

**SELF-SILENCING: A PSYCHOSOCIAL
STUDY OF THE EXPERIENCES OF
DIASPORIC PROTAGONISTS IN THE
SELECTED WORKS**

BY

MAH E LAQA AFRIDI



**NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF MODERN LANGUAGES,
RAWALPINDI
JUNE 2025**

Self-Silencing: A Psychosocial Study of the Experiences of Diasporic Protagonists in the Selected Works

By

MAH E LAQA AFRIDI

National University of Modern Languages, 2021

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY

In English

To

FACULTY OF ARTS & HUMANITIES



NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF MODERN LANGUAGES, RAWALPINDI

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NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF MODERN LANGUAGES FACULTY OF ARTS & HUMANITIES

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Thesis Title: Self-Silencing: A Psychosocial Study of the Experiences of Diasporic Protagonists in the Selected Works

Submitted by: Mah e laqa Afridi

Master of Philosophy

Degree name in full

English Literature

Name of Discipline

Dr. Khadeeja Mushtaq

Name of Research Supervisor

Dr. Arshad Mahmood

Name of Dean (FAH)

Registration #: 64 MPhil/Eng Lit/Rwp/F21

Signature of Research Supervisor

Signature of Dean (FAH)

Date

AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

I Mah e laqa Afridi

Daughter of Jehanzeb Afridi

Registration # 64 MPhil/Eng Lit/Rwp/F21

Discipline English Literature / Linguistics

Candidate of **Master of Philosophy** at the National University of Modern Languages do hereby declare that the thesis **SELF-SILENCING: A PSYCHOSOCIAL STUDY OF THE EXPERIENCES OF DIASPORIC PROTAGONISTS IN THE SELECTED WORKS** submitted by me in partial fulfillment of MPhil degree, is my original work, and has not been submitted or published earlier. I also solemnly declare that it shall not, in future, be submitted by me for obtaining any other degree from this or any other university or institution.

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ABSTRACT

Title: Self-Silencing: A Psychosocial Study of the Experiences of Diasporic Protagonists in the Selected Works

This study examines the psychological and social struggles of diasporic mothers in *Little Bandaged Days* (2020) by Kyra Wilder and *The School for Good Mothers* (2021) by Jessamine Chan. It explores how self-silencing, mental instability, and strained relationships with family and society shape their experiences. The research highlights the pressures placed on mothers, particularly in diasporic contexts, where cultural displacement and isolation amplify emotional distress. Drawing on Dana Crowley Jack's Self-Silencing Theory (2010), the study investigates how women, in their efforts to meet societal expectations, often suppress their emotions and sacrifice their individuality. This internalized pressure leads to psychological struggles such as anxiety, depression, and a loss of self-identity. The notion of the "ideal mother" reinforces emotional restraint, affecting mother's mental well-being and social relationships. In the selected novels, motherhood is portrayed as a complex and demanding transition rather than an instinctive or purely joyful experience. Societal norms and cultural ideals impose unrealistic expectations, worsening the struggles of diasporic mothers who already face alienation and inadequate support. The study critiques how family dynamics, marital relationships, and institutional systems often fail to provide meaningful assistance, deepening their sense of isolation. Beyond individual experiences, this study highlights the broader impact of self-silencing on social structures and generational patterns. It advocates for rethinking gender norms and promoting a more inclusive, realistic portrayal of motherhood. Ultimately, it calls for greater awareness, systemic change, and emotional support to empower women, allowing them to reclaim their voices and identities.

Keywords: *Self-Silencing, Diaspora, Mental Health, Motherhood*

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I am deeply grateful to Almighty Allah for giving me the strength, patience, and wisdom to complete this research. Without His blessings, none of this would have been possible.

I would like to sincerely thank my supervisor, Dr. Khadeeja Mushtaq for her continuous support, valuable feedback, and guidance throughout this journey. Her encouragement helped me stay focused and improve my work. I am also thankful to the Head of the Department and the Dean for providing the necessary resources and a learning environment that made this research possible.

A special thanks to my family, especially my parents, for their unconditional love, prayers, and support. Their encouragement kept me going through the toughest times. To my siblings and friends, I deeply appreciate your patience, motivation, and for always believing in me.

Lastly, I want to acknowledge my own hard work and perseverance. This journey was full of challenges, but I pushed through and kept going. Alhamdulillah for everything.

DEDICATION

To all the mothers who continue to struggle and sacrifice with unwavering love and strength.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The research focuses on instances of self-silencing and how the psychosocial experiences of diasporic mothers affect their psychological well-being and their ability to navigate the restrictive expectations imposed by both foreign and native societies. For centuries, societies have been structured around patriarchal systems that assign specific roles and expectations to women, especially mothers (Sultana 1–18). Mothers are typically entrusted with the responsibilities of nurturing, caring for, and providing for their children and families, with the expectation that they prioritize their children's needs over their own. Throughout the ages, the role of mothers has undergone a metamorphosis, shaped and molded by factors such as cultural norms, ethnicity, faith, and economic circumstances. Yet, despite these fluctuations, the significance of mothers in society has remained steadfast—an immutable and essential component of the fabric of our communities. From nurturing the youngest members of our families to imparting wisdom, values, and life skills, mothers play a crucial role in shaping individuals and future leaders. They are the guardians of love, the caretakers of souls, and the architects of growth and development. The influence of a mother stretches far beyond the confines of her household, permeating every aspect of life and leaving an indelible mark on the world (Brenning 2257–2267).

Dana Crowley Jack's *Self-Silencing Theory* is adapted to shed light on the intricate psychological experiences of the protagonists in the selected works. These novels are chosen for their strong focus on the psychological struggles faced by diasporic mothers. Both narratives revolve around female leads who experience emotional turmoil due to a lack of familial and institutional support. Their displacement in unfamiliar cultural environments deepens their mental and emotional challenges. Erika and Frida, the protagonists, offer two unique yet relevant portrayals of women navigating motherhood under pressure, making their stories particularly suitable for a psychosocial analysis centered on self-silencing. *Little Bandaged Days* revolves around Erika, her husband M, and her two children E and B. Erika's life changes, and her mental state begins to deteriorate when the family relocates to Geneva (a French-speaking country). She strives to be the perfect wife and mother—always available for her family, preparing warm meals

for her frequently absent husband, feeding and cleaning for her children, and entertaining them with daily games. She even reassures her mother that she is doing well and loving the new place, sharing small accomplishments such as saying 'Bonjour' in French as an attempt to ease her mother's constant worry. Initially, Erika enjoys her surroundings, exploring the neighborhood with her children and sitting by the water pump in the park. However, over time, her inability to speak French leads to increasing isolation. Her focus narrows solely to her children, to the point of neglecting her husband and even her concerned mother. She eventually shuts herself and her children inside the apartment, locking doors and windows, leaving no room for external intervention. Her insomnia, isolation, and relentless effort to care for her children become overwhelming. *The School for Good Mothers* by Jessamine Chan tells the story of Frida, an Asian American woman who moves from New York to Philadelphia. A single mother co-parenting with her ex-husband, Frida faces discrimination for her heritage and parenting style. After leaving her 18-month-old daughter alone in her apartment for two and a half hours, an incident she calls "a bad day", she is sent to an experimental facility that aims to rehabilitate mothers accused of even minor parenting infractions. At the facility, Frida is mocked and judged, particularly for her Chinese parenting style. She is commanded to follow strict rules to regain custody of her daughter. Frida complies diligently, treating her AI-generated daughter with the same love and care as her real child. She silences herself, conforming entirely to the expectations imposed on her. Her defense mechanism is triggered after losing her parental rights, leading her to kidnap her daughter, Harriet, simply to spend time with her. This act draws attention to the institution's cruelty, highlighting how it causes more psychological harm than help.

In the field of Communication Studies, silence goes beyond mere quietness or the absence of sound. Silencing is an active verb, denoting a deliberate action. Historically, it has encompassed a broad spectrum—from interpersonal dismissals to the erasure of entire cultures, such as the colonization and attempted genocide of Native Americans, and the ongoing marginalization of Indigenous communities. Self-silencing, the deliberate choice to mute one's voice, often stems from internalized messages and past experiences that result in embodied pain (Du 260–268). This learned behavior becomes ingrained both

physically and mentally. Even a single traumatic event can be enough to embed these experiences in the nervous system, manifesting as chronic pain triggered by memories—consciously or unconsciously recalled. Expanding on this, Bakhtin observed that authoritative voices from childhood—parents, religious institutions, teachers—become internalized, forming deeply embedded messages that make internal discourse difficult (Ahmed 2–16). Self-silencing, thus, becomes not just a reaction but a survival mechanism. Beyond the personal, this phenomenon exists on a societal level. Though women may no longer be physically punished for speaking publicly, they still face verbal interruptions, dismissals, and neglect. Sexist oppression teaches them from birth that their value is inferior to men’s and that their words only matter if they align with others’ expectations (Olson 1–33). This is particularly true for survivors of sexual abuse, who often grow up within layers of normalized silencing. For them, self-silencing becomes a defense mechanism. Even when surrounded by supportive individuals, they may remain silent, as trauma has deeply rooted the habit within them (LeBlanc 3885–3898).

In Western societies, although there is growing emphasis on gender equality, mothers are still expected to prioritize their children over themselves. This expectation may include sacrificing career goals, personal growth, and social lives to fulfill idealized roles. In more traditional societies, gender roles remain fixed—mothers are expected to stay at home, manage household duties, and raise children. In such cultures, the mother is revered for her role in shaping her children's futures and maintaining strong ties with extended family as a support system (Marcus-Newhall 87–107). Despite changes in societal values, the “ideal mother” stereotype remains burdensome. Understanding cultural differences is key to supporting mothers and developing effective policies that ensure their well-being (Mesman 385–397). The culture and society in which one is raised profoundly influence behavior, identity, and expectations. Being part of a diaspora presents unique challenges: feeling like an outsider, facing language barriers, discrimination based on race, religion, or class, and experiencing mental stress. Diasporic mothers endure added pressure from constant scrutiny of their parenting while trying to manage their families and shield their children from culture shock. They often act like semi-permeable membranes—filtering what reaches their children from the outside world. Such mothers struggle with language,

assimilation, traumatic pasts, limited opportunities, and abrupt life changes. These factors can lead to alienation and psychological breakdown if they fail to integrate into society (Liu 16–23).

Life becomes a balancing act of choosing actions that inflict the least pain, with little hope of alleviating suffering. Both psychologists and feminist scholars agree that the path to healing lies in the act they are most discouraged from—speaking out. For mothers relocating to foreign countries, these pressures are intensified. Language barriers hinder their ability to communicate, especially regarding their children's education, health, and well-being. Fear of being misunderstood or ridiculed silences them. Cultural differences in parenting practices add to this strain. When maternal instincts conflict with societal expectations, women are forced to suppress their own approaches to conform. The absence of a support network—friends, extended family, community—deepens this silence, as they are compelled to handle everything alone. Bureaucratic obstacles further contribute to this struggle. Navigating complex systems in a foreign language can be daunting, creating a sense of helplessness that leads to self-silencing.

In conclusion, the challenges faced by diasporic mothers in foreign countries are deeply intertwined with the phenomenon of self-silencing. Psychological frustration, social isolation, and unrealistic expectations compel these women to silence their authentic voices—sometimes leading to collapse, and other times to radical acts of resistance.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

The diasporic mothers informed by their native culture, ethnicity, family as well as the situational context, internalize standards of behavior deemed as socially acceptable. In the act of self-silencing, the women gain social approval for their behavior and are labeled often as ‘good.’ However, this approval comes at the cost of their psychological health, increasing their vulnerability to depression and weakening the very relationships they have nurtured with care. The present study examines the psychological challenges of diasporic women as they navigate between motherhood and social expectations in the selected texts.

1.2 Research Questions

The research questions are:

1. What are the traditional expectations for women who become mothers? How much is motherhood prescribed by norms, values, and expectations, especially in the context of diasporic mothers?
2. What are the psychological manifestations of self-silencing in the female protagonists from the selected texts?
3. How do the female protagonists navigate between motherhood and societal expectations in the selected texts?

1.3 Significance of the Study

This study holds considerable significance as it delves into the potential causes of stress among diasporic mothers through the selected analytical frameworks. By examining the pressures faced by these women, the research highlights the societal expectations that impose unrealistic standards of motherhood, often compelling them to prioritize the needs of others at the expense of their own well-being.

