

BEYOND THE UNSPEAKABLE: EMBODIED APPROACHES TO FEMALE
TRAUMA IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S *ALIAS GRACE*

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Introduction

In recent decades, post-colonial studies' increasing engagement with and questioning of Western literary trauma theory has brought about a radical opening-up of the dominant deconstructive model and academic discourse, represented by scholars such as Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub and Cathy Caruth. This development is significant in many ways, not the least of which is that it has brought to light an experience of trauma that had been long neglected and provided opportunities of expression for victims that had long been systematically silenced. Colonial subjects had fought for years to have their trauma acknowledged and expressed, but had found the existing discourse limited and wanting. Indeed, many academics working within the field of post-colonial studies set out to demonstrate "how problematical it is to work with Western psychiatric and cultural theories of trauma in a complex post-colonial situation" (Borzaga 65). Michelle Balaev points out the importance of alternative models that drive towards the inclusion of a wider range of representational possibilities and "challenge the classic model's governing principle that defines trauma in terms of universal characteristics and effects" (2). This, then, is also the main goal of this dissertation in that it is symptomatic of this more general desire to move beyond the dominant model in trauma theory by means of alternative models, thus hoping to provide a "wider range of representational possibilities" and a new perspective on the relationship between language and traumatic experience, in this case specifically the *female* experience.

A number of arguments regarding the limitations of the dominant model and its handling of female trauma in this thesis will originate from academic literature aimed at or originating from the post-colonial situation. After all, post-colonial critiques on Western trauma theory constitute the first large-scale instance of questioning and breaking away from the confining paradigm of Western Freudian psychoanalysis and trauma theory. In many

ways this entails a re-application of a mode of trauma theory remodelled for and attuned to the post-colonial situation to the Western situation it originated from, from one silenced subject to another silenced subject. One might wonder whether this does not constitute yet another problematic and unsanctioned pillaging of the former colonies for the advancement of the Western cause. It is important to point out that the (potentially improper) claiming of post-colonial trauma theory is not the intention of this dissertation, nor am I claiming that the experience of Western women is in any way more meaningful, more scarring, or even equally as traumatic as that of the (post-)colonial subject. If anything, it attempts to point out similarities and recognizes the ways in which some aspects of the post-colonial framework may be insightful when applied to the situation of the female subject in our Western, neoliberal, patriarchal society. As Roger Kurtz's points out, contemporary African writing and "all the conditions of its production and consumption [...] originate in the context of a massive, continent-wide experience of deep social trauma" (425). I would argue that female trauma narratives are likewise in every aspect of their production and consumption conditioned by an everyday, society-wide experience of social trauma constituted by the phallogocentric nature of Western society and its harmful rhetorical practices of shaming and silencing. Crucially, this social trauma manifests itself in varying degrees depending on a number of factors relating to the individual. Kurtz himself is a great advocate of the reversal of influence; he states that though "application of trauma theory in the African context is in fact a productive exercise, [...] the benefit of this exercise is not so much what [western trauma theory] can do for African literatures as what it can do for trauma studies" (424). Clearly, then, the re-appropriation of alternative models originating from the post-colonial situation is not necessarily a case of cultural misappropriation or unauthorized pilfering; it is in fact above all a desirable and advantageous development for both fields of study.

Of course, singling out one particular mode of trauma, “female trauma,” comes with its own set of potentially problematic implications. First and foremost, it immediately brings to mind questions regarding gender-essentialist thinking. It is a dangerous thing to suggest that the female experience is deserving of its own theoretical approach, for it plays into the myth that women are inherently, innately, different from men – and, within a patriarchal tradition, implicitly inferior to them. Therefore, instead of working against the problematic narratives originating from both historical and contemporary Western society, it runs the risk of simply fuelling the very same sexist arguments it set out to reject. However, the argument that I am attempting to make in this thesis – that the female experience of trauma warrants a number of approaches that go beyond the dominant model in order to be more fully understood and acknowledged – does not derive from the supposition of a fundamental psychological or neurological dissimilarity between the male and female experience of trauma. Instead, it assumes that, considering a number of socio-economic, political, historical and ideological factors, women face a different kind of trauma and social reception within Western society from men: in other words, I am proposing a circumstantial difference, not an essentialist difference. Still the term “female” in “female trauma” is not unambiguous or incontestable, for what do we mean when we talk about the female experience that demands additional consideration? The ongoing debates arising from the paradigm shift instigated by gender studies make it a difficult task to define the “female.” With the limited scope of this thesis in mind, I will model my definition of the female after the example set by the very discourse I am questioning and am thus necessarily embedded in, which is Western trauma theory. In order to argue and illustrate that Western trauma theory’s approach to female trauma is unsatisfactory, it is important to adopt the same conception of what constitutes the female. The Greeks believed that the symptoms we now largely associate with PTSD were the result of the uterus’s restless movement throughout those female bodies that had not (yet)

born children. The origins of the concept of female trauma are thus closely linked to the idea of female fertility and sexual reproduction. In this thesis, then, “female” will refer to an embodied form of femininity; it refers to those bodies that are or should have been able to bear children. It is, perhaps, a remarkably physical definition to work with in a theoretical field that is, at least in more recent times, largely concerned with the psychological, but the female body will constitute a crucial part of the alternative approaches I propose.

This, then, is the main purpose of this thesis; it argues that alternative approaches are in order to more comprehensively represent the (embodied) experience of trauma amongst women in Western society. The decision to explore multiple *complementary* approaches has been a conscious one. Michelle Balaev points out that “a single conceptualization of trauma will likely never fit the multiple and often contradictory depictions of trauma in literature because texts cultivate a wide variety of values that reveal individual and cultural understandings of the self, memory and society” (8). A too limited theory of trauma would lose its efficacy as a productive epistemological tool and sooner come to constitute a barrier to any deeper understanding of it. This is why I have opted not to construct *one* theory of the female trauma, but instead to propose a number of alternative models and approaches. These models and approaches will prove their effectiveness in the form of a case study of Margaret Atwood’s *Alias Grace* (1996), a fictionalized account of the life of the historical figure Grace Marks, a poor Irish immigrant who suffered from amnesia related to the traumatic experience of either witnessing or participating in the double murder of her employer and his housekeeper. *Alias Grace* is particularly interesting in this context because of its meta-commentary on trauma theory and narratives. Because of this aspect, combined with a general emphasis on the lived experience of women in patriarchal society central to many of Atwood’s works the novel lends itself particularly well to explorations of female trauma in the Western tradition.

In chapter 1 I will start out by tracing the concept of trauma back to its origins. I will pay particular attention to the narratives emanating from the medical discourse surrounding hysteria and trauma, highlighting the paradoxical and problematic conceptualization of the female subject in psychoanalysis. Furthermore, I will show, taking *Alias Grace* as a case study, how psychoanalysis and the dominant model of trauma theory can be a fruitful epistemological tool when applied to trauma narratives, but also what its limitations are in the face of the female trauma. Chapter 2, then, will further examine the underlying cause of these limitations and the origin of the harmful narratives perpetuated within the trauma theory discourse by exploring the relationship between the phallogocentric nature of Western society and women's place within it. It will demonstrate *why* the female experience of trauma warrants additional reflection and that, in some ways, it lies beyond the reaches of the dominant model. And finally, Chapter 3 will propose three alternative approaches that aim at providing a more inclusive account of the female trauma. All three approaches will be characterized by an emphasis on the embodied experience of trauma and treat the female body as a potential site of expression.

Chapter 1: The Origins and Limitations of the Dominant Model

Historically, the field of psychoanalysis – and the study of trauma in particular – has a fundamentally paradoxical relationship with both the female subject and women’s reality. It is paradoxical in that Freudian psychoanalysis is both dependent on and suspicious of the female subject’s reality and has historically both given voice to and attempted to silence women’s expression. In this chapter I will begin by taking a closer look at the narratives that have historically been constructed about women within the paradigm of psychoanalysis and consider the inherited implications of these narratives within contemporary trauma theory. For if we wish to move towards a theory of trauma that is better equipped to express the female experience, it is imperative that we do not just consider the theoretical developments within the field of psychoanalysis but - more specifically – consider the position of women within the theoretical framework and their role in its construction, for historical narratives about the female subject continue to influence our treatment and understanding of female patients today.

Thus, instead of taking an epistemological approach and tracing the academic developments and innovations of the field, I will emphasize those narratives on the female subject that lie latent and implicit within this discourse of progress: it is an attempt at reading between the lines of the ground-breaking academic developments culminating in trauma theory as we know it. This exploration of the narratives of psychoanalysis and hysteria will be followed by a succinct overview of the resulting dominant mode of contemporary trauma theory, illustrating the sort of knowledge and understanding we might gain from this dominant deconstructive approach to trauma and also highlight what sort of limitations are inherent to it. The next chapter will be concerned with exploring the second part of my observation and elaborate on the silencing propensity at the core of these narratives, a propensity that is an inherent and covert part of Western society as a whole.

Narratives on the Female Subject

Contemporary clinical and literary trauma theory traces its origin back to ancient Greek civilization. The Greeks noticed that some women exhibited at times a number of striking corporeal symptoms, which they quickly assumed to be a specifically *female* problem linked to the “agility of the uterus” (Van Haute & Geysken 11). They theorized that the syndrome – which came to be labelled with the Greek word for “uterus”, namely “*hystera*” – and its bodily manifestations were the result of the uterus’ restless movement throughout the body: women who did not bear children “risked having her uterus wander about her body,” causing symptoms such as paralysis, nervousness, fainting, insomnia, sexual promiscuity and anxiety (Klages 41). Clearly, then, the concept of hysteria carries strong associations with (young) women and fertility. Not only are these association accompanied by implications of bodily frailty (for the Greeks still conceptualized hysteria as a largely, if not uniquely, physiological syndrome), they also frame female sexuality, virginity and promiscuity as matters that demand medical intervention, social censure and/or male fascination. Hysteria, then, following its ancient Greek definition as a condition affecting specifically women “who did not bear children,” became an affliction that was confined to a great degree to two (stereo)types of women. On the one hand, there is the infertile older woman, unable to become pregnant; on the other hand, there is the young virgin, as of yet presumably unfamiliar with her own sexuality. These, then, are the two bodies that the Greeks implicitly believed to be most susceptible to hysteria. As a result, the two main narrative strains emanating from this first conceptualization of the syndrome are those concerned with either female *bodily deficiency* or female *sexual inexperience*. Especially this last discourse would prove an enduring stereotype in the academic development of women’s hysteria.

The narrative thread on hysterical women was subsequently picked up by the acclaimed French neurologist Jean Martin Charcot. Charcot, who practiced in Paris in the

1880s and 1890s, went against widely accepted medical beliefs when he theorized that “the origin of hysterical symptoms was not physiological but rather psychological in nature” (Ringel 1). This constituted a significant narrative shift; the female hysteria patient was now no longer a helpless victim of a bodily affliction in the form of an overexcited uterus, but someone whose aberrant behaviour was of her own making, a physiological manifestation of her own repressed memories and desires. Though he rejected the physiological origins of hysterical symptoms and even theorized that men could also suffer from the affliction, women still constituted the vast majority of Charcot’s patients, for he practiced at the legendary Salpêtrière, a place that had for many years been the home of women who had “gone wrong.” By the time Charcot took over the department in the 1880s, it was largely young women who had suffered “violence, rape, and sexual abuse” that found “safety and shelter” within its walls (Ringel 1). However, “safety and shelter” were relative terms, for these often vulnerable, sometimes mad, and nearly always traumatized young women undergoing hypnotic treatments: the Salpêtrière quickly drew the attention of the crowds. Charcot began to present his most successful cases to large audiences “through live demonstrations in which patients were hypnotized and then helped to remember their trauma,” a process that would supposedly lead to the relieving of their bodily symptoms (Ringel 1). The young women under hypnosis were often reduced to screaming and twitching, arching their bodies and writhing around in impassioned abandonment. Charcot’s description of the fourteen-year-old rape victim Louise Augustine Gleizes’s strange trances relates how she

[...] closes her eyes, her physiognomy denoting possession and satisfied desire; her arms are crossed, as if she were clasping the lover of her dreams to her breast; at other times, she clasps the pillow. Then come little cries, smiles, movements of the pelvis, words of desire or encouragement. (qtd. in Doyle 73-74).

In this passage we recognize the age-old Greek trope of the young virgin, sexually inexperienced and yet plagued by sexually promiscuous desires.

As a result of Charcot's views and practices, two new implications were added to the ongoing narrative of hysteria and female trauma. First of all, the new medical notion of hysteria as an affliction of the mind instead of the body came with its own connotations relating to the (female) patient's mental state and, consequently, madness. After all, it was not the body's faulty functioning, but the patient's distraught and twisted mind that caused the physical manifestations of hysteria. These connotations of madness were further underscored by Charcot's custom of displaying the female patients, for the practice of publicly exhibiting the mentally ill was a tradition dating back to the 1600s, when curious visitors to Bedlam Hospital were allowed a peek into the cells of the chained lunatics. As such, Charcot's habit of putting hysterics on display tapped into ingrained and centuries-old narratives on madness (Doyle 73). Moreover, the public exhibition of madness also brings us to the second addition to the narrative of hysteria that was introduced (or perhaps simply made more explicit) by Charcot: that of the female hysteria patient as a spectacle. If the diagnosis of hysteria can be read as a way for the Greeks to give bodily and material signification to everything that was "mysterious or unmanageable" in women, as Judith Herman has argued, then Charcot turned this absence of understanding into a spectacle for his audience of predominantly young male students.¹ This idea of the madwoman on display is further accentuated by Charcot's tendency to photographically document his patients during their sessions as he captured the girls in the throes of their hypnotically induced passions. Both in the live demonstrations and in the photographs taken during private sessions, the young girls are coded as objects presented for the benefit of the male gaze, evoking pleasure and fascination. Much like Laura Mulvey would point out nearly a century later in her seminal 1975 article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," the young women "are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with

¹ However, as Judith Herman points out in her influential work *Trauma and Recovery*, the Tuesday Lectures were attended by "a multi-colored audience, drawn from all of Paris: authors, doctors, leading actors and actresses, fashionable demimondaines, all full of morbid curiosity" (10).

their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*" (837). Charcot and his students were hardly interested in the female subject's experience, narrative or reality; they were fascinated by her spectacle, a spectacle of madness, but also of subjection to male control. It is in a large part due to these practices and developments in the Salpêtrière that the young, pretty, but above all mad woman became the narrative stereotype of the female hysteric.

