



Psychological Trauma and Grievance in Alice Sebold's *The Lovely Bones*

P. Jenci Gladwin ^{1*}, Dr. M. John Suganya ²

Department of English

^{1*,2} PSG College of Arts & Science, Coimbatore.

^{1*} jgladwin@gmail.com

² suganyajohn@gmail.com +91 9994924381

Abstract:

This article explores the psychological trauma and grievance faced by the characters in *The Lovely Bones*, a fantasy novel written by American writer Alice Sebold. Psychological trauma is a kind of damage to the mind that occurs as a result of an extremely distressing event. In the novel, the main character, Susie Salmon is raped and killed by her neighbour. Here, psychological trauma is explained through the second main character, the father of Susie, Jack Salmon, who finds it difficult to accept the death of his daughter. Death causes grief and it becomes difficult to accept the reality, especially if it is the loss of a beloved one. This article further explores the pressure and struggle faced by other characters after the death of Susie. It also deals with the forms of grief that the Salmon family goes through. Also, this novel is interesting since it is narrated from Susie's point of view. After her death, Susie's spirit goes to a place called personal heaven. So, the fantasy approach is explained in this article through the main character Susie as she watches her family from her personal heaven which is something impossible to achieve and it clearly shows the author's creativity. Alice Sebold stands out from her contemporary writers as she possesses some extraordinary and unique qualities in her writing. This book, in which the narrator tells her story from beyond the grave, shot to the top of most 'best' lists in 2002, earning ebullient praise from critics and exceeding the sales of works from more established authors.

Keywords: psychological trauma, grief, fantasy, personal heaven

Introduction:

Alice Sebold was born on September 6, 1963, in Wisconsin. The daughter of two academic parents, Sebold grew up in a household overshadowed by dysfunction. To help diffuse the hardships her home life introduced, the cantankerous and sarcastic Sebold took on the role of the family moron. After high school, Sebold, in order to distance herself from her family, got into Syracuse University in upstate New York. But during her first year at the school, Sebold experienced a horrific event that changed her life. While walking back to her dorm one evening, Sebold was brutally attacked and raped in a tunnel. After reporting her case to the police, one of the policemen said she was lucky to be alive.

The story of Alice Sebold's life and rape became the subject of her first book, a memoir called *Lucky*. Its name was inspired by the policeman who had remarked that she was fortunate to be alive following her attack. *The Lovely Bones*, a revised and edited incarnation of Sebold's earlier novel about the rape and murder of a young girl, was published in 2002. The book earned Sebold the Bram Stoker Award for First Novel in 2002, and the following year, it won the American Booksellers Association Book of the Year Award for Adult Fiction. In 2009, a film adaptation of *The Lovely Bones*, starring Mark Wahlberg and Susan Sarandon, was released. Sebold published her second novel, *The Almost Moon* in 2007. It tells the story of the murder of an elderly woman by her suburban daughter in a fit of rage.

A Glimpse of the Novel:

The Lovely Bones is based on a true tragic incident that happened a long time ago in the 70's. Susie Salmon, a 14-year-old girl was raped and murdered on December 6, 1973. Susie was a sweet young girl who was the eldest in her family. She was raped by her neighbour, George Harvey, while she was returning home from school through the corn field. Though the incident was tragic, the author manages to transform it into something hopeful and redemptive by finding the real murderer and by bringing justice to the death of the poor girl, Susie.

Susie observes the difficulties that her family undergoes after her death from her own personal heaven. She learns that, with her desires she could even bring changes to the lives of her loved ones on earth. She desires the best for them and she watches over them from her heaven.

The Lovely Bones is in first person narration as it was narrated by Susie herself from her heaven.

Psychological Trauma and Grievance:

Trauma is often the result of an overwhelming amount of stress that exceeds one's ability to endure, or integrate the emotions involved with that experience. Trauma may result from a single distressing event or repeating events of being overwhelmed that can be precipitated in weeks, years, or even decades as the person battles to cope up with the immediate circumstances, eventually leading to serious, long-term negative consequences. Because trauma varies between individuals and according to their subjective experiences, people will react to similar events differently. In other words, not all people who undergoes a potentially traumatic event will actually become psychologically traumatized. However, it is possible for some people to develop post-traumatic stress disorder after being exposed to a potentially traumatic event.

Psychological trauma is a sub-category of Psychoanalysis. So, it can be considered as a part of psychoanalytic theory. Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory of personality states that human behaviour is the result of the interactions among three component parts of the mind: the id, ego, and superego. Conflicts among these three components, and our efforts to find balance among what each of them 'desires', determines how we behave and approach the world. This theory which is known as Freud's structural theory of personality, places great emphasis on the role of unconscious psychological conflicts in shaping the behaviour and a person's personality.

Psychological trauma as discussed earlier is faced by several characters in *The Lovely Bones*. Susie's death mainly affects her father, Jack Salmon. He is the frustrated hero of the book. He is the loving father who knows the truth of his daughter's murder, but can't prove it. His struggle is perhaps most poignant. He sticks it out every inch of the way, facing the reality of his world, and trying to keep his loved ones and himself from going mad over what has happened to Susie.

