



RESEARCH PAPER

Traumatic Childhood and Adult Personality in Michaelides' *The Silent Patient*

Dr. Ayesha Ashraf*¹ Shafqat Naseem² Ghania Khan³

1. Assistant Professor, English Department, University of Jhang, Punjab, Pakistan, Drayeshaashraf@uoj.edu.pk
2. Lecturer, Department of English, University of Jhang, Punjab, Pakistan
3. Lecturer, English Department, University of Jhang, Punjab, Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this study is to explore Alex Michaelides' novel *The Silent Patient* (2019) to evaluate the representation of impact of childhood abuse on young adults' personalities in general and the main character i.e. Alicia in particular. This research is qualitative and it analyzes the text in the light of Sandor Ferenczi's theory of trauma and Sigmund Freud's personality theory. Moreover, textual analysis is used as a research method to keenly analyze words, dialogues and conversations between the characters. The present study is significant as it combines psychological and fictional domains by analyzing the hazardous impact of childhood abuse on human adult personality. In conclusion, this study found that Alicia as an adult is focused more on the negative memories of childhood abuse. She fails to evolve as a positive person. This research ends with the recommendation for further analysis of other characters of the novel in the light of various psychoanalytic theories.

Keywords

Childhood Abuse, Memory, Personality Traits, Psychotherapy, Trauma, Repression

Introduction

It's important to know that nothing is more important than our children. And if our children don't think they are important to us, if they don't think they are important to themselves, if they don't think they are important to the world, it's because we have not told them that they are our immortality. (Morrison, 1995)

Goldman & Salus (2006) define child abuse as "a failure to act on the part of a parent or caretaker that results in death, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse, or exploitation; or an act or failure to act that presents an imminent risk of serious harm" (20). Childhood shapes one person's personality that "permits a prediction of what a person will do in a given situation" (Cattell, 1950, 2). Traumatic childhood effects children's adult life and behaviour as stated, "Studies link extreme neglect and abuse with long-term changes in the nervous and endocrine systems" (Heide & Eldra, 2006).

Alex Michaelides (1977-present) is a British-Cypriot author and a screenwriter. His debut novel *The Silent Patient* is a psychological thriller that got fame as New York Times and Sunday Times bestseller. It mainly deals with the issue of traumatic childhood as two main characters Alicia and Theo lead a difficult

emotional life on the basis of repressive memories which trigger complex psychological impulses in them.

Literature Review

In this section of the study, we aim to scrutinize the existing research scholarship on the impact of childhood abuse on adult personality. The very first article "Origins of Adulthood Personality: The Role of Adverse Childhood Experiences" by M. Fletcher and Schurer connects the childhood maltreatment experiences with conscientiousness and neuroticism. This study asserts that parental/childhood maltreatment along with drastic health effects do cause destruction in the substantial relationship between adulthood conscientiousness and advantages of human capital. It states; "variations in personality may have their origins not only in childhood temperament, but also in childhood experiences associated with exposure to specific parenting styles" (2017, 155).

Similarly, another research study titled "Childhood Trauma Exposure Disrupts the Automatic Regulation of Emotional Processing" evaluates the deficits in emotional and behavioural regulation specifically caused by childhood violence or abuse. It quotes, "Early-life trauma exposure is a potent risk factor for neuropsychiatric disorders including anxiety, depression, and posttraumatic stress disorder" (Etkin and Wager, 2007).

On the other hand, Shelley in "Childhood Emotional Abuse and the Attachment System Across the Life Cycle: What Theory and Research Tell Us" describes; "Early emotional abuse engenders insecure attachment, that support maladaptive coping responses, and contributes to poor mental health, and consequently shapes the quality of romantic relationships" (2010, 5-51). Child abuse is of many types including physical and emotional like beating, slapping, hitting, and sense of insecurity in the mind of the child related to his/her parents and environment.

Roy (2020) in her study explores the character of Alicia in *The Silent Patient* as a hysteric subject in the light of femininity, and from psychological perspectives of Jacques Lacan, Freud, and Juliet Mitchell. She asserts: "Alicia's 'hysteria' does not represent her 'sacrificial' instinct but incarnates her revolt against repressive patriarchy, a reversal of the same patriarchal tool to dismantle its gender based binary constructions" (73).