Among the young physicians attracted to Charcot's clinical lessons in the Salpêtrière were Sigmund Freud and Pierre Janet. Whereas Charcot had taken the approach of a taxonomist, carefully observing, documenting and classifying the bodily symptoms of hysteria and demonstrating how these could be relieved by means of artificially induced hypnosis, these three practitioners instead "highlighted [hysteria's] relationship to a traumatic antecedent" (Ringel 2). Charcot had relocated the origin of hysteria from the uterus to the workings (female) mind and now Freud, Breuer and Janet looked for the impetus of these workings in external/environmental causes.² The implication of this new approach was that, consequently, it is not the (female) mind that works in abnormal ways, but the (female) social reality that includes abnormal experiences. By the mid-1880s all three investigators had come to realise that "hysterical symptoms could be alleviated when the traumatic memories, as well as the intense feelings that accompanied them, were recovered and put into words" (Herman 12). Breuer's patient Anna O. famously referred to this practice as the "talking cure" (Herman 12). Charcot had made his girls speak, but as a spectacle; he had, arguably, never really listened. The revolutionary approach proposed by Freud, Breuer and Janet, on the other hand, was built on the assumption that having hysterical women put their experiences into

² I have decided to work with the term "female" between parentheses throughout this chapter, for though the claims being made by Charcot, Freud, Breuer and Janet are framed as universal and not gender-specific, the fact that they are predominantly – if not exclusively – based on case studies involving female patients suggests that, if anything, they are true of women, which does not deny the potential broadening of the claims to include the male experience.

words and listening to their story would lead to positive results and relieve the somatic symptoms.

Originally, Freud and Breuer theorized that the traumatic antecedent could be “any experience which calls up distressing effects – such as those of fright, anxiety, shame or physical pain” (Freud 6). However, it was not long before Freud grasped on to the narrative deeply interwoven into hysteria’s long history, namely the role of (female) sexuality in the causation of the hysterical affliction: Freud theorized in *The Aetiology of Hysteria* that “the origin of hysteria could be found in early childhood sexual experiences that have later been repressed from consciousness” (Van Haute & Westerink 571). In this theory, which came to be known as the “seduction theory”, the neuroses were thought to originate “from an ‘abnormal’ traumatic moment in early childhood” (Van Haute & Westerink 571). However, “within a year [of the publication of *The Aetiology of Hysteria*], Freud had privately repudiated the traumatic theory of the origins of hysteria” (13-4). As Freud reformulated his ideas into what would be the fantasy theory, he came to explain hysteria not as a result of an “abnormal neuropathic disposition”, but as a result of “a general human sexual disposition” (Van Haute & Westerink 571). In theory, Freud’s shift from the seduction theory to the fantasy theory implied a return to the traditional narrative inherited from Charcot that ignored the external and/or social causation of the pathogenic effects. In practice, it meant that Freud stopped listening to his female patients once again. Judith Herman argues that Freud,

who had pursued the investigation the furthest and grasped its implications the most completely retreated in later life into the most rigid denial. [...] Though he continued to focus on his patients’ sexual lives, he no longer acknowledged the exploitative nature of women’s real experiences. With a stubborn persistence that drove him into ever greater convolutions of theory, he insisted that women imagined and longed for the abusive sexual encounters of which they complained. (18-19)

Thus, the young, pretty, mad hysteric that Charcot had called into being for the purposes of his infamous demonstrations was now, above all, a liar. Her story could not be trusted, for – without knowing it herself – she unconsciously desired precisely that which traumatized her.

Thus Janet, Freud and Breuer had set out with lofty intentions, striving to listen when women spoke and to take seriously the retrieved confessions exposing the traumatic reality of women's lives, but instead their efforts led to the establishment of the defining psychological theory of the next century that was founded specifically "in the denial of women's reality" (Herman 14).

Notably, the next revival of the long-running narrative on trauma was as far removed from the domain of the female experience as it could possibly be: it was in the context of the atrocities of the First World War that hysteria made its subsequent appearance. For the first time since its inception, it was now men who constituted the great majority of its sufferers. Soldiers began to act like hysterical women in the face of the horrors of trench warfare. The symptoms were initially believed to result from physical causes: psychiatrists theorized that these were bodily reactions to "the concussive effects of exploding shells" and the affliction was accordingly labelled "shell shock" syndrome (Herman 20). Soon, though, the men of western medicine were forced to admit that "the emotional stress of prolonged exposure to violent death was sufficient to produce a neurotic syndrome resembling hysteria in men" (Herman 20). It is notable that, despite the many similarities in the somatic symptoms and neurotic origins, the affliction came to be known under the misnomer "shell shock," and not "hysteria". This can be read as an effort by the western military, political and medical authorities to begin a new narrative in order to avoid tapping into the existing medical discourse on hysteria, for the legitimization of combat neurosis in medical circles went hand in hand with debates centred upon and discrediting the moral character of the patients. Soldiers who fell victim to the neurosis were accused of exhibiting womanly behaviour and being "at best a constitutionally inferior human being, at worst a malingerer and a coward" (Herman 21). This illustrates that the historical narratives of hysteria and (female) trauma carry a number of deeply engrained negative associations, which are translated to the male

context in the form of cowardice, frailty, immorality, laziness and inferiority. Thus, even though women are, in the context of war and shell shock, reduced to invisibility and excluded from the narrative of trauma, their absence still gives shape to the medical discourse surrounding male trauma, a discourse of shame, discrediting and dismissal.

The emergence of the women's liberation movement in the 1970s once again called attention to the female experience of trauma. Their method of consciousness-raising was the first explicit attempt to add narratives to the trauma discourse that were not imposed upon women by the Western men of medicine. They emphasized the social/external causation of the traumas women encountered (and which Freud had abandoned before), focussing on the "tyranny of private life" that existed in the domestic sphere (Herman 28). The feminist movement also seemed to grasp on to the fact that both the narratives and discourse itself were engrained in a language that was inherently detrimental to the female subject and set out to rephrase the discussion. For example, they found it necessary to "redefine rape as a crime of violence rather than a sexual act," in order to undercut the Freudian implication that "rape fulfilled women's deepest desires" (30). Clinician Judith Herman was one of the leading figures in this effort at adding female-constructed narratives to the discourse. The study of (female) trauma, she argues, is marked by a history of "episodic amnesia" (7). The surges of activity and innovation followed by a society-wide silence do not signify a lack of interest, but rather accentuate that "the subject provokes such intense controversy that it periodically becomes anathema" (Herman 7). Indeed, despite the effort of the feminist movement trauma discourse and its narratives have proven slow to adapt to change and more prone to silencing itself when faced with critical opposition.

Contemporary Trends in Trauma Theory

This, then, is the inherited history of trauma that forms the basis of the dominant model of Western contemporary literary trauma theory and these are the narratives on the female subject that lie embedded within that history. Since the main claim and purpose of this thesis is based on the argument that the dominant model is insufficiently insightful when it comes to capturing female trauma comprehensively, it might be productive to first consider the views and arguments that this model promulgates, explore what sort of insights into trauma it generates and identify some of its more harmful blind-spots. With the phrase “dominant model” I am referring to the deconstructive strain of scholarship that is characterized by an interest in the possibilities and limitations of *speaking trauma*. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, Freud and Breuer had theorized that patients, having experienced unexpected, violent or overwhelming events that are not “fully grasped as they occur,” consequently repeatedly lived through these events in the form of “flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena” (Caruth 91). Yet they found that

each single individual hysterical symptom immediately and permanently disappeared when we had succeeded in bringing clearly to light the memory of the event by which it was provoked and in arousing its accompanying affect, and when the patient had described that event in the greatest possible detail and had put the effect into words. (Freud 6)

In their 1991 work *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature*, however, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, question the Freudian belief that language is capable of expressing traumatizing experiences or complex emotions. Focussing on the experiences of holocaust survivors, they note that there is “in each survivor, an imperative need to *tell*” while at the same time “there are never enough words or the right words, there is never enough time or the right time, and never enough listening or the right listening to articulate the story that cannot be fully captured in *thought, memory and speech*” (78). As a consequence, survivors/witnesses of the traumatizing event struggle to produce testimony and the rest of

the world struggles to hear and absorb the reality of the event. Trauma constitutes a crisis of witnessing that originates in the breaking down of the symbolic order: language simply lacks “words, images, and narrative forms which can convey [the survivor’s] experience accurately” (Horowitz 51).

The idea of trauma as a response to a shattering experience that rejects linguistic expression is critically developed by Cathy Caruth in her seminal study *Unclaimed Experience* (1996). Caruth shifts the locus of signification from the actual event to the return of the traumatic event, arguing that “trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual’s past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature – the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance – returns to haunt the survivor later on” (4). Thus the trauma constitutes the ultimate paradox in that “the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it” (92). Knowing and not knowing are inextricably entangled in the language of trauma; the traumatic event simultaneously demands and defies witnessing, as well as the witness’s ability to form a narrative of it. Language, then, is “capable of bearing witness only by the ‘failure’ of witnessing or representation” (Leys 5). It is precisely in the breaking down of the referential function of words that language can even begin to succeed in testifying to traumatic horror (Leys 4). Roger Luckhurst calls attention to the “flat contradiction” inherent in contemporary trauma theory, namely its paradoxical conceptualization of the unspeakable nature of trauma and the therapeutic value of putting it into words (82). It raises fundamental questions regarding the nature of expressing trauma: is it “aporetic, leading to increased indeterminacy and impossibility” or is it “therapeutic, enabling a ‘working through’ and eventual resolution of trauma” (Visser 274)? In any case, the idea of trauma as something “unspeakable” has become fundamental to western society’s understanding of trauma and trauma victims. From the perspective of Felman, Laub, and Caruth trauma and silence go hand in hand.

This is precisely the argument that some literary scholars, particularly those working outside of the dominant model, have opposed. Michelle Balaev, for example, criticizes how the “classical” scholarship promulgated by scholars such as Caruth popularized a theoretical trend that conceived of trauma as an “unrepresentable event” preventing any “linguistic value other than a referential expression” (1). She points out that while the model has its uses in forwarding claims “regarding language’s inability to locate the truth of the past,” it was also “quickly accompanied by alternative models and methodologies that revised this foundational claim to suggest determinate value exists in traumatic experience” (Balaev 1). These alternative models, many of them originating from the field of postcolonial studies, “challenge the classic model’s governing principle that defines trauma in terms of universal characteristics and effects,” particularly those related to its unspeakability (Balaev 2). Indeed, Irene Visser also notes that, since its rapid expansion and diversification in the early 1990s, Western trauma theory is increasingly critiqued as “inadequate to the research agenda of postcolonial studies” (Visser 270). Thus, as the dominant model has become challenged, alternative models have begun to appear and it is above all the non-Western subject that is being recovered from their systematically imposed silence. This thesis is an effort to achieve the same for the female subject.

Though the main claim of this thesis is that the dominant model is restrictive when it comes to capturing female trauma comprehensively, it does not imply that the dominant model should be rejected or is inapplicable to the female subject altogether (as will be illustrated by the case study below). Indeed, one may point out, for instance, that there are many female scholars who have contributed important insights to the trauma theory paradigm. It would thus be too blunt to claim that the dominant model does not consider the female experience at all. However, contemporary literary trauma theory is greatly indebted to Freudian psychoanalysis. I would argue that, unless explicitly rejecting or questioning the

position of the female subject within this discourse – a position marked by narratives on bodily deficiency, sexual deviancy, madness and mendacity – even female scholars work within a theoretical framework that has historically resisted both the female subject and her expression of reality. In other words, female scholars, though they may implicitly or explicitly set out to include the female experience of trauma in their considerations, they are still working and theorizing within a discourse that is not particularly open to the expression of female reality, arguably even perpetuating, to a variable degree, the narratives on which the discourse is established. These claims will be unpacked in more detail in the next chapter. First, though, I propose we consider the sort of insights that the dominant model yields as a framework for understanding trauma and shortly consider the fundamental blind-spots that lead to the neglecting of certain essential aspects of the female experience of trauma. Margaret Atwood’s 1997 novel *Alias Grace* will function as a case study.

***Alias Grace* and Deconstructive Trauma**

One of the first things to note about *Alias Grace* is that it engages with trauma and trauma theory on two levels; the form and the content of the narrative. In other words, it is not just a story *about* trauma; it is a story that mimics the very *experience* of such a trauma. This mimicking, according to Anne Whitehead, is precisely what constitutes a “trauma fiction.” Many novelists of trauma narratives believe that effective trauma fiction “cannot avoid registering the shocking and unassimilable nature of its subject matter in formal terms” (Whitehead 83). In practice, then, the impact of trauma can only be expressed in narrative by mimicking trauma’s “forms and symptoms, so that temporality and chronology collapse, and narratives are characterized by repetition and indirection” (3). Trauma fiction, though, being naturally closely tied to trauma theory, constitutes somewhat of a paradox – particularly in view of the notion that trauma is “unspeakable”. For, as Whitehead puts it, “if trauma

comprises an event or experience which overwhelms the individual and resists language or representation, how can it be narrativized in fiction?" (3) Caruth, who introduced the notion of trauma's unrepresentability in language, uses Freud's concept of *Nachträglichkeit*³ and of the non-linear temporal relation of trauma to the past to suggest that "if trauma is at all susceptible to narrative formulation, then it requires a literary form which departs from conventional linear sequence" (Whitehead 6). Moreover, as Whitehead points out, trauma emerges in Caruth's writing above all as a "crisis of truth"; she highlights the fragmented nature of testimonial narratives by trauma survivors and how these oftentimes conflicting narratives problematise the ethics of a search for a truthful representation of the past.

Whitehead goes on to sum up several essential characteristics of trauma fiction, pointing out that it generally

problematizes its own formal properties, at the levels of reference (what relation does the narrative bear to reality?), subjectivity (can the traumatised subject still say 'I' in a way that has meaning?) and story (does the character control the 'plot,' or is he or she controlled by it?). (83-84)

Furthermore, trauma fiction often draws on the supernatural and demands a certain suspension of disbelief from its reader: this disruption of the real represents the breakdown of the symbolic order that is considered central to the experience of trauma (Whitehead 84). In general, then, trauma fiction relies "on the intensification of conventional narrative modes and methods," combined with a number of key stylistic features such as "intertextuality, repetition and a dispersed or fragmented narrative voice" (Whitehead 84).

