for a while and he seems to be getting away with everything (Booker, 2004). Again, the respondents were not to blame for their own suffering. Their family members were taken away from them by the regime and the only blame can be put on the regime. The third stage is the Frustration stage (Booker, 2004). This could be seen as the beginning of the Tragedy plot for the respondents. The frustration stage is where their family member is taken away from them, things begin to go wrong and this frustrates the narrator. The fourth stage is the Nightmare stage, in which things are out of the hero's control. He has a mounting sense of threat and despair (Booker, 2004). For the respondents, this is the moment that they figure out that they will never see their family members again. This is connected with the Quest and Overcoming the monster plot: their search for their family members keeps resulting in nothing and the injustice of the regime becomes worse. The final stage is the Destruction or Death wish stage (Booker, 2004). This can be distinguished in the stories of the participants in an abstract way. The last stage is where they accept that their family member is really gone. Or for some of the respondents, it is the moment that they saw the name of their loved one on the death list published by the Dutch Public Prosecution Office (Openbaar Ministerie, 2004). In the Tragedy Plot, the hero dies in this last stage (Booker, 2004). However, the respondents clearly did not die. However, they do have to continue living with the pain of the loss. Even though it is not the same as dying, it is a terrible fate and therefore fitting for the last stage of the Tragedy plot.

#### How the plots are intertwined

As was noted at the beginning of the narrative analysis, the three plots described above are intertwined. They cannot be seen as separate. When looking at the stories of the victims, the umbrella plot could be overcoming the monster. In the case of the victims of the communist regime, the monster that needs to be overcome is the communist regime and the lack of justice regarding this regime. The victims need to overcome the injustice that was apparent during the

time of the communist regime, as well as the injustice nowadays. Furthermore, they need to overcome the terrible experiences that the victims have experienced during the communist regime, they need to learn to give it a place in their story and to continue living their life. However, to overcome these monsters, they need to learn to live with the Tragedy and they need to fulfil their Quest.

The Tragedy plot, as can be read above, is filled with the loss of family members, either by arrest and execution, or by the civil war itself: bombings, fights, or shootings. To overcome the monster that is the communist regime and the injustice, they need to keep on living and they need to remember the victims of the regime. When the victims of the communist regime are recognized, the terrible deeds of the regime will be as well. This will bring the victims a step closer to justice, for when the deeds of the regime are recognized, more can be done to either punish them or to make them admit what they have done. Because not all the victims want the regime to be punished, they mostly want the regime to admit what they have done. In sum, the loss that the respondents have to deal with makes it so important for them to be recognized. They still have to live with the loss, but few people know what they have been through. Admittance of the people of the communist regime will help the victims to be recognized and therefore will help them overcome their monsters.

The Quest plot can also be found in the Overcoming the monster plot. This can especially be found when looking at the injustice as the monster that needs to be overcome. Many Afghan people have lost their family members due to the injustice of the regime. They were arrested and killed without any form of process or possible defence. Furthermore, for many of the family members it is still unclear what has happened to their loved ones. During the regime it was their quest to find out what had happened to their family members, why were they arrested? Are they alive? These were the questions that they kept asking themselves. For some, an answer was received in 2013 when the Dutch Public Prosecution Office published the death list. However, knowing that their family member was dead led to more questions for some: how did they die, where did they die, what were their thoughts? Because these questions still remain, the monster, in this case the legacy of the regime, remains as well. The continuing search will help them in the long run to overcome the monster, but for now, it is

also what is blocking them from overcoming the monster.

In sum, the plots of the victims of Afghanistan are not finished yet. The Tragedy plot will always remain, since the pain of the loss of family members will always be present. The Quest plot is not finished, because many of the Afghan victims still don't know what has happened to their loved ones, and those who do not what happened still can't find peace because they don't know everything. Furthermore, their Quest will not be fulfilled unless there is justice for the victims. Either by punishing the perpetrators or by getting them to admit what they have done and making them apologize. Because the Quest and Tragedy plots are not finished, the victims will be confronted with the consequences of the communist regime every day. This, in turn, results in an inability to overcome the monster. Only when their victimization is truly recognized and there is justice for all the victims of the communist regime in Afghanistan they might be able to find some form of closure for their narrative plots.

