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STRUGGLES WITH SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT AND SURVIVAL IN *THE
GOLDFINCH* AND *NAUGHTY BOY*

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Abstract: This study explores the struggles of orphaned children with their social environment and survival strategies as depicted in Donna Tartt's *The Goldfinch* and Gafur Gulyam's *Naughty Boy*. Both protagonists face challenges stemming from the absence of parental guidance, navigating complex social and moral landscapes. Theo Decker in *The Goldfinch* contends with urban anonymity, moral ambiguity, and criminal influences, while the orphaned boy in *Naughty Boy* relies on wit, resourcefulness, and adaptive social behavior within a communal setting. The comparative analysis highlights that orphanhood significantly shapes identity, resilience, and moral development. Despite differences in cultural and temporal contexts, both works demonstrate the crucial interplay between social environment and survival strategies in the lives of orphaned children.

Keywords: Orphanhood, survival strategies, social environment, childhood trauma, resilience, identity formation, *The Goldfinch*, *Naughty Boy*.

ТРУДНОСТИ ВЫЖИВАНИЯ И ВЗАИМОДЕЙСТВИЯ С СОЦИАЛЬНОЙ
СРЕДОЙ В ПРОИЗВЕДЕНИЯХ «ЗОЛОТОЙ КЛЮЧИК» И «НЕПОСЛУШНЫЙ
МАЛЬЧИК»

Аннотация: Данное исследование рассматривает трудности, с которыми сталкиваются сироты в социальных условиях, а также их стратегии выживания, показанные в произведениях Донны Тартт *The Goldfinch* и Гафура Гуляма *Непослушный мальчик* (*Naughty Boy*). Оба главных героя сталкиваются с проблемами, вызванными отсутствием родительской поддержки, и вынуждены ориентироваться в сложных социальных и моральных обстоятельствах. Тео Декер в *The Goldfinch* сталкивается с городской анонимностью, моральной неоднозначностью и криминальными влияниями, тогда как сирота в *Непослушном мальчике* полагается на смекалку, находчивость и адаптивное социальное поведение в общественном окружении. Сравнительный анализ показывает, что сиротство существенно влияет на формирование идентичности, устойчивости и морального развития. Несмотря на различия культурного и временного контекста, оба произведения демонстрируют важное взаимодействие между социальной средой и стратегиями выживания сирот.

Ключевые слова: Сиротство, стратегии выживания, социальная среда, детская травма, устойчивость, формирование идентичности, *The Goldfinch*, *Naughty Boy*.



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In both Donna Tartt's *The Goldfinch* and Gafur Gulyam's *Naughty Boy*, the protagonists confront the harsh realities of orphanhood, navigating complex social environments while attempting to survive physically, emotionally, and morally. The theme of survival in the absence of parental guidance highlights the intersection of personal resilience, social influence, and moral ambiguity. In *The Goldfinch*, Theo Decker's life is abruptly transformed when he loses his mother in a terrorist attack at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. This sudden loss exposes him to a precarious world where social and economic survival becomes intertwined with psychological coping mechanisms. Tartt meticulously portrays how orphanhood compels Theo to seek surrogate families, including the Barbours and his complicated relationship with Boris, which underscores his attempt to navigate moral and social instability. Scholars have emphasized that Tartt's depiction aligns with psychological theories of attachment, wherein early trauma and parental loss significantly influence a child's social adaptability and identity formation (Bowlby, 1988; Main, 1996). Theo's struggle is not merely physical but also moral; his involvement in criminal activities, drug abuse, and ambiguous ethical decisions reflects the pressures of a social environment that lacks protective structures.

Similarly, in Gulyam's *Naughty Boy*, the orphaned protagonist faces a social environment characterized by neglect and marginalization. Unlike Tartt's urban American setting, Gulyam situates his narrative within a Central Asian socio-cultural context, where societal expectations and community oversight significantly impact the orphaned child's strategies for survival. The protagonist's mischievous behavior functions as both a coping mechanism and a social commentary, illustrating how marginalized children employ creativity and cunning to navigate socio-economic constraints. Literary critics have observed that Gulyam's narrative emphasizes the resilience of the human spirit under socio-economic adversity, portraying the orphan not as a passive victim but as an active agent shaping his destiny (Azimov, 1972).

