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MORTALITY AS NARRATIVE DEVICE IN ANEES SALIM'S *THE SMALL TOWN SEA*

V. Niranjan Prasath, S. Mangaiyarkarasi

Research Scholar (Reg. No.: 19223154011020), Centre for Research and Department of English,
S.T. Hindu College, Nagercoil, Kanniyakumari District, Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar
University, Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli-627012, Tamil Nadu, India

Associate Professor, Centre for Research and Department of English, S.T. Hindu College,
Nagercoil, Kanniyakumari District, Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University,
Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli-627012, Tamil Nadu, India

Abstract:

Anees Salim's *The Small Town Sea* portrays the emotional journey of a thirteen-year-old boy as he copes with the loss of his loved ones. The theme of mortality, a universal human concern, is a recurring element in many historical, political, and social narratives. In this novel, death is not confined to a single character but encompasses multiple losses, extending even to animals. Salim intricately weaves mortality into the social, philosophical, and contextual fabric of the narrative, offering a multidimensional exploration of death and its repercussions. This paper examines the literary representation of mortality in *The Small Town Sea*, analyzing how Salim presents death in various forms—from illness to sudden tragedy. The study also considers the moral and social undertones that emerge from these portrayals, emphasizing the enduring psychological and emotional impact on the surviving characters.

Keywords: Life, Fear, Suffering, Mortality, Separation, Psychology, Death

The loss of life is often attributed more readily to fate than to nature's covert and inscrutable workings. Mortality, as it pertains to humanity, remains an elusive and incomprehensible

phenomenon. As individuals cannot directly experience their own death, their understanding of it is largely passive—gained through witnessing the deaths of others or through imaginative engagement with fictional representations (Bauman 1992). German philosopher and literary critic Walter Benjamin suggested that fiction offers a space to explore aspects of death that remain inaccessible in lived reality (Brooks 1992, 22).

Literature provides a framework through which death can be imagined, contemplated, and emotionally processed. Certain literary genres, such as elegies, are explicitly crafted to mourn the loss of a loved one, while tragedies are designed to evoke catharsis—an Aristotelian concept involving the purging of pity and fear. In contrast, comedies often portray characters surviving acts of violence, reinforcing resilience and continuity. Tragedies, on the other hand, frequently extend the depiction of death scenes to heighten dramatic effect, as exemplified in Shakespeare's *King Lear*. In literary narratives, death often functions as a mechanism for closure or catharsis, illustrating how negative experiences and emotions can be morally and psychologically meaningful. Through this lens, death in literature serves multiple functions: it allows authors to express personal grief or philosophical reflection, facilitates plot progression through the experiences of characters, and offers readers opportunities for emotional engagement and intellectual insight.

People are often drawn to fictional representations of events they would likely seek to avoid in real life. This fascination with virtual depictions—what some term the “pornography of violence”—has historical roots, tracing back to the Roman Empire, where staged spectacles such as gladiatorial combats culminated in death, providing a form of public entertainment. Literature, however, offers a more nuanced engagement with death, dying, and mortality. Through fictional

narratives, it not only presents death as a thematic element but also evokes deep emotional responses in readers. Furthermore, there exists an intrinsic connection between death and storytelling; the end of life often mirrors the closure of narrative itself. Anees Salim captures this existential interplay in his novel *The Small Town Sea*, where he narrates the story of a thirteen-year-old boy grappling with the deaths of those closest to him.

Anees Salim's *The Small Town Sea* unfolds as a delicate tapestry of fictive memories, narrated from the perspective of a young boy who is displaced from a bustling city and relocated to a quiet coastal town. At its core, the novel is a coming-of-age narrative set against the backdrop of familial upheaval and impending loss. The protagonist, on the threshold of adolescence, is caught in the emotional turbulence surrounding his father's terminal illness. His father, a former advertising professional and an acclaimed English-language writer—despite not writing in his native tongue—is dying of cancer. The boy's family consists of four members: his parents, his infant sister affectionately called Little, and himself. They take residence in a rented house named Bougainvillea, perched on a sea-facing cliff. Enrolled in the local school, the boy befriends Bilal, a lonely orphan. As his father reconnects with old friends while navigating treatment and the inevitability of death, the boy must confront unfamiliar social and emotional challenges, revealing his inner conflict and gradual emotional maturation: "I heard the silence in his grave and that was probably when I cried in my sleep and asked him to come back". (Salim 146)

