

Hidden Violence: Trauma, Shock, Silence, and Psychological Control in Freida McFadden's *The Housemaid*

Dr J. Christy Lydia Jancy*  

Abstract

Freida McFadden's The Housemaid explores the hidden dimensions of psychological abuse through the interconnected experiences of trauma, shock, silence, and punishment within the domestic sphere. Rather than relying on supernatural horror or overt violence, the novel constructs fear through subtle manipulation, emotional coercion, confinement, and the gradual revelation of concealed truths. This article examines how these elements function collectively to establish and sustain systems of domination within intimate relationships. Particular attention is given to significant incidents such as Nina's confinement in the attic, forced self-harm, institutionalisation, Millie's entrapment, and the eventual reversal of power.

The study argues that McFadden presents psychological horror as a carefully organised system embedded within ordinary domestic life rather than as a series of isolated acts of violence. Drawing upon trauma studies, psychoanalytic criticism, and theories of disciplinary power, the paper demonstrates how fear becomes internalised through repeated experiences of manipulation and control. The Housemaid challenges conventional understandings of domestic safety by revealing that the most dangerous forms of violence often remain concealed beneath trust, familiarity, and respectability. The novel offers a compelling critique of psychological domination, illustrating that trauma is sustained not only through physical abuse but also through silence, institutional complicity, and the normalisation of coercive power within everyday relationships.

Keywords: Trauma, Psychological Horror, Silence, Punishment, Domestic Violence

Submitted: 02.08.2026

Revised: 29.08.2026

Accepted: 04.09.2026

Published 02.10.2026

*Dr J. Christy Lydia Jancy, Assistant Professor of English, Nazareth Margoschis College, Pillaiyamanai, Nazareth - 628617, Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli-627012, Tamil Nadu, India.

©2026 Dr J. Christy Lydia Jancy. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction, provided the original author and source are credited.

Introduction

Freida McFadden's *The Housemaid* presents psychological horror not through supernatural elements or sudden violence but through the gradual revelation of hidden systems of control embedded within domestic life. The novel transforms familiar spaces into sites of fear by exposing how manipulation, confinement, and emotional domination operate beneath the appearance of normal family relationships. As the narrative progresses, seemingly insignificant details acquire new meanings, compelling both the protagonist and the reader to reinterpret earlier events. This gradual disclosure creates a profound psychological impact, demonstrating that fear often arises not from the unknown but from recognising that danger has existed all along.

Aim and Objectives

This article examines the interconnected themes of trauma, shock, silence, and punishment in *The Housemaid*. Rather than functioning independently, these elements form an integrated system that establishes and maintains power. Trauma shapes the psychological responses of the victims, while shock emerges through the reinterpretation of past experiences in light of newly revealed truths. Silence functions both as a mechanism of oppression and, in certain situations, as a survival strategy. Punishment reinforces authority by encouraging obedience through fear rather than through constant physical violence. Through incidents such as Nina's confinement in the attic, her forced self-harm, her institutionalisation, Millie's entrapment, and the eventual reversal of power, the novel demonstrates that psychological domination is carefully organised and deeply rooted within the domestic sphere.

Discussion

One of the earliest manifestations of this hidden system of control appears in the attic room assigned to Millie. Initially, the room seems merely uncomfortable and inconvenient. Its small size, isolation, and poor living conditions appear to reflect Millie's difficult financial circumstances rather than deliberate abuse. Although she notices unusual details, including a window she cannot open and a lock on the outside of the door, she tries to dismiss them as harmless irregularities. However, the atmosphere of uncertainty changes dramatically when she discovers that escape is impossible: "I get to the door of my room and I grab the knob and... It doesn't turn" (McFadden 41). In that moment, discomfort becomes genuine fear, yet Millie stays in the house because she believes she has no better option.

