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Silence as Coping Mechanism: Understanding Psychological Trauma in Alex

Michaelides' *The Silent Patient*

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I am honoured to dedicate this work with love and thanks to:

My dear parents, words cannot describe my gratitude to you. Along this journey, your unwavering love, constant encouragement, and endless sacrifices have been my source of strength to reach my academic achievements.

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DEDICATION

To the experiences we never expected, and the paths that were redirected.

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the use of silence as a coping mechanism for psychological trauma in Alex Michaelides' novel, *The Silent Patient*. The narrative centers on Alicia Berenson, a painter who becomes mute after allegedly murdering her husband, Gabriel. This research explores the psychological underpinnings of Alicia's silence, analyzing how it serves as both a manifestation and a shield for her trauma through the lens of Freudian concepts. By applying Freud's theories of repression, the unconscious mind, and the defense mechanisms, the study investigates the symbolic significance of Alicia's muteness, drawing connections between her silence and her internal psychological turmoil. Furthermore, it examines the responses of other characters to Alicia's silence, revealing their own psychological complexities and perceptions of trauma. By delving into the interplay between silence and psychological distress, this study aims to uncover the intricate ways in which trauma can shape and silence the human psyche, offering a deeper understanding of the protagonist's silent suffering and the broader implications for trauma victims. The incorporation of Freudian analysis provides a comprehensive framework to interpret the protagonist's behavior and the dynamics of trauma, repression, and recovery in the narrative.

Keywords: Alicia , Trauma , Sigmund Freud , Repression , Silence , Unconscious Mind .

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Introduction

The research is conducted to discuss and analyse the masterpiece of Alex Michaelides' *The Silent Patient*. The novel is a contemporary landmark work that consists of psychoanalytic ethos. The work displays the fact that Michaelides is highly invested and immersed in Freudian psychoanalysis. Furthermore, the novel gained publicity because it weaves together aspects of suspense and trauma. Hence, this dissertation investigates the novel in relation to psychoanalysis to unravel the intellect behind the making of the work.

The Silent Patient is Michaelides's debut work that initiated his literary career. Alex Michaelides was born in Cyprus to a British mother and a Greek Cypriot father. He moved to Britain after high school, and got a master's degree in English Literature. He also studied psychology and worked in a ward of troubled teenagers ("The Silent Patient: by Alex Michaelides"). His interest in psychoanalysis shaped his work wherein it revolves around trauma and psychoanalytic therapy. Therefore, this work uses psychoanalysis theory in order to analyse the novel wherein the core theme is the silence of the protagonist.

Michaelides's origins shaped his interests wherein he incorporates Greek mythology in his work. His allusion to the Alcestis rendered the work more exquisite and note-worthy in the way it drives readers to investigate the story by emphasizing the Alcestis as a symbol. Moreover, Michaelides includes quotes from Freud, which proves the relation of the work to Freudian theories.

The Silent Patient is narrated from the lens and voice of Theo Faber, a forensic psychoanalytic, who displayed a grave obsession with the story of the protagonist, Alicia. On the other hand, Alicia is an artist who murdered her husband whom she loved deeply; her silence after the murder stirred the curiosity of the public, but they could not reach any truths from her

due to her adamant silence. However, silence in the story was interpreted as a deliberate resistance to share the truths about the murder; however, it was also regarded as repression from a psychoanalytic approach. Theo endeavours to unravel the suspense that lies behind the silence that lasted for years.

Silence has many various interpretations; however, in the work of Michaelides, it is concerned with trauma wherein it is interpreted as a defence mechanism (repression), a coping mechanism, and a resistance. It is necessary to study silence and define its meanings and implications in literature in order to approach literary works in the best way critically and understand the characters and the meaning implied by the author.

Additionally, this study aims to address the following key questions:

Main Research Question:

How does Alex Michaelides' "The Silent Patient" explore the use of silence as a coping mechanism for psychological trauma?

Sub-Questions:

1. In what ways does the protagonist's silence in "The Silent Patient" reflect her psychological state and trauma?
2. How do other characters in "The Silent Patient" interpret and respond to the protagonist's silence, and what does this reveal about their own psychological conditions and perceptions of trauma?

Literature Review

It is noted that psychoanalysis and psychotherapies emphasize verbal communication in therapeutic situations; however, silence is considered a resistance and a defensive inhibition to

integration. Additionally, works that investigate silence as a significant phenomenon are scarce in psychoanalytic literature (Shafii et al. 431).

Jacob Arlow explains that the silence of the patient in psychoanalytic therapy is “the natural enemy of therapeutic success” (Arlow 44). Therefore, silence is an act that impedes the flow of therapy. It makes it challenging for the therapist to understand the mind of the patient and this hinders the process of healing or attempting to reach resolutions about the issues and traumas.

Furthermore, the patient’s silence, since the early days of psychoanalysis, was deemed a resistance; this resistance is considered a refusal or hindrance to the fundamental rule of psychoanalysis (Brockbank 457). The act of transference is vital in psychoanalytic therapy so that the therapist can intercept the roots of the problem, but silence blocks the path of the psychoanalyst through the patient’s resistance to sharing their experiences. Alicia’s silence was also perceived as resistance, which added ambiguity around her and her story of murder.

Studying the implications of silence results in acquiring a new understanding about mutism in literature. Alicia’s mutism was woven as the epicentre of the narrative, which involved suspense and ambiguity. As a result, Michaelides succeeded in portraying the fact that silence holds significant implications. The lack of verbal communication signified strong implications of trauma and hidden stories, which are repressed as a form of coping mechanism.

This work aims to investigate the psychoanalytic implications of silence, which is portrayed through the character of Alicia, a traumatized artist. It explains silence as a coping mechanism through the studies of Freud who endeavoured to explain the human character and mind’s reaction to trauma. Therefore, the work expounds on Freud’s theories to explain silence as a coping mechanism. In this regard, the research answers the following questions: how did

psychoanalysis define trauma and defense mechanism? What are the implications of silence? and how is silence portrayed as a coping mechanism in *The Silent Patient*? The main objective is to answer the former questions through the investigation of *The Silent Patient*. Furthermore, the main focus in analysing Alicia's character is her silence.

This work explores silence as a coping mechanism and resistance through the character of Alicia, which Michaelides has surrounded with mystery and suspense. The silence and refusal of verbal communication implied strong meanings and not mere passivity. The severity of Alicia's trauma led to her silence, and the research intends to study the silence's implications which are repression, resistance, and coping mechanism.

On top of that, the research depended on the analytical method to approach the novel. The research compiled data about trauma and Freudian psychoanalysis in order to analyse the character of Alicia as a traumatized patient who had painful childhood memories. Freudian psychoanalysis focuses on the childhood of a patient to investigate the basis of the trauma, and that is the case in *The Silent Patient*. Freud explained defense mechanisms as a reaction to unbearable experiences, and Alicia adopted silence as a coping mechanism.

The first chapter includes a thorough investigation of trauma and an introduction to Freudian psychoanalysis. The focus is to have a wholesome idea about trauma and understanding silence in relation to traumatic experiences. Additionally, the chapter explains the notions of defence mechanisms and repression to understand the implications of silence, which is understood, from Alicia's character, as a coping mechanism and resistance. Moreover, the chapter also implores psychoanalysis beyond Freud, focusing on how different postmodernists viewed silence.

What is more, the second chapter is concerned with the analytical part wherein the novel is analysed in accordance with the data in chapter one. The main focus of the analysis is the protagonist, Alicia, whose silence led the narrative; Alicia's silence is studied as a reaction to her accumulated traumas which were manifested after her husband's murder in the act of mutism. The chapter also explores the narrative techniques which rendered the work unique; Michaelides incorporates the epistolary technique to decipher vague parts of the story. The author has spellbindingly employed narrative techniques to unfold the psychological depth of trauma.

Chapter One

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

1.1. Introduction

The human psyche is undoubtedly remarkable. It holds the external and internal life of the person wherein individuals interact differently to their experiences even if they were the same. Some experiences end up becoming a trauma. Trauma is an essential topic in this work because it is the core of psychoanalysis. This chapter attempts to approach psychoanalysis from all angles wherein it initiates by explaining trauma and how it was approached and explained by specialists. Indubitably, Sigmund Freud has an indispensable role in explaining trauma; therefore, this chapter will tackle Freud's scholastic findings and interpretations.

The main goal of the study is to provide the theoretical background in order to analyse the concept of silence as a means of resistance. *The Silent Patient* is centred upon the main character's silence, Alicia, due to her traumatic experience. Hence, this chapter discusses the historical background of trauma wherein prodigies endeavoured to explain that psychological suffering exists. Freud has an indispensable role in galvanizing interest to the field of psychology with his revolutionary theories that explain human behaviour that is exposed to trauma. Freud introduced defence mechanisms, which are a sort of psychological protective shield that keeps the patient detached from the traumatic experience. This chapter attempts to introduce silence as a defence mechanism. It draws upon Freud's theory of repression that explains the meaning of defence mechanism, then endeavours to explain how silence is another defence mechanism that protects the patient and that it is not a passive act or choice.