Alias Grace, a fictionalized account of actual historical events surrounding the murders of Nancy Montgomery and Thomas Kinnear, self-reflexively and almost necessarily engages in a process of embedding itself in historical reality and establishing a web of intertextuality. Even before the actual narrative begins, the novel opens with a number of

³ Freud's *Nachträglichkeit* relates to the process by which "certain experiences, impressions and memory traces are revised at a later date in order to correspond with fresh experiences or with the attainment of a new stage of development" (Whitehead 6). It has often been translated as either "deferred action" or "afterwardness".

historical documents: an account of the hanging of convicted murderer James McDermott by the *Toronto Mirror*, the engraved portraits of the historical Grace Marks and James McDermott that were included in their confessions, followed by a highly sensational poetic rendering of the event leading up to the murder and the subsequent trial and conviction. The function of these texts is not only to “make reference to a time that is not the time in which the reader is reading the book” (Atwood 1507), but to put the reader in a similar position as Dr. Jordan, who cannot help but approach Grace’s subsequent narrative with preconceptions and prejudices gained from this very same sensationalist media coverage. Besides accounts taken from newspapers, Atwood also includes other types texts: excerpts of poems by Alfred Lord Tennyson, Emily Brontë and others; parts of historical documents; the original confessions of Grace Marks and McDermott; paragraphs from Susanna Moodie’s account *Life in the Clearings* (1853). These intertextual references operate outside the diegetic world of the narrative, but *Alias Grace* also contains several intradiegetic allusions to biblical stories (ranging from Job to Susanna and the Elders), Greek myths (Pandora’s Box) and Sir Walter Scott’s *The Lady in the Lake*. These references within the diegetic world, often in the form of a dialogue between Grace herself and a male character, have the reverse effect of the extra-diegetic texts in that they bring to light Grace’s intelligence, high moral standard, religious nature and independent thinking instead of emphasizing her supposedly depraved nature. As such, the intertextuality in *Alias Grace* highlights the diverse and contradictory sides of Grace’s character; it shows that she is not either/or, but this *and* that. She is dual, often a combination of two extremes, as she herself also observes perceptively:

I think of all the things that have been written about me – that I am an inhuman female demon, that I am an innocent victim of a blackguard forced against my will and in danger of my own life, that I was too ignorant to know how to act and that to hang me would be judicial murder, [...] that I am of a sullen disposition with a quarrelsome temper, that I have the appearance of a person rather above my humble station, that I am a good girl with a pliable nature and no harm is told of me, that I am cunning and devious, that I am soft in the head and little better than an idiot. And I wonder, how can I be all of these different things at once? (25)

Grace's bemusement at how she can be all these conflicting things at once can be read in two ways. If she has in fact exhibited this contradictory behaviour, her unstable identity highlights how trauma survivors often struggle with the balancing of multiple extremes and find themselves "caught between the extremes of amnesia or of reliving the trauma, between floods of intense, overwhelming feeling and arid states of no feeling at all, between irritable, impulsive action and complete inhibition of action" (Herman 47). If, however, the words "how can I be all of these different things at once" constitute a dismissal of the opposing identities ascribed to her, the paragraph highlights the impossibility of the task that the trauma victim faces when trying to make herself understood to her community and reconstruct the self after identity has been shattered. Herman points out that a "supportive response from other people may mitigate the impact of the event, while a hostile or negative response may compound the damage and aggravate the traumatic syndrome" (61). The negative response that Grace has received from her surroundings can only have decreased her ability to regulate between extremes.

Besides intertextuality, *Alias Grace* also makes significant use of repetition. Repetition, both on the level of the form and the content of the narrative, becomes most pronounced during what Bal calls "traumatic recall". Besides the recurrent image of the blooming red peonies⁴ that signifies the recurrent intrusion of Grace's vivid memory of Nancy picking peonies, one of the most notable instances of repetition comes in the form of a series of hallucinations/dreams/flashbacks experienced by Grace, each of them ending in – or, arguably, beginning with – the words "I think I sleep" (344-345). The repetition of the words "I think I sleep" not only reflects the repetition compulsion as theorized by Freud, but also draws attention to the weakened and unstable boundary between Grace's conscious and

⁴ The official opening sentence of the novel runs: "Out of the gravel there are peonies growing" (5)

unconscious states. Frequently either the reader or the characters themselves cannot be sure whether something is a dream or reality, almost as though they have been brought into a state of trance. The novel explores the liminal state between wakefulness and sleep and the dangers that the crossing of this boundary constitutes, for it is when we enter the unconscious that mankind succumbs to “the animal life that continues below consciousness, out of sight, beyond the reach of will” (161). The most obvious formal manifestation of repetition, however, is the frame narrative Atwood uses to relay Grace Marks’ life story. The narrative plays out in two temporalities: the present, in which Grace has agreed to recount her life story to Dr. Jordan, and the past, detailing Grace’s experience of the days leading up to and following the murders of Nancy Montgomery and Thomas Kinnear. The central part of the narrative – the recounting of the events surrounding the murders – is thus an attempt at reliving and repeating the traumatizing events. In a way, then, repetition in *Alias Grace* constitutes a form of non-linear temporality, in that the narrative allows Grace to live in two temporalities at the same time. Indeed, at some point after the aforementioned series of hallucinatory dreams it even appears as though the reliving of her past has made Grace come loose from time and space completely: “I wake up at cock crow and I know where I am. I’m in the parlour. I’m in the scullery. I’m in the cellar. I’m in my cell, under the coarse prison blanket, which I likely hemmed myself” (345). She exists in both times and in all places at once, experiencing past and present as though they happen simultaneously, much like Caruth’s claim that the traumatic experience “is not locatable in the simple violent or original event,” but rather “in the way that its very unassimilated nature [...] returns to haunt the survivor later on” – in other words, the past intrudes upon and interlaces with the present (Caruth 4).

Fragmentation, especially with regards to subjectivity, also plays an important role in the formal embodiment of trauma. What stands out most when reading *Alias Grace* is the

way in which Grace's first-person narration is alternated with the third-person omniscient narration focalized through Dr. Jordan. While this alternation itself is a significant example of the fragmentation of the narrative voice in the novel, this question becomes even more compelling when we take a closer look at the narrative voice of Grace herself. Notably, though it is technically a case of first-person narration, it exclusively contains instances of direct speech taking on the form of indirect speech. That is to say that Grace's narration – which, as a first-person narrative, is necessarily focalized through herself – absorbs all speech from other characters, without any distinction being made between those present and thus capable of speaking for themselves, and those absent and thus necessarily mediated through Grace's speech. Dialogues between Dr. Jordan and Grace herself are thus related in the following fashion:

If you will try to talk, he continues, I will try to listen. My interest is purely scientific. It is not only the murders that should interest us. He's using a kind voice, kind on the surface but with other desires hidden beneath it.

Perhaps I will tell you lies, I say.

He doesn't say, Grace what a wicked suggestion, you have a sinful imagination. He says, perhaps you will. Perhaps you will tell lies without meaning to, and perhaps you will also tell them deliberately. Perhaps you are a liar.

I look at him. There are those who say that I am one, I say. (46)

This raises the rather existential question, where does Grace end? Fragmentation, then, is another way in which the novel highlights Grace's unstable and fluctuating identity and narrative voice. This is emphasized to an even greater degree in one of her hallucinatory dreams, in which she relives the night before the murder of Nancy Montgomery and alternates between the identity of herself, Kinnear, McDermott and Mary (344). In this passage, her individual identity has become completely undone. This illustrates Luckhurst's claim that "aside from myriad physical symptoms, trauma disrupts memory, and therefore identity, in particular ways" (1). This, of course, is precisely the crux of the novel's well-crafted narrative voice, which allows for Grace's culpability to remain ambiguous and unresolved. Notably, when Grace reaches the moment of the murders in her narrative, the

novel switches from Grace's first-person narration to the third-person narration focalized through Dr. Jordan, creating a distance between the reader and the eyewitness account.

Now we shift from manifestations of trauma on the level of form to the level of content and begin to read the novel as a meta-commentary on trauma. *Alias Grace* is very much concerned with narrating trauma. One problem it addresses is the (historical) fact that Grace Marks told many different stories about the day of the murders; her accounts, those present at the trial believed, contained too many discrepancies to be truthful. As Grace wonders what exactly she should tell Dr. Jordan about that day, she remembers "what I said when arrested, and what Mr. MacKenzie the lawyer said I should say, and what I did not say even to him; and what I said at the trial, and what I said afterwards, which was different as well" (342). These contradictory accounts can be construed as a sign of untruthfulness, but, alternatively, they could also be a symptom of her traumatized state. Herman, for example, points out how "[p]eople who have survived often tell their stories in a highly emotional, contradictory, and fragmented manner which undermines their credibility" (1). Plausibly, then, it is not just Grace's narrative authority that is fragmented, but also her experience of the events themselves. Atwood's text thus raises a central question that also lies at the basis of Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience*, namely whether language can get at the truth of trauma. The implication of both texts seems to be that language falls short, for when considering what version of events she will relay to Dr. Jordan, Grace herself calls attention to the ambiguity of language, narrative and speech:

Was I crouching behind the kitchen door after that, crying? Did he take me in his arms? Did I let him do it? Did he say Grace, why are you crying? Did I say I wished she was dead?

Oh no. Surely I did not say that. Or not out loud. [...]

Did I push him away? Did he say I will soon make you think better of me? Did he say I will promise to tell you a secret if you promise to keep it? And if you do not, your life will not be worth a straw.

It might have happened. (343)

What one says is not necessarily what one means and what one tells is not necessarily what happened. All possibilities are equally viable and thus equally true in Grace's experience, and in the absence of the original event. She composes her story based on the expectations of her audience, wishing to please and hoping to be believed. Indeed, when Dr. Jordan brings her a rare treat she frankly admits that she "set to work willingly to tell my story, and to make it as interesting as I can, and rich in incident, as a sort of return gift to him" (286).

Dr. Jordan, on the other hand, does believe that the truth of the past can be extracted from Grace's memory, if only the subject is approached with the right methods. He adopts a method "based on suggestion, and the association of ideas" as he attempts to re-establish "gently and by degrees [...] the chain of thought, which was broken, perhaps, by the shock of the violent events in which she was involved" (97). Grace herself, though claiming complete ignorance of these events, seems at some level to be aware of these essential memories that might be locked away, for she describes "a feeling of being torn open; not like a body of flesh, [...] but like a peach; and not even torn open, but too ripe and splitting open of its own accord. And inside the peach there's a stone" (79). This is Grace's own metaphor for her traumatic memories, buried deep but always threatening to burst to the surface, wanting to be made visible to the world. Indeed, metaphors function as an important stylistic device reflecting the symptoms of trauma within *Alias Grace*. Metaphors, much like Dr. Jordan's approach to retrieving traumatic memories, are based on connotations and associations. As such, they are an effective stylistic method for relaying the unconscious connections the mind makes. For example, when Grace observes the flowers on the Turkey carpet, her associations flow as follows: "[t]hey have petals the shape of the diamonds on a playing card; like the cards spread out on the table at Mr. Kinnear's, after the gentlemen had been playing the night before. Hard and angular. But red, a deep thick red. Thick strangled tongues" (30). Following Dr. Jordan's own theory of association, "[i]n order to get from the first term to the third, the

second is essential; though from the first to the second, and from the second to the third, is no great leap” (69). Grace’s own association of ideas, then, would run along the lines of Flowers – Playing cards – Mr. Kinnear’s – Strangled tongues. Her metaphor thus illustrates how her repressed memory of the violent strangling of Nancy Montgomery seeps through the cracks of her consciousness. Dr. Jordan feels as though he and Grace are locked in “a contest of wills,” for he senses that Grace is struggling against the thread of associations he wants her to follow (374). She either purposefully or unconsciously refuses to play into his game of suggestion: to every meeting he brings a vegetable, “hoping for a connection that will lead downwards: Beet – Root Cellar – Corpses, for instance; or even Turnip – Underground – Grave,” but “all he’s got out of her has been a series of cookery methods” (104). However, in the case of her use of metaphors, it appears as though she is caught unawares or the current of unconscious associations is too strong to struggle against, and the repressed memories float to the surface.

For all her alleged opposition to remembering, Grace actually expresses, on multiple occasions, a deep desire to relate her story and even admits that “I have enjoyed telling about those days [at Mr. Alderman Parkinson’s]” (186). Simultaneously, though, she fears the knowledge that might be obtained through reliving the past and feels as though she is powerless against the current of her memories. As she and Dr. Jordan draw near to the stone within the peach, to the fateful day of the murders, she believes that “the story must go on with me, carrying me inside it, along the track it must travel, straight to the end, weeping like a train and deaf and single-eyed and locked tight shut; although I hurl myself against the walls of it and scream and cry and beg God himself to let me out” (345). Yet with remarkable acuity, she points out that “[i]t is only afterwards that it [the confusion of life] becomes anything like a story at all. When you are telling it, to yourself or to someone else” (346). This drive towards narrative, towards the ordering of traumatic experiences to facilitate the

mental processing and absorption, is reminiscent of Freud's talking cure or Janet's theory of the "liquidation" of experiences. Janet argues that

[a] situation has not been satisfactorily liquidated [...] until we have achieved, not merely an outward reaction through our movements, but also an inward reaction through the words we address to ourselves, through the organization of the recital of the events to others and to ourselves, and through the putting of this recital in its place as one of the chapters in our personal history. (qtd in Herman 37)

Grace's desire to recite the events of her life is likely also an unconscious desire to satisfactorily work through the more painful experiences. Indeed, when Dr. Jordan promises her that they will "get to the bottom of it" together, she replies that it "would be a great relief to me, to know the whole truth at last" (372). Like many trauma victims, then, she is of two minds about obtaining knowledge of the repressed events. One might argue that, considering the many conflicting accounts Grace has promulgated, she has had plenty of opportunity to construct her narrative and work through the traumatic memories. However, for many years Grace has lived in imposed silence, dissuaded from telling the truth or discredited when she did tell the truth. When Dr. Jordan's pursuits finally present her with a receptive audience, she reflects that "[i]t was difficult to begin talking. I had not talked very much for the past fifteen years" (77). Indeed, whenever she *was* asked to talk, she was instructed to repeat the story that other people, specifically her lawyer Kenneth MacKenzie, had constructed for her. As such, she has never really had the opportunity to "satisfactorily liquidate" the memories and consequently feels such a deep need to carry onwards with the story.

In her book *Reading Trauma Narratives: The Contemporary Novel and the Psychology of Oppression* (2015), Laurie Vickroy explores the question that takes centre stage in the second half of *Alias Grace*, namely whether the bouts of amnesia that Grace suffers from might be read as a temporary supernatural possession of her body by the captive spirit of Mary Whitney – which would be in line with Anne Whitehead's observation that authors of trauma narratives often include supernatural elements to give shape to traumatic

experiences – or whether Grace’s amnesia should be read as a sign of a split personality. Vickroy argues that Grace’s split personality is “evident in her visualisations of, but inability to normally remember, her traumatic, suppressed, but intrusive memories” (37). Not only is the narrative structure split between two versions of Grace (her naïve, younger self and her world-weary, older self), but Grace is doubly split, as the deceased Mary’s personality begins to emerge from Grace during unconscious states. This emergence of a second personality is linked by Vickroy to the contemporary diagnosis of dissociative identity disorder, “a rare and extreme manifestation of trauma, whose sufferers are known for ‘staggering dissociative capabilities’” (52). Indeed, as Judith Herman points out, the secondary consciousness may carry out acts without knowledge of the primary identity (124). One of the ways in which this split identity is most clearly materialized in the novel is through female sexuality. Grace is notably reticent about sex, perhaps a consequence of having witnessed her mother’s sexual abuse and Mary Whitey’s fatal abortion, whereas her alternate personality is strikingly “sexually receptive, even aggressive, and in turn spurs male aggression” (Vickroy 53). Indeed, the dissociated personalities are capable of exhibiting “highly contradictory patterns of relating” (Herman 125).

These, then, are some of the insights that an analysis based on trauma theory might produce. However, just as Dr. Jordan does not succeed, in the end, in bringing to light the complete and truthful account of the murders, the dominant model does not succeed in bringing to light all of the complex aspects of the female trauma. What it often neglects to take into account is the “larger biographical, political, and cultural context” in which the trauma takes place (Borzaga 67). In a way, it obscures a number of other traumatizing factors in a woman’s life “that cannot easily be described as ‘events’ – rather, as a series of *conditions* in which her life unfolds” (68). Our analysis has mostly focussed on one *singular* traumatic event: the witnessing of the murder of Nancy Montgomery and Thomas Kinnear.

