

## The Dead Never Dies: Exploring Poisonous Presence of the Absent Mother

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### ABSTRACT

Life is not easy, it is full of pain and sorrow that empties our psyche and forces us to withdraw from life itself. What make it even more difficult is our weak and unreliable experiences of childhood. It becomes difficult to stay alive when existence itself comes as a burden that too without a support system. What breaks our hearts the most and fills them with pain and sorrow is when the objects that are supposed to nourish us abandon us and leaves our undeveloped psyche to bear the pain it is incapable of bearing. This research aims to study the state of deadness and proneness to self-destructive tendencies evoked by the absence of the mother and the maternal environment. It would analyze the narratives of the characters from the movies- A Death in the Gunj, The Hours, and The Seventh Continent and apply thematic analysis and narrative analysis as methodologies.

**Keywords:** *Deadness, Suicidality, Absence, Toxicity, Poisonous, Breakdown, Mourning, Melancholia, Silence.*

Experiences of living in this world offer us a life that lingers murkily at the border of death and nothingness for some people. Their life becomes less about life and more about death where the joy of living is comparatively lesser than the atrocities they are forced to face daily. Moreover, death is often described as an un-experiential moment, a moment that cannot be understood and explained without the experience of dying itself. However, in the following research I attempt to understand the realm where death and life meet; a life that isn't about living or about dying but a deadening life. A life of meaninglessness, emptiness, wordlessness and a life that is forbidden to the one who lives it.

Furthermore, it is also theorised and explained that death is about absence, it is a realm of nothingness and an experience that is forbidden to the human psyche. However, it is not just the death that constitutes absence but life itself can become something that beholds death; a life of lifelessness, a life that is haunted by the absences rather than enriched by joys and presences. This lingering between the life that symbolises 'being' and death that is a symbol of 'nothingness' complicates the subject's life. Thus, a life that encompasses a physiological death still comes as malleable but a death that isn't physical rather is psychical complicates it

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even more and it is this complexity that this research entails grappling with. Whenever there's a conversation around non-material things it is often perceived as nonsensical, illogical and unreasonable but it is the immaterial force that constitutes life. In that sense, some immaterial things have more impact than one could ever imagine.

Absence and presence in my view become the most crucial immaterial things that make life what it is and in these absences and presences there's an object, an object that gives us the capacity to live but at the same time can impinge upon our whole existence. These objects being damaged themselves poisons the life to whom their presence matters. One such object whose absence can consume life to its core is the absent mother or the absent maternal environment. The mother is not present enough to help the child to learn how to live in this threatening and insecure world.

The capacity to feel alive and to live a pleasurable life is a process that we learn from the environment and interpersonal attitudes that surrounds us as theorised by Winnicott and other psychoanalysts. Winnicott focuses on the incapacity of the Other, he is sensitive to the incapability of the external forces to support the child's aliveness. Likewise, if the environment itself is poisoning and denies its responsibility of providing us with essential life-supporting experiences it becomes damaging and consuming. The damage done by the experiences of absence imbalances the subjects life and breaks down their desire to live, it makes them incapable of arriving at a feeling of completeness and creates a hole in their existence making it almost impossible to bear what life offers them. Additionally, it deadens them internally and psychically.

The internal state of deadness or a state where one feels dead inside is arrival and is not just limited to the psyche but extends to the material body as well. In some cases, the feeling of deadness is so awful where the violence is done to a point of no compromise, to a point where recovery becomes impossible and it makes them suicidal and forces them to take their own life.

Phillips (2017) writes, “the truth about life is that it would have been better not to be born. And we have been born, and being given this belated knowledge. A knowledge that makes a mockery of our desire; that reveals all our purposes as hiding places and refuges. At least life has taught us this: that life is unbearable”. What Phillips has written resonates with the forbiddenness that life entails. Life is already unbearable and hard to live and it is the presence of an object that makes it bearable and less painful. However, when the object itself becomes absent it also takes away with it all the life that the subject would have lived. Instead of nourishing, these objects deplete them making survival difficult and in some cases impossible.

When people go through such painful and unbearable experiences they start to value death more than life, they deaden themselves psychically and begin to feed upon their life. These individuals are saddened and numbed by the damage that living brings to them creating an unfillable void in their psyche. Eigen writes, “For some people, the sense of deadness is pervasive. They describe themselves as zombies, the walking dead, empty and unable to feel” (2004, p.3). Life comes as unbearable to all of us, it is painful to live but we also know that this pain is momentary and that there are moments of joy as well. We find something or the other to hold onto life, to survive. However, that's not the case for all of us, for some this pain is unendable and it destroys their whole existence. Moreover, the psyche by deadening itself tries to undo what has been done to it, it begins to work in the reverse and diminishes itself to

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the point of zero, to a state of unborness and nothingness.

Kristeva uses the phrase, “A Past That Does Not Pass By” in the context of life and death of speech in people suffering from a ‘noncommunicable grief’. These are the people whose mothers or maternal environment is absent from their function and as a result incapacitates the subject to feel alive; moreover, it consumes and feeds upon their life like a parasite. People who experience object loss are the ones who are unable to overcome that loss and spend their entire eternity mourning for them. Kristeva here certainly speaks about a past, a past that does not remain just a past rather it creates a wound that remains open forever. Even though the location of the origin is essentially in childhood, it poisons their entire future. Kristeva (1992) writes, “The disappearance of the essential being continues to deprive me of what is most worthwhile in me; I live it as a wound or deprivation... I nurture with respect to the one who betrayed or abandoned me... It follows that any loss entails the loss of my being- and of being itself”. Their heart always remembers the pain it went through.

The absence that we have been talking about is not because of the literal death of the object; perhaps it takes place in the presence of it. The object is present but is dead in its function, is dead psychically because the object itself is absorbed in bereavement. This transformation in the psychical life occurring due to the death of the object is experienced by the child as traumatizing; because, “without any warning signal, love has been lost at one blow” (Green, 1996, p. 150). The unavailability of the object that was supposed to help them adapt to the unbearable reality impoverishes their psyche and takes away with it all the meaning that is essential to stay alive and to grow. The bonds and the environment that were supposed to flourish their life becomes toxic. These bonds damage them and deaden them.

It is also true that separation from the mother is a necessary step towards the attainment of selfhood and to have a life of one's own but in the cases who are deprived out of their life, this separation is too sudden. As Green puts it, the mother is never really lost rather is buried alive, but her tomb itself disappears. To add onto to the discussion, we have had so far, I would like to refer to Green's work *The Dead Mother*, he writes, people who go through such loss experiences, “psychical collapse, which would be to the psyche what fainting is to the physical body. The object has been encapsulated and its trace has been lost through deca-thex is; primary identification with the dead mother took place, transforming positive identification into negative identification, i.e. identification with the hole left by the deca-thex is (and not identification with the object), and to this emptiness, which is filled in and suddenly manifests itself through an affective hallucination of the dead mother, as soon as a new object is periodically chosen to occupy this space”. The subject internalizes the absence itself, they identify with the hole created by the dead mother and live their whole life mourning for this loss, grieving for the bonds they never had the experience of living.

Furthermore, I want to understand the cycles associated with active self-destructive propensities and how one arrives at an ability to slaughter their own material body. This longing to kill oneself and the deadness that we have been discussing so far can be aftereffects of overstimulating and understimulating environment and parenting. Too much absence and too much presence imbalances an individual's life and breaks down one's desire to arrive at a feeling of completeness.

Moving forward, I want to work upon the following themes since I feel a connection with them and have sensed and observed it in the individuals that surround me. I have likewise detected its presence inside my self where life is not experienced as joyful rather is

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experienced as a burden, a burden that I am forced to carry on a daily basis. I often feel that something is missing in my life and is incomplete. I am always searching for something or the other without realizing what it is that needs to be searched. It is a search that will never end because it is a search for life itself, a life that I never had an opportunity to live. In any case, this opportunity to work upon this theme assisted me in arriving at an understanding of my own state, furthermore, helped me in arriving at a sense which is viewed as unreasonable, nonsensical, and irrational in the society we have constructed and occupied.

Keeping all the discussion in mind I believe that this research will be relevant in gaining a clearer picture of the sorrows that a subject lives with daily. It will provide us with the social, clinical, and psychological understanding of deadness as a state and as a way of living. Additionally, it will help us in arriving at a better understanding of suicidality and what makes one more prone to self-destruction. This paper will likewise assist us in understanding the psychical and psychological impact of the current situation we are living in where individuals are losing their desire to live and have a feeling of deadness because of the loss of their objects due to pandemic.

This research will additionally give a language to the silent and the silenced, to some extent it will make the pain verbalizable which is often misrecognized, misunderstood, and is inarticulable. Furthermore, it also to some extent will help in normalising what is considered pathological and will help us in arriving at a better understanding of the un-understandable and the unreasonable.

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

*We are living in a world in which nobody is free, in which hardly anybody is secure, in which it is almost impossible to be honest and to remain alive.*

*-George Orwell*

It is hard to talk about death and significantly more hard to think about it and write on it. The state and the quality of life that I want to contemplate is a state which lies at the border of life and death itself. Some consider this state as a response to the traumatizing world while on the other hand, some consider it to be a process through which experiences are attributed to meaning. Accordingly, it is not simply a state rather it turns into a quality of life; a way of living. There seems a feeling of internal deadness, unaliveness, or the individual does not feel sufficiently invigorated to proceed with life in the manner in which they should proceed and support life. Their existence is contaminated, wounded and injured. They see their experiences, not as their own, it is considered to be something which does not belong to them, something which didn't rise out of them yet as something which was given to them. They are isolated from their encounters, their emotions, their contemplations and this disengagement is obvious in the language that they use and the manners in which it is utilized.

