

THE INVISIBLE LIVES OF SERVICE WORKERS: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF SILENT LIVES IN ANEES SALIM'S *THE BELLBOY*

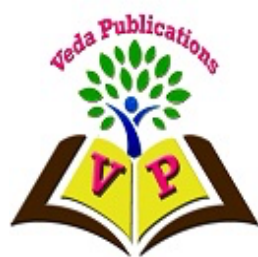
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Abstract



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With a mix of wry humour and heart-wrenching poignancy, Anees Salim's *The Bellboy* (2022) provides a haunting psychological portrait of Latif, a young boy from a disappearing island who becomes a bellboy at a Paradise Lodge in a bustling city. *The Bellboy* is as much a commentary on how society treats and victimizes the intellectually vulnerable as it is about the quiet resentment brewing against religious minorities in India today. This paper examines the phenomenon of "urban invisibility" the psychological and social erasure of service workers in contemporary urban spaces. Integrating Erving Goffman's Dramaturgy, Ralph Ellison's theory of invisibility, and Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, the study explores how the ethics of neglect impact the mental health and identity formation of the protagonist. The paper concludes with the proposal of a "Pedagogy of Visibility," advocating for educational frameworks that foster ethical recognition of marginalized labour.

Keywords: *Urban Invisibility, Anees Salim, Social Psychology, Identity Diffusion, Educational Ethics, Service Labour.*

Introduction

Anees Salim's novel, *The Bellboy*, offers a nuanced exploration of the lives of service workers in an Indian metropolis. The novel's protagonist, Latif is put to work at a seedy hotel named Paradise Lodge, but of course where most of the guests end up dead or dying. In fact, he is witness to one such incident on his very first day at work. Through Latif's narrative, Salim reveals the invisible lives of service workers, highlighting the tensions between their labour and their identities. As Salim writes, "The bellboy's job was to be invisible, to make himself invisible" (Salim 2015, 23). This statement encapsulates the experience of many service workers, who are tasked with rendering themselves invisible to the guests they serve. However, as the novel reveals, this invisibility is not simply a matter of choice, but is rather a product of a broader system of oppression that seeks to erase the labour and experiences of service workers.

The novel highlights the ways in which the labour of service workers is eroded, both literally and metaphorically. Latif's work is characterized by long hours, low wages, and a lack of benefits or job security (Salim 2015, 45). These conditions are not unique to Latif's experience, but rather reflect the broader structural issues that shape the lives of service workers. As sociologist Arlie Hochschild notes, "The service sector is characterized by a high degree of labour intensity, low wages, and job insecurity" (Hochschild 1983, 12). This is precisely the context in which Latif and his fellow service workers find themselves, struggling to make ends meet in a system that seeks to exploit their labour. Despite the erasure of their labour, Latif and his fellow service workers resist the oppressive system through various forms of resistance. Latif's character, for instance, is marked by a fierce determination to assert his identity and agency in the face of an oppressive system (Salim 2015, 100). Through his narrative, Latif reveals the ways in which service workers can resist the erasure of their experiences by asserting their own voices and stories.

As literary critic Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak notes, "The subaltern cannot speak, but this does not mean that the subaltern is silent" (Spivak 1988, 281). In the case of Latif and his fellow service workers, their silence is not a product of their own agency, but rather a result of the oppressive system that seeks to erase their experiences.

The Bellboy offers a powerful exploration of the invisible lives of service workers in an urban metropolis. Through Latif's narrative, Salim reveals the tensions between labour and identity, highlighting the ways in which service workers are marginalized and excluded from the benefits of their labour. This paper has drawn on sociological theories of labour, power, and identity to contextualize the novel's exploration of the lives of service workers. As we continue to grapple with the complexities of labour and identity in the urban metropolis, The Bellboy offers a crucial reminder

of the need to listen to and amplify the voices of those who are often relegated to the margins of society.

In the context of global capitalism and urban development, the figure of Latif encapsulates a broader socio-economic phenomenon prevalent across the Global South, where rapid urbanization and economic growth often mask deep-seated inequalities and social neglect (Brembeck & Wessel, 2020). The service sector, while vital to economic growth, often perpetuates cycles of marginalization for those who work within it. These laborers are systematically denied recognition, not only of their labour but also of their human dignity (Standing, 2011).