Even Vickroy's reading is no exception, despite noting the "many sources and contexts of trauma in [Grace's] life," for in practice her argument simply shifts the locus of the trauma from the murders to Grace's witnessing of Mary Whitney's abortion and death, which results in a dissociative identity disorder. Borzaga points out that the material conditions in which the victim lives are often removed from the narrative of the analysis altogether (73). The conditions being closely related, perhaps even equated, to the existing social, political, economic and ideological circumstances of society, the female experience of trauma is in some fundamental ways different from the male experience. Chapter 2 will explore the reality of these conditions by means of a number of key feminist texts and consider how they give birth to the female trauma while simultaneously resisting its expressing.

Chapter 2: Feminism and the Expression of Female Trauma in Patriarchal Society

The female subject's experience of trauma is not yet fully understood so long as it is approached within the theoretical framework of the deconstructive dominant model inherited from Freud because of its inherent resistance to the expression of female trauma. As pointed out in the previous chapter, one of the main limitations of the dominant model is that it neglects the "larger, biographical, political, and cultural context" in which the trauma takes place (Borzaga 67). In other words, it is not aimed specifically at considering and dissecting the effect of the societal circumstances of the trauma. Nonetheless, in her exploration of the influence of feminist values on Western society's understanding and medical treatment of traumatized women, Emma Tseris notes that current mental health interventions show more attention for "the sociopolitical context of women's lives" (153). As a consequence, she points out, it is sometimes understood that mental health practitioners have a "more holistic and progressive" understanding of women than they have historically displayed. Yet, she cautions, this is certainly an assumption that requires some nuancing and she urges for "a critical dialogue regarding the extent to which trauma theory has resulted in significantly improved mental health practices" for women (154). Tseris argues that these developments do not necessarily "represent the radical paradigm shift that is sometimes claimed" (154). What do we make of Tseris' seemingly contradictory claim that there is simultaneously a greater professional acknowledgement of the importance of societal circumstances regarding women's traumas, and yet no significant improvement in the way these traumas are handled in treatment?

I would argue that this stubborn stagnation can largely be traced back to the old narrative patterns Western trauma theory inherited from the ancient Greeks and Freudian psychoanalysis. Tseris notes how a large portion of the mental health interventions for trauma

“continue to be informed by assumptions about the biological basis of women’s emotional distress” despite receiving either the label trauma or PTSD (159). The persistent and “hidden assumptions” underlying these practices were, and still are, detrimental in that they “constrain the possibilities for how a woman’s identity can be constructed and understood” (Tseris 159). It appears, then, that despite the readily available diagnosis of PTSD, there is still a propensity towards the traditional narratives surviving from the historical discourse of hysteria and psychoanalysis. The damage of this traditional discourse is dual: not only are the prejudices attached to the discourse detrimental to the understanding of the victim’s trauma, but when treatment is made to match a supposed neurobiological cause it deflects attention from “interventions that involve social change and activism” (154). As Tseris concludes, trauma theory’s capacity to “engage with the social issues of gender inequality is at stake as it becomes preoccupied with decontextualized symptoms” (Tseris 158). Even though the PTSD diagnosis has shed light on the social causation of women’s trauma, opposing widely held assumptions about “brain-based disorders or behavioural differences inherent in being female,” interventions are still rooted in traditional narratives on women’s trauma, narratives that have been imposed upon them rather than constructed by them. Tseris reads in these narratives “the patriarchal assumptions that allow for women’s ongoing exposure to trauma” (155). This chapter, then, will examine why, exactly, the dominant model is resistant to the expression of female trauma, trace the harmful narratives – which point at the resistance of this discourse – back to their roots in Western patriarchal society and consider what an alternative model should effectively encompass.⁵

⁵ In this chapter I will make use of a number of terms that are closely related and yet essentially different. As such it might be useful to shortly explain their meaning in this thesis. With the term “narrative” I am – and have been – referring to the stereotypical and generalized stories society constructs about the female subject (or indeed any subject). “Rhetorics”, a term that will be introduced in this chapter, denotes the functional rhetorical tactics and actions that society employs to construct these narratives. When I speak of “discourse” (medical or otherwise) I am speaking of the accumulation of all existing narratives and academic knowledge within that particular field.

Patriarchal Ideologies and Phallogocentrism

Charged phrases such as “patriarchal assumptions” demand to be nuanced. It is important – indeed, almost obligatory – to point out that the concept of patriarchy in feminist discourse does not single out any man in particular. Since patriarchy is a mode of society, it refers to a society in which both men *and* women participate. Thus, as Allan Johnson points out, a society is “patriarchal to the degree that it promotes male privilege by being *male dominated, male identified and male centred*” (qtd. in Bennett 55). Thus, though men are certainly implicated in the patriarchy, “not all men have gained equally from patriarchal structures, and some men [...] have suffered directly” from it (Bennett 56). Patriarchy, then, is not a single or uniform pattern and the “degree of male domination, female autonomy, hierarchy among males, and other factors is quite variant” amongst different communities (Gruenbaum 41). Yet what all these communities have in common, fractured⁶ though these categories of ‘male’ and ‘female’ may be, is that “within each group of men and women – whether the group [is] structured by commonalities of class, race, ethnicity, or whatever – women as a group [are] disempowered *compared to men of their group*” (Bennett 57-8).

Foucault also warns against approaching patriarchy as a monolithic entity. More accurately, he argues, it is an entity whose power is exercised through the institutions that structure social relations (Norton 1472). In order to explore the structure and functioning of these socializing institutions in more detail, I will turn to Louis Althusser’s conceptualization of Ideological State Apparatuses. Althusser’s theory on ideology combines structuralist and psychoanalytic theories (particularly that of Jacques Lacan) to rationalize why a group of people might consent to a mode of society in which they themselves are systematically oppressed and powerless. To this discourse, though, I would like to add another instrument of

⁶ The categories of ‘men’ and ‘woman’ may be fractured based on “race, class, marital status, sexual orientation, and world region” (Bennett 56-7).

power at the disposal of patriarchy: patriarchy maintains itself through the fundamental and complementary forces of ideology and phallogocentrism, two concepts that are closely related, interwoven even, to the point where it is difficult to separate the two. Before taking a closer look at the origin of the narratives patriarchy promulgates and the rhetorics it employs to establish these, let us consider the machinations of its ideologies. In his seminal work “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation),” Althusser explores how society achieves and maintains stability by reproducing the conditions of production. Unlike its colloquial definition, ideology for Althusser does not stand for a set of ideas or beliefs that one voluntarily chooses to adhere to or reject; ideology is an involuntary espousing that is the result of structural factors in society. But what shape do these structural factors take on, and why is its espousing involuntary?

The structural factors producing and maintaining the rituals of ideology take the form of Ideological State Apparatuses. As a Marxist, Althusser focusses on the material circumstances of the subject within the capitalist system, a system that exploits and disempowers them while they perpetuate it. In order for the capitalist production process to continue unhindered, reproduction of the conditions of production is essential. For Althusser, one of the most fundamental of these conditions is labour power, which entails

not only a reproduction of its skills, but also, at the same time, a reproduction of its submission to the rules of the ruling established order, i.e. a reproduction of submission to the ruling ideology for the workers, and a reproduction of the ability to manipulate the ruling ideology correctly for the agents of exploitation and repression, so that they, too, will provide for the domination of the ruling class ‘in words.’ (1337)

This way, the suppression of the subject is enforced by the reproduction of the ruling capitalist ideology, a reproduction that is facilitated by the Ideological State Apparatuses.

Althusser’s theory splits Marx’s superstructure into a politico-legal level and an ideological level, the first of these being the (Repressive) State Apparatus and the second being the Ideological State Apparatuses. Whereas the Repressive State Apparatus “functions massively

and predominantly *by repression* (including physical repression), while functioning secondarily by ideology,” the Ideological State Apparatuses enforce their influence “massively and predominantly *by ideology*, but they also function secondarily by repression, even if ultimately, but only ultimately, this is very attenuated and concealed, even symbolic” (Althusser 1342). Moreover, unlike the Repressive State Apparatus, which operates entirely in the public domain, the Ideological State Apparatuses function in the private sphere and thus do not exert their power by means of explicit coercion or force, but rather through establishing unconscious consent in the form of accepted “practice” or “rituals”. This, then, constitutes the involuntary nature of ideology. In theory, Althusser’s scheme substitutes ideology for the Imaginary within Lacan’s three-part structure of the Imaginary, the Real and the Symbolic. The implication is that, much like the Imaginary, one is born into ideology and consequently there is no position outside of it: “you and I are *always already* subject, and as such constantly practice the rituals of [ideology]” (1356).

Ideological State Apparatuses, then, ensure the reproduction of the ideology of the ruling class in a capitalist society. In patriarchal society, however, it is not (only) a case of a ruling *class*, but a ruling *gender*: the male gender. For a long time, and to a great degree still continuing today, the Ideological State Apparatuses in Western society that have ensured the ongoing existence of the patriarchal ideologies have consisted for the majority of (white) men: Althusser’s Ideological State Apparatuses take the form of “churches, schools, the family, courts, political parties, unions, the media, sports and the arts” (1333), all institutions and social systems which have historically proven resistant to the inclusion of women in positions of power. This dynamic between the ruling class, or in this case the ruling gender, and representation in the Ideological State Apparatuses is highlighted by Althusser when he notes that

[g]iven the fact that the ruling class [read: ruling gender] in principle holds State power [...], and therefore has at its disposal the (Repressive) State Apparatus, we can

accept the fact that this same ruling class [ruling gender] is active in the Ideological State Apparatuses insofar as it is ultimately the ruling ideology which is realized in the Ideological State Apparatuses. (1343)

Simultaneously, the ruling gender must necessarily maintain hegemony over the Ideological State Apparatuses in order to hold State power over a prolonged period of time and as such, it is a closed-off and self-perpetuating system. Moreover, it is a system in which women always occupy a place. According to Althusser, there exist only two roles within society: State Apparatuses either “ensure *subjection to the ruling ideology* or the mastery of its ‘practices’” (1337). This would explain why, despite their undeniable suffering under its yoke, many women have “supported [patriarchy], some have benefitted from it, and most have raised their daughters and sons to conform to it”; after all, they are either subjected to it or they are complicit in it (Bennet 56). And since there is no position outside of ideology, these are the only two courses available to women, as well as men. In *Alias Grace*, the stealth and inescapability of the patriarchal ideologies is reflected, for example, in Dr Jordan’s thought patterns: his attitude towards women is characterized by apparent progressiveness but covert sexism. Though he condescendingly refutes the widely held view that “women are weak-spined and jelly-like by nature, and would slump to the floor like melted cheese if not roped in” (83), he subsequently resolves to avoid his landlady, for he suspects her deserting husband has left her feeling lonely and “loneliness in a woman is like hunger in a dog” (85). Moreover, he often unconsciously assumes spiteful intentions in women, silently suspecting the servant Dora of chilling his breakfast in advance, which leads him to mentally refer to Dora as “a greased pig” (70).

Whereas men naturally take up the position of the enforcer of ideology, women are generally forced into the position of the subjected. According to Althusser, the dominant Ideological State Apparatus in capitalist society is the educational State Apparatus: the schools. When it comes to the ideology of the patriarchy, the dominant Ideological State

Apparatus is the family. This is not to say that the virtues of its ideology are not also taught in the other branches of the State Apparatuses, but the family plays the dominant role. It is within the sphere of the family that men and women, as always-already subjects, first act out and reproduce the practices of the patriarchy's ideology. Gruenbaum, for example, points out how many cultures "have even institutionalized [a young boy's] transition from childhood dependence and lack of power and authority to new roles with authority over women as the boys become men" (40). These institutionalized transitions take on the form of initiation ceremonies, important familial occasions. The ceremonies illustrate that men in patriarchal societies must often go "through a far more wrenching experience than girls – they must learn how to assert control and domination over the females who have until then had a large degree of power over them" (Gruenbaum 41). Gruenbaum argues that this role reversal lies at the core of the "dominating male role" and is fundamental to the maintaining of patriarchy. Clearly, then, the male is born and raised to take up the task of "the mastery of [ideological] practices"; the female's lot is "subjection to the ruling ideology." Yet this does not explain *why* Western society and its ideologies construct a privileged position for men.

In order to answer this question, we must consider the origin of the rhetorics that the patriarchal ideology employ and the narratives these generate (some of which we have already located within the historical discourse on hysteria), which I propose to trace back to the concept of phallogocentrism. Phallogocentrism, a concept constructed by Jacques Derrida, refers to a combination of phallogocentric and logocentric systems of thought. Derrida argues that Western metaphysics is based in logocentrism, in that it is "centred on logic and on the spoken word as a guarantor of presence and identity" (Klages 64-5). In "Of Grammatology" (1967), Derrida points out that metaphysics has historically "always assigned the origin of truth in general to the logos: the history of truth, of the truth of truth, has always been [...] the debasement of writing and its repression outside 'full' speech"

(1689). From a logocentric perspective, then, speech is the original form of language, favoured above writing. The power of speech thus becomes associated with “consciousness, selfhood, and rational thought” (Klages 65). The logocentric nature of Western society becomes problematic when we consider the second part of the compound: phallogocentrism. In his consideration of Jacques Lacan’s works, Derrida criticizes the psychoanalyst of phallogocentrism, for Lacan considers the Phallus⁷ the “source and origin of language, the transcendental signified” (Klages 65). The Phallus, then, is located at the centre of the symbolic order. This means that, insofar as “the Symbolic Order is the structure of language itself, where subjects are able to connect signifiers and signifieds in order to achieve stable meaning, language is a *phallogocentric* system, centred on the Phallus as the organizing and ruling power” (Klages 65). Lacan also emphasizes that language and its structure “exist prior to the moment at which each subject at a certain point in his mental development makes his entry into it” (Lacan 1169). Just as Althusser argues that ideology reproduces the conditions of its own production unchallenged by virtue of the subject being born into it, Lacan notes that “the subject, too, if he can appear to be the slave of language is all the more so of a discourse in the universal movement in which his place is already inscribed at birth, if only by virtue of his proper name” (1170). As such, just as there is no position outside of ideology, there is no position outside of language and – since language favours the Phallus – outside of phallogocentrism. The subject is born into a discourse that establishes and repeats itself, constituted by the very phallogocentric structure of language and, in turn, the logocentric structure of Western metaphysics.

The relation between ideology and phallogocentrism is a dual and intertwined one: patriarchal ideologies are structuralized manifestations of the phallogocentric nature of our

⁷ The word ‘Phallus’ is capitalized here because it does not refer to the physical organ. In Lacanian psychoanalysis it is a symbolic for the ultimate position of power.

society. Phallogocentrism is the universally internalized, primordial ur-ideology that shapes and produces all other expressions of ideology within our society. Thus, man's continuation as the ruling gender is not only perpetuated through ideologies it enforces in the Ideological State Apparatuses; Lacan's theory makes it an intrinsic and fundamental aspect of language, and consequently the very process of shaping identity (for logos establishes "consciousness, selfhood, and rational thought"). This means that, built into the functioning of the Law of the Father, the Symbolic Order and the Western way of thinking about selfhood and identity there is, at the very foundation of it all, a repression of the female. If the Phallus, the symbolic male source of power, takes up position at the centre of language, then language inherently resists expressing the female. One might point out how this conclusion – that a language structured around the male symbolic necessarily resists the female experience – assumes a relationship of mutual exclusion between the two. This assumption is based on Hegel's argument that "logocentric structures [are] organized through a series of binary oppositions (mind/matter, light/darkness, presence/absence, nature/culture, good/evil, etc.), the first term of each being desirable and the other shunned" (Norton 1940). If we consider the binary opposition male/female, we can draw the conclusion that a language favouring the first term must necessarily shun the second term, at least to some degree. As such, within Western patriarchal society women rely on a mode of expression that is inherently resistant to the expression of their experience.

