

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

A. Background Of Study

Divorce constitutes one of the most severe forms of relational trauma an adult can undergo. Beyond the legal termination of a marriage, divorce disrupts the foundational psychological structures of identity, attachment, and emotional security that the marital bond sustains. Clinical researchers have consistently documented that the dissolution of a romantic partnership produces a constellation of negative psychological effects that closely parallel those observed in traumatic loss: elevated anxiety, clinical depression, grief, identity disruption, social withdrawal, and pervasive feelings of helplessness and failure (Trichal, 2021; Hald et al., 2022). These effects rarely remain confined to the period of formal separation; they persist, intensify, and evolve across the months and years following juridical divorce, producing divergent mental health trajectories that are shaped by both personality and coping capacity (Hald et al., 2022). Psychological pressure during divorce influences not only emotional experience but also behavior, decision-making, physical health, and occupational functioning, making the post-divorce period a sustained crisis that extends across multiple life domains at once (Wahyuni et al., 2024; Wanberg et al., 2023).

The psychological mechanisms through which divorce produces these effects are best understood through the lens of psychoanalytic theory. Sigmund Freud's foundational contributions the structural model of id, ego, and superego; the concept of repression as the primary defense against intolerable psychic content; and the identification of defense mechanisms such as projection, rationalization, intellectualization, and displacement provide an analytically precise vocabulary for describing the unconscious processes that govern behavior under sustained psychological pressure (Di Giuseppe & Perry, 2021). Applied to the context of divorce, psychoanalytic theory illuminates not only what individuals experience but why they behave as they do in ways that often appear self-defeating, contradictory, or disproportionate: the rationalization of one's own failures, the projection of guilt onto a former partner, the intellectualization of grief as a defense against its full affective weight. These mechanisms are not unique to clinical populations; they are universal responses to situations in which the ego's regulatory capacity is exceeded by the demands placed upon it (Loway & Nurochman, 2023). The grief stages identified by Kübler-Ross denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance provide a complementary framework for tracing how these defense mechanisms are sequentially engaged and dismantled across the arc of the divorce process (Avis et al., 2021). Together, psychoanalytic theory and grief psychology constitute a uniquely powerful dual framework for

understanding the interior logic of behavior that, viewed from the outside, may appear incoherent.

Film has long been recognized as a culturally significant site for the representation and exploration of psychological experience. The relationship between cinema and psychoanalysis is not merely analogical; scholars in the tradition of psychoanalytic film studies have demonstrated that the structure of cinematic narration its organization of time, identification, and visual imagery operates according to the same logic as psychic processes, making film a medium that is inherently suited to the dramatization of unconscious material (Bellagamba, 2023). Psychoanalytic film theory has produced a sustained body of scholarship demonstrating that fictional characters in cinema function as psychological case studies through which audiences process their own unresolved conflicts, grief, and relational anxieties through mechanisms of identification and projection (Reghintovschi & Reghintovschi, 2025). Empirical studies have confirmed this method's analytical productivity: Çelik and Elmacı (2024) demonstrated that Freudian and Lacanian frameworks can be rigorously applied to the structural reading of a contemporary film's protagonist; Elmacı et al. (2024) established that psychoanalysis, applied as a systematic descriptive method to film characters with neurotic behavioral patterns, generates explanations that purely narrative approaches cannot produce; and Reghintovschi and Reghintovschi (2025) showed that object-relations psychoanalytic reading of superhero characters exposes the grief and ego-conflict dynamics through which mass cinema audiences process collective psychological experience. These studies collectively confirm that psychoanalytic character analysis of film is a methodologically valid and theoretically productive scholarly practice.

Within this established scholarly context, Noah Baumbach's *Marriage Story* (2019) constitutes an exceptionally well-suited object for psychoanalytic character analysis. The film follows Charlie Barber (Adam Driver), a theater director, and Nicole Barber (Scarlett Johansson), an actress, through the dissolution of their marriage and the adversarial legal conflict it generates. Unlike most cinematic divorce narratives, which subordinate psychological interiority to plot-level events, *Marriage Story* centers its dramatic and narrative logic almost entirely on the interior psychological experience of its two protagonists: their defense mechanisms, their grief, their identity disruption, and their coping responses. The film warrants analysis through psychoanalytic and psychological frameworks for four specific reasons. First, its screenplay is constructed around the systematic deployment of psychoanalytic defense mechanisms: Charlie's rationalization of his infidelity, his projection of responsibility onto Nicole, and his intellectualization of the marriage's failure are dramatized with clinical precision across identifiable, discrete scenes. Second, the film portrays the non-linear grief stages identified by Avis et al. (2021) not as a tidy sequence but as an overlapping, recursive process that is interrupted and reset by legal and relational events, reflecting the empirical reality documented by Hald et al. (2022). Third, the film's bilateral structure giving equal narrative weight to both partners makes it uniquely suited to a comparative psychoanalytic reading that

can reveal how the same marital system produces divergent psychological trajectories in two individuals simultaneously. Fourth, *Marriage Story* is a work of demonstrable psychological realism, produced in close consultation with clinical insights, that has already attracted scholarly attention from family systems theory (Katmer et al., 2021) and rhetorical analysis (Christiansen, 2022), confirming its legitimacy as a serious object of academic inquiry.

