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## | RESEARCH ARTICLE

### Unvoiced Trauma: Narrative Silence and Ethical Boundaries in *The Silent Patient*

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#### | ABSTRACT

This research investigates the dilemmas faced by the psychotherapist in the novel, *The Silent Patient*, by Alex Michaelides published in 2019. Theo Faber, the protagonist of the novel, insists to be the patient's therapist and develops a close relationship with the patient Alicia, who is suspected as a murderer and stays silent for a long time. The relation between both the therapist and the patient is developed until it becomes personal. This research paper also discusses deeply the power of breaking the rules and the boundaries between the therapist and the patient. It also aims to raise questions about the ethical responsibilities of mental health professionals and all the challenges they may come across. The novel traverses the tension between the desire to help a patient and the ethical obligation of a healthcare professional. It leads the readers to consider the potential consequences of contravene ethical codes. The novel discusses the effects of breaking the boundaries between the therapist and the client's family and the reason behind that.

#### | KEYWORDS

Boundaries, ethics, patient, tension, therapist, silent, manipulation

#### | ARTICLE INFORMATION

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#### Introduction

Alex Michaelides' *The Silent Patient* is a psychological novel about a therapist's deep connection with his patient. The story of the novel attracts the reader to learn interest more about the case, but it also raises serious ethical concerns regarding the limits that should exist between mental health professionals and patients. Theo Faber, with whom the story begins, is attracted to Alicia Berenson, a lady who has stopped communicating after accusing her with a horrific crime. As Theo went deeper into Alicia's background, he starts to cross lines, making no distinction between therapist and patient. Theo becomes involved with Alicia's story, until he thought that her story becomes part of him. He begins to see himself in her and projects his own traumas onto her experiences. Theo's preoccupation drives him to engage in behaviours that are outside the bounds of a regular therapeutic partnership. He becomes very demanding about her details her life that is unrelated to her therapy.

There are a boundary and limits between the patients and clients but because of his position of power, Theo may affect Alicia's emotions and thoughts, which might have negative effects. Theo plays a complicated job as a therapist, he is a professional with training in helping others, on the one hand. However, he is a human creature with his own weaknesses and ambitions. The boundaries between his personal and professional lives are covered by his interest in Alicia. The power of quiet is one of *The Silent Patient's* most fascinating features. Theo strives to fill the gap left by Alicia's silence. But this silence is a means of resistance rather than just a sign of pain. Alicia controls the story of her own life by being silent. The therapist has power and is able to manipulate Alicia. He also has an obligation to treat her skilfully. This method comprises a detailed examination of the novel's narrative elements, including character interaction, narrative structure, and descriptive passages, with a focus on identifying situations in which moral limits are questioned or transgressed. Character Analysis of Theo and Alicia-emphasises on analysing the behaviours and viewpoints of the key participants in the therapeutic alliance. Understanding their moral dilemma

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and the reasoning behind their choices is the goal of therapy. Furthermore, Thematic and Ethical analysis with an emphasis on moral integrity, compassion, empathy, and honesty, this paradigm looks at the moral principles and character traits that influence ethical judgement in therapeutic settings. The purpose of this study is to give some light to any moral issue in the novel and the importance of more investigations about therapeutic practices.

## **Review of Literature**

Shoukat et. al (2021) examines Alex Michaelides's *The Silent Patient* protagonist's, Theo Faber, from the standpoint of Freud's theory of personality, which is covered in his work *The Id and the Ego*.

Akram & Muhammad (2024) analysed the novel *The Silent Patient* and explores that it challenges readers to think critically about childhood experiences, the psychological elements that shape people's personalities, and the effects of traumatic experiences.

Akhter (2020) shows that the main goal of contemporary writing across the world has been to raise awareness of the plight of marginalised people, especially women, who endure mental and physical violence at the hands of their family members.

Nashif (2021) talks about important questions about professionalism and ethics while treating with silent patients in psychiatric settings are raised by the *Silent Patient* novel.

Sampe Ada et. al (2023) explains that how the story portrays how the conduct can impact social interaction.

Salsabila (2023) pointed out that the outcome demonstrates that the protagonist of *The Silent Patient* has four consequences from betrayal of love. These include trauma from betrayal, loss of integrity, loss of trust, and retaliation.

Penih (2022), analysed that in Alex Michaelides' 2019 novel *The Silent Patient*, the protagonist, Theo Faber, experienced life-altering trauma and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). She used the novel's narration, quotes, discussions, and dialogues as her study material. She also conducted internet surfing in order to locate pertinent further facts.