The Patriarchal Rhetoric and the "Everyday"

Søren Kierkegaard's *Stages on Life's Way* (1845) effectively illustrates how language resists the female half of the perpetual opposition male/female. In a manner very reminiscent of Derrida, Kierkegaard's texts both describe and perform this fatal shortcoming. As he ponders

the way in which women “elude” expression in language, the text enacts what it argues, effectively taking on the function of the performative:

To be a woman is something so special, so mixed, so compounded that there are no predicates to describe it, and the many predicates, if they were used, contradict one another in a manner only a woman can tolerate, indeed, even worse, can relish. (56)

By putting into words the impossibility men face in attempting to express “woman,” his very articulation of these words ensures the continuation of this status quo. Kierkegaard goes on to point out that “in actuality she signifies less than man,” seemingly in agreement with Lacan’s assertion that the Phallus is at the centre of the Symbolic Order, which in turn constitutes the site of signification (56). For Kierkegaard, then, woman’s entire meaning

is negative; her positive meaning is nothing in comparison – indeed, it probably is even corruptive. It is this truth that life has concealed from her, and life has consoled her with a fancy that surpasses anything that can arise in any man’s mind and has paternally arranged existence in such a way that language and everything else strengthens her in the fancy [...]. (61)

It is not just that she does not possess the power to signify, as men do, but this absence of power has been hidden from her by means of “a fancy” put into place by language itself. This, once again, points at ideology’s drive towards self-reproduction. The way in which language in a phallogocentric structure such as Western society is unable to adequately express the female reality and experience – or, as it has come to be represented in many writings by male thinkers such as Kierkegaard, the way in which women “elude” language⁸ – has led to the construction of the woman as a mystery: the Feminine Myth, as Simone de Beauvoir termed it.

In “The Second Sex” Beauvoir highlights how, in patriarchal cultures, “man is the norm and woman the deviation” (1263). In its inability to understand “woman” (woman embodying the essential Other to the norm that is man), society constructs the mystery of the

⁸ Notably and significant, a shift in blame from the male to the female, implying that women are purposefully evading comprehension and expression.

female: “against the dispersed, contingent, and multiple existences of actual women, mythical thought opposes the Eternal Feminine, unique and changeless” (Beauvoir 1265).

Kierkegaard, for one, explicitly adheres to this patriarchal rhetoric; woman constitutes such a mystery that she defies expression in language. But because women are in fact dispersed, contingent and multiple, “a number of incompatible myths exist, and men tarry musing before the strange incoherencies manifested by the idea of Femininity” (Beauvoir 1266).

Thus, the problematic nature of the feminine myth comes to the fore when it encounters the real-life woman, for if “the definition provided for this concept is contradicted by the behaviour of flesh-and-blood women, it is the latter who are wrong; we are told not that Femininity is a false entity, but that the women concerned are not feminine” (Beauvoir 1265).

The facts of reality, then, are shown to be impotent against the myth. In other words, women’s lived experience and actual existence is negated in the face of the male-constructed and male-perpetuated myth. The phallogocentric forces of society oppose women’s expression of their existence in reality and favour man’s mythical construct.

A particularly prevalent narrative emerging from the rhetoric of the feminine mystery is man’s construction of women’s identity as one of two extremes in yet another binary opposition, namely that of virgin/whore.⁹ Beauvoir refers to this opposition in terms of “the Muse, the Goddess Mother, Beatrice” and “the Praying Mantis, the Mandrake, the Demon” (1266). As a result, women continuously run the danger of transitioning from the virgin to the prostitute, a transgression of their sexual identity as constructed by the man-made myth. And it is a slippery slope at that, something that Grace Marks seems acutely aware of in the novel: when McDermott claims she promised him sexual gratification in return for the double murder of Nancy and Kinnear, Grace reflects that “once I’d given into him, he would

⁹ As I have already noted in the previous chapter, this focus on female sexuality, particularly virginity and promiscuity is a prevalent narrative strain in the history of hysteria.

consider me a whore as well” (385). Indeed, during the subsequent trial, she is confronted with this very fact when Jamie Walsh, who she believed to be a friend and admirer, proves “he would do all in his power to destroy [her],” simply because of the allegation that she engaged in sexual relations with McDermott, which turns her “from being an angel in his eyes, and fit to be idolized and worshipped” into “a demon” (418). Yet no matter which half of the myth a woman embodies, both identities encounter dangers in patriarchal society; the virgin’s body is always “already rapeable,” whereas the whore’s body is always already raped (Johnson & Moran 14). As Beauvoir points out, few myths have been “more advantageous to the ruling caste than the myth of woman: it justifies all privileges and even authorizes their abuse” (1267). To claim that women are a mystery does not imply that they are silent, but “that [their] language is not understood” (Beauvoir 1268). Grace suspects, for example, that though Dr Jordan appears to take notes of their conversations, “it cannot possibly be anything that has come out of my mouth, as he does not understand much of what I say, although I try to put things as clearly as I can” (281-82). Here, the problematic nature of phallogocentrism in general and the rhetoric of the feminine myth in particular is once again emphasized; the myth of the feminine signals that language resists the expression of the female experience, for though she is speaking she is not understood. The treacherous nature of language for women becomes painfully clear to Grace at her trial, where

every word that came out of my mouth was as if it was burned into the paper they were writing it on, and once I said a thing I knew I could never take the words back; only they were the wrong words, because whatever I said would be twisted around, even if it was the plain truth in the first place. (79)

Her language, the only language available to her, is not open to expressing her reality; in fact, it actively resists expressing her experience and reproduces her submission to the quotidian.

In order to better understand the quotidian and the conditions that constitute women’s reality in patriarchal society, I would like to invoke Heide Grunebaum’s concept of the “everyday”. She proposes the concept in relation to the (post-)apartheid situation in South

Africa, claiming that in the aftermath of both colonialism and the apartheid regime the “perception of distance [from the historical conflict] is created, so historically embedded and socially reproduced mechanisms of structural violence, psychosocial affect, and material impact of what remains and continues are excised” (113). This distantiating from the original historical conflict is reminiscent of Tseris and Bennett’s claims that we assume a positive transformation in the status of women within our society. This assumption is part of the Western narrative of progress, but in reality it remains ambiguous whether women’s position in society and the roles ascribed to them therein are indeed ameliorating. Distancing the present from the past situation by posing the latter as more explicitly detrimental and unsatisfactory allows for an excision of the past from the present, while simultaneously allowing harmful narratives and material conditions that still remain to exist uninterruptedly. Grunebaum argues that “the everyday is the time-space” of this historical erasure and it is here that “structural and historical violence are reproduced and normalized” (114). It is the twin processes of “accumulated *erasures-in-time*” and “longer durational sweeps of *erasure-over-time*” that generate “spatial, temporal and cognitive disaggregations permit[ting] a generalized social denial and historical excision to be reproduced in the present” (Grunebaum 114). Thus, the societal conditions that allow for women’s continued subjection and exposure to traumatic circumstances continue to exist because they are isolated in the past and denied in the present. Scott Veitch notes that “part of the power of the organization of society lies precisely in the ordinariness of its features that routinize everyday life” (Grunebaum 115-16). This is precisely what Althusser claims in relation to ideology. It is not questioned, even by those suffering from it, because its practices are not understood as artificial. Or, as Grunebaum phrases it, “as the taken-for-grantedness of the world around is inhabited in its naturalized given-ness it ceases to be experienced as constructed [...] and structure ceases to be apprehended as ideological” (116).

Thus, it is in the everyday that the ideologies and rhetorics of patriarchal society become reproduced and normalized, a process without a starting-point outside the individual subject, for there is no temporality before “everyday”. Though the everyday is shared by all, how it is lived and what form it takes on are the direct result of ideology. As such, it is not a question of whether you sleep, but where you sleep; not a question of whether you eat, but what you eat, and so on. In effect, the everyday is “multiple, simultaneous and minutely differentiated according to one’s socio-economic, gendered, classed or racialized ‘place’” (Grunebaum 118). Moreover, it is structured in such a way as to keep everyone in their right ‘place.’ The everyday, then, is also the site in which patriarchal ideologies become manifest through conflicts of gender inequality and gendered violence, which can take the shape of sexual assault, misogyny, domestic violence, unequal moral standards, and so on. In *Alias Grace* the normalized, everyday nature of this reality is reflected in a conversation between Dr Jordan and Grace, when Dr Jordan wonders

“Did [Kinnear] ever touch you? Did he take liberties?”

“Only what was usual, Sir.”

“Usual?” says Simon. He is baffled.

This shows that gender inequality and gender violence are so inherent to women’s reality that they come to constitute the usual, the everyday.

With this in mind, I would argue that women’s everyday experience of and subjection to harmful ideological rhetorics and gendered material circumstances can reasonably come to constitute what Judith Herman labels prolonged exposure to trauma, something which (I hope to have shown) is an inherent consequence of phallogocentric societies. Herman explains that “[w]hen the victim is free to escape, she will not be abused a second time; repeated trauma occurs only when the victim is a prisoner, unable to flee, and under the control of the perpetrator” (74). Considering the recurrent observation that there is indeed no position outside of either language or ideology, and considering the only two options available within

ideology are to become complicit in it or subjected to it, women are demonstrably both imprisoned in and under the control of the patriarchal system. Indeed, as Herman goes on to point out, women within Western society “are rendered captive by economic, social, psychological, and legal subordination, as well as by physical force” (74). Thus, the everyday becomes the time-space, not just of historical erasure, but of an ideological subjection experienced as “prolonged, repeated trauma” (74). For women, it often becomes a *traumatic everyday*. However, it is critical to point out that, just as women’s everyday is fragmented based on socio-economic, political and ethnic differences, so the traumatic everyday varies in shape and degree based on these same aspects.

As with any trauma, prolonged, repeated exposure leaves its scars on the female body and mind. In “Unbearable Weight” (1993), Susan Bordo argues for the conception of the body as “a powerful symbolic form, a surface on which the central rules, hierarchies, and even metaphysical commitments of a culture are inscribed and thus reinforced through the concrete language of the body” (2240). Following this claim, the body becomes more than just a “*text* of culture;” it is a “*practical*, direct locus of social control” (Bordo 2240). Under the social control of patriarchal society the female body becomes a docile body, embodying the narratives espoused by phallogocentrism. Just as Herman argues, conceiving of this social control in the form of physical force is too narrow a conceptualization. Rape, sexual abuse or domestic violence are only some of the more extreme manifestations of the harmful ideologies that the patriarchy inscribes upon the female body. Indeed, one of the less explicit ideologies that Bordo focusses on is the “pursuit of an everchanging, homogenizing, elusive ideal of femininity” (2240). The injuriousness of this pursuit is also addressed by Grace, who notices that “the young ladies nowadays were starving themselves because of the fashion, which was to be pale and sickly, and they laced their stays so tight they fainted as soon as looked at” (315-16). In other words, Beauvoir’s *Feminine Myth* is not only problematic in

that it denies women the opportunity to express their own reality, but through the chasing of this elusive myth women also become complicit in the subjection of their own bodies to the harmful ideologies. As such, the female body can be read as an “aggressively graphic text [...] – a text that insists, actually demands, that it be read as a cultural statement, a statement about gender” (Bordo 2243). Often, these statements take on a “hyperliteral form,” becoming a grotesque caricature of the elusive ideal they are meant to represent. The cultural statement, Bordo emphasizes, is necessarily written “in the languages of horrible suffering,” namely that of abject physical suffering (2247). If female bodies plagued by hysteria, agoraphobia and anorexia carry cultural meaning relating to the ideological construction of the feminine ideal, then bodies scarred by rape, sexual abuse and domestic violence demand to be read as statements relating to the ideological construction of harmful rhetorics on the female subject and their material conditions in Western society.

One of the central themes of *Alias Grace* is the exploration of women’s everyday lives within the everyday reality of patriarchal society. In her analysis of Atwood’s novel, Holly Blackford focusses specifically on the implications of the dynamics between mistress and servant, as embodied by Nancy and Grace. The mistress-servant relation, she argues, is characterized by the fact that “both employer and servant lack male power and feel inherently inferior as women, a commonality that creates a tendency for both mistress and servant to scrutinize the customs and behaviours of one another – to be, in short, competitive” (236). Thus, woman’s lack of power within patriarchal society forces them to become each other’s competitors instead of companions and supporters. Whereas Vickroy constructs a case for dissociative identity disorder (as discussed in the previous chapter), this assertion opens up the possibility for another interpretation of Grace’s split personality: patriarchal society causes a split in women’s personalities, for it constitutes women always as both each other’s companions and competitors at the same time. To Grace, Blackford notes, “it is Nancy who

seems to have two personalities [...]. One moment, Nancy is like a sister; the next, when the gentleman is present, she is vindictive and ignores her. Grace's own dual personality only seems to mirror Nancy's dual personality" (254). The relationship between the two women illustrates Althusser's claim that one either becomes subjected to or enforcer of ideology. In order to get ahead in life and gain a share of male power, women must become complicit in perpetuating the gender inequality of patriarchal society by espousing the ruling ideology. In the most extreme cases, they must be willing to do away with their competitor, because for women the struggle continues "until one or the other dies or leaves the house" (Blackford 236).

Besides highlighting the fact that women in patriarchal societies are forcibly split, always both the companion and the competitor, the subjected and the enforcer, *Alias Grace* also emphasizes how women are split in the eyes of men, for it plays on the persistent virgin/whore binary. Grace's mother, for instance, functions as the symbolic embodiment of the "virgin"; she is submissive, receptive, faithful and demurely suffers her fate. Nancy, on the other hand, becomes the embodiment of the "whore"; she is promiscuous, domineering, ambitious and sometimes even aggressive. Mary exemplifies what happens to a woman who transgresses and transitions from the virgin to the whore. Yet once again, it does not matter which half of the myth the women come to represent, for their end is the same: the female body succumbs. Grace is the only one who effectively manages to avoid the virgin/whore binary by simultaneously completely embodying it – just as Bordo would argue – in its hyperliteral form. Though the novel does hint that Grace has some sexual experience, she is overall extremely and explicitly reticent about sexual interaction, likely conditioned in this attitude by the horrifying things she has seen sexually active women suffer. Grace's secondary consciousness which, Vickroy argues, mirrors Mary Whitney's personality, takes up position at the other side of the spectrum, being extremely and explicitly sexually

aggressive. The very fact that Grace's mind is so completely split between the these two, to the degree that the one consciousness has no knowledge of the other, mimics the absolute binary nature of the virgin/whore rhetoric; it leaves no room for middle ground. Notably, then, Grace as the literal embodiment of the binary is the only female body that does not succumb to the forces of society. These are some of the ways in which the traumatic everyday takes shape for women in *Alias Grace* and how the patriarchal ideologies take shape in practice. What remains to be explored is how the consequences of the twin forces of phallocentrism and ideology (which find their perpetuation in the traumatic everyday) naturally lead to a female experience of trauma that is shamed and/or silenced, a process that in itself comes to constitute a secondary trauma.

