

# ***The Shape of Absence***

By

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A thesis submitted to the Department of English and Humanities in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of  
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It is hereby declared that

1. The thesis submitted is my own original work while completing degree at BRAC University.
2. The thesis does not contain material previously published or written by a third party, except where this is appropriately cited through full and accurate referencing.
3. The thesis does not contain material which has been accepted or submitted for any other degree or diploma at a university or other institution.
4. I have acknowledged all main sources of help.

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## Approval

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## **Dedication**

To every Nina Carter, the silent architect of our sanity, breathing in survival mode, protecting us from the inner storm when reality heavily rains. May we find the strength to wake from the dream before we are washed away by the same tide that took Samantha.

## **Abstract**

*The Shape of Absence* is a psychological novella about Samantha Gilbert, a therapist in Edinburgh, trying to escape memories of her traumatic childhood. To survive years of neglect and isolation, Samantha's mind has created an illusion of a happy life. Her reality begins to crack when her husband and infant child disappear without a trace.

As she searches for answers, the arrival of a mysterious teenage patient, named Nina, pushes Samantha to face the truth. The story shows that Samantha is an unreliable narrator dealing with schizophrenia. Her husband, baby, and patient Nina were not real people, but coping mechanisms created by Samantha to escape her loneliness and trauma. The novella explores themes of memory and the "inner split." It ends with a tragic confrontation where Samantha can no longer contain the "inner rain" of her reality.

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## Chapter One

### Where it Rains Inside

It is pouring on the day when the smell of wet soil reminds me of how hard I am to love. As I look through the window, I can see how heavily it is raining, and the barks of the trees are not breaking; the leaves are not falling, but my heart is.

I sat by the window; my knees pulled up to my chest. I am watching the raindrops slide down the glass. Outside of the glass, everything looks calm and peaceful. Trees are moving gently, and the road is empty except for a girl walking with an umbrella. She looks free. Inside the Gilbert residence, it feels like a cage.

'Samantha! Do not act like you can't hear me!' Selene shouts from the kitchen. 'There are dishes in the sink. The floor is a mess. Your father's bottles are still on the table. Get up and clean the mess!'

I don't have the energy to answer. I just rested my head against the cold window. The rain sounds soft; softer than her voice could ever be, maybe softer than the way she loves me. She always says she cares. But her love feels like a list of rules I must follow. Her affection feels like poison.

'I said NOW!' she yells again. 'I heard you,' I said quietly.

She does not reply. That silence, the dangerous one, always falls into the house like a shadow. I know she is standing there, her jaw clenched and hands gripping the counter the way she always does when she feels disrespected. Sometimes she slams cabinet doors for hours, or "accidentally" drops things just so the noise reminds me I failed to follow her rules. Sometimes she rearranges my room while I am at school and throws away my things to "teach me cleanliness".

She calls it love. I call it a warning.

Then I just walk away. She is probably angry now because I don't react fast enough to her command. That's how it works here: if you don't follow fast enough, she takes it as a sign of disrespect, and then the silent treatment begins. A cold silence that lasts all day, the kind that makes the air feel heavy.



I pull my blanket around me, not because I am cold, but because it makes me feel like I have a protective wall between myself and everything else. They say we learn how to love and care for others from our mothers. I don't know if that is true. Maybe that's where lies the root of my confusion and emotional isolation. I can't tell the difference between love and control, between confession and silence.

I look outside my window to watch the rain again, wishing to be like those raindrops. But my eyes catch something beautiful, or maybe weirder, I can't tell. I can never tell; I am twisted between my emotions, it gets confusing from time to time, or maybe I make it complicated, I really don't know.

I see that girl again, laughing with someone, maybe her mother. They look close, like nothing stands between them. The kind of moment that feels warm, where love is just there, without asking for it. I watch them and feel something unravelling inside me. I used to think love should feel simple, open, and soft. I used to think love was supposed to feel like that. Now... I am not sure anymore. Maybe I never really knew love. Maybe all I learned is how to survive without it.

The house smells like burnt toast and cheap air freshener. I walk into the kitchen slowly. My mom is standing by the sink, her back to me.

'You didn't sweep the floor,' she says without turning around. 'I will do it after lunch,' I replied.

She sighs loudly with one of those exaggerated sighs meant to fill the room. 'You always say that and then I end up doing everything,' she says. 'I never asked you to,' I say, then instantly regret it.

She turns to face me, her eyes sharp. 'What did you say?' she says. 'I just meant... I was going to do it,' I say quickly while my head looks down.

That isn't enough. I can feel her stepping closer even before she moves. She lifts my chin with two fingers, not gently. 'Look at me when I talk to you,' she says. Her voice is low, dangerous. 'You think this house runs on your schedule? You think you are the only one tired?'

'I did not say that. I replied' 'Exactly. You never say anything.' she says.

But she doesn't stop there. She grabs the broom and shoves it against my chest, not hard enough to bruise, just hard enough to humiliate. 'Since you won't speak, at least be useful,' she says.

Her eyes dare me to cry. So I don't. Crying only makes things worse. She calls tears "drama" and once made me mop the floor again because I "dripped emotions everywhere".

You never say anything, I repeat in my head. The statement is, in fact, true. I keep most things inside, especially the things that hurt. If I ever do speak them out loud, I am afraid they will become too real.

I find Dad sitting in his usual chair in the living room. He is staring at the TV without really watching it. His beer can is on the table, half finished.

'Hey,' I say, sitting on the floor near his feet. 'Hey, kiddo.' He smiles weakly. 'Rough Morning?' I nod. 'She is in one of those moods again.'

'She is always in one of those moods,' he says with a dry laugh. 'Your mom loves you. She just... does not know how to show it.' 'I do not think she knows how to love,' I say quietly.

He does not answer right away, as if he knows he cannot defend anymore. He just looks at the TV like he is trying to escape into it. Then he says again, 'She loves you. Just in her own way. She's under a lot of stress.'

'So am I,' I say, louder than I mean to. He blinks slowly, then nods. 'I know, Sam, I know.'

He reaches for my hand, holds it gently. 'You are a good kid, smarter than me; stronger too.' 'You say that like a compliment, but I'd rather not have to be strong all the time.'

He does not respond. He just let go of my hand and leaned back in the chair, staring ahead like he is not there anymore.

