



THE RETURN OF REPRESSED PAST TRAUMA IN THE SILENT PATIENT BY ALEX MICHAELIDES (2019)

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Abstract

This study is about the return of the repressed trauma that was experienced by one of the main protagonists in the novel *The Silent Patient* (2019) by Alex Michaelides. This study focuses on the internal problem of one of its protagonists. This analysis uses psychoanalysis and literary theory. The results of this research are that the main protagonist suffers quite a lot due to her repressed trauma. One of the main protagonists tries to make her talk and make her get out from her silent treatment habits that plagues her nowadays.

Key words: *Trauma, Repression, Repressed, Manifestation, Past.*

A. INTRODUCTION

According to camh.ca, Trauma is the word used to characterize the difficult emotional fallout that someone who experiences a distressing event may have. It can be difficult to define traumatic situations because different people may experience the same thing differently from one another. According to American Psychological Association, Trauma is an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, rape, or natural disaster. Immediately after the event, shock and denial are typical. Longer term reactions include unpredictable emotions, flashbacks, strained relationships, and even physical symptoms like headaches or nausea. According to a study titled *Trauma and Literary Studies: Some "Enabling Questions"* by Elissa Marder (2006) (page 1), the word "trauma" comes from ancient Greek and means "wound." Although the precise definition of the modern concept of trauma varies by context and discipline, the general consensus is that if trauma is a wound, it is a very specific type of wound.

According to the *Trauma Practice*, there are several types of trauma such as Type 1 Trauma which refers to single-incident traumas which are unexpected and comes out of the blue. They can be referred to as big T trauma, shock or acute trauma. A condition related to big T trauma or Type 1 trauma is Post Traumatic

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Stress Disorder. And Type 2 Traumas more likely to occur repeatedly and over an extended period of time. They could have been encountered in the context of a close attachment figure or in an interpersonal interaction throughout childhood.

People may experience physical or emotional confinement, which is more closely associated with complicated PTSD. According to *Wounds and Words* by Christa Schönfelder (2012) (Page 10), Cathy Caruth's theorization of trauma is among the most important in the humanities. Her *Unclaimed Experience* (1996) provides literary trauma researchers with some important new findings. For instance, it looks at how trauma representations might help people understand by acting out a collapse of meaning and how, ironically, trauma—which defies traditional story forms—may be portrayed through the breakdown of language, or the failure of words. *Unclaimed Experience*, however, also serves as an example of how the term "trauma" has become overused in literary studies. Caruth's method broadens the definition of the term to the point that it appears to blur the lines between traumatized and non-traumatized people as well as between perpetrators and victims. Also in *Wounds and Words*. Every attempt to define and theorize "trauma" entails attempting to make sense of the bewildering variety of contemporary conceptions of trauma, which range from cultural trauma to PTSD. The intricacy of the psychiatric historiography is like a jungle, making it even harder for any attempt to write a history of trauma.

B. RESEARCH METHOD

The Data analysis will carried out by conducting an evaluation through interpreting the problems found using descriptive qualitative research methods and this analysis is using psychoanalysis and literary theory. The data obtained came directly from the descriptive qualitative literary research object or use library research method namely from reading material and online resource, like from other books, articles, and research journals. The source of data that I used for this analysis is *The Silent Patient* (2019) which is a psychological thriller about a murder of a husband in the hand of his wife and about the therapist obsessed with uncovering her motive written by British–Cypriot author Alex Michaelides. He spent three years studying psychotherapy and two years working at secure unit for young adults..

C. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. Research Finding

1.1. The repressed trauma experienced by Alicia

In this section, the researcher examines the repressed trauma experienced by Alicia in the novel *The Silent Patient*.

Alicia has experienced trauma from the car accident that killed her mother. That accident traumatized Alicia tremendously that she had thought of that accident several times. Trauma can leave such deep impact on anyone who has it that they often think about it. This is one of the ways trauma can affect people which shown in this following passage.

“In the file, Alicia’s next of kin was listed as her aunt—Lydia Rose—who brought her up, following the death of Alicia’s mother in a car accident. Alicia had also been in the car crash, but survived. That trauma must have affected the little girl profoundly. I hoped Lydia would be able to tell me about it.” (P. 41)

This quote shows that the trauma of the death of Alicia’s mother can deeply affected her even though she was just a little girl at the time because that was the time she is still thinking about it until today.

Quote down below shows one of the effects of the accident had on Alicia. The quote below shows that one of repressed trauma that Alicia experienced was a car accident that killed her mother. It caused her to hate the yellow color due to the car she was on was yellow. It was shown that she sometimes has doubts about that accident and even think that her mother would try to kill her. Such things sometimes can happen to the traumatized people. Her attempt to repress her trauma of that crash was to hate yellow color in order to adjust her mind of that accident and because her mother’s ”attempt” to kill her.

“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 that’s crazy. Why would she want to kill me?” (P. 59)

This quotes shows how her mother’s death affects her. She sometimes believed that her mother tried to kill her in that accident which shows how that traumatic accident can sometimes make people believe there was more to that accident instead of what actually happened.