Shame and Silence: A Secondary Trauma

In *The Female Face of Shame* (2013), Johnson and Moran explore why women in Western society are generally more shame-prone than men (3). They pay particular attention to the body as a starting point to understanding the association between shame and femininity. Within Freud's theory of psychoanalysis, shame becomes a feminine characteristic because it proceeds from a "genital deficiency"; in other words, it is the result of the ever-absent phallus (Johnson & Moran 10). Freud's assertion, however, is only a small manifestation of the larger forces at work within Western society that practice shaming rhetorics directed at women, women's bodies and women's experience of trauma. Shame is a dual experience. Johnson and Moran point out that it is "not only an individual, embodied experience but one rooted in familial and cultural contexts" (3). It is both perpetuated by the self and by the intrapersonal context, for shame "arises from 'a feeling of inferiority,' the painful consciousness of having 'violated a prescribed code'" (Fayard 35). Thus, shame is an embodied experience generated by the self, but it only comes into being in the context of a community that prescribes the

codes violated in the first place. On the one hand, then, it constitutes a “gesture towards self-erasure and invisibility,” as evidenced by the idiomatic expressions aimed at representing the shame effect, such as “I could have died on the spot” or “I wanted to sink through the floor” (Johnson & Moran 4). On the other hand, it is enforced by “oppressive ideologies such as sexism, homophobia, racism and colonialism,” which “damage, cripple, and distort the female subject precisely because they function as *shaming* ideologies” (Johnson & Moran 3). Thus, these shaming ideologies set specific gender codes that, when violated, generate rejection from both society and the victim herself.

The problem in patriarchal society, however, is that it has constructed the codes in such a way that almost any form of speaking out is a violation. Women attempting to make their experience, reality or story heard often become subjected to “the contempt of respected others” (Fayard 35). Fayard points out that

[i]f to feel shame is to feel seen and exposed, then shame acts as a powerful mechanism of social and internal sanction insofar as it causes the self to internalize injunctions about specific behaviours by identification with the shamer whose judgements it cares about. (39)

Thus, much as women are complicit in the perpetuation of harmful ideological discourses in patriarchal society, women also become complicit in the shaming of themselves by accepting and internalizing the judgement of the shamer – a judgement which is in turn constituted by the ruling ideology. This is precisely why shaming ideologies are such a useful tool for patriarchal society when it comes to repressing women’s experience. Shame and silence, then, often go hand in hand, and in many cases it is not clear which of the two precedes the other. Fayard points towards a particularly harmful effect of these shaming and silencing ideologies in the specific case of rape: “the wound of trauma and the dishonour of rape are reinforced by the anxiety triggered by the fear of exposure and the shaming procedures (contempt and rejection) that might follow” (39). Rape thus becomes an experience that silences the self, because putting it into words entails risking the censure of others. This

censure, taking the form of the shaming procedures of contempt and rejection, is what is known as *victim shaming*: it is an extremely harmful rhetoric that associates the “shame of rape with a discourse of discipline and punishment for the victim” rather than for the perpetrator. In other words, the blame for the traumatic experience is transferred to the victim. Victim shaming often takes on the shape of one of two rhetorical strategies. Firstly, society is prone to construct a narrative in which the victim embodies the role of the whore in the virgin/whore binary. Fayard notes that in the “shaming gaze of the phallogocentric structure which mirrors the rapist’s sexist reference system, the raped body becomes an object of abjection and the victim is envisaged as a potential temptress or an object of contempt” (40). This narrative forces the traumatized body into the transition from the virgin to the whore. The second tactic open to the shamer is to call into question the truthfulness of the victim’s reality. In the tradition of Freudian psychoanalysis, this approach constitutes a painful negation of the reality of women’s experiences. Indeed, De la Conca attests that many rape victims go through the harrowing process of having “the reality, and therefore the truth, of the event attested” (75). The patriarchal forces of shame and silencing, which are exercised in the traumatic everyday, thus come to constitute a sort of *secondary trauma*. De la Conca even goes so far as to claim that, for many women, “the trauma is triggered by the various ways silence is imposed on them” rather than by the traumatic event itself (76).

Taking a step back, let us recall Cathy Caruth’s approach to trauma as an unrepresentable event. For her, trauma constitutes a fundamental paradox between knowing and not knowing, illustrating the inherent contradictions of experience and language and showing how “textual representation of reality is never straightforward, always provisional and perhaps even impossible” (Kurtz 422). In other words, trauma eludes linguistic articulation. Since the publication of *Unclaimed Experience*, this claim has been nuanced, contested and reconceptualized by scholars such as Michelle Balaev and Roger Kurtz.

Without either rejecting or accepting Caruth's assertion of the inexpressibility of trauma, I would like to propose that it is not necessarily the traumatic experience that is inexpressible for women (though this may very well be the result in practice), but female trauma becomes to a degree inexpressible because language in our phallogocentric society resists women's expression of their experience and instead enforces a traumatic everyday in which their experience is further repressed by means of shaming ideologies. This fundamental shortcoming of language in phallogocentric society has been exposed by French feminists such as Hélène Cixous since the 1970s, when she advocated the necessity of an *écriture féminine*: a "second, 'feminine language,' based, in this case, on an ethics of care attuned to the powers of the maternal" (Onega & Ganteau 5). This understanding amongst feminists that there is indeed a need for an alternative language aimed at expressing the experience of women ostensibly supports the assertion that the language available in patriarchal society is not adequate: through its favouring of the experience and signification of the male subject, language simultaneously works to repress the female subject.

In "The Laugh of Medusa" (1975), Cixous argues that "woman" has been immersed "in her naivité, kept in the dark about herself, led into self-disdain by the great arm of parental-conjugal phallogocentrism" so that she has become "ashamed of her own strength" (1943). She describes how and why women have always felt mute by focussing on the physical sensations of a woman wishing to speak up in public, but failing to do so:

Time and again I, too, have felt so full of luminous torrents that I could burst – burst with forms more beautiful than those which are put in frames and sold for a stinking fortune. And I, too, said nothing, showed nothing: I didn't open my mouth, I didn't repaint my half of the world. I was ashamed. I was afraid, and I swallowed my shame and fear. I said to myself: You are mad! (1943)

A number of things stand out as significant in Cixous's description. For one, *Alias Grace* seems to echo her experience when Grace compares herself and her growing desire to give voice to her story to a ripe peach about to burst (79). Moreover, Cixous highlights the

previously discussed shaming ideologies, exemplifying how silence and shame (“I, too, said nothing [...]. I was ashamed”) often go hand in hand in a gesture of self-censorship when it comes to women expressing their reality, whether this reality takes the form of “luminous torrents” or traumatic experiences. And finally, it harkens back to the harmful narratives originating from the historical discourse of psychoanalysis, when women who dared to speak up were called hysterics and risked being turned into spectacles of madness. This rhetoric of hysteria and madness, still a persistent and covert part of the ruling patriarchal ideology, becomes, as Cixous illustrates, internalized as women repeat it, telling themselves that they are “mad” for feeling as if they could burst. Thus, shame leads women to silence themselves, while keeping silent is often equally a cause of shame. *Alias Grace* even seems to suggest that women who do speak up risk their very lives. Mary is “bold in speech when [they] were alone” to the point where she astonishes Grace “at the words that came out of her mouth,” but she is soon reduced to silence at the hands of the cruel abortion doctor (173). Nancy, too, meets with impertinence, animosity and even a violent end at the hands of McDermott for the sole reason that she “never gave him a moment’s rest from her tongue, and found fault constantly” (264). For women to speak up about anything, then, necessarily entails accepting potential repercussions.

Despite this general danger, Cixous spurs women on to claim their voice by claiming a position in the very symbolic order that neglected them for so long. This, then, is the importance of *écriture féminine*: it is a tool to counter the silencing force of phallogocentrism. It is by writing and by “taking up the challenge of speech which has been governed by the Phallus, that women will confirm women in a place other than that which is reserved in and by the symbolic, that is, in a place other than silence” (Cixous 1947). But they must not simply destabilize the position they have been assigned within the phallogocentric system of signification; they must

invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulation and codes, they must submerge, cut through, get beyond the ultimate reserve-discourse, including the one that laughs at the very idea of pronouncing the word “silence” [...]. (Cixous 1952).

More specifically, this new language is one that women “must write through their bodies” (1953). As such, Cixous emphasizes the embodied nature of the act of breaking the forces of silence. For, like Bordo, she believes that women will find expression through their bodies. Bordo claims that the female body is simultaneously a site of resistance and subjection. It is a text that expresses the reality that women are unable to put into words. Even if the available language and symbolic system resists the female experience, the body is a system of signification that is always open to them. The experience of trauma can thus finally be given expression by means of the female body. And if female bodies are capable of signifying, they become more than a site upon which the traumas of the everyday are rendered visible. They become possible sites of therapeutic healing; they become the site of the talking cure. Thus, the female body will be central in the alternative approaches to female trauma I will propose in chapter 3.

Chapter 3: Three Embodied Approaches to the Female Trauma

Many scholars working on (what used to be) the margins of the field of Western psychology, such as those focussing on the postcolonial or post-apartheid situation, have pointed out that the dominant discourse in psychology has historically had little to no eye for the social causation of psychological processes (such as trauma). Edward E. Sampson argues that the “dominant discourse within the western tradition and within the psychology it has spawned can be described as exclusionary” in that “history, culture and community are generally not considered as central to understanding what are presumed to be universal psychological processes” (30). No doubt as a reaction to critical remarks such as those made by Sampson, recent years have seen the emergence of a challenger and possible successor to this dominant discourse, “social constructionism”. However, though social constructionism is laudably “inclusive of history, culture and community, it shares with the dominant tradition an exclusion of embodiment” (Sampson 30). As such, neither the social constructionism nor the dominant discourse takes into account the “inherently embodied character of all social practices” (Sampson 30). Thus, Sampson’s broader critique of Western psychology corresponds with observations by Tseris, Herman and Bennett regarding the treatment of female trauma. All three note an apparent development towards a more inclusive approach to and a broader understanding of the social causation of female trauma. And yet the body has not been a part of this more inclusive dialogue. Since the female body is an important signifying system for the expression of female experience, it is productive that an embodied approach be taken in order to advance understanding of the female trauma. To be sure there have been many scholars – influential ones at that, such as Judith Butler and Michel Foucault – who have engaged with the body and its place/role within society. However, as Sampson points out, these social constructionist studies are mostly focussed on “the *object-body*” instead of embodiment. The object-body is “the body that is known as a third-person observer

knows any object in the world” (Sampson 31). These discourses are thus “discourses *about* the body, not embodied discourses” and they lack the desired consideration of embodied social practices (Sampson 31).

The three approaches to the female trauma that I will propose in this chapter are united by their origin in this embodied discourse. Schubert and Semin argue that to approach the human from an embodied perspective entails “examining how biological constraints give expression to human functioning in socially situated contexts, and how that varies with ecological, material and existential conditions” (1135). According to them, all human functioning is “constrained by the properties of our evolved brains and bodies, and therefore it is embodied” (Schubert & Semin 1135). Though I appreciate the vast area of operation that their definitions ascribe to the embodied discourse, I do not necessarily wish to conceptualize the discourse around the body as one of “biological constraints” only. It is not just about constraints, it is also about opportunities and possibilities. An embodied approach should first and foremost be concerned with the inner life and circumstances of the body in question and how these influence and give shape to its experience of (social) reality. Thus, approaches to trauma rooted in embodiment should focus on the “role of the body” in the “interaction with other agents and the world” (Schubert & Semin 1135). Looking at trauma from an embodied perspective, the proposed alternative approaches make use of the potential of the female body as a site of meaning making and expression. Indeed, Sampson points out the crucial role of the body in social reality, stating that “[w]e spend too much of our energy focussing on language and ideology and so miss the embodied character of language and hence the position of the body in ideological practices” (49). Starting from this claim about the interaction between the body and ideology, he argues that the “pedagogy of the oppressed must be addressed to the deeply embodied quality of oppression” (49). Sampson, then, asserts that any move towards emancipation must necessarily address the oppressed body that yearns

for this emancipation, for it needs to learn a new way of comportment in order to obtain its desire. Too often we miss the embodied nature of oppression and domination and consequently overlook the embodied route to potential emancipation (Sampson 50). The purpose of this chapter, then, is to come to an embodied discourse regarding the female experience of trauma and let the female body become a site of expression and, consequently, the first step towards emancipation.

The Affective Turn

If Sampson advocates a turn towards the embodied experience in psychology in general, then affect theory is this trend put into practice most explicitly, particularly in the field of trauma studies. In her 2012 article “Trauma and the Turn to Affect,” Ruth Leys points out how “in the course of the past several years the deconstructive theory informing Caruth’s approach has lost much of its appeal, with the result that trauma theory has been modified,” a modification which, Leys notes, is characterized by its “renewed attention to the body” (5). The difficulty of working with a term such as “affect” is that it has no uniform definition or application; its functioning differs across different academics’ works. However, most theorists agree that “affect must be viewed as independent of and, in an important sense, prior to ‘ideology’ – that is, prior to intention, reasons, meaning, and belief – because it is a non-signifying, autonomic process of the body that takes place below the threshold of conscious awareness and meaning” (9). In effect, these theorists assume a disjunction or gap between the affective processes mediated within the subject and the subject’s own cognition or knowledge of the objects that mediate these processes (Leys 9). Because of the speed with which these processes thus occur within the body, the mind has no time to intervene and affective thinking takes place below the level of “conscious awareness and meaning.” As such, affects are often described as “inhuman,” “pre-subjective” and “visceral” forces and

intensities that, while being separate from them, influence our thinking and actions. They are, in a sense, non-intentional bodily reactions. Leys herself, though, is opposed to the anti-intentionalist notion expressed in the idea that “action and behaviour are held to be determined by material-corporeal affective dispositions that are independent of the mind’s control or participation” (12). She notes, however, that this idea of non-intentionality has “a powerful grip on our cultural imaginary and is not easily dislodged” (12). General fascination with the idea might evidence a broader desire to find a level of existence and interaction with the world that is not rooted in and constituted by ideology. And perhaps, in the case of the female subject, this expression without mediation or censorship by mind or ideology is precisely what is necessary.