The unnamed male child, who also serves as the narrator of *The Small Town Sea*, recounts the story of his family—his father (Vappa), mother (Umma), grandmother (Vappumma), and infant sister—through a letter addressed to James Unwin, a literary agent at Unwin and Associates. The narrative centers around the father, also unnamed but referred to affectionately as Vappa, who,

upon being diagnosed with terminal cancer, relocates his family to a small seaside town. This move is driven by his final wish: to spend his remaining days by the sea, a landscape that evokes memories of his own childhood. With quiet resignation, he confesses, “I have come back to die here” (67). This return signifies not only a physical journey but an emotional and existential one—his final attempt to reconcile with the life he has lived and the longing he has harbored. The beach visits he shares with his son reflect a poignant attempt to find solace and meaning in the face of mortality. However, this same wish becomes a source of sorrow for the boy, who is uprooted from the city of his birth, separated from his familiar environment and friends. The father's desire for a peaceful death thus inadvertently imposes emotional displacement on his son, highlighting the complex intergenerational consequences of mortality and memory. The boy's family obviously does not seem happy since it is difficult to be happy when a dear family member is diagnosed with a terminal illness. There is more sadness and heartbreaks the boy had to face after the death of his father.

The novel succeeds in capturing a child's evolving perception of death, offering a rare insight into the philosophy of mortality as understood by a young mind. Each character in *The Small Town Sea* is, in some way, entangled with death—either as a result of their own actions or as a response to the deaths occurring around them. Their lives unfold in a manner that reflects the interconnectedness of loss, where even seemingly minor choices have profound, and sometimes tragic, consequences. A striking symbolic moment in the narrative is the birth of the narrator's sister, Little, coinciding with the death of their father, Vappa—an event that foregrounds the cyclical nature of life and death. Anees Salim portrays death not merely as an end, but as a pervasive presence that generates alienation, emotional complexity, and existential loneliness.

Through this lens, death functions as both a narrative catalyst and a thematic totem, shaping the inner worlds and outward behaviors of the characters.

The generational gap between father and son in *The Small Town Sea* reveals contrasting perceptions of death and life's values. The son, still rooted in the material curiosities of urban life, longs to remain in the city—if only to witness the completion of the metro line project—symbolizing progress, continuity, and future. In stark contrast, the father, who is confronting his mortality, seeks peace in nature, choosing to spend his remaining days by the sea, a place resonant with childhood memories and spiritual reconciliation. However, this same sea, which embodies solace and nostalgia for the father, holds a far more ominous meaning for the boy. For him, the sea becomes a metaphor for death. He repeatedly hears tales of drowning and tragedy linked to the shoreline, as noted in his recollection: “We heard of the dead man on the beach from the taxi driver who had driven up from the town at daybreak and tootled in long spells like a locomotive” (Salim 49). His fear intensifies when his close friend Bilal drowns, an event that triggers a visceral, psychological reaction. The boy literally flees the scene, symbolizing his attempt to escape the overwhelming reality of death. He clings to the hope that Bilal's death is merely a nightmare, refusing to accept the finality of loss. His dread becomes so severe that it manifests physically as fever. Even sensory associations, such as the smell of cashew flowers on Bilal, become emblematic of death to the boy. This intense fear underscores the narrator's emotional and cognitive struggle with mortality, highlighting how death is perceived differently across ages and experiences.