I am trying to communicate and address an abyss that seems to be noncommunicable at times, something which is difficult to explain without being touched by the experience of such emptiness, sadness and meaninglessness. I'll be bringing into account the narratives of the subjects who have been wounded and hurt or the subjects that have been damaged by the resources that were supposed to nourish and flourish their lives. In this part of the paper, I will try to explore the foundations that lie at the core of such experiences of deadness and

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melancholic personalities. Further, I will be discussing the factors that give birth to such unaliveness.

Reading Kristeva, Green and Eigen was a particularly edifying encounter, they verbalized the inarticulable, communicated the non-communicable and named the unnameable. They helped me in incorporating my fragmented self and made me more comfortable with the life that I am living. Simultaneously they encouraged me in figuring out the experiences that appeared nonsensical to me. To some extent, I found an object for my objectless world as their work gave me the "thing" that was absent from my life. Writers and analysts like them have the potential to verbalize the inarticulable, they are able to express the experiences which the experiencer itself is unable to express for themselves. Notwithstanding, in the accompanying discussion a large portion of my references are from their work, they have been integral to my thinking and played a fundamental part in understanding the quality of life that I want to study through this exploration.

### *Theoretical/experiential understanding of Deadness*

Kristeva (1992) writes to convey the essence of the experience that people with deadness encounter, "An infinite number of misfortunes weigh us down every day ... All this suddenly gives me another life. A life that is unlivable, heavy with daily sorrows, tears held back or shed, a total despair, scorching at times, then wan and empty" (p.4). These lines immediately struck me by how much what she has written resonates with the quality of life I am living and hence is trying to understand through this research. She adds, "I live a living death, my flesh is wounded, bleeding, cadaverized, my rhythm slowed down or interrupted, time has been erased or bloated, absorbed into sorrow ... Absent from other people's meaning, alien, accidental with respect to naive happiness, I owe a supreme, metaphysical lucidity to my depression. On the frontiers of life and death, occasionally I have the arrogant feeling of being witness to the meaninglessness of Being, of revealing the absurdity of bonds and beings" (p.4). We are not just saddened by the life that we live but at the same time are shocked by it. Our own life becomes that of a shock, where instead of getting nourished, it comes as something which damages us and harms us. We become obsessed with the life that we have lived, we constantly think about the lived life in a manner where this obsession and these constant thoughts leads to further harm. This deadness also constitutes a state of emotionalness or a state of frozen emotions, it becomes difficult to produce emotions and if produced it becomes hard to sustain them. As can be found in the accompanying reference from Eigen's work, "There can be not only the lack of capacity to generate, sustain, and process emotions but also the lack of capacity to sustain and process gaps, empty times, nothingness moments" (1996, p.35). There is a stillness, a blankness that constantly drives their life.

Besides, Eigen adds, "For some people, the sense of deadness is pervasive. They describe themselves as zombies, the walking dead, empty and unable to feel" (1996, p.3). They feel like the dead and act like the dead. People with such states are walking corpses. Further, he adds, "death—that stranger of strangers, other of others, alien of aliens— wells up from my body, seizes me, takes me away. Processes that constitute me and support my life are also enemies. Death wipes meaning out of life" (Eigen, 1996, p.5), with this psychic death the meaning also dies, their feelings dry and experiences are not seen as lived experiences but as something given to them. They regress to the state of unbornness, the earliest state. "Death had eaten away almost all it could eat away" (Eigen, 1996, p.7). It eats away all that makes one feel alive and sustains life, making one's existence blank, empty, wounded and damaged. To the point where "*one becomes too much for oneself*" (Eigen, 1996, p.8)

### *Lost Object and Objectless Life*

The psychoanalytic school of thought believes that object relations exist from the beginning of life and are necessary to sustain life and make connections. However, in the quality of living this research entails to study it is the sudden withdrawal of the primary object which is experienced as deadening. This sudden loss ruins the psyche and holds the subject captive in such manner that it poisons all the vitality and the capacity to feel alive. Kristeva writes, “The disappearance of that essential being continues to deprive me of what is most worthwhile in me; I live it as a wound or deprivation, discovering just the same that my grief is but the defendant of the hatred or desire for ascendancy that I nurture with respect to the one who betrayed or abandoned me. My depression points to my not knowing how to lose-I have perhaps been unable to find a valid compensation for the loss? It follows that any loss entails the loss of my being-and of Being itself. The depressed person is a radical, sullen atheist” (1992, p.5). They experience the objects around them as subjects, as feeling and thinking beings. They have no “real” subject to relate to, a subject which is present to them without any fear of losing it.

As psychoanalysis believes, the first object is usually the significant other/caregiver and when this first object is lost before its actual time it gives birth to lifelessness or other forms of damage. Green points out that “The dead mother, contrary to what one might think, is a mother who remains alive but who is, so to speak, psychically dead in the eyes of the young child in her care” (1986, p.142). Thus, it is this absence of the mother which makes them experience loss and makes them melancholic. It is this unavailability which deadens them. The mother who is supposed to regulate their distress, who is supposed to care for them and comfort them is absent. Additionally, for me it becomes difficult to comprehend the cause behind this deadness, is it the lost loved object that they mourn or is it the love that they received from that object? Green (1986) writes, “The transformation in the psychical life, at the moment of the mother's sudden bereavement when she has become abruptly detached from her infant, is experienced by the child as a catastrophe; because, without any warning signal, love has been lost at one blow” (p.150). She says that the loss “constitutes a premature disillusionment and that it carries in its wake, besides the loss of love, the loss of *meaning*, for the baby disposes of no explication to account for what has happened” (Green, 1986, p.150). The sudden loss of maternal care and love takes away the meaning and aliveness that is present in the baby and besides it also takes away with it their capacity to feel alive again as discussed previously. In this whole process of losing the object “*Unconscious identification with the dead mother takes place*” (Green, 1986, p.150), they internalize the deadness and the absence that is present in the environment and in the care they received. They identify with the hole, the void, and the emptiness that was created due to the withdrawal of the mother.

Moreover, the phrase ‘dead mother’ has been used in a metaphorical sense to highlight the absence of the mother which can be physical, psychological or emotional. It doesn't mean to imply that she is dead, rather is absent from the caring function that she supposed to perform, ‘her heart is not in it’. Besides, Green writes, “The patient has the feeling that a malediction weighs upon him, that there is no end to the dead mother's dying, and that it holds him prisoner” (1986, p.153). They are never able to overcome the experienced loss and constantly are in the search for the objects to fill the void but are unsuccessful in doing so; hence, live an objectless life, struggling to find the object, the ‘thing’ but are unable to do so.

To elaborate more on the subjects inability to transition onto the new object I would like to quote Green, he writes, “Consciously, he believes his reserve of love to be intact, available

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for another love when the occasion arises. He declares himself ready to become attached to another object, if he appears to be friendly and he feels loved by him. He thinks the primary object no longer counts for him. In truth, he will encounter the inability to love, not only because of ambivalence, but because his love is still mortgaged to the dead mother. The subject is rich but he can give nothing in spite of his generosity, for he does not reap enjoyment from it" (1986, p.156). In reality, they never lost the object, its absence still haunts them making them incapable of falling in love and expressing love for another. The love that is felt with this absent object is not experienced again with anyone else. Rather, I believe that this love changes into narcissism since the dead/absent mother is fortified within them, in a quest to love the object which is inside them they start loving themselves. "He becomes his own mother, but remains a prisoner to her economy of survival. He thinks he has got rid of his dead mother. In fact, she only leaves him in peace in the measure that she herself is left in peace. As long as there is no candidate to the succession, she can well let her child survive, certain to be the only one to possess this inaccessible love" (Green, 1986, p.156).

They lose themselves in the process of losing the object, the absence scars their self and their life. Ogden writes, "The relationship with the original object is a part of the past that one will never have again. At the same time, the past is never lost completely in a depressive mode in that one can repeat something of the experience with the original object in a relationship with the new object" (1988, p.21). They constantly mourn for the lost object and this mourning is never complete, they mourn for it throughout their life. Besides, they are constantly in search of the object that was lost or is absent and missing. Their relationship with the lost object becomes inseparable and unforgettable. People who live such quality of life couldn't find an object to connect with and at the same time find it difficult to disconnect themselves with the loss that they have experienced in their earlier stages of life.

In addition, it is not just the absent object/mother that haunts them, maternal abandonment threats also damage and wounds them. As Michael Eigen writes, "maternal abandonment gestures, especially punitive ones, threaten the integrity of mental and physical self-relations and are frequently associated with suicidal urges. By punitive abandonment threats, I mean the mother's active use of separation to menace and subdue the child. In certain cases, the mother may pack her own or the child's bags and mimic leaving. She may actually leave home or, worse, take the child out and leave him or her in a strange place all alone. The child learns to suppress feelings, lest the mother terrorize the child with the threat of being without her" (1981, p.561). Hence, the deadness is not just a response to the lost object rather it can also result from the threats of losing the loved object or from getting separated and detached from the significant other. It can likewise be said that it is the loss or the fear of loss that threatens and deaden them. They are the prisoner to the objects that have not been lost but are unfounded and missing.