I sit on my bed, and the same book is open in front of me. I am not really reading. Just holding the pages, letting my eyes run over the words. It is one of those quiet things that understands things people do not. It is written by one of my favourite writers, Sylvia Plath. The book's name is '*The Bell Jar*', her only novel. Books never yell. They never make me feel guilty for needing space.

I turn to the window again. The rain has stopped, but the streets are still wet and shiny. My reflection looks back at me with tired eyes, messy hair, someone I am not sure I recognise. I touch

the glass gently and ask the question I always ask at the end of a day like this... 'Is this what love is supposed to feel like in your own home?'

I open my diary to keep myself occupied as the rain no longer amuses or entertains me. My diary knows me better than the lady who always shouts and the man who is always devouring liquor. As I flip through pages, I can always find that little poet, another version of me. I write poems for fun, a way of escape from my dreary, unloved life. I never say anything; instead, I try to turn my experiences, my emotions, myself, into poetry.

The mirror in my room catches my eye suddenly. My pale eyes with dark circles all around them. Sometimes I wonder if my mother would recognise me in these eyes, where dew once shimmered, and now only a void remains. I wonder if she can hear the change in her daughter's laughter, which is lost somewhere in time. She should know. She must know.

A sudden memory crawls back, the kind that doesn't knock before entering. I was nine, standing in the same hallway, holding a report card with trembling hands. I could remember her face when she saw the one subject I struggled with. She didn't yell at first. She smiled a dry, terrifying smile. Then she grabbed my arm so hard her nails dug into my skin. 'Do you enjoy embarrassing me?' she whispered, dragging me into the kitchen.

I could remember the clatter of utensils, the sting of her words sharper than anything she threw that day. I learned something important that evening: love, in this house, has conditions.

## Chapter Two

### When Silence Screamed

Nights in this house always feel endless, as if time itself has stopped. The old clock that my grandfather bought for the old grey wall never seems to move, yet its ticking fills the silence like a hammering that jars one's nerves and won't let the house sleep. Each second feels slow and heavy, the sound echoing across the wooden floor. The air is thin and stale. It is filled with the dank, musty smell of damp walls and old beer that dried long ago. Sometimes, I feel this house is alive, watching over us, breathing with us, waiting for the right moment to crush us under its weight.

I am sitting with my notebook open. The page is still blank. I am holding the pen. It stays long in my hand, but I cannot write. I want to escape into the world of words. The voices from the kitchen are pushing into me like some kind of poisonous smoke.

Mother's voice breaks first, sharp and fast. 'Dorian, you are rotting this family. You are killing us with that bottle.' Father answers with a laugh that isn't laughter. 'At least I don't kill with words.'

I have heard this line before, repeated like a broken song. But that night feels different and sharp, too final. Her chair scrapes against the floor. 'You think she...' her hand points at me, her voice shaking, 'You think she doesn't see? A drunk. A shadow. A man who left long before his body will.'

Father stands up with a clumsy red face. 'DON'T YOU DARE USE HER AGAINST ME.' His voice cracks. The bottle slips from his hand and breaks on the tiles. All the liquid spills on the floor. It smells like my childhood. But this time with a strong whiff carrying danger, I suppose.

The sound freezes me. My chest hurts. I want to shout, but no words come out of my mouth. 'ENOUGH!' he shouts, grabbing mother's waist. Her scream tears through the house. 'LET GO!'

And then... chaos ensues. Someone trips and hits the edge of the table. A glass breaks, and there is a loud thud that makes the whole room shake. For a moment, no one moved.

My father falls. His hand reaches for the table, but he misses and then lies still on the floor. His chest rises once, then again, then stops.

The silence after this is worse than the fight; it tells the truth the shouting never could. The kitchen light is buzzing above us, cold and steady. The smell of liquor mixes with something I can't name. Mother's hand trembles. Her lips part, but no words come.

Then suddenly she moves and whispers, 'Samantha', then she screams, 'Help me! Do something! He's okay, he has to be okay.'

I cannot move; I sit frozen in my chair, as if the wood has locked me there. My hands shake in my lap. My eyes stay on his face. My breathing becomes heavy. I cannot look away, no matter how much I want to. I wait for him to open his eyes, to curse again, to hear his bitter laughter again; he needs to open his eyes at any cost, but he is not there anymore, simply not there... It all feels like a dream I am trapped in.

We never spoke of it again. Not the fall. Not the silence. Not the way his eyes looked when the light left them forever.

The funeral is coated in black silence. The silence is louder than the day he was gone. Damp earth, shovel, scrape, people whispering empty words. I remember the coffin being lowered, the ropes creaking, the ground swallowing him until I cannot see his face anymore... What haunts me most isn't the grave but the speed with which everything is happening around me right now. How fast a man becomes earth.

I am lying awake, staring at the ceiling. I think of all the things I never said to him. How much I wanted him to stop drinking. How I wanted him to look at me with clear eyes, just once. Instead, I am left with his last smile, a smile that was tired and fragile.

Days before, he had told me, 'You are stronger than me'. It feels less like a compliment, more like a burden to be carried. I never wanted to be strong, but I have no other option.

I open my notebook to write. Thoughts flow like a gushing river in my head. I just need to frame these thoughts and emotions into words. This will be my last writing in this house. I will leave tomorrow for somewhere unknown, maybe to erase and leave everything behind, just like he did.

I am shaking my pen. I am thinking about that little me and comparing her to me now. What would she think exactly at this moment?

*Where should I go when the little girl in me wants to hug her father? Where should I run to when the world gets too heavy? Where can this head find a shoulder when the little girl misses her mother? Now the prisoner is free, but she doesn't know how to set herself free. She walks through unlocked doors but still checks for those keys. She looks for arms that are no longer in reach, and a home that is no longer here. She is not a child, but she's not an adult yet. Where should she go when the memories speak louder than the present? Where does healing begin for the girl who doesn't know what freedom feels like?*

I pack soon after. Books, notebooks, and clothes folded without care. Mother is standing in the doorway. Her arms are crossed like armour. 'You will regret leaving,' she says. It is clear enough that it isn't a warning; it is a prophecy.