Material and Methods

The present study contextualizes Ferenczi's trauma theory and Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis in relation to childhood abuse and its adverse impact on adult life of the abused. Ferenczi's trauma theory emerged in his writings of 1931-32, when he presented his theory in his paper "Confusion of Tongues Between Adults and the Child". He is of the view, that due to exposure to any trauma irrespective of its occurrence time, we get uncomfortable towards the perpetrator but still we "identify with the aggressor" (qtd. in Frankel, 1998, 101). Similarly, psychoanalysis criticism was developed by Austrian Sigmund Freud. Barry (2020) in *Beginning Theory an Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* states; "Psychoanalytic criticism is a form of literary criticism which uses some of the techniques of psychoanalysis in the interpretation of literature" (92). Freud in his "Moses and Monotheism" published in 1939 describes positive and negative effects of psychological trauma. He opines

that positive effects appear as the victim's strategy to live them without internalizing the destructive spirit, while negative effects damage his/her self-confidence to counter the similar situations, in future. These personality disorders play an important role in the physical, psychological and social interaction of the abused person/s. Further, Sigmund Freud describes three aspects of personality i.e. id, ego and super-ego.

This study uses textual analysis (content analysis) as a research method as "There is no such thing as a single, correct interpretation of any text. There are large numbers of possible interpretations, some of which will be more likely than others in particular circumstance (2001, 4). Similarly, "According to Frey and Kreps (1999), There are four main approaches of Textual Analysis; Content Analysis, Rhetorical Analysis, Performance Analysis and Interaction Analysis (Salahuddin, Seher, Saba Zaidi, and Saman Salah, 38.). This study uses content analysis as Weber (1990) defines, "Content analysis is a research method that uses a set of procedures to make valid inferences from the text. These inferences are about the sender(s) of the message, the message itself, or the audience of the message" (9).

Results and Discussion

Content Analysis

The Silent Patient

The novel is based on the story of an artist couple, Gabriel is a photographer, and his wife Alicia is a painter. They have been married for almost seven years. The story puts the reader in shock in the beginning by disclosing Gabriel's brutal murder. At the time of the incident, Alicia was also wounded and was present around the dead body. It is said that Alicia is the murderer of her husband Gabriel but she gets silent for almost six years. Alicia is put on trial that is quickly processed and people start blaming her as a cheater who should be punished. She is therefore charged with her husband's murder and is held by the court. While her litigation goes on, she paints a piece and names it "Alcestis" that is based on the story of a Greek heroine, who sacrifices her life for her husband. Apparently, her painting stands in complete contrast to her own life reality but, later on, the similarities are found in both the cases. During the litigations, Alicia's lawyer justifies the murder by linking it to her mental health history. He avails the services of a forensic psychotherapist Professor Diomedes, who seconds his argument by referring to her past mental health issues. In accordance with his opinion, the court gets lenient with Alicia and she is sent to a psychiatric unit named "The Grove". The Grove is a busy mental hospital with many patients who are suffering with several psychotic disorders, e.g. Alicia and previously Theo himself. During a long stay at The Grove, Alicia undergoes psychotherapy performed by a team of efficient psychotherapists, who try their best to make her speak out the reality. However, from the trial till remand, she remains silent. In the forensic unit, she meets the narrator of the novel and her psychotherapist i.e. Theo Faber. Alicia's life story has been unfolded by the narrator after acquiring her personal diary that describes her childhood experiences as well as her marital relationship with her husband.

The trauma and personality analysis of Alicia is divided into following different sub-heads.

Effects of Abuse Trust Deficit

Content analysis reveals that Alicia's tragic past casts a disastrous impact on her mental, physical and social behavior that shapes her outer personality. The diary also mentions the play "Alcestis", that Alicia and Jean-Felix happen to watch as an opportunity to bid farewell to each other forever. She feels quite relatable to the female heroine of the play, who has experienced the similar injustice. However, after the play finishes, Jean-Felix suggests her to stay alert in these words, "You're way too trusting. The people around you ... you trust them. Don't. Don't trust them" (178).

The novel shows that, on the very first day of his job at the Grove, Theo notices the miserable state of Alicia. She looks heavily sedated and he decides to treat her; "There was no time to waste: Alicia was lost. She was missing. And I intended to find her" (29). He, therefore, requests Professor Diomedes to allow him to conduct therapy session with Alicia. But Diomedes is totally hopeless regarding Alicia's case because he describes her as an unreceptive patient. Alicia chooses to remain silent due to lack of trust that has been internalized in her personality. She shouts at Theo as, "You can't help me. Look at you, you can barely help yourself. Freak. Fraud. Liar.Liar (72).