#### 4.4 Reflection

##### *4.4.1 Reflection on narratives*

The first thing that became clear was that the respondents did not tell their narrative often. Not to their children and definitely not to strangers. Children of the narrators were often present to function as a translator, and when asked whether they knew everything their father or mother had told, they almost always answered no. However, the respondents were glad to share their story, so the victims of Afghanistan would get a voice. But even though they were willing, and often even grateful, to tell their story, it was very hard for them to do so. They were not used to telling it and thus some memories were relived again, which had not been for quite some time. This led more than once to tears.

Another thing that was noteworthy, was that there was a certain level of distance when talking about their experiences. For instance, they would simply say: "then he was arrested" and carry on with their story. None of the respondents immediately described what went down when they were arrested. Where they were, whether the respondent was there when it happened, were they cuffed? They would not talk about this unless they were asked. Furthermore, they did not talk about how certain things affected them. When talking about the arrest of a family member, they would not tell what that did to the family, unless they were

asked specifically. This level of distance could implicate that they have yet to process all that has happened to them.

Furthermore, what was interesting to experience, was that when asked to tell their life story, no one actually started at birth. Their life stories began with the communist regime taking power in Afghanistan. This is consequent with research on victim narratives, which states that severe forms of victimization can challenge the process of sense and meaning making. These difficulties are caused because episodes of victimization play a major part in someone's life story. Their beliefs about the world as an honest place are shattered and a rupture between the experience of self before, during and after the victimization can be the consequence of this (Pemberton, Aarten & Mulder, forthcoming). Before the communist regime, life in Afghanistan was good and peaceful. Older respondents talked about how happy and easy their life was during that time, they studied for free and there were no problems concerning getting a job. However, this happy and easy self had to change because of the rule of the communist regime. They either had to stand up for themselves and their families, or had to stay quiet and in hiding to avoid being arrested themselves. They went from happy and peaceful to scared and on guard. However, as one of the respondents pointed out, during the period of the communist regime, their victimization was not yet seen as victimization. Nesar explained: *"During the war... you were only thinking about your life. I have heard from people that the pain will eventually rise. But now you see... when you have a peaceful life, you all of a sudden notice how hard that was. And how recklessly you acted."* So now they have fled to the Netherlands, their life is peaceful once again. There is no ongoing war here, they don't have to watch their back. But the fear and frustration still remains in them. Their perpetrators are still walking around freely, they are not punished and therefore the respondents are scared that the same thing can happen once again. This is why, for now, they cannot find their peace in the Netherlands. Because this period of their lives has made them become a victim.

The last thing that became clear when analysing the narratives, is that the respondents do not have their happy ending yet. Even though they are safe in the Netherlands, there still is injustice and they still don't know what exactly has happened to their family members. The government of Afghanistan has not admitted their crimes and the perpetrators are not

prosecuted. Furthermore, the loss still feels fresh for the respondents, even though it has been more than 30 years ago. Although the suffering of loss will never go away, bringing the perpetrators of the communist regime can bring the victims and their family members some peace. Their victimhood will be recognized and their suffering will be known. Furthermore, some of the family members have said that they will not stop searching for the truth, the full truth. What happened to their family member, where it happened, how it happened and who did it. They will never be at ease until they find this out.

#### *4.4.2 Researcher's reflection*

At first I found the idea of interviewing strangers about their very heavy experiences to be nerve-wrecking. I had never done an interview before and I felt like I had no idea how to do it. Especially since I couldn't just ask questions from a list. I had to listen to their stories and make up the questions as I went. But immediately after the first one, I had an idea about the way I wanted the interviews to go. As I did more interviews, I did not feel nervous anymore. I knew what I wanted to know and apparently, the respondents felt at ease with me. I felt so honoured that they trusted me with their personal stories and gave me a small insight into their culture. I was always offered some form of beverage or snack that was typically Afghan.