As the novel unfolds, the attic's significance undergoes a dramatic transformation. Features that once appeared insignificant are revealed to have been intentionally designed to imprison its occupants. Millie's fear intensifies as the panic "escalates once again" (McFadden 41), emphasising that the room is not simply unpleasant but deliberately restrictive. The external lock, previously dismissed as an architectural peculiarity, becomes unmistakable evidence of calculated control. Likewise, the sealed window is no longer a structural defect but

part of a carefully constructed mechanism designed to eliminate any possibility of escape.

The scratch marks on the attic door become particularly significant during this process of realisation. When Millie first notices them, they merely create a vague feeling of unease. She reflects, “My fingers brush against the scratch marks on the door, wondering who the last poor woman trapped in here has been” (McFadden 41), suggesting that another woman once suffered in the same space. After the truth is revealed, however, these marks acquire a far more disturbing meaning. They become physical evidence of desperate attempts to escape, proving that imprisonment has occurred repeatedly within the house. Fear, therefore, emerges not because new horrors suddenly appear, but because familiar details are reinterpreted through newly acquired knowledge. The attic consequently evolves into a powerful symbol of concealed domination operating beneath the appearance of ordinary domestic life.

Nina’s experiences most fully expose the attic’s hidden violence. Her imprisonment reveals that punishment within the novel is neither impulsive nor accidental but systematic and repetitive. Nina herself recognises the deliberate nature of Andrew’s actions when she realises, “Andy set this whole thing up. He tricked me into coming up here. He installed a lock on the outside of the door” (McFadden 201). This realisation demonstrates that confinement is not an isolated act of cruelty but an established method through which Andrew maintains authority over his wife.

Equally disturbing is the arbitrary nature of Andrew’s punishments. Nina is not confined for serious wrongdoing but for minor imperfections or perceived disobedience. Such punishments reveal that discipline is not intended to correct behaviour but to create constant uncertainty. By keeping punishment unpredictable, Andrew creates an environment in which fear becomes constant rather than occasional. Nina gradually learns that even insignificant actions may provoke severe consequences, forcing her to regulate her own behaviour in anticipation of possible punishment.

The psychological impact of this system becomes even more apparent when Andrew compels Nina to participate directly in her own suffering. After locking her in the attic, he orders her to remove one hundred strands of her own hair before granting her freedom. The experience is described with painful precision: “About eighty times, I grabbed a strand of my hair, braced myself, and pulled. . . So when seven o’clock hits, I am sitting on the cot, clutching an envelope containing a hundred strands of my hair” (McFadden 205).

Unlike direct physical violence, this punishment forces Nina to become the instrument of her own pain. Every strand she removes reinforces Andrew’s authority while simultaneously weakening her sense of personal autonomy. The slow, repetitive nature of the act prolongs psychological suffering, making obedience itself a source of trauma. Fear is therefore internalised, requiring less external

enforcement because the victim begins to anticipate punishment even before it occurs.

This process illustrates one of the novel's most disturbing insights: sustained punishment eventually becomes psychological conditioning. After repeated experiences of confinement and humiliation, Nina no longer requires continuous surveillance to remain obedient. The possibility of punishment becomes as powerful as punishment itself. Fear gradually moves from the external world into the mind, influencing perception, decision-making, and everyday behaviour. In this way, domination extends beyond physical imprisonment and becomes an enduring psychological presence.

The novel, therefore, presents trauma not simply as the consequence of violence but as the cumulative result of repeated psychological conditioning. Andrew's methods demonstrate that the most effective systems of control rely less on overt brutality than on creating a state of permanent uncertainty. "In recent years, domestic violence has become one of the most discussed social problems" (Savin et al. 64). Through this gradual internalisation of fear, *The Housemaid* reveals how ordinary domestic spaces can become powerful instruments of psychological oppression.

This analysis extends to the themes of trauma, institutional power, and the politics of silence, highlighting their complex interconnections. Andrew's system of punishment extends beyond physical confinement and gradually assumes institutional dimensions. His control is sustained not only through direct abuse but also by manipulating external authorities, ensuring that Nina's experiences are dismissed while his own credibility remains unquestioned. The novel demonstrates that power becomes most effective when private violence is reinforced by public institutions.