### ***Understimulating and Overstimulating environment: Getting depleted by the ones who nourish***

In the previous section we talked about the absence and the loss, in this particular section my focus would be on the processes and relationships which are supposed to be nourishing but instead leads to depletion and damage. "Sense of deadness varies in form and background. It can cripple an entire life or only part of life. It occurs in individuals who have been overstimulated or understimulated or a combination of the two: parents can erratically overstuff or deprive a child of emotional transmissions" (Eigen, 1996, p.xvi). It is essential to achieve a balance, being overprotective, overloving, engaging in overcare that one needs can lead to deadness and so does doing its opposite. On one hand, too much contact becomes too

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stimulating and evocative and on the other hand, the lack of it can lead to deprivation. It is a balance between these components which makes one feel alive.

Eigen writes, “overload of emotional toxins fused with nourishment can have dire somatic consequences, sour a person's life-feeling, and influence whether one wishes to live or die” (Eigen, 1999, p.xvi). It is this overload that instead of nourishing them acts as a poison. He adds, “What is offered as nourishment can be both empty and violent. Individuals forced to make do with empty and violent nourishment are trapped inside and outside themselves” (Eigen, 1999, p.xix). It is this toxic nourishment or the bonds which are damaging which give birth to the state of deadness. Deadness is not only a result of absence as discussed in the previous section but at the same time can also be caused by too much presence. Furthermore, one can only take what one is capable of taking in, too much of something becomes indigestible and intolerable. Eigen his book *Psychic Deadness* states “In an informal fashion, one can speak of being overwhelmed or flooded by energy, stimuli, drives, emotions, ideas. At such moments, filters or containing systems break down or are inadequate. One may enjoy the flood, but one may only be able to take so much of it and no more, or it may be too dangerous to begin with. In response to massive flooding, one may massively shut down. It is as if the psycho-organism short-circuits, turns off, being unable to bear its sensitivity. The blankness of too much is replaced by the blankness of nothing” (1996, p.8). They are flooded with too much presence that it becomes too much for their psyches to hold and to process, it becomes intolerable which as a result hampers their life and quality of living.

Additionally, it is not just overstimulation or understimulation which can result in deadness, a mixture of both can also cause this state to appear. As Eigen puts it, “To be wasted, blown away, destroyed without a trace. To be waste material, a child's soul turned to shit, a shit-self, shitting itself out, treated like gold one moment and shit the next by out of control, golden-shitty, brutal, sentimental, uncomprehending parents. To be wasting away, undernourished, ravaged, stuffed with emotional toxins, flooded with eye-popping horrors that eat one's insides out’ (1996, p.174). Inconsistency in stimulation makes one feel that the world is unpredictable and it is this unpredictability and unsurety of responses and care which haunts them. They don't know if they are gold or shit, hence turns into no-thing, into nothingness and the living dead.

### ***Silence and the Scarcity of Speech***

*For the speaking being life is a meaningful life; life is even the apogee of meaning. Hence if the meaning of life is lost, life can easily be lost: when meaning shatters, life no longer matters.*

*-Julia Kristeva (1992, p.6).*

One important phrase that Kristeva uses in this passage to describe the state is “noncommunicable grief”. The individual experiencing this grief due to the absence discussed earlier does not have the capacity to articulate what they are going through or are internally suffering from, simultaneously they are not aware of the cause of such wounded existence and grief that they go through daily. She continues to talk about this absenteeism and the inaccessibility of language to express what one is going through. She adds, “Faced with the impossibility of concatenating, they utter sentences that are interrupted, exhausted, come to a standstill. Even phrases they cannot formulate. A repetitive rhythm, a monotonous melody emerges and dominates the broken logical sequences, changing them into recurring, obsessive litanies” (p.33). Most of the time they are silent, monotonous and speak minimally. It becomes hard to formulate a language to express what one feels internally. Thus, silence



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becomes a response to the world which did not allow them to form a language to express their pain. They "withdrawal into inactivity or playing dead, wounded by irreparable frustrations or harms" (p.36). It appears to me that the silence is learned just like learned helplessness because they are not aware of any other way to deal with the agony that has been incurred onto them and the torment that they have experienced. Being silent acts as a defense to not fight and neither to fly rather stay and experience the situation. Their silence is a way through which they communicate, without it, they have nothing to act or to say.

Their language is as insufficient as the world which fails to make them feel alive. Furthermore, silence here not only symbolizes a way through which they communicate but at the same time symbolises death; death of words, symbols, meaning and of their whole existence. "Listen again for a few moments to depressive speech, repetitive, monotonous, or of empty meaning, inaudible even for the speaker before he or she sinks into mutism. You will note that, with melancholy persons, meaning appears to be arbitrary, or else it is elaborated with the help of much knowledge and will to mastery, but seems secondary, frozen, somewhat removed from the head and body of the person who is speaking. Or else it is from the very beginning evasive, uncertain, deficient, quasi mutistic: "one" speaks to you already convinced that the words are wrong and therefore "one" speaks carelessly, "one" speaks without believing in it" (Kristeva, 1992, p.43). In further discussions she also adds "the speech of the depressed is to them as an alien skin; melancholy persons are foreigners in their maternal tongue. They have lost the meaning-the value-of their mother tongue for want of losing the mother. The dead language they speak, which foreshadows their suicide, conceals a Thing buried alive. The latter, however, will not be translated in order that it not be betrayed; it shall remain walled up within the crypt of the inexpressible affect, anally harnessed, with no way out" (Kristeva, 1992, p.53). These lines by Kristeva signifies that depressive people or people who feel dead not only feel short of words but at the same time they feel disconnected with what they are saying. Sometimes they say it just for the sake of saying and do not mean it, whereas, on the other hand sometimes they feel so much that they are unable to find a language to say it. I connect to such experiences a lot as sometimes I convey certain things without having a connection with them and sometimes, I can't even express what I feel or think inside. My own lived experiences become distant from my body and myself and sometimes experiences that do not belong to my body and myself are experienced as my own.

I additionally believe that there are chances that individuals who experience such deadness may likewise not use language because communication is a process where one gives and the other receives. There are chances that they don't want to give anything further now since they have already given a lot which can be seen through the losses they have experienced. Hence, there is a longing to only receive from the other, where this receiving is experienced as a feed to their hollowed existence and as a cure to their wounded self.

### *Fantasizing about the Unlived Life*

The people who are deadened by their experiences wants to make the other person understand without even attempting to express their desires, their needs and motives. They feel that language is insufficient to convey what is happening inside them and hence instead of using this insufficient language it is better to stay silent. In this silence, they create fantasies and imagination. "A dweller in truncated time, the depressed person is necessarily a dweller in the imaginary realm" (Kristeva, 1992, p.61). Besides, André Green in her book "On private madness" says, "the subject *excludes himself* and constitutes himself in the absence of affective representation, which gives birth to fantasy, which is a production of the subject's

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‘madness’” (1986, p.147). People who experience deadness create fantasies, not like psychotics but rather they are created by maintaining a connection with the real world. This imagination is not based on unreality but becomes a place of exploration and creation. As Eigen writes, “fantasy regulates the balance of good and bad feeling: pumping out the bad pumping in the good” (1996, p.38). I believe that in this state there is a constant pumping in to regulate the “bad” that is present inside, it plays an important role in keeping them alive through whatever life is left within them.

People who live with such states or this quality of life tend to monitor their lives through creating fantasies, they fear the real contact with the world around them and hence as a result creates an imaginative world where such desires can be fulfilled. “He can see the possibility of contact, feel longing, imagine touching and being touched by another. But the actual happening of it is light-years away” (Eigen, 1996, p.180), they make connections in their imaginations and this desire of relating with the other is fulfilled only through the fantasies, actual happening of such touching and getting touched by the other seems impossible and hard. In imagination, they become closer to the Other than one ever can in real life. It gives them moments of floating through existence without being crushed.

### *Deadness as a Defense*

Moving further, deadness not only emerges as a response to the traumatic reality but it becomes a shield that protects an individual from getting mad, it is a way of staying sane, logical and acceptable in this world. It becomes a sane response to the insane world as believed by the existential school of thought. Besides, I would like to quote Kristeva here, she says, “the sadness that overwhelms us, the retardation that paralyzes us are also a shield-sometimes the last one-against madness” (p.46). It is a defense that allows one to create a safe space, a space where one can save oneself from the unbearable, too frightening and unacceptable pain that surrounds them. The individuals deaden themselves as a form of self-protection, though the process is unconscious it does make one feel safe and saves one from becoming insane. McWilliams in her book “Psychoanalytic Diagnosis” while describing primary defense processes adds, “people who retreat from social or interpersonal situations, substituting the stimulation of their internal fantasy world for the stresses of relating” (2011). In other words, she is trying to convey that when the outside world becomes too stressful and unbearable, people withdraw into their fantasy world to balance out the stimulation. It is used as a shield against death and also as a protector against too much living and aliveness. Often this too much aliveness is followed up with a pang of unconscious guilt where one feels guilty about surviving and living while their objects are dead, absent, misplaced, or as objects which were unable to live or did not want to survive. Their lifelessness becomes a defense towards aliveness and emotions.