In practice, affect always occurs between subjects or between a subject and object: it exists as a relational and circulating structure. Vilashini Cooppan defines affect as a “circulatory economy composed of objects, bodies, emotions, and histories in contact” (60). Affects, then, “do not exist *in* themselves or *in* particular entities [...] but instead emerge as ‘an effect of the circulation’ among them” (Cooppan 60). In other words, affects exist only as mediated processes. Moreover, according to Michael Richardson, though affects are transitory and momentary, they have also proven to be “layering, stratifying, slowly sedimenting” (154). This stratification and sedimentation of trauma happens in two ways. On the one hand, Robertson points out that the expression of trauma includes both a “*writing about trauma* but also the *trauma of writing*” (154). Thus, when women give expression to their experience through the body, they do not solely express the trauma, but the very act of expression can be a traumatic experience on its own.¹⁰ As such, the affects mediated throughout both these acts come to be stratified. On the other hand, Teresa Brennan points

¹⁰ The “trauma of writing” differs from the secondary trauma proposed in chapter 2 in that here it is the act of writing/expressing that constitutes the trauma, as opposed to the potentially traumatic social reception of the result of this act of expression.

out that, particularly in the case of rape or incest, “negative affects are affixed to the traumatized body” as if the “psyche has incorporated the very structure of abuse in some malformation” (47). In this sense, affect sediments. I will argue that this idea of traumatic affects as stratifying on and sedimenting within the body provides us with an important new framework for reading trauma in *Alias Grace*. Because affect is a much broader and more primordial notion than trauma (by definition, it simply refers to a moving sensation and does not even rule out mediation of positive affect) and entails a process of stratification or sedimentation, it allows us to approach affecting experiences that cannot be traced back to a singular traumatizing event or occurrence in the strictest sense. Thus, when it comes to the traumatic everyday of women in patriarchal society, an experience that is hard to conceptualize as a “trauma” in the strict sense of a response to a specific incident, these cases might be acknowledged and understood more thoroughly by means of a consideration of their affective force.¹¹

When reading *Alias Grace* with a specific sensitivity for affective experiences, what stands out is Grace’s apparent lack of intense emotion or strong affective response. She narrates her past from a position of temporal and emotional distance, the novel consisting mostly of an uninterpreted/unmediated report of her first-person direct speech. Indeed, this is one of the most notable characteristics of Grace’s narration; her emotional distance and the apparent indifference with which she recounts a number of shockingly horrific events and the appalling circumstances of her life in general. For example, when the Marks family is forced by poverty to migrate to Canada and are boarding the ship that is to ferry them across the ocean, Grace notes how “some of the women were wailing a good deal; but I did not do so, as

¹¹ Another option open to us would be to rephrase the definition of trauma to include this (social) reality, a development that – as we have seen – has also picked up speed in recent years. Yet this redefinition of the limits of trauma still implies a continuation within the traditional paradigm of trauma theory rooted in psychoanalysis, whereas affect theory is somewhat further removed from this discourse and might prove to be less resistant as a consequence.

I did not see the use of it,” despite – or precisely because of – the fact that she is unlikely ever to return to their country and their kin (129). And when her mother dies during their passage, Grace confesses that “I did not cry” (139). Instead, she worries terribly about which sheet to wrap her mother’s body in for the funeral, for “all we had was three sheets” – two old and one new – and “I did not know which one to use” (139). Grace’s general detachment, however, only renders the few moments in the novel that she does experience intense affect more significant, the moments that she is literally overcome with sensations.

After she has received her pardon and sets foot outside the prison as a free woman for the first time in almost thirty years, Grace herself points out that at “such times of more than ordinary brightness or darkness I used to faint” and that, indeed, “it would not have been in nature for me to have remained unmoved, on such a momentous occasion” (519). First of all, this passage evidences one of the main characteristics of affect theory pointed out above: affect does not focus only on negative experiences to the exclusion of positive affective force, but is equally applicable to moments of “more than ordinary brightness or darkness.” Secondly, it points in the direction of Grace’s propensity to faint as manifestation of moments of affect, for these moments attest to her being more than ordinarily affected. This means that we can read Grace’s fainting and perhaps even the lapses in her memory not as straightforward signs of mental instability or a split personality, but more importantly as testaments to and consequences of an intense affective response. It is thus not so much about what is not known (i.e., the events taking place when she is unconscious, the information Dr Jordan so desperately wishes to obtain) but about what precedes the unknown.¹²

The first instance of Grace being overcome by affect that the reader comes across is when she comes face to face with a doctor. The Governor’s wife has promised Grace’s

¹² In this sense, then, affect theory does not negate conventional trauma theory, but sheds light on a different aspect of trauma: the two are not mutually exclusive.

compliance with the doctor's request to measure her head; as the two others exchange pleasantries, Grace observes the unfamiliar doctor, until

I see his hand, a hand like a glove, a glove stuffed with raw meat, his hand plunging into the open mouth of his leather bag. It comes out glinting and I know I have seen a hand like that before; and then I lift my head and stare him straight in the eye, and my heart clenches and kicks out inside me, and then I begin to scream.

Because it's the same doctor, the same one, the very same black-coated doctor with his bagful of shining knives. (32)

Immediately after this occurrence she faints and though she is "brought round with a glass of cold water dashed in the face" she continues to scream (33). The incident highlights what Teresa Brennan argues about affect, namely that negative affect often becomes affixed to the traumatized body. In other words, the encounter with a doctor mediates an affect that has already been fixated within the body. It is not so much the confrontation with the man that causes Grace to faint, for as he walks into the room and exchanges a few words with the Governor's wife, Grace has ample time to absorb and observe his presence with relative composure. It is when she meets his eye, establishing a connection between herself and the doctor, that her body becomes affected and her heart "clenches and kicks out." This shows that affect is both relational and mediated. The passage also suggests that affect might in fact predate cognition. Only much later, after the doctor has long gone, does she realize that "it was not the same doctor in any case, it only looked like him" (33). Her reaction to his person was such a visceral, primordial reaction that it completely forewent any rational thought or regulated emotion, such as the recognition of another human being: the affective response followed so closely upon the establishment of the connection that it preceded interference by rational thought.

In affect theory we need not search for one specific event that constitutes the origin of the trauma, explain the presence of a particular manifested symptom or even attempt to rectify or retrieve that which has been forced into the subconscious. A deconstructive approach might reasonably lead us to conclude that Grace's fainting was the result of a

resurfacing of the memories surrounding Mary Whitney's botched abortion, triggered by the presence of the physician. But affect theory lets us consider the affective responses on their own. Grace's response could safely be categorized as fear, induced by the sudden and intrusive eye contact with the unknown doctor. Yet it is the gloves, the leather bag and the black coat in particular that mediate a great affect within Grace: when she observes his hand, she sees a "glove stuffed with raw meat"; when he reaches for his instruments, she sees this glove forcibly, almost aggressively, "plunging into the open mouth of his leather bag"; when she beholds his black-coated person, she instinctively knows that he comes with "a bag full of shining knives." Affect is often mediated by objects and these three objects in particular are powerful triggers, for they are a referent not just to this one doctor but to all men of medicine that have passed through Grace's life up to that moment. In this way, the affect mediated by the objects is cumulative and come to constitute a stratified trauma; it is the result of a process of sedimentation. The gloves and bag and coat do not simply represent the one doctor that botched Mary Whitney's abortion, but mediates affect related to the memory of any doctor or physician Grace encountered throughout her life that came with (the equivalent of) a leather bag in his gloved hand and a harmful, misogynist, dismissive, or patronizing attitude towards female patients: the abortion doctor, the doctors at the asylum (mis)treating Grace for hysteria, the ship doctor neglecting Grace's mother. Notably, Dr Jordan comes into her life without either gloves or a leather bag; indeed, one of the very first questions Grace poses to the young doctor is, "Do you have a bag with knives in it? [...] A leather satchel" (42). As such, the affects "operate in non-linear, non-hermeneutic, and non-signifying ways" (Cooppan 55). It is a non-linear experience in that it carries the affective force of all these previous experiences, moments when she might have felt helpless, degraded, powerless, frustrated. This shows that a focus on the mediation of affect and its accompanying

consideration of trauma as a stratification ensures a more understanding consideration of the traumatizing potential of the everyday.

Pain and the Birth of Language

The second alternative approach I will propose is to reconceptualize female trauma through the lens of physical pain. Despite the origin of the word in Greek, where it refers to a “wound” in general, trauma in psychoanalysis and trauma theory has strictly come to denote a psychological wound. This development was a crucial victory in its own right for multiple reasons, not the least of which was that this redefinition prompted a move away from any conception of trauma or hysteria as originating from a deviation or deficiency in the female body, particularly the uterus. That is not to say, however, that physical pain, such as pain caused by (gendered) violence, does not play a critical role in many women’s lives and constitutes one of the main causes of female traumas. This reality was first addressed by the feminist movement of the 1970s. They protested that the largest group of trauma victims was as yet unacknowledged and consisted of women suffering from domestic abuse (Herman 28). One of the very first manifestos emerging from the American feminist movement, Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), tellingly referred to it as the “problem without a name” (Herman 28). Yet physical pain is not restricted to domestic abuse; it often pervades women’s lives, is inherent to it even, from more common manifestations in the form of menstrual pains and childbirth, to atrocities such as rape, female circumcision and domestic or otherwise gendered violence.¹³ Focusing on the physical pain that trauma often entails for women gives us another glimpse into the challenge that women face when they attempt to make their story known.

¹³ The forms of violence belonging to this last category are, I would argue, a result of harmful ideology, whereas the first are clearly biological and inevitable afflictions.

According to Elaine Scarry, “[p]ain achieves its aversiveness in part by bringing about, even within the radius of several feet, this absolute split between one’s sense of one’s own reality and the reality of other persons” (4). Physical pain thus highlights in the most violent way possible the impossibility that humans face in articulating their individual experience and reality in its entirety and its full affect to another human being. To experience pain, Scarry suggests, is to experience something that no other person will ever fully acknowledge or understand, no matter how much they may wish to empathize: thus, it constitutes an absolute split between two realities, in that it both brings about this split and draws attention to a distance that was already there to begin with. Scarry further elaborates on this most fundamental split when she argues that “for the person in pain, so incontestably and unnegotiably present is it that ‘having pain’ may come to be thought of as the most vibrant example of what it is to ‘have certainty,’ while for the other person it is so elusive that ‘hearing about pain’ may exist as the primary model of what it is ‘to have doubt’” (4). She concludes that pain thus “comes unsharably into our midst as at once that which cannot be denied and that which cannot be confirmed” (Scarry 4). What we are dealing with, then, is not simply absolute certainty and an *absence* of absolute certainty experienced respectively by both parties (which would imply the possibility of meeting on neutral ground), but absolute certainty on the one hand and absolute doubt on the other (a much more fundamental opposition). As Scarry puts it, to “have pain is to have *certainty*, to hear about pain is to have *doubt*” (13). This opposition may lie at the core of one of the most harmful rhetorics of patriarchal society, namely the questioning of the victim’s reality and experience that accompanies the social rituals of silencing and shaming.

Scarry’s argument is reminiscent of Caruth’s when she proposes that pain “achieves in part through its unsharability, and it ensures this unsharability through its resistance to language” (4). Scarry bases her claim on linguistic arguments, pointing out that unlike “any

other state of consciousness” pain has no “referential content,” by which she means that it “is not *of* or *for* anything” (5). In other words, the phenomenon of pain takes no linguistic object and as a result it has proven extremely difficult to relay in language. Scarry even takes her argument one step further when she emphasizes that pain does not only “resist language but actively destroys it, brings about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned” (4). Since women already face a challenge expressing their reality in a phallogocentric society, it would be reasonable to assume that the unsharability of physical pain adds another obstacle to their struggle for expression. Perhaps, though, this unsharability is both the problem and (part of) a solution. For pain does not just resist expression in language, much like language in a phallogocentric society resists the expression of female trauma, but it shatters this language and returns to a state *before* linguistic expression. If we contend that expression in a phallogocentric language is problematic for women in the first place, then perhaps a shattering of linguistic meaning is not solely detrimental. Indeed, Scarry points to this positive potential when she goes on to state that to

witness the moment when pain causes a reversion to the pre-language of cries and groans is to witness the destruction of language; but conversely, to be present when a person moves up out of that pre-language and projects the facts of sentience into speech it is almost to have been permitted to be present at the birth of language. (6)

Thus, the very shattering quality of physical pain also allows for the rebirth and perhaps invention of a new language, a language that is not resistant and that has the expressive potential to give voice to women’s reality.¹⁴

¹⁴ One might point out that a focus on physical pain does not include women who only suffer from a psychological wound. Yet often, even in cases that would strictly count as non-violent, physical pain becomes an important part of the wound, for people who suffer from any sort of trauma are more likely to engage in self-harm or attempt suicide (Herman 50). Moreover, as mentioned before, these alternative approaches do not claim to be all-encompassing, for that is likely impossible; they are meant to help shine light on under-examined aspects of the female experience of trauma.

One character in *Alias Grace* seems to be in an almost continuous state of pain, or at least grave discomfort: Grace's mother. Besides being with child so often that Grace "cannot remember [her] mother when she wasn't in what they call a delicate condition," she is also of a weak disposition and has suffered her husband's violent outbursts for many years. During the family's crossing of the Atlantic Ocean towards Canada she falls gravely ill and though the pain she endures is not the direct result of violent acts, it is made abundantly clear that the twelve pregnancies her body has sustained have fatally weakened her constitution. Grace notes, for example, that, when her mother gives birth to a child just a short while before their migration, she "was ill for a longer time than usual" (126). Indeed, every pregnancy is another onslaught on her frail body, and her abusive husband refuses to take responsibility for or even acknowledge the assault these pregnancies constitute, angrily demanding to know of his wife "[w]hat you are bringing another brat into this world for, haven't you had enough of that by now, but no you can't stop" (123). It is no surprise, then, that when Grace finds that her mother has taken a bad turn and complains about a severe stomach pain, she immediately suspects that "it was another mouth to feed" (137). Her mother also complains about "such a violent headache she could scarcely see, and I brought wet cloths and laid them on her forehead; and I saw she had a fever" (137). When Grace and a fellow friendly passenger examine her belly, "prodding and poking, [...] my mother screamed" (137). Clearly, then, as Scarry would suggest, extreme physical pain reduces Grace's mother to a state prior to language, to the "pre-language of cries and groans" (Scarry 6). Indeed, as the situation worsens, "she could scarcely speak, and what she did say made no sense at all" (138). This, then, is the break-down of all linguistic expression that many women are subjected to under the systematic violence of patriarchal society.

The real problem in this case, however, is that this break-down of language is not followed by what Scarry refers to as "the birth of language," when the sufferer finds the

strength to move up out of the pre-language of screams and manages to give linguistic expression to their pain, despite the phenomenon's inherent resistance to language. For Grace's mother, this opportunity of expression is not only obstructed by the sad reality that her life-long suffering finally proves fatal and she succumbs before reaching this stage; it is also obstructed by the ship's doctor who, incapable of addressing the cause of pain (or perhaps even unwilling to do so), simply decides to administer laudanum, and "a great dose of it, because my mother soon became quiet, which was no doubt his object" (138). Here, we have a literal case of the silencing of a woman's expression of her trauma. The ship's doctor wishes to silence her screams, the sounds that signify the physical pain that is both a consequence of the traumatic everyday and that constitutes a trauma in and of itself, thus refusing Grace's mother the opportunity to let this physical suffering be transformed into an expression of her experience. In the end, despite Grace's hope for a "fine deathbed speech," her mother "did not say a word" as she passes away" (138). Mary Whitney's case is surprisingly similar to that of Grace's mother. She suffers terrible pain as the doctor performs a brutal abortion on her that leaves her screaming and crying out (203). That night, when the two girls go to bed, Mary is still reduced to "groans of agony" which "after a time [...] grew quieter" (204). The next morning Grace finds "Mary, dead in the bed with her eyes wide open and staring" (204). Much like Grace's mother, then, Mary's body succumbs to the physical pain associated with her trauma without being able to find expression for it: she takes to her grave the identity of the unknown gentleman who had indirectly "done [Mary] to death" by impregnating and then discarding her, "as surely as if he'd taken the knife and plunged it into her body himself" (206).