Jack Salmon holds a special love for his daughter. His hobby is to make ships inside the bottles and set it to sail. Susie is the only person who loved it as much as her father did. This shows a special bonding between Susie and her father. He had a room full of bottles and ships which he had collected since a long time back. But when the news of Susie's murder reaches him, it hit him like a hurricane. Later, he is found smashing and destroying all the ships and bottles from his collections. He even broke the ones that he had made together with Susie. This shows how much he was broken. He faces psychological trauma when Susie's murder was confirmed. He tries to call the police frequently to let them know about George Harvey. No one believes him at first.

The way he suffers makes the readers pity him. The love he had for Susie made him crazy enough to make all attempts to prove that George Harvey is the killer. Even when no one believed him he still continued to prove his point with the help of Lindsey, his other daughter.

Lindsey, Susie's younger sister, is thirteen when Susie dies. Lindsey's relationship with her father is deeply touching. After Susie's death, she becomes increasingly protective of her father, and she even switches places with him, metaphorically, in the critical break-in scene. She knows that her father is defeated in his attempts to prove Harvey's guilt, and she steps in to do the job for him. With reference to the article Complex trauma and behavioural theory in Bharathi Mukerjee's novel by Nivetha P V and M John Suganya, this article explores Psychological Trauma and Grievance in Alice Sebold's *The Lovely Bones*.

Lindsey, when Susie was dead faces a lot of pressure at school. She faced all the troubles caused by her fellow students at school. Though she doesn't respond properly to the principal when he tried to comfort her for her sister's loss, we can see her going through her sister's stuff and her pictures, reminiscing their time together and laying in her bed treasuring Susie's memory. Here the bond between the two sisters can be

seen. Lindsey was also traumatized just like her father, after the death of Susie. Being Susie's sister becomes a much bigger part of Lindsey's identity after Susie's death. But only in the eyes of others. She remains her own person, devoted to helping her family deal with the tragedy.

Abigail, Susie's mother also faced a bundle of pressure after her daughter's death. She seems to be a complicated woman. Her love for Susie is apparent in her intimate knowledge of things related to Susie, as detailed to Len Fenerman (The detective assigned to Susie's case). Abigail and Susie shared a special love. The readers can find Susie remembering her mother even when she was being raped by George Harvey.

When Abigail learns that Susie is dead, she becomes an adulteress and then she even abandons her family. Susie was mature enough to understand her mother's mental state. She identifies her mother as an independent person, with the freedom to make her own choices. She understands that her mother has her own way of processing grief, loss, and figuring out what she wants.

Susie missed her entire family. She watched her father going through various stages of trauma and the grievance faced by her sister, mother and her little brother. Though she had company in her heaven, she longed for her family's love. When she understood that it is impossible for her to go back to earth to share her family's love, she starts to wish for good things to happen to her family. Susie was also traumatised because of what she had gone through while on earth. She learns to see things in a way that let her hold the world without her presence in it.

"These are the lovely bones that had grown around my absence: the connections-sometimes tenuous, sometimes made at great cost, but often magnificent-that happened after I was gone. And I began to see things in a way that let me hold the world without me in it. The events that my death wrought were merely the bones of a body that would become whole at some unpredictable time in the future. The price of what I came to see as this miraculous body had been my life" (Alice 316).

Fantasy in *The Lovely Bones*:

The word fantasy means imagining impossible or improbable things. Fantasy is found throughout the narration because everything that happens in *The Lovely Bones* seems improbable and something that cannot be achieved in real life. Here, we can find Susie sharing her experience when she first entered the heaven. Many people believe in heaven and hell but no one must have ever heard of someone having their own personal heaven. It sounds highly supernatural and impossible.

"That in everyone's heaven there were soccer goalposts in the distance and lumbering women throwing shot put and javelin" (Alice 12).

Alice Sebold has given a playful image to Susie's personal heaven. This line is a proof that the heaven that is explained here is clearly different from the preconceived idea about heaven.

We might have different ideas about heaven. Many people believe in the supernatural elements and many people do not. They think of it as a superstitious belief and there is nothing wrong in having such thoughts, as ideas and beliefs may vary from person to person.

Sebold has brought in fantasies and used her imaginations in many ways in order to give a twist and to make the tragic event sound interesting. Fantasy is a vital part of our thinking. It is imagination in its extremes and shows how far our minds can expand beyond the normal.

Fantasy lays the road for our future wishes. Without a certain degree of imagination and extensive fantasy we will never be able to accomplish anything in life. Fantasy is thus necessary as it provides mental impetus to think beyond the normal, the real and helps us to shape our future.

Fantasy could however slowly become an obsession as for example if you constantly fantasize about someone or something that could become easily unhealthy and obsessive. Since fantasy itself is an exaggerated mental process, only fantasy with a healthy realistic goal would be a positive phenomenon.