'Maybe,' I answer, my bag is feeling heavy on my shoulder. 'But staying here is worse.' There are no tears, not even a hug for me. It is only her angry silence that follows me out the door. This is her last gift to me. Then I left...left for the night train, to the dark city, to some unknown, to start afresh...

## **Edinburgh**

This city feels alive in ways the house never was. It is too alive, and it is giving a dark academia vibe, just like my book fantasies. Cars are rushing, lights are flickering, and strangers are rushing past me without looking. I want to disappear and not be someone to look out for. After years of being in the centre of a war, it feels strange to be invisible, but it also feels like the end of the beginning.

I rented a small room just outside the city centre. The wallpaper is peeling off the walls. The floor smells like onions and damp carpet. Through walls, I hear neighbours living, laughing, fighting, and loving. As if their lives leak into mine through the walls.

I saved money by editing essays for students who struggled with translation. I used to translate short articles for online journals and format academic papers for people. These were simple tasks, nothing remarkable, but the money was quite good enough, but it grew slowly because I never spent on anything except books. Books are the only thing I allow myself to get spoiled with. Buying books feels like buying a doorway into someone else's mind. Someone braver. Someone clearer. I live inside those pages so intensely that I sometimes forget I have a life outside them. I borrow experiences from characters the way others borrow clothes so carefully as if they didn't quite belong to me. In reality, I have none of my own. I am living by what others feel and perceive about the world, and I do not have the courage, confidence, or even the experience to form my own perception of life.

It is my first night. Where I begin for the end but there is always this thought that is hanging in the end. Why did I freeze that night? Why do my memories blur? Why can't I remember if he fell or she pushed? Freud said, we bury what we can't bear. Maybe I buried the truth so deep it began to rot inside me.

I am sitting by the window. My notebook is in my lap. City lights reflecting on the glass pane of the window, but all I see are his eyes...tired and how they are closed forever. I try to write, try to trap that night in words. But every sentence breaks.

*Bottle*

*Floor*

*Silence*

*His eyes.*

Broken words; that's all my pages could hold. Sometimes I dream of him calling out my name and then her hands pushing me away. I wake up with a heavy weight on my chest every day.

But here at last, this silence is mine. No one can use it as a weapon. I can sit with it, even if it hurts. And yet in that silence, one question always returns: *If memory is water and it rains too much inside...do we drown, or do we learn how to breathe underneath?*

I don't know yet. But every night I feel the water rise.

It is the first morning I wake up to silence instead of shouting. The air feels light. For the first time, I feel like I am truly away. I get up right away not because I have to, but because I choose to. I make coffee and hold the warm cup in my hands. But as I sit there, my mind goes back to the house I left. I wonder what my mother is doing right now. Is she walking around the kitchen? Is she screaming at the empty air? The thought is bitter, but I swallow it down. I wash my cup and go out the door. It is time for university. I enrolled at the University of Edinburgh, I was about to root for literature and philosophy but then I told myself I want to understand people. I want to know about human psychology. Actually, the truth is simpler to tell. I want to understand myself. I am so consumed by those fictional protagonists that I almost forget who I am or am supposed to be.



## Chapter Three

### **Sacred Presence or Absence...?**

Ten years have passed, but sometimes I feel they carried me like a river I never chose to enter. I only float, letting the water decide.

When I was twelve, my father took me to a river near our town. The water looked calm, but it pulled hard underneath. I was afraid. I told him I couldn't do it. He didn't laugh. He stood behind me, one hand on my back and said, "Don't fight the water. Just breathe. Let it carry you a little. I'm here." I remember stepping in, shaking, and the cold biting my legs. I kept thinking I would sink. But my father's hand stayed steady on my back. That day I learned something simple: sometimes you survive not because you are brave, but because someone is behind you, holding you up. Now when people tell me I'm strong, I think of that river. I didn't become strong. I just learned how to float after the hand behind me disappeared.

Still, I tell myself I have found peace. Peace is something I practice like a routine, not something I own. Some days it feels real. Other days it feels like a carefully arranged room where one wrong movement could collapse the furniture.

My days begin with the same picture: pale morning light through thin curtains, the smell of my baby and Zed's voice calling from the kitchen, "Coffee's ready."

For a while, it is enough. But "enough" has always been my safest word. It feels like I am not asking life for too much, because asking has never ended well for me.

The apartment smells of warm milk, bitter coffee and the sweetness of baby lotion. Small things make up my world. Tiny socks folded in drawers, soft blankets with blue stars and a lullaby that I sing for my baby. I always hear the sentence Zed keeps telling me, 'You are stronger than you think.' I think I have heard these words before. But I have grown tired of strength. Strength is not a gift, it is a weight I never asked for.

At night, when the baby's breath rises once and twice and continues like a soft rhythm, I sometimes think of my father. How his chest rose once, twice and then not again. I wonder if one day my

baby will carry the same memory of me. Death doesn't simply take; it leaves behind shadows that keep growing.

I try not to stay in those thoughts for long. My work as a therapist demands presence. People come to me with their wounds, and I listen. I guide them carefully into the dark corners of themselves, places they are too afraid to look at alone. Pain wears many masks, but in the end, all of it cries in the same language. Sometimes I think maybe this is why I survive, to hold the grief of others without letting it drown me. But still a question follows me everywhere: If I can help others heal, why does my own heart still limp?

The baby is a few months old then. Its laughter has just begun to shine in the house, just like a bright melody. This morning after waking up I was already late for my chamber so I rushed to my laundry room. I am humming without any thoughts, believing that life is so simple yet peaceful.

When I am about to leave and bid my baby a daily goodbye, the crib is empty. For a second, my brain refuses to accept the word *empty*. It reaches for logic instead. Zed must have taken him to the living room, he must be warming milk, he must be rocking him near the window. My body stays still, waiting for reality to correct itself.

My voice rose, and it became too sharp and playful, 'Zed, bring our baby back. The baby needs to rest.'

Silence...

I rush into the kitchen. Empty... The living room, empty... There is no single trace of my husband and my baby, as if the walls have swallowed them whole. My eyes instantly catch on our coffee table, on the table, Zed's coffee cup is empty as always. He always finishes his coffee as if there was no single coffee drop here in the first place. I always thought he really loves coffee.

Then I look for his black sweater, but it is missing too. The missing sweater feels louder than the missing person. Fabric should stay behind. Objects usually do. When even the ordinary things vanish, the room begins to feel staged like a scene arranged for my confusion.