Rage

The novel demonstrates that Alicia harbors a feeling of deep rage in her personality that pours out on various occasions. For instance, when Alicia is probed by Theo, her trauma gets refreshed and she becomes revengeful. She writes in her diary about it, "I wanted to kill him, kill or be killed—I leaped on him and tied to strangle him and scratch his eyes out, bash his skull to pieces on the floor" (72). Ferenczi comments on this very risky position of analyst/ psychotherapist/doctor, he refers to the "unusual sacrifice of risking an experiment in which the doctor put himself into the hands of a not undangrous patient" (*The Clinical*, 21). Her condition is revealed through the mouthpiece of Theo, who notices abnormal responses of Alicia regarding her therapy sessions. He relates her present behavior to her tragic childhood effect; therefore, he decides to know about her. He discloses that, after the terrible road accident that killed Alicia's mother, her father said; "My poor girl, my Eva...Why did she have to die? Why did it have to be her? Why didn't Alicia die instead?" (221). She starts blaming herself for her mother's death. In her book *Sigmund Freud*, Thurschwell (2009) comments on the same feeling of guilt as she states; "This fear of the father's power becomes the baby's super-ego, the internal voice which stops the child from doing things he shouldn't do" (48).

Social Exclusion

The text reveals that Alicia was orphaned at a very early age, and her childhood is mainly characterized by the abandonment. During a visit to her parents' house where she had spent her childhood, Theo narrates; "This was the house where Alicia had been born. It was where she spent the first eighteen years of her life. Within these walls her personality had been formed: the root of her adult life, all causes and subsequent choices, were buried here" (140). He also shows his interest to know her marital life. The role of Theo shifts from being a psychotherapist to a detective as Max says; "You sound more like a detective than a psychiatrist" (128). To his surprise, all her relatives like Lydia Rose; her aunt, and Max; her brother-in-law refuse to cooperate with him on any matter. However, he provokes Alicia's nurse, Yuri to reveal any significant information about her, as he has been taking care of Alicia for

the last six years. However, Yuri discourages Theo by suspecting that he is attracted to her beauty and has no intention to treat her. She is further excluded after the murder incident, when the judgmental behavior of society hits her hard. She has been disowned by not only her next of kin but also the head of the psychiatric hospital, who has lost interest in her as a patient.

Theo describes his wife and Alicia; "It's hard to imagine two women more different than Kathy and Alicia. Kathy makes me think of light, warmth, color, and laughter. When I think of Alicia, I think only of depth, of darkness, of sadness" (51). However, he is sympathetic towards Alicia and thinks about her differently. Another psychologist Ruth calls this forced exclusion and abandonment as the "pain of not being loved" (90). The character of Max has been shown as a complete contrast as outwardly he appears to be noble, helpful and kind but later on he is involved in disrespectful acts towards his brother Gabriel and his wife. It expresses that Alicia used to spend her days mostly in cafes with air conditioning just to escape the unbearable heat. Since they are unable to afford air conditioning, she decides to buy a fan but Gabriel disapproves the idea on the pretext that it's noise will disturb his sleep. However, Alicia takes the fan with her and even uses it while she paints.

Depression

The very significant aspect that Alicia's journal/diary reveals is, her severe depression, for instance, the very incident when she thinks that she is being watched. She feels that a man regularly spies their house, so, she informs Gabriel about the stalker. He believes that she is fantasizing such visuals, however, Alicia, out of fear, begins to show signs of depression and paranoia. For her safety, she decides not to go out for three days, but Gabriel, however, convinces her to attend a dinner invitation by Max. At the restaurant, Alicia expresses her doubt that the stalker could be Max himself, but Gabriel disapproves her allegation. Later on, she hears someone barging in, and she supposes that the prying man has entered into their house.

After reading this incident in her diary, Theo formulates several questions in his mind regarding that man, who chased Alicia. His doubt was on his colleague; Christian West, therefore, he confronts him, who admits that he had once treated Alicia after the death of her father. He tells that he did so as a favor to Gabriel, who happened to be his school friend. Christian describes Alicia as psychotic referring to her allegation of being watched as, "Pure fantasy. I should have thought that was obvious" (195). Alicia has made the same allegation in the past as well, when she was living with Gabriel in Hampstead. At that time, she accused a man for watching and chasing their house, but, upon investigation, that man was found blind. Christian mentions that her suicide threats were also baseless, and reflect her urge to get her husband's attention. Theo also visits Cambridge to meet Alicia's cousin Paul and asks him about the prying man, but he also expresses his doubts, "She wasn't right in the head" (210). These signs reflect her severe depression and anxiety towards feeling of being abandoned or harmed by someone.