We can find Susie having interest on an Indian boy called Ray Singh. Ray Singh is Susie's first kiss and first love. Ray and Susie were just getting to know each other when she died.

"It was not my writing, but the writing of the boy who had a crush on me: Ray Singh. On his mother's special rice paper Ray had written me a love note, which I never read" (Alice 21).

The love letter that he slipped into her schoolbooks on the day of her death is only read by her from heaven. Seeing Susie taken from her life right at the moment she is embarking on her first romance makes her death seem more cruel.

Susie doesn't dwell on Ray's process of grief, but it is obvious that this early tragic loss marks his life. Apart from his kissing experiments with Ruth, it doesn't seem that Ray had any romantic relationships after Susie's death. Susie had a very special connection with Ruth, one of her classmates, even after her death

which is again practically impossible. Ruth even loans her body to Susie to make her wish about having a life with Ray Singh come true. The relationship between Ruth and Susie is a notable one as their bonding was against nature. Susie's encounter with Ray Singh is clearly a great fantastic imagination of Sebold. It gives a supernatural yet romantic touch to the story line.

Another person in *The Lovely Bones* who has a ghostly experience is Buckley. Buckley is Susie's little brother. He's about four when Susie is killed. Susie had a warm and close relationship with her brother. Buckley believes in Susie's supernatural ability to show herself, to communicate with the living, and he sees her several times.

“Had my brother really saw me somehow, or was he merely a little boy telling beautiful lies?”
(Alice 91).

We are not very sure about Buckley's encounter with Susie's spirit being true. But it shows his love for Susie and it gives a fantasy touch to *The Lovely Bones*.

Though Alice Sebold had portrayed Susie as a spirit, she does not seem to be harmful. Susie touches Ruth when her soul leaves to heaven and it ends up creating a special bond between them without any harm. Sebold has given a new thought to the readers about spirits and ghosts through Susie's character. Susie as a spirit, visits Ray, Ruth and Buckley and she never harms anyone. Susie teleporting through Ruth's body adds a magical touch to the concept of fantasy in *The Lovely Bones*. The way Susie's personal heaven changed according to her desires, made her feel comfortable, proving to be an ideal place for her thus making it Susie's Utopia.

Conclusion:

This article gives a clear picture of each character who individually struggles to face and overcome the reality that Susie is no more.

The researcher would like to conclude by stating that the role of a girl child is very important in a family and every girl has a special relationship with her family and friends. But her connections and bonding are destroyed by some humans with animal nature and behaviour and also by the society which is full of harm. Nowadays, there is no safety for even babies and this proves how much our society has been ruined lately. Girls must always be prepared to face anything and self-defence skills would really help to face anything and anyone as it has become almost impossible to change the attitude of the society towards women. There are people who really cares for the safety of the fellow being but the harmful ones are more in number than the good ones. So everyone should take their safety in their hands to keep themselves protected.

The author, Alice Sebold conveys her ideas and thoughts about how a girl is treated in the recent society and how hard she has to struggle to survive through all the troubles and hindrances. Alice Sebold was able to portrait both the physical and psychological struggles of Susie and her family with reality as she had once been a victim of rape and brutal attack. So, her words are mostly an outcome of her experience. This article states that the love of a girl or a woman is pure and she can never forget her family at any cost.

References:

“Alice Sebold Biography.” *OurBiography*, 8 Oct. 2018, <https://www.ourbiography.com/alice-sebold>.

Clews, Zoe. *The (Vital) Difference between Hope & Fantasy*. Zoe Clews Hypnotherapy London, 4 July 2017, <https://zoeclews-hypnotherapy.co.uk/vital-difference-hope-fantasy>.

“Important Quotes.” *The Lovely Bones*, <https://gionet.weebly.com/important-quotes.html>.

“Lindsey Salmon in the Lovely Bones.” *Shmoop*, Shmoop University, 11 Nov. 2008, <https://www.shmoop.com/study-guides/literature/lovely-bones/lindsey-salmon>.

“Psychological Trauma.” *Anagrammer Scrabble Word Finder*, https://www.anagrammer.com/scrabble/psychological_trauma.

“Research Paper on Alice Sebold.” *Bartleby*, <https://www.bartleby.com/essay/Research-Paper-On-Alice-Sebold-CEF7251267D4B1DF>.

Sandal, Emilie. "Emilie - English: Social Studies 14/15." *Google Sites: Sign-In*, 29 Oct. 2014, <https://sites.google.com/site/englishsocialstudies1415/home/blogs/emilie>.

Sebold, Alice. *The Lovely Bones*. Picador, 2009.

Sofianoss. "The Psychology of Fantasy ." *By Sofianoss on Deviantart*, 18 Jan. 2018,

<http://www.jetir.org/view?paper=JETIRFG06016>

<https://www.deviantart.com/sofianoss/journal/The-Psychology-of-Fantasy-726249947>.