Furthermore, she is shown having a survivor guilt and can’t trust herself with kids due to that car accident as shown in the following quote. This quotes below shows that she has a survivor guilt due to her mother’s death. Survivor guilt is a common experience following traumatic events in which others have died (Murray, 2021), (page 1). For those who have gone through morally damaging experiences—that is, people who have done or seen things that go against their moral principles—guilt is one of the most prevalent feelings. Alicia’s survivor guilt is affecting her so much that she thinks that she can’t even be trusted with children.

“I dismissed it then, but thinking about it now, it seems obvious. I don’t want to admit the truth to myself—that a huge part of my life is missing. That I’ve denied I want children, pretending I have no interest in them, that all I care about is my art. And it’s not true.

It's just an excuse—the truth is I'm scared to have kids. I am not to be trusted with them.

Not with my mother's blood running through my veins.” (P. 111)

The quotation above shows how is Alicia's survivor guilt affects her. She believes that she can't be trusted with children because she's afraid that accident will happen to her and affect her children due to what happened with her mother. Survivor guilt can affect people in many ways such as making them severely doubt themselves, wishing them to be dead instead, and more.

The following quote shows that Alicia tries to repress the trauma of her husband, Gabriel's death as Theo keeps badgering her about his married status to see if she will break her silence. This quote shows that Alicia tries to repress her husband's death in her mind that when being pressured about it she leaves in rage because Trauma can lead to negative emotions such as anger, sadness, and shame.

“And when I say I hate her, I don't mean all of me hates her. Just a part of me hates. It's about holding on to both parts at the same time. Part of you loved Gabriel. Part of you hated him.”

Alicia shook her head—no. A brief movement, but definite. Finally—a response. I felt a sudden thrill. I should have stopped there, but I didn't.

“Part of you hated him,” I said again more firmly. Another shake of the head. Her eyes burned through me. She's getting angry, I thought.

“It's true, Alicia. Or you wouldn't have killed him.”

Alicia suddenly jumped up. I thought she was about to leap on me. My body tensed in anticipation. But instead she turned and marched to the door. She hammered on it with her fists.

There was the sound of a key turning—and Yuri threw open the door. He looked relieved not to find Alicia strangling me on the floor. She pushed past him and ran into the corridor.

“Steady on, slow down, honey.” He glanced back at me.

“Everything okay? What happened?”

I didn't reply. Yuri gave me a funny look and left. I was alone.” (P. 87)

This quote shows that if someone pressed Alicia about what she feels about Gabriel, her trauma of his death caused her to attack that person despite her attempts to stay silent to close herself from the world.

Her repressed trauma also affects how she does her job as a painter sometimes, such as when she tried to make a painting of Gabriel on the cross. This quotes below show that something that Alicia repressed, which in this case is her trauma, can get in the way of her work as she thinks that there is something watching her. This could be one of the manifestation of her repressed trauma as she imagines something that wasn't there.

“But something was wrong. I don’t know what—maybe I was pushing too hard. I just couldn’t get the shape of his eyes right, nor the color. The first thing I ever noticed about Gabriel was the sparkle in his eyes—like a tiny diamond in each iris. But now for some reason I couldn’t catch it. Maybe I’m just not skilled enough—or maybe Gabriel has something extra that can’t be captured in paint. The eyes remained dead, lifeless. I could feel myself getting annoyed.

“Fuck,” I said. “It’s not going well.”

“Time for a break?”

“Yeah. Time for a break.”

“Shall we have sex?”

That made me laugh. “Okay.”

Gabriel jumped up, took hold of me, and kissed me. We made love in the studio, there on the floor.

The whole time, I kept glancing at the lifeless eyes in Gabriel’s portrait.

They were staring at me, burning into me. I had to turn away.

But I could still feel them watching.” (P. 62)

As seen in this quote, Alicia’s repressed trauma makes her anxious about her own painting that she thought the painting is looking at her even though that wasn’t what happened.

1.2. Manifestation of the repressed trauma as experienced by the main protagonist

The repressed trauma can manifest in many different ways such as anxiety, anger, fear, sleep issues, and many more. Alicia is seen in novel manifests her repressed in several ways. One of which is self-harm and self-isolation.

“The file revealed little. When she was first admitted, Alicia slashed her wrists twice and self-harmed with whatever she could get her hands on. She was kept on two-on-one observation for the first six months—meaning two nurses watched over her at all times—which was eventually relaxed to one-on-one. Alicia made no effort to interact with patients or staff, remaining withdrawn and isolated and for the most part, the other patients had left her alone. If people don’t reply when you speak to them and never initiate conversation, you soon forget they’re there. Alicia had quickly melted into the background, becoming invisible.” (P. 40)

The quote shows that ever since she was first admitted, Alicia harmed herself and she also made no effort to interact with everyone and remaining withdrawn and isolated for most of the time.