Anggriani et. al, (2022) explains that teachers and students should read Alex Michaelides' *The Silent Patient* because it has moral, religious, and educational principles including the importance of truth and beauty.

Akhter (2020) examines how literature and society are interdependent and two sides of the same coin. The history of civilisations shows that all cultures have evolved with time, and literature is no exception.

Ashraf et. al, (2020) utilised Lyotard's theoretical idea of mini-narrative to analyse *The Silent Patient* as a postmodern work. Numerous features, including inter-textuality, numerous storylines, unorthodox characters, and psychological concerns of the new age—that is, the postmodern condition—have been identified by the research.

DO Mustafa (2021) highlights the fact that the major protagonists' psychological struggles were caused by persons they held in high regard.

## **Analysis**

Alex Michaelides' *The Silent Patient* presents a captivating narrative that traverses complexities of the therapist-patient relationship and the ethical boundaries that should be negotiated. This analysis will supply the key ethical dilemmas raised in the novel, examining the therapists' actions and their involvement in to the patient's well-being. *The Silent Patient* sheds light on the stigma associated with mental illness and shows the trauma of childhood. Alicia's crime is seen as a direct result of her mental health history, and the novel deals with society's attitudes towards these issues.

Alicia had a long history of mental health problems, it was claimed, dating back to her childhood. The judge dismissed a lot of this as hearsay—but in the end he allowed himself to be swayed by Lazarus Diomedes, professor of forensic psychiatry at Imperial College, and clinical director of the Grove, a secure forensic unit in North London. (P. 16)

The novel surveys the anxiety between a doctor's duty to maintain the patient's trust and desire to understand the patient who has committed a horrific crime and remained silent for years. The therapist, Theo Faber, struggles with the ethical involvement of going inside the patient's mind. Theo is trying to examine whether Alicia understands the nature of his therapy or not, and to what extent she would give information about herself when she is mentally unsettled.

"The police questioned her in the presence of her lawyer. Alicia remained silent throughout the interview. Her lips were pale, bloodless; they fluttered occasionally but formed no words, made no sounds. She answered no questions. She could not, would not, speak. Nor did she speak when charged with Gabriel's murder. She remained silent when she was placed under arrest, refusing to deny her guilt or confess it." P.12

The mystery started when Alicia stopped talking and eating, she was only painting with the "monstrous lack of remorse of a cold-blooded killer" (p.12) though the defense pointed that she had a long history of mental illness. She makes her only statement about the murder in the form of a painting, which she titles *Alcestis*, after an ancient Greek play. Among the fascinated crowds who visit the gallery to see the painting first hand is Theo Faber, a professional psychotherapist and the primary narrator of the novel. He is both professionally and personally intrigued by Alicia's on-going silence. Theo's interest in psychotherapy stems from his own struggles with mental health raised by an abusive father. In the beginning of the novel, it was obvious that Theo reveals more about his personal life. He also spoke about his relationship with his wife, Kathy.

It's from the beginning when the therapist introduced himself as helper, rescuer. He narrated his background and his relationship with his father. It seemed that he was not happy in his childhood, this was the reason behind his sympathy to Alicia's case. Theo spoke about his childhood when his father dragged him and bet him with the belt from his wrist. Theo commented that he studied psychotherapy not to help others but to help himself, "we study psychology to heal ourselves." (19)

When Theo starts to treat Alicia, he indicates his own childhood troubles. His abusive father and submissive mother. The only happy memory from his childhood is playing alone with the snow. Theo is obsessed by his father's mistreatment which led him once to a suicide attempts. He was attracted to Alicia's case and he applies to work at The Grove to uncover the cause of her silence. Theo had a terrible childhood, he knew that there is a secret behind Alicia's silence and hoped to break through to her, he feels that he must better understand her life in order to discover the source of her trauma. He requests interviews with those who knew Alicia before the murder, including Jean-Felix, whose gallery represented Alicia's art. Theo also meets Alicia's brother-in-law, Max Berenson, who claims that Alicia had been seeing a therapist unofficially at Gabriel's insistence. During a visit to Alicia's family home, Theo learns a good deal about Alicia's unhappy childhood from her cousin. Alicia's Mother accident also was an act of suicide. She also wrote about her passionate feelings of love for her husband and her hatred of Max, who has attempted to kiss and touch her inappropriately on several occasions.