A crucial example of this manipulation occurs during the incident involving Cecelia. After secretly drugging Nina, Andrew creates circumstances that make her appear mentally unstable. Disoriented and physically weakened, Nina struggles to understand what is happening around her. Her confusion is evident as she asks, "Who is in there? Who is in my bathroom?" (McFadden 211). The question reflects her fragmented perception of reality and illustrates the psychological effects of Andrew's calculated actions.

Despite her impaired condition, Nina's immediate concern is the safety of her daughter. On hearing running water, she desperately attempts to reach the bathroom, insisting, "I've got to save her... My baby needs me" (McFadden 212). Her response clearly reveals maternal protection rather than violent intent. Yet before she can explain herself, control of the situation is taken from her. The command, "Mrs Winchester. Don't move." (McFadden 212), marks the moment when institutional authority replaces her own voice, preventing her from presenting the truth.

The police's arrival fundamentally alters the meaning of the incident. Instead of recognizing Nina as a victim, they immediately construct her as a perpetrator. This

reversal is made explicit in the question, “Why were you trying to drown your daughter?” (McFadden 212). The accusation illustrates how quickly appearances override reality. Andrew’s carefully orchestrated deception succeeds because the authorities interpret visible evidence without questioning the circumstances that produced it.

The distortion becomes even more complete when the officials conclude that Nina “... took a bunch of the drugs herself” and decide to “get her to the hospital. I’ll call her husband and let him know we got here in time” (McFadden 213). Ironically, the individual responsible for the abuse is treated as the concerned husband, while the victim is portrayed as mentally unstable. The episode illustrates how psychological manipulation extends beyond the domestic sphere, acquiring legitimacy through institutional intervention.

Shock reaches its most powerful expression in this sequence because Nina is not merely confronted with danger; she witnesses her reality completely replaced by an invented narrative. The experience destroys her confidence in her own ability to communicate truth. This is captured poignantly when she reflects, “I open my mouth, but no sound comes out. Drown my own daughter?... I was trying to save her. Can’t they see that?” (McFadden 212). Her silence is not voluntary but enforced by circumstances that strip her voice of authority. The inability to speak becomes another form of imprisonment, reinforcing the psychological isolation created by Andrew’s abuse.

Following this incident, Nina is admitted to a psychiatric institution, where her credibility is further dismantled. Medical authority becomes another instrument for validating Andrew’s control. She is diagnosed with “major depression and delusions,” and is persuaded that “the delusions are what led me to believe my husband was keeping me captive in a room for two days” (McFadden 214). Instead of acknowledging the violence she has endured, the institution transforms her memories into symptoms of mental illness. Her lived experience is officially erased, making resistance increasingly difficult.

The psychiatric facility, therefore, functions as an extension of domestic oppression. Unlike the secrecy of the attic, institutional confinement carries social legitimacy. Medical professionals and legal authorities reinforce Andrew’s version of events, illustrating that systems of power often operate through respected institutions as effectively as through private acts of violence. By combining domestic abuse with institutional validation, the novel exposes the complexity of psychological domination.

The dynamics of manipulation in *The Housemaid* have also attracted scholarly attention. Arain and Hussain argue that “manipulation in the novel functions through emotional control, deception, silence, and calculated psychological influence” (Arain and Hussain 900). Their study suggests that “the Winchester family employs emotional intelligence not as a means of empathy but as a strategy for domination and personal advantage” (Arain and Hussain 903). This interpretation supports the

view that Andrew's behaviour is systematic rather than impulsive, revealing manipulation as a deliberate way to maintain authority.

The study further observes that emotional blackmail, gaslighting, and the distortion of reality gradually undermine Millie's confidence and emotional stability. These techniques create confusion and self-doubt, demonstrating what the authors describe as the "dark side" of emotional intelligence. Rather than fostering understanding, emotional awareness becomes a weapon that enables the powerful to exploit the vulnerable.