The findings of this study are crucial in shedding light on the psychological and emotional toll exerted on diasporic mothers who struggle to conform to rigid cultural and social ideals. It underscores how societal norms perpetuate self-silencing behaviors, leading to long-term mental health consequences. By drawing attention to these challenges, this research contributes to a broader discourse on gender roles, migration, and maternal identity.

Additionally, this study serves as a valuable resource for scholars, policymakers, and mental health professionals by offering insights into the lived experiences of diasporic mothers. It advocates for the need to reexamine and redefine traditional expectations of motherhood, promoting a more inclusive and supportive environment for mothers navigating the complexities of cultural assimilation and identity preservation. Through this analysis, the study emphasizes the importance of addressing these societal pressures to ensure the emotional and psychological well-being of diasporic mothers and their families.

1.4 Delimitation

This research focuses on the struggles of diasporic mothers and examines how specific life events contribute to their psychological distress, leading to the loss of their sense of self, their children, and their homes. This study intentionally focuses on female characters to examine how gender-specific expectations, particularly in diasporic contexts, contribute to patterns of self-silencing. Women—especially those in maternal roles—are more inclined to internalize ideals of perfection, self-sacrifice, and emotional control, which heightens their vulnerability to psychological suppression. By centering on female experiences, the research is better positioned to unpack the intertwined effects of motherhood, gender norms, and cultural displacement. The study analyzes these themes in *Little Bandaged Days* and *The School for Good Mothers* through the Self-Silencing Theory proposed by Dana Crowley Jack. By applying this theoretical framework, the research explores how societal expectations and cultural displacement contribute to self-silencing behaviors, ultimately affecting the mental and emotional well-being of diasporic mothers.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of a literature review is to position the current research within contemporary scholarship and identify gaps in existing critical sources relevant to the area of study. In this literature review, the themes of self-silencing, motherhood, cultural norms, diasporas, and the psychological and emotional struggles of women in society have been explored. However, despite extensive studies on these themes, significant gaps remain that this research aims to address. *Self-silencing* refers to a behavioral tendency, most observed in women, where they suppress their personal thoughts, feelings, and desires to maintain relational peace or conform to social norms. Dana Crowley Jack's theoretical framework, which forms the basis of this study, suggests that such suppression often leads to emotional detachment, loss of identity, and in many cases, psychological distress—especially among women who have been socially conditioned to place others' needs above their own.

In the context of migration, these challenges tend to intensify. Women not only grapple with traditional gender roles but also face the added strain of adapting to new languages, cultural systems, and unfamiliar institutions. When these challenges intersect with the responsibilities of motherhood, the emotional toll becomes even more severe.

2.1 Literature on Self-Silencing, Diaspora and Motherhood

2.1.1. Self-Silencing and Cultural Displacement

Yunpeng Du's work “*“I Don't Feel Like Talking About It” Silencing the Self under Coronavirus*” focuses on self-silencing that encapsulates a range of actions, including self-isolation, avoidance, and a process of self-justification. It stems from the belief that remaining quiet is more advantageous for self-preservation than speaking out, driven by the fear of potential or past pain, shame, and threats to one's survival. Yunpeng Du's work has significantly contributed to the understanding of self-silencing, with a particularly enlightening account of a young woman, Amy, who was studying in London and originally from Wuhan, China. Amy's self-silencing was a response to the backdrop of the global COVID-19 outbreak, where blame was disproportionately placed on Wuhan, intensifying pre-existing Asian-targeted racism. Amy keenly observed the escalating tensions, triggered

by her appearance and the association of Londoners with the pandemic's blame game. She encountered racist comments, criticism of her homeland, and vague references to hate crimes against Eastern Asians. The additional burden of further tarnishing the image of Chinese international students and deepening offensive stereotypes of the Chinese in London compelled Amy to stay silent and isolated. Her rationale, grounded in self-preservation, was driven by the belief that speaking out would expose her to potential harm and social hostility, compounded by her lack of guidance in navigating confrontational discussions related to the coronavirus. Over time, Amy's self-silencing became a daily coping mechanism, a shield against vulnerability and danger, as well as a means of avoiding situations that could worsen or perpetuate negative perceptions of the Chinese in London. Her motto, encapsulated by "I don't want to talk about it," encapsulates her experience (Du 260-268). Amy reported that the repercussions of her self-silencing included increased feelings of depression, anxiety, and loneliness, which negatively impacted her mental, physical, and relational well-being (Du 260-268). Du's account of Amy's story provides a comprehensive understanding of self-silencing. To summarize, self-silencing involves individuals muting themselves due to the social pressures imposed by dominant cultures, the dismissal and erasure of marginalized voices, the indoctrination that they do not deserve a voice or to be heard, the fear of consequences for speaking out (both on a personal and collective level), and the internal emotional distress of being met with dismissal, hostility, violence, and shame. While Amy's self-silencing was a defensive measure she adopted, it was rooted in oppressive social and cultural mechanisms, primarily driven by the imperative of self-preservation. Nonetheless, self-silencing can be explored in greater depth, including the cessation of nonverbal communication. For example, Du's study suggests that the student he interviewed extended her self-silencing to nonverbal forms of communication, as she isolated herself in her room. This isolation went beyond just muting her words; it encompassed all forms of expression, including nonverbal cues. Furthermore, self-silencing can extend to internal manifestations within the body, such as stifling one's internal voice. As discussed by Mikhail Bakhtin in his *Theory of Multivoicedness*, our minds contain internalized voices, including societal and authoritative messages, alongside our voices. Self-silencing encompasses suppressing one's voice, allowing the authoritative voice to dominate. Given that the authoritative voice

reflects the socio-cultural mechanisms of the environment, it mirrors the oppressive sexism ingrained in Western society. Consequently, even though an individual may possess a voice that questions and challenges the authoritative one, self-silencing silences this inner voice, thereby letting the authoritative voice take precedence in the individual's thoughts and actions. In doing so, individuals suppress their emotions, dismiss their experiences, diminish their bodies, and forget their memories, internalizing the dehumanizing societal mechanisms of misogyny and oppression (Bakhtin 305). Du found that his participant also engaged in internal self-silencing, manifesting not only as silencing of vocal expression but also as a deep-rooted shame associated with her place of birth. This shame extended to her past, memories, and origin, creating a self-diminishment that fragmented her sense of self. Self-silencing also extends to silencing one's memories, origins, and internal self, effectively breaking the self into fragments. While Du's study highlights the psychological burden of self-silencing, it does not examine how this phenomenon impacts diasporic mothers within domestic and familial settings. This study addresses that gap by analyzing self-silencing as a survival mechanism for diasporic mothers balancing cultural expectations, motherhood, and assimilation in a foreign environment.

2.1.2 Embodiment and Internalized Oppression

Piran's book *Journeys of Embodiment at the Intersection of Body and Culture* is based on interviews with 171 girls and women, along with focus groups with school-aged girls, which highlights how self-diminishment could lead to women eating less to occupy less physical space (Chrisler 117-120). Like the women in Piran's research and the woman in Du's study, self-silencing extends beyond verbal suppression to encompass one's presence and expression. This suppression inhibits the use of resources essential for survival. Consequently, breaking free from self-silencing implies claiming ownership of one's words, emotions, and expressions in all forms, one's past, their body, the resources necessary for survival, and their rightful space on this planet as a woman (Olson 13). While Piran's work provides a foundation for understanding women's suppression of personal identity, it does not address how diasporic mothers experience self-diminishment both emotionally and psychologically as they struggle to maintain both cultural heritage and social acceptance in a new society. This study extends Piran's insights by focusing on self-

silencing beyond physical embodiment and into the realm of maternal identity and psychological well-being. Various explanations have been proposed to account for the increased susceptibility of women to certain mental illnesses within the context of women's mental health. However, due to the complexity of the topic, no single explanation is deemed adequate on its own. The *"Silencing the Self" theory* sheds new light on this issue by recognizing the significance of social and cultural factors. With its relational approach, the theory emphasizes the importance of core relationships and their impact on a woman's mental health. Despite being studied concerning several physical and psychological disorders since its inception three decades ago, the theory has received insufficient attention from scholars. Nevertheless, it has the potential to enhance our understanding of women's mental health issues. This review aims to present a comprehensive narrative of existing research on *"Silencing the Self"* in connection with psychiatric illnesses such as depression, eating disorders, and premenstrual dysphoric disorder. It seeks to combine previous work as a starting point for further examination of unexplored aspects (Emran 1-12). In Western societies, new mothers report being affected by ideas that imply mothering is a happy and satisfying task that comes easily to women. However, research shows that even among new mothers who are not depressed, negative sentiments about parenthood are frequent. It has been proposed that having such emotions may be associated with guilt and shame. This study evaluates new mothers' opinions of the social acceptability of negative thoughts and investigates links with guilt, shame, and psychological distress (Afiyanti 29-34).

2.1.3 Mental Health and Emotional Suppression

The study *Perfectionism, Silencing the Self, and Depression* investigated the relationships between distinct types of perfectionism, self-silencing behaviors, and depression. Involving 202 participants, the research utilized the Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale, the Silencing the Self Scale, and a measure of depression. The findings revealed that both socially prescribed perfectionism and self-oriented perfectionism are linked to self-silencing. Additionally, the study found that socially prescribed perfectionism and self-silencing behaviors are correlated with higher levels of depressive symptoms. Partial mediation was identified, with the Silencing the Self Scale

and its subscales mediating the relationship between socially prescribed perfectionism and depression. Furthermore, the study demonstrated that individuals with socially prescribed perfectionism who also have an externalized self-perception or high levels of self-silencing reported greater depression. Overall, the results underscore the importance of examining multiple vulnerability factors together and highlight the need for further research on the factors that influence the connection between perfectionism and psychological distress (Flett 1-12). While this research highlights the link between perfectionism and self-silencing, it does not specifically address how these factors affect diasporic mothers, who face additional pressures to conform. This study builds upon Flett's findings by examining how perfectionism and self-silencing function in diasporic maternal identities.

2.1.4 Diasporic Displacement and Maternal Identity

Anastasia Christou (2011), in her research *Narrating lives in (e)motion: Embodiment, belongingness, and displacement in diasporic spaces of home and return*, discusses the importance of emotions in the life of diasporas. This research was conducted through the stories that the diasporas narrated, the emotions were different for men and women as it was related to the hegemonic social structures. The experiences also varied due to the foreign country that these diasporas were settled in and the sense of belonging as well. In this research, the first-generation and second-generation diasporas are also discussed and it shows that the first-generation diasporas felt a sense of loss and alienation and they desired to move back to their homeland because they were also treated like diasporas but there was a lack of alienation in the second generation as they had already learned to assimilate with the society and they society had also treated them like natives (Christou 249-257). While Christou provides a valuable discussion on displacement and belonging, her study does not account for the specific pressures faced by first-generation diasporic mothers, who experience isolation and cultural displacement while also navigating their roles as caregivers. This research extends Christou's work by specifically analyzing how self-silencing manifests in maternal figures who must balance their cultural roots with the expectations of their host society. The title of Norpa T. Palayukan's research is *Cultural Clash in "The Secret Garden" by Frances Hodgson Burnett*. The study centers on Mary, who moves from India to Yorkshire, England, and her interactions with the

people in her new home, including Mrs. Medlock, Martha, and Collin. The findings suggest that a clash of cultures arises around Mary, as she is not familiar with the customs and culture of those around her in Yorkshire, leading to conflicts. Anugrah explored cultural conflicts in the novel "A Passage to India" by Edward Morgan Forster in his thesis. The research highlighted the differences in culture between the English and Indian characters, including beliefs and worship, way of living, dress, language, and climate, which resulted in conflicts. The conflicts in the novel were due to differing cultural values and were reflected in the behavior of the characters. In her thesis, *Cultural Conflicts in Intercultural Communication of Paul Haggis Film 'Crash'*, Amin focuses on cultural conflicts in the language aspect of the dialogue of the film, as well as cultural conflicts in real life that are captured in the film. Using discourse analysis, the writer identified ten utterances in the film that demonstrated cultural conflicts arising from diverse cultural perceptions in translating language (Fahirah 6-7). These studies focus primarily on broad societal and linguistic conflicts rather than the personal and psychological toll these conflicts take on diasporic mothers. This study bridges that gap by exploring how cultural displacement leads to self-silencing in mothers who must negotiate between their native traditions and the expectations of their new environment. *All the Madwomen in the Attic: alienation and Culture Shock in Jamaica Kincaid's See Now Then* is the article that examines the experience of alienation and the challenges of "culture shock" in contemporary diasporic Caribbean literature. According to Rack, diaspora inevitably leads to feelings of alienation, as individuals must adjust to new psychological cues in a new society. This article analyzes two classic works of English literature, *Jane Eyre* (1847) and *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), about *The Madwoman in the Attic* (Gilbert 277-288), to explore connections and provide insight into Kincaid's latest novel as a reinterpretation of these earlier texts (Alonso 277-290). The study highlights how diaspora leads to feelings of isolation as individuals adjust to new societal norms. However, this research does not specifically address how self-silencing, as a response to cultural alienation, impacts diasporic mothers. This study fills that gap by analyzing how diasporic mothers internalize alienation, leading to the suppression of their voices and emotions.