Theo relates Alicia's depression to that of her mother Eva, and her diary also describes her as being somewhat similar in her mental status to her mother. The evidence that, both of them attempt to end their lives in suicidal ways, proves the similarity. Eva hits the car in the wall when Alicia is sitting beside her, and, likewise, Alicia murders her husband first, and then tries to cut her own wrists. She says; "Gabriel was a traitor, the broken hearted faced the betrayer and noticed Gabriel had

a tyrant's eyes, my father's eyes.... That's the truth. I didn't kill Gabriel. He killed me. All I did was pull the trigger" (263). These lines show the deep impact of her father's negative presence on her mind, and, in Gabriel she sees that, and gets uncomfortable.

Paul also describes how her father Vernon had wished her death in the car crash instead of Eva. He stated; "I understood now why *Alcestis* had struck a chord with Alicia. Just as Admetus had physically condemned Alcestis to die, so had Vernon Rose psychically condemned his daughter to death" (214). Similarly, her childhood maltreatment is relatable to Theo also, that is the reason that he urges Alicia to communicate. The text shows that, during the forthcoming sessions, she starts opening up about her expressions. Theo fears; "We were crashing through every last boundary between therapist and patient" (222).

Phobia

Textual analysis reveals that, in the very first session with Alicia, Theo identifies her phobia and insecurity related to different aspects of her life. She looks weak internally as well as externally, she could not even bear the seasonal heat of weather, hence, she used to go to café and get cool air. He is clever enough to relate her phobia to her distant past, and in particular the car accident on 18th July. Alicia describes in her diary that her mother Eva had suffered psychotic issues and had attempted to commit suicide while driving by hitting her car to a brick wall. Eva dies but she survives and the painful memory in the form of flashbacks remains with her for the rest of her life. She gets fearful of the idea that she may, one day, become mad like her mother and her doubt becomes evident when she paints Gabriel on the cross. Alicia's diary also describes the immense love that exists between her and her husband who happens to be a supportive husband regarding her love for painting. Therefore, upon realization of her guilt that she had killed her husband, she slits her wrists. She writes about it in her diary as:

I used to think it was suicide. Now I think it was attempted murder. Sometimes I think I was the intended victim. But that's crazy. Why would she want to kill me? The truth is we're all scared. I'm terrified of myself – and of my mother in me. Is her madness in my blood? (59)

The novel reveals that though there seems to exist a genuine love bonding between Alicia and Gabriel but yet they often fought with each other. For instance, at one occasion there is seen a heated discussion between them on the idea of having a gun in the house. Her diary describes her deep fear of becoming a mother that is caused by her childhood trauma and it has made her feel like she can never become a good mother. In spite of Gabriel's idea of having a baby, she doubted that she will eventually turn out to be like her mother. Her phobic state of mind represents the negative effect as described by Freud. Freud states; "Negative effects of trauma serve to keep the forgotten event from being repeated, and as such are the defensive reactions of avoidance, inhibition, and phobia" (qtd in "Developmental Perspective", 40). Alicia's diary also reveals that she was once sexually assaulted by Max, Gabriel's brother, who warns her to stay quiet about his inappropriate behavior. In her diary, she narrates the incident of Gabriel's death when she explains that one day she was busy painting that she noticed a masked man. He was standing right behind her who also attacked her and dragged her from her studio to the kitchen. As soon as Gabriel's arrived, this masked man bashed his head with the butt of the gun before and shot him six times afterwards. Theo doubts her story as it lacks consistency with the police

report. For instance, contrary to her claims, she was not found tied up and Gabriel had been shot five times only. Theo shares her story with professor Diomedes, who states, "Alicia has cast herself as the victim and this mystery man as the villain. Whereas in fact, she killed Gabriel" (236).

The diary contains her murder confession where she describes how Theo had forced her to kill her husband. He asked Gabriel to choose either his life or Alicia but later chooses his life at the expense of his wife's. His choice takes Alicia back to her childhood memory when her father chose to murder her and save his wife. Despite Theo leaving both of them alive, the flashback of childhood trauma drives Alicia into angst and she kills her husband in cold blood. Although she admits her crime but she also wants that Theo should also be punished for playing with her emotions. She discloses every detail about Theo in her diary and hides it before passing out from the lethal morphine injection.

Inappropriate Behavior

The novel reveals that Theo follows his wife's lover, and finds out that he is a married man, but his wife is unaware of his extramarital affair. He keeps watching the stranger's house and he eventually plans to reveal to the man's affair to his wife. He hides his identity by wearing a black mask and a pair of gloves and, finally, he enters the woman's house. Theo's hypocritical character is revealed when he tries to help Alicia only to cover up his tracks regarding Gabriel's murder. By the end, Theo injects Alicia with morphine in order to induce an artificial coma so that she cannot disclose his evil side to the world. He then pretends to collect Alicia's belongings, but, in fact, he is worried about her diary. However, he is convinced that Alicia will never mention his involvement in Gabriel's murder. Jean-Felix happens to find the diary stuffed in one of her paintings and he gives it to the police. It reveals that Gabriel had an affair with Theo's wife, Kathy. Theo, out of revenge, goes to Gabriel's house and ties him up, and forces him to choose any one from his life or that of his wife. Gabriel chooses his own life and then Theo frees Alicia who takes the gun and kills Gabriel. Her diary proves that Theo was as guilty of Gabriel's murder, as Alicia herself but Theo blames her unstable mental health as responsible for the murder. Ultimately, Theo's effort towards self-preservation is revealed that he chose to work at the Grove just to rid of any evidence against him.

