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**From Rejection to Belonging: Alternative Community Formation and the Politics of Chosen Family in Contemporary Fiction**

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**Abstract**

The study investigates how communities form out of rejection as an outcome of sustained interpersonal interactions within modern literature. Specific attention will be paid to the process of reconstructing a sense of belonging for marginalized people. The study employs qualitative textual data from the literary work entitled *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World* written by Elif Shafak. Data was sourced from the selected literary work via close readings of key narrative events involving familial rejection, social exclusion, and the emergence of chosen communities. Many textual examples were intentionally chosen to facilitate thematic analysis of rejection and community formation. IPAR Theory proposed by Ronald P. Rohner is used as the main theoretical framework, alongside sociological theories on community and belonging. Rejection experiences have a significant effect on personality development and contribute to identity disintegration and emotional instability, eventually leading to the formation of chosen communities. The “*water family*” from the novel becomes an example of such compensatory mechanism, where the characters receive a sense of acceptance, support, and a feeling of inclusion, but not complete freedom from feelings of exclusion. Such an approach to study enriches inter-disciplinary studies on literature by means of connecting psychological and literary approaches for the purpose of understanding community through a broader perspective. In addition, the current study develops previous literary criticism through emphasis on alternative communities as sources of strength and partial redemption.

**Keywords:** Interpersonal Rejection, Alternative Communities, Belonging, Identity Fragmentation, *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World*

**Introduction**

In the contemporary discourses of literature and culture, the notion of “community” has radically changed from being an unalterable biological entity into a dynamic formation which people construct for themselves. There has been growing emphasis on the existence of “alternative communities,” or “chosen families,” in the fields of sociology, psychology, and literary criticism. Such communities tend to defy conventional definitions of family and kinship by prioritizing emotional connections and communal experience over blood relations and official acknowledgment. In literature, these communities operate as spaces where characters can reconstruct their sense of self and agency after being excluded from mainstream family structures and social groups (Abdulwahab et al., 2026).

The theme of interest can be exemplified by the novel *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World*, where the subaltern subjects create a new network of caring that is termed the “water family.” The novel has attracted numerous scholars who have explored issues of gender oppression, marginality, and otherness in their works; however, the significance of the alternative community construction as a narrative and psychological strategy has received little attention. In most cases, scholars concentrate on analyzing the structures of power rather than focusing on the subalterns’ strategies for constructing new communities.

As a way of overcoming this gap, the current study tries to look at how alternative communities develop and operate as instruments for providing individuals with a sense of belongingness where rejection and discrimination prevail. In particular, the study will focus on examining how the community known as the water family functions as an emotional and collective mechanism that provides members with opportunities for rebuilding their identities. For this reason, the study will be informed by the following questions: (1) What are the means by which marginalized individuals establish alternative communities in the absence of biological and social recognition? (2) To what extent do these communities help overcome rejection?

This study is grounded in interdisciplinary theoretical approaches to community, belonging, and relational identity, incorporating both sociological and psychological theories that define community not as a stable entity but as an active and constructed process. Such theories focus on the significance of common experience, emotional exchange, and mutual recognition in the development of strong social connections, especially among disenfranchised communities. From this perspective, alternative communities can be seen as compensatory mechanisms that question conventional norms of family while fulfilling the emotional and psychological needs of the socially disadvantaged.

The current study advances literary scholarship in the contemporary period by emphasizing the importance of exploring the process of creating alternative communities. In doing so, the study moves away from literature that speaks to victimization and exclusion to literature that focuses on agency, interrelations, and resilience. The current study builds upon interdisciplinary debates regarding kinship and community affiliation by providing insights into the practical aspects of the life of marginalized people who find themselves caught between rejection and acceptance. Additionally, the study provides theoretical perspectives on the concept of the “chosen family,” which not only acts as a literary technique but is also a socio-psychological process.