However, to be confronted with so many stories about loss was hard. Even though I always felt very professional before, during and after the interviews, once I analysed them, their stories touched me on a deeper level. I had more time to think about them and the more I thought about them the more I could identify with the pain of their loss. Everyone can imagine the pain they would feel after losing a family member, even though no one can actually imagine the pain it brings. But losing family members in this way, no one can, or should be able to, imagine.

What was also very special about the relationship between the respondents and me was the level of gratitude that they showed me. They were so moved by the fact that I was going to let their voices be heard and they couldn't stop thanking me. This is one of the reasons why my thesis has been such an amazing experience for me. The gratitude that these strong people showed me, made all the effort I put into this worth it.

I have learned how to listen to stories in an objective way. How to find the right balance

between offering sympathies, but still keep it professional. For me, this was all very new. However, to be objective during an interview is very hard to accomplish. Everything I do can influence the interview in different ways. For instance, the questions I asked could distract them from the structure they used to tell their story. It is very hard to regain your thought once someone interrupted it. Therefore, certain information could have been lost. Furthermore, because I really wanted the respondents to tell their own story in their own way, I intervened very little in their initial story. This resulted in many different structures and build ups of the story, which made it a little harder for me to analyse the plots. Additionally, in the first few interviews I didn't ask the respondents about their future goals. Therefore I don't have the same information for all the interviews, which makes it hard to draw a valid conclusion regarding the future of the respondents.

Another way in which I could have influenced the interviews is in the way I responded to the respondents emotions. I am an empathic person and if someone tells me about something terrible that has happened I always want to show my empathy immediately. However, sometimes I could have been too quick with showing my empathy and I did not allow the respondent to tell me their own feelings about it. However, the first time I noticed that I did that, after listening to the interview again, I could train myself during the other interviews to keep that to a minimum. Additionally, the way I responded to respondents crying probably has influenced the interviews as well, though I think in a positive way. The first respondent that cried after I asked him a personal question, I felt so guilty of. I made him cry, I felt like a terrible person. However, I gave them the time to compose themselves and to collect their thoughts. I feel like it was good for them that I gave them the time. I showed them that being emotional was nothing to be ashamed of and definitely not something that I hadn't seen before. Furthermore, by giving them the time to collect their thoughts, they often knew better what they wanted to tell me. Their stories became more structured and they reflected on their feelings on certain experiences more without my intervening then before. Additionally, after the interview they seemed relieved in a way. They confronted their feelings, that had been suppressed for so long. And for me, it felt very special that they were comfortable enough with me and with the interview, to show their emotions.



Therefore, it is safe to say that my thesis and the interviews have been a very valuable life experience for me. I have learned so many new skills that I am sure I will use again the rest of my life.

## 5. Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to investigate how family members of direct victims of the communist regime place the loss of a family member in their life stories. In chapter 2 it is explained that the telling of a narrative is important for the formation of a narrative identity. In summary, people construct and share stories about themselves, describing particular episodes or periods in their life and discussing what these experiences mean to them. These episodes are constructed and internalized into an evolving and integrative story, which is called the narrative identity. In a narrative identity people reconstruct the past and imagine the future in a way that provides a person's life with some degree of purpose or meaning. Through a narrative identity, people can convey to themselves and to others who they are now, how they came to be, and where they think their lives may be going in the future. Because the themes and plotlines are integrated into their narrative identity, the overall conclusion will be made based on these.

The main themes that were found in this thesis were: Lack of justice, Search for answers and Redemption and Contamination. Lack of justice contained the subthemes Lack of justice during the regime and Lack of justice now. The lack of justice during the communist regime, but especially the lack of justice now challenge the sense and meaning-making of the respondents. They still cannot comprehend how and why the communist regime did all the terrible things that they did. Search for answers contained the subthemes Search for answers: dead or alive, and the Search for answers: reason for arrest. Since most of the questions of the respondents remain unanswered, their sense-making is challenged as well. This might influence the way in which the respondents are processing their loss. However, more research should be done regarding this subject. Lastly, contamination and redemption were important themes in the life stories of the respondents. Afghanistan was a good and happy country and it got contaminated by the regime. However, Afghanistan was then bad and this marked the beginning of the redemption theme. The narrators in the end came out of the negative experience stronger.