Manipulation in the novel extends beyond individual relationships and reflects broader structures of class and privilege. The Winchester family's social status grants them credibility, while Millie's economic dependence restricts her ability to challenge their authority. "Furthermore, among married people, the association between narcissism and interpersonal relationships was considerably mediated by emotional manipulation" (Habiba and Menahil 235). Consequently, domination is reinforced not only through personal cruelty but also through inequalities embedded within society itself. Psychological control, therefore, emerges as both an individual and a systemic phenomenon.

Andrew further strengthens this system by exploiting Nina's deepest emotional attachment: her daughter. He warns that "nobody will believe you if you talk about it. . . poor Cecelia could be in danger" (McFadden 225). This threat ensures obedience without requiring continuous physical punishment. Fear for her child's safety outweighs fear for herself, making resistance almost impossible.

Through these episodes, *The Housemaid* demonstrates that psychological domination depends not only on violence but also on the strategic use of trauma, silence, institutional authority, and emotional dependence. By controlling both private relationships and public perceptions, Andrew creates a system in which victims are isolated, discredited, and rendered incapable of resisting the narratives imposed upon them.

Silence occupies a central position in *The Housemaid*, but its meaning varies by character and by the circumstances in which it operates. Rather than functioning solely as an indication of oppression, silence becomes a complex response to power, serving as both a mechanism of control and, at times, a strategy of resistance.

Andrew's silence is deliberate and strategic. Rather than relying on overt aggression, he maintains authority by concealing information, manipulating appearances, and letting uncertainty dominate the lives of those around him. His composed and respectable public image prevents others from recognising the violence hidden beneath his calm exterior. By withholding the truth and avoiding direct confrontation, Andrew strengthens his control while making his victims appear unreliable.

Nina's silence, by contrast, arises from fear and powerlessness. Her repeated experiences of confinement, humiliation, and manipulation gradually erode her confidence, making resistance increasingly difficult. The repeated punishments she

endures produce lasting trauma, causing her to anticipate danger even when no immediate threat exists. As fear becomes internalised, she begins to regulate her own behaviour, demonstrating how psychological control eventually replaces physical force. Her silence, therefore, reflects not merely an inability to speak but the lasting psychological consequences of sustained abuse.

Millie responds to silence in a markedly different way. Although she initially appears vulnerable, she gradually recognises that premature confrontation would place her in greater danger. Consequently, she chooses silence as a deliberate means of observation and survival. Her earlier experience of imprisonment helps her recognise patterns of manipulation more quickly, allowing her to remain cautious while gathering the knowledge needed to resist Andrew's control. In Millie's case, trauma produces awareness rather than complete submission, illustrating that individuals respond differently to similar experiences of oppression.

Cathy Caruth argues in *Unclaimed Experience* that trauma is a wound inflicted upon the mind and, as such, is not a simple, healable event like some physical ailments. According to Caruth, "trauma is an overwhelming experience that is best represented in a literary text because of the text's symbolic and ordered narrative. What makes literature the privileged, though not the only, site of trauma is the fact that literature as an art form can contain and present an aspect of experience which is not fully comprehended or mentally processed by either victims or authors." (145)

This contrast demonstrates that trauma does not generate a single psychological response. Whereas Nina's prolonged abuse results in internalised fear and silence, Millie's past experiences encourage vigilance and strategic thinking. Her silence, therefore, represents not weakness but calculated restraint, enabling her to preserve some agency within a hostile environment. The novel consequently suggests that silence may function as either an instrument of domination or a means of survival, depending on the individual's circumstances and awareness.

Millie's own confinement in the attic marks a decisive turning point in the narrative. When she is locked inside the room, the threat she had previously sensed becomes an immediate reality. Her reaction is intensified by memories of her earlier imprisonment, transforming the attic into both a physical prison and a reminder of previous trauma. Unlike Nina, however, Millie refuses to accept the role of passive victim. Rather than internalising Andrew's authority, she develops a carefully planned strategy to dismantle his system of control.