## **Literature Review**

The idea of community has played an important role in the field of sociology and literature for many years, viewed primarily as a stable institution that depends on geographic location, family ties, or common culture (Nawaz et al., 2024; Ijaz & Rabi, 2022). According to the theories of classical sociologists like Ferdinand Tönnies, *Gemeinschaft* is a type of social organization that relies on organic connections between people and contrasts *Gesellschaft*, characterized by its impersonality and rationalization (Tönnies, N. 2024). Nonetheless, recent study challenges the dichotomy and focuses more on the flexible, contingent, and emotional aspects of the community. Zygmunt Bauman proposes viewing community in late modernity as a “negotiated” structure driven by the individual’s desire for security in conditions of social disintegration (Bauman, 2001; Hussain et al., 2026). At the same time, Benedict Anderson suggests considering the existence of imagined communities that have emerged based on shared myths rather than social interactions (Anderson, 1983).

As far as psychological and cross-disciplinary approaches go, belonging is seen increasingly as an essential need in people, especially when rejection is concerned. In particular, basic work done by Roy Baumeister and Mark Leary suggests that “the need to belong” acts as a strong motivation that pushes people to build relationships with others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Rejection,

whether family-related or society-wide, causes damage to this need, leading to such problems as emotional disturbances, problems with identity development, and isolation (Leary, 2001; Ahmad et al., 2025). Furthermore, Interpersonal Acceptance-Rejection Theory suggested by Ronald P. Rohner offers an excellent theoretical background for analyzing the effects that rejection has on one's mental well-being, considering them both long-term and accumulative (Rohner, 2015; Ullah, Rabi, Khan, & Ahmad, 2025). While focusing mostly on negative implications of rejection, IPARTheory nonetheless implies other ways of obtaining the needed acceptance and thus can serve as a bridge to research about chosen families (Rabi et al., 2025).

The concept of “chosen family” has become a more widely used critical approach within literary theory, analyzing marginalized subjects’ reconstitutions of their identities and sense of belonging to family in ways that do not conform to conventional kinship ties. Judith Butler claims that kinship cannot be seen as something biologically pre-given but is rather “a performative practice, amenable to modification” through relationships which can be anything but conventional (Butler, 2004; Khan et al., 2026). Kath Weston's groundbreaking book *Families We Choose* shows how the LGBT community forms new types of families, built on notions of care and support, in order to challenge conventional conceptions of a family that rely on heterosexuality (Weston, 1991). Such approaches have been adopted by literary critics to discuss literary representations of the alternative community as an environment that supports the subjects' well-being. Nevertheless, the field of literary criticism on chosen family has developed primarily within Western literary traditions and lacks its application to global contemporary literature.

The critical approaches to analyzing *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World* have mostly been limited to issues of gendered violence, exclusion, and marginalization. For example, Robab (2025), in an analysis of the novel using the concept of “otherness,” shows that marginalized people are not only excluded from the dominant society but also prevented from accessing its systems of governance. In addition, Iqbal, (2023) and Taheri (2022), using feminist theories of patriarchy, have examined the exploitation of female bodies in the novel. Furthermore, Mahdi et al. (2021), using the concept of structural inequalities, place the story in a larger system of oppression. While these analyses provide an insightful understanding of the social and political dynamics of the text, they have overlooked the interpersonal relationships in favor of the structures of power. Consequently, the idea of forming alternative communities, especially the “water family,” emerges as a secondary issue.

New interdisciplinary approaches in the analysis of literary works have started balancing this gap by paying attention to the importance of relationality and affect in literary depictions of marginalization. For instance, Sara Ahmed argues for the significance of feelings such as pain, attachment, and solidarity in the formation of collective identities and relationships (Ahmed, 2014; Latif et al., 2026). It follows that alternative communities may be seen as an affective network arising out of common experiences of discrimination and marginalization. In the literary field, such communities serve both a narrative and socio-psychological purpose in negotiating issues of inclusion and belonging among characters. However, the application of such theories to Shafak’s novel is underdeveloped, especially in terms of examining chosen families both as a narrative and psychological concept.