Three plots could be distinguished within every life story of the respondents. These three plots are Quest, Overcoming the Monster and Tragedy. These plots cannot be seen as separated, they are all linked to each other. The umbrella plot in the life stories is Overcoming

the monster. The monster that needs to be overcome is the communist regime and the lack of justice regarding this regime. To overcome these monsters, they need to fulfil their Quest and to live with the Tragedy that will always be a part of their life. The Tragedy plot covers the losses in the families, caused by the regime. It is important for the respondents that their stories are heard and that the victims of the communist regime will be recognized. The first step towards recognition is to fight the impunity regarding the regime. To overcome the lack of justice, which is one of the monsters that needs to be overcome. The Quest that needs to be fulfilled is to find out everything regarding the victims of the communist regime. The reasons why they were arrested, when they were executed, why they were executed, how they were executed and where they are buried. These are all important questions for the respondents. Furthermore, as can be seen in the Tragedy plot as well, sharing these stories will combat the impunity of the communist regime. In short, both the Quest plot and the Tragedy plot are necessary to make the stories of the victims known. Once the stories of victims are known, they will be recognized and this will support the fight against the injustice and impunity of the communist regime.

#### Limitations

There were a few limitations for this thesis. The first one that needs to be discussed, is that for some interviews a translator was needed. What makes this a limitation is that there is no way to be sure for the researcher that what is being said has actually been said. The translator might have missed something while listening, or might not be able to translate it correctly to Dutch. Another limitation of using a translator is the fact that for 2 of the respondents, the translator was their own child. Parents want to protect their children from as much as they can, so there is no way of knowing whether they would have told the researcher more or at least more in depth details of their life narratives than when the translator would have been a stranger, or when there would not have been a translator at all.

Another limitation of this thesis is the language barrier. Even though most of the respondents did speak Dutch, some of them were heavily accented. This made it sometimes hard for the researcher to figure out what has been said, when listening back to the interviews. Furthermore, there was no way for the interviewer to be sure that something they said was

actually what they meant. Expressing yourself in a language that is not your first will always be hard.

Another limitation is that three of the interviews were not recorded. The two were not recorded due to a failure of the device. Therefore the researcher had to type these stories from memory. The second story was not recorded because of privacy reasons. The respondent thought that her story was too recognizable and didn't want anyone to hear her voice. Therefore the researcher had to write down everything she said, making it possible that some details that the respondent told were lost due to the researcher trying to keep up with writing.

The last limitation is that more attention should have been paid to their journey to the Netherlands and their lives in the Netherlands now. The procedure of seeking asylum can affect the narrative identity as well, for this can sometimes be very hard for individuals. However, most of the respondents did not talk about this and the researcher did not ask for it in most of the interviews, leaving no possibility to discuss the possible effect of the journey to live in the Netherlands on the narrative identity of family members of victims of Afghanistan. Furthermore, not all respondents were asked about their future goals and therefore no valid conclusions can be made based upon this.

#### Future research

After analysing the stories of the family members of Afghan victims, many new openings for future research have been created. For instance, gender differences in life narratives could be an interesting opening for future research. According to Marin, Bohanek & Fuvish (2008), parents talk more about emotion and more about emotional regulation with daughters than with sons. This could mean that the narratives of girls and females would have more expressions of emotion than those of boys and males. In this thesis, only three women were interviewed, against eight men. So no conclusion can be drawn from this thesis. Therefore, it would be interesting to search for differences in emotional display between male and female narratives.

Another interesting topic for a research would be to not interview the first generation of family members of the victims, meaning the ones who experienced the loss and the regime first hand, but to interview the second generation of family members. As can be read in the

theoretical framework, children, and especially adolescents incorporate their family history in their narrative identity as well. The first generation of family members experienced the hard times the communist regime gave them first hand, however, their children have not and are living a peaceful life in the Netherlands. They can probably not imagine what their parents must have been through. Therefore it would be interesting to investigate how the victimization experiences of parents influence the narrative identity of the children. Especially with regards to the Afghan victims.