### *True and False Self*

*Forever I shall be a stranger to myself.*  
-Albert Camus

People who are damaged by the objects and the bonds that are supposed to nourish them also distorts their sense of self. Truer or genuine selves of these poisoned people are hidden deep inside. Eigen writes, “If pain comes from inside the body, then the inside of the body becomes Other, not-I, something that is happening to me, an alien, hostile, or indifferent you” (1996, p.5). Perhaps, as discussed earlier that the mother is buried alive within the psyche so it can likewise be said that the cause of the pain lies within the body. In the process of losing the object, they have lost themselves and their orientation towards their real selves. “To have

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glorious moments one needs to be able to move between states, between selves, between worlds. The rhythmic movement between self and other never quite evolved or took hold” (Eigen, 1996, p.17), or when Winnicott says that, “the False Self sets up as real and it is this that observers tend to think is the real person” (1960, p.142). There is an inability to move between states and selves because they are stuck in the falsity that has formed, their false self becomes the only state which is available to them and which is used to relate to the external world outside. As stated earlier, this deadness is not only confined to one's emotions but the self and reality as well. It appears to me that they have resurrected their true self with the lost object which is buried deep inside them.

Eigen while describing a case study of a boy who was experiencing deadness because of the partial sex change operation writes, “He created an untellable secret in order to protect and save the more intangible intimation of secret (sacred) mystery. His partial sex change operation converted the inner sense of secrecy and hiding into a literal thing to be closed about. He could marshal resources around a fixed thing-no-thing that must never be shared. The private, incognito dimension of self partly turns into a concrete dread, a symptom” (1996, p.184). He, just like others who experience deadness walled off the true self and made it invisible. Their genuine selves are hidden sometimes consciously and sometimes unconsciously. It appears that their true self has been lost inside their own body, it has been submerged inside them just like the lost object. They search for this lost self but I think that it was lost even before it formed or before it started to exist. Hence, living falsely is seen as a better opportunity than not living at all.

### **METHODOLOGY**

My research would be a close analysis of narratives. These narratives have been purposely chosen as they revolve around the concept of deadness, suicidality, absence, and breakdown and deals directly with the same. The first is the movie “A Death in the Gunj” directed by Konkona Sen Sharma, the second movie is “The Seventh Continent” directed by Michael Haneke and the third is “The Hours” directed by Stephen Daldry based on a novel storied by Michael Cunningham. My research entails close analysis of the different manifestations of the breakdown in these movies and looks at the lifestyles of the characters as they live them. In addition, I will be using thematic analysis to analyse the narratives based on the themes described in the previous section.

#### *Narrative Analysis*

Narrative analysis is a process where the researcher analyses and interprets the narrations and the stories shared and created by the one who is being researched. Listening to narratives helps in constructing a coherent and integrated world of the Other and helps the researcher in becoming aware of their unknown and untold parts. Psychoanalysis and other qualitative research methods consist of reaching the truths of one's life by helping the one who is being researched construct a narrative of the life they have lived but has been disavowed, repressed or language for articulation are absent. Kakar writes, “Psychoanalysis is essentially telling and retelling the story of a particular life. Explanation in psychoanalysis is then narrative rather than hypothetical deductive. Its “truth” lies in the confirmatory constellation of coherence, consistency, and narrative intelligibility. Whatever else the analyst and the analysand must be doing, they are also collaborators in the creation of the story of an individual life” (1991, p.4). This formulation that Kakar gives is not only limited to the clinic but can be extended to the social and other research areas. In that sense, the movies as stories and stories within the movies helped me organize and make sense of their lives and their

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storied accounts. Multiple characters in the movies became my research participants who presented their lives through stories and where I as a researcher interpreted those narrations.

### *Thematic Analysis*

Thematic analysis on the other hand is the most widely used technique for data analysis. It can be described as a method that emphasizes on identifying and analysing the narratives based on the commonality and similarities in the stories presented to the researcher. It is a process of identifying the themes and clustering the collected data based on commonality. Similarly, in this research the themes that become a basis for analysing the data are, “Silence and the Scarcity of Speech”, “Fantasizing about the Unlived Life”, “Deadness as a Defense”, “True and False self” and most importantly the data is analysed under the themes- the absence of maternal environment, objectlessness and objectless life, and lastly is analysed based on the impact of the overstimulating and understimulating environment.

To understand the complex matters that this research entails it becomes necessary to listen to the life stories as life presents itself. Listening to life as one lives is a beautiful path that takes us into the depths of emotions and closer to the subject's inner life. It helps us in understanding the Other based on their lived experiences and takes us closer to their subjective experiences. Moreover, the relationship between the researcher and the researched is a co-constructed relationship where both co-experience and re-experience their known and unknown parts. Sharing and narrativizing one's life is a meaningful journey where one makes sense of the other and through engagement with this Other also makes sense of their own self. Hence, in the case of this research, my inarticulable parts of the self became less alien and more available. Additionally, analysing the narratives of the characters based on the themes mentioned in the previous section became a medium through which I reached closer to the truth of their life and also to unknown and incommunicable parts of my own lived life.

## **ANALYSIS OF THE DATA/INTERPRETATIONS**

### **A Death in the Gunj**

*Someone may seem to be communicating when in fact he is signaling that his world is extremely reduced and that he lacks the tools that make communication possible. He swings between omnipotence-helplessness in a black hole now, using words and behavior to signal his conviction that no development is possible. The flow of time and history is stultified by an impossible demand: to have or be everything without being capable of tolerating anything. Evacuative activity, especially getting rid of self, becomes an obsession and psychic murder a way of life.*

*-Michael Eigen (2004, p.50)*

Breakdowns are annoyingly hard to word and process. Additionally, in some cases, breakdowns not only feed upon life for moments but can be damaging and poisoning to the capacity to feel alive. There is something so bewildering about a breakdown that it makes the person live a life without joy and pleasure. Moreover, breakdown has a history and transience as opposed to suddenness and shock, has a blurry beginning making difficult to comprehend it.

This movie is Konkana Sen Sharma's directorial debut that deals with a wide range of social issues introspecting gender roles and masculinity in its darker forms. Perhaps my focus in this

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particular discussion would be centred around the themes of deadness and suicidality as is the motive of this research. Additionally, my focus will be on the loss of the mother and the absence of a nourishing environment. I will explore how these experiences of loss break the person down, taking away everything that it possibly could.

The movie is a beautiful example to understand the role human beings play in one another's sensitivity. The movie begins with a corpse in the trunk of the car and then it takes us back to the story of the dead figure. The moment which appears at the beginning is the moment that ensues at the end. Watching this movie was a journey from the past to the present and from the present to the past.

The movie is about a twenty-three year old “boy” named Shutu and revolves around a Bengali family’s vacation. The family is meeting after a long time so everything and everyone is excited and joyous. “And among this wave of festivity is Shutu: a young man with a recently deceased father, someone who’s finding ways to grieve. But, during a vacation, in a big house nestled among forests, no one cares about fresh wounds; people want visceral experiences – an adrenaline rush, a horror story, an illicit kiss” (Thakur, 2017). He becomes a thing among other things and nothing else. He is someone who is burdened down by the atrocities that this world has offered him. Additionally, as described by Thakur, he is quiet, subdued, and isolated. "Shutu draws frogs in his notebook. He’s preserved a moth between its pages. He inspects an ant through a magnifying glass and when it dies, he buries it in the ground. Shutu is not a man of the world; he’s a man of words" (Thakur, 2017). He is a man of silence, of thought and dread: dreadful of living too much or of living itself.

Shutu is suffering from an inconsolable sadness, unending pain has concealed and absorbed all his capacity to speak and to verbalize. I see a presence of cognitive chaos that feeds upon his speech and leaves no space for the expression. Besides, it feels like his speech has withdrawn itself from this loud external reality. He is silenced by the loud, consuming society; a noise so loud that it kills him, an unbearable loudness feeds upon him. It can likewise be said that silence which is the language of the dead symbolizes their death. Furthermore, this discussion reminded me of a moment where Shutu falls out of words and becomes silent while talking to her mother on the phone. He is unable to utter even a single word. It is this silence that caught my attention and made me wonder about various possibilities behind it. The loss of words signifies something about his relation with the mother, it symbolizes absence of the mother in his life. He is unable to speak because the damage done to him is unutterable and incommunicable.

For him, the sexual act or intimacy he has with Mimi played by Kalki Koechlin itself is very anxiety-provoking. This dread evoked by sexual intimacy is a fear of separation from the primary object, it evokes fear and guilt of losing the object as theorized by Green and Kristeva. In addition, the sexual acts symbolize life, it symbolizes something that comes into life as alive. Accordingly, it can be said that he was fearful of recreating something, of bringing something to life where he himself felt un-created, un-produced, and a no-thing. The recreational processes of intimacy and of sharing bonds of love provoke a lot of anxiety where they are afraid of losing the mother and of finding something new. The ego is at a loss in its ability to love and to create because all their love is directed towards the lost idealized object. They are unconsciously frightened of getting close to someone else because they have lost their capacity and capability to get close, to fall in love. People like Shutu are so damaged that no matter how nourishing the other is they continue to be at a loss, continue to live a life without joy and pleasure. The harm done to them is massive and overpowering that

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vanquishes their whole life and the capacity to be alive and feel alive. People like him feel excluded from their own life. To sum up the discussion we have had so far I would like to say that all their capacity is directed towards one object, absorbed by one object: their lost mother.