It feels like as if they have stepped out of the world in the middle of breathing.

I rush to the window. People are walking with bags and talking softly with each other; their morning looks calm. No one looks up. No one knows my world has just fallen apart. My throat burns, but no words come out of my mouth.

I ran to the police, my words shaking. ‘MY HUSBAND...he... he left with our baby.’ They ask for detailed names, papers, and proofs. I nod as if I can give them what they want, but the moment they say “proof,” something tightens inside me. Proof has never been my strength. My life has always been built on feelings, not paperwork on what I carry in my body, not what I can show with my hands.

I rushed back home to look for the evidence they wanted. I keep on searching drawers, boxes, folders and all the old envelopes. My hand shakes as I pull them apart. The harder I search, the more I realize how suspenseful it all is. Where is Zed’s handwriting? His Signature? The baby’s tiny hospital bracelet? Each missing piece cuts into me like glass. The absence begins to feel organised, as if someone has erased them carefully not with violence, but with precision. And a darker thought slips in, unwanted and sharp: *what if there was never anything to erase?*

I entered the police station with an empty hand; my heart was emptier. The officer only looks at me with quiet pity. Pity is a kind of judgement when you are already drowning. I leave before they can turn my grief into a question I cannot answer. He asked for the evidence again. There is no word I can say to them at this very moment. I leave before they start questioning again. Because how can I answer when I am no longer sure of anything myself?

After that, the days blurred together. Nights were unbearable. I used to lie in my bed with my eyes closed, but my mind never sleeps. Thoughts kept moving like restless ghosts on the ceiling. Every sound, the tick-tock, the sound of the clock, felt too loud. It was like being awake inside a dream I could not escape.

After that, each morning, I wait for the door to open for Zed to walk in carrying the baby in his arms. I wait for the smell of his sweetness and the smell of coffee beans.

‘Love’, I realize. It's always a fragile illusion. First, it was my mother’s poisoned affection. Then my father’s silence and now the final blow is from a man who was nothing but air wearing the shape of comfort.

I return to my notebook, because writing is the only place that has never abandoned me. I write in my notebook: *If love is a trick, am I the magician or the fool who claps for her own show?*

The ink is running while my tears are falling, and it is fading my words from my diary until they look blurry. Still, I keep working for my patients who come with grief while sitting in front of me, pouring out their silence from the deepest corner of their hearts. I listen to them; nod. They see me as calm, steady, and reliable, someone with whom they can share their pain. They never know each story is a mirror, and it is reflecting the fractures inside me.

A patient once told me, “You look so calm. I wish I could be like you.” I smiled like a professional and thanked her. But inside, I wanted to confess: calm is sometimes just a mask that fits well. Some people don’t heal. They just learn how to sit with the wound without screaming,

Sometimes, after a session, I press my palm to my stomach and feel an echo there, like the faded memory of carrying something unknown. I wonder if my absence can grow inside a body the same way presence once did.

I tell myself I will survive. But I have learned by then, survival is only another word for carrying painful memories. And mine have only multiplied.

## Chapter Four

### **The Familiar Stranger**

My life is a carefully constructed, quiet room. I am Samantha Gilbert. I am a professional therapist. My greatest skill is looking perfectly still. For ten years, I have spent perfecting this act by learning how to absorb the pain of others without showing any of my own. My office is my escape room: clean, organised, smelling of old books and calming lavender. It is the direct opposite of the place I escaped, the cold, messy, emotionally dark Gilbert residence.

I told myself I needed this job to help people. The real truth is, I needed it to anchor myself. After Zed and the baby vanished, a huge empty space opened up in my life. Listening to other people's loud troubles is the only thing that keeps me from floating away into the emptiness of my own. I focus on their reality because mine feels dangerously puzzled.

My first patient of Tuesday morning, Mr Ethan, comes in with the familiar and heavy weariness of a man who cannot protect himself. He is kind, gentle and quite exhausted by his own compliance.

'I'm just... I'm done, Samantha,' he begins, resting his head against the back of the chair. He looks as if gravity itself is too much for him. 'My boss needs me to take on this huge quarterly report that should be done only by me by this Thursday. It's impossible and it's going to exhaust me. But when he asked, I heard the word 'absolutely' fall out of my mouth before my brain could even say no.'

I sit still, giving him the calm, the silence he doesn't allow himself. 'What were you afraid would happen if you had said no, Ethan?'

'I panic to say no,' he whispers. 'I feel like if I refuse, I will lose everything. I'd lose the job, the respect, the ground under my feet. It's like disappointing them is a threat... like a physical danger to myself. I can't breathe, Samantha.'

I am sitting still, looking at him gently and nodding as I listen.

‘My throat just locks up,’ he says, his voice cracking with sudden distress. ‘The second I think about refusing, I get this terrifying image of losing my entire life, my home, my job. It’s not really about the report; it’s about that crushing feeling of not being good enough. It feels like I’m going to be completely wiped out.’

I lean forward slightly. ‘Who taught you that disappointing someone meant physical danger?’

He looks at his hands, twisting his wedding band. ‘My mother. She was strict, but her disappointment was always the worst weapon. If I tried to set a boundary or just didn’t want to do something according to her, she never yelled. She used to look at me with that cold and heavy stare and say ‘You are an ungrateful child. You are embarrassing your mother’. I learned that her love was not a comfort to me, rather it was a wage I had to earn every single minute by being exactly what she wanted me to be.’

*Earning love, hmm...*

A cold and familiar hand squeezes my chest. I have lived that same truth in the Gilbert house. My mother, Selene, had that perfect heavy look. I know what it feels like to have affection be conditional, something I once wrote feels like poison because of all the rules attached to it.

‘You learned that your worth was tied to your sacrifice, Ethan.’ I say this statement to him by defining his pain with the clarity I couldn’t apply to my own. ‘You carry a deep, internal fear that if you put yourself first, you will be abandoned. You are still living by the rules of that terrified child who is still constantly seeking approval from your birthgiver.’

We talk about breathing and pausing, creating a small moment of space between the demand and the involuntary ‘yes.’ He leaves feeling lighter, thanking me deeply for making his invisible cage visible.