2.1.5 Cultural Adaptation and Culture Shock in Diaspora

Haykal Kevinsky's thesis, *Proses Dinamika Komunikasi Dalam Menghadapi 'Culture Shock' Pada Adaptasi Mahasiswa Perantauan*, investigates the communication process and dynamics of college students who are sojourners at UNPAD Bandung as they face culture shock. The study identifies the tendencies of students during the process of adaptation to foreign cultures, which can lead to different types of adaptation, including assimilation, separation, and integration (Pertiwi 1-23). In her study, *Culture Shock Experienced by Foreign Students Studying at Indonesian University*, Dwi Poedjiastutie investigated the potential culture shocks that foreign students may encounter at an Indonesian university. The study involved a questionnaire that was completed by 10 foreign students. The results indicated that foreign students experienced culture shock in three areas of academic life, namely the roles and attitudes of teachers, poorly organized programs, and the attitudes of local students (Pertiwi 57-74). However, these studies do not specifically address how diasporic mothers navigate cultural adaptation while fulfilling their maternal roles. This study contributes to the discourse by examining how diasporic mothers experience culture shock and self-silencing as they attempt to raise their children in unfamiliar environments.

2.1.6 Cultural Expectations of Motherhood

Through the critical lens of matricentric feminism, the research investigates the fictional motherhood representations in Caryl Phillips' novels *The Final Passage* (1995) and *The Lost Child* (2015). There is a substantial body of study that focuses on these novels from a variety of angles, but Phillips fills a gap in the literature by examining how mothers are portrayed in them. Phillips covers a variety of other maternal experiences in these novels. Thus, to understand these mother characterizations in his writings, an intersectional reading is recommended. Literary mothers, or portrayals of motherhood in literature, can take on different forms depending on the social, cultural, economic, and political climate of the period they were written. Recent literary studies have focused heavily on how literary depictions of motherhood might reveal how women are oppressed or empowered in patriarchal, racist, and/or economically disadvantaged societies (Güzen 1-6).

While previous studies have focused on patriarchal oppression in maternal roles, there has been little emphasis on how diasporic mothers experience dual pressures—maintaining their cultural heritage while assimilating into new societies. This study builds on Güzen's work by investigating how self-silencing emerges as a coping mechanism for diasporic mothers struggling to conform to both their native and adopted cultural norms.

Through an ideology now known as the "Cult of True Womanhood," the unproductive matron rose to prominence during the 1820s, 1830s, and 1840s as a representation of "bourgeois class hegemony." This ideal specified a role for women who were constrained by the kitchen and the nursery, covered in religiosity and chastity, and completed with subservience. Barbara Welter first introduced this in her book *Dimity Convictions: According to The American Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1976), a "True Woman" was viewed as being inherently superior to males in terms of virtue and serving as the symbolic custodian of morals and decency within the family. It was believed that women were naturally inclined toward piety, purity, submission, and domesticity. (Welter 151-174). Being a true woman, according to Welter, was an enormous responsibility: "A true woman was a true woman, wherever she was found. In a society where values changed frequently, fortunes rose and fell with frightening rapidity, and where social and economic mobility provided instability as well as hope." Men and women alike were immediately doomed as enemies of God, society, and the Republic if they ventured to alter the complex of values that constituted True Womanhood. The American lady of the nineteenth century had the dreadful duty and sacred responsibility of supporting the temple's pillars with her feeble, white hand. A True Woman was expected to act as the defender of religion and civilized society in a world where males were tasked with building and spreading an industrialized civilization out of the wilderness. The ideal of True Womanhood was ingrained into young girls at an early age, who were taught to be submissive and display great self-control, because being a True Woman was such an essential duty. My research extends Welter's work by analyzing how societal expectations of motherhood force diasporic women into self-silencing as they attempt to balance personal identity with culturally ingrained gender norms.

2.1.7 Feminist Literary Resistance

Preetha Laxmi Mani in her article discusses the short stories written by Tamil woman R. Chudamani (1931–2010) and Hindi woman Mannu Bhandari (1931–) in the 1950s and 1960s openly depict female protagonists who share their male partners' ambitions for sexual freedom, economic independence, and human equality. Both authors started their careers as published authors at a time when few women had achieved literary success in Hindi and Tamil or were regarded as having the same literary worth as their male peers. The two, however, defied widespread critiques that women writers were overly didactic, social reformers, sentimental, or that they were primarily focused on creating "shock value" or amusement by portraying characters who defied or challenged social and sexual mores of their time (Mani 176-190). Bhandari and Chudamani have consistently been translated into English and anthologized in widely read collections of Indian literature and women's writing. They have also been published in the same prestigious journals as canonical Hindi and Tamil male authors. What insights might Bhandari and Chudamani's novel articulations of feminine desire offer into how we understand the genealogies of feminism and women's writing in India, given that their works were written at a time when feminist politics was in decline and there was a dearth of "literary" women's writing being produced? This essay argues that Bhandari and Chudamani expanded the boundaries of feminist theory and women's literary expression in the early aftermath of independence within their historical and geographical contexts. *Adhikr* and *apanatva* in Hindi, and *atikram*, *urimai*, *niyyam*, and *katamai* in Tamil, a language that universalizes female desires by articulating them in uniquely humanist terms, were used rhetorically to accomplish this. Liberal conceptions of individual freedom, rights, and entitlements have been referred to by such widely used terminology at least from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. By the 1950s, these concepts had established themselves as pillars of the country's political discourse. However, in the contexts of Hindi and Tamil, these notions of entitlement also characterize more established power dynamics among familial, sponsored, and religious communities. As a result, even while they are related to rights and privileges in the court of law, these ideas are ingrained in a variety of emotive and moral frameworks, some of which support divergent concepts of the self. Bhandari and

Chudamani use a discourse of entitlement in their fiction to portray ambitions, obligations, and commitments of women as being on par with those of men. Thus, even as these sentiments also allude to a discourse of gender equality and women's freedoms and rights, the language of entitlement permits the expressions of feminine desire to be interpreted within the traditional terms of literary humanism of the time (Machwe 145-149). However, while their narratives critique patriarchal oppression, they do not specifically address how diasporic mothers navigate self-silencing when their maternal roles are scrutinized in foreign societies. This study extends their insights by examining how diasporic mothers, like Erika and Frida, are subjected to external judgment, forcing them into silence.

2.1.8 Intersectionality: Race, Class, and Diasporic Motherhood

In the 1400s, the word "motherhood" first appeared as "something seen as so unquestionably good as to be beyond criticism [and a state of being] symbolizing irrefutable and undeniable goodness and integrity." Motherhood has always been associated with goodness. However, this common notion does not question or acknowledge how socially constructed motherhood is, nor does it address how fluid and changing the practice of motherhood can be. Mothering also depends on history, society, politics, and economy. It is stated that motherhood is about bearing and rearing a child with undeniable joy, and the voices of these mothers are absent in the process. Motherhood is not just universal, but it also offers a prism through which to analyze the complex environment that women in modern Western world live in. Women who become mothers come from challenging environments, which are made much more challenging by pregnancy, childbirth, and the raising of young children. These spaces are influenced by a variety of factors, including women's mental and physical health, sexual orientations, employment situations, and the nature of their close and intimate relationships. They are also determined by cultural, social, political, and economic contexts. Within the same areas, mothers must navigate the difficulties of pregnancy, childbirth (or adoption), and childcare (Ross 1-10). Ross's research does not specifically explore how diasporic mothers experience motherhood differently from women in their home countries. This study adds to that discourse by examining how migration reshapes the perception and practice of motherhood, often compelling diasporic mothers to conform to unrealistic cultural ideals.

In the above list of reviewed articles, it has been seen that this research is beneficial in highlighting the concepts of motherhood and how the mothers try hard to keep order in the house, giving her love and care to their husbands and children. These mothers may sometimes become so engrossed in making everyone happy that they forget about themselves, their happiness, and their mental and physical health. They require the same amount of affection and appreciation in return. The elements of alienation, paranoia, and schizorenic mother are also present in Erika and Frida, the protagonists of the selected novels. In African American and Caribbean literature, themes like motherhood, mother-daughter relationships, missing fathers, and/or "disrupted" households have been particularly well-received. For many women, becoming a mother is an exciting and fulfilling experience. Society has created numerous idealized representations of motherhood, imposing expectations on women that can lead to disappointment. This disappointment is followed by an emotional response, which could be fear, remorse, or shame. But other women can experience this discrepancy between their ideal selves and their actual selves and adjust with little emotional outpouring. This phenomenon was not previously covered by a nursing theory. The psychology discipline's "Self-Discrepancy: A Theory Relating Self and Affect" presented concepts and definitions that might be used to develop a nursing theory (Higgins 93-136). My research applies self-discrepancy theory to the experiences of Erika and Frida, illustrating how diasporic mothers suppress their desires and aspirations in order to meet societal standards of motherhood.

2.2 CONCLUSION

The existing body of literature provides substantial insight into the individual themes of self-silencing, mental health, and motherhood. However, these aspects are often explored in isolation—studies may investigate emotional suppression in women, the psychological effects of migration, or the societal expectations placed on mothers, but seldom do they address how these elements intersect. In particular, there is a noticeable lack of research examining how self-silencing operates within the lives of diasporic mothers, who face the compounded burden of cultural dislocation and gendered expectations.

This study addresses that gap by analyzing fictional representations of diasporic women who undergo psychological and emotional strain as they navigate motherhood in unfamiliar environments. It explores how cultural displacement, institutional pressure, and internalized ideals of maternal perfection contribute to the silencing of their voices. Through Dana Crowley Jack's Self-Silencing Theory and a method of close textual analysis, the research uncovers how contemporary literature reflects the inner lives of women who are expected to endure quietly, give endlessly, and conform silently—revealing the deep emotional costs of this imposed invisibility.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Theoretical Framework

Dana Crowley Jack proposed the *Silencing the Self* theory based on a longitudinal study of twelve clinically depressed women. According to her theory, women have schemas for building and maintaining successful intimate relationships that can contribute to depression. To maintain these relationships, women may suppress their feelings, thoughts, and emotions. The inability to express one's self can lead to a decline in self-esteem and a loss of self. As these feelings persist, repressed emotions can turn into anger, leading to depression. Self-silencing can contribute to a decrease in dignity, self-regard, and feelings of worthlessness. Individuals who self-silence often sacrifice their own emotions and sentiments to maintain their relationships and seek approval, which results in depression (Jack 97-106).

There is a strong relationship between self-silencing and gender and cultural norms, and social structures. According to the culture and society, women are expected to be submissive, selfless, and vulnerable. According to Jack, women conform to the idealized gender roles due to the influence of an "Over Eye"- a partner, family, society, cultural, and/or moralistic voice. Women often internalize societal norms that reinforce gender-based hierarchies. This creates a continuous conflict between their identity ('I') and the imposed external perspective ('over eye'), a struggle that is particularly pronounced among women experiencing depression. These gender norms dictate that women should prioritize others' needs over their own, evaluate themselves based on external standards, and strive to please others (Jack 5). This study found that when depressed women evaluate their feelings and roles in relationships, they tend to use morally charged language with negative connotations, such as "selfish", "bad", and "worthless". While it is evident that their cognitions are inherently negative, Jack emphasizes the significance of the moral content in these evaluations and the standards used for self-judgment. Gender differences have been identified in the formation and functioning of morality, with females being more

focused on relationships and affection rather than abstract principles of justice as expressed in laws and rules. The standards that depressed women use to compare their actual selves to their ideal selves are derived from their family, current social context, and the culture in which they live and work. These areas, often conflicting with each other, set the standards of “goodness” for the ideal wife, mother, or working wife and mother that women use for their self-judgments.