Freud's theories about how trauma is perceived in the human mind were quite welcomed and adapted in psychology and literature. At the same time, Freud's works were controversial

and polemical because they challenged universal truths. He explained the difference between the conscious and the subconscious and the locus of traumatic experiences in the mind. Furthermore, he introduced repression as a defence mechanism that is adopted by a patient to avoid recalling hurtful memories. This study will draw upon Freud's ideas to understand silence as a defence mechanism. What is more, the work will discuss silence beyond Freud.

1.2. DEFINING TRAUMA AND ITS Types

In order to answer the questions of the study and approach silence as the core theme, trauma must be well explained for it is the cause of adopting a defence mechanism. It will be explained that trauma is an unfortunate event that harms the psychological barrier of the person and engenders negative effects on the patient.

The term "trauma" originates from the ancient Greek meaning "wound." She adds that the definitions of trauma vary according to the discipline; However, there is a general agreement among them all that describes trauma as a wound. Trauma is not a physical wound but rather a psychological one. It harms the peace of the person causing undesirable effects.

Particularly, trauma refers to a psychological wound or injury that happens because of a distressing event or experience in the person's life. Trauma emerges due to the inability of the person to digest a certain occurrence ("Trauma"). However, people's perception of harmful experiences differs from one person to another; therefore, traumas do not occur necessarily to all people with the same harmful experience ("Trauma"). This stresses the fact that a person's perception of the events surrounding them is the cause of becoming traumatized. People's perception of the events depends on them. Whereas some people emerge victorious from a traumatic experience, unfortunately, others may be affected.

Viplavi Joshy claims that what makes an event traumatic is the event itself and what the event means to the victim. He adds that the trauma causes alterations in the person's mind, body, emotions, and behaviour (Joshy). The perception of the experience depends on the meaning a person attributes to the related event. Furthermore, it is noted that traumatic experiences incur changes in the person's character.

Joshy also recognizes three types of trauma: Acute Trauma, Chronic Trauma, and Complex Trauma. Firstly, Acute Trauma happens when something unpleasant occurs suddenly such as car accidents or natural disasters. However, Chronic Trauma happens when the person is continuously exposed to traumatic experiences over time such as child abuse, domestic violence, bullying...etc. Nonetheless, Complex Trauma is the result of several traumatic experiences of Acute and Chronic traumatic events such as Attachment Trauma (Joshy).

Harmful and unfortunate experiences are categorized differently resulting in three types of trauma. In this regard, the meaning that a person attributes to an event determines the reaction toward the accident. Furthermore, trauma, which is the response to a painful experience or many experiences, affects the person's entirety.

Charles R. Figley and others argue that "The field of trauma psychology is simultaneously ancient and recent,"(1) they claim that the existence of trauma psychology dates back to 1900 BC, wherein the first records tackling trauma were literary works and religious texts that depicted the reactions of people to horrific events they had witnessed or experienced. However, in the modern era, the term trauma dates back to the 17th century when the term was used to refer to physical injuries that result in shock or damage to the body. Nonetheless, during the 19th century, the term usage expanded to refer also to the psychological impact of catastrophic events (1-2).

Ancient times merely provided illustrations of people's reactions to unpleasant events. However, the term trauma and its implications emerged in the modern era first describing severe physical injuries, and then it developed to include emotional impacts.

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administrations (SAMHSA) aimed to provide a nuanced definition of the concept of trauma, and they generated the concept of "The Three E'S of Trauma: Event(s), Experience or Event(s), and Effect," the concept concludes that event(s) include the external threat, whereas the individual's experience determines whether it is a traumatic event (SAMHSA 8). Trauma is explained that "A particular event may be experienced as traumatic for one individual and not for another." Furthermore, the effects of the trauma may occur immediately or be delayed, and the duration may vary from short to long one (SAMHSA 8).

SAMHSA also explains trauma in relation to the community. It is reported that the community has a significant effect on the experience of the traumatized. The communities that are helpful and understanding may facilitate healing; however, the communities that overlook psychological impacts may be re-traumatizing. In the same vein, it is mentioned that the entire community may suffer from trauma collectively because of a life-threatening such as natural disasters or despotism and tyranny. The SAMHSA claims that "Communities are often profoundly shaped by their trauma histories" (17).

The same as there exists individual trauma, there also exists community trauma. Communities may have shared experiences that affect the lives of their people collectively. The shared collective experiences would determine the community's responses, reactions, and perceptions, which will be implemented in their history and culture as a social group (SAMHSA 17).

1.2.1 Psychological Trauma

It is noted that the investigation of the relationship between trauma and mental illness is accredited to the neurologist Jean Martin Charcot, a French physician who worked with traumatized women during the late 19th century. Charcot's main focus was hysteria, and most women comprised symptoms of hysteria which are amnesia, paralysis, sensory loss, and convulsions. It was believed that the cause of hysteria is physiological. However, Charcot was the first to notice that the reason of hysteria is psychological. He described the problem as dissociative problems resulting from facing unbearable experiences (History of Trauma. 1).

Later, Pierre Janet, a student of Charcot, carried on the investigation focusing on dissociative phenomena and traumatic responses. Janet explored the effects of traumatic experiences on personality development and behaviour. Through experiments, he found out that the patients' reacted intensely to their perception of traumatic events; however, the symptoms can be alleviated through hypnosis (History of Trauma. 1).

Interestingly, Freud found an affinity with the works of Charcot and adopted his ideas. Freud and Breuer in their *Studies and Hysteria* (1893) labelled traumatic dissociation as "hypnoid hysteria" and emphasized its relationship to a traumatic antecedent. In the 1880s, Janet, Freud, and Breuer concluded independently that hysteria is engendered by psychological trauma (History of Trauma. 2).

Nonetheless, Freud moved from his claim that external factors cause hysterical symptoms, and emphasized that it is the unacceptable nature of the experience that creates trauma. Therefore, Freud "privileged intrapsychic theory and fantasy over external trauma." However, he suggested that external trauma can influence the victim's mind (History of Trauma. 2).

Diamond Diana (2004) stresses that Freud claims that there is an interplay of external and internal factors that create trauma; and that Freud and Breuer explain that trauma is the result of a series of partial traumas that the act of their summation keeps causing traumatic effect (284). Freud and Breuer believed that the traumatic effects that appear on a patient are caused by multiple unfortunate experiences and that remembering the experiences summons hysterical effects.

Michele Balaev claims that the field of trauma studies in literary studies received quite the attention in 1996 with the publication of Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* and Kali Tal's *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literature of Trauma*. Scholars like Caruth advocate that "trauma is an unsolvable problem of the unconscious that illuminates the inherent contradictions of experience and language," this emphasizes the linguistic indeterminacy and inability to locate the truth of the past (Balaev 1).

1.3. Freudian Psychoanalysis: Understanding Silence and Trauma

This work relies on psychoanalytic theory, and the theory is ascribed to the renowned Sigmund Freud. Freud has revolutionized psychology and introduced unprecedented concepts; he is known as the father of modern psychoanalysis and the person who galvanized attention to the field of psychology.

Sigmund Freud was brought to the world on May 6, 1856. The house he was born in is located in Freiberg, Moravia. The town was a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire then. His mother doted on him greatly and always repeated the prophecy of the peasant, who helped her during giving birth to Freud, claiming that the boy is going to grow up to become a great man (Puner 1-2).

Freud was attacked by the organized Church because of his subversive theories that claim that humans are animals driven by instinct. He was utterly convinced that the unruly animal must be tamed; in other words, he believed that man must order himself and he lived according to his maxim (Puner 223-224). Freud subverted the universal, religious, truth that man is the highest divine creation. As a result, his unprecedented approaches and ideas were deemed controversial.

Despite that, Freud was opposed due to his extreme perspectives and theories. However, he is greatly revered for his studies and launch of psychoanalysis theory nowadays. Dianna Kenny explains that Freud aimed to provide an understanding of human mental functioning through psychoanalysis, which is a form of treatment, a theory, and a tool for investigation. Freud, outrightly, claimed that humans are animals who had been reformed into human beings due to developmental factors influenced by family and society (Kenny 1).

Freud and his scholars deem the studies on Hysteria the beginning of psychoanalysis because it shifted the focus from the physiological to the psychological realm. Psychoanalysis introduced the unconscious mind, repression, and hidden meaning all of which are the essential pillars to interpret the human mind according to Freud (Kenny 2). Retrospectively speaking, doctors and physicians used to consider hysterical symptoms as problems in the human body or brain; however, the studies on Hysteria initiated by Charcot proved that there exists a psychological side that reacts to traumatizing events.

According to Freud, the human mind adapts to traumatic experiences through what he called defense mechanisms. To defend itself, the ego guards itself against internal events that are deemed unacceptable. It is claimed that defense mechanisms were generated to protect self-esteem (Baumeister et al. 1082).