#### Final remarks

One of the goals of this research was to give a voice to a group of forgotten victims. The respondents of this research were indirect victims of the communist regime in Afghanistan (1978-1992). They were indirect victims because they have lost family members to the communist regime either because of the civil war or by arrest and execution. The research is a continuation of the research of Mandersloot (2016) who had gathered narratives of the direct victims of the communist regime. The combination of these two researches and future research can hopefully help to combat unpunished war crime offenders from Afghanistan. For human rights violations, in such large numbers as in Afghanistan, should not remain unpunished and victims of these large scale crimes should be recognized and never forgotten.

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## Appendix 1: Consent form

# TOESTEMMINGSFORMULIER

U bent gevraagd om deel te nemen aan het onderzoek 'Verhalen van familieleden van directe slachtoffers van het communistisch regime in Afghanistan'. Deze wetenschappelijke studie wordt uitgevoerd door Intervict, Tilburg Universiteit.

**Uw gegevens worden vertrouwelijk behandeld, ze worden nooit openbaar gemaakt.**

### Toestemming deelname onderzoek

Hierbij bevestig ik dat ik ...

- Zowel mondeling als schriftelijk over het bovenvermelde onderzoek geïnformeerd ben,
- De opzet van het onderzoek begrijp,
- De gelegenheid heb gehad om aanvullende vragen te stellen over het onderzoek en dat deze vragen naar tevredenheid zijn beantwoord,
- Toestemming geef voor deelname aan het onderzoek en voor verwerking van de te verzamelen gegevens voor wetenschappelijke onderzoek.

Ik behoud me daarbij het recht om op elk moment zonder opgaaf van redenen mijn deelname aan dit onderzoek te beëindigen.

Naam respondent: \_\_\_\_\_

Datum: \_\_\_\_\_

Handtekening \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix 2: Statement of Integrity

Tilburg University  
Law School

### Statement of Integrity

(Article 13 par. 2 Master's Thesis Regulations (*Scriptiereglement*))

<b>Name student</b>	Surname: Ponjee	First name(s): Anark
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<b>ANR:</b> 699201	<b>E-mail address:</b> a.m.j.ponjee@tilburguniversity.edu
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<b>Title of the paper or thesis</b>	The most painful qualities are the ones that are never said and never appear A qualitative research into the narratives of family members of Afghan victims residing in the Netherlands in the first period (1978-1992)
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<b>Name of the supervisor(s)</b>	P.G.M. van Eck - Aarten
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The RULES AND REGULATIONS OF TILBURG LAW SCHOOL'S EXAMINING BOARD (*Regels en Richtlijnen van de Examencommissie van de Faculteit der Rechtsgeleerdheid, R&R*) contains the following rules in connection with plagiarism.

Article 7, paragraph 6 – Rules for the examinee / fraud

- g. in a Master's thesis or other assignment, copying data, texts, arguments, or ideas of others without a correct reference or without quotation marks.  
The following instances, among other things, constitute plagiarism.
- Passages from the work of another are copied almost verbatim without a correct reference or without quotation marks and/or
  - passages from the work of another are paraphrased without an indication that the opinion or idea of another is concerned and without a correct reference or without quotation marks and/or
  - the elaborated ideas or discoveries of another are presented as the student's own ideas or discoveries.
- h. in executing a (final) research project, manipulating or incorrectly presenting the research results with a view to misrepresentation.  
The following acts, among other things, constitute fraud.
- The data used in the study were distorted, made up, or represented in an irresponsibly selective way;
  - points of view, interpretations, and conclusions of others were intentionally twisted;
- i. at any time providing opportunities or inducement for fellow students or examinees to commit fraud.

In Article 8 it is stated what sanctions the Examining Board can impose.  
For more information, see <http://plagiaat.rechten.uvt.nl/files/doc.asp?lang=en>

**Statement of the student:**

I hereby declare that I will not commit plagiarism or fraud or otherwise act in breach of the R&R in doing research for and writing the above-mentioned paper or thesis.

**Date:**

**Signature:**

14/06/2017

