



CHILDHOOD ALTERS ADULTHOOD: PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAUMA AS PORTRAYED IN *THE SILENT PATIENT* BY ALEX MICHAELIDES

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ABSTRACT:

This research paper analyses the psychological trauma in childhood which leads to the alteration of adulthood through the novel, *The Silent Patient*. The novel *The Silent Patient* is a psychological thriller, that revolves around Theo Faber, a psychotherapist, and Alicia Berenson, an artist. They meet as a result of an affair between their partners. And their lives take a complete turn one day. Alicia is hospitalized in a psychic hospital, The grove. Theo takes more interest in Alicia's case, as she remains silent for the past six years. She had been convicted for murdering her husband. So, Theo decides to treat Alicia and goes to The Grove. There, several truths get revealed. Can a person's childhood trauma lead them to become a bad person? Can a person turn into toxic, possessive and ultimately commit a murder because of their unhealthy childhood. This has been analyzed with the characters, Alicia and Theo. A person's adulthood can be altered due to their adulthood. This concept has been analyzed psychologically with evidence in the novel and theories from psychology.

Keywords: British literature, psychological thriller, child psychology, adulthood, trauma, traumatic response, crime investigation.

Child psychology is an important branch of psychology that looks at the psychological development of children. It starts from childhood and lasts till maturity, with emotions such as joy, rage, sadness, fear, shyness, surprise, exhilaration, embarrassment, shame, remorse, pride, and empathy appearing as kids start to form a sense of self. Jean Piaget is credited as its creator, who discovered that children go through various phases of emotional and mental development throughout childhood, and suggested a strong connection between intellectual development and growth in the areas of emotion, society, and physicality. A person's childhood has a significant impact on their adult life. Childhood trauma is a major factor in the psychological development of children, as it can lead to fear, violence, aggression and even life-threatening character.

It can be caused by physical, sexual or verbal abuse, and can be caused by bullying, loss of a loved one, accident, natural disaster, non-affectionate parents, feeling of inferiority, betrayal etc. PTSD is common in children of almost 15% of girls and 7% of boys after a traumatic experience. It can affect their brain's development physically, mentally and socially, and can cause depression, anxiety, anger issues, stress and psychotic disorder. If this trauma is left untreated, the effects may stay for a long time and they may develop a resistance to the negative things related to that trauma.

The Silent Patient is a story about Alicia, an artist, and Theo Faber, a psychotherapist. Alicia kills her husband Gabriel by shooting him five times and then goes completely silent. After six years, Theo wants to take over her case and joins The Grove, where Alicia is treated. He investigates her past trauma about her mother's suicide and tries to treat her by reducing her medicine dosages, letting her paint again, and talking to outside sources. He also finds out that Alicia has been assaulted by Max, her brother-in-law, and she was about to change her paintings from her best friend Jean's gallery.

Theo asks Alicia about her mother's suicide and finds out that a man broke into her house, tied them up, and shot Gabriel. Alicia is found in a coma the next day and Theo finds that she has been injected with morphine and tells everyone that Christian did it. The most important details in this text are that Christian is arrested, Theo goes to the house of Kathy's lover, Gabriel, and Alicia is there too. Theo had been roaming around Alicia's house and broke in on the night of Gabriel's death. He tied Gabriel and Alicia and exposed that he is a cheater.

After realizing that her husband had been cheating her, she visualizes Gabriel as her father and herself as her mother due to her childhood trauma. Alicia then shoots Gabriel five times on his forehead. Theo gave morphine to her as he didn't expect her to kill him, but when he realized that Alicia had recognized him, he wanted to kill her. The police find Alicia's diary and arrests Theo. Childhood trauma can have a lifelong effect, and the next chapter discusses how Alicia's and Theo's adulthood are altered due to the childhood psychological trauma they experience.

In the book *The Silent Patient* both the main characters, Alicia and Theo have undergone certain traumatic experience which have led to their tragic adulthood. Childhood is the most crucial, important and lovely period in everyone's life. It is the period which is the basic to construct a better adulthood. Many psychologist and child therapist insist that building a healthy childhood is very necessary. Early childhood experiences can have physical, social, and emotional effects that last a

lifetime. While a young child's early experiences and surroundings can help put them on a stronger course for the rest of their lives, traumatic events or circumstances can have a permanent, negative effect.