His mourning for the loss he experienced and is experiencing will never be complete because people like Shutu represent and identify them with the absence created by the sudden loss of the nourishing objects. People who are deadened by a sudden absence are the ones who remain prisoners to the lost objects. These objects continue to exist and are present even in their absence, they continue to live and haunt the subject throughout their life making survival almost impossible and painful. These objects haunt the subject and feed upon them until the point of death until life becomes too much for them. They become like “A Past That Does Not Pass By” (Kristeva, 1992, p.60). Kristeva adds and I am in complete agreement with her formulation, people who are deadened by their experiences are “Riveted to the past, regressing to the paradise or inferno of an unsurpassable experience, melancholy persons manifest strange memory: everything has gone by, they seem to say, but I am faithful to those bygone days, I am nailed down to them, no revolution is possible, there is no future ... An overinflated, hyperbolic past fills all the dimensions of psychic continuity”. Their whole life centres around the loss and the absence created by the objects that were supposed to nourish them. Also, it takes us back to the initial discussion where I talked about the fear of losing the object and starting anew. They are trapped and are stuck into their past with the object, with the experience of absence that the object produced hence become lifeless and incapable of moving forward from those experiences. The absence creates psychic holes, holes that make life crushing and unlivable. Therefore, it becomes necessary to fill those holes to survive. However, people who are deadened by the experience of absence lack the capacity to recover from those experiences. These holes become unfillable, it empties them out of life.

Shutu appears to be in the trap of this absence of the mother: the nourishing maternal environment. He is mourning not just for the mother but also the father he has lost recently. He lost the ones who were supposed to regulate, transform, and hold him (Eigen, 2004, p.38). The objects did not just deny their responsibilities rather destroyed him; objects transformed into objects. Moreover, he did not know what to do with the objects that were attacking him and were toxic but rather continues to carry on with the toxicity because there is no other way of living available to him. He was unable to find new objects or relations to cherish, even if he did, he did not deepen or grew through them. Thus, this toxicity and polluting relations kill him. His life has been violated to an extent from where there is no return possible, to a point where recovery seems impossible and uncompromisable. The absence of the maternal object and environment had eaten away almost all it could eat away.

Now I would like to move onto the next theme and would briefly like to talk about the creation of falsity and false self. Eigen and other psychoanalysts believe that secrecy is healthy to some extent and is necessary for normal development. The secrecy acts as a shield that protects one's self from the impinging reality. However, if I try to understand the secrecy and secret self in relation to the people like Shutu it appears that the self is not only hidden from the external world rather it is hidden from the subject itself. They lost their self even before it was formulated and carry an unformulated self that lacks an identity of its own. Another way of formulating the construction of a secret self or the true self in the people who are deadened by their life experiences is that their true self is walled off and is invisibilized or buried deep down with the internalized and interjected<sup>[1]</sup> absence; absence of the object that has entered inside from the outside forcefully.

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It appears that Shutu has no desires of his own, no identity that belongs to him rather does what others expect out of him. His self is not a self that belongs to him rather carries a self-formulated by others. He created an untellable secret he himself is unaware of. The deadness, the absence, and the loss I have been talking about is not only confined to emotionality and desires rather it also destroys their sense of self and sense of aliveness. Also, the self is created by the experience of being alive and when the experience of being alive itself is polluted it becomes impossible to have a sense of belongingness, it becomes hard to develop a self.

The external reality was abandoning, threatening, and humiliating where he was not considered as a subject rather was seen as a thing, a thing of no use, a thing to mimic and laugh about. His screams, his pain testifies his connection with life. The reality bombed and poisoned him out of the capacity to feel alive. Therefore, his life became fruitless, and going on to fight became useless, he gave out too much and received too little in return. To elaborate I would like to quote Adam Phillips from his book *Missing Out*. He writes,

We are humiliated, that is to say, when we entrust ourselves or are entrusted to people who don't care for our well-being; people who need to render us helpless, people who need us to feel humiliated. People who abandon us when we abandon ourselves to them. Not getting it, at its worst, is a malign helplessness; what we need in these situations is not so much a room of one's own, but a gang of one's own.

(2012, p.54)

It is believed and theorized that the sense of aliveness comes from nourishment from interpersonal relationships as discussed earlier. Adam Phillips writes, “the developing child survival depends upon nourishing and protective contact with ‘caretakers’; anything in the individual that disturbs this is potentially life-threatening” (2013, p.40). However, in his case, these essential objects which are necessary for survival did not help him in the growth of aliveness rather lead to deadness. Life became intolerable, it became worthwhile to continue living even for a second. The pain of living is experienced as unmendable, a pain that will continue to haunt him forever and ever. As a result, in the end, in death itself, he found solace and peace. It is by killing himself he freed himself from the unlivable life, freed himself from unending and unbearable pain. It is this pain that crippled his whole existence leaving no room for life. Hence, the destructive force within and the deadening environment outside forced him to take his life away. He dies, in part, from exhaustion and violation that living brought to him. Eigen says, “individuals' deadness involves a violent process and violence runs through the social fabric. Violence is not only an attempt to enliven the self: it also deadens the self and often is a part of self-deadening processes” (2004, p.xxiii). These lines signify the involvement of nourishing and essential figures or the environment that is supposed to help us grow but how they become a poison and damages the person. Damage that can not be undone and is unrecoverable.

To add to the discussion around the capacity to feel alive I would like to add that, deadness, worthlessness, and meaninglessness come from the responses we receive from the external environment. However, when this outside environment reacts in a manner that is poisoning and damaging it hurts us to the depth of our core. To elaborate more on this, I would like to bring an instance from the movie, this instance is of the little girl named Tani, who lost herself while running after Shutu and did not return home. The whole house was on fire

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searching for the lost girl blaming Shutu for being irresponsible. Such a horror it would have been for him to go through the experience of this humiliation. However, he still is courageous enough to go and find her in the dark but he loses himself on the way to searching for her. But this time no one cared about the loss. His presence, as well as his absence, became unnoticeable as if his getting lost didn't bother anyone. So, I noticed that it was at this moment a breakdown happened. Broken Shutu breaking down over and over again. Thus, the end of the movie and the end of his life did not come as a surprise to me. What else would I have expected out of it when life itself becomes so worthless and useless? He was hurt, badly hurt by the look on the face of the people he thought would care about him. How unaffected they were by his absence as if he never existed for them. He was depleted by not having any impact on them. How can someone stay alive when their life itself goes unnoticed and unimpactful? How can we recognize worth in the life we are living when we are not allowed to feel worthy of it? How does one learn to grow when there is no space provided for growth? How does one recover and stay alive if depletion and humiliation themselves are unending?

To conclude, I would like to quote Eigen from his book *Psychic Deadness*. In this book, he describes death as “stranger of strangers, other of others, alien of aliens— wells up from my body, seizes me, takes me away. Processes that constitute me and support my life are also enemies. Death wipes meaning out of life” (2004, p.5). In other words, the bonds that are supposed to nourish us not only become absent from their functions but also take away the life from us. The “death” of the mother and the loved ones wipes away all the meaning from our life, it leaves us with nothing but an unprocessed pain, unbearable loss, and unmendable hurt.

### *The Seventh Continent*

The Seventh Continent is an astonishing film by Michael Haneke, modern life's isolation and estrangement are the themes that are obvious in his work. His films are often reviewed as not only afflicted by the absence of love but also makes the individual remain in a limbo state. Nonetheless, the same is the case with this film. The movie begins with casualness, where a middle-class family of three are busy following their mundane routine, emotionally and psychologically disconnected from each other, the world as well as themselves. A family that experiences discomfort with the monotonous routine that won't ever end. It is an account of a family that is preparing to kill themselves, a family that opted to die instead to live as the life they were living became unlivable and suffocating.

This film in a way appears quite paradoxical to me, where in the beginning it made me feel nothing but later around the end it made me feel so much that for a moment it became unbearable, the emotional and psychical pain it evoked appeared to be unending. There's a brutal and critical approach through which Haneke explores the modern life and modern subjects. The pain that he is able to showcase in this movie is not glorified or glamorised but rather is felt by the audience within their mind and body. The beginning of the film evoked silence and feelings of weariness and detachment in me, I sat tight for something 'unusual' to happen, something different, something strange. However, peculiarity was present since the beginning of the movie, it was just eventually I understood the bizarreness, the torment, the burden and the void that was present in the film. It felt like that the three characters in the movie have been forbidden from enjoying their lives to the fullest, they were refused to live a life they wanted to live.

The life that the characters are living in the movie has become so unbearable that they want to regress to a state of unbornness, want to slide back to a state of zero, a place where there is



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zero complexity and no stimulation. Space where they can empty themselves of their feelings, thoughts, pain and empty themselves out from this tormenting world.

Nevertheless, now I would like to move forward and would like to discuss the film based on the research themes that have been highlighted in the review of the literature. The film is about a powerful world that makes one feel powerless, about the absence of freedom, insecurity and unbearable that makes one's life toxic, forcing them to take their own lives. These uncountable numbers of misfortunes make their life full of sorrow and terrorizing. Moreover, I believe that suicide and murdering are closely related where even in suicide a doer is always present, a doer who does the damage.

