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## EXISTENTIAL CRISIS AS MANIFESTED IN ANEES SALIM'S THE ODD BOOK OF BABY NAMES

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### Abstract

The paper entitled Existential Crisis as manifested in the novel *The Odd Book of Baby Names* by Anees Salim delves into the fundamental aspects of existentialism and its impact on human existence. Existentialism prioritizes the importance of individual existence, freedom, and choice, as well as the responsibility that comes with it. It explores the human condition and the questions surrounding the meaning and purpose of life. Human beings live their life with family, friends, and loved ones, while these relationships provide a sense of purpose and fulfillment. When these connections are threatened through the loss of a parent or loved one, it can shatter the very foundation of a person's life. The loss of a parent leads to an existential crisis by challenging one's identity, purpose, and role in the world. In such a crisis, a person may begin to question his own existence, feeling as though his life lacks meaning and significance. The characters in *The Odd Book of Baby Names* struggle with the loss of their parents and their search for identity. Without a clear sense of identity, they may feel excluded from society. The sense of disconnection from themselves and others can lead to profound loneliness and a sense of meaninglessness.

**Keywords:** Existence, Identity, Meaninglessness, Purpose, Struggle

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### INTRODUCTION:

An existential crisis is an inner conflict that arises within a person and questions the fundamental aspects of their existence, such as the meaning and purpose of life. It often emerges from a deep sense of uncertainty and the realization of life's emptiness. This crisis can lead to the feelings of confusion, anxiety, or despair, as the people struggle to understand their choices, values, and the meaning of their life. It is a moment of self-reflection that challenges one's own beliefs and identity. The existential crisis can occur at any stage of life and often leads to the feeling of isolation from others. This article explores the existential crisis experienced by people and examines the consequences of a lack of identity, meaninglessness, and isolation in life.

In the novel *The Odd Book of Baby Names*, a king who loses his kingdom during the independence of India is depicted as having two legitimate sons and numerous illegitimate children scattered across the land. One of his habits is naming all of his illegitimate children, but he leaves them in a desperate and uncertain situation after their birth. These children live their lives filled with meaninglessness and emptiness, as their identities are lost and they are often regarded as orphans by society. This sense of abandonment creates isolation, fear, and hatred from those around them. This makes them to live an excluded life and a cut off from the community.

In the formation of a child's identity, external factors such as family status, societal influence, and the country play a vital role. These factors significantly impact the development of a person's self with positive outcomes. When a person struggles to reconcile his self-image with the expectations or realities around him, it creates a barrier in the development of his identity. This internal conflict can lead to an identity crisis, where the individual experiences confusion and uncertainty about his role and place in the world. Kobena Mercure in his 'Welcome to the Jungle: Identity and Diversity in Postmodern Politics' depicts the causes of identity crisis as, ". . . when something that is believed to be permanent, consistent and reliable is challenged by the feeling of hesitation and unpredicatability" (43). Identity crisis is one of the most crucial factors that affect a person's place in society. A person who experiences confusion about his own identity faces numerous challenges. Identity is essential for everyone, as it allows a person to stand on his own and carve a unique place in society. However, when a person feels lost in the vast world and lacks a clear sense of identity, the crisis can become overwhelming. This sense of confusion is often triggered by the need

to make important life decisions or choices without sufficient guidance and clarity. This condition leads to a struggle of understanding one's own role and purpose.

In the novel *The Odd Book of Baby Names*, Shahbaz is one of the illegitimate sons of the king, whose mother passed away during his childhood. Shahbaz lives his life without any guidance or care. He grows up like an orphan. He seeks shelter in his maternal uncle's home, but he is mistreated by his aunt, which further intensifies his sense of abandonment. Shahbaz does not get any opportunity to return to his father or claim any familial support. He is trapped in a situation where he cannot reveal his true identity to anyone, not even to his father. The only thing his father has given him is his name and leaves him to struggle with a sense of emptiness and a loss of self in a world that sees him as an outsider. Shahbaz states, "Too grand a name for a boy who lived in an alley like ours. Then, so was mine: Shahbaz Mir Qamarudin Khan. A few years after we came to know why had such strikingly similar names, that we were the illicit children of the ruler" (OBBN 13).