To assess self-silencing and its relationship with various intimacy schemas in women’s depression, Jack developed the Silencing the Self Scale (STSS). This scale includes four subscales, which the authors derived logically: external self-perception, care as self-sacrifice, silencing the self, and the divided self. The concept of externalized self-perception involves evaluating oneself based on how others perceive them, which often leads to negative self-judgment. Care as self-sacrifice is the tendency to maintain relationships by prioritizing others' needs over one's own. Silencing the self involves suppressing one’s expression and actions to avoid conflict, potential loss, and retaliation. Finally, the divided self refers to presenting an outwardly compliant persona that does not reflect one’s true, authentic thoughts and feelings, resulting in an inner sense of division (Jack 6).

It is evident that women, in particular, are pressured to conform to the norms and feminine ideals established by their culture. Relational schemas of self-silencing are prevalent across many cultures. These schemas typically involve women remaining attached to relationships for economic security. As these relational schemas prompt women to suppress their expressions and anger, conform to others' expectations, and evaluate themselves against the culturally defined ideal of an "ideal/perfect/good woman," they contribute to depression. The idealized image of a "good woman" conveys to women that they are responsible for maintaining intimate relationships. Consequently, women often silence their desires for equality to align with others' expectations. In this process, the standards women impose on themselves regarding their inner feelings and behaviors lead to self-silencing to preserve their relationships. These dynamics give rise to the emergence of a ‘divided self.’ She proposed that women often experience a divided self, where one part of their identity seeks authenticity, while another part evaluates them based on external

gender norms and societal pressures. This external perspective dictates that to conform to these expectations, women must silence their true selves. This aspect of their identity suppresses their desire for authenticity, convincing them that self-silencing and conformity are necessary to avoid conflict and preserve intimate relationships. Negative emotions emerge during this self-silencing process because, despite believing that this behavior helps maintain relationships, women are also conscious that it reinforces inequality within those relationships. Jack observed that the women she interviewed expressed feelings of resentment, hopelessness, defeat, despair, and resignation due to their inability to voice their true thoughts and feelings. They also felt angered by the inherent imbalance in their relationships (Jack 7-9).

Jack describes her "Silencing the Self" (STS) theory of depression in women as a "reflexive" model of depressive vulnerability. According to Jack, this reflexive model suggests that an individual's unique images of relatedness interact with their life history and current situation. These interactions are influenced by cultural, societal, and familial standards, as well as historical power imbalances favoring men. These standards and categories are largely socially constructed. Despite societal advancements, many women continue to face the threat of poverty following divorce. Depressed women often feel they must either sacrifice their own needs and feelings to maintain their relationship or express their true selves, which can lead to isolation and the loss of the relationship. Jack notes that this dichotomous thinking prevents the integration of self and others and hinders open communication essential for intimacy (Jack 247-248). Many women, therefore, choose to silence themselves in unsatisfactory relationships, particularly those with a dominant partner or in coercive or unsupportive work environments, to maintain a somewhat protective status quo. It is crucial to understand that self-silencing, according to Jack, does not imply a literal loss of voice but rather the concealment of important aspects of one's identity from outward expression.

The STS theory posits that self-silencing results in loss of self, inner division, anger, and self-condemnation, heightening some women's vulnerability to depression. It involves significant cognitive effort in self-inhibition and self-monitoring, such as suppressing certain words, thoughts, and actions to maintain relationship harmony. The motivations for

preserving the relationship include fear of retaliation, lack of alternative behavior models, and idealized images of women as loving and responsible for the emotional climate of the relationship. This active self-censorship fosters self-alienation, where women project an outwardly compliant self while harboring inner anger, resentment, and hopelessness of being genuine in a relationship, ultimately resulting in a loss of self or authenticity. Gender-specific prohibitions against expressing anger and aggression in females further reinforce this self-censorship, especially when a woman's background emphasizes nurturance, caring, and "goodness" (Jack 153-154).

3.2 Research Methodology

This research is qualitative and employs textual analysis to explore how self-silencing operates within the lived experiences of diasporic mothers. Textual analysis, as a method, is particularly effective for examining literary works, as it enables the researcher to critically engage with the themes, narrative structures, and character developments that contribute to the broader discourse on gender, migration, and identity.

3.2.1 Textual Analysis Model

3.2.1.1 Close Reading

This study utilizes close reading as its primary model of textual analysis. Close reading is an interpretative and detailed method that allows for the identification and examination of key themes, motifs, and symbols within literary texts. By focusing on the language, dialogue, and psychological depth of the protagonists in *Little Bandaged Days* and *The School for Good Mothers*, close reading provides deeper insights into how self-silencing behaviors manifest in diasporic motherhood. Through close reading, this study critically engages with how authors construct characters and narratives that reflect the struggles of diasporic mothers. The analysis pays special attention to the internal monologues, interpersonal interactions, and societal pressures that shape the protagonists' psychological states. This approach helps to uncover how self-silencing is reinforced through external expectations and how it impacts the identity and mental well-being of these characters.

3.2.1.2 Feminist Literary Criticism

Additionally, feminist literary criticism is integrated into this study to examine how patriarchal ideologies and cultural norms influence the self-silencing tendencies of diasporic mothers. Feminist criticism provides a framework for understanding how gender roles, societal expectations, and historical constructs shape the maternal experiences depicted in the selected novels. By analyzing how literature critiques and reinforces these gendered ideologies, this study contributes to the broader discourse on power dynamics and identity formation in diasporic motherhood.

3.3 Conclusion

Through this approach, the research ensures a thorough and critical examination of the selected texts. The combination of close reading, textual analysis, and feminist literary criticism provides a nuanced understanding of how literature represents and critiques the self-silencing of diasporic mothers, offering valuable insights into the intersection of gender, migration, and psychological distress. The nature of this research is qualitative. Through textual analysis, the experiences of self-silencing among diasporic mothers are explored. The two novels *Little Bandaged Days* and *The School for Good Mothers* are read in a way that focuses on how the protagonists navigate their roles as mothers in the face of cultural and societal pressures. The key themes and motifs in the texts are analyzed, such as, diaspora, motherhood, identity, cultural expectations, and mental illness, to uncover how self-silencing is exhibited in the lives of diasporic mothers.

CHAPTER 4

ANALYSIS

The analysis of the two novels is conducted in the light of the *Self-Silencing Theory* by Dana Crowley Jack. The analysis highlights specific textual elements, such as dialogues and narratives extracted from novels, and subjects them to in-depth analysis as part of the research process.

4.1 Introduction

The transition into motherhood holds significant importance in the lives of women. It is a period marked by profound physical, psychological, and social changes, as women integrate their maternal identity and their relationship with their newborn infants. Cultural depictions of motherhood as a natural, instinctive, and joyful journey often contribute to a disparity between these societal expectations and the realities faced by women. Consequently, women may feel pressured to possess an innate knowledge of infant care, even without prior practical experience. Falling short of these idealized cultural standards of motherhood can lead to detrimental consequences. Society often perceives a 'good mother' as someone who embodies happiness, selflessness, and boundless patience. Consequently, women may judge themselves as 'bad mothers' when they perceive a disconnect between their experiences and these societal expectations. Additional research also indicates that women may grapple with feelings of inadequacy, abnormality, or being labeled as 'bad' mothers when they experience negative emotions concerning motherhood or struggle to manage its demands. Erika and Frida, the protagonists, are the victims of such cultural expectations. To prove themselves as “good mothers,” they try to conform to the norms, values, and expectations a society has of a mother and in doing so they lose a sense of self, their individuality, and their voice.

4.2 Analysis

According to the *Self-Silencing Theory*, the two diasporic protagonists, Erika and Frida, begin their journey of self-silencing when they relocate for their husbands' jobs, only to be left alone in an unfamiliar country with their children and an empty house to

manage. The few months or years are spent with ease and excitement, but that does not last for long. They are also supposed to conform to the unrealistic and ideal standards of motherhood because if they lack in any of the traditional values, norms, or expectations, they will be considered “bad mothers.” The acculturation stress or the culture shock, when one moves to an alien state, experienced by these mothers is likely influenced by the different norms and culture of the host country and the homeland (Jack 229). It is evident from the beginning that the two mothers are struggling to keep their sanity intact.

Frida, from *The School for Good Mothers*, leaves her eighteen-month-old daughter, Harriet, alone at home. Frida is an Asian single mother. Her parents are Chinese immigrants, but she is born and raised in the US. She is co-parenting her daughter with her ex-husband, Gust. Frida moved to Philadelphia with her husband for his job. Soon after, he left her for Susanna. Frida’s neighbors inform the Child Protection Services immediately, and they take her into custody. Frida knows the rules and regulations of the state, so she reminds herself to stay under the speed limit and avoid running into red lights as she drives to the station. She is anxious and reminds herself *to breathe*. From the beginning of the novel, the readers may think that it is Frida’s fault that she could have asked for help from Gust, but they fail to understand that when a single working mother is overwhelmed by her duties and responsibilities, she tends to break down.

All through Labor Day weekend, she felt frantic. Last Friday and Saturday, she had her usual insomnia, sleeping two hours each night. On Sunday, when Gust dropped off Harriet for Frida’s three and a half days of custody, Harriet was in the throes of an ear infection. That night, Frida slept ninety minutes. Last night, an hour. Harriet’s crying has been relentless, too big for her body, too loud for the walls of their tiny house to absorb. Frida did what she could. She sang lullabies, rubbed Harriet’s chest, gave her extra milk. (Chan 6)

Erika, from *Little Bandaged Days*, from the beginning of the novel gives off suspicious and concerning hints. Her apartment appears to be dark as if she has shut all doors, windows, and curtains. Erika’s mother is worried about her, but no one comes to visit Erika when she needs their support.

I told her I was fine, that it was amazing here. That E had fed swans by the lake. That I had already learned to say bonjour. Bonjour, I said, and wiggled my fingers at her through the screen. I wanted her to see me like that, speaking French I mean.” (Wilder 8) She feels comfortable in half-light apartment: “It was grey, soothing. To me it felt like the inside of an oyster. Delicate and safe and tucked away with us inside it. Everything was cool and clean and new. (Wilder 9)

Erika is trying to assimilate into the new country and culture as a diaspora. She has learnt how to say bonjour. They would smile or nod at her in public but mostly people kept to them. She also says: “Sometimes speaking French was like having your mouth filled with rocks and expecting your tongue to just leap, flying overall the dips and drops and cracks in the words in the sound of them.” (Wilder 9) They were buying expensive Swiss toys assimilating into the culture. “We were going to live like real Swiss people; toys would be handmade, expensive, beautiful, sparse and practical.” (Wilder 10)

We see that once a woman becomes a mother, all her conversations involve her children. She cannot talk or make any noise while her children are asleep. According to the *Self-Silencing Theory* proposed by Dana C. Jack, mothers are expected to look after their children whether they are diasporic mothers, single mothers, married mothers, working mothers, or stay-at-home mothers. She says that depression in women arises due to unsatisfying relationships where their desires for intimacy are unfulfilled, despite their efforts to engage in behaviors they believed would lead to closeness, a notion reinforced by societal expectations. Not only did they fail to establish intimacy with their partners, but they also experienced a gradual erosion of their self-identity. In attempting to meet their relational needs by adhering to the roles of a "good wife" and a "good mother," embodying qualities society traditionally values in women, such as selflessness and self-sacrifice, these women were compelled to suppress any emotions that contradicted the image of themselves as endlessly giving and devoid of self-interest. When their needs went

unmet, they perceived it as a personal failing, believing that they somehow didn't care enough or in the right manner. (Jack 119)

When Frida is on her way to the station, she does not pick up the calls coming from her ex-husband because she is scared, he might shout at her. She recalled how Gust would call her every night, when Harriet was with her, to find out if she had new words or motor skills.