A review of the existing scholarship reveals three consistent and interrelated gaps that this study addresses. In the field of psychoanalytic film analysis, studies have produced productive readings of individual protagonists' unconscious conflicts, defense mechanisms, and pathological patterns (Çelik & Elmacı, 2024; Elmacı et al., 2024; Reghintovschi & Reghintovschi, 2025), but none has extended this methodology to a bilateral, comparative design in which two characters navigating the same relational crisis are analyzed simultaneously and contrastively. In the empirical literature on the psychology of divorce, robust findings have been established on the mental health consequences of marital dissolution (Trichal, 2021), the role of self-differentiation and emotional fusion in post-divorce adjustment (Moral et al., 2021), and the divergent mental health trajectories that personality moderates (Hald et al., 2022), but none of these studies examines how their documented psychological phenomena are given narrative and cinematic form. In the body of scholarship directly engaging with *Marriage Story*, existing studies have approached the film from family counseling frameworks (Katmer et al., 2021) and from rhetorical and ethical analysis of conflict discourse (Christiansen, 2022), but none has conducted a systematic psychoanalytic character analysis that integrates divorce psychology, grief theory, and coping mechanisms as a unified interpretive framework applied simultaneously to both protagonists.

This study addresses these three gaps through a dual-character psychoanalytic analysis of *Marriage Story* that constitutes its specific scholarly novelty. Unlike all existing studies reviewed, it applies a unified theoretical framework integrating the Psychology of Divorce (Trichal, 2021; Moral et al., 2021), the non-linear grief stage model (Avis et al., 2021), and the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (Obbarius et al., 2021; Ryu, 2024) to a systematic scene-by-scene analysis of both Charlie and Nicole simultaneously. This bilateral design enables the study to generate findings that single-character analysis structurally cannot: specifically, findings about the complementary psychological positions the two partners occupied within the marriage, the gendered asymmetry in how equivalent emotional phenomena function psychologically, and the structural features of pre-crisis coping that only become visible through contrastive comparison. By demonstrating how the empirically documented psychological effects of divorce are given psychologically precise cinematic form in *Marriage Story*, this study bridges the disciplinary gap between the empirical psychology of divorce and the methodology of psychoanalytic film studies a bridge that, to the best of this researcher's knowledge, has not previously been constructed in the scholarly literature on either field.

B. Research Question

Based on the above background, the researcher focus on the following question :

1. How are the psychological effects of divorce portrayed through the character of Charlie and Nicole in Marriage Story (2019)?
2. What coping mechanisms do Charlie and Nicole employ to navigate the emotional challenges of their divorce?

C. Objectives of Study

Based on the formulation of the problem above, the aim of the researcher is to know:

1. To analyze the psychological effects of the divorce experienced by Charlie and Nicole.
2. To identify the coping strategies used by Charlie and Nicole during their divorce process.

D. Benefits Of Study

1. Theoretical Benefits

This research is expected to enhance understanding of how divorce affects psychological well-being, contributing to the fields of psychology, sociology, and film studies. Provides a framework for analyzing characters in films as case studies of psychological phenomena.

2. Practical Benefits

This research is expected to helps individuals experiencing or recovering from divorce to understand the psychological challenges they may face and identify potential coping strategies..

E. Research GAP

A review of the previous studies reveals a set of consistent and significant gaps in the existing literature. **First**, the field of psychoanalytic film analysis (Group 1) has produced valuable methodological precedents for applying Freudian and object relations frameworks to the psychological analysis of fictional characters in cinema (Çelik & Elmacı, 2024; Reghintovschi & Reghintovschi, 2025). However, these studies share a fundamental limitation: they analyze the psychological states of individual characters in isolation focusing on one protagonist's unconscious conflicts, defense mechanisms, or pathological patterns without examining how

psychological distress unfolds across two characters in a shared relational crisis. None of the film studies reviewed engages with divorce as a bilateral psychological process in which two individuals simultaneously experience, respond to, and cope with the same traumatic event from divergent psychological positions. This represents a methodological gap that the present research directly addresses.

Second, the empirical literature on divorce and emotional trauma (Group 2) has generated robust, well-validated findings on the psychological consequences of marital dissolution. Trichal (2021) documents the systematic mental health effects of divorce; Moral et al. (2021) establish the role of self-differentiation and emotional fusion in psychological adjustment to separation; and Hald et al. (2022) trace the divergent mental health trajectories that individuals follow across the months following juridical divorce. Collectively, these studies produce a detailed empirical picture of what divorce does to the human psyche. However, not one of these studies examines how these documented psychological effects are given narrative and cinematic form in a fictional representation of divorce. The relationship between the empirical psychology of divorce and its artistic representation in film has not been explored in this body of literature. The present study addresses this gap by treating *Marriage Story* as a case through which the empirically documented effects of divorce can be examined in their cinematic expression.

Third, the small but growing body of scholarship that directly engages with *Marriage Story* (2019) has approached the film from family systems theory (Katmer et al., 2021), ethical and rhetorical analysis (Christiansen, 2022). These studies have collectively validated *Marriage Story* as a legitimate and productive object of psychological and humanistic scholarship. However, none of them conducts a systematic psychoanalytic character analysis of Charlie and Nicole as psychological subjects examining, in clinical and theoretical depth, grief trajectories, and coping strategies that structure each character's response to the divorce. Katmer et al. (2021) analyze the film through family counseling frameworks and focus on relational systems rather than individual psychology. Christiansen (2022) examines the rhetorical and ethical dimensions of the characters' conflict discourse without situating these patterns within a psychoanalytic framework of unconscious motivation. No existing study applies a dual-character psychoanalytic analysis to *Marriage Story* that simultaneously integrates divorce psychology and coping theory as its interpretive foundation.