According to National Center for PTSD, one of the reasons why people harming themselves are to block upsetting memory and turn her anger inward instead of direction it towards others. In this case, Alicia may have tried to repress

the memory of her husband's murder from her head and to use her anger towards herself instead of anyone else at this point. Alicia's trauma of her husband's death caused her to harm herself no matter how hard she tried to repress the memory of it.

Another way of manifesting trauma is anger. According to National Center for PTSD, Anger is also a typical reaction to situations that feel unfair or in which you have been victimized. Anger can be particularly common after being betrayed by someone, according to research. Trauma instances involving assault or exploitation may be the ones where this occurs most frequently. This quotation below shows that due to her trauma, Alicia may lashed out unexpectedly especially towards people that might have annoyed her.

"Only one incident stood out. It took place in the canteen, a few weeks after Alicia's admission. Elif accused Alicia of taking her seat. What exactly had happened was unclear, but the confrontation escalated rapidly. Apparently Alicia became violent—she smashed a plate and tried to slash Elif's throat with the jagged edge. Alicia had to be restrained, sedated, and placed in isolation." (P. 40)

As shown in the above quote, trauma can manifest when the traumatized person is agitated by someone that the person suddenly gets violent and attack that someone when they feel they are being pressed for whatever reason.

It is shown in this quotation that sometimes Alicia's trauma can manifest as an uncontrollable rage when she suddenly attacked Theo Faber during his attempt to make her talk.

*"As she stared at me, I became aware of what had been troubling me the whole session. It's hard to put into words, but a psychotherapist quickly becomes attuned to recognizing mental distress, from physical behavior and speech and a glint in the eyes—something haunted, afraid, mad. And that's what bothered me: despite the years of medication, despite everything she had done, and endured, Alicia's blue eyes remained as clear and cloudless as a summer's day. She wasn't mad. So what was she? What was the expression in her eyes? What was the right word? It was—
Before I could finish the thought, Alicia leaped from the chair. She threw herself toward me, hands outstretched like claws. I had no time to move or get out the way. She landed on top of me, knocking me off balance. We fell to the floor.
The back of my head hit the wall with a thud. She bashed my head against the wall again and again, and started scratching, slapping, clawing—it took all my strength to throw her off.
I scrambled along the floor and reached up to the table. I groped for the attack alarm. Just as my fingers grasped it, Alicia jumped on me and knocked the alarm from my hand.
"Alicia—" (P. 73)*

This quote shows that despite her attempts to repress her trauma by being silent, Alicia's defense would eventually break and attack anyone who tried to make her talk. It shows that any attempts to repress the trauma can be broken and that would leave the represser unstable and that anyone who tries to communicate with the represser should be careful around them in case unexpected lashing out by the represser happens.

The quotation below shows another example of Alicia's manifestation of repressed trauma, this time it's about the trauma of her mother's death in which she painted something that represented the car accident that killed her mother.

"I looked at it. The painting had the same photo-realistic quality as the rest of Alicia's work. It represented the car accident that killed her mother. A woman's body was sitting in the wreck, slumped at the wheel. She was bloodied and obviously dead. Her spirit, her soul, was rising from the corpse, like a large bird with yellow wings, soaring to the heavens." (P. 141)

The above quote shows that Alicia made the painting that represented the car accident that killed her mother as a way to express herself about what she felt about that accident, it is also a way her trauma of that accident manifested by making her painting something based on that accident.

Based on the data above there are several ways people repress their trauma and several ways their repressed trauma can manifest. It was shown that Alicia chose to stay silent as her way to repress her trauma of her husband's death and sometimes lashed out when people keep badgering her about that incident. Her silence becomes her coping mechanism to avoid confronting her trauma.

2. Discussion

Based on the data above there are several ways people repress their trauma and several ways their repressed trauma can manifest. It was shown that Alicia chose to stay silent as her way to repress her trauma of her husband's death and sometimes lashed out when people keep badgering her about that incident. Her silence becomes her coping mechanism to avoid confronting her trauma.

D. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

1. Conclusion

It can be concluded that *The Silent Patient* is a novel that tells about a woman who tries to repress the trauma of her husband's murder by being silent all

the time. Based on the psychoanalysis and literary theory, the researcher concluded that there are ways to repress trauma as seen in this novel.

First by refusing to speak to anyone in order to repress the trauma of a tragic incident. Someone would try refuse to speak a word about what happened during that incident in order to repress the trauma of that incident even when someone tries to ask her about it. That someone could choose to not responding at all to any attempt to make her speak. However, even if someone tries to stay silent, she would eventually break the silent and even attack someone who asked them if their attempt to make her speak managed to hit her nerve.

Another way someone could repress their trauma is by hating something else even remotely connected to that traumatic accident such as hating the color closest to them during the accident such as yellow. They would do this to adjust their mind of that accident.

2. Suggestions

Suggestions for the future researches are that they should look into the repressed trauma more because as seen in this novel, repressed traumas can drastically change someone's attitude. There are many ways for the repressed trauma to manifest. We need to find out more about how people repress their trauma and how to make them move on from their trauma so we can help them better.

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