She hates the disappointment in his voice when she fails to deliver. But Harriet is changing in other ways: a stronger grip, noticing a new detail in a book, holding Frida's gaze longer when they kiss good night. (Chan 7)

Here, we can see that the authoritative figure, that is the husband, can get angry and question the wife if she fails to give a satisfactory answer about why the children are not learning things that they should. Neither society nor husbands seem to understand that setting such unrealistic ideal standards for mothers to conform to may lead the mothers into depression. They do not understand that these few months after childbirth are extreme for the mother and the children. If the mother develops postpartum depression, it may be harmful to both herself and her children. She may experience resentment, emotional detachment, or even self-harm due to the overwhelming physical and emotional changes. Jack, in her book, states that the act of self-silencing and the concealed inner anger culminate in a process of self-alienation, causing the woman to perceive herself in two contradictory roles: one as an "outwardly conforming and compliant self," and the other as an "inner, clandestine self-harboring anger and resentment." (Jack 5)

Erika and Frida are under extreme pressure to be socially accepted as "good mothers", but society fails to understand the internal emotions that these mothers experience. By the end of the novel, Frida, despite the consequences she is about to face, becomes rebellious toward society, her husband, her friends, and the government. She kidnaps her daughter and exposes the horrendous truth about the rehabilitation center she has been kept in, to become a "good mother". On the other hand, Erika becomes schizophrenic and tries to harm her children as a result, she burns down her apartment.

For mothers to be considered “good mothers,” women go beyond their strength and abilities, but when they start to feel overwhelmed, it leads to madness. Some, like Frida, end up neglecting or abandoning their child, while others, like Erika, become overly protective.

Frida becomes so sleep-deprived that when she is waiting for the officers and the social worker to come and interrogate her, she puts her head down and falls asleep. She has to explain herself to everyone repeatedly, apologizing again and again, but the state-appointed officers, social workers, and therapists do not believe her story. They exaggerate her account before the court judge to ensure her admission into the newly established rehabilitation center, a facility for which they receive payment. Frida tells the officers that:

I went out for a coffee. And then I went to my office. I shouldn't have. I know, it was so stupid. I was exhausted. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to. Can you tell me where she is? (Chan 8)

The officers believe Frida is pretending to play dumb with them though she seemed smart enough to understand that she had left her child home alone for two hours. She explains repeatedly that it was a mistake and that it was her first full-time job and while she had been given the privilege of working from home, she had to step out briefly to get the hard copy for the article she was working on, and she lost track of time.

On the other hand, Erika is trying to bond with her daughter no matter how tired she is. Erika tells her daughter, E, that: “The apartment is small like a treasure chest, and that means we turn into gems when we step inside.” (Wilder 11)

In Jack's book, *Silencing the Self Across Cultures: Depression and Gender in Social World*, several references address how society has set standards for the idealization of motherhood, mothers are expected to be *self-sacrificing, selfless, loving, and caring* (Jack 241). The moment they do anything for themselves, they are considered “bad mothers” and are constantly criticized. Not only are the actions judged, but even their appearance is scrutinized. The officers from the state criticize Frida for the way she was dressed to go to work.

This is how you showed up to work?” Officer Harris nods at Frida’s bare face, her chambray button-down, stained with toothpaste and peanut butter. Her long black hair tied in a messy bun. Her shorts. The blemish on her chin. She swallows. “My boss knows I have a baby.” (Chan 9)

We see that the people of Switzerland still hold the same expectations and stereotypes of mothers, even working women look down upon stay-at-home mothers. When Erika and her husband move to the new state, they are shown apartments by the relocation agent sent by M’s office. Erika shows her discontent with the lady, but she is forced to “*put a smile on her face and silence her feelings*” because that is what is expected of her. Erika says:

But I didn’t like the way she only asked me to open the drawers in the kitchens or peek inside the washing machines to see how big they were (Wilder 11). “For you!” the lady would say.

Since Erika has silenced herself in front of everyone, she actually starts to think that:

And I supposed that really they were for me, weren’t they? My clothes and E’s clothes and B’s clothes that could be crumpled up into a washing machine. M’s clothes and her clothes, the clothes of working people, would of course have to be sent to at the dry cleaners. (Wilder 11)

According to Jack and Bakhtin, there exists an *Over-Eye*, also known as the *internalized voice or authoritative* figure whose voice is so deeply engrained in the minds that the internal discourse with this voice becomes impossible, hence, resulting in self-silencing. After a woman has incorporated the expectations and principles of a patriarchal system that mandates her to prioritize caring for others at the expense of her voice, she often discovers herself, in the phrasing of Jean Baker Miller, caught in a cycle of “engaging in altruistic actions while experiencing negative emotions.” (Jack 99)

Taking care of the children and the house entirely on their own can become overwhelming, so when these mothers get the chance to hide anywhere from their children they do hide. Frida believes that the best short escape for a while from her daughter is the ExerSaucer where Harriet is safe and quiet since she is fed and changed into a new diaper and she will not be climbing in Frida’s lap or touching her laptop as she finishes her article.

Frida tries her best to keep Harriet busy and entertained, she reads to her before bedtime and in the morning when she wakes up.

They'd been up off and on since 4:00 a.m. Frida's article was due last week. All morning, she went back and forth between Harriet's play corner and back to the living room sofa, where she had her notes spread out on the coffee table. She wrote the same paragraph over and over, trying to explain Bayesian modeling in layman's terms. Harriet kept screaming. (Chan 9-10)

The other time when she gets a chance to escape is when she goes out, leaving Harriet at home all by herself. She does not mean to abandon her child this way, but she is overwhelmed by her daughter's screams and shouts:

What she can't explain, what she doesn't want to admit, what she's not sure she remembers correctly: how she felt a sudden pleasure when she shut the door and got in the car that took her away from her mind and body and house and child. (Chan 17)

She keeps on gaslighting herself; she keeps on saying that she should not have left the file in the first place; then none of this would have happened to her. She would not be in any type of trouble. Even when Gust was living with Frida, he expected her to take care of Harriet if she was crying, even though Frida herself was having a mental breakdown. "Old Gust would yell. As he did on the nights she hid in the bathroom and wept instead of holding the baby" (Chan 11). Similarly, Erika found herself a safe place in the apartment, an empty room, where E and B were not allowed to go. "I kept the children out of the empty room. Perhaps it was for me: a little place" (Wilder 14).

Erika also feels pleasure at the hotel because she does not have to make breakfast, lunch, or dinner for her children, and she does not have to clean up the room and make the bed. All she does there is to enjoy her time with her children and go out explore the new place. At night, when the children were asleep, she would order a champagne and wait for M to come and have a drink with her, but that never happens.

Both the protagonists feel lonely because they have no one to rely on, Gust is co-parenting, but Frida still loves and cares for him. She feels protected in his presence and

wishes to be with him again, but he seems happy with Susanna. The few moments with Gust feel comforting to Frida, but she still feels ashamed. She resists saying I love you. Resists thanking him.

It's been months since they were alone together. She feels ashamed for wanting to kiss him even now. He's more beautiful than she ever deserved, tall, and lean and muscular. (Chan 13)

Erika, on the other hand, moves to her new apartment with her husband and children. She feels that M is never there but like a "good wife" and a "good mother," she is not supposed to complain and put a smile on her face and reassure everyone that everything is perfectly all right and that she is happy. "I smiled at her my biggest and my best smile, the one that told her, I am so happy, don't you see how happy I am. You have a happy, happy mother" (Wilder 17).

M was always gone...I knew he was working so hard and everything would be easier for him, and more equal really, if everything at home was perfect and dinner was cooked well and left ready for him (Wilder 21).

Mothering is a demanding job that requires constant attention and emotional energy. Mothers work tirelessly day and night to please their children and their husbands, and if they live in a joint family, they take care of the entire household. However, the moral criteria these mothers use to evaluate their actions and sentiments have multiple origins, stemming from both the broader cultural environment in which they resided and their relationships. The prevailing cultural context maintained stringent and normative guidelines regarding what constitutes the "right" approach to being a "good" mother, even though mothers were simultaneously informed that there was no singular correct method for mothering a child. These conflicting messages left them with the impression that there was only one established and inflexible path to exemplify "good" motherhood. Consequently, they endeavored to adhere to these standards, fearing that any deviation might lead to perceptions of deficiency and inadequacy. They were anxious that by openly acknowledging their challenges and experiencing negative or ambivalent emotions, they risked being branded as "inadequate" mothers, faced the possibility of losing custody of their children, and potentially being institutionalized. (Jack 472)

“Perhaps, instead of being monitored, a bad mother should be thrown into a ravine” (Chan 27).

Both the protagonists are sleepless and tired and restless; they stay up until their children sleep and wake up early in the morning to feed them and look after them. Frida is still in pain, as her wounds are still fresh, while Erika feels as if she is broken into pieces and every morning, she brings together those pieces to start her day. She believes that this is just a phase of her life, and she will get through it. They both run back and forth to manage their household and care for their children. They clean the house, do the dishes, wash laundry, and nurse their children, yet these mothers never even complain about their extraneous workload. Instead, they stay silent until their silence endangers both their own lives and those of their children.

I wasn't sleeping, I really wasn't. Not much. Not enough. E got up early. B stayed up late. In between the nights stretched, the hours drifting farther and farther from each other, like planets pushing outwards, always more and more alone inside the expanding dark (Wilder 33-34).

My hands were raw from washing dishes, from grappling with the unmanageable weight of wet laundry, from soaping hair, and brushing teeth (Wilder 34).

Harriet had just started smiling, was only sleeping for three-hour stretches. Frida's days were spent covered in spit-up and drool, rushing to clean the house or cook or do laundry between rounds of nursing and diaper changes (Chan 29).

Women are expected to be people-pleasers, doing good and looking good for their families, husbands, and children. In doing so, these women or mothers develop the “Supermom syndrome,” wanting everything to be perfect and doing things with perfection but when they are unable to do things perfectly, they feel guilty. You can't be Supermom and can't do it all, yet we all hold onto this image that we can, and we measure ourselves by the standards of our mothers in terms of raising kids. You know, I feel guilty when I'm not there with the warm milk and cookies and when I'm not putting every Band-Aid on.

And then I'm guilty because I'm not enough of a spouse for my husband, and I'm guilty because I'm not doing an adequate job professionally and never quite getting it right (Jack 292).

Erika and Frida are both socially withdrawn because Erika faces language barriers and Frida faces racism. People either ignore them or frown at them or judged them, but they always stay silent. Erika locks herself inside her apartment and starts losing her mental health, she starts sleepwalking as well and hallucinating, and Frida is caught up by the state and its system and rules.

One night, I came back to myself with a start. It must have been two or three in the morning, one of those hours between children, when the apartment seemed to have no one but myself inside it. I found myself standing by the door, my hand on the door handle, my bag on my shoulder...I picked him up and shushed him (Wilder 34).

Frida used to find American mothers babbling pitifully. Other mothers give her disapproving looks when she pushes Harriet on the swings silently when she sits at the edge of the sandbox and tries to skim the New Yorker while Harriet plays alone. She is sometimes mistaken for a distracted nanny. Once, when Harriet was seven months old, there was a mother who outright scolded her as Harriet crawled around the playground.

Why wasn't she watching her baby? What if the baby picked up a rock and tried to swallow it and choked? Frida didn't try to defend herself. She grabbed Harriet and hurried home, never returning to that playground, even though it was the closest and cleanest one (Chan 31).

Frida's maternal journey emphasizes her feelings of isolation and unease within a community of American mothers. The idea of self-silencing becomes apparent in Frida's actions as she chooses not to defend herself when confronted and eventually distances herself from the local playground. Frida's discomfort arises from a divergence in cultural approaches to motherhood. The narrative portrays her as deviating from the established norms and expectations of the American mothers in her vicinity. The expression "American-mother babble pitiful" implies a certain disdain or disconnect that Frida

experiences regarding how American mothers converse or engage with their children. This sentiment suggests she may feel a sense of inadequacy or judgment. The disapproving glances and presumptions made about Frida, including being wrongly assumed to be a distracted nanny, underscore the cultural divide between her and the other mothers. The episode where a mother reproaches her for not closely supervising Harriet on the playground highlights the disparities in parenting styles based on cultural differences. The rebuke unveils a prevalent mindset among American mothers that places a high emphasis on constant vigilance and a specific approach to child-rearing.

Avoiding being called a “bad mother,” Frida lets her guard down and listens to what others tell her, and lets others decide for her. She agrees to get the divorce even though she does not want to; she blames herself for not being attractive enough. If she had been healthier, it might have been easier for Gust to live with her, and he might have thought about saving the marriage. She still thinks that Gust left her because she relapsed and he hadn’t experienced her hysterical crying spells, her anxiety spirals: “If only she’d had the chances to prove herself as a mother, she likes to think” (Chan 28).