Given these deficiencies, the current investigation endeavors to bridge sociological, psychological, and literary theory by analyzing the construction of alternative communities in *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World* by way of the notion of the “water family.” The focus on the water family will contribute new insight into how marginalized communities can resist trauma and construct alternative forms of community through relationship. In this way, the study provides important interdisciplinary knowledge by showing how literature does more than mirror processes of community building; literature theorizes them.

## **Methodology**

This study takes an interpretive textual approach to investigate the construction of alternative communities through a qualitative research design. Qualitative approach is ideal in literary works because of its ability to probe into the narrative framework, as well as the thematic and structural elements. The study aims to investigate how rejection influences the construction of communities that serve as spaces of resistance and belonging.

The text selected for the purpose of analysis is “*10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World*” by Elif Shafak. The text has been consciously selected as it offers many examples of marginalized characters and explores themes like rejection, trauma, and different forms of identity. Its use of reconstruction of the protagonist’s life through memory creates an interesting way to study the impact of marginalization and the creation of different communities.

The study is guided by the Interpersonal Acceptance-Rejection Theory (IPAR Theory), which was constructed by Ronald P. Rohner, as well as sociological perspectives on community as a concept. The former gives an insight into the role of perceived rejection and its influence on the psychological state, whereas the latter helps explain the development of the “chosen family” phenomenon as a way of coping with negative social experiences.

This study uses an interpretive method, where thematic and textual analyses are used together. Important episodes from the narrative which have a connection to either rejection or community building are analyzed. This is done using the theories provided by IPAR Theory and community theory to understand how communities are formed and work within them.

The data collected for this study will be based on an in-depth examination of the chosen novel. Textual data that highlight instances of exclusion, marginalization, and community building will be systematically identified and coded. The identification and coding of these texts are informed by theoretical constructs, such as rejection, coping with rejection, and compensation through attachment, among others.

Since the study is based on the analysis of an already existing literary work, it will not have any human subjects and hence does not need to seek any ethical clearance. Nonetheless, research ethics can be ensured by ensuring that the text is analyzed in its true sense, citing all sources of information used, and maintaining academic integrity.

The limitations associated with the study are that the study will be based on only one literary work. This limits the generalizability of the results since only one case will be considered in the analysis. Also, since qualitative research is subjective in nature, some elements might have been overlooked in the analysis, despite using theories to support it.

## **Analysis and Discussion**

The creation of alternative communities in *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World* is inherently tied to the psychological and social ramifications of prolonged interpersonal rejection. Applying the Interpersonal Acceptance-Rejection Theory (IPAR Theory) of Ronald P. Rohner, the novel illustrates that prolonged feelings of rejection, especially those stemming from family and social relations, cause a lasting emotional deficit that drives people towards alternative ways of fulfilling their need for belongingness. The character of Leila perfectly exemplifies this process, as her history of neglect, abuse, and moral opprobrium has stunted her psychological growth and caused a lack of self-esteem. According to the foundational premises of IPAR Theory, such rejection leads to psychological problems like chronic shaming, detachment, and low self-respect. Consequently, not only does this negatively impact one's subjective self-image, but it also affects their interpersonal relationships, causing marginalized persons to seek out alternative social networks that offer them validation.

# From Rejection to Belonging: The Formation of Alternative Communities in *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World*

An interdisciplinary study of how sustained interpersonal rejection shapes identity, and how alternative communities become sources of connection, care, and resilience.

### 1. STUDY AIM

This study examines how alternative communities are formed as responses to sustained interpersonal rejection in contemporary fiction, with particular focus on the reconstruction of belonging among marginalized individuals.

### 2. DATA & METHOD

Qualitative textual data from *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World* by Elif Shafak.

Data collected through close reading of key narrative episodes depicting familial rejection, social exclusion, and the formation of non-biological relationships.