He closes the door and leaves for the day. I am so tired of talking, even after all those sessions by then. But sessions are the only thing that gives me company I never knew I needed. I am left alone in my chamber, and the silence in the room begins to feel like the heavy silence that always followed one of my mother’s fits.

It is late in the afternoon, and the wind is blowing heavily outside. Then I hear the faint tapping on my office door twice. First, I thought it might be the wind, then it happened again, three... exactly three taps. I got curiously annoyed and stood up. Then I open it myself.

There is a heavy wind the moment the door opens, and that wind messes up my hair. But there is a smell in the wind that feels like childhood. A strange teenage girl dressed in a black, oversized sweater that seems to swallow her. She walks into my chamber and takes the chair then immediately goes into a familiar posture: pulling her knees tight against her chest. It is the familiar, protective posture of someone trying to become invisible, the same way I used to sit by the window in the Gilbert residence.

‘Hello, I’m Samantha. Please tell me what brings you here to talk today.’

She doesn't look at me. Her pale eyes are fixed on the ceiling. Her voice is mysteriously soft with a low musical sound that carries the strange quality of poetry, as if she were reading lyrical poems.

‘I am here because my reflection is a liar. The mirror shows a girl who is calm, who is fine. But inside, she is like an old house where it always rains, and the rain has started to drown the furniture.’ Her words flow to my ears like lines from a known script.

The shock is physical, and it directly hits my chest. It tightened my throat, and my jaw locked up by then.

‘A house where it always rains.’ That is my metaphor. That is the phrase I used years ago to describe the miserable scenario of my childhood home.

‘That is a very powerful and painful image, Nina,’ I manage, gripping the armrests of my chair, forcing myself to remain still. ‘What is this internal rain made of?’

She speaks of her parents not as people, but as abstract forms of pain. ‘My mother’s love was like a hand holding me roughly,’ she softly whispers. ‘It wasn't for warmth or comfort. It was only for holding on so tight that it left bruises, and my father was like a sad and half-finished song.’

A rough hand... My mother's controlling and suffocating affection feels like poison to me. A half-finished song... My father, I have no memories of him. His memories are like a song that was half finished by the singer.

The parallels are so perfect and so exact. They are terrifying to me.

'You turn these hard things into beautiful language,' I say in my mind. 'Is this a way to keep the pain at a distance? To make it feel less effective?'

She looks directly at me. Her gaze is deep and familiar. 'I keep most things inside, especially the things that hurt,' she says. She felt like a sound of breath. 'If I ever did speak them out loud, I was afraid they would become too real.'

My heart freezes. I know those words. I wrote those exact words in my teenage diary. The memory of forming those very letters on the page feels clearer than the girl sitting across from me.

I am looking for my glasses on my book table, where I left them last while reading '*No Longer Human*'. Suddenly, I see Clara. She is my assistant. Without any kind of knocking on my door, she rushes to me with a cold look. She never enters my chamber without knocking first. She looks at me with a cold face and delivers the final news: My mother, Selene Gilbert, died 2 days ago.

My head becomes numb after receiving the news, and there is a slight ache in my chest that is asking me, 'Should we cry?' It is like the final heavy sound of a long-suffering chord being cut. I have always felt her presence following like a shadow.

I have to go back to the Gilbert residence to close the last belongings my parents left behind. The next morning, I leave for my old house while driving my car. I could not attend the funeral.

I am thinking about my last patient, Nina... Nina Carter. She did not say bye before leaving or maybe I got too occupied with my mixed feelings after receiving mother's news. I cannot remember seeing her leave, but all I know is that I cannot wait for our next session. There was some kind of tension in the air while she was in my chamber, and with the news of my mother being gone, the air is lighter than ever before.



## **The Gilbert Residence**

The old house is suffocating. It smells like quiet anger, and with every step, I am reliving those blurred memories. I stand in the living room trying to remember the constant confusion and emotional isolation. Then, while moving forward to my mother's room and while walking my eyes get on the kitchen window. The light is buzzing above my head and it is raining heavily outside.

I sat on my dining table's chair, pulling my knees tight against my chest to enjoy the rain. Suddenly, there is a whisper in my ears: 'where it always rains'.

I froze for a moment. That voice... it sounded familiar, like I had heard it not long ago. My stomach tightened. I tried to tell myself it was nothing, but my body didn't believe me. My hands went cold, and I felt a small fear rise in my chest. Then I remembered why I came here. I couldn't stay. I had to finish what I was doing and leave for my chamber. I forced my feet to move, even though my legs felt heavy. The house was quiet in a way that made every small sound feel loud. My steps on the floor sounded like they didn't belong.

I walked to my mother's room. The door opened with a soft creak. The air inside was still, holding the smell of old perfume and closed windows. The room looked the same as always, neat, controlled, and cold. It felt like a room that did not allow mistakes. I went straight to the closet. The wooden door stuck for a second before it gave way. Inside, the clothes hung like shadows. I pushed them aside carefully, as if touching them could wake something up. At the back, behind heavy coats and folded fabric, my fingers brushed against something hard.

A small box.

It was dusty, and the dust coated my fingertips. I pulled it out slowly, my heart beating faster for no clear reason. The box was heavier than I expected. I sat down on the floor because my legs suddenly didn't want to hold me anymore. The floor was cold through my clothes, and the chill went straight into my bones.

I opened the box. Inside were my old journals. They were wrapped in my mother's brown scarf the scarf she used to wear on quiet days when she didn't want anyone to look at her. Seeing it there made my throat tighten. It felt like the scarf was not only protecting the journals it was hiding

them. Hiding me. My hands started to shake as I pulled the journals out. The covers were worn. The pages smelled like old paper. For a second, I almost put them back. I almost closed the box and pretended I never found it.

But I didn't.

I opened the first journal. My handwriting jumped at me messy, rushed, and uneven, like I was writing while trying not to be caught. The pages were full of poems and lyrical lines. Some words were scratched out. Some sentences were written darker, as if I pressed the pen too hard. Reading it felt like touching a bruise. These journals were not just stories. They were my way of staying alive when life felt too heavy. They were proof that I needed somewhere else to go even if that "somewhere else" was only inside my head.

