

## Exploring the character Alicia Berenson's defense mechanism in Alex Michaelides' novel *The Silent Patient*

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### Abstract

Cypriot literature holds a prominent role in expressing the reality of human life, culture, tradition, experience of people through its various genres as literature is interconnected with human life. Literary works from the island Cyprus is found mainly in languages like Greek, Turkish, English, and French etc. Novels became the dominant genre in Cypriot literature as it highly throws light on the lives of fictional characters to bring empathy. Cyprus born British-Cypriot writer Alex Michaelides is one of the thriving contemporary psychological thriller novel writers illustrates the importance of childhood psyche development. He is born on 1977, first he started his career as a screen writer for the films *The Devil You Know* and *The Con Is On*. He started his literary career with the publication of his debut novel, *The Silent Patient* in 2019 which became New York Times bestseller as it sold a millions of copies overnight and also won the Goodreaders Choice Award in mystery and thriller category in 2019. He is also known for his second novel a psychological detective story *The Maidens* published in 2021. As he is obsessed with Agatha Christie's mystery novels, Alex Michaelides involved himself in producing the works in thriller genre. In this novel, *The Silent Patient*, Alex has used some elements of Greek mythology especially 'Alcestis', who remains muted when her husband betrayed her. The character Alicia Berenson contains the similar aspect of 'silence' in the novel *The Silent Patient*. This novel stressed the consequences of unhealthy psyche development of people in a modern society through a bewitching story of a murderer Alicia Berenson. The unhealthy childhood psyche development of Alicia made her to relay on defense mechanism (displacement) which resulted in harming the self and the society.

**Keywords:** Alicia Berenson, childhood development, defense mechanism, displacement, psychology, silence

## **Introduction**

Literature is a collection of works, creative writings and facts which depict the reality of society with some aesthetic and artistic values. Literature and mankind are interconnected as it expresses the reality of human life, culture, morals of life, tradition, experience of people in other parts of the world etc. The essence of literature is to showcase the portrait of real life. Literature explores the real condition of a society and reflects the reality of people's life.

There are different genres in literature which serve as a medium for a man to express his ideas and thoughts as a writer in a creative manner. This includes short story, poem, drama, prose, play etc. Among various genres of literature, novel became dominant one as the trend of writing novel and novella has increased. Rewriting of short stories many times during ancient period brought the trend of novel writing. Novel and short story differs only in length, number of themes and content. Novel depicts a precious image of human life and society.

In novels, the major theme revolves around the protagonist and highlights the conflicts detangled by the character. This almost showcases character's ups and downs in his life. The character may be a real life character or a fictional one. But the role of a writer is to delve into the mind of a man and bring a chain of reactions which will help the readers to get ideas over the psyche of a man.

There were various well built novels which deal with the psychological elements. Among them the study deals with the psychological thriller novel *The Silent Patient* written by a Cypriot writer Alex Michaelides. This bestselling debut novel of Alex Michaelides was published in the year 2019. He has also worked as a screen play writer for the movies *The Devil You Know* and *The Con Is On*. Alex is an M.A. graduate, he learned human psychology for three years, and worked for two years at a secure unit for young adults. This experience provided the material and inspiration for this novel *The Silent Patient* which contains in depth psychological elements.

This thriller novel is based on a woman Alicia Berenson, a famous painter, muted in guilt for murdering her husband, photographer Gabriel Berenson. As she remains muted in her trail she was admitted in *The Groove*, a psychiatric hospital for treatment. There she met her

seemingly innocent therapist Theo Faber who was also involved in her husband's murder. From there the plot of the novel moves on, investigating the mystery behind Gabriel's murder, childhood development of Alicia Berenson and people she came across her life.

Besides, being famous painter, Alicia is a victim of childhood trauma. At first she experienced a happy marital life with her husband in most enticing place of London. One day everything fell apart; Alicia shot her beloved husband cold-bloodedly and then remained silent. She never uttered even a word.

‘Alicia never spoke again....Alicia remained silent – but she made one statement. A painting...The painting was a self-portrait. She entitled it in the bottom left-hand corner of the canvas, in light blue Greek lettering. One word: ALCESTIS.’(9, 10).

Alicia Berenson is the murderer. When she refused to speak in her trial, her silence triggered public to criticise not only her but also her works which were appreciated prior to the death of her husband. But Theo Faber, criminal psychotherapist understood that Alicia's paintings are portraying her circumstances and depiction of people who were affected her psyche from her childhood to adult stage. Theo in his frustration inadvertently unlocked the repressed trauma of Alicia, which made her to shoot her husband. His intension was only to take revenge on Gabriel and inflict the same pain from which he was enduring. However, Alicia's trauma brought the lives of Gabriel, Alicia, Theo and Kathryn in to an unpleasant state.

The bewitching story and conflict of Alicia Berenson grasped the attention to study the psyche of Alicia and about the people who have intimation towards her via Anna Freud's (1936) theory of Defense Mechanisms. Her idea of Displacement is used to analyse what Alicia Berenson in order to overcome her negative emotions.

Displacement is a psychological defense mechanism in which a person redirects a negative emotion from its original source to a less threatening recipient. One the best example is of the defense is displaced aggression. If a person is angry but cannot direct his/her anger towards the source without consequences, he/she might get rid of their anger on a person or thing

that poses less of a risk. Displacement is also like many other psychological defense mechanisms that often occur subconsciously. The person might not be aware of they are doing.