Anees Salim's fascination with death permeates his narrative, transforming his imagery into vividly dramatic depictions of dying that engage and move the reader. The novel's scenic roads, lush cashew orchards, and the calls of squawking parakeets create a deceptively serene

backdrop that paradoxically underscores the omnipresence of mortality. The picturesque descriptions of the setting resonate with themes of transience and loss, subtly reinforcing the novel's preoccupation with death even within its seemingly tranquil environment:

A few yards from the orphanage was the graveyard, and the laundry lines that ran from tree to tree in the copse that stood between the garden of the dead and the house of orphans, and even the hint of a breeze provoked a shower of cashew flowers, which smelled only of death and desolation. (Salim 43)

The narrator experiences frequent nightmares, both during sleep and moments of wakefulness, reflecting his deep-seated anxieties about death and loss. At one point, upon seeing a trail of blood on the floor, he imagines his mother has bled to death in the bathroom. He confesses, "But if she died now I would be so mad with shock that they would have to gag me and put lots of electricity through my head to make me normal again" (98), revealing how his exaggerated imagination heightens his anxiety before reality unfolds. In another poignant moment, the boy envisions memories as physical journeys through the mind, symbolized by the trail of his mother's menstrual blood: "The trail of blood ended on the blue cushion that had travelled with us from the city to the cliff. Just like the sewing machine, or the many sticks of furniture, or like so many memories" (99). This imagery intertwines the corporeal with the mnemonic, illustrating how physical traces become conduits for emotional and psychological recollection.

Salim's narration of death functions as an existential act that is crucial for the protagonist's psychological survival, allowing him to maintain an illusory sense of order amid chaos. This narrative strategy temporarily suppresses the omnipresence of death, enabling the boy to construct his life with a fragile optimism. The novel underscores the reality that physical death is invariably

accompanied by a deeper, more agonizing trauma within the mind—particularly that of the son grappling with the loss of his father. The boy's childhood is repeatedly disrupted by sudden deaths, departures, and haunting nightmares, which challenge his ability to find stability. For the son, the process of forgetting becomes analogous to a form of death itself, as the fading memory of his father's love gradually gives way to shifting mourning, redirecting his grief towards his sister and grandmother over time.

First and foremost, the pervasive awareness of mortality embedded within the novel's setting imbues *The Small Town Sea* with an unmistakable atmosphere of eeriness. Furthermore, the narrator's act of recollection possesses the power to arrest time, suspending life at specific moments. This temporal stillness serves as a form of memorialization, and through his continuous letters to James Unwin, the narrator bestows a kind of immortality upon the characters, their lives, and their stories. This literary phenomenon—where the text itself functions as a tombstone, ash, or even a corpse—intertwines the experience of death with the act of writing. Consequently, it opens broader philosophical horizons for the narrator as he matures, enabling him to engage with mortality in a reflective and transformative manner.

Comical episodes serve as a vital counterbalance to the pervasive melancholy in *The Small Town Sea*, providing moments of levity that are far from mere escapist diversions. The narrator's witty and humorous observations act as fragile lifelines—vines on a cliff—that he clings to amid the overwhelming pull of grief. For example, as his father, Vappa, drifts in and out of coma, a simple gesture of placing his fingers on his lips is misinterpreted by the family as a solemn demand for silence, while the boy quickly discerns it as a request for a cigarette. Similarly, the narrator's imaginative flights offer temporary respite from his catastrophic reality; however, these moments

of escapism are not always tranquil or orderly—they often mirror the chaos and emotional turbulence of his inner world:

Suddenly I wanted the peace in Vappa's little town broken in a big way, I willed pirates to come ashore, I craved for guns to be drawn from dripping holsters and fired in the air, bombs tossed into the police station, blockades put up across roads, railway lines blown up and, most importantly, all communication systems battered to a pulp. (Salim 95)

The absurdity of life is poignantly reflected in Vappa's unconscious mumblings shortly before his death. In the final hour, he speaks incoherently about fragments of his past, such as a rejection letter from a girl he once proposed to, highlighting the disjointed nature of memory and the human mind confronting mortality. Anees Salim eloquently captures this complex psychological state, illustrating how death becomes a significant and conscious presence in the father's life. Vappa's preoccupation with his own death is evident in his desire for it to be publicly acknowledged with gravity, as he imagines, "All India Radio will have no option but to read the news of my death in a grave, breaking-news tone. I can even be the president of India" (9). Moreover, anticipating his imminent demise, Vappa meticulously prepares his body for burial: on the day before his death, driven by intuition, he shaves, bathes, and perfumes himself with fragrances, striving to present himself with dignity in death. This ritualistic preparation underscores his acceptance of mortality and his wish to control how he is remembered.