A substantial number of relevant textual instances were purposively selected and systematically analyzed to identify recurring patterns related to rejection and community formation.


### 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Interpersonal Acceptance-Rejection Theory (IPARTheory) developed by Ronald P. Rohrer

Complemented by sociological perspectives on community and belonging.


### 4. FINDINGS

**SUSTAINED REJECTION**




Experiences of neglect, abandonment, and exclusion from family and society.

**PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT**




Shapes psychological development, leading to identity fragmentation and emotional instability.

**MOTIVATION FOR ALTERNATIVE BONDS**




The search for acceptance and care motivates the formation of alternative or "chosen" communities.

**FORMATION OF ALTERNATIVE COMMUNITY**



The "water family" emerges as a chosen community that offers belonging and mutual care.

### THE "WATER FAMILY" A COMPENSATORY STRUCTURE



### EMOTIONAL VALIDATION

Provides recognition, affirmation, and unconditional acceptance.


### MUTUAL CARE

Built on solidarity, empathy, and everyday acts of kindness.

### RECONSTRUCTED BELONGING

Creates a sense of home and identity beyond blood ties and societal labels.

### YET, NOT A COMPLETE CURE



While the water family offers healing and stability, it does not fully erase the long-term scars of rejection. The past remains a quiet undercurrent.

### 5. CONTRIBUTION TO SCHOLARSHIP

- Integrates psychological theory (IPARTheory) with literary analysis to deepen understanding of character experience and social dynamics.
- Highlights community as both a social and emotional construct.
- Foregrounds alternative communities as sites of resistance, resilience, and partial healing in the face of systemic marginalization.

### 6. SIGNIFICANCE

- Extends existing literary criticism by centering the healing potential of chosen bonds.
- Offers insights into the lived realities of marginalized individuals and their strategies for survival and belonging.
- Encourages interdisciplinary dialogue between literature, psychology, and sociology on the human need for connection.