I turned to a page and read:

*The flowers in the attic are always dry because the rain outside never touches them.*

*They think a house is safe just because the doors are locked.*

*I keep most things inside, especially the things that hurt.*

*If I ever did speak them out loud, I was afraid they would become too real.*

My chest hurt as I read it. I swallowed, but it didn't help. I stared at those lines like they were written by a stranger, yet I knew every word was mine. I could almost see the younger me sitting somewhere alone, trying to turn pain into something softer, something pretty, something safe. And then the truth hit me. I had always thought the poems were my escape. I thought they were a cover, a disguise like makeup over a wound. I believed the lyrical words were protecting me from the Gilbert house and all the things inside it. But now I understood. They weren't hiding the pain. They were the pain.

The poems didn't cover the truth. They carried it. They held it carefully, wrapped it in beautiful language, and placed it on the page because I had nowhere else to put it. I used imagination the

way some people use locks. I built a safer version of life inside my mind because the real version was too hard to face.

In that moment, sitting on the cold floor with the journals in my lap, I realised something simple and frightening: I never escaped. I just learned how to survive by pretending.

I close the journal, then I get up, take the keys, lock up my house and leave for the second time of my life. This time I am more puzzled than the little me who left for an unknown reason. The memories inside that journal are heavier than its pages and I am carrying all of them with me.

## Chapter Five

### The Unmasking

I drive back to Edinburgh and rush to my office. The journals lie open, not as simple poems but as evidence of a sickness. Those beautiful words I wrote to escape the truth were only the silk threads of a cage. I used my mind to craft a safer version of existence because the plain, raw truth was unbearable. The rain is not falling outside; it is simply within me.

My first patient of the day is a man named Mr. Davies. His worry is quiet and small: he is upset about a simple, gold tie pin his father gave him. He lost it. He keeps repeating, "It was just a small piece of proof. Now it's gone, and it's like he never gave me anything at all."

I sit there, offering the false calm I perfected. I watch his mouth move, and his words feel muffled. There is a whisper in the echoing space of my skull. Where is my proof? The baby's blanket? Zed's watch? All gone, or never there.

The air in the room grows suddenly thin. No knock. No sound.

She is simply there. Nina Carter, in the oversized black sweater, the sweater that feels like the shape of absence. She sits in the corner chair, knees pulled up to her chest as always, and her posture is the perfect, fragile echo of the child I was.

Mr. Davies goes on about his missing pin. But Nina's words are only in my mind, flowing like a chill across my skin.

"The small proof is the biggest lie," she whispers, her voice low and lyrical. "You are now hearing about a lost gold pin, but you never had the baby's tiny hospital band. You never had the proof. The man you called Zed, who was nothing but air wearing the shape of comfort, he left no stain because he was an unseen object you carried in your mind."

The illusion collapses. I am feeling the empty space of the crib. My past loves, they were my heartbreaking hallucination.

“The small proof was never yours,” Nina continues, her pale eyes locking onto mine. “The prisoner is free, but she doesn’t know how to set herself free. She looks for objects that were never there.”

I look at Mr. Davies. He is still worried about the tiny, gold pin. His reality is stable. Mine is gone.

“Do you see her?” I ask Mr. Davies, the sound tearing in my throat. He stops, confused. “See who, Samantha? I only see you, and you look ill. Shall we stop here for today?”

Nina is not a girl. She is the voice of my sickness. She is the final, terrible truth. I dressed up in a black sweater.

The outside world intrudes. The door to the chamber flies open. "Samantha, the next patient is here," Clara says, her voice sharp and routine.

I look back at the corner where Nina sat. The chair is empty. She vanished the moment the solid world entered the room, proving that she is a construct imagination of mine. She was a lie I could no longer hold in the light. My calm is gone. I am only the damaged girl now.

I have to prove she exists. I have to prove I am sane. This cannot be real. I am a professional psychologist. This cannot happen to me.

The need to find Nina and to find a single piece of physical evidence is a desperate act of mine now. I rush from my perfect office room like a clumsy little girl. It is the same room that I always felt was my greatest achievement in control. Now it mocks me with its neatness.

I searched the filing cabinet. I pull open drawer after drawer. I search for a signature, a date or even an intake form. Nothing. I tear through the index for Nina Carter. There is no file. The slot is blank, perfectly clean, just like the memory of Zed and my baby. The flashbacks were so real, they were so real that this moment feels artificial to me.

I ran to the CCTV recording system. My heart beats against my ribs. It is desperate for a flash of that black sweater. I watched the session with Mr. Davies. I watched myself sitting and nodding. Then I watched the corner.

The chair was always empty. The beautiful, sad girl never walked through my door. She is a ghost of my past self. A delusional self of mine, an unhealed version of me, begging to get healed only for us this time.

If Nina is a ghost of my mind, a projection, an illusion rose from my deep-seated need to finally face the truth of my past... Then what about my adult life? Zed. My marriage. The baby. Our daughter. Their tragic, sudden disappearance?

The memory of them is also wrapped in the same beautiful, tragic poetry, the same mystery. My entire adult existence feels like another story, a more complicated poem I wrote to give myself a reason to be strong. Was the loss I am grieving, the loneliness, the pain, real? Or is it merely the most devastating illusion my mind ever created to survive the long, empty silence of the Gilbert house?

I am breaking. I rush from the office, leaving the lights turned on, my notebook with me, and leaving my car where I left it. I drive to my apartment, but I am not driving home; I am driving toward the last, final silence. I don't turn on the lights. I stand in the darkness, embracing the real and heavy silence that belongs to me alone.

The rain begins outside heavily. It feels like it is competing with my inner rain. It feels like a battle between the world's sorrow and my own private flood.

I stand there still, and I am listening to the pounding on the roof, the sound of the world trying to break in. I used to ask: If memory is water and it rains too much inside... do we drown, or do we learn how to breathe underneath?

But the question was wrong. I never learned to breathe; I learned to build a false surface. I took the chaos of my father's death, the rage of my mother. I made everything into poetry. I have tried to heal through my patients. It was all delusional, the love of my life, my baby; it was all delusion. I couldn't move on from my childhood trauma, and I punished myself by creating a perfect, controlled life that was empty and unreal.

For one last time, I opened my notebook, my way of escapism, where my illusions became my reality, my life story. My hand is shaking, but I start to write; one last real confession, which I was too afraid to face my entire life.