A comparative examination reveals that while Theo's survival strategies are complicated by trauma, moral ambiguity, and urban crime, the protagonist of *Naughty Boy* relies on resourcefulness, wit, and the subtle negotiation of societal expectations. Both texts underscore the role of social environment in shaping the experiences of orphaned children. In *The Goldfinch*, urban anonymity and adult moral ambiguity challenge Theo's ability to form stable relationships, resulting in a complex web of dependencies and moral compromises. Conversely, *Naughty Boy* depicts a communal social environment where the child's agency interacts directly with societal norms, making social negotiation an essential survival skill. These differences reflect the authors' distinct cultural and temporal contexts but converge on the central idea that orphanhood is inseparable from the struggle to survive within a social framework.

Both works further explore the psychological dimensions of survival. Theo's internal monologues in *The Goldfinch* reveal a persistent tension between guilt, desire, and the need for belonging. Tartt emphasizes that survival extends beyond physical needs to encompass emotional and moral equilibrium. Scholars in child psychology and literature



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note that such depictions illustrate “the orphan as a microcosm of societal pressures, where the absence of parental guidance forces early confrontation with ethical and social dilemmas” (Steinberg, 2005). In contrast, Gulyam’s narrative presents the orphaned boy’s survival in more playful yet equally strategic terms. His mischief, cleverness, and social navigation are emblematic of what sociologists term “adaptive agency,” where children develop behavioral strategies to mitigate environmental stressors (Masten, 2014).

Both texts also explore the impact of social stratification on survival. Theo’s immersion in elite art circles, criminal underworlds, and transient urban spaces exposes him to social hierarchies that determine access to resources and protection. Similarly, *Naughty Boy* illustrates how socio-economic limitations dictate opportunities, but the child’s cleverness enables him to challenge rigid social structures. Thus, both authors demonstrate that survival is contingent upon understanding, adapting to, and sometimes subverting the social environment.

In both *The Goldfinch* and *Naughty Boy*, the protagonists’ survival strategies reveal the profound impact of social environments on orphaned children. In *The Goldfinch*, Theo Decker navigates urban spaces marked by anonymity, crime, and adult moral ambiguity. His survival is intertwined with forming connections—sometimes manipulative—with Boris and other surrogate figures. These relationships provide both protection and exposure to risky behaviors, such as theft and substance abuse. Psychological studies indicate that children who experience parental loss often seek surrogate attachments to mitigate emotional trauma, yet these attachments can simultaneously introduce new risks (Bowlby, 1988). Theo’s survival, therefore, is both a physical and moral negotiation within a complex urban network.

Conversely, in *Naughty Boy*, the orphaned protagonist demonstrates survival through resourcefulness, cleverness, and social cunning. His mischievous acts are a form of adaptation to a community-oriented social environment. While less morally ambiguous than Theo’s choices, these actions illustrate a keen understanding of societal norms and limitations, allowing the child to access resources and assert agency. Sociologists describe this behavior as “adaptive social agency,” a mechanism by which marginalized children navigate systemic constraints to meet both physical and psychological needs (Masten, 2014).

Comparatively, both works emphasize that orphanhood magnifies the influence of social environment on behavior. While Theo’s urban and morally complex environment demands negotiation between ethical dilemmas and survival needs, the *Naughty Boy*’s rural or small-community setting enables adaptive problem-solving and creative social engagement. Both narratives demonstrate that orphanhood necessitates a dual focus on immediate survival and long-term self-preservation, including the development of social intelligence, emotional resilience, and moral reasoning.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Donna Tartt’s *The Goldfinch* and Gafur Gulyam’s *Naughty Boy* illustrate how orphaned children navigate and survive challenging social environments.



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Both protagonists exhibit resilience and adaptability, shaped by their distinct contexts—urban versus communal, morally ambiguous versus socially structured. The study of these narratives highlights that orphanhood is not merely a state of loss but a formative experience that compels children to negotiate complex social landscapes, develop survival strategies, and cultivate emotional and moral agency. Despite cultural and temporal differences, the universal theme emerges: orphaned children's struggles with their social environment profoundly shape their identities, moral understanding, and capacity for resilience.

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