For Frida, protecting her baby is more important; she stops taking any maternal antidepressants so that her child can be healthy. But her husband does not understand all of that, he leaves her all alone to take care of herself, not supporting her emotionally. When a woman is pregnant, she expects everyone around her to protect her mental, physical, and emotional health. If they are not taken care of properly, they tend to silence themselves and suffer. Frida is suffering in silence, but she thinks if she starts taking antidepressants everyone will start judging her and calling her a “bad mother.” Susanna starts to teach her how to take care of Harriet as if she is the mother, Frida completely silences herself and lets others pull her strings the way they want as if she is their puppet.

Frida should eliminate all plastic from her household. Exposure to plastics is linked to cancer. She should install a water filtration system so Harriet won’t be exposed to heavy metals and chlorine in her drinking water or at bath time. She should make sure all of Harriet’s clothing is made from organic cotton in factories that provide a living wage. She should buy

organic skin care and diapers and burp cloths and bedding, chemical-free wipes. Would Frida consider switching to cloth diapers? (Chan 29-30)

Susanna emerges as an authoritative figure, prescribing not only the choice of household materials but also dictating parenting practices, such as cloth diapering and elimination communication. These expectations, rooted in societal norms, may induce stress, and compel mothers to suppress their preferences or instincts, contributing to a sense of self-silencing.

She should try elimination communication. Wasn't that how they did things in China?...By the time Susanna began nagging her about the benefits of long-term breastfeeding and baby wearing and co-sleeping. (Chan 29-30)

Moreover, the reference to cultural practices, such as the elimination of communication in China, underscores the impact of cultural influences on shaping societal expectations for mothers, illustrating how cultural and societal values play a role in defining the acceptable parameters of parenting. While the concept of the 'ideal' woman may vary across diverse cultures, a fundamental premise persists, asserting that women are considered unequal to men yet are burdened with the responsibility of nurturing the quality of their relationships. Women grapple with the challenge of fostering intimacy within the context of this inherent inequality. Historical generations, bound by unequal marriage and sexual agreements, advocated a solution that urged women to keep silent regarding the disparities in their relationships and society. To do so, women were required to muster considerable internal effort, projecting an outward appearance of compliance while suppressing their desires for equitable participation and recognition. In this process, they relinquished the potential for authentic intimacy and personal growth in favor of conforming to what culture deems as 'valuable' or 'normative' for women. Paradoxically, these actions, initially intended to nurture intimacy and security, ultimately resulted in a loss of self-identity that heightened a woman's susceptibility to depression and diminished the prospects for genuine intimacy (Jack 11).

The protagonists do not have close or intimate relations with their partners because M is never at home and Gust leaves Frida for Susanna.

Maybe we were residents of different countries now, me and M... Our credit cards were almost identical to look at, but of course that meant very little, or really that meant nothing at all. (Wilder 32)

“M was back sometimes and sleeping but he felt always very far away.”
(Wilder 34)

On the other hand, Frida wants to make things work between Gust and her, but he has made up his mind to let go of their marriage. Frida is accused of being selfish when she desires to get intimate with her husband. Here as well, the mother is expected not to be selfish about her desires and suppress them and display herself as a selfless mother.

It wasn't that Frida didn't have ideas about child-rearing. She liked that book about French parenting, but Gust was horrified at the idea of sleep training Harriet at three months, the idea of prioritizing their adult needs. The ethos of that book was selfish. “I'm ready to be unselfish,” Gust said. “Aren't you?” (Chan 32)

Frida and Erika are both unhappy with how they look outwardly. There is no one to tell them they are doing great as mothers and they look perfectly fine in their new mother body: “I was unhappy with the way I was dressed, with my uncombed hair, my lips, barnacled with dead skin, were like tide pools.” (Wilder 27) Frida thinks that marriage and bearing a child has changed her, she thinks she is not beautiful anymore, especially in front of Susanna. She used to be considered lovely, she is petite and slender, and with her round face and bangs and porcelain-doll features, people used to assume she was still in her twenties.

Silencing the self, feelings, emotions, and thoughts mostly leads women to develop problems mentally, emotionally, and physically. Women are greatly affected by it because they must conform to cultural standards and norms and cannot voice their opinions most of the time. When these emotions are constantly suppressed, eventually they come to the surface in the form of anger, guilt, depression, and anxiety. Frida and Erika both silence themselves for the betterment of their relationship and to appear as good mothers in society. The consequence of their loss of self and voice leads them to bring harm to their children.

When Frida leaves her daughter, her neighbors call the Child Protection Services who take Harriet into custody but luckily Gust is there to take her home. Frida is charged with neglect and abandonment of her daughter and is sent to a rehabilitation center. No one except her divorce lawyer, Renee, believes in her and supports her. They accuse her of being a “bad” and “unnatural” mother. Since she is an Asian diaspora, they ask her about her parents and cultural upbringing, her mental history. Due to her inability to answer their questions properly, Frida is sent to a so-called rehabilitation center where mothers like her are taught how to be perfect and exceptional mothers.

The questions were more detailed than Renee anticipated. Again, Frida tried to emulate the playground mothers, but there was too much hesitation, too many inconsistencies. She didn't sound attentive enough, patient enough, committed enough, Chinese enough, American enough. (Chan 48)

According to Natasha Mauthner, postpartum depression correlates with the strength of the marital relationship, a prior record of depression (which encompasses past postpartum depression), the family's psychiatric history, a lack of substantial social support, and the experience of stressful life events beyond childbirth. These external stressors might encompass situations such as family bereavement, illness, relocation, or stressors associated with childcare. Women who set lofty standards for themselves because of the idealized standards set by society and cultural expectations suffer the most. The notion of motherhood is presumed to be an inherent and central aspect of women's lives. This romanticized perspective on motherhood, coupled with the significant emphasis placed on gainful employment in society, led these women to rationalize their commitment to the unpaid responsibilities of motherhood. Merely being a mother was insufficient; they felt compelled to be not simply good, but perfect and exceptional mothers. Consequently, during the period of depression, these women encountered challenges in relinquishing their idealized notions and standards of motherhood. They persistently strove to meet these ideals because, from their perspective, failing to do so would brand them as "inadequate" mothers. (Jack)

Erika, another diasporic mother, has difficulty assimilating with the new culture because of the language barrier. She has been trying her best to be the perfect mother to

her children and the perfect wife to her husband. But due to the lack of social support from her neighbors and husband she isolates herself, spending most of her time with her children, playing games, going to the market, exploring the city, and going to the park but eventually, she locks herself and her children inside the house, not realizing that this might depress her. It becomes evident that her mental health is deteriorating. One day, Erika comes back home from the park and finds a bouquet at her doorstep, instead of looking after the beautiful flowers she sets them in a vase and lets them wither there: "I could never remember to get rid of them and so we, E, B and I, watched the deterioration." (Wilder 33)

She feels alien in that country and interacting with people becomes a strenuous sport for her. She is afraid that people might judge her for her looks and her parenting style. She notices another mother at the park and calls her Nell; she fascinates Erika as she carries everything with ease and looks beautiful despite being the mother of two children. She thinks about Nell all the time and how her house would be perfectly set and her children clean and nicely dressed. It is also evident that she regrets quitting her job as well, which might also be one of the reasons, she felt excluded.

I didn't have a job, not anymore. Afterwards, after E was born, after I quit, well, it was as if I had woken up on a very quiet island. An island where it was always afternoon and I was alone, alone with E. (Wilder 40)

Since she has little support from her husband, as a result, they do not spend quality time with one another, and there is no intimacy between them either, so she withdraws herself from M as well. She does not want to go on the trip with him and also does not want to interact with M's friends and their wives.

But we were fine here, I told him. Besides, I told him, there wasn't such a thing as holidays for mothers, or holidays from mothering for that matter. So why pretend we could go somewhere to get a break...Mothering is a hard job, it needs a lot of space to breathe. Really, I didn't want to travel, I only wanted to sleep. (Wilder 41)

The responsibility for childcare is predominantly associated with women and any psychological, emotional, or social issues observed in a child are consistently attributed to

perceived shortcomings in mothering. The existing constraints on family dynamics and structural supports, notably the availability of daycare facilities and maternity benefits, further reinforce cultural values emphasizing the significance of full-time motherhood. These contradictory messages can often leave women feeling uncertain about the most appropriate approach to fulfilling their parental duties. Rather than prescribing a single definitive method of parenting, these mixed messages could be interpreted as offering both men and women a range of diverse parenting models. There is an emerging discourse promoting flexibility in childcare and parenting. Childcare guidelines propose that 'women can adopt various and satisfactory approaches to mothering within the context of a loving and nurturing relationship,' recognizing that each mother is best suited to determine what serves her and her child's well-being. (Jack 473)

Frida feels constantly under pressure, the social worker evaluates her mothering style with Harriet so she can present a report to the CPS and the court, if she passes these different meetings and provides satisfactory results then she might get her daughter back otherwise she is to be sent to the rehabilitation center that teaches mothers about good mothering.

You have thirty-five minutes left, Ms. Liu. Why don't you two start playing? I need to see you play with her. Ms. Liu, please don't block the child's face. Why don't you start playing? Does she have toys here somewhere? Frida shelters Harriet with her body. "Please give us a minute. We haven't seen each other in eleven days. She's not a seal." (Chan 52)

The social worker keeps on pushing Frida to play with her and after two appointments she passes her judgment in front of the judge that Frida was being "too needy" around Harriet and that Harriet was being repulsive towards that social worker, she even bites the social worker's hand. Furthermore, they notice that Harriet is acting like a baby instead of a toddler in front of her mother; she is crawling instead of walking, losing her speech, and wanting to be held. She even adds that the neighbors have heard Frida yelling, and she might become a danger to her daughter. Social workers make money out of the evaluation they do; they keep causing problems for parents so that they could take the children into custody and the government would pay them.

Erika cleans the house at night whenever E and B are fast asleep. She takes out the trash and there she sees the old woman in the purple coat sitting at the coffee table puffing cigarettes. To Erika, the woman does not look mysterious, but she is tired and lonely. Erika feels it because she was feeling the same way: "I took two steps towards her, I really did. Thinking maybe in my tiredness that she had arranged all this somehow, for me. Thinking that she was signalling me." (Wilder 47)

We see that Erika's mental health is constantly deteriorating because she has no one to take care of her or listen to her. Supposedly, Nell feels like a character in her imagination, and through Nell, Erika's silenced side is evident. Erika wants to talk and break her silence, she wants to talk to her mother whose connection is always bad, and this is also a reason Erika shows signs of madness. She wants someone to listen to her attentively but in the end, she is always left in the empty house, cleaning it and taking care of her children.