The movie begins with oppressed silence and faceless bodies. The characters appear to have silenced their utterances as if their words have died or were never alive. This film is full of blankness and stillness where there is no interaction taking place, neither through act nor through speech. Silence in the film was very long and quite frequent making the audience feel isolated and at a loss of words. This scarcity of language shows how defeated they felt by this world, it indicated emptiness and a complete lack of affect. Moreover, sometimes silence conveys more than what verbalization is capable of conveying, silence is the language of the dead in that sense the characters appear no different. It is as if they have run out of ideas, are puzzled, and are at an abyss of wordlessness. Besides, such silences not only emanate from a scarcity of words but perform a very important function that protects and shields the person. The primary function of silence is that of defense. By being silent the characters were putting and bringing in something out to the audience but at the same time were pulling something inside, making the viewer feel wordless and blank. Their silence was trying to convey a message, where they were trying to say to the world: "Please don't kill me; I am already dead" (Akhtar, 2013, p.30). Consequently, this silence can be interpreted as symbolizing death; the death of the self. Their silence appears to be a result of mental/emotional suicide that has already taken place.

The silence not only expressed the disconnection between characters but at the same time depicted how the three characters were attuned to each other's pain. There were moments where one sensed the suffering of the other without their intentional attempt to verbalize their pain. They were present in their absences and were absent in their presence, just like the 'dead mother', a mother who is dead and absent but at the same time is also someone who is always present. Salman Akhtar in his book *Psychoanalytic Listening* talks about "contemplative listening", a person in this state of silence turns their attention inward and tries to comprehend and digest new insights, to catalogue what they have just heard or seen. However, I was wondering what happens when there's too much hearing and seeing that it becomes hard to digest and make sense, as is seen in the movie. There was an over presence outside that it became impossible for the characters to digest and hence were silenced for life, they lost all their faith and meaning in words and life, therefore, lost their lives as well.

In addition to silence, silence as a defense, defense against life and a withdrawal from life there's also a masked existence that is present quite pertinently in the film. Masked self can be described as something where the individual distances themselves from others so that what is inner cannot be known. Distancing, silence, and withdrawal are a few characteristics of this self as described by Russell Meares in the book *The Metaphor of Play*. I am referring to the characters in the movie as masked characters because when I started watching the film it didn't appear to me that there is something 'unusual' with the characters, they appeared so normal and casual. They created a false self for self-protection, to protect themselves from

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the persecutory world so that reality does not kill them over and over again. As the end of the film approached, I sensed that there was a disconnection between the self and the world as well as between the self and the body, hence, the consequence is the death of the self and the body. The world around them has failed to understand them and their feelings. All three characters “adopted a mask of jolliness that hides their depression from others, and in this way perpetuates their sense of futility and worthlessness”<sup>[2]</sup> (Meares, 2005, p.157). For me, as an audience, it was difficult to have a sense of their genuine self; it appeared that it was hidden deep inside. From the outside, it appeared that everything was normal but, on the inside, there was a volcano erupting. I believe that in the process of being present to the world they lost themselves, or in a manner became absent to their desires and pleasures. Their construction of the false self appeared to be only the self that existed; their falsity became the reality for me. I was unable to have a sense of their true self throughout the film as if they have resurrected their genuine self deep inside their body.

In addition, this creation of false self or masked self and the silence can be seen as a defense against a reality where one creates a false self to make the reality bearable and less painful. This construction of falsity emerges as a response to the harsh reality, in some cases, it deadens the person whereas in some it makes them mad. In the movie, I think it was deadening that was happening more in comparison to the maddening, as it can be seen that all three of them do not get mad but instead kill themselves. However, defenses like the construction of a false self-system, withdrawal, displacement, sublimation, creation of a fantasy world are not always strong enough to protect an individual, sometimes the shield is not strong enough to protect us from the unbearable of the world, from the insane reality, hence, we end up taking our own life as the family ended up doing in the film. There are times when these defenses are unable to perform the protective functions which they are supposed to perform. Thus, people with such a deadening and overstimulating environment are left with only one defense against aliveness and that is death.

Moving forward to the object lessness, towards the under stimulating and overstimulating environment that was present in the movie. The first instance that I would like to bring into consideration is when Anna is writing a letter to her mother in law; she talks about her mother dying and other painful events that have occurred in her life recently. There are chances that this death of the mother would have been a triggering point for her, something that would have evoked certain emotions and feelings in her. Moreover, in the letter she also talks about her brother suffering from depression, this also hints at the parenting and the maternal environment that they were provided. Both Anna and her brother are disturbed in a sense which gives us a picture of the family dynamics and parenting. This disappearance of the mother or the maternal environment, in general, would have deprived them. The loss of the mother that has occurred is not only psychological but there is a loss that is happening in ‘real’. This loss outside was felt like a loss inside, a loss of one's aliveness and of being itself.

An individual is never an individual in a literal sense; the person is always a part of a larger social structure that builds them up where the maternal figure lies at the core of one's creation. And when this creator is lost there is nothing left in the creation. Furthermore, I would also like to add that, as seen in the film that it was a collective suicide. They all died or killed themselves because the object of desire was not left behind, the object of desire also died with them. Hence, this suicide was not only of the self but at the same time also of the objects of one's desire. It would have been comparatively difficult to die without the Other hence, all three killed themselves for the sake of themselves as well as of their objects.

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Moreover, if I think about Eva, the daughter, I think of George and Anna as the ones who deprived Eva of sustaining life. They became the objects, where their love was a not of poison. Nourishment in general can never be free of toxins, but their nourishment was full of toxicity. <sup>[3]</sup> They both were so deprived themselves that they filled their daughter with the same deprivation, with the same deadness and loss. Consequently, it can be assumed that all three characters were at a loss of a maternal figure and were experiencing a scarcity of affection and love. The figure that was supposed to nourish them was lost. The external reality that was supposed to flourish their lives was damaging them and was killing them. To depict it more clearly, I would like to quote Kristeva from her book *Black Sun*, she says,

“I love that object," is what that person seems to say about the lost object, "but even more so I hate it; because I love it, and in order not to lose it, I imbed it in myself; but because I hate it, that other within myself is a bad self, I am bad, I am non-existent, I shall kill myself.” The complaint against oneself would therefore be a complaint against another and putting oneself to death but a tragic disguise for massacring an other.

(1992, p.11)

Thus, this hatred for the Other that emanates from the self, from the destructiveness and the death instinct that is present within, and the aggressivity that is present outside is internalized which leads to hatred for the self, making oneself feel bad about themselves and hence results in death. I think that it is because of the internalisation of this overstimulating hatred and intolerable aggression present in the outside world that stimulates the three members to take their own life. In other words, it can likewise be said that they became violent with themselves in response to the violence present outside. The outside world overstimulated them, it became like an unbeatable enemy hence, ‘beating’ the self and killing the self became the chosen path. Their suicide appears to be driven by the abject circumstances, the reality did not come to them as nourishing instead damaged and poisoned them. They killed themselves to end the pain, to get out from the overstimulating mad and maddening world.

In conclusion, I would like to say that there was no freeness in life that they were living. The film was not just about suicide but about the murder in a sense by society, it shows how the world that is supposed to protect us turns against us. The three characters internalized the aggression where the self became the canvas to portray and paint this aggressivity. Moreover, I realized that it is not just the destructive self or instinct that destructs us, rather it is the paranoid world, impinging and painful reality that also becomes something that burdens and damages one's existence. The society that we are living in is very paradoxical, where it becomes the reason for our aliveness but at the same time becomes something that kills us.

### ***The Hours***

The Hours movie is a perfect example to study deadness which is the motive of this research. The way the demon of depression is tormenting the characters in the movie is something that I have never seen on the screen before with this perfection. This movie intertwines three women of different generations where each woman is suffocating from unnameable melancholia and mental illness. The movie is based upon the fascinating novel *The Hours* by Michael Cunningham. However, my focus here would be on the movie and not so much on the novel. The movie consists of themes that show a longing for happiness and the struggles that life entails. Each woman in the movie beneath the surface is in some kind of crisis. Each of them is haunted by the life they are living and the life they have lived. Each woman in the

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movie is trying to get out of something or the other, they want to escape from the life they are living. These three desperately unhappy people are in search of happiness and are constantly at war with survival, juggling between life and death.

In a nutshell, the movie is about three women who are searching for some meaning in their lives, searching for life itself. They all are living at different times but still connected by the meaninglessness and the suffering that life imposes on them. The movie begins with the suicide and a farewell note of Virginia Woolf in 1923 London, who is working on her first draft of a novel named Mrs. Dalloway. A novel, that becomes a crucial part of women of the next two generations. Virginia Woolf becomes a grandmotherly character in a sense. A grandmotherly figure who is battling with mental illness and have attempted suicide several times. All the three worlds of three generations seem to be running parallel to each other; they are not directly linked to each other but still share a deep connection. Therefore, the movie doesn't seem to be sequential but parallel. Another character is Laura Brown (1951, Los Angeles) who is a motherly character, a housewife, a struggler, struggling to survive and struggling to bake a cake for her husband. She is four months pregnant and the mother of Richard. She attempts to kill herself by abandoning the small boy but changes her mind later. However, this leaves an unending impact on the little boy who is tormented by this throughout his life. This tormented and melancholic boy later became a writer who is cared for by Clarissa Vaughan (2001, New York City). She works as an editor and is fond of the relationship that she shares with Richard and is terrified of losing him.

For me, this movie is a story of not just three characters that I have discussed in the previous section but Richard also plays a central role in the movie. I felt closely related to the characters because there are times where I feel closed off and alienated from the life that I am living, the life that I am forbidden to live and the life that I am forced to live. All the characters in a way are struggling to live a life that they were not allowed to live, searching for freedom from pain of existing. I hear them all saying 'I can't take it anymore'. Nonetheless, now I would like to move forward and would like to discuss the movie about the important themes that were visible in the movie.