In the fields of Education and Psychology, the study of Latif is crucial. It highlights how environments that fail to provide "recognition" leads to the fragmentation of the self. This paper argues that Salim's narrative is a critique of a society that consumes service labour while ignoring the labourer's humanity, leading to a state of existential neglect.

2. Theoretical Framework: The Psychology of Erasure

Understanding the silent lives of service workers, as depicted in Anees Salim's *The Bellboy*, necessitates a nuanced exploration of psychological theories related to social invisibility, identity, and emotional neglect. This section synthesizes key theoretical perspectives to elucidate how service workers like Latif experience erasure and psychological alienation within the urban landscape.

2.1 Erving Goffman: The "Non-Person" in the Front Stage

Erving Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical perspective offers a compelling lens to analyse Latif's experience as a service worker. Goffman describes social interactions as theatrical performances, where individuals perform roles on a "front stage" to meet societal expectations, while maintaining a private "back stage" where authentic feelings and thoughts are concealed. In the context of *The Bellboy*, Latif's role as a bellboy embodies the "Non-Person" archetype, an individual who is physically present but socially invisible. Goffman emphasizes that service workers are expected to suppress their genuine selves to uphold the polished image of service, thus creating a division between their authentic identity and their role. As Goffman (1959) notes, "the individual is often a 'non-person' in the eyes of the audience" (p. 28).

In Latif's case, the "Front Stage" demands politeness, efficiency, and emotional neutrality, while his "Back Stage" harbours grief over his sinking island homeland and personal anxieties. The strict compartmentalization fosters "Role Distance," leading to alienation from one's own feelings and identity. This dissonance results in psychological stress, as the worker's authentic self is systematically suppressed to maintain the social order of service (Goffman, 1959).

2.2 Ralph Ellison and the "Refusal to See"

Ralph Ellison's (1952) conceptualization of invisibility extends beyond mere physical invisibility to encompass a psychological dimension—the "refusal to see." Ellison argues that societal invisibility is a form of social control, where marginalized groups are rendered unseen or unacknowledged, not through physical erasure, but through a refusal of recognition.

Applying this to Latif, his uniform functions as a "mask", a symbol that signifies his role but also conceals his true self and personal suffering. Ellison (1952) states, "Invisibility is a sort of refusal to see; it is a societal decision to ignore the person's full humanity" (p. 4). The guests' indifference and the lack of eye contact with Latif exemplify this refusal, reducing him to an object rather than a person.

This chronic lack of acknowledgment leads to 'identity diffusion', where Latif internalizes the social neglect and begins to doubt his own existence and worth. His sense of self becomes fragmented, as societal invisibility erodes his personal agency and diminishes his self-esteem.

2.3 Maslow's Hierarchy: The Ethics of Neglect

Abraham Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs provides a psychological framework to understand the neglect faced by Latif. The lower levels of the pyramid: Physiological and Safety needs are presumed to be met through basic sustenance and security. However, higher-level needs: Belongingness, Esteem, and Self-Actualization are systematically denied to service workers like Latif in urban settings.

Latif's emotional neglect exemplifies a failure of the societal system to fulfil these needs. His work environment neglects his need for belonging and esteem, which are vital for psychological well-being. When these needs remain unmet, individuals are trapped in a state of deficit, leading to frustration, depression, and a diminished sense of purpose. This neglect is an 'ethical failure' of the urban collective, which prioritizes superficial appearances and economic efficiency over the psychological health of its labour force. As Maslow (1943) emphasizes, "Self-actualization and esteem are fundamental to human fulfillment, and their denial constitutes a moral lapse" (p. 382). The systemic neglect of service workers' psychological needs perpetuates their invisibility and internal suffering.