And with my lips that weren't moving I would ask her if it was possible to tell between what a man, what a husband, had to do and what he chose to do, and if had to, and chose to, changed for a husband who became an important man. (Wilder 49)

Erika compares herself to a carpet and a bottle, these are unimportant non-living things:

I wanted to tell my mother that now, sometimes I felt like the carpet, drinking things up, and not choosing what, and sometimes I felt like the bottle, caught and not breaking. That sometimes I felt like these things, the carpet and the bottle, rather than the owner of the carpet and the bottle, like I had been before. (Wilder 50)

Frida feels helpless when Harriet does not cooperate with her when she visits her. They both feel the pressure put on them by the social worker. Frida must silence herself because she wants her daughter back, but Harriet is too little to be controlled. When Frida meets her daughter, they are expected to play for evaluation, they are given little time for that. Harriet acts aggressively towards the social worker when she is told to play with her

mother and Frida feels happy because her daughter is doing the things, she wishes she could do: “She feels mortified but proud. This is her demon child. Her ally. Her protector.” (Chan 54)

The women grapple with feelings of guilt and shame for not swiftly overcoming their emotional challenges, coupled with the apprehension that their depression may inflict emotional harm upon their children. These sentiments are compounded by their sense of inadequacy in not living up to the idealized image of a perfect mother that they had internalized. Furthermore, they are haunted by their own 'selfish' yearnings for a semblance of emotional spaciousness in their lives. The overwhelming exhaustion they experience, along with societal pressures against openly acknowledging its authenticity, serves to immobilize them in the face of these suppressed aspects of their depressive experiences (Jack 336). Despite the efforts Erika is putting into the family house and the relationship she is still left unappreciated disappointed and guilty. She feels happy and contented to see her husband when he comes back home from his trip but all he wants to do is sleep and not talk to her at all. She wished to be dressed the same way he was dressed so they both could understand each other and talk about their work but it was only what she desired. He only talked about how messy the house was not caring about how tired and exhausted his wife was: “Jesus he said, walking past me, walking over to open the windows in the living room. Look at this place. He was whispering, we both were.” (Wilder 50)

These mothers must explain their actions before their authoritative figures to justify them, since they have been conformed to silence themselves from childhood till adulthood, they lose the ability to express their authentic selves. “We were only playing, I wanted to say to M. Or, really what I wanted to say was that I was having trouble sleeping here, in the apartment ... But, in the end I only said, Oh, because I couldn't really say anything else.” (Wilder 50)

It is evident in the novel in several places that Erika wants to say something but she is unable to because she wants to be seen as an obedient and selfless wife, mother, daughter, and overall, a woman. But at the same time, she expects and wants M to consider her feelings and ask her about her feelings, days, and time spent alone in the house and in this alien country. “Wait, I said, cleaning up the fort, pulling the pillows off the kitchen floor

without explaining why they were there, but wishing, really wishing that he would ask” (Wilder 51). Frida also had to keep her evil and dangerous thoughts to herself in front of the social worker for her daughter’s sake. The social worker was lecturing about boundaries and giving extra hugs and kisses but not realizing that they met after a long time and they might have missed each other, she was also mothering her and telling her how to mother her own child correctly.

Frida’s fists were clenched. Her toes curled inside her shoes. She kept her head bowed, stared at the rosary tattooed on the social worker’s ankle. Had she looked the social worker in the eye, she might have delivered the first punch of her life. (Chan 55)

Duties never end for women, they are expected to be available for everyone every time, there is no break for them, they must be self-sacrificing; putting everyone else’s wants and needs as her topmost priority and her wants and needs are to be suppressed. No matter how tired they are, they are supposed to finish all the chores by themselves because they may be judged for being careless, or selfish and bad.

After he went to sleep I wanted to fall into bed with him but I remembered the guest room and I didn’t want him to find it in the morning and think, well, I don’t know what. So I packed all the things I’d collected there into a garbage bag and took it all out to the bins and when the guest room was empty again I felt better about things. (Wilder 51)

Erika was suffering from insomnia from the time she came into the apartment, and in that time, she used to find chores to do to distract herself from doing something that would not be considered as good. She was fascinated by the sound of the knives she was sharpening. This makes it evident that Erika found solace in the things that are considered harmful.

I found I couldn’t quite climb into bed with M, so I tried curling up beside B’s crib on the sofa, but I couldn’t sleep there either. Instead I took the broom and the rags and started to clean the kitchen, spraying and wiping all the surfaces. I cleaned out the drawer where I’d been stuffing the tram

tickets. The salt and pepper shakers were shining now on the counter and the chairs were pushed into their places at the little kitchen table. I made it so it was as if no one lived in the apartment. (Wilder 51-52)

Women are expected to suffer in silence and make people feel sympathetic towards them. Only that way people could feel sorry for them, respect them, support them, and realize that these mothers are guilty and ashamed for not fulfilling their ideal mother or wife duties.

Renee thinks the state should see her atoning. She should work or pray or exercise. She should clean. She shouldn't watch television or waste time on her computer or phone. She must show them that she's wrestling with her guilt. The more she suffers, the more she cries, the more they'll respect her. (Chan 56-57)

The idealized concept of a 'good woman' conveys the notion that women bear the responsibility for nurturing intimate relationships. Consequently, women often choose to stifle their voices, relinquishing their aspiration for equality to align with societal expectations. In this journey, women establish certain expectations for their inner emotions and conduct, which, in turn, leads to the suppression of their authentic selves in the interest of upholding these relationships. This dynamic engenders a sense of a divided self within them. M tells Erika that he will be coming for dinner when he comes back from his work trip. But since Erika was going through an inner turmoil, she had two thoughts that came to her mind; one of an ideally good wife and the other of a woman who is mentally, emotionally, and physically exhausted, who is hungry for attention, she wants to be heard because these standards set by the society are overwhelming. Due to these standards, women have silenced themselves and lost the sense of individual identity only for the sake of their families. Erika has shown signs of depression and mental deterioration but since she is not given satisfactory support, she feels lonely and isolates herself from everyone.

I'll be back tonight, he said. I'll be back for dinner. OK, I said, that's great, and I felt at once a desire to cook the most wonderful thing, boeuf bourguignon maybe where you open up a bottle of wine and let the whole thing just slide into the pot, something extravagant, and exceptional and

surprising, and I also wanted to empty all the pots onto the kitchen floor and shout at him, who will cook the dinner you're saying to me now that you're going to eat. Who will cook that. (Wilder 53)

Experiences of parenting are different for everyone. Erika is overprotective of her children and a threat to them and Frida, also a protective mother, faces difficulty in taking care of her daughter and is punished for it. But that does not mean these mothers don't love their children or are selfish. Being immigrants or Diasporas, they face challenges in their social setup and their ways of coping with these challenges are also different. Frida and her parent's parenting style are judged by the social workers, her parents talk about Ms. Torres saying, "She made parenthood sound like fixing a car. The food part, the safety part, the education part, the discipline part, the love part" (Chan 59). She feels anxious and envious of Susanna talking to the social worker with so much ease. Whenever Frida says something, the social worker is quick to write it down and note it for evaluation making Frida feel like a criminal. She forces Frida not to carry Harriet like a baby when she is crying, When Harriet gets a nosebleed, the social worker is only concerned about the time left and she suggests Frida play with her daughter, but instead, Harriet falls asleep and Frida ignores her warning, this behavior is not acceptable by the social worker she uses all the information against Frida in the court, considering her an unnatural, bad mother. She is sent to the rehabilitation center to learn how to be a "good mother."

Erika cooked food and put it on the table warm and delicious for her children and husband to eat but always ended up eating cold food because M never showed up on time. She was envious of Nell because she was the only woman at the park who was never in a hurry to get home. Erika also develops a desire to lie down on the picnic blanket in the sun and tell her kids to play by themselves, but she never experienced this. Women get accustomed to their duties and silencing themselves that they do not mind it anymore. Erika does the same, she cleans and washes but never complains anymore, and she finds excuses to go out at night to the grocery store when M is home. She enjoys her own company now. The common element rendering women susceptible to severe stress is their isolation. They find themselves in situations where they are alone at home, responsible for children, devoid of close friends for meaningful conversations, without fulfilling work beyond their

household duties, and lacking involvement in any community or religious activities. Essentially, these women have undergone profoundly distressing experiences, yet their life circumstances leave them bereft of social support and opportunities for open communication. Consequently, they are forced to endure their suffering in solitude. In such a context, it becomes understandable why they grapple with significantly diminished self-esteem, feelings of hopelessness, overwhelming sadness, a pervasive sense of emptiness, and even suicide – all of which are cardinal symptoms of depression (Jack 61). Since Erika is fascinated by the lady with the long purple coat, she goes out at night, dressed perfectly, and sits at the coffee table just like her. She wants to talk to Nell and the lady but because of the language barrier, she can only make up conversations in her mind and think about them all the time. Erika does not realize that her obsession with these women is negatively affecting her mental health, also M does not bother checking up on her whenever he comes home.

Rearing a child, nurturing, and taking care of him or her are all controlled and traditionally dominated by the views of “experts” – family, friends, healthcare professionals, and other mothers. Keeping the prescribed ideals in mind and working on them leads these mothers to lose their voice. The mothers cannot do what they want, or they pleased to do, they are required to do what is best for their children and family, but they are also told to behave, feel, and think like the mothers they want them to be. This causes confusion and the mothers are always on their toes trying to do everything perfectly and in the right way as told and they gradually start to lose themselves and develop mental health problems. Frida and Erika being mothers and Diasporas face similar problems; they are judged culturally. They have difficulties assimilating into the new state and their new role as mothers. Frida is a “dual diaspora” as she comes from New York to Philadelphia and later she is sent to the rehabilitation center against her wish to learn how to be a “good mother.” “She wants to rant about her hearing, tell someone who’ll understand about the Honorable Sheila Rogers, who said, “We’re going to fix you, Ms. Liu.” (Chan 69)

We’re giving you the opportunity to participate in a new rehabilitation program,” the judge said. “You’ll undergo a year of instruction and training. At a live-in facility. With women like yourself. (Chan 69)

This rehabilitation center has lesson plans and Artificial intelligence-controlled baby dolls that evaluate the mother's feelings and behavior and let the mothers practice being good mothers. They are given different situations to teach these dolls manners and protect them from harm. These rehabilitation centers use high-end technology but their ways of making the mothers "good mothers" are traditional and there is no chance of error for these mothers. The more they make mistakes, the farther they get away from being with their children and eventually lose custody of their children.

On the other hand, Erika, who is a stay-at-home mother and has two children has difficulty communicating with her mother, husband, and the outside world. She finds a safe place for herself and her children. She finds comfort in her apartment where she takes care of her children and plays with them but at the same time, Erika is heading towards insanity because she feels lonely and unloved, she works day and night to be the perfect wife and mother but she also feels that she is not getting appreciated for her hard work and feels that if she were a working woman then maybe her husband would talk to her and be grateful. Erika's husband sensed that there was something wrong with his wife but did not bother to ask her further questions or look after her for a few days.

Something was off wasn't it, M said...I took a breath and refused absolutely to remember any details about the way my hands shook during those days, about the feeling of flying and falling at the same time inside the apartment, about being unable to brush my teeth. Take me to bed I wanted to scream at him. (Wilder 68)

Frida found support in the rehabilitation center through the other mothers, their crimes were not big but like all protective mothers, they loved their children in an unusual way which was unacceptable to the society. These mothers were so pressurized in the rehabilitation center that some of them decided to quit and run away to their families who did not know how the rehabilitation center was only making money out of them and not helping any of the mothers. Some mothers committed suicide because they were not able to survive without their children, and they could not even conform to the ways of mothering set by the center. They were not allowed to talk to any of their family members about the

training or how they were doing, nor could they talk to the fathers who were sent to the center.

Erika was so obsessed with cleaning and washing that she did not even listen to M when he told her to stop and go to bed. But Erika wanted to make sure everything was spotless and safe for her children. Erika's thoughts made things evident that she was suffering in silence and hiding her true self from her husband and everyone around: "It was better to have it all over and done with, put away, disposed of, to wake up to a morning in the apartment with no evidence of any day before." She had harmful things going on in her mind but since she silenced herself and left no evidence for anyone to judge her no one knew that she was herself a threat to her children and not the outside world. Erika came across the lady with the purple coat a couple of times, but she never talked to her. Once she was throwing out the garbage and encountered the lady over there picking out food from the cans. She was disappointed to see the lady like this since Erika thought she could relate to the lady when she found her at the coffee table. She thought she was in trouble for ruining the grass and the concrete so she locked herself and her children inside the house for one day so no one suspects her: "I wouldn't be able to leave. We would have to hide all day inside where we could never be found" (Wilder 73). She was her support in the empty house and alien country. Since she was afraid of being called a bad mother by others in society, staying inside her house was the best option she found, but it was not the absolute best option for her because she was becoming a threat to her children.

Perhaps a wall of roses would spring up and protect me from the concierge.

Perhaps there would never be a knock at the door. Perhaps we could stay here in this apartment and sleep for a hundred years. Perhaps we would never be unhappy. Malheur. Malheureux. (Wilder 73)

The motherly instincts of Frida and Erika did not allow them to conform to the ideals that society had set for them. They tried their best to be the perfect mothers for their children but because of the constant mocking of society and fear. Frida and the other mothers in the rehabilitation center were made to say and believe that they were not good mothers.

Bad parents must be transformed from the inside out. The right instincts, the right feelings, the ability to make split-second, safe, nurturing, loving decisions. “Now, repeat after me: I am a bad mother, but I am learning to be good. (Chan 77)

Here, the Over-Eye, mentioned by Jack, is the teacher at the rehabilitation center. The mothers believe that whatever the instructors say is the reality and it is the right thing; they lose their voices in the center. These mothers are only told to think about taking care of their doll babies and care for them and learn to make their children the first and foremost priority. Erika starts feeling paranoid and is in a state of hypervigilance. She thought that if she left her children even for a second, someone would harm them, or they would harm themselves then she would be accountable for that in front of the police as she is the mother and she stays at home to take care of them.

