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Research article

Between Attachment and Abuse: Stockholm Syndrome in Kate Elizabith Russel's Novel *My Dark Vanessa*

Asst. Lect. Abeer Oday Ismael

Department of English, College of Arts, University of Tikrit, Tikrit, Country, Iraq

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***Correspondence author*:**

abeer.ismael122@tu.edu.iq

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ABSTRACT

Stockholm syndrome is a psychological phenomenon in which victims of abuse or hostages develop positive emotional attachments to their captors or abusers. This paper examines the phenomena's history, the victims' conditions, the factors that contribute to their development, and the dynamics used by the abusers. It covers sexual harassment, trauma bonding, attachment types, and survival strategies. A prime example that mirrors Russell's own experiences is Kate Elizabeth Russell's My Dark Vanessa (2020). The paper analyzes the complex relationship between Vanessa Wye, a teenage protagonist, and Jacob Strane, her manipulative English teacher. The work applies many concepts and theories, like child abuse, attachment, trauma bonding and sexual harassment, as well as the main theory, Stockholm Syndrome. The study includes perspectives of many theorists like Bowlby, Graham, Ochberg, Dutton and Herman in the textual analysis. The research proves that Russell's novel offers a heavy understanding of the psychological case adolescent victims endure.

ما بين التعلق والاستغلال: متلازمة ستوكهولم في رواية اليزابيث كيت روسيل فانيستي المظلمة

م.م. عبير عدي إسماعيل
قسم اللغة الإنكليزية، كلية الآداب، جامعة تكريت، العراق

المُستخلص

متلازمة ستوكهولم ظاهرة نفسية تنشأ فيها روابط عاطفية إيجابية بين ضحايا الاعتداء أو الرهائن وخاطفيهم أو معتديهم. تتناول هذه الورقة البحثية تاريخ هذه الظاهرة، وظروف الضحايا، والعوامل التي تُسهم في تطورها، والأساليب التي يستخدمها المعتدون. وتغطي التحرش الجنسي، والترابط الناتج عن الصدمة، وأنواع التعلق، واستراتيجيات البقاء. ومن الأمثلة البارزة التي تعكس تجارب راسل الشخصية رواية كيت إليزابيث راسل "فانيستي المظلمة" (٢٠٢٠). تحلل الورقة العلاقة المعقدة بين فانيسا واي، بطلة الرواية المراهقة، وجاكوب سترين، مدرس اللغة الإنجليزية المتلاعب. يطبق العمل العديد من المفاهيم والنظريات، مثل إساءة معاملة الأطفال، والتعلق، والترابط الناتج عن الصدمة، والتحرش الجنسي، بالإضافة إلى النظرية الرئيسية، متلازمة ستوكهولم. تتضمن الدراسة وجهات نظر العديد من المنظرين مثل بولبي، وغراهام، وأوشبيرغ، وداتون، وهيرمان في التحليل النصي. يثبت البحث أن رواية راسل تقدم فهمًا عميقًا للحالة النفسية التي يعاني منها الضحايا المراهقون.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التعلق، الاستغلال الاطفال، كيت اليزابيث روسيل فانيستي المظلمة، متلازمة ستوكهولم، الترابط الناتج عن الصدمة.

١,١ Introduction

Nils Bejerot, as a Swedish psychiatrist and criminologist, after the accident studied the behavior of individuals under extreme stress during a siege after consulting for the Swedish police. He coined the term "Norrmalmstorg syndrome" to describe the psychological bonding of hostages with their captors, which later became known as "Stockholm syndrome". Bejerot's analysis result suggested that this attachment refers to immature emotions, reflecting societal bereavement. Despite its shortcomings, his framework attracted the attention of numerous specialists looking for empathic explanations for the occurrence. The phrase "Stockholm factor" developed into "Stockholm syndrome". Bejerot noticed a paradox: captives and captors might form emotional relationships (Jones, 2020, 206).

Stockholm syndrome is characterised by the emotional attachment and role inversion that often arise in situations involving captor and hostage dynamics that occurs in short and limited time. The phrase was first coined when a bank heist occurred in Stockholm, Sweden, in 1973, during which four bank tellers were imprisoned for six days. The phrase was mostly used to define the occurrence of "mutual feelings of attachment" that emerged between captors and captives during the six-day ordