



# Identity Crisis and their Tragic Destinies in Anees Salim's *The Small Town Sea*

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## ARTICLE INFO      ABSTRACT

The postmodern familial structure is deeply shattered due to the emotional distance between family members. Traditional cultural values are fragmented by giving rise to strained and fragile relationships within the modern nuclear family. Parents serve as the primary source and the foundation of identity and emotional grounding for their children. When this foundation gets collapsed through death, abandonment, neglect of the emotional instability and moral confusions and pave way to negative influences. Mainly, orphan children from minority communities get affected severely as they face social exclusion, limited opportunities and isolation. Anees Salim, being an Indian writer shed light on the lives of orphan and abandoned children by the parents in the society. The novel *The Small Town Sea* exposes the struggles faced by the thirteen years old protagonist, after the death of his deceased father and remarried mother. This paper explores how the lack of nurturing environment leads to severe loss of identity in the abandoned child's life.

**Keywords:** Postmodern, Culture, Identity, Abandonment, Minority

Identity plays an important role in shaping a person's value and social standards. Every person in the society often builds his personal identity through life's hardships and experiences. But fundamental aspects such as family, traditions, nationality and mother tongue are not optional, they are inherited to build the core form of one's own existence. Among these parents serve as a primary foundation in establishing a child's identity. When this foundational identity is forsaken or broken by the abandonment, loss or separation of the parents, it leads to identity crisis. Children who experience such crisis in the society are largely morally deviated and drawn into the social ill- activities. This article explores the psychological and social challenges faced by the abandoned children as portrayed in the novel *The Small Town Sea* by Anees Salim.

Anees Salim, an Indian author, belonging to a minority community portrays the lives of marginalised and neglected children in the society. In his novel *The Small Town Sea*, he narrates the life of thirteen years old narrator and his orphaned friend Bilal. Both the friends experience a deep emotional abandonment from their parents. Their life journey through parallel path is shaped by the absence of parental care. The novel exposes a harsh social reality where children are left orphaned in the pursuit of personal happiness of the children. These kinds of children are once celebrated as a source of joy, then later on they start to consider them as burdens to move into a new relationship. This sudden and forced abandonment leaves deep psychological scars by making it extremely difficult for children to survive in the new orphaned situation. The sudden and forced abandonment of children by their parents is one of the most painful experience in the family. In the novel *The Small Town Sea*, the narrator is displaced from the city to a small seaside town to fulfill his father's last wish. Displacement is a challenging experience where children struggle alot to adapt to an unfamiliar surrounding. After the death of his father, the narrator's life places him to face a series of emotionally difficult situations. Once the forty days of mourning period ends, his mother prepares herself for remarriage. She takes his younger sister along with her and abandons the narrator. This decision deeply wounds the narrator. In the crucial age for understanding morality and emotional development, the narrator is left alone to navigate the life without parental support. This sudden abandonment in child's life is the main reason which shatters the sacred parent- child bond and leaves them emotionally fragmented.

After his mother's remarriage, the narrator begins to experience the sense of orphanhood. Though the narrator is biologically connected, he feels a sense of emotional and social displacement from both the parents. His mother starts to reside in the new family with loyalty and emotionally connected environment. This emotional breakdown with his mother reinforces his sense of exclusion and makes him consider her as a stranger. This emotional detachment leads him to alienate himself voluntarily. The lack of emotional guidance and parental presence makes the narrator feel invisible and forgotten. The absence of familial warmth gives the feeling of emptiness and lack of identity within him. The narrator shares the abandoned moment as,

When it was finally time for me to leave, the old lady, true to Vappumma's prediction, asked me to stay back for the night. Umma smiled weakly as I promptly declined, saying Vappumma was alone at home, then she walked me to the thorny fence and stood there as I started the journey home, hiding the sense of urgency in my small strides. At the first bend in the path, I glanced over my shoulder and found her still at the fence. She lifted Little's hand and made her wave at me, waving herself with her free hand. (201, 202)

The narrator is invited to visit his Umma's new home after her remarriage. The narrator is excited to meet his mother. But Vappumma insists him not to stay there and maintain distance from Umma. She tries to remind him that the house no longer belongs to him. Vappumma states, "They might say you can stay overnight. But don't. It's not your house," she said, giving me the auto fare" (197). The moment is a turning point in the narrator's life. He begins to feel the growing distance between himself and his mother. It is very hard for the narrator to accept the reality and start his alienated life with positive approach. Despite his longing for affection, he is placed in an emotionally unavailable situation. This dislocation of his Umma deeply wounds him and leaves a scar as a stranger to his mother.

When the narrator resides with his parents, he is celebrated and treated with warmth and love by the outsiders in the society. But when he is orphaned, the perception of others towards him changes drastically. After the remarriage of Umma, the narrator is labelled and treated as orphan by the society. Even his Vappumma begins to see him with pitiness, she often displays a worried and sorrowful face whenever he is away from home. This kind of emotional shift in others deeply affects him. Furthermore, when the narrator's father was alive, his father's friends actively engaged their time with the narrator and treated him with kindness. After his father's death, the same friends begin to treat him like a stranger and make him feel so avoided and excluded.

The narrator and Bilal go to beach to play cricket. At that time, Kunjumon, a friend of the narrator's father arrives and warns them not to go near the rocks. Kunjumon fails to recognize the narrator and treats him like an orphan. This moment deeply pains the narrator, as it reflects how he has lost his identity and significance following his father's death. The narrator states, "Go," he said, giving a slight push to our shoulders. "Don't ever come and play near the rocks again." . . . It surprised me- almost saddened me- that Kunjumon didn't recognize me. He was the one who had taken me out to sea; whatever little I knew of the oceans, I owed to him" (157). These moments create a deep sense of alienation within his own family and the society. Louie W. Attebery details the life of orphans as, "The orphan may be described as having lost physically or emotionally one or both biological parents and being endangered as a consequence; moreover, he usually seeks and finds companionship of some kind. He is frequently isolated from his place" (206).

Being orphaned is an emotionally painful experience that often forcechildren into silence and emotional numbness. Their voices remain unheard and their presence are largely unacknowledged. Mostly, they are rejected, forgotten and marginalised in the society. In Anees Salim's novel *The Small Town Sea*, Bilal experiences the same situation. He is abandoned by his stone hearted mother. He is taken into custody by an Islamic orphanage, where his basic needs are satisfied and he performs small jobs to manage his personal expenses. Despite surviving as an orphan on the margins of society, Bilal remains unknown and invisible. He dies in the strong waves of the secret beach. The villagers begin to fabricate different versions of stories. The narrator states, "Deaths provoke stories in a small town like ours, Mr. Unwin. Especially a mysterious one like Bilal's" (259). Among these tales, one version is that ofimamhas files two official complaints in the police station. One is the missing case of runaway inmate and the other is missing amount of five thousand rupees. Orphans in the society are often blamed quickly. They are easily accused and criminalised in many circumstances. Their silenced existence makes them invisible to the world and makes them feel outsider in the society. Child outsidersness refers to the feeling or situation in which a child is excluded, isolated, or not fully accepted within their family, peer group, or society. It leads to a crisis of belonging, where the child feels like an outsider in places where they are supposed to feel safe and loved. This results in identity issues and emotional numbness. Christine Wilkie-Stibbs in his work *The Outside Child* states,

Child-outsiderness manifests itself in the child who is adopted, in care, orphaned, homeless, a refugee, seeking asylum, part of a diaspora, immigrant, displaced, or dispossessed; is the victim and/or survivor of violence, abuse, poverty, neglect, or war; or is silenced, rendered invisible, or specially controlled and silenced by certain power structures, ideologies, or belief systems. (10)

Orphaned and abandoned children often suffer from a lack of emotional and moral guidance. Without proper guidance and support, they are easily manipulated and driven into unethical and criminal activities

against the society. As parents are the primary source of financial and moral support, these children are left to survive on their own. They are dropped to a position, where they are forced to do small business and even beg to meet their needs. The lack of guidance in an abandoned child's life results in moral confusion and identity crisis. As these kinds of children have been once brought up in socially and morally balanced environments, the sudden collapse of this foundation leads to behavioural deviation. The narrator and Bilal after being abandoned by their parents engage themselves in street vending and begging. To manage their expenses, they even start to steal things from others. The narrator plans to steal Vappumma's jewellery to meet his metro train journey. The narrator states,

I was so obsessed with wealth creation that one day I found myself looking at a tiny nugget of jewellery, Vappumma had left on the table before taking her bath. My fingers tapped an impromptu rhythm on the table, circling around the piece of gold so ancient that it looked like copper. A train trundled past the house and, as if the din could muffle the sound of thieving, I swept it off the table and stashed it away in my pocket. A clean lift- no witness, no evidence. (235)

These actions reflect the desperate situation of the abandoned children, where the absence of moral and parental guidance often pushes them into difficult and miserable situation. Without parents, the world becomes a strange and alienating place for children. Their lives are filled with hopelessness and emotional detachment. They often face rejection in various phases of life, which leads them to frustration and self-doubt about themselves. The narrator begins to experience such alienation and disappointment after Umma's remarriage. He wishes to buy a new shirt for her remarriage. Umma agrees to buy it but she fails to fulfill the promise before leaving. The narrator's another wish is to witness the metro launch in the city but it gets shattered by the tragic death of his friend, Bilal. Like his identity, his dreams and desires get shattered.

After his mother's remarriage, Vappumma becomes the caretaker of the narrator. However, her sudden death adds a great loss to his life. He wishes that his mother would return from abroad and reunite with him in this hard time. But in the end, she remains silence and did not come back for the burial ceremony of Vappumma. The narrator gets disappointed and his life becomes a cycle of sorrow, abandonment and unfulfilled desires. These kinds of parenting and abandonment are deeply distressing in a child's life. One of the most painful aspects of being abandoned is the absence of proper emotional closure for the child. Some parents offer false hope to manage their children. But it makes the child emotionally weak and helpless. These false promises foster a lifelong longing for parental warmth and presence. In the novel *The Small Town Sea*, Umma repeatedly gives false hope to manage the longings and questions of the narrator. The narrator states,

"But a week ago, she had hinted at her inability to honor her promise; she was now planning to skip one summer vacation and come home a year later, but she would stay with me for two months instead of one. She made new promises, of taking me to places she thought were still on my wish list: the beach, the planetarium and Shivan's home in the city" (265, 266).

The narrator clings to her words and starts to anticipate her return. However, these hopes remain unfulfilled. As a result, the narrator becomes emotionally fragmented and his identity in the society becomes questionable without parents. Ultimately, his life becomes a tragic representation of abandonment and identity crisis.

The lives of abandoned children are often marked by identity crisis. Without the presence and guidance of parents, their identities become questionable and they are socially alienated within the society. The absence of parental guidance leads to moral deviation and leaves them emotionally vulnerable. These children remain unseen and unvalued on the surface of society. Repeated rejection in their life deepens hopelessness within them. The lack of proper closure in familial relationships makes them emotionally fragile and often pushes them towards social ill activities. Thus, these kinds of identities and tragic destinies that appear in the life of abandoned children are beautifully portrayed in Anees Salim's novel *The Small Town Sea*.

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