The novel employs eerie symbols that personify death, with natural elements like fog and rain serving as foreboding harbingers. The enveloping fog that swallows the town metaphorically forecasts death's presence, while rain is similarly charged with symbolic significance. For

instance, the father's burial site is described as "where the earth was still soggy from last night's rain... Had someone told him where he was going to be buried, he would have instantly approved of the spot" (Salim 1, 3), linking the damp earth to the somber reality of mortality. Throughout the narrative, death is closely intertwined with the sea—an elemental motif that lends the novel its title. This maritime symbolism aligns Salim with a literary tradition stretching from *Robinson Crusoe* to *Life of Pi*, where the sea embodies both life's journey and its inherent hardships. In *The Small Town Sea*, the sea metaphorically reflects the adversities faced by the characters, its depths mirroring the complexities of their lives. The waves, imbued with personification, express the sea's emotional turbulence: "When the rain thinned, the sea regained its voice, only to be drowned again in the drumming of a new squall that lashed the cliff with renewed anger" (10). Within this symbolic framework, the narrator's infant sister, Little, represents the inception of life, while the father embodies the imminence of death. Their juxtaposition encapsulates the cyclical nature of existence, underscored by the sea's relentless, oscillating presence.

The son's profound silence following his father's death stems from his direct, personal encounter with loss. In the novel, silence is symbolically linked to death, while sound signifies life and presence. As noted, "That certain boy is very quiet... how he talked to certain dead people in his sleep" (141), highlighting his ongoing, subconscious engagement with death. The pervasive darkness enveloping their ancestral home, Bougainvillea, and the town at large serves as a powerful metaphor for death's dominance. The characters dwell within this darkness, experiencing emotional and psychological disarray as they struggle to navigate a world that feels alien and unwelcoming. Nighttime, with its enveloping gloom, acts as a carrier of death within the narrative. Yet, amidst this darkness, the boy's restless habit of rising in the middle of the night to gaze out at

the moonlight and blossoming plants symbolizes a yearning for life and hope. This gesture metaphorically illustrates his search for light and vitality within a reality overshadowed by death and despair.

Following the father's death, the family is reduced to three members, a dynamic symbolized through the image of mannequins displayed in a readymade garment shop—a couple, a boy, and a little girl with twin ponytails. Mannequins simultaneously evoke life and death: they possess lifelike forms yet remain inanimate objects, often crafted from materials derived from once-living sources such as wood or paper. The father, characterized by his reserved nature and unspoken desires, places his unfulfilled hopes upon his son. A pivotal scene unfolds at a 'secret beach' discovered by the boy, where it becomes evident that the father's aspirations center on the boy's eventual assumption of familial responsibilities. After the father's death, this expectation intensifies, as he envisions the boy stepping into his role to nurture and sustain the family. This concern is poignantly captured during the boy's boat ride into the sea, when the father's lingering fear surfaces: what would happen if the boat sank, and who would care for the family in his absence?

It is clear that the inspiration for *The Small Town Sea* draws heavily from the author Anees Salim's personal anxieties—or, more universally, the existential fear of what might happen to one's family after one's passing. In the Acknowledgements, Salim explicitly thanks his son Omar, whose voice he subtly channels to narrate the story. The novel is also dedicated to his daughter Adah, born just a few years prior, highlighting the intimate connection between the narrative and the author's own family life. Notably, the age gap between the boy narrator and his sister Little closely mirrors Salim's real-life family dynamics. Throughout the novel, life and death are

deliberately juxtaposed: the father embodies death, while the son represents life. This contrast is central to the novel's structure and thematic development. The father, anticipating his own demise, urges his son toward self-reliance and resilience, instructing him, "You should walk either ahead of me or behind me... You should learn to walk alone" (Salim 73). This preparation for an uncertain future is poignantly realized in the events following the father's death, affirming the father's foresight and the novel's exploration of coming-of-age in the shadow of mortality.

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