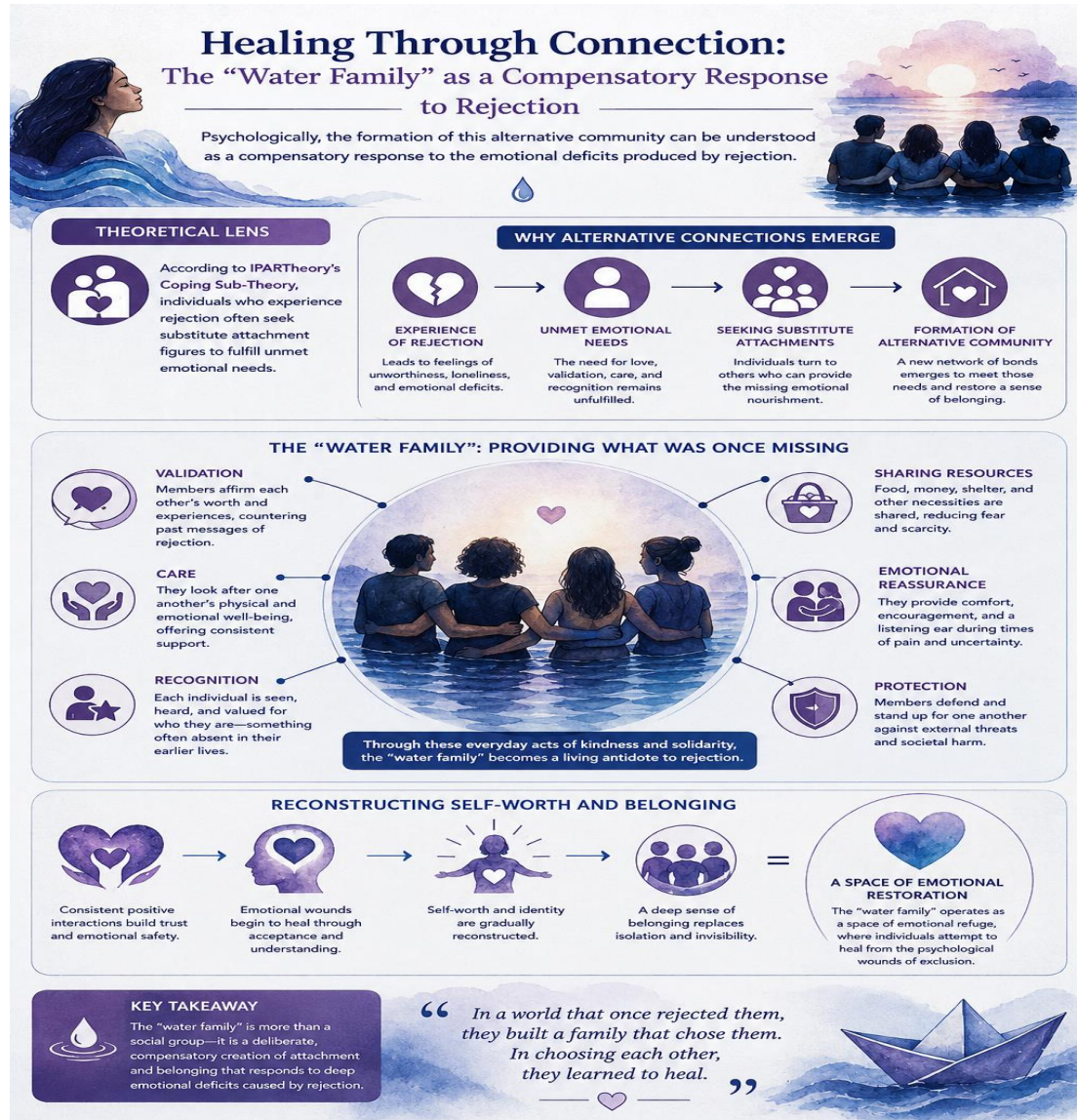
" In a world that rejects, we still find ways to belong. In the ripples of chosen love, we learn to live again. "

The separation of Leila from her biological kin constitutes the first disruption that drives her to develop non-traditional social ties. It is a psychological rather than geographical disruption, as it means the breakdown of primary emotional relationships that provide security. From the perspective of IPAR Theory, parents' rejection plays an important role in forming individuals' psychology, and Leila's case represents an excellent example. The moral rejection that her father displays, together with his unwillingness to shield her from the violence she suffers at school, turns her family into an unwelcoming environment. Leila's leaving her house does not mean her independence but the inability to cope with the rejection. Thus, it proves that relational disruptions experienced in childhood have a strong impact on further life choices.

The development of the idea of the "water family" in the novel is a crucial moment in terms of the transformation of traditional concepts of kinship and affiliation. Being composed of people like Nalan, Jameelah, Zaynab, and others, this community exists as a result of marginalization instead of being linked by blood ties. Analyzing this idea from a sociological perspective, one may speak about its relation to the concept of "chosen families." According to contemporary sociologists, the chosen family is understood as an alternative to traditional family models, where the basis for creating family relations is not connected to blood ties but rather is linked to affection, solidarity, and other factors.

From a psychological perspective, the creation of an alternate community can be attributed to being compensatory for the emotional gaps created because of rejection. The coping mechanism, part of IPAR Theory, states that rejection usually causes people to seek substitute attachment

figures to fill gaps of need that have not been satisfied. In this case, the “water family” creates such relationships with one another as they offer each other the validation, support, and recognition that was previously denied to them. Actions of kindness, such as sharing, consoling each other, and protecting each other from outsiders, are some ways in which the characters restore their emotional well-being. Therefore, the “water family” can be considered a place of emotional healing where people attempt to compensate for the psychological.