*My mother's love was conditional, a rulebook written in poison. My father's presence was silent, a slow fading into the floor. Zed's comfort was air, perfectly erased from the physical world. My baby was a wish, a beautiful, ungranted prayer. And Nina was the final proof that my life was a perfect mirage, designed to protect me from the heartbreaking truth: that I was utterly, entirely alone and insane.*

*The house where it always rained was not the Gilbert home; it was the space behind my eyes. And the water is rising. There is nothing left to absorb the flood.*

I close the notebook and walk to the bathroom. I don't need to see the mirror; I know the face of a failure and how the pale eyes stare back. My eyes search for the bottle, and I find the bottle; my final gentle escape. The liquid inside is clear, promising a final silence.

I don't want to be strong anymore. The strength was the lie. I was never strong. My weaknesses were masked up by all these fake scenarios.

I swallow the whole bottle quickly without getting delusional once again and then lie down on the cold carpet. I close my eyes, my last thought is how my father fell, and I see it was my mother who pushed him, the vision is so clear as if I am reliving that moment. The rain outside starts to fade. The last sound of the world softening slowly into the eternal silence I have been carrying since the night my father fell.

I am finally sinking into eternal silence.

## **A Critical Reflection on the Novella**

### **Introduction**

This creative thesis explores how trauma disrupts identity and memory through the form of a psychological novella. This novella revolves around the effects of trauma and childhood abandonment on an individual's mind. The storyline is about a mental health professional whose life was a fiction, a life she had created to blot out her dark past, which was beginning to disintegrate in front of her very eyes, because the life she was living was a product of a mind which had created a world around her because she had no one in life, just a figment of her imagination. This story shows how the mind uses "self-erasure" and imagination as a shield against a reality which is too hard to bear.

### **Context and Influences**

The literary and philosophical works of authors such as Fyodor Dostoevsky, Franz Kafka, Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Plath, and Osamu Dazai have greatly influenced my novella, *The Shape of Absence*. Also, Sigmund Freud has a great influence on my novella, as he is the father of psychology. I was heavily influenced by him as well. During my undergraduate studies, when I concentrated on modernist, existential, and psychological literature, I frequently encountered these authors. Over time, reading their works affected more than just my taste in literature; it gradually altered my perspective on human suffering, the mind, and the function of storytelling. I had a limited and somewhat unbalanced interaction with these authors' ideas when I first read them. Their understanding of loneliness, hopelessness, emotional suffering and the conviction that suffering is at the core of human existence drew me in. I accepted the darker sides of their philosophy at that point in my academic career. I mistook detachment for wisdom, suffering for the truth, and loneliness for a deep soul. This way of thinking affected my early writing, which frequently featured melancholy without self-awareness, development, or resolution. But after re-reading their work with scholarly guidance, I realised that these authors weren't celebrating hopelessness. Instead, they exposed suffering so that it could be studied, questioned, and understood. This insight was a pivotal moment in my writing and thinking, and it greatly influenced the writer I eventually became.



Samantha lives entirely inside her own mind, trapped by her own thoughts. Like a character in a Dostoevsky novel, she believes her constant guilt and inner turmoil are proof that she is a deep, moral person. **(Dostoevsky, Notes from Underground)** She is so focused on her own internal battles that she no longer knows what is real or what is just a memory. **(Existentialism)** Unhealed versions of trauma, fear and doubt are all prominent in her thoughts. In the chapter, “The Unmasking”, she discovers that the life she had been living was a psychological shield she constructed to survive rather than the reality. Dostoevsky’s view that the most significant suffering occurs internally rather than externally is reflected in this gradual emotional breakdown, just like Dostoevsky’s emotionally disturbed narrators. **(Dostoevsky, Notes from Underground)** Samantha’s breakdown is not an overnight experience; it develops over years of unexamined and unhealed traumas.

In the novel, we also witness the impact of Franz Kafka’s fear and alienation. Samantha resides in a dreamlike world beyond normal, but she is never given any absolute authority over what happens in her reality. Her husband and child have vanished, and thanks to Nina’s oppressive presence, Samantha becomes an almost **(Kafkaesque)** blend of dread as she endeavours to untangle any semblance of sense, only to be met with silence. In “The Familiar Stranger,” Samantha harbours the possibility that she’s infected and is beginning to find herself unwillingly part of a monstrous conspiracy, identifiable by appearance. In her own mad world, she is involuntarily stuck, with its own laws, never articulated to her as an invisible mechanism shared by the creatures of “Franz Kafka.” **(Kafka, The Metamorphosis)**

The influence of Virginia Woolf is woven into the novel’s voice and form, which creatively plays with time. Virginia Woolf’s stream-of-consciousness writing inspired me to try a shadow of the emotional narrative structure rather than the conventional linear progression of a story. **(Woolf Mrs Dalloway)** In specific chapters, such as “Where it Rains Inside” or “When Silence Screamed”, the plotline shifts from thought to thought, from sensation to sensation, and memory to memory, seemingly developing as an internal biography of a single character. Her recognition of the primacy of inner reality, even over outer reality, inspired her to delve into Samantha’s inner reality. And rain, silence, mirrors, and rooms are not just locations but feelings in the flesh. This enables the reader to feel loneliness rather than merely observe it. It is therefore fitting that her memories

seem to be refracted through a shattered glass, an apt image given that this shattering reflects the broken state of her psyche and sits comfortably within Woolf's modernist interpretation of stream of consciousness.

Sylvia Plath's influence is felt most in the novel's confessional mood, fierce language, and probing of feminine pain. Sylvia Plath's writing has helped me see that suffering does not have to be watered down or covered up to matter. Samantha's desires on mothers who love their children conditionally, fathers who remove themselves emotionally, and her own emotional detachment are very close to those of Sylvia Plath. There is that... symbolic expression: 'The house where it always rained was not Gilbert's; it was here, behind my eyes'." Clearly indicates this. **(Plath, The Bell Jar)** Writing, or even thinking, for Samantha is both an escape and a chance to summon Plath's writing itself. In this novel, sadness is not seen as a weakness, nor is loneliness or mental illness.