In the movie, it is visible how it is difficult to articulate the pain one is going through, especially in the case of Laura and her son Richard. It gets difficult for a person living in such grief that they are not well equipped with the usage of language to express what they feel. But, it is through their body they are able to express their emotions, as in the movie it is seen how dead and exhausted their bodies are. Their bodies look like walking dead; they appear to be like alive corpses. The movie illustrates how their silence becomes a riposte to this traumatizing and forbidding world that did not permit them to form a language in the first place to disseminate their grief. People in the movie are living a life that cannot be communicated; only the person who is living that life can understand how daily sorrows put them down.

Silence is not only a response to the lives they have lived but at the same time brings to our attention something about this deadening world, here silence symbolises death; the death of one's whole existence. They are suffering from an irreversible illness. Kristeva puts it beautifully, she says, people who suffer such unnameable and noncommunicable grief are the people who do not believe in language, rather are prisoners of affect. Their mood and affect is their language, it is through the emotions they connect to their self, the Other and the world. All the characters in the movie have been silenced by their lost objects or are silenced because they have lost themselves as an object.

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The silence created by the object loss entices me to the next theme, the theme of objectlessness. In the movie people either were mourning for the necessary objects that they have lost or were unable to transition from an already formed object where this primary object continues to haunt them even in their absence. These objects of desire were very lively even in their absence. As discussed earlier, for a child maternal care is an essential component for biological development as well as for psychic nourishment and when this nourishing maternal care becomes poisoning and damaging the injury is on their whole life, their whole life is polluted by it. In the movie, Laura brought this poison to her son Richard, throughout his life he was plagued by the absence and the wound that her mother had created in him. All his life he represented the death of her mother and is always in a mourning state mourning for the loss of his object, of loss of her care and love. The failure of this essential object leaves behind a void, a wound that threatens the person who is left behind throughout their existence. I would like to quote Kristeva here to elucidate the wound that the death of the object creates, she says,

She is I? Consequently, the hatred I bear is not oriented toward the outside but is locked up within myself. There is no hatred, only an implosive mood that walls itself in and kills me secretly, very slowly, through permanent bitterness, bouts of sadness, or even lethal sleeping pills that take in smaller or greater quantities in the dark hope of meeting . . . no one, unless it be my imaginary wholeness, increased with my death that accomplishes me.

(1992, p.29)

Here she is saying that the person who is mourning has lost their desired object and the hatred that this loss evokes is not expressed in the outside world but that loss and the anger is internalized and walled off within the self. The person who experienced the loss has lost themselves in the process. They do not hate the object, they are not angry but are always in a state of loss, grieving and haunted by it. They died with the object and hence is living a dead life, living a life without life. In the movie especially Richard can be seen living a life that I have described above. The psychological death, as well as her physical absence, are both seen in Richard's case. He is constantly in search of an object to restore the vacuum that the loss of his mother created but is unable to do it because his dead mother is still alive inside. Moreover, he has other objects in his life but is unable to love them in the manner he loves his mother even in her absence, he is unable to grown and deepen the bonds with them. Laura Brown who herself was suffering from depression damaged him, she who was supposed to be a source of vitality for the child has brutally transformed his life.<sup>[4]</sup> All the characters in the movie are experiencing a moment of bereavement about something or the other, they all are wondering about the things that have suddenly detached from them or have been taken away. They have been cadaverized because without any signal their love has been taken away from them. Green writes,

After the child has attempted in vain to repair the mother who is absorbed by her bereavement, which has made him feel the measure of his impotence, after having experienced the loss of his mother's love and the threat of the loss of the mother herself, and after he has fought against anxiety by various active methods, amongst which agitation, insomnia and

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nocturnal terrors are indications, the ego will deploy a series of defences of a different kind.

(1996, p.150).

I would prefer not to explain it as it is self-explanatory but would like to add that one of the defenses against this loss is death, be it psychical or physical and we get to see both of these deaths in the movie. They die because there's nothing left to live other than ruins, unfathomable holes, and a wound that cannot be inoculated easily.

Besides, if I talk about Laura, she is the mother, the object who feels incapable of loving, a mother whose whole 'heart is not in the care', she is unable to take care of and love the child because she was not loved and cared for. Hence, Laura filled her son with the same deadness that she was experiencing in her life. She forbade her child to live a life that she was unable to live. Additionally, sharing was forbidden to her and so was for Richard, they both were arrested in their capacity to love. How can she love her child, how can she teach her child how to live if she herself never learned to live and to love? Furthermore, I was wondering what happens to the child when the dead mother attempts suicide and I found an answer in the movie; the child also desires to die just like the mother. Here I would like to quote Green again in reference to the dead mother like Laura Brown. A dead or absent mother like her creates a paradoxical state about her absence and presence for the child. She says,

If the mother is in mourning, dead, she is lost to the subject, but at least, however, afflicted she may be, she is there. Dead and present, but present nonetheless. The subject can take care of her, attempt to awaken her, to cure her. But in return, if cured, she awakens and is animate and lives, the subject loses her again, for she abandons him to go about her own affairs, and to become attached to other objects -with the result that the subject is caught between two losses: presence in death, or absence in life. Hence the extreme ambivalence concerning the desire to bring the dead mother back to life.

(1996, p.164)

Similarly, it is also evident that the characters in the movie are not unknown to fantasies, the subject has excluded themselves from the reality and has rather constituted the absent objects and the affection that they were supposed to provide in their fantasies, things which they are unable to achieve in real are now present in their imaginations. This constitution in response gives birth to fantasy which later is seen as a form of 'madness'. The solidarity with the objects that was unachievable in reality is hence achieved in their minds. The characters in the movie are often seen fantasizing about the life that they have lived and also about the life they yearn to live but due to unfortunate personal and interpersonal relations could not be achieved. Virginia Woolf wonders about her freedom, freedom from her madness and the pleasures that are forbidden from her, about her place of desire that is London. Laura Brown wonders about killing herself, she wonders about the un-lived life. I believe that it is only fantasies that are keeping her going. Her son, Richard, wonders about her mother, about her presence and the absence, about the love and care he didn't receive. At last, it is Clarissa, she wonders about the relationship she has with Richard, she is trying to keep the relationship with Richard alive through fantasies. The relation that she can not have in real life with him comes alive only in her imaginations. Green adds that the ego that has a hole in it either generates fantasies, which as a result creates artistic qualities or produces highly productive

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intellectualization. As seen in the movie they are in some way or the other are connected to creation and are fond of creation, they create stories and write books which in itself is a creative and artistic expression. Accordingly, the fantasy world not only acts as a defense but at the same time, becomes a space of recreation where the person lives the life that they haven't lived so far. Fantasy becomes a space to liberate oneself from love but at the same time, it becomes a space where one reclaims the lost love. In this sense, it becomes a space of appearance and disappearance. It is this liberating and reclaiming of love that is visible in the movie, though it is not present so outwardly but one can sense it. Furthermore, it is through the fantasy that the person maintains a connection with the dead mother, through this the person keeps alive the connection with the mother which in reality is dead; fantasy nourishes the dead mother. It is this aliveness of the mother in the fantasy world that can be seen in Richard's case. Relations are maintained in the psyche that one is incapable of achieving in reality. It is because of this all the characters appear to be so disconnected from the real world because they are living a separate life within them.

The movie also brings in the aspects of nourishment, parenting and how that impacts one's sense of aliveness. I have talked about this in bits and pieces in the previous section where I have discussed object relationships. However, in this part, I will talk a bit more about the toxicity in nourishment that leads to a poisoned life. Richard is the first instance that comes to my mind while I think about this particular theme. His mother is a poison for him but still, he tries to extract emotional nourishment from this poisoning object. He was contaminated by the toxins that he received from his nourishing figure. Hence, every pore of existence is that of poison. He is constantly trying to absorb the nourishment from the toxins that are available to him. He is living a life where his existence feeds upon him. He consumes, breathes, he absorbs poison because that is all that is available to him. His mother not only brought him love but limitless other things that haunted him throughout his life. One can have a sense of how emotional toxicity in the nourishment can impinge one's existence. Therefore, everything in a sense depends upon the kind of nourishment that child receives, toxicity fused with nourishment can have everlasting consequences, it influences the child's aliveness and can lead deadness. In Richard's case it was deadness that nourishment brought to him, he was fed poison that only death freed him. Likewise, it can be said that he received traumatizing nourishment that traumatized his entire life, that haunted him throughout until the end. In addition, Clarissa loved her so much but he was unable to accept and feel alive again. There was a huge void inside him that can not be filled; space always left empty for the love of the mother. On one hand, he was nourishing himself by the very things that poisoned him which was his mother, Laura. Whereas, on the other hand, things that were nourishing to him appeared to be poisoning as seen in his relationship with Clarissa. She tried to offer him the love that he never received but he couldn't take it. Hence, this in return filled Clarissa's life with similar poison that he was feeding upon. In other words, it can likewise be added that his wound injured the bond that he shared with Clarissa. They were damaged by the bonds that gave them life, disabled by the connection that would have helped them to grow.<sup>[5]</sup>

Similar is the case with Virginia Woolf, Leonard Woolf who is portrayed as the maternal figure, who is taking care of her and loves her. However, his love does not bring vitality to her life. His love is infectious as it is not allowing Virginia to live her life to the fullest. His love is forbidding her to explore what she desires, limiting her because of her madness. Accordingly, it can likewise be said that she is filled with poison by the objects that are supposed to nourish her. It doesn't matter how much love you give to a dead person, love cannot make them feel alive again. Therefore, our sense of aliveness can be damaged and likewise can be damaging. It can be like a poison to the people who are connected with us but

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at the same time can be poisonous to us, hence, it is this circular moment of damage that I saw in the movie, damaged objects were damaging people. In other words, there is formation as well as malformation at the same time, love that damages us is also the love that makes us stay alive even if it is for little moments. It is the overstimulation and under-stimulation or combination of it that damages the person. The damage it produces is so deep that the person is never able to enjoy life to its fullest. It is so intense that even when the damaging object is removed from life it continues to haunt the person.