I went to the bathroom to take a shower, leaving my coffee only half drunk on the table. This was of course a dangerous thing, a terrible thing, for a mother to do. A hot drink on the table, steam curling like a snake, tempting tempting little just-woken hands to grab it. I left it anyway, feeling already penitent. Already explaining myself to someone, the police maybe ... I would just be screaming when they tried to ask me. (Wilder 74-75)

Erika would do things that she would not remember doing later and would not worry about it either in the beginning because she thought it was M doing it. Someone had written her name with lipstick on the wall of her bathroom, and she thought it was M who wrote it since E was not that tall and could not even spell.

Both the diasporic mothers finally break free from the social expectations and pressures that were imposed on them by their surroundings. They show retaliation and a rebellious nature towards society because their mental health is affected severely by unrealistic ideal motherhood standards. Frida works hard in the rehabilitation center for her daughter so that she can get her parental rights back. However, the state judge makes a disappointing judgment based on her evaluation and takes away Frida's parental rights. They tell her to stay away from Harriet till she is eighteen years of age. But it is extremely difficult for a mother to let go of her children. She did not react to the news because she

had silenced herself for so long that she thought showing her anger would prove that she is not fit for being a mother: “Frida nods. She hopes the next parent sitting in this chair will become violent. Someone should throw the social worker against the wall, strangle her, push her out the window.” (Chan 268)

In these lines, the protagonist wishes that the next parents who come to the institute are not scared of these social workers and she expresses her inner desire and shows her violent behavior because she has been holding it in and silencing herself so that no one criticizes her or judges her and labels her as a “bad” mother. These mothers are not only changed mentally, they are changed physically as well: “She looks conservative and tidy, not the mother she was before, not the mother she became, but a mother from a manual, blank and interchangeable.” (Chan 268)

Erika needed help and support, but she denied it, she used to feel lonely, but she did not tell anyone because she did not want to appear as a weak mother who wanted others to take care of her children. The only person she could talk to was E because every time she tried to talk to her mother, there was distortion. Due to the lack of support from her husband and the alien society and traumatic events of life, Erika becomes mentally disturbed, she suffers in silence. She becomes restless and insomniac. She compares her sleep to a dragonfly: “Sleep was like a dragonfly in my hands, always fluttering, always trying to get away from me.” (Wilder 86)

Portraying the fake outer self for people so that they do not criticize the mothers, these mothers develop mental health issues which then lead to depression, insomnia, anxiety, and social withdrawal. Eventually, these mothers rebel and retaliate against the unrealistic standards set for women. Erika showed her disapproval of societal expectations and locked herself and her children in the apartment, she became a threat to herself and her children. She starts hallucinating and thinking that there is someone else in the house doing things that she did. She thought she was an excellent mother because she did not yell at her children.

I could be an excellent mother who does not yell, Hurry up! Hurry up! Hurry up! to her child in a shrill ugly voice. We could smile and walk so slowly and that was fine and wonderful and of course we could stop and look at

this flower and that flower and talk about them along the way. Of course we could do all this happily and slowly, of course we could take our time.
(Wilder 87)

It gets exhausting for mothers to try to be perfect because they are human beings with emotions and feelings and an identity, but the societies do not understand it and still expect them to be happy. They try to feel contented and happy and put everyone's needs above their own: "Sometimes it seemed like being a good mother, the best, meant mostly covering yourself over in a layer of smiling and smiling. There was nothing to think about except making everything exactly right in the minute you were in." (Wilder 88)

Being a perfect mother may be exhausting but they still work hard to provide for their children and give them the best. Frida was this type of mother, she worked hard for her daughter to provide for her and even after her parental rights were terminated, no one could take away her motherly instincts from her: "She wants to tell Gust that she loves him, give him directions for the next sixteen years, tell him how Harriet should be raised (Chan 270). When Frida passes out of the center, she is depressed, she returns to her medications and socially withdraws from everyone: "When she imagines it, it's always pills. Pills and bourbon. Never a razor blade and a bathtub. Her body feels like it's filled with electricity. Her hands tingle" (Chan 275). She becomes a threat to herself, she has suicidal thoughts, and Gust, Will, and Renee think she might hurt herself by cutting her wrist or coming in front of the bus. Will takes care of Frida now, along with Renee: "He's hidden the knives" (Chan 275)

Frida in the end, discloses the truth of the rehabilitation center by putting Emmanuelle's picture with her and she kidnaps her daughter because the state has separated them and considered Frida unfit to be a mother. Frida rebels and breaks her silence in this way. Frida, in the end, imagines Harriet having a child: "She'd like to tell Harriet that she can help raise that person. She can be careful. She'll convince her daughter to trust her. I am a bad mother, she'll say. But I have learned to be good." (Chan 287)

Erika feels threatened by the outside world at the end of the novel, her mental health deteriorates with time, and she starts hallucinating. There was banging on the front doors and windows, lights flickering in every corner of the house. She would scream "Help!" but

now no one could hear her. There were red marks on E and B's arms and cheeks, like rashes and kisses. This may suggest that the mother had either been hurting them or loving them.

There was someone else, I was sure, in the apartment, making E's bed, tending to her ... Sometimes I thought I heard someone singing to B while he slept, sometimes I sort of startled awake and found it was me that was doing it, me that was singing. (Wilder 188)

There was a sudden fire in the apartment, and Erika believed that it was Nell who started the fire. Erika got hurt while saving her children and passed out. When she gained her senses, she was getting into the ambulance. Erika, B, and E were at the hospital for some days, taken care of and being fed by the nurses. Erika slept for as long as she wanted not worrying about her children. She held E's hand to console her, but E seemed to distance herself from her mother, clutching onto her toy giraffe. Erika thought everything would be fine when they thought of shifting to a new bigger, brighter place. But then she started doubting her instincts again trying to tell M to change the plan, but she couldn't because saying 'no' to the husband was unacceptable and this would portray her as a bad wife.

4.3 Conclusion

Though both Erika and Frida undergo profound psychological suffering, their narratives do not reflect passive submission. Instead, their actions, while unconventional or socially condemned, serve as a reaction that challenges dominant expectations of maternal silence and sacrifice. Frida's decision to take back her daughter, knowing the consequences, is not simply an emotional impulse. It is an act of resistance against a system that pathologizes minor parental lapses. In a society where motherhood is heavily scrutinized, especially for marginalized women, this desperate move becomes a powerful reclaiming of agency and voice. As Chan portrays, Frida complies until the system breaks her resolve, and what emerges is a shift from silent endurance to open defiance. Similarly, Erika's mental collapse is more than a symptom of psychological instability. It is a quiet, symbolic protest against cultural and emotional isolation. Her withdrawal from language, people, and routine represents the breakdown of identity under the pressure to embody ideal motherhood in a foreign environment. Her final destructive act is not simply chaos. It is

the result of prolonged emotional suppression and alienation. These reactions demonstrate that silence does not always signify weakness or compliance. In many cases, it is a survival mechanism, a last effort to preserve the self when no support system exists to acknowledge emotional pain. For diasporic mothers, the ongoing navigation between their maternal responsibilities and the rigid expectations imposed by society becomes increasingly difficult, often pushing them toward emotional withdrawal and psychological strain.

The experiences of these protagonists reinforce the central claim of this research that self-silencing among diasporic mothers is not a purely individual struggle; it is shaped by external forces and systemic neglect. Cultural expectations dictate that mothers perform perfection while their struggles remain invisible. When combined with racial prejudice, language barriers, and institutional failures, the result is isolation, emotional fragmentation, and ultimately, acts of rupture or rebellion. This analysis affirms that literature not only reflects these lived experiences but also critiques the societal structures that perpetuate them. Erika and Frida's stories offer a lens through which to understand how cultural displacement, maternal ideals, and emotional silencing intersect. By interpreting silence as both a protective strategy and a cry for help, the study contributes to broader conversations about maternal mental health, gender roles, and the psychological toll of migration. Through close reading, this chapter has illustrated how fiction can serve as a powerful medium for exploring the unseen emotional burdens of diasporic motherhood. These findings form the foundation for the next chapter, which considers how such narratives can inform real-world change through policy, social awareness, and future academic inquiry.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

This research has examined the psychological and emotional experiences of diasporic mothers through the lens of Dana Crowley Jack's Self-Silencing Theory, using *Little Bandaged Days* and *The School for Good Mothers* as literary case studies. The analysis brought to light how the central characters, Erika and Frida, struggle under the weight of cultural displacement and gendered expectations, both of which push them toward self-erasure in the name of ideal motherhood. These women internalize the demand to appear endlessly nurturing, emotionally composed, and devoted. Their inner lives are shaped by the belief that they must never falter. Their silence is not simply a personal choice but rather a reflection of the societal and institutional pressures that leave them feeling voiceless. Over time, this internalized pressure causes them to unravel—emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. Yet even in their breakdowns and rebellion, they carve out a quiet resistance to the roles they have been forced to perform. Ultimately, the findings of this study show that self-silencing is not a private or isolated condition; it is a deeply rooted social response, shaped by cultural ideals, institutional neglect, and limited emotional support. The stories of Erika and Frida bring attention to struggles that are often hidden, unspoken, or dismissed. They reflect the very real psychological burdens carried by countless mothers navigating unfamiliar terrains while holding themselves to impossible standards. The journeys of Erika and Frida are fictional, but they speak to a deeply felt reality. These women mirror the experiences of mothers who live at the intersection of multiple identities and conflicting expectations. They show us what it means to try to be everything for everyone while quietly losing touch with one's own self. This research encourages us to listen not just to words but also to silences—the silences that hide pain, disappointment, and quiet defiance. It urges scholars, institutions, and communities to honor the emotional complexity of motherhood, particularly for women navigating life between cultures. When society begins to truly see and support these women, we take a step closer to building a world that values care, connection, and psychological well-being—not just performance and perfection.

5.1 Implications

The emotional toll that idealized motherhood imposes becomes even more pronounced in diasporic settings. Women who migrate are often expected to preserve their cultural roots while simultaneously adapting to a new way of life. Within this balancing act, they are judged more harshly when they falter. The pressure to embody perfection, especially in their role as mothers, leaves them little room to express emotional vulnerability or seek support without fear of judgment. This study emphasizes that emotional suppression and self-silencing can have devastating effects on a mother's mental health. Erika's withdrawal from reality and Frida's acceptance of institutional punishment both stem from internalized feelings of inadequacy. Their experiences highlight the need for greater psychological awareness, especially for women trying to adjust to life in culturally unfamiliar environments without a support system. Beyond psychology, the study also offers a literary contribution. By analyzing these novels through a feminist lens, the research draws attention to how fiction serves as a powerful medium for expressing the struggles of marginalized women. Through Erika and Frida, we gain insight into the unspoken emotional burdens carried by mothers who are expected to give everything of themselves while receiving little in return.

5.2 Recommendations

This study makes it clear that change is needed, not only within families and communities but also at broader social and institutional level. Cultural expectations must be reexamined so that mothers, particularly those in diasporic settings, are not punished for their humanity. Governments and institutions must develop more compassionate and inclusive policies that acknowledge the unique challenges faced by immigrant and diasporic families. Psychological support should be made available in culturally accessible forms, and communities must be encouraged to become more understanding and less judgmental of women's parenting choices. In societies like Pakistan, where rigid gender norms still define much of a woman's worth, greater awareness of maternal mental health is essential. Women who migrate from such contexts often carry these expectations with them, only to find new challenges layered on top by the host culture. Academic institutions can play a vital role by including diasporic literature and feminist criticism in their

curricula, enabling future generations to better understand the complex dynamics at play in the lives of diasporic women. Future research could explore how various cultural communities shape expectations of motherhood and how these expectations affect the psychological well-being of mothers across generations. Long-term studies could offer more insight into how self-silencing impacts not only the mothers themselves but also their children. The influence of digital media—whether as a space for self-expression or as a mirror of harmful ideals—also deserves closer attention. In addition, more work should be done to examine how legal systems, mental health services, and social policies can be restructured to support, rather than scrutinize, mothers in cross-cultural contexts.

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