On the other hand, it should be noted that the novel reveals the complexity of the negative effects caused by rejection, since their impact is not only difficult to neutralize but also impossible despite having alternative communities that help one feel safe and loved. Thus, while being in an environment that does not judge and accept them as they are, the protagonists still suffer from signs of psychological disintegration that demonstrate the influence of their previous experience. For example, the feelings of shame experienced by Leila are deeply rooted and exist regardless of the community of people who do not stigmatize her. In accordance with IPARTheory, rejection effects are cumulative and long-lasting. The described situation allows us to highlight the difference between emotional support provided by an alternative community and the possibility to recover from the trauma that a person has faced before.

In addition, it becomes evident that the emergence of alternate communities cannot be explained by psychological mechanisms alone. The marginalization suffered by Leila and her friends takes place in a social context marked by a number of oppressive structures such as patriarchal culture, economic instability, and bureaucratic indifference. Such structures effectively work to deny entry to those who do not conform to mainstream cultural values, thereby perpetuating cycles of exclusion and oppression. The emergence of the “water family” thus takes place as an effect of and reaction to such structures. This allows the creation of an isolated environment in which those who have been marginalized can affirm their own humanity in opposition to the dehumanizing effects of society at large.

This conflict between empowerment and vulnerability plays a crucial role in appreciating the importance of alternative communities within the novel. In the first place, the “water family” gives the possibility for its members to get back a feeling of dignity and identity that has been stolen from them by the conventional society. Thanks to mutual recognition, these characters can establish an identity that recognizes their value. However, at the same time, the community itself stays open to any external influences that can destroy it. This fact emphasizes the fragility of alternative identities and communities as well as the danger of exclusion even in those cases when people have found a home.

**Living Between Two Shores: The Dual Reality of Alternative Communities**

Insights from *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World*

The “water family” offers a lifeline of belonging and care, yet it exists under constant threat from the very systems that reject and marginalize its members.

*“We found each other in the waters others threw us into.”*

**THE EMPOWERING SIDE**  
How the “water family” restores what was denied.

- RECLAIMING IDENTITY & DIGNITY**  
Members rediscover self-worth and humanity that mainstream society refuses to see.
- MUTUAL RECOGNITION & SUPPORT**  
Through validation, care, and everyday kindness, they affirm each other’s value and experiences.
- BUILDING A SHARED IDENTITY**  
They create a collective sense of belonging rooted in solidarity, understanding, and shared adversity.
- A SOURCE OF HOPE & RESILIENCE**  
The community becomes a sanctuary that nurtures hope, strength, and the will to keep going.

In a world that rejects, the “water family” offers acceptance, love, and the courage to reclaim one’s story.

**THE CENTRAL TENSION**  
A constant negotiation between empowerment and limitation.

EMPOWERMENT vs. LIMITATION

The “water family” thrives as a space of love and resistance, yet remains constrained by forces beyond its control.

**THE BROADER REALITY**  
Marginalized individuals must continuously navigate a world that simultaneously excludes them and depends on them—living in the in-between, where belonging is both a triumph and a struggle.

System excludes and devalues → Alternative communities emerge in response → Members find strength, healing, and belonging → Cycle of exclusion persists

**THE LIMITING SIDE**  
Why the community remains vulnerable.

- EXTERNAL THREATS**  
Patriarchy, poverty, stigma, and state neglect constantly endanger the community.
- PRECARIOUS EXISTENCE**  
Their social position is unstable, making their sense of belonging fragile and temporary.
- PERSISTENCE OF EXCLUSION**  
Even within acceptance, the scars of exclusion—shame, trauma, and fear—continue to linger.
- LIMITED POWER TO CHANGE SYSTEMS**  
The community resists and survives, but the larger system that oppresses them remains intact.

Belonging exists, but it is never fully safe as the world outside continues to reject and devalue them.