The power reversal reaches its climax when Millie imprisons Andrew in the very attic he used to dominate others. Describing the decisive moment, she states, "I slip out of the room and close the door behind me... I turn the key and pocket it" (McFadden 271). This act mirrors Andrew's earlier methods of confinement, yet its purpose differs fundamentally. Millie does not imprison Andrew to establish tyranny but to prevent further violence and liberate those he has abused.

The psychological reversal becomes even more striking when Andrew attempts to reassert his authority. Millie calmly rejects his demands, responding, "Hmm. I

don't think you're in any position to be making demands" (McFadden 272). The statement signifies a complete inversion of power. The individual who once dictated every condition of punishment now finds himself powerless, while his former victim assumes control with confidence and composure.

Millie's success is not accidental but the result of careful preparation. She explains, "Everything has to go exactly right in the next twenty seconds. I have spent over six hours planning this..." (McFadden 271). Her victory, therefore, depends not upon physical strength but upon patience, intelligence, and strategic action. By exposing Andrew to the same conditions he imposed upon others, she reveals the cruelty and calculated nature of his methods while simultaneously dismantling his authority.

The novel also suggests that violence is perpetuated across generations. Andrew's behaviour is presented not merely as an individual failing but as the product of attitudes learned within his family environment. This influence becomes evident through his mother's assertion, "If you don't take care of your teeth. . . then you lose the privilege of having teeth" (McFadden 303). Such reasoning presents harsh punishment as both reasonable and necessary, revealing how abusive patterns become normalised within domestic life and transmitted across generations.

Because violence is treated as ordinary, it often goes unnoticed. Andrew's politeness, social respectability, and emotional restraint conceal the brutality of his actions, enabling abuse to exist beneath the surface of everyday family life. The novel, therefore, blurs the distinction between ordinary domestic behaviour and psychological violence, demonstrating that oppression often flourishes precisely because it appears normal.

Another significant contribution of *The Housemaid* lies in its distinction between physical imprisonment and psychological entrapment. While the attic visibly restricts movement, fear and manipulation continue to confine individuals even after they leave the room. Nina remains psychologically imprisoned by threats, emotional dependence, and repeated trauma, while Millie's financial insecurity and social vulnerability initially limit her freedom.

Trauma studies and posthuman studies are two paradigms that became popular in the late twentieth century and have been used to define the culture of our time. Both fields deal with subjectivity, agency, embodiment, and the relation with 'the other', viewing subjectivity and the self as shattered and fragmented. However, while trauma studies focuses on the process of acting out and working through to return to a sealed, complete conception of the self, posthuman studies explores the fluidity and interconnectedness that results from the decentralization of human subjectivity in our technological, boundary-blurring reality (Baelo-Allué 219).

The novel, therefore, suggests that the most enduring forms of captivity exist within the mind rather than within physical walls. More recent works, like Roger Luckhurst's *The Trauma Question*, investigate the postmodern, shattered, and

dissolving nature of the traumatic narrative in contemporary literature. Roger Luckhurst notes that modernist literature often exhibits the “shattered subjectivity” (156) of trauma survivors, reflecting how historical upheavals shape individual and communal identities.

The Housemaid presents psychological horror as the product of interconnected systems of trauma, shock, silence, and punishment. Andrew’s authority is maintained through physical confinement, emotional manipulation, institutional power, and calculated intimidation, revealing that domination depends upon the interaction of multiple forms of control rather than isolated acts of violence.