It is significant, however, that the text seems unwilling to allow these characters to leave the process of signification and expression unfinished. Grace's mother and Mary Whitney have been bereft of the ability to "project the facts of sentience into speech" during

their lives and they will find no rest in the afterlife until they do. After her mother's body has been disposed of in the bottomless depths of the ocean, a supernatural occurrence instils in Grace the belief that her mother's spirit remains behind, "trapped in the bottom of the ship," so that "now she would be caught in there for ever and ever, down below in the hold like a moth in a bottle" (141). The same goes for Mary, who, buried in her nightgown, "didn't look dead in the least" (229). Indeed, she gives off such a lifelike impression that Grace confesses that she finds it "very hard [...] to believe that Mary was truly dead" (229). I would argue that both women find no rest because they have not been allowed the opportunity to rise above their pre-language states and tell their stories the way they want them told. This last part is most explicit in Mary's case. After her death, as the scene of the tragedy is being cleaned up literally and its history figuratively by the members of the household, Grace imagines Mary to be "listening to us, and hearing about our plans to tell these lies about her; and I thought, She will not be easy in her mind about it" (206). Indeed, though Mary stubbornly takes the identity of her lover and murderer to her grave, her desperate need to make her story known drives her restless spirit to haunt and even take possession of Grace. Notably, it is when a fellow servant muses, "There is more to this than meets the eye, I wonder who the man was," that Grace first hears Mary's voice, urging Grace to "let [her] in," illustrating that the haunting is triggered by Mary's need to make the truth known (207). A focus on the physical pain that often accompanies the female experience of trauma thus allows us to find new meaning in and understanding of these experiences and supposedly supernatural occurrences.

Female Trauma as (Post)memory

The concept of 'postmemory' is a contested one, but may nonetheless prove fruitful in the context of female trauma. The term was coined and popularized by Marianne Hirsch, who

conceives of postmemory as “the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic, experiences that preceded their births but that were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right” (103). Hirsch, a daughter of Holocaust survivors herself, applies postmemory specifically to the context of the genocide, but the term might reasonably be applied more broadly. Her theory is based on the assumption that

descendants of survivors (of victims as well as of perpetrators) of massive traumatic events connect so deeply to the previous generation’s remembrances of the past that they need to call that connection *memory* and thus that, in certain extreme circumstances, memory *can* be transmitted to those who were not actually there to live an event. At the same time – so it is assumed – this received memory is *distinct* from the recall of contemporary witnesses and participants. (106)

Thus, postmemory thus manifests “in certain extreme circumstances” as a structure of trans- and inter-generational transmission, the content of this transmission being the knowledge and experience of the traumatic event (106). As such, it is a case of “inherited” trauma that, significantly, is most commonly transferred within the family circle. Hirsch refers to the “nonverbal and noncognitive acts of transfer [that] occur most clearly within a familial space, often in the form of symptoms” as the “language of family, the language of the body” (112). Thus, familial ties provide effective opportunities for the transference of trauma and also for finding expression of the trauma, whether verbal or nonverbal. As a site of postmemory, the “[f]amilial structures of mediation and representation facilitate the *affiliative* acts of the postgeneration” (Hirsch 115).

If we apply the concept of postmemory to the context of female trauma in patriarchal society, then one of the things to take note of is that Hirsch seems to refer to traumas that are community-wide and/or generation-wide. They are shared traumas that come to dominate the narrative of a whole community or generation. The traumatic quality of the everyday that has been put forward in this thesis as a main cause of female trauma is in this sense both much narrower and infinitely broader in its scope. On the one hand, it is narrower in the sense that

the traumatic everyday is a lived experience and, as such, it is minutely differentiated in form and degree for every woman depending on countless factors. Thus, arguably, these experiences lack the commonality of an atrocity like the Holocaust. On the other hand, it is simultaneously infinitely broader in that it is not restricted to a community or even a generation. It is a reality that is experienced to a variable degree by all women of all ages. Women's reality in a patriarchal society thus constitutes a potentially traumatic situation without a temporal demarcation or ending in sight. The descendants inherit the trauma as a continued reality in that the circumstances of the "original" trauma continue relatively unchanged. In this sense, then, female trauma does not fit Hirsch's description of an inherited trauma that "precede[s] one's birth and one's consciousness" (107), for women are born into the same system every single day and their consciousness is shaped by it. One might point out, then, that female trauma is in the strictest sense not a case of postmemory, but simply memory, for postmemory seems to inherently imply a temporal distance from the traumatic event. However, Hirsch herself seems ambiguous on this point. She highlights, for example, that

[t]he "post" in "postmemory" signals more than a temporal delay and more than a location in an aftermath. [...] Postmemory shares the layering of these other "posts" [postmodern, postcolonial, postfeminist, etc] and their belatedness, aligning itself with the practice of citation and mediation that characterize them, making a particular end-of-century/turn-of-century moment of looking backward rather than ahead and of defining the present in relation to a troubled past rather than initiating new paradigms. (106)

She goes on to use the example of postcolonialism to point out that the "post" does "not mean the end of the colonial but its troubling continuity" (106). Thus, Hirsch seems to both suggest that postmemory is aware of a continuance of the problematic source, while at the same time highlighting that it is an experience of trauma that is marked by a temporal distance.

On his part, Ernst van Alphen objects not just to the "post" in postmemory, but also questions the use of the term "memory" in its own right. With regards to the first part of the

compound, Van Alphen questions the validity of terms such as “second generation” or “the generation after” that are inherently associated with the concept of postmemory. He opposes the implication latent in the phrase that “seems to suggest a fundamental continuity between first and second generation” (474). Indeed, what should be emphasized, he argues, is that “the second generation is a completely new generation, one that differs fundamentally from the generation of their parents” (474). When it comes to the second part of the compound, Van Alphen objects from a semiotic perspective. He firmly asserts that trauma cannot be transmitted between generations because “[t]he connection of memory to the past is basically an indexical one: the person whose memory it is has lived that past. Postmemory is in this respect not relatively but fundamentally different from memory” (486). The children of survivors of the Holocaust lack this indexical relationship that defines memory, for their relationship to the past events “is based on fundamentally different semiotic principles” (486). It would be more accurate, Van Alphen goes on to suggest, to interpret the deep connection that these children feel with the past as “a *displacement* of the connection with the parents” (487). Yet Van Alphen’s criticism, which is undeniably well-founded and legitimate in its own right, becomes more complex in the context that I have outlined for female trauma. For not only does this context not assume a “generation after,” but both/multiple generations share the same indexical relationship in that they experience minutely differentiated versions of the same traumatic reality in the present. I would argue, then, that female trauma is a case of (post)memory, in that it is a stratification of, on the one hand, narratives that precede birth and consciousness (i.e. post) and, on the other hand, the individual’s lived reality of the everyday (i.e. memory).

Alias Grace seems to be attuned to and interested in the existence of a certain inherited component to trauma amongst women. For instance, when Grace sets out to relate her life story to Dr Jordan, she begins by reminiscing that “[t]here is a verse I remember from

a child: Needles and pins, needles and pins / When a man marries his trouble begins. It doesn't say when a woman's trouble begins. Perhaps mine began when I was born [...]" (118). This last part is significant; Grace implies that a woman's trouble begins when she is born. This either indicates that she is invariably born into a troubling situation or that she comes into the world already bearing the troubles of someone else (i.e. inherited troubles). In phallogocentric societies, I would argue both are in fact the case. Women's realities often constitute a coupling of inherited trauma and lived trauma: they combine the sympathetic deference for and intimate knowledge of the traumas of previous generations of women with the individual experience and navigation of the contemporary social reality. As such, it is an experience of trauma that is passed from female body to female body and that, while progressing in a linear temporal fashion, simultaneously constitutes a continuous retrospective acknowledgment of the historical reality of preceding generations.

According to Hirsch, one of the most fundamental ways in which inherited trauma manifests itself for the younger generation is "by means of the stories, images, and behaviours among which they grew up," which through transmission eventually attain the deep affective force of memories of actual lived experiences (106-07). It is these "stories, images, and behaviours" circulating in the everyday that *Alias Grace* seems to be particularly attuned to. The novel highlights how many women – often fulfilling the role of a mother figure to Grace – communicate stories and exhibit behaviours to other women that seem to constitute a sort of doctrine or gospel that they are impelled to repeat to one another from the day that they are born. For example, when Grace and Mary head off into town for errands, "Mrs. Honey preached us a sermon before we set off, and said we were to behave modestly, and go and come back straight away, and not speak to any strangers, especially men" (175). These exhortations women address towards one another, and particularly towards the younger generation, attest to the presence of something deeper. They attest to the presence of a

traumatic potential that all women are susceptible to and set out to protect one another against, an intimate knowledge of trauma they have inherited at birth.

Another telling example of this solidarity amongst women and their attempts to protect one another against the actual lived experience of this inherited trauma takes place when Grace and Mary prepare for bed. As Mary brushes out the young girl's hair, she tries to warn Grace of the dangers that lie ahead, saying that

you will be a beauty, soon you will turn then men's heads. The worst ones are the gentlemen, who think they are entitled to anything they want; and when you go out to the privy at night, they're drunk then, they lie in wait for you and then it is snatch and grab, there's no reasoning with them, and if you must, you should give them a kick between the legs where they'll feel it; and it is always better to lock your door, and to use the chamber pot. But any kind of man will try the same. (190)

And Grace innately recognizes the truth and familiarity of Mary's advice, for she immediately notices that "we were in the same story as the one Aunt Pauline used to tell about my mother, and I nodded wisely and said that she was right" (190-1). Thus, (post)memory in *Alias Grace* takes on the form of everyday platitudes, commonplace sayings and "womanly advice." In this sense, then, the female trauma *does* find a way of expression. It is communicated between women, between mothers and daughters, in the shape of everyday advice and truisms. It can be distinguished in remarks such as "don't talk to strange men" or "make sure you don't go out by yourself." These exhortations are much more than a communication of a specific personal trauma; they are a communication of *female* trauma, a trauma that is at the same time collective and individual. Women tell each other similar stories because they experience similar traumatic events. Thus, it is not surprising that as time progresses the roles eventually become reversed and we encounter an older, more world-weary Grace repeating the same advice and narratives to the younger generation. When Lydia expresses her longing for Dr Jordan to invite her to tea in his personal chambers, to which she hastens to add "[w]ith Mama, and Marianne, of course, as I must have a chaperone," Grace

patiently replies that a chaperone “is always advisable [...] for a young girl” (285). Though Lydia petulantly accuses Grace of being “an old stick,” expressing her disappointment by saying “I suppose it’s nothing to you, you’ve done all sorts of things, but I have never been to tea in a man’s chambers before,” Grace steadfastly points out that “[j]ust because you’ve never done a thing before, Miss, [...] is no good reason to do it. But if your mother would be going, I am sure it would be respectable enough” (285). Just as Mary Whitney, Aunt Pauline and Mrs. Honey once impressed on her the danger of finding yourself alone with a man, she now warns Lydia against the same danger. Grace’s words are not simply a verbatim repetition of the advice she once received, but they are invested with the pain and heartbreak of a life lived and a first-hand knowledge of the truth of these words.

Conclusion

This thesis has set out to answer a number of questions surrounding the necessity of a special approach to trauma in women's lives. First of all, it has explored the historical narratives and specific rhetorics that our contemporary understanding of female trauma has been based upon, highlighting how this discourse is often inherently harmful, dismissive and stigmatizing in ways that have proven to be much more persistent than we generally care to admit. Secondly, it has attempted to explain how, despite growing awareness of the existence and pervasiveness of female trauma and its social causation, these discourses and stigmas continue to exist, focusing specifically on the forces that aim to shame victims into silence. And finally, it has looked for alternative and/or supplementary approaches to understanding in all its complexity the traumatic potential of women's everyday in patriarchal society, finding new opportunities and modes of expression in embodied discourses. These alternative approaches are not meant to replace the paradigm of dominant trauma theory, but they are meant to challenge the origins of the dominant discourse and its resulting narrow lens when it comes to female trauma. Just as Grace brings herself, Mary Whitney, and Nancy together in the design of her quilt, a Tree of Paradise that "blend[s] them in as part of the pattern," female trauma is perhaps most effectively relayed in the form of a patchwork quilt: one must find a clear image in the patchwork of different fabrics and forms, for only taken together as a whole do they attain meaning (534). Thus, the proposed alternatives should not be seen as mutually exclusive amongst one another or even as substitution for the dominant discourse in trauma theory.

It might be tempting to assume that the represented social reality used as an argumentative basis throughout this thesis is outdated, especially considering the selection of a historical novel as a case study and many of the historical narratives and rhetorics addressed, all of which harken back to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In some ways,

this might be true, but unfortunately in a most fundamental way they are not: these harmful rhetorics and practices still persist, though they may be ever so slightly less pronounced or explicitly present. Sexism and misogyny did not disappear when women gained the right to vote, entered into the labour force, stood up for themselves as they established the first feminist movements or proclaimed to have final say over their own bodies. In 2015, bestselling author Jon Krakauer published a nonfiction book in which he reports on a series of sexual assaults and rapes at the University of Montana at Missoula, exploring the countless ways in which both society and the justice system in the contemporary U.S. constitute a silencing force for many survivors, discouraging them from making their stories known to others. Missoula became the backdrop of a nation-wide scandal that brought to light the prevalence of sexual assault and rape, not just at the University of Montana, nor even in college towns, but in American society at large. For, as Krakauer is adamant at pointing out, though many believed the disturbingly high number of reported rapes at the university to be an irregularity, “rather than being the nation’s rape capital, Missoula had an incidence of sexual assault that was in fact slightly less than the national average” (371). Moreover, recent years have seen the high-profile rise of the “Me Too movement,” a movement, spearheaded by a number of celebrities in the entertainment industry, aimed at generating visibility and awareness of the prevalence of sexual harassment and assault against women in the workplace. The sheer force of the public response to the social media exposés and the way in which the hashtag was picked up by women outside of the entertainment industry to draw attention to their own similar experiences in the workplace illustrates the magnitude of the problem.

Though these statements only relate to cases in which the trauma is caused by sexual assault or rape, I provide these contemporary examples to emphasize that the consideration of women’s reality in the traumatic everyday of patriarchal society is still highly relevant,

perhaps even more relevant now that it is so tempting to focus on the progress that has been made instead of the vestigial dangers of the old discourse. Though the publication of *Alias Grace* predates both the Missoula rape-scandal and the birth of the Me Too movement by roughly two decades, Atwood's insistence on the exploration of the conditions of women's lives in patriarchal society in the majority of her novels seems indicative of a personal concern with the pervasiveness and normalization of problematic patterns in contemporary (Western) society. In *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), for example, Atwood sets out to break through the barrier of normalization by constructing a post-war dystopian reality that is frightening in its invocation of fundamental aspects of our contemporary society. The popularity of the 2017 HBO mini-series based on the novel and the forthcoming publication of a sequel, *The Testaments* (expected September 2019), point to a continued resonance with its subject matter. Thus, questions raised about the outdatedness and relevance of women's social reality in *Alias Grace* are counterbalanced by the very selection of the themes with which it is concerned: whether the setting be historical or dystopian, the essential problem remains equally relevant. And if the problem continues to be relevant, we must continue to find new modes of expression and new ways of understanding.

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