Freud's theories revolutionized psychology and brought novel knowledge to the field that aimed to relieve patients of their traumas that have been paining them for a long time. Although Freud aimed to benefit humanity, he was vehemently opposed due to his unacceptable claims that denigrate the human race, classifying them as animals.

1.3.1. The Hidden Self: Understanding Repression and Defense in Psychological Dynamics

- **The Unconscious Mind**

Freud introduced the unconscious as the locus of thoughts and feelings which we are not aware that it drives our strivings and behaviors. It is the place of wishes, desires, and impulses; a place that is not constrained by logic or social values. The unconscious mind beholds the unpleasant and forbidden experiences that are repressed and remain outside the range of the conscious mind (Kenny 2).

Daniela Knafo describes that Freud along with Breuer explained that the splitting of consciousness and somatic conversion symptoms occur because events may not be experienced with feelings or abreacted which leads to their conversion into bodily symptoms; or because the memory isolates the experience from consciousness and repressing it in the unconscious (173).

The unbearable events and experiences take place in the unconscious mind of the person and remain outside the range of the conscious mind. Residing in the unconscious mind is an act of repressing the experiences which is interpreted as a defence mechanism. Freud and his followers believed that the conscious displaced harmful memories to the unconscious mind which makes the event unrecalled. This act of defensiveness is labelled repression because the unconscious is repressing undesired experiences or feelings from being remembered. However, that comes with a cost wherein the traumatized psyche is meant to suffer from inevitable effects that appear on the person's character in many various ways.

- **Repression as a Defensive Mechanism**

Because of repressing painful or undesirable events, repression becomes known as a defence mechanism that keeps the experiences in the unconscious away from the conscious mind. However, the repressed materials appear in disguised ways such as in dreams, slips of tongues, jokes, and symptoms. The cure according to Freud is to uncover the hidden meanings of the symptoms and make the patient re-experience the unwanted event in the conscious. This approach became known as the affect-trauma model (Kenny 2).

Kendra Cherry, in “Repression in Psychology,” (2024) defines repression as the act of an unconscious blocking of unpleasant experiences from the conscious mind. Repression was introduced by Sigmund Freud as a defence mechanism in order to ward off feelings of guilt or anxiety. She adds that Freud believed that the unconscious has a major impact on the person’s character and that during the process of attempting to heal patients, Freud endeavoured to uncover the feelings of the unconscious. He concluded that there is a mechanism that safeguards the emotions in the unconscious, and therefore he discovered repression. Furthermore, repression can be manifested in dreams, slip of the tongue, Oedipus complex, or phobias.

According to Cherry’s explanation, the unconscious is the repository of unwanted experiences that have a traumatic effect on the person. Because of the person’s unacceptance of certain events, the memory of those events moves to the unconscious mind area and remains inaccessible to the conscious mind. Repression allows the conscious mind to be free from the unwanted feelings stimulated by the harmful experience.

Despite that, the mind activates a defence mechanism repressing the undesired feelings or experiences. It is noted that the repressed memories appear as hidden meanings in the patient’s

behaviour or dreams. Therefore, the role of the psychoanalyst is to pinpoint the hidden meanings to approach the problem in the most suitable way.

Freud attempted to project the memories of the unconscious into the conscious mind in order to aid the process of minimizing their harmful effects on the character of the patient. In the process of understanding how unpleasant memories reside in the unconscious, Freud discovered that this is an act of repression that serves as a defence mechanism. Hence, he saw that healing resides in transporting the hidden memories to the conscious mind. The process that Freud undertook to achieve his goal was by intercepting the hidden meanings that the patient displays in their character or dreams.

In a nutshell, the repressed memories appear in the form of hidden meanings in the dreams or behaviours of the patient. These hidden meanings are approached carefully to study and intercept the causes of trauma. Psychoanalysis attempts to analyse the person's behaviours, particularly defence mechanisms that lead to reaching an understanding of the problem and its solution.

- **Silence as Repression**

This research studies Michaelides's *The Silent Patient*, attempting to dissect the meaning behind silence. The main character, Alicia, remains silent for 6 years after killing her husband and refuses to share her memories with her psychotherapist. In this regard, silence is manifesting psychological trauma. Fakiha Arain claims that "the concept of silence transcends its role as a mere protective or symptomatic response; it emerges as a language, a nuanced form of communication that speaks volumes beyond the limitations of words" (Arain 38). Silence serves as a language that displays the severity of the trauma without uttering a word. Therefore, verbal communication is not the sole means of communicating the existence of a problem.

Repression and silence are acts of hiding the painful events in the unconscious mind. Silence refers to the fact that there are hidden meanings, stories, or feelings. Through silence, Alicia aimed to express her trauma. Therefore, silence served as a means of expression just like the impacts of repression reflect hidden meanings. Repression held back memories from remembrance, and silence held back the communication about the experience which served as a coping mechanism for Alicia.

- **Silence as Resistance**

O'Grady and Meinecke (2015) exquisitely describe that "Silence speaks an ineffable language everyone seems to know but no one can say. It tells us what is not here; it makes the obvious ambiguous" (2). Hence, silence in itself is a language that conveys a strong meaning, but it keeps the mystery around the experience and problem. The silence of Alicia was perceived as resistance that stirred more curiosity for her therapist Theo who seemed adamant to know the story behind the absolute silence.

Tarsha Warin (2007) explained that Freud understood silence as a resistance to transference and to remembering. Later, psychoanalytic literature adapted the ideas of Freud and interpreted silence as resistance (11). Therefore, the silence of a patient is perceived as a resistance to remembering the repressed experiences and a resistance to sharing them as well.

Language is vital to people because it allows transmitting information and communication. However, traumatic events can impose mutism on the person depriving them of the ability to transmit or communicate because of the severity of their experience (Pearl and Dunston 19-20). The severity of the experience imposes mutism as a defence mechanism.

People or rather patients resort to silence to avoid speaking about their painful memories. Henceforth, characters in literary works such as Alicia choose mutism to avoid

sharing or remembering painful events and jot them down in the unconscious mind. The refusal to share their memories and repressing them in the act of silence is interpreted as resistance that impedes the process of psychoanalyzing the problem.

1.3.2. Trauma in Freudian Psychoanalysis

As mentioned earlier, Charcot is accredited to be the first who admitted that hysteria is caused by psychological trauma. Freud drew upon Charcot's infrastructural information and outlined his own theories and approaches to psychological trauma. He is accredited with launching psychoanalysis, which provided an understanding of human behaviour and mind.

- **Freud's Views on Trauma**

Freud's earliest studies were about trauma. He published his first work investigating trauma as a co-authorship with Breuer in *Studies on Hysteria*, the work comprised a collection of psychanalysis treatments for multiple patients. Freud defined trauma through Hysteria. Freud and Breuer said, "We regard hysterical symptoms as the effects and residues of excitations which have acted upon the nervous system as traumas" (49). They admit that certain experiences attack the nervous system and result in hysterical problems.

Keiser (1967) explained that Freud described trauma as any form of excitation from the outside that breaks the protective shield (781). Henceforth, trauma stems from external experiences that pierce through the person's protective shield, which is in other words the nervous system. The external traumatic experiences mold into the form of trauma and cause hysterical symptoms that distort the behaviours and character of the patient.

Rick Curnow (2007) elucidated that Freud and later authors such as Garland claimed that trauma occurs "when there is a disruption of a protective barrier in our mind, which protects us

from harmful and painful excessive stimulation” (1). It is consented by Freud and others that trauma is a disruptive harmful event that negatively stimulates the person and causes harm.

- **Traumatic Memory and Recall**

As explained earlier, Freud introduced repression as a defence mechanism that represses traumatic memories in the unconscious. The APA dictionary of psychology defines repression as “the basic defence mechanism that excludes painful experiences and unacceptable impulses from consciousness. Repression operates on the unconscious level as a protection.”

Knafo eloquently explains that Freud distinguished repression from the act of simple forgetfulness and stressed that it is a defence mechanism wherein it excludes distressing content from the consciousness to avoid distressing emotions. She adds that Joseph (1996) has written on the act of the frontal lobe of preventing harmful memories from entering the left hemisphere “thereby preventing verbal information processing of these same memories” (qtd. in Knafo, 173).

Curnow describes the effect of trauma as follows:

After a traumatic event, there may be two distinct phases. There is an initial breakdown when the protective shield is breached by trauma, and there may be a catastrophic disruption of functioning. There is a sense that death is imminent, or that one is threatened by total annihilation of self. The victim is often shocked and confused, perhaps unable to take in what has happened. He may be silent and withdrawn, or talkative and excited. Sometimes we describe people in this state as “dissociated” (173).

Freud contended that patients repress their memories in the unconscious instead of the conscious in order to keep those memories out of reach and unremembered. This act of repression defends the patient from the emotional outbreak. Simply put, repression serves as a

defence mechanism that protects the patients from the disturbing emotions accompanied by the undesirable experience(s).