*To belong is to resist. To resist is to hope. And to hope is to keep choosing each other—again and again.*

In addition to this, the novel destabilizes the concept of belonging by emphasizing its fluid nature and highlighting how it can be a point of contention. The dynamics among the “water family” characters arise from negotiation between individual experiences of trauma and efforts toward forming a unified sense of solidarity. Such a phenomenon consists of connections and conflicts, which are intrinsic features of human interactions and relations, no matter what form they take. As such, in this particular case, the process corresponds to recent academic insights into the essence of community as an ever-changing concept rather than a solid entity.

In terms of answering the research questions, the analysis shows that interpersonal rejection is indeed an element that influences not only psychological development but also social interaction. The cases of Leila and others show how interpersonal rejection leads to fragmented identities, emotional instability, and social isolation, thus corroborating the theoretical postulations of IPAR

Theory. On the other hand, the establishment of a water family shows the ability of individuals to form new communities in the face of such difficulties. The act of community building becomes a means of resistance to social oppression by allowing excluded individuals to take control of their identity and lives.

Nevertheless, the study also highlights the fact that these groups constitute only an incomplete remedy for the problem of rejection. While they offer the necessary psychological comfort, they can never replace the lack of early acceptance or the effects of structural exclusion. This revelation adds depth to the knowledge about the correlation between the two concepts, indicating that other communities do not serve as substitutes for mainstream communities but merely represent their inability to cope with the reality of life. Therefore, in this regard, the novel becomes a powerful critique of both familial and societal institutions.

In essence, the emergence of alternative communities in *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World* is indicative of an intricate relationship between trauma and recovery, isolation and connection, and disintegration and reconstruction. Through the synthesis of psychological and sociological approaches to this issue, it is evident that membership is not simply a sociological phenomenon but a profound existential need. Thus, the water family becomes an embodiment of the human ability to defy exclusion by forging significant connections.

### **Conclusion**

The present study has explored the development of alternative communities in the novel *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World*, taking both community theory and Interpersonal Acceptance-Rejection Theory (IPAR Theory) by Ronald P. Rohner into account. It should be noted that there is some correlation between sustained interpersonal rejection caused by neglect in the family environment and social discrimination on the one hand and the development of alternative communities among marginalized individuals on the other. Identity fragmentation, emotional instability, and a feeling of inner shame result from such phenomena, thus confirming all key premises of the IPAR Theory. Under these circumstances, the formation of the so-called “water family” is a necessary step, since this alternative community serves as a means of adaptation, emotional support, and acceptance for those marginalized from society.

At the same time, the study also confirms that although such alternative communities provide substantial emotional support, they cannot completely compensate for the ongoing effects that the rejection experienced at an earlier age might have on one’s mental health. Trauma is an important element in all three cases considered, indicating the cumulative and lasting nature of the effects caused by rejection and revealing the inability of belonging to other communities to provide complete psychological relief. On the other hand, the establishment of chosen communities is a strong form of rebellion against the discrimination inherent in society and redefines the notions of family, identity, and legitimacy. Overall, this study brings together insights from the fields of psychology and sociology to develop a complex view of belonging as an intricate and controversial phenomenon.

### **Recommendations**

In light of the results of this study, future studies in literary criticism should delve deeper into the use of psychological theories such as IPAR Theory to analyze modern novels, especially those dealing with trauma, marginalization, and inclusion. The use of an interdisciplinary approach to literary criticism that integrates psychology, sociology, and cultural studies will help provide a better understanding of the way fictional literature represents the human experience of rejection and acceptance. Also, comparing the results obtained from various literary and cultural contexts may establish whether the trends observed in this study are universal or cultural-specific.

In addition, this study also encourages increased focus on narrative studies that center on marginalized individuals and alternate forms of belonging. Academic courses should include

literary works such as *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World* so that one can better understand the implications of marginalization on both psychological and social levels and the importance of empathy and acceptance in fostering human relations. Further study could examine the issues of resilience, healing, and resistance in alternative communities. While much attention is paid to the traumatic experiences of these groups, it might be beneficial to focus on more comprehensive perspectives on human experiences.

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