Millie’s resistance demonstrates that oppressive systems can be challenged, yet the novel also reminds us that such systems are deeply embedded within ordinary social relationships. Horror emerges not from extraordinary events but from recognising that manipulation, silence, and coercion can exist in familiar domestic spaces, hidden behind trust, affection, and respectability. *The Housemaid* argues that the most dangerous forms of power are rarely immediate or visible. They operate gradually through repeated acts of manipulation that reshape perception, silence resistance, and normalize domination. By revealing how trauma influences memory, how shock transforms understanding, how silence regulates power, and how punishment secures obedience, Freida McFadden presents a compelling critique of psychological abuse within domestic life. The novel reminds readers that the greatest threats often arise not from strangers but from trusted relationships, where control remains concealed until its devastating consequences become impossible to ignore. Horvitz asserts:

If traumatic events are not repressed, they can be used: victims remember and imagine stories to be repeated and passed on. That is, when the stories of the past are consciously recognised, the cycle of violence can end, because the narratives, not the trauma, are repeated and passed on. (134)

Conclusion

Trauma frequently results in social isolation and alienation, disrupting an individual’s sense of identity and belonging. However, reading and producing texts serve as therapeutic and restorative practices, enabling survivors to reconnect with broader communities, reconstruct fragmented identities, and gradually rebuild the disrupted narratives of their lives. This study adopts an interdisciplinary approach that extends its significance beyond literary studies by contributing to the discourse on trauma, mental health, and gender. Through an analysis of hidden trauma in *The Housemaid*, it demonstrates how literary narratives expose the psychological consequences of abuse, silence, and oppression while illustrating the therapeutic potential of storytelling in articulating suppressed experiences. “Depending on the mental state of the victim, the psychological consequences of sexual violence and clinical and psychological abuse were identified” (Nutskova 75). By situating trauma within gendered and systemic structures of power, the study enriches discussions in psychology, sociology, trauma studies, and feminist theory. “Future public health

interventions should draw on culturally centered strength-based resilience approaches for healing trauma and advancing health equity” (Stone et al. 265). It concludes that *The Housemaid* serves as a compelling literary testimony to the enduring impact of hidden trauma, revealing the intricate relationship between memory, silence, identity, and survival, and reaffirming literature’s vital role in fostering awareness, empathy, and healing.

Works Cited

- Arain, Fakiha, and Waqar Hussain. “Hidden Strings: The Art of Manipulation in Freida McFadden’s *The Housemaid* through Psychoanalytic Study.” *International Journal of Sustainable Applied Sciences*, vol. 2, no. 9, 2024, pp. 897–908.
- Baelo-Allué, Sonia. “The Posthuman Trauma Novel: Reconfiguring Subjectivity in Patricia Lockwood’s *No One Is Talking about This* (2021).” *European Journal of American Culture*, vol. 43, no. 3, 2024, pp. 219–38. https://doi.org/10.1386/ejac_00124_1.
- Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Johns Hopkins UP, 1996.
- Habiba, Umm e, and Menahil. “Addressing the Mediating Role of Emotional Manipulation for the Association Between Narcissism and Interpersonal Relationship Among Married Individuals.” *Qlantic Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2025, pp. 226–35. <https://doi.org/10.55737/qjssh.vi-ii.25357>.
- Horvitz, Deborah M. *Literary Trauma: Sadism, Memory, and Sexual Violence in American Women’s Fiction*. State U of New York P, 2000.
- Luckhurst, Roger. *The Trauma Question*. Routledge, 2008.
- McFadden, Freida. *The Housemaid*. Bookouture, 2022.
- Nutskova, E. V. “Diagnostic and Forensic Assessment of the Psychological Consequences of Sexual Violence and Abuse against Girls.” *Psychology and Law*, vol. 8, no. 4, 2018, pp. 75–88. <https://doi.org/10.17759/psylaw.2018080408>.
- Savin, S. D., V. F. Shchepelkov, and A. N. Sidorova. “Domestic Violence as a Social Problem in the Russian Society: Between Privacy and Publicity.” *RUDN Journal of Sociology*, vol. 25, no. 1, 2025, pp. 64–78. <https://doi.org/10.22363/2313-2272-2025-25-1-64-78>
- Stone, L. C., M. Avila, and B. Duran. “El Nacimiento del Pueblo Mestizo: Critical Discourse on Historical Trauma, Community Resilience and Healing.” *Health Education & Behavior*, vol. 48, no. 3, 2021, pp. 265–75. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10901981211010099>.