3. Latif: A Psychological Case Study of Identity Fragmentation

Anees Salim's *The Bellboy* offers a profound exploration of Latif's internal psychological landscape, illustrating how systemic social invisibility and emotional neglect can catalyse a process of identity fragmentation. Latif's background originating from an island that is literally sinking serves as a

powerful metaphor for his fading sense of self within the urban environment. His psychological deterioration exemplifies the destructive effects of erasure, especially during the formative adolescent years.

3.1 The Cognitive Load of Disappearance

The Formation of Identity through Social Feedback'

Psychologist Charles Horton Cooley's (1902) concept of the 'Looking-Glass Self' posits that an individual's self-concept is shaped by how they believe others perceive them. Positive reinforcement, acknowledgment, and social recognition bolster a coherent sense of self, particularly critical during adolescence, a period marked by identity consolidation (Erikson, 1968). Conversely, persistent social neglect results in a diminished or fragmented self.

In *The Bellboy*, Salim vividly depicts Latif's marginalization:

"He was the boy who opened doors but never entered the rooms of the powerful. He was a shadow that held a tray, a name on a badge that no one bothered to read. In the hotel, he learned that to be useful was to be invisible." (Salim, p. 42)

This passage underscores Latif's lack of meaningful social feedback—the absence of recognition or acknowledgment from the guests and staff alike. Without positive social validation, Latif's self-concept deteriorates, leading to psychological 'hollowing out', a process where the individual's identity becomes fragmented and devoid of coherence.

4.The Psychological Consequences of Social Neglect

The chronic lack of interaction and recognition triggers a cascade of cognitive and emotional effects:

Loss of Self-Peace and Self-Continuity:

Without external affirmation, Latif's sense of where his "Self" begins and ends becomes blurred. He begins to see himself solely through the lens of his role, an invisible servant rather than as a multifaceted individual.

Role-Identity Confusion:

This confusion between the 'self' and the 'role' is particularly perilous during adolescence, a critical period for identity development (Erikson, 1968). When social feedback is absent or negative, adolescents may experience 'identity diffusion', characterized by confusion, fragmentation, and a lack of coherent self-narrative (Marcia, 1966).

Psychological "Hollowing Out":

The cumulative effect is akin to psychological atrophy, where latent self-awareness diminishes, replaced by a fragile, role-dependent identity. As Latif's sense of self erodes, he becomes more susceptible to feelings of worthlessness and despair.

5.Supporting Literature:

Research on social invisibility and its psychological toll, such as that by Goffman (1963), demonstrates that sustained social disqualification and invisibility can result in internalized stigma and diminished self-esteem. Similarly, Baumeister and Vohs (2004) emphasize that social recognition is crucial for maintaining a resilient sense of self, and its absence leads to identity fragility.

6. Findings: The Cost of Silence

The research identifies three primary findings:

Identity Atrophy: Social invisibility functions as a form of sensory deprivation for the "Self." Without social reflection, the ego begins to shrink.

Environmental Parallels: There is a direct psychological link between Latif's "sinking island" and his "sinking status" in the hotel. Environmental and social displacement work together to accelerate psychological collapse.

Performative Dehumanization: The hotel guests engage in "performative neglect" to avoid the guilt associated with exploiting underpaid, underage labour.

6. Conclusion: Breaking the Ethics of Neglect

The marginalised lives of service workers within contemporary urban spaces is foregrounded in *The Bellboy*. The novel demonstrates that to ignore a person is not a passive act; it is an ethical decision with profound psychological consequences. Anees Salim has presented how hospitality labour is structured around invisibility, emotional suppression, and unequal power relations. The service workers have been reduced to functional bodies and are denied recognition as full human subjects. By pointing Latif's experience within broader discourses of urban invisibility and social stratification, the study highlights the ethical failure of modern societies to acknowledge the dignity of service work. By integrating texts such as *The Bellboy* into pedagogical practice allows education to serve as a transformative space that affirms the agency of invisible workers and critically engages with the structures underpinning social and economic exclusion. A "Pedagogy of Visibility" must train individuals to acknowledge presence, labour, and humanity as moral responsibilities. Until systems of learning and social organisation prioritise recognition over convenience, urban spaces will continue to produce invisible lives. Visibility, as Salim's narrative makes clear, is not optional—it is foundational to being human.

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