Birth to age eight early childhood experiences have an impact on how the brain develops, laying the groundwork for all future learning, behaviour, and health. Children who have a solid foundation are better able to acquire the abilities necessary to operate as adults. There is a period of fast brain growth from birth and age three in particular, during which billions of connections between individual neurons are formed. There must be mechanisms and treatments accessible from birth to facilitate such development. Every young kid needs excellent care in order to develop. Early Childhood Councils create local alliances and linkages to create communities that are hospitable to kids and families. A person's brain develops from the time of conception till maturity. The early interactions and experiences a kid has with caregivers contribute to impact their brain development. Early brain development strengthens a child's foundation and enhances favorable long-term results. However, not all children experiences are good. Stress that is severe and persistent due to abuse, neglect, or poverty can be harmful to a child development.

Fortunately, supportive communities and good interactions may assist early children and their families in developing resilient skills and solid, loving relationships, enabling young children to reach their full potential. When families prosper in welcoming environments and have access to early learning opportunities, adequate health care, and social, emotional, and mental health assistance, children have a solid head start. The best chance to prepare kids for success in school and in life is via positive, high-quality early experiences.

In the book *The Silent Patient*, many incidents insist the importance of childhood for a better adulthood. A common thing between Alicia and Theo that can be found is that both were traumatized by their childhood. In Alicia's case, the first thing that caused trauma to her is the death of her mother. Alicia's mother committed suicide with Alicia inside her car. If a person wants to commit suicide, they will not bring their child with them. But she did. So, Alicia considers this as a murder, not just a suicide attempt.

I thought of my mother. Was she crazy? Is that why she did it? Why she strapped me into the passenger seat of her yellow mini and sped us toward that redbrick wall? I always liked that car, its cheerful canary yellow. The same yellow as in my paint box. Now I hate that color-every time I use it, I think of death. Why did she do it? I suppose I'll never know. I used to think it was suicide. Now I think it was attempted murder. Because I was in the car too, wasn't I? Sometimes I think I was the intended victim-it was me she was trying to kill, not herself. But this is crazy. Why would she want to kill me? (59)

As a child she will be terrified of what her mother did to her. First of all, her mother did not think of living at least for her child's sake. And then she didn't have the courage to die alone and took Alicia with her too. The fear in that little kid is so horrible which haunted her for years. The second thing is, as a father, Alicia's father should have taken care of Alicia more than anyone else in that situation. Even though he lost his wife, he has his child, so he should've felt relieved that at least he got Alicia alive. But her father hated Alicia for being alive instead of her mother. Her father behaved in a very cruel way. Her father loves her mother so much and grieves her loss. He had rage inside him as he couldn't accept his wife's death. But he showed that rage to Alicia. He shouted at her saying that she could've died instead of her mother. This is the cruelest thing a father can do to her daughter. Alicia says to her cousin Paul that she died that day.

"Vernon was going on about how much he loved Eva-how he couldn't live without her. 'My girl,' he kept saying, 'My poor girl, my Eva ... Why did she have to die? Why did it have to be her? Why didn't Alicia die instead'"

I stared at Paul for a second, stunned. I wasn't sure I understood. "why didn't Alicia die instead?"

"That's why he said."

"Alicia heard this?"

"Yeah. And Alicia whispered something to me-I'll never forget it. 'He killed me, 'she said. 'Dad just-killed me.' (236)

Alicia's father committed psychological infanticide to Alicia which became an irremovable scar on her heart. When Theo Faber asked Gabriel to decide who would survive and who would die, it was the same ceremonial method of sacrificing Alicia. Gabriel wished not to die. He selected Alicia to pass away in his place.

"Yes. Alicia dies, or you die. Your choice, Gabriel. Let's find out how much you love her. Would you die for her? You have ten seconds to decide.... Ten ... nine "And then Gabriel spoke. I didn't recognize his voice at first. Such a tiny voice, so far away-a little boy's voice. A small child-with the power of life and death at his fingertips. "I don't want to die," he said. (280)

When the same kind of feel was received from Gabriel whom she thought of a savior, she couldn't handle betrayal. She killed Gabriel thinking that she didn't deserve to live happily with him as her father told. I saw it now. I would never be safe. Never be loved. All my hopes, dashed-all my dreams, shattered-leaving nothing, nothing. My father was right-I didn't deserve to live. I was nothing. That's what Gabriel did to me.

That's the truth. I didn't kill Gabriel. He killed me.

All I did was pull the trigger. (282)

Alicia experiences a number of realizations and emotions as a result. She has been deceived once more since she believed Gabriel loved her and would even give his life for her. She learns otherwise, though. Alicia pulls out the gun after Theo has left and shoots Gabriel six times.