Non-verbal Expression

The Silent Patient places the silence as a strategy to convey meanings that makes it a significant ally of speech in the entire therapeutic process. The text writes, "Alicia remained silent—but she made one statement. A painting. The painting was a self-portrait. She titled it in the bottom left-hand corner of the canvas, in light blue Greek lettering. One word: Alcestis" (12). Alicia, at times, behaves like a non-speaking subject who knows how to express her rage and inner thoughts through her paintings, and silence, later on. During her sessions, she remains silent throughout that seems a challenge to Theo, and he tries to come up with a better plan. "Psychoanalysis has understood silence either as a defence, a symptom or as a necessary punctuation, but it is more intensely a part of language than these explanations would suggest" (Gale & Sanchez, 2005, 205-220). Due to her persistent silence, she was given an opportunity to paint and "Alicia had painted a redbrick building, two figures were discernible on the fire escape. A man and a woman escaping the fire" (163). The woman was she herself and the man referred to Theo.

Theo's visits art gallery in order to observe her latest painting "Alcestis" reveals the reason why she preferred to stay silent after Gabriel's murder. The novel demonstrates that Jean-Felix despised Gabriel because Alicia loved him so much and paid him full attention. However, Gabriel repeatedly warns Alicia to stay away from Jean-Felix because his mysterious behavior could prove dangerous to them. However, in her diary, Alicia expresses her feelings of dislike for Jean-Felix and she also warns him that she is not going to work with him anymore. It is Jean-Felix who suggests Theo that, in her current state of mind, Alicia should be allowed to paint so that her inner personality as well as hidden thoughts can be expressed through her art. Jean-Felix, the gallery owner, happens to know a lot about Alicia that he shares with Theo, for example, her feelings of abandonment towards her father. Jean-Felix and Alicia studied in the same art school, therefore, they knew each other for a long time. Finally, Alicia is allowed to paint but this liberty becomes short-lived because her rival Elif, another patient, defaces one of her paintings that drives Alicia crazy. Professor Diomedes decides to cut off Alicia's therapy sessions and, upon listening this, the later hands over her personal diary to Theo. Her act leaves the readers wondering about the information that it contains, and it adds suspense and thrill to the story. Theo tries to understand about Alicia's past by meeting her relatives; therefore, he visits Cambridge and her cousin Paul Rose and his mother, Lydia Rose. Paul believes that Alicia can never commit a murder because she has always been very kind hearted and innocent lady. Contrary to Paul's verdict, Lydia maintains a negative image of Alicia that may be because once painted her in a grotesque portrait. Alicia also hated her aunt due to her aggressive and indifferent behavior towards her and their hostility reminds Theo of about his own abusive childhood at the hands of her cruel father.

Conclusion

The present study analyzed the character of Alicia in terms of its literary depiction of sociological as well as the psychological impact of bullying and childhood abuse. It demonstrated that intertwining merges the destructive effect of abuse along with the positive individuation generates double personality. Consequently, a character can display the negative effects of abuse, but, at the same time, he/she can behave as a resilient person with positive effects. The side B (good) depicts him as a hero or antihero victim who just won over negative influence of abuse. By applying Ferenczi's and Freud's respective theoretical frameworks, this research found that the novel depicts that Alicia, as an adult, focused more on the negative memories of childhood abuse, and, as a result, she fails to evolve as a positive person. Therefore, she remained in the fog of gloomy childhood memories of abuse. By the end, she herself turns into a criminal or perpetrator of abuse. This study is significant for the teachers, researchers, students to understand literature from various dimensions.

The study also demonstrates that the novel is enriched with depiction of various psychological dimensions of every character, and that needs to be explored with the help of application of various theorists. Based on recent understanding of the effects of child maltreatment, literature invites policymakers to focus on this challenging scenario of personality disorders with respect to the traumatic childhood maltreatment. This novel is majorly based on characters' psychological issues and personality splits, therefore, this research ends with the recommendation for further analysis of other characters in the light of various psychoanalytic theories.

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