To understand the "Doubling" (**Split Personality**) in *The Shape of Absence*, we have to look at the influence of Osamu Dazai. Dazai's writing often focuses on deep loneliness and the desire to disappear. In this story, "Doubling" shows how a person's identity can be split apart when they feel completely alone. And in these ways, the characters of **(Dazai, No Longer Human)** connect, tending to live as normally as possible while feeling totally disconnected from the same world, and this shaped Samantha as much. It is also made evident in the story that her marriage, motherhood, and work life are but illusions, an effort to protect her against loneliness, which she cannot stand. As in *No Longer Human*, the entire world becomes self-delusion itself. Instead, Samantha is deceiving herself rather than others. Nina is the embodiment of the broken part of her younger self, the result of Osamu Dazai's work, in which emotional division, not a devastating event, is what makes tragedy. These authors not only shaped my literary tools, such as unreliable narration, psychological disunity, or melancholy, but also my philosophical development as a writer. I entered darkness without understanding these works, and later I sought understanding and awareness.

Repression theory, which is mentioned by Sigmund Freud, can be understood in relation to Samantha's state of mind in *The Shape of Absence* in that Freud's theory states that when memories become too painful, the mind has the tendency to repress those memories in the unconscious mind, allowing them to manifest in distorted forms later on in life. **(Freud, Introductory Lectures on**

**Psycho-Analysis)** In Samantha's life, she has repressed memories of abuse exhibited by her mother and the death of her father. In particular, she recognises that love means suffering when she hears that she, as a girl, is "strong." This imprinting of love as a kind of endurance, and rather than concern, which continues when her imaginary husband tells Samantha the same thing her father did: that she is a strong woman. On a psychoanalytic level, Samantha's experience illustrates both repression and return as a pattern established by a parent's pattern within a romantic relationship. **(Oedipus Complex)** Samantha's collapse happens when the pressure of the repression can no longer hold back the truth.

## **Creative Methodology**

In this novella, fiction serves as a research tool to examine how trauma shapes a person's identity. The story explores how much pain a mind can endure before it begins creating false realities to survive. By focusing on feelings more than facts, the writing process itself becomes a way to study the inner split caused by years of being alone. This shows that creative writing is a serious way to understand the mind that regular research cannot. The story follows the tradition of psychological realism, which focuses on what happens inside a person rather than outside. In this novella, the world is shown exactly how the character feels it, not how it actually is. This helps show how trauma can make illusions, like a fake family, feel 100% real. Because the storyteller is unreliable, the reader shares the character's confusion and fear, culminating in a final moment when the truth is revealed. It also draws on modern literature to show how the past haunts the present. The story reflects how a traumatised mind jumps between memories and the present day. This novel is more than being influenced by these authors; rather, it is the continuation of questions these authors posed in my mind, such as how much truth one could bear, how memory alters reality, or how the mind produces illusions to sustain life. During my undergraduate studies, I came to understand that literature is both a mirror and a wound, and my novel resides at that intersection.

*The Shape of Absence* is essentially a psychologically realistic text, with the emphasis on inner psychological experience rather than action. There is no presentation of reality as it is, but only as a psychological experience. Reality is filtered entirely through a character's experiences or psychology. Nothing that has happened to Samantha, from the abuse of her childhood to the death of her father, or the disappearance of her husband and son, or the arrival of Nina, is presented as

fact. This storytelling style also helps the novel delve into how trauma changes the characters' perceptions and how their minds reshape reality to cope with the situation. Through the storytelling, the reader is made to feel Samantha's confusion and fear rather than having her character unfold before them.

The novella also shows subtle Gothic tendencies, not created through Gothic imagery, such as castles or monsters, but through atmosphere and psychology. The Gilbert family home represents the Gothic space that is mute, oppressive, and filled not with damned souls but with the memory of the past. The typical domestic environment is menacing, and even silence is a form of violence. Later, Samantha's psyche becomes a Gothic space, harbouring suppressed truths that manifest as twisted visions, most notably through the character of Nina. The terror in the novel stems from the psychological disintegration.

The novel also falls within the modernist genre in terms of its structure and ideology. It challenges the history of linear narrative and realistic conceptions of reality, instead pursuing a fragmented methodology through memory, the inner self, and subjective realities. Time is flowing, and the boundaries between the past and the present are not definite, but they become part and parcel of each other. This conforms to modernism, which holds that reality is fluid and subjective. The novel is bereft of moral closure, instead presenting doubt, conflict, and uncertainty. This can be traced in how the novel alternates its narrative forms, a characteristic of modernist narrativity, in which various styles can be accommodated within the same novel, with disparate themes and ideas that pertain to the same story and plot.

On a philosophical point, the novel addresses the existential and psychoanalytic theories of self-deception, identity, and memory. One of the most outstanding problems is whether reality is a product of truth that is not dependent on the mind, or is it a product of the mind. This is highlighted by the fact that Samantha sees hallucinations and imagines her loved ones, and this shows that identity does not exist but is created by her imagination. As it could be observed, the novel also touches upon psychoanalytic repression, dissociation, and trauma. It is Samantha's mind that is creating the baby, Zed, and even Nina, as products not of her desires but of her needs. Her state of mind clearly shows how the mind dissociates to protect itself against pain. The first-person

narrative voice is essential to the novel's psychological depth. They all sound through Samantha's eyes and do not provide the reader with an objective view of the world. This brings about a feeling of closeness, yet also one of uncertainty. It is not that Samantha is knowingly deceiving or misleading other individuals. The fact that Samantha has a mental illness and is traumatised is what makes her unreliable. Once the reader realises the truth, it is time to doubt everything that was accepted before. It creates a feeling of confusion that is reminiscent of the real-life events that are linked to mental illness. These are the reasons why the novel is clear-cut in the genre of psychological fiction. It is more focused on what is perceived internally and not on what happens externally. The biggest climax in this case is a psychological one, when Samantha understands that her entire adult life is an illusion, created as a defence mechanism to overcome the trauma of her childhood. It is this internal reality, not reality as such, that determines the novel, and the novel narrates the story of the crumbling away of that reality in the presence of the truth that can no longer be overlooked.

## **Conclusion**

*The Shape of Absence* illustrates how creative writing can be a rigorous form of inquiry in relation to trauma and memory. Through its correlation of narrative form to fragmentation, the novella can be seen to play its part in an understanding of the manner in which fiction can be used to convey the inner world in a manner which cannot easily be put into words.

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