"As a psychotherapist, I thought it obvious that she had suffered a severe trauma surrounding Gabriel's death; and this silence was a manifestation of that trauma" (P.18). Theo, grapples with the ethical implications of delving into the mind of a patient who has remained silent for years. Theo has some breakthroughs with Alicia, who at first responds well to his attempts to engage her in art therapy before attacking him without warning. He is encouraged by this response, as it shows that she is in some way expressing her feelings, though Theo's treatment of Alicia is abruptly cut short when she brutally attacks another patient. Before the hospital staff sedate her, she surprises Theo by giving him her diary. In it, he reads that Alicia was being stalked in the days before Gabriel's murder. The concept of informed consent is a recurring theme.

"Nothing ... nothing to say."

"I'm not sure I believe that. I think there was too much to say."

A pause. A shrug. "Perhaps. Perhaps ... you're right."

"Go on."

She hesitated. "At first, when Gabriel ... when he was dead—I couldn't,

I tried ... but I couldn't ... talk. I opened my mouth—but no sound came

out. Like in a dream ... where you try to scream ... but can't." (241)

Theo must consider whether his patient, Alicia, truly understands the nature of their therapy and the potential risks involved. Alicia gave Theo her diary, he reads that Alicia was being stalked in the days before Gabriel's murder. The novel raises questions about the extent to which a patient can truly give informed consent when their mental state is compromised.

### **Analysis of Ethical Boundaries**

The novel highlights the importance of maintaining patient confidentiality and also exploring the benefits of therapeutic intervention. The unfocussed therapeutic boundaries is a central theme, reminding readers to question the limits of empathy and compassion in a professional setting. It serves as a thought-provoking exploration of the ethical considerations surrounding mental health treatment. It encourages readers to consider the delicate balance between providing care and

protecting the victim. Theo gets the job as Alicia therapist because he genuinely feels bad about what happened with her. Theo initially genuinely wants to help Alicia. The novel highlights the concept of the therapist-patient relationship. Theo, the therapist, holds a position of authority and influence over Alicia, the patient. This power dynamic can create a vulnerability for the patient, making them open to exploitation or manipulation.

Theo travelled to Alicia's childhood home, where he met her adoring younger cousin Paul and her angry, morbidly obese Aunt Lydia. Lydia has always hated Alicia, and Theo finds himself overcome with pity and disgust for the whole family. Theo returns to Alicia's childhood home, where he learns a disturbing story: after her mother died, Alicia's father Vernon told her he wished Alicia had been killed instead.

"We talked about Alicia's childhood—and mine. I told her about my father, and growing up in that house; she seemed curious to know as much as possible about my past and what had shaped me and made me who I am. I remember thinking, There's no going back now. We were crashing through every last boundary between therapist and patient. Soon it would be impossible to tell who was who." (243)

*The Silent Patient* is working as a detective novel, to reflect the deep impact of childhood trauma, the difficulties of breaking free from the past, and the complex relationship between patient and therapist. The tragic consequence of Theo Faber's actions is the murder of both Alicia Berenson and himself. Driven by his obsession with understanding Alicia and her silence, Theo crosses ethical and legal boundaries. Finally, he becomes very close to a dangerous situation, leading to a tragic outcome.

"She ended the call and switched on an electric fan. She stood in front of the fan, her hair blowing in the breeze. She picked up a paintbrush and approached a canvas on an easel. She stood with her back to me. Then she caught sight of my reflection in the window. I think she saw my knife first. She stiffened and slowly turned around. Her eyes were wide with fear. We stared at each other in silence. This was the first time I came face-to-face with Alicia Berenson. The rest, as they say, is history. (274)

## **Conclusion**

*The Silent Patient* is a novel that deals with the trauma left by childhood abuse, the bad experience in childhood which can shape man's behaviour that can unconsciously without his awareness. Theo and Alicia, make the reader ask, can anyone overcome childhood trauma. The novel's turning point lies in the revelation of Theo's past events, showing his own psychological complexities and his relation with his client. Theo's position as therapist and investigator at the same time makes Alicia weaker and easily manipulated. When the man with the mask asked Gabriel to choose either to kill him or his wife, he chose his life over hers and that might remind her with her dad's choice when he wished death for her. Alicia shot her husband on his face five times and kept silent for years. The story reveals that some events that happened during childhood cannot be healed even with therapy. The novel's actions shows that boundaries between the therapist and the patient should exist. Theo becomes extremely involved with Alicia, without making any difference between professional and personal relationships. This behavior raises ethical discussion about the therapist willingness to harm and exploit his patient. The novel calls attention to the imbalanced relationship between both the therapist and the client.

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