Now I would like to move forward and would like to discuss briefly about the organization of the self. Characters in the movie are experiencing deadness, they want to kill themselves and want to free themselves from the life that they are living. However, this desire is hidden, but as an outsider to the whole scenario, I was able to see the falsity in them. They are trying their best to stay alive, to survive. They walked like a person who is dead, their hearts were full of emotions but their life were empty of meaning. Behind their aliveness lies deadness, this deadness is covered by a false self, a self that is not alive but still pretending to have a life. Their psyche has split itself, into a self that is visible to the outside world and a self they aren't aware of. A self that survives in their fantasies and a self that survives into the real, external world.

To conclude this I would like to say that all the characters in the movie that have been highlighted in the discussion so far are experiencing a split in their selves, in their psyche where on one side it is the fantasy world and on the other a world which is present outside. They have been damaged by the objects that were supposed to nourish them and as a result, they have become damaging to the people who are related to them. They were poisoned hence, became poisonous themselves. They feel lost in this world, the reality is experienced as damaging and without any joy. Besides, they are in a state where they are constantly moaning and searching for their objects but are unable to do so throughout their life. Their pain has silenced them, they are struggling to find a language, to communicate what they are feeling inside but are unsuccessful in doing so. Hence, they are living a life where they feel dead, a deadening life and a dead self.

### **AN ENDING**

This paper presented different viewpoints on deadness, suicidality, and breakdown evoked by the drama of life and interpersonal bonds. Our initial formulation was that the deadness as a way of living and as a state is evoked and provoked by the sudden loss of our primary caregivers which is essentially the mother. As portrayed in various narratives from the films, the damaged psyche and unformulated self seems impelled by violence in the external world, violence that is done to an underdeveloped psyche. Moreover, sudden loss of the primary object and abandonment threatens damages the subject and empties them out of their life. This absence opens up a chasm, a hole that is unfillable and irreversible. It evokes a timeless yearning for the unlived life or the life that the subject was not allowed to live, a life that has been missed out. At the same time the subjects yearn for freedom from the absence and want to re-establish a connection with the lost object, they search for freedom from the sorrows of life that burdens them on a daily basis. They want to get rid of the ancient pain, from the lifelessness and incompleteness, from the poisoning life that has been inflicted upon them. Stern writes, “After the infant’s attempt to invite and solicit the mother to come to life, to be there emotionally, to play, have failed, the infant, it appears, tries to be with her by way of identification and imitation” (1994, p.13). Thus, to keep their mothers alive in her absence the child interjects the absence itself and becomes absent from their life. The child does not lose her rather become her; absent and dead.



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The subject loses their individuality and separateness and becomes like the mother that they have internalized and buried alive. They live a life that does not belong to them but a life devoted to their dead mother. The essential character of the deadness that we have been talking about is that it takes place in the presence of the object. The object abandons the child because it itself is absorbed by bereavement. Hence, it is an absence that takes place in the presence; the object is still alive but dies psychically. It can likewise be formulated that though the mother is being separated because of her withdrawal and unavailability at the same time she also merges with the child. It is a paradox where the mother becomes absent from reality but finds a life within the psyche. Hence, the deepest secret of the dead mother is that she never dies. “In sum, we find less a dead object, than an object that is deadening” (Sekoff, 2005, p.123).

Yet we know from psychoanalysis that it is hardest to recover from the damages done in childhood. Violence done to the undeveloped psyche haunts the subject and consumes them inside out leaving no space for growth and recovery. However, it is also true that the mother's affective withdrawal from her infant is a relatively common occurrence and does not necessarily lead to the states that this research studies. But what matters the most and lies at the core of experiences of deadness is how violently the absence took place and at what age. Earlier disturbance in the mother-child relationship incapacitates the child to regulate the emotions and forces them to live a life where pleasure itself is missing and is forbidden. The pleasure of existing and of being alive is experienced as a pang of guilt, as a punishment because how can they continue living when their love is already dead. Thus, the dead mother becomes like a ghost that continues to destroy them throughout their life.

Furthermore, human life begins without separation where the child experiences the mother, not as a separate entity but as a part of the self, both mother and the child are bound together. However, as the child grows there comes a time where they start to have a self and a psyche of their own, they separate and individuate, they unbind themselves from the primary objects and transition onto new objects rebinding themselves with them. This process of binding-unbinding-rebinding (Brunet, 2018) is necessary for the healthy development of the child. However, people whose mother, which is essentially the primary caregiver, withdraws and abandons their child before unbinding and rebinding could take place creates holes in the psyche making life unlivable, intolerable, and painful. Now neither do the child have an emotionally and affectively available mother nor do they have any other object to sustain life. The mother neither does allow the child to separate from her and nor does she allow the child to transition onto the new objects.

In some instances, it also appeared that the mother or the maternal environment was unable to nourish and lacked the capacity to be present emotionally and affectively as a supporter. A supporter that was supposed to nourish and help the subject grow rather due to their own depression they became emotionally absent leaving the child with nothing but the absence and emptiness. Emotional unavailability of the mother to her child's life can be devastating and takes away with it their capacity to feel alive. As seen in the discussions we have had so far it can likewise be concluded that it is the absence of the maternal environment and overstimulating and understimulating environment that evokes a state of lifelessness and silences the subject. Absence ruins the psyche and seizes to hold the subject vitally. People who are deadened by these experiences maintain a corpse-like posture, are unable to find a language to verbalize and articulate the pain they are going through, speak minimally and monotonously as if the voice has died and dried up. Their physical body conveyed more about their inner world than what language was capable of communicating. The self-

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destructive and suicidal tendencies symbolises the pain that life brought to them. Additionally, we also reached an analysis where it was formulated that the subject lives their life in imagination that they are unable to live in reality. They fantasize about the life they would like to have but are unable to live because of the impinging and traumatising reality.

It was also analysed that the deadness and the process of fantasization act like a defense against the threatening and consuming reality. The psyche becomes numb and dead and is unable to experience the events as they take place, it is unable to feel for anything or anybody. However, it is also true that it is the experience of the dead mother which makes them hypersensitive to their inner life as well as the inner life of the others. In that sense, there are instances where the experiences of others are experienced as if they belong to their own self but it is also true that there are times when their own experiences become alien to them. Additionally, it was also observed that the deadness is not only limited to oneself but is extended to the bonds shared by the subject with other humans. They contaminate and infect the lives of the people just like they were poisoned and damaged by their mother.

Our initial conjecture was that the people who live their life like the walking dead have a false self-system. However, the analysis has revealed a somewhat different direction, though their true self is invisible it is also true that whatever is visible is not necessarily a false self. During the discussions and analysis, it was revealed that people who are deadened by their experiences have a deformed self, a self hidden from their own self. They were never able to build a self-system in the first place because the damage was done too early hence, they carry an unformulated self. Their self is not just hidden from the external world but to their own self; mute and lifeless looking self.

Likewise, it can be believed that there exists a relationship between the experience of the absent mother that takes place during the initial stages of life and the lifelessness, incompleteness, nothingness, meaninglessness, and deadness experienced during the later stages of life. In other words, there exists a relationship between lifelessness and the childhood experiences of absence.

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### ENDNOTES

- [1] Christopher Bollas while explaining internalization of the dead mother writes, “the illness he carried was from somewhere else, an ‘interject’ not an introject. An interject is an internal object that arrives in the internal world either due to a parental projective identification, interjected into the self, or to a trauma from the real that violates the self, or both. An introject always expresses an aspect of the self’s need or desire—a complex inner organisation reflecting the vicissitudes of the self’s status over time—while an interject is an interruption of the self’s idiom by the forceful entry of the ‘outside’. Differing types of hesitation, uncertainty, blankness, and stupor reflect the presence of an interject which as the work of the other (or real) bears no internal sign of unconscious meaning: it simply ‘sits’ inside the self, its ideational content bounded by seizures of thought or behaviour” (2005, p.95).
- [2] Meares brings this up while trying to understand and make sense of a case of a girl, he assumes that the girl “seems to be saying that those around her fail to understand her feelings and, indeed, do not wish to understand them”. I have changed the word *her* to *their* in order to be inclusive of all three characters that are present in the movie.
- [3] Eigen talks about nourishment and toxicity in great detail in his book ‘Toxic Nourishment’. This particular line is from the same book. He says “In life, nourishment can never be free of toxins. But there can come points when the latter increases to such an extent that suicide may seem the only option”.

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- [4] Andre Green discusses Dead Mother and the long-lasting impact that this absence can have on the baby in great detail in the chapter 'The Dead Mother' in the book *On Private Madness*.
- [5] Michael Eigen talks about this in greater detail in his book 'Damaged Bonds', some of my thoughts in this particular discussion are derived from the same work.

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The author declared no conflict of interest.

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