At the end of the novel, Theo explains what exactly had happened to Alicia in an attempt to defend himself. He too has felt guilty for pushing Alicia into committing a murder without having the knowledge of her instability and trauma. He says, "I finally understood what I had reenacted, the long-forgotten land mine on which I had trodden." Gabriel was the second man to condemn Alicia to death; bringing up this original trauma was more that she could bear-which is why she picked up the gun and visited her long-awaited revenge not upon her father, but upon her husband. As I suspected, the murder had much older, deeper origins than my actions. (285)

In Theo's case, he had an abusive father, who beats him and his mother often. He remembers his mother's face which is very scared of his father. He used to say hurtful words to Theo. This is verbal abuse and this can give a long-lasting trauma on people. Every time he is in an anxious situation, he hears his father's words in his mind saying negative things, that he will not be able to do it. Also, he was isolated during most of his life. He was longing for love and care as he did not receive any kind of kindness from his parents. So, when he received the love, he was longing for from Kathy, he didn't want to lose it.

When Theo finds out about Kathy's affair, he remembers his childhood where his father would beat up his mother all the time. Because of that horrible trauma, Theo became a drug addict during his college days. On the day he found out about Kathy's affair, Theo remembered his college days and desperately wanted to talk to his mother. He couldn't believe that the person whom he loved the most, the person who was like the world to him had betrayed him. He describes it as,

"My mind went to that cold room at college, all those years ago-tearing open packets of paracetamol with clumsy, numb fingers. The same numbness overtook me now, that same desire to curl up and die. I thought of my mother. Could I call her? Turn to her in my moment of desperation and need? I imagined her answering the phone, her voice shaky; just how shaky depended on my father's mood, and if she'd been drinking. She might listen sympathetically to me, but her mind would be elsewhere, one eye on my dad and his temper. How could she help me? How can one drowning cat save another? (91).

He became so obsessive towards her and her love. This can be taken as an effect of Theo's childhood situations and experiences. In the Theo's case he just doesn't stop by feeling sad, depressed and mourning for getting cheated. He instead takes it to the worse condition. He spies on Kathy and stalks her. When he found Gabriel, he stalked him too, found his house and monitored it. He watched Gabriel's house when isn't around. Eventually, Alicia notices Theo and that's what she confides about to Barbie. He had a kind of murderous rage within him too like Alicia. In a particular situation, Theo thinks like his father and how he would react when he found that he was being cheated on. He started to imagine things like a psychopath. He says,

I thought of my father-I knew what he'd do in this situation. He'd murder the guy. Be a man. I could hear my father shouting. Toughen up. Was that what I should do? Kill him? Dispose of him? It was a way out of this mess-a way to break the spell, release Kathy and set us free. Once she had grieved his loss, it would be over, he'd just be a memory, easily forgotten, and we could go on as he before. I could do it now, here, in the park. I'd drag him into the pond, plunge his head underwater. I'd hold it there until his body convulsed and went limp in my arms. Or I could follow him home on the tube, stand right behind him on the platform, and-with a sharp shove-push him in the path of an oncoming train. Or creep up behind him on the deserted street, clutching a brick, and bash out his brains. Why not? (225)

He acted as a trigger for Alicia's trauma and he became indirectly responsible for Gabriel's death. In both Alicia's and Theo's case, childhood trauma is the most common thing which haunted them for years and triggered them to commit things like stalking, obsession, depression and ultimately, murder. What if they are not traumatized? How would they're lives be? The answer is quite assumable. Alicia would have lived happily with her paintings and exhibitions. Even though if she finds out that Gabriel was cheating her, she would've been hurt but still she would've moved on with her career. Theo would have been a good psychotherapist and led his life better. Even after knowing that Kathy had cheated, he would have taken it practically. Psychologically, having attracted to someone after marriage is quite natural so he would have let Kathy choose what she wants.

Alicia's and Theo's lives would have way better if they have not experienced these traumatic situations. Alicia would not have become a murder convict. She would have been a great artist and led her life peacefully. Theo would have not been turned to his bad self, being a stalker, being obsessive or triggered Alicia to kill Gabriel. He would have been a best psychotherapist and continued his life like the way he wanted. Their childhood trauma has caused massive effect in their adulthood. Also the affair between Gabriel and Kathy acted as a major trigger which brought them into their disastrous fate. They are examples showing that the spoiled childhood can alter their adulthood.

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