As a consequence of repression, verbal communication about the traumatic events becomes improbable. Patients may choose silence to avoid recalling the events. Henceforth, silence is a form of defence mechanism. Arain explains that Alicia's silence is a deliberate choice that denotes a "powerful form of communication" and that it portrays inner strength and resilience (41)³¹. In this regard, silence denotes a strong meaning of strength; it also serves as a coping mechanism to the distressing and horrific event in Alicia's life, which is killing her husband. Alicia's refusal to share the story of the events proves the severity of her trauma and how silence served as the most suitable defence mechanism in her situation.

Relatively, Freud believed that treatment lies in recalling repressed memories into consciousness and confronting them. This process leads to an outpouring of emotions, dubbed catharsis, and attainment of insight. Furthermore, Freud noted that the patient may show resistance by refusing to talk about the topic, blanking out, falling asleep, or missing appointments. Freud described that such behaviours mean that the act of recalling an experience is close but it is hindered by the patient's fear i.e. an act of repression. Freud addresses that the patients' memories get fragmented during the process of recalling which is caused by fear. The behaviours of patients that hinder the process of recalling memories in the conscious mind serve as gaps wherein they choose to evade the confrontation and be silent about it.

1.4. Silence as a Defence Mechanism: Beyond Freud

The field of psychoanalysis received quite a proliferation of works, and many theorists discussed silence as a defence mechanism. Silence is not mere passiveness; it denotes strong meanings without the use of verbal communication. Silence in itself is communication.

Michaelides portrayed Alicia's silence as the core of the story which leads to centering the significance of silence.

Paul Williams Toth (1996) claims that silence is perceived by therapists as a form of resistance and a conscious act to refuse cooperation, but in fact it is an important facet that needs to be studied. Silence is a form of resistance that may be a part of the person's character development, and it may have its roots in shame or other emotions. He adds that the silence of the patient impacts the treatment (1-2). Therapists considered silence as a conscious resistance that dismisses cooperation. Alicia's silence seemed to be disturbing the expected smooth sailing of the treatment by Theo who seemed persistent to know the story of Alicia.

Chalkiadaki (2014) argues that silence is not a passive acceptance of oppression, but rather it is an effective form of defense that covers repressed thoughts. Madison describes that actions like remaining silent or avoiding certain topics are "indicators at the behavioural level of repression tendency at work" (24-25). This explanation categorized the tendency of silence as a form of repression.

1.4.1. Contributions of Psychoanalysts other than Freud

Anna Freud, the daughter of Sigmund Freud, is highly revered for contributing to the field of psychoanalysis. She is known as the founder of child psychoanalysis. Most importantly, she expanded on her father's work, identifying different types of defence mechanisms (Cherry, Anna Freud Biography). She claimed that it is the role of the analyst to bring into consciousness what is repressed in the unconscious mind (Kelland).

Psychoanalysis emerged widely during the 20th century, wherein literary theorists and critics used psychoanalysis to analyse and understand literary characters. Eagle (2003) argues that rather than attempting to uncover the patient's mind, the focus must be on the fact that the

mind is “interpretively constructed” whereas the patient’s reality is independent³⁷. This postmodern view contradicts and dismisses the traditional psychoanalysis and stresses the independence of the patient’s mind and reality.

Wynen and others (2019) claim that contemporary researchers consider silence as a conscious choice, and identified two types of silence: acquiescent silence, which is based on the belief that speaking up will make no difference, and quiescent silence which is based on the fear of the consequences of speaking up. Therefore, silence is a strategic choice (500). Choosing silence to meet a certain end is a deliberate act

Michel Foucault’s contributions are considered quite significant in the field of literature. He explored that silence can be a tool of power. Steven Bindeman explains that Michel Foucault deems silence as a political issue wherein he believes that silence is a form of oppression and an element of power-relations discourse (Bindeman 144). Foucault provides the following passage to explain silence:

In the midst of the serene world of mental illness, modern man no longer communicates with the madman. ...the language of psychiatry, which is a monologue by reason about madness, could only have come into existence in such a silence. My intention [in writing *Madness and civilization*] was not to write the history of that language, but rather to draw up the archaeology of that silence (qtd. in Bindeman 144).

Foucault aims to say that silence is not personal but rather social because societal norms impose silence through shame or embarrassment. The society is an apparatus of values, norms, and hierarchies. The point of Foucault’s power-relations notion is that society holds the decision about discourse and silence; however, silence can be a tool of power. Alicia held the power over her experience through her silence.

In the same vein, Robin Paine Clair discusses a similar point of view to that of Foucault, wherein she contends that silence can sequester or express experience (Bindeman 144). Alicia has committed a horrendous act according to society. She was admitted to psychiatry rather than prison because her actions of murder and silence deemed her unstable socially. She chose to sequester her experience; however, the silence was also indicative of the severity of her traumatic experience. Alicia's silence repressed her memories and indicated the severity of her trauma without verbal communication.

1.5. Conclusion

This chapter introduced its main themes: trauma, Freud's psychoanalysis, and silence as a defence mechanism. It has been reported that trauma first appeared in early literary texts, however, the effects of trauma were ascribed to physiological dysfunction. The effects of trauma were recognized as Hysteria. The symptoms of hysteria were finally recognized by Charcot to be the result of psychological trauma that pierced through the nervous system.

In addition, the study explored the meaning of trauma, which is a referral to a psychological wound that engenders harmful emotions to the traumatized patient. However, the perception of the harmful experience is what determines the level of effect because people may be exposed to the same sort of experience, but react differently.

Furthermore, Sigmund is accredited for launching psychoanalysis and explaining human behaviour. Freud explained that the traumatized person represses painful memories in the unconscious mind; this act was labelled as repression, which is known as a defence mechanism. Despite that, the conscious mind jots down painful memories in the unconscious to avoid recalling them, the memories appear in the form of hidden meanings in the behaviour or dreams of the patient.

The core theme of the dissertation is Michaelides's *The Silent Patient*; therefore, the study explored silence as a resistance and defence mechanism. The protagonist, Alicia, used silence as resistance against sharing her memories and a defence mechanism against remembering her experience. Although silence is regarded as a deliberate refusal to cooperate, it served as Alicia's coping mechanism. The silence was also a proof of the character's grave situation because of the traumatic experience. Silence communicated meaning without verbal intervention.

Lastly, the chapter explored psychoanalysis beyond Freud. The field of psychoanalysis received quite an interest wherein it was used in both psychotherapy and literature. The literary field benefitted from psychoanalysis by exploring and understanding the aspects of trauma in characters. Furthermore, pioneers like Foucault explained the aspect of silence in relation to power. Nonetheless, Paine Clair described that silence has two characteristics, which are sequestering or expressing experiences.

This chapter as a whole provided data about psychoanalysis and trauma. It is centred upon the theories and studies of Freud who laid out the basis of the field. The research distinguishes the locus of trauma and its effects on the traumatized person. According to Freud and his followers, trauma resides in the unconscious and manifests itself in the form of hidden meanings. The data of this chapter lead to exploring silence as a defence mechanism and a form of resistance toward communicating and remembering trauma.

Chapter Two

Analysis of *The Silent Letter*

“ There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you”

(Maya Angelou).

2.1 Introduction

The Silent Patient provides an intriguing journey to the psyche of a traumatized artist, Alicia. Michaelides draws upon psychoanalytic concepts to weave his masterpiece that involves suspense and the psychological impact of trauma. Alicia’s action of murder and her mutism after the incident incur an atmosphere of mystery, and that mystery leads the narrative to be finally decoded by Theo, the forensic psychoanalytic, who vehemently aims to unravel the truth.

The work is narrated through the lens of Theo Faber who displayed a questionable obsession with Alicia’s story. Theo, as a psychoanalyst, chose to risk his career life for the sake of following Alicia and becoming her therapist. Theo is the narrator and the character that slowly unravels the mystery around the story.

The first section provides an analysis of Alicia’s character which could only be understood by investigating her childhood from a Freudian perspective. Furthermore, it explores the psychological impact of silence that rendered the patient a completely different person from who she was. Also, it discusses the symbolism of paintings that are significant to understanding Alicia.

What is more, this chapter delves into the narrative techniques of the work that made it stand out as a contemporary masterpiece. Michaelides incorporated the epistolary technique and flashbacks to cover many aspects of the story including Alicia’s present and past. Michaelides

masterfully weaved two stories, the story of Theo and the story of Alicia, separately, and then he surprised the reader with the plot twist.

This chapter delves into the details of Alicia's character in order to provide an analysis of her according to Freudian psychoanalysis. Therefore, this chapter consists of the analysis of *The Silent Patient* according to what have been discussed in chapter one. The constituents of chapter one, mainly Freudian psychanalysis and concepts of repression and resistance, are going to be depended on to delve into the details of Alicia's character.

2.2 Analysing *The Silent Patient* through Freudian Psychoanalysis

The silence of Alicia is a reflection of the betrayals from both her parents and then Gabriel who did not hesitate to sacrifice her; these choices, by her beloved ones, were interpreted by Alicia as "psychic murder" ("The Silent Patient: by..."). In this regard, Alicia's childhood is vital to the narrative, for it was the source of her psychological suffering. Her childhood was the incentive to murder Gabriel.