Without a proper identity, Shahbaz is ignored by society. He longs for a reunion with his father, but the king overwhelmed by the number of his illegitimate children, doesn't even remember him. One day, the king visits Shahbaz's village. Shahbaz uses the opportunity to seek his help. However, when the king sees his pitiful face, he mistakenly assumes that he is a beggar. The king places alms in Shahbaz's hand by treating him as a stranger. This act deeply hurts Shahbaz, leaving him heartbroken. In this moment, his sense of identity is questioned and the emotional turmoil he endures from being excluded and overlooked by both his father and society is highlighted.

A meaninglessness crisis is a profound sense of disillusionment or despair that arises when a person perceives his life as lacking purpose or significance. It mainly occurs when a person comes to the realization that his actions, relationships, or existence feel like failures. This can lead to a deep questioning of the meaning of his life, his role in the world and the value of his efforts. Such a crisis often emerges during major life changes, such as the loss of a loved one or the failure to meet their life goals. The feeling of meaninglessness can cause emotional distress and leads some people to experience a sense of hopelessness. In extreme cases, a person may even end in suicidal ideation. This crisis is marked by a struggle to find direction and a sense of purpose in life, leaving the individual feeling isolated and uncertain about his place in the world. James Tartaglia's philosophy states that life is inherently meaningless in the society. This perspective is based on the idea that the universe does not inherently provide meaning or purpose to human existence. James Tartaglia in his *Philosophy of a Meaningless Life* defines meaningless life as,

The meaninglessness of life is a microcosm of the meaninglessness of reality; in the case of human life, the teleological explanations that make sense of our behaviour break down when we disengage from the framework to consider the overall purpose of this behaviour, and in the case of reality, the causal explanations that make sense of particular objects and events break down when we try to make sense of reality as a whole. (36)

Living a meaningful life is something everyone desires. A life filled with love, joy, and support from family and loved ones provides purpose and fulfillment in one's life. In the novel *The Odd Book of Baby Names*, Hyder is another illegitimate child of the king. Hyder is a stammering man, who works as a caretaker for the ailing king, his father. Having lost both parents at an early age, Hyder grows up as an orphan and is shunned by those around him. He lives in solitude and yearns to be close to his father. Despite his love and respect for his legitimate brothers, Moazzam and Azam, they treat him as nothing more than a servant. As an illegitimate child, Hyder maintains a distance from everyone including his own father. When he is appointed to care for the king, he finds brief solace and joy in the role. Hyder states, "Which other jo . . . jo . . . jo . . . job would pay you to sit under a chandelier and watch a former king . . . ki . . . ki . . . king, who was also your father, die?" (OBBN 10). But his happiness is fleeting, leaving him hurt and questioning his purpose. Hyder desperately seeks meaning and peace in every corner of his life, but he remains lost in a cycle of loneliness and rejection.

Social isolation and loneliness is a growing health crisis that is on the increase in the postmodern world. This crisis often occurs when a person feels they do not belong or are unable to form meaningful connections with others. This emotional distress and a loss of personal identity paves a way for alienation and isolation. Humera is the illegitimate daughter of the king and is somewhat blessed compared to her half-siblings, as she receives birthday presents from her father every year without fail. Despite being King's beloved daughter, she leads a life of confinement and isolation. Her existence is controlled and she is restricted from interacting with outsiders. This restricted life leaves her mentally distressed and she craves for freedom and the fresh air of the world outside her secluded space. Although she is the king's lover's daughter, she feels excluded from society and unable to connect with others due to her unknown identity to the society. One day, a doctor came to treat her disease but when he stops visiting her, she slips deeper into loneliness and isolation. Humera express her loneliness as, "Even though the doctor stopped coming, the Saturday sessions continued. I became both the doctor and the patient, switching from one chair to the other placed on either side of the table. I asked simple questions in the role of the doctor and gave difficult answers like the real me" (OBBN 30). As her loneliness grows, she encounters Shahbaz, another illegitimate child of the king, and falls in love with him. But when she learns of his identity, the realization of their shared illegitimacy causes her to run away from him. The

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existential crisis both endure is struggling with their identities, rejection, and isolation. This ultimately leads to a painful disconnect from society by making them unknown to each other despite their deep connection.

Thus, existential crises such as the loss of social identity can deeply impact a person's mental peace and stability. Social identity is a fundamental and essential aspect of human life, as it provides individuals with a sense of belonging, purpose, and direction. When a person is unable to establish or maintain a clear identity, his life can quickly feel meaningless and purposeless. This lack of identity forces him to confront the harsh realities of the world, often leading to feelings of confusion, disillusionment, and despair. This article explores the different manifestations of existential crises in *The Odd Book of Baby Names*, by analyzing how the characters struggle with their social identity.

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