Though we have number of developments in the field of psychoanalysis, the concept of displacement was originated with Sigmund Freud. He saw it as an unconscious distortion, involving a shift of emphasis from important to unimportant elements. But Sigmund Freud's daughter Anna Freud was one of the first psychologists to make a list of defense mechanisms in twentieth century. She introduced and analysed ten of her own defense mechanisms. Her ideas on defense mechanism increased through the years by newer psychoanalysts. Psychologists say that displacement is one of the unconscious defense mechanisms of human mind. The mind substitutes either a new aim or a new object for goals felt in their original form to be harmful, dangerous or unacceptable.

A study conducted Malone JC, Cohen S, Liu SR, Vaillant GE, Waldinger RJ, (2013), "Adaptive midlife defense mechanisms and late life health" states that who used adaptive defense mechanisms including displacement, at mid-life had better physical health later in life. They suggest that mature defences play a key role in creating solid and supportive social relationship.

Another study conducted by Mohiyeddini C, Bauer S, Semple S. "Displacement behaviour is associated with reduced stress levels among men but not women" shows that displacement protect us from negative feelings, help us to minimize disappointment, protect our self-esteem, and helps to manage stress levels. Displacement can protect us from anxiety by hiding thoughts that are stressful or unacceptable for us and helping to preserve our sense of self.

Similarly, Ferandez-Antelo I, Cuadrado-Gordillo I's study "Moral disengagement as an explanatory factor of the polyvictimization of bullying and cyberbullying" says that if a person relies on displacement as a defense mechanism to deal with all of their emotional upset, it is less likely to be unhelpful and may harm him.

In this study the scope is to analyse the character Alicia's displacement, a defense mechanism based on Anna Freud's theory of defense mechanism through displacement. They

say that displacement helps us to channel our emotions and urges it could be considered as inappropriate or harmful to more healthy, safe, or protective outlets. When defences mechanism such as displacement is used appropriately, they can protect us from disappointment, stress, negative feelings etc.

In the novel *The Silent Patient*, defense mechanism: displacement is widely noticed in the characters Theo Faber and Alicia Berenson. Both the characters have displacement to redirect their feelings which resulted in causing harm. There are several factors such as age, intensity, frequency, that influence how and when displacement occurs. Young children are more direct about expressing their feelings. They simply yell at their parents when they are upset. Nevertheless when they are grown up, they yell at their younger sibling. In case of Theo and Alicia unfortunately they did not get chance to yell at their parents and they do not have siblings.

Displacement in defense mechanism is not only diverting negative emotions or showing anger on less effective people or thing. Displacement is redirecting the negative emotions from the primary or original source to a less threatening recipient. Even negative emotions such as dislike, anger, can be expressed through some activities. Anger can be showed in many art forms. For example, one can oppose a person's ideas in ones writing, commenting or trolling a person in form of goblin picture etc. One can also show their anger and dislike through paintings and pictures.

In this novel Alicia is a famous painter of the town. Her paintings would posses some difference from other paintings in the gallery. Because Alicia usually portraits her own picture and people in her life especially whomever affected her. One of Alicia's paintings depicts the incident of a car accident. Inside the crashed car there were a women and a small child which depicts the car accident in which Alicia lost her mother Eva. She painted this because she always had a thought that Eva had suffered mental illness and had consequently attempted to end both their lives by driving through a brick wall. Alicia was the sole survivor of that and this anger on her mother is displaced in the form of painting.

Lydia Rose never considered Alicia as her family member. She always tortured Alicia verbally and physically. Alicia never liked her. So painted Lydia Rose in a monstrous look through which Alicia express her anger on her aunt and feel happy while seeing Lydia's reaction on her ugliest picture showcased in gallery. Through that Alicia gains happiness in embarrassing her monster aunt. Even Alicia attempted suicide and also attacking people many times. Whenever Alicia is rescued from suicidal attempts, She fought off the attempts to save her life. This proves Anna Freud's perception of displacement, that the inappropriate practices of displacement cause harm.

In many cases Alicia use painting as displacement a defense mechanism. Her self portrait depicting Gabriel's murder entitled ALCESTIS is one of her important paintings. Through that she portrays Gabriel's murder and herself as a Greek mythological character Alcestis. Displacement is not expressing emotions immediately. It is pouring out later in the place of less consequence. In that manner, Alicia painted like punishing Gabriel and retelling the myth for being muted after the murder.

Alicia also behaved violent during her stay in The Grove. She have stabbed Elif one of the violent nurses at The Grove, when she defamed Gabriel to Alicia. This proves that Alicia's psyche is not ready to accept the truth and seeks displacement to escape from the truth.

## **Conclusion**

By this the study concludes that, the character Alicia in the novel *The Silent Patient* is identified as a person who uses displacement: defense mechanism in various stages of her life in order to express her long buried emotions. By analysis the psyches of people in Alicia's life especially Eva, Vernon Rose, Lydia Rose, Theo Faber, Elif, it is clear that psyche of a person is depend on the psyches of the people in the surroundings. Though Alicia used to express her emotions later, she is not a coward. Alicia boldly reacted in Gabriel's case and punished him shooting five times on his face.

In Theo's case she tested him to know his emotion on being the lead in killing Gabriel. When she finds that Theo is doing her therapy is to cover up his involvement in the murder,

Alicia used her diary to reveal the truth about the seemingly innocent therapist Theo Faber before she goes to unconscious. After the murder, Alicia's Id moves away and Ego grows gradually is seen clearly through the qualitative analysis of text and psychoanalytic analysis of the character Alicia Berenson in the novel *The Silent Patient*. Alex Michaelides through this proves that, displacement behaviour is obvious in humans under socially stressful situations.

The study proves that the overreliance on displacement or any other defense mechanism can be problematic, unhelpful. Addressing with a therapist or counsellor can help one to reduce the overdependence on any defense mechanism or displacement. A therapist can easily identify one's displacement and treat accordingly before it causes harm.

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