Freudian psychoanalysis pays quite the attention to childhood experiences. Freud asserts that the way the parents or caregivers nurture the children has a long-lasting impact on the character of children; therefore, childhood experiences shape the person's character and behavior (Traylor et al). " I felt a sudden sadness and revulsion" (Michaelides 93).Whenever Alicia gets the flashbacks and memories, she seems to live and sense the same feelings and traumas.

Alicia's childhood was portrayed as painful and traumatic because her mother ended her life when her daughter was with her in the car; Alicia's survival induced an ever-lasting trauma in her especially when realizing that her mother's intention was to kill both of them together. Alicia could not make out the motive or the reason behind her mother's choice, and she could not even ask about it because her mother already died.

Besides, Alicia did not find emotional support even from her father who clearly stated his willingness to sacrifice her instead of her mother. As a result, she grew up with trauma induced in her early childhood. The fact that her relatives did not want to cooperate with Theo either is another proof that she could not find a peaceful environment while growing up.

Nonetheless, Theo's attempt to investigate Alicia's past stemmed from the psychoanalytic approach that analysed and approached trauma by understanding the patterns and reasons that caused certain behaviours. Alicia experienced trauma when she was a mere innocent child; her parents chose to abandon her and disregard her existence. As an adult, Alicia contemplated her mother's choice of committing suicide and clearly attempted to kill Alicia with her, also Alicia's father wished for her death instead of her mother's; all these events made Alicia traumatized. She conceived her parents' choice as a deliberate action to murder her.

Freudian psychoanalysis believed in the indispensability of investigating the patient's past specifically childhood because it contains the source of trauma. Alicia's deliberate choice to kill Gabriel stemmed from her unconscious mind that was triggered by a similar event of betrayal that was caused by her parents.

- **Character Study**

Alicia's past shaped her character as an adult. The beginning of the narrative displays that Alicia keeps her thoughts to herself which is why her husband asked her to keep a diary. As a painter, her drawings reflected her inner thoughts. The fact that she saw her husband as Jesus is proof of her admiration and adoration of him.

Moreover, she frankly admitted her love for him in her diary by claiming that she started writing at the beginning in order to please Gabriel who asked her to do so. Alicia is severely attached to Gabriel; she perceives him as God / her savior, to the extent that she once portrayed

him on cross, saying : “He saved me – like Jesus” (Michaelides 70). . As mentioned in chapter one, trauma is determined by the level a person attributes to the person, and Alicia highly revered her husband in her life. . For instance, she confessed in her dairy that sometimes she unconsciously gets the idea of hurting her husband “I hated seeing him so upset, looking at me with hurt eyes. I hate causing him pain—and yet sometimes I desperately want to hurt him, and I don’t know why” (Michaelides 178).

Deep within her subconscious, Alicia kept a silent and long-standing desire to exact vengeance upon her father, seeking retribution for the emotional destruction he had inflicted upon her. It was not solely Gabriel's affair with Theo's wife that drove Alicia to gruesomely murder him and subsequently render herself, the real reason is the recurrent of sentencing Alicia to death. “*Gabriel was the second man to condemn Alicia to death; bringing up this original trauma was more than she could bear*”(Michaelides 451). The container has always failed Alicia, leaving her at a psychic war between guilt and fear. Alicia’s parents or her husband were supposedly the ones who provide her with a holding environment through which she can translate her emotions and reflect her self-image, whereas they instead collapsed so did her inner self .

Furthermore, Michaelides showcases that Alicia has a disturbing past by pinpointing that she had undergone therapy and was prescribed strong medications. Alicia’s past made Gabriel skeptical of her doubts, deeming her fears of the stalker as an illusion. Because of Gabriel’s skepticism of her words, she resorted to silence.

The first aspect of Alicia’s silence began with her act of keeping her suspicions to herself and refusal to undergo therapy again which rendered her powerless to do anything. Therefore, it is noted that she preferred art and writing rather than verbal communication and sharing her

experiences. The journal comprised of Alicia's mind and thoughts that she could not share and decided to repress from everyone including her beloved husband.

The diary, a significant pillar in the narrative, displays Alicia's depression and describes her situation as similar to her mother's because both of them attempted to commit suicide. The mother ended her life when her own daughter was with her in the car, whereas Alicia kills her husband first and then attempts to end her life (Ashraf et al. 564). Alicia's past controlled her adult self.

The accident of murder awe-struck the public and also Theo, in particular. The public could not understand the motives because of Alicia's silence, and Theo could not make out the reason for her decision to commit such a crime despite that he spared their lives when he entered her home and threatened to kill them.

Alicia committed herself to mutism after killing her husband, stirring the curiosity of everyone. Freud describes that a traumatized person represses the painful experience in the unconscious as a defense mechanism. In this regard, Alicia's defense mechanism was silence which served as an act of repression toward remembering her trauma and also a type of resistance to sharing her story and cooperating in therapy.

Alicia adamantly refused to cooperate and talk about her experience which was perceived as an act of resistance by the therapists. After the murder, the protagonist chose silence and aggression. She became highly aggressive and incessantly attempted to commit suicide which led the asylum to drug her to become calm. Silence was her coping mechanism which she chose to cope with the trauma that remained ambiguous until Theo unraveled it.

Freud contended that trauma appears in the patient's characters in the form of dreams, slips of the tongue, or behaviors (see Chapter 1); the trauma of Alicia appeared in her behavior

wherein she became highly aggressive and secluded from the world and reality. Michaelides describes how Alicia responds aggressively to any kind of threat, such as Elif's taunting. This behavior proves that Alicia's actions are triggered by any sort of threat. Her actions of self-harm and being aggressive toward others stem from external stress which leads to such actions (Shoaib 864).

Michaelides displays that Alicia has deep rage inside of her that pours out on different occasions (Ashraf et al. 563). The first encounter between Alicia and Theo in the face-to-face therapeutic session triggered her rage; her rage was inexplicable at the beginning, but she later explained in her diary that she partly recognized him and wanted to kill him "I wanted to kill him, kill or be killed" (Michaelides 72).

The doctors at the Grove and the readers are forced to face the power of silence and its impact on individuals and relationships. Silence in *The Silent Patient* is "a metaphor for the secrets and hidden traumas" (Meenakshi). Although the Grove doctors' were hopeless toward silence; the resistance to speak displayed the intensity of trauma.

- **Psychological Impact of Silence**

Silence in psychoanalysis was always perceived as the patient's resistance to cooperate. The patient's silence is an act of resisting "the fundamental rule of psychoanalysis" (Brockbank 457). The Grove doctors gave up on Alicia after many attempts to make her talk. Diomedes's act of challenging Theo to make her talk is proof that they had no hope for her to share or communicate after so many years.

Alicia's silence becomes not merely a personal choice but a response to a complex socio-cultural environment. The quote "The more I write, the more I remember. And the more I remember, the more I understand" [6] from Alicia's diary highlights the therapeutic nature of

self-expression, underscoring the profound psychological effects of her silence and the transformative potential of self-discovery.(Arain41)

Freud deemed silence as “the most powerful resistance” to communicating ideas and remembering. Abraham suggests that silence is a defense for repression (Lane et al. 1091). Henceforth, silence was the coping mechanism that protected Alicia from remembering her experience. She repressed the painful memories in her unconscious mind and rendered them out of reach from herself and the external world.

The first time Theo saw Alicia in the Grove, he described that she was completely invisible because of her silence. The silence rendered her detached from the physical world and altered her to become the worst version of herself. Theo describes “I hadn’t expected her to be in such bad shape. There were some echoes of the beautiful woman she had once been: deep blue eyes; a face of perfect symmetry. But she was too thin and looked unclean” (Michaelides 43). Alicia chose to abstain from verbal communication and also life.

Arain explains that silence is a representation of repressed feelings and that Alicia’s quivering lips are a sign of internal conflict. Plus, the silence was Alicia’s defensive tactic (39). She declares: “I’m terrified of myself— and of my mother in me. Is her madness in my blood? Is it? Am I going to—” (Michaelides 94).As an unfortunate fate, the little Alicia internalized a sense of guilt thinking that she was the reason behind her mom’s death. The painful experience gravely traumatized Alicia and rendered her unable to socialize or engage in verbal conversation. She committed herself to silence just like how Alcestis did because of how immense they perceived betrayal by their beloved one.

Theo’s idea to make Alicia paint was a creative approach to push her back to the physical world and to think because medications harmed her ability to be conscious and aware of her

surroundings. Despite that she chose silence, she did not refuse to use art to express herself; however, her art became another mystery aspect. Additionally, Theo's internal struggles led him to pursue a career in psychology, aspiring to help others while seeking to heal his own emotional wounds. "The real motivation was purely selfish. I was on a quest to help myself. I believe the same is true for most people who go into mental health. We are drawn to this profession because we are damaged—we study psychology to heal ourselves"(Michaelides 25).

From a feminist psychiatric perspective, Michaelides' enigmatic novel *The Silent Patient* delves deeply into themes of pain and silence. According to Roy (2020), Alicia's "hysteria" challenges conventional gender-based norms, subtly undermining entrenched patriarchy and acting as a form of rebellion against its oppressive structures. This perspective aligns with broader psychoanalytic debates that recognize the role of silence in conveying trauma and housing repressed emotions. Furthermore, Roy suggests that Alicia's silence not only illuminates her traumatic experiences but also indicates the complexities of the psychoanalytic relationship, especially considering that Theo, her therapist, grapples with his own unresolved psychological issues. This dual exploration of Theo and Alicia's intertwined stories enriches the narrative, highlighting the intricate interplay between silence, trauma, and the diverse conditions of their psyches.(Arain39)

Theo felt helpless toward the adamant silence, so he thought of ways to approach the story that he could not know from Alicia's mouth. After he discovered that Alicia's childhood was the reason that triggered her to kill Gabriel, he intended to use the psychoanalytic technique of moving the unconscious memories to the conscious mind.

The line "*Lips that quiver become a representation of words left unsaid, a sign of internal conflict*" [6]. This line illustrates the physical manifestation of silence and the internal struggle it represents, emphasizing the psychological nuances woven into the narrative.

It also illustrates how physical signs like trembling lips symbolize unspoken thoughts and emotional turmoil. It highlights the character's struggle to express themselves, revealing deep psychological issues and the complexity of their inner conflict. This imagery enriches the narrative by emphasizing the tension between silence and suppressed emotions.

Additionally, Michaelides displays Alicia as an intelligent person, for she chose to play with her therapist a mind game. Alicia's memories were distorted; therefore, she decided to lie to Theo in an attempt to make sure of her suspicions. Theo's attempt to kill her and discard her from existence was an unexpected plot twist. Despite being drugged, Alicia was strong enough to write down her last words in the diary to inform people about Theo's crime and the reason that led her to that state.

Furthermore, the fact that Alicia has well-hidden her journal during her last moments of consciousness proves that she intended to share the truth. She wanted her story to be finally revealed and unravel the crime of Theo who has been responsible for the demise of her life, her marriage, and her career. Theo was not merely an interested psychoanalyst; he was the cause of Alicia's paranoia and her murder of Gabriel.

- **Symbolic Interpretation**

Alicia Berenson, the central figure of *The Silent Patient*, is a renowned painter who gains infamy after murdering her husband, Gabriel. What makes Alicia unique is her refusal to speak following the crime, a silence stemming from deep-seated trauma and psychological distress.

Psychiatrist Bessel van der Kolk, in *The Body Keeps the Score*, explains how trauma can lead to communication issues like selective mutism. Alicia's silence acts as a coping mechanism to protect herself from her traumatic past. Alicia's art becomes an outlet for her suppressed emotions. Laurie Schneider Adams, in *Art and Psychoanalysis*, argues that artists often express their deepest emotions through their work. Alicia's haunting and intense paintings reveal the psychological scars left by her trauma.(Jose28)

Alicia has not developed effective coping mechanisms for dealing with her negative emotions. Instead of relying on verbal communication, she often turns to painting as a means of expressing herself and conveying her inner thoughts and feelings. Thus, after the murder, instead of engaging in verbal communication and defending herself, Alicia chooses silence as her response. Whereas her silence said it all, her silence speaks volumes, resonating with unexpressed emotions. "Silence, I discover, is something you can actually hear"(Murakami 229).This choice reflects her difficulty in expressing herself through words due to the lack of containment and holding environment in her upbringing. Instead, she channels her emotions and experiences into her artwork painting . The painting of Alcestis, a figure from the Greek mythology who sacrifices herself for her husband, Euripides, serves as a powerful symbol of Alicia's own inner turmoil and her willingness to bear the burden of guilt or punishment. Through her art, Alicia finds a way to communicate and convey her emotions, desires, and struggles that words alone cannot adequately express.

Theo also paid attention to the Alcestis believing that it portrayed a certain hidden meaning, but he failed to uncover it. The relation between Alcestis's story and that of Alicia did not make any sense because Alcestis died for her lover, being sacrificed by her husband, whereas Alicia

killed her lover. Nonetheless, it turned out at the end that Alicia murdered Gabriel out of love; her immense love for him made his act of betrayal unbearable.

Alicia's personality was portrayed in her painting. She found a resemblance to Alcestis, a Greek heroine, who chose silence and self-sacrifice because of her husband's betrayal. She chooses to sacrifice her own life for her husband, but when she is brought back to life, she commits to silence because she felt betrayed. Alicia's silence was also because of the betrayal she was put through by her parents and husband (Shoaib et al. 862).

Michaelides described how Alicia desperately begged Gabriel to not sacrifice her when Theo threatened them, but he chose himself after all. Theo, the stalker, asked them to sacrifice either themselves or the other party. She chose to sacrifice herself to save Gabriel, but the husband chose himself instead. This led the unconscious memories of childhood to resurface again and act as the motive to kill her beloved and herself later. Her failure to end her life made her express her feelings through the Alcestis.

Alicia drew herself with an open mouth and a paintbrush in her hand, signing the painting as Alcestis. Alcestis refers to betrayal and silence as a strong means of communication that transferred the severity of trauma or situation without clearly unraveling the facts and motives to commit such a horrendous act.

As an artist, painting was Alicia's means of expression. She wanted to communicate but her mutism did not allow her to. The first time, she communicated her traumatic feeling through the Alcestis, and the second time was when she drew in the Grove. Both paintings contained hidden meanings that only Alicia understood then.

The way Theo and Jean-Felix viewed Alicia's art differed. Jean-Felix admired her art and deemed it joyous and worthy of noting, but Theo aimed to study the art and saw that it contained

the hidden meanings from her unconscious. Theo perceived her art as a representation of her trauma. Theo's perception of the paintings highlights his own guilt ("The Silent Patient...").

Alicia has portrayed the significant people and events in her collections. She painted the car crash where her mother died; her gallerist perceived it joyous, but Theo understood the dark implications of trauma. However, Jean-Felix considers painting Gabriel on the cross meant that she had planned to kill him months prior to the murder ("The Silent Patient...").

Paintings symbolized the ethos of mystery around Alicia's story and thoughts. The motives behind the murder were completely unclear and ambiguous, and silence added to that ambiguity. Theo, nonetheless, understood the implications to some extent; he related the paintings to the dark side hidden in her unconscious that locked the painful memories and repressed them from transference and being remembered.

In a nutshell, Alicia's creativity in her paintings portrayed her repressed memories which she found solace in painting them rather than talking about them. Alicia's childhood was gravely engraved in her unconscious to the extent that she behaved like her mother who ended her life. Alicia's parents and caregivers were the source of her trauma and that was later portrayed in her art which was perceived differently by different parties.

In addition, her portrayal of Gabriel as Jesus interpreted the way she viewed him. Jesus is a sacred religious character, and even Gabriel was hesitant about being painted as Jesus. However, Alicia's mind and her perception of Gabriel as Jesus proved how sacred her love for him was. The extent of her love for her husband signified the extent of her pain when he betrayed her.

The paintings compensated for silence; however, their meanings were ambiguous and only could be made clear by Alicia herself. Theo could partly unmask the meanings behind the paintings by acting as a detective and relating the patterns of childhood trauma. Nonetheless, the

diary was the key to understanding the chain of mysterious events. Paintings served as tools for incurring suspense, and the diary served as the answer to the unanswered questions.

2.3 Narrative Structure and Techniques

Alex Michaelides has been quite creative in narrating his story which comprised both suspense and psychoanalysis to dissolve the ambiguous case of Alicia's story. At the beginning of the narrative about the narrator, Michaelides employed the significance of psychological aspects in the story by relating to Theo's psychological turmoil and his path to embark on a psychoanalytic career.

Theo is a representation of psychanalytic therapy which originated from Freud. Michaelides depended on Freudian psychanalysis to weave his story which is centered upon trauma: the traumas of Alicia, and the trauma of Theo, the forensic psychanalyst. Theo was both a projection of childhood trauma and the executor of psychoanalytic techniques.

Michaelides used the epistolary technique to intersperse Theo's narrative with the narrative of Alicia that was presented in her diary. The diary comprised the narrative of Alicia's story and events before Gabriel's murder ("Summary and Study Guide..."). In fact, the diary compensated for Alicia's silence, or rather spoke for Alicia instead of having a verbal confrontation. It is clarified that Alicia did not share her thoughts even before the murder incident; she chose to write indiscreetly instead of sharing her concerns.

Alicia wrote in her diaries her repressed thoughts. She said to herself "I don't know why I'm writing this. That's not true. Maybe I do know and just don't want to admit it to myself" (Michaelides 7). She was repressing her thoughts out of her conscious mind. Saying that she refuses to admit the reasons for writing in her diary refers to her refusal to certain facts in her life that she aims to repress from people and hide in her journal.

Repression is a core theme in psychoanalysis wherein Freud explains that it is a defense mechanism that a patient resorts to for the purpose of eliminating the painful memories from being remembered. Alicia already had traumatic childhood memories which she repressed.

The diary was also a depiction of Alicia's distress that she could not share with anyone. The fact that her former therapist, Christian, and her husband did not believe what she said about the man following her made her more reserved about sharing and talking.

Hailey Spinks (2024) defines epistolary technique as the telling of a story through written communication such as letters or diaries. She adds that "This technique allows for a creative approach to developing plot, allows the author to adopt multiple perspectives, and sets the stage for innovative characterization." Michaelides provided a wholesome picture of the story by including Alicia's accounts from her diary.

- **Use of Perspective and Suspense**

The Silent Letter draws attention to the ambiguity of events: the ambiguity of Alicia's story about murdering her husband, and the ambiguity of Theo's unexplained interest in pursuing Alicia. Throughout the narrative, the narrator portrays Alicia's immense love for her husband; therefore, her sudden action of murder creates a sense of suspense and mystery. Furthermore, Theo's decision to downgrade his career for the sake of pursuing Alicia's case was another form of suspense.

Michaelides said about Alicia: "Her enduring silence turned this story from commonplace domestic tragedy into something far grander: a mystery, an enigma that gripped the headlines and captured the public imagination for months to come" (12). Therefore, Alicia's mystery was partly unveiled through her diary. Particularly, the diary was depicted as an essential part of the story as a whole wherein it contained the secrets of both Alicia and the mystery man.

Despite that the diary recounted the story of Alicia which she no longer could share due to her silence. The diary also creates a sense of suspense because she clearly states that she loves her husband and committed to writing in the diary to not worry him about her. However, love and murder were completely contradictory.

Suhad Daher-Nashif (2021) explored *The Silent Letter* as a literary work that is used for educational purposes in medical humanities programmes. He explained that the novel can give rise to “discussion among medical students about professionalism and ethics in psychiatric settings”. More importantly, he adds that Michaelides’s narrative indicated to the reader that the patient’s silence does not mean emptiness or absence of emotions, but it designates a way of communication and expression (1-2).

Therefore, Michaelides explored the depth of Alicia’s trauma through her silence which he interpreted as a scream for help. Theo’s character did not neglect or denigrate Alicia’s silence as others did; on the contrary, he believed that silence is hiding grand truths which he endeavored to unmask.

The narrative structure employed to dissect the mystery behind the silence depended on Theo’s search for the truth from Alicia’s life and environment before the unfortunate incident. Because of Alicia’s refusal to cooperate, Theo resorted to investigating Alicia’s latest work, the *Alcestis*, and to get to know about her from her family and acquaintances.

The *Alcestis* is the last piece of art produced by Alicia after murdering her husband. It is explained that “ALCESTIS IS THE HEROINE OF A GREEK MYTH. A love story of the saddest kind. Alcestis willingly sacrifices her life for that of her husband, Admetus, dying in his place when no one else will” (Michaelides 13). Alicia’s labeling her piece *Alcestis* created a sort of ambivalence because she clearly stated in her diary that she loved her husband; however, she

atrociously murders him. Theo considered the Alcestis as a sign that holds the truth; a truth that only Alicia beholds.

Furthermore, Michaelides portrayed the depth of Alicia's trauma by narrating her incessant attempts of suicide; her first time was right after shooting her husband wherein police officers witnessed the flood of blood that came from Alicia's act of cutting her wrists. Despite that she was rushed to the hospital and saved; she attempted suicide again as soon as she regained consciousness. Alicia's fiery temper and her incessant attempts to kill herself obliged the doctors in the asylum to give her strong dosages of medicine to keep her alive.

Additionally, Theo, as a psychoanalyst, became gravely interested in Alicia's childhood, for he believed he could find answers in the past. Theo stressed that he needed to know her childhood; he clearly claimed that "if I was to make sense of Gabriel's murder, I needed to understand not only the events of the night Alicia killed him, but also the events of the distant past" (Michaelides 36).

Menaka (2023) claims that many incidents in *The Silent Patient* emphasized the importance of childhood. He explains that Alicia and Theo are related due to their common suffering during childhood which affected them until adulthood (722). Theo was traumatized by his father, whereas Alicia was traumatized by her mother's attempt to kill her and her father's wish that she should have died instead of her mother.

Theo considers Alicia a projection of his pain. He claims that he wants to help Alicia, and reminds the reader of his relationship with his therapist Ruth which mirrors his relationship with Alicia. The novel is deeply interested in the psychological wound of childhood and asks whether trauma can be overcome. However, in the end, both characters seem to fail to overcome their traumas and commit atrocious crimes and mistakes (*The Silent Patient*).

Relatively, the investigation of Alicia's past unveiled the secret that Theo has been eagerly looking for. As a psychoanalyst, Theo detected the trauma caused by Alicia's parents and understood the source of her suicidal thoughts and inclinations. Her parents condemned her to death when she was just an innocent child seeking the love of her parents..

What is more, Theo's narration of Alicia's story and his story simultaneously turned out to be a plot twist at the end. He used flashbacks to tell his story of betrayal which unfolded the other part of Alicia's story. Theo's interest in Alicia turned out to be personal, and their stories intersected to become one. Flashbacks are when the writer journeys back to past events; however, what is special about Michaelides work is that he journeyed back to the past without giving the hint of transporting back in time; he made the story of his betrayal by Kathy and the story of his therapeutic work with Alicia seem to be simultaneous, occurring at the same time-frame.

Theo also used flashbacks to tell the story of Alicia through her journal. Alicia's silence engraved mystery about her story, but the journal unmasked bits of her story. Flashbacks were also used to portray Theo's traumatic childhood. Nonetheless, Theo's investigation of Alicia's childhood is another flashback that provides a wholesome idea about the origin of the incentive to commit murder (Gnanamuttu 61).

Gnanamuttu reported that Michaelides used flashbacks in order to provide background information that supports the main storyline and render the readers more connected to the story, "Michaelides through the flashback techniques makes the story more interesting and realistic" (62) ¹⁰. Flashbacks compensated for the lack of verbal information from Alicia wherein her journey conveyed half the truth; on the other hand, the investigation of her past also revealed the missing truth, then finally the events lead to reveal the involvement of Theo in the story of

Alicia's act of murder. All the flashbacks intercepted the depths of the traumas of both Theo and Alicia: they both shared a painful history of childhood trauma.

- **Narrative as Recovery**

Michaelides refers twice to Sigmund Freud in his work, and he sets his narrator as a psychoanalyst. Therefore, psychoanalysis is a core theme in the work wherein it attempts to understand trauma and unveil the mystery of murder. As explained in chapter one, Alicia's silence is perceived as a defense mechanism and resistance, and Theo's role is to unveil the truth behind that silence through psychoanalytic therapy.

Theo approached Alicia from multiple angles to attempt to know the reasons behind her action of murder. Theo attempts to convince Alicia that he merely wants to help her, the expression "I want to help you see clearly" (Michaelides 65) signifies a hint that was explained later that Theo was already connected to Alicia's murder story. Theo was both the cause of trauma and recovery.

The use of flashbacks and going back to Alicia's childhood is a vital aspect, for psychanalytic therapy believes in the significance of childhood in shaping one's personality. When Theo finally found about Alicia's past from her cousin, he could link the dots to understand the implications of the Alcestis "I understood now why Alcestis had struck a chord with Alicia. Just as Admetus had physically condemned Alcestis to die, so had Vernon Rose physically condemned his daughter to death" (Michaelides 213). Investigating the past drew Theo closer to the truth and partly explained Alicia's personality and hidden thoughts.

Alicia's vehement silence led Theo to provide her with the chance to draw again to express her thoughts. The final record of Alicia's thoughts was her painting, *The Alcestis*. Therefore, Theo concluded that Alicia as a painter would better express her thoughts by painting and

drawing what is on her mind. Later, Theo's approach proved to be successful and Alicia drew a portrait of her and Theo outside a burning asylum. The painting was another mystery that was unveiled at the end when Theo's truth became known to the reader.

When looking at the portrait, Theo could not make out whether Alicia drew him as the savior or perpetrator, which created another sense of suspense. At the end of the story, after the truth was revealed, the meaning of the portrait was also revealed to be a hint from Alicia about Theo. Furthermore, Alicia's portrait served as a partial success for Theo because he could finally make her express something after her long silence.

Psychoanalysis stresses that in order to heal a patient, the analyst must bring back repressed memories to the conscious mind. Alicia had repressed her painful traumatic childhood, and Theo's blind belief that he would find something in the past was just spot on. By bringing up her childhood, Theo could finally break the silence that lasted for years.

Alicia admitted that her silence at the beginning was caused by the trauma of murdering her beloved husband. When Theo suggested that she must have regained her ability to speak after some time; she admitted to the theory and insinuated that speaking became useless to her and she deliberately chose it as a conscious act of avoiding verbal communication.

Theo was to the protagonist both the incentive to murder her husband and also the means to recovery. Alicia's act of murder was the result of accumulating trauma since childhood about abandonment and betrayal; her husband's choice of sacrificing her stirred her childhood trauma and led her to commit violence. She believed that Gabriel killed and she just retorted back. Her silence began the moment Gabriel chose himself over her whereas she chose him over herself. Despite that Theo did not shoot her, and Gabriel kept calling her name, she said "The dead don't talk" (Michaelides 255).

Theo's repetition of the expression that he merely wants Alicia to see the truth projects his desperate urges to become a savior for Alicia, the woman whom he did not know if not for his wife's betrayal. The first time Theo approached Alicia's life was to stir problems in the marriage he deemed fake; it was an act of revenge because after extracting the painful betrayal from Gabriel's mouth he was relieved and considered Alicia on his side, both of them betrayed by their beloved ones.

The second time Theo approached Alicia, he repeated the same motive claiming that he wanted to help her see the truth. However, he had a selfish motive which is knowing the truth behind Alicia's choice after sparing her life and her husband's. Therefore, he went to great lengths to unravel the secrets which were maintained through silence.

Alicia's recovery necessitated the unveiling of her deep repressed traumas which her parents engraved in her as a child. Alicia's mother wanted to kill her, whereas her father wished for her death. The reasons for such horrendous actions remained a mystery to Alicia who was a mere innocent child. The repressed childhood traumas were revived when Gabriel condemned her to death when she was willing to sacrifice herself for him. As a result, Alicia condemned herself to silence because dead people cannot speak.

The people Alicia had loved most condemned her to death; therefore, she deliberately chose to give up on life and on being a part of the physical world by quitting verbal communication. However, eventually, her recovery was due to Theo's investigation of her past and bringing it back to her memory.

1.4 Conclusion

This chapter consists of the analysis of Michaelides masterpiece *The Silent Patient*. The novel is a contemporary work that delves into the psyche of the protagonists, providing a thriller

of suspense and psychoanalytic investigation. Michaelides exquisitely portrays aspects of psychoanalysis in his work.

The first section analyzed the character of the novel's protagonist through the Freudian psychoanalytic approach. It provided a thorough investigation of Alicia's silence which was proved to be a defense mechanism then a deliberate resistance to be involved in the physical world. Her childhood traumas were the cause that stirred her to commit the atrocious act of murdering her husband whom she clearly stated her love for him.

Alicia's silence was her coping mechanism; however, it rendered her invisible and detached from her surroundings and environment. Despite that she renounced verbal communication; she sought solace in writing in her journal which kept all her secrets. Furthermore, her paintings were symbols and pieces of evidence that proved to be vague to the outside world, but the ambiguity was unveiled at the end, unraveling the secrets behind the portraits.

Both the portraits and the diary were instrumental in unraveling parts of the story. The diary has compensated for Alicia's silence and rendered Theo and the readers closer to the truth but also creates another suspense because Alicia's claim in her diary that she admired her husband stirred confusion and questions about her sudden action.

The Alcestis was an allusion to Greek mythology; however, it also stirred confusion because Alcestis died for her lover unlike Alicia who killed her lover. The first chapter explained that trauma depends on the perception of the victim; therefore, Gabriel, the person Alicia loved the most, made her utterly traumatized by his betrayal to the extent she committed a crime.

Moreover, the chapter also included an analysis of the techniques used by Michaelides to produce this exquisite work. Michaelides incorporated elements of suspense and psychoanalysis. He also used the epistolary technique that provided a creative approach to the narrative. The

narrative techniques have acutely unfolded the psychological depth of trauma. Besides, Michaelides portrayed trauma in the characters of Alicia and Theo as well, who was supposedly the psychoanalyst savior of Alicia.

Michaelides profoundly displayed the significance of childhood in nurturing the personality and character of the person. In his work, he highlighted the devastating influence of childhood trauma on both Alicia and Theo in shaping their future actions.

On top of that, the chapter also discussed the narrative as recovery. Through psychanalytic therapy, Theo succeeded in breaking Alicia's silence and unfolding her entire story. Despite that Theo was the only witness of what happened the night of the murder, he wanted to know the reasons behind her choice to murder Gabriel after he left and spared their lives. He resorted to investigating Alicia's entire life and specifically her childhood to reach his goal. In the end, he succeeds in knowing the reason for murder, and also brings back Alicia's repressed memories causing her to regain her voice.

Conclusion

This study aims to analyze the novel and examine how silence, trauma, external relationships and childhood contribute to the formation of adults' psyche and project as a coping mechanism, focusing on the impact of an abusive father figure and an absent mother. After having analyzed the novel, several significant conclusions can be drawn regarding the role of parents in shaping an individual's psychological makeup. The Silent Patient emerges as a novel that delves into the complexities of psychological difficulties stemming from the holding environment. The novel highlights the profound influence of early childhood experiences and parental dynamics on an individual's mental health and well-being, adding to that past traumas. It underscores the impact of the holding environment, referring to the emotional and relational context in which a child develops until the murdering day, on the formation of one's inner world and psychological development. Moreover, the characters of Alicia and Theo serve as compelling examples, demonstrating how their childhood experiences and parental relationships have shaped their adult lives and contributed to their psychological struggles moving to the updated events that effected their attitude. Additionally, the novel's exploration of psychological difficulties relating with the concept of the Freudian theories on a global level. The themes and issues raised in the story are not confined to a specific culture, ethnicity, or gender. They touch upon fundamental aspects of the human condition, such as the search for identity, the impact of past traumas, the complexities of relationships, causes of murdering, and the universal need for psychological well-being. By addressing these topics, The Silent Patient invites readers from diverse backgrounds to reflect on their own experiences and empathize with the challenges faced by the characters. It underscores the shared humanity that connects individuals across different walks of life highlighting the universality of psychological struggles and the need for

understanding and support referring to psychoanalytical platform . In essence, *The Silent Patient* serves as a powerful narrative that sheds light on the significance of parental influence and the broader psychological difficulties faced by individuals. It offers valuable insights into the universal aspects of the human experience, emphasizing the importance of empathy, awareness, and support in navigating the complexities of psychological well-being. The first chapter provides the theoretical background of the study discussing the key concepts and frameworks of psychoanalytic theory and influential theorists' perspectives (Sigmund Freud+). The second chapter explores the contextual aspects of the study by examining the characters' backgrounds, upbringing, family dynamics, and social environments. This chapter considers the impact of these factors on their psychological well-being. The second chapter investigates the contextual aspects that shape the lives of the main characters and how Alicia adopted silence as a coping Mechanism and how other characters interpret and respond to the protagonist's silence . The chapter offers a detailed background of Alicia's life, including her upbringing, family dynamics, and social environment. It explores the influence of her childhood experiences, relationships with family members, and any significant events or traumas that may have impacted her current mental state . This dissertation aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the characters' experiences and psychological backgrounds in light of the theoretical concepts discussed earlier. Indeed, *The Silent Patient* is not exclusive for psychological exploration only. There is ample room for further wonderful exploration in various areas such as feminism, criminology, mythology, and a limitless number of themes and issues. These additional research avenues allow for a deeper understanding and analysis of the novel, uncovering its multifaceted layers and exploring its broader implications whether in the short or long term .

ملخص

تبحث هذه الدراسة في استخدام الصمت كألية للتكيف مع الصدمة النفسية في رواية أليكس ميخائيليدس "المريض الصامت". تتمحور الرواية حول أليسيا بيرنسون، الرسامة التي تصاب بالصمت بعد مقتل زوجها غابرييل. يستكشف هذا البحث الأسس النفسية لصمت أليسيا، ويحلل كيف يعمل الصمت كمظهر ودرع لصدمة نفسية من خلال عدسة المفاهيم الفرويدية. من خلال تطبيق نظريات فرويد عن الكبت والعقل اللاواعي وآليات الدفاع، تبحث الدراسة في الدلالة الرمزية لصمت أليسيا، وترتبط بين صمتها واضطرابها النفسي الداخلي. علاوة على ذلك، تدرس الدراسة استجابات الشخصيات الأخرى لصمت أليسيا، كاشفةً عن تعقيداتها النفسية وتصوراتها الخاصة للصدمة. ومن خلال الخوض في التفاعل بين الصمت والاضطراب النفسي، تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى الكشف عن الطرق المعقدة التي يمكن أن تشكل بها الصدمة النفسية الإنسانية وتُسكتها، مما يوفر فهمًا أعمق لمعاناة بطلة الرواية الصامتة والآثار الأوسع نطاقًا على ضحايا الصدمة. يوفر دمج التحليل الفرويدي إطارًا شاملًا لتفسير سلوك بطل الرواية وديناميكيات الصدمة والكبت والتعافي في السرد.

الكلمات المفتاحية: أليسيا، الصدمة، سيغموند فرويد، الكبت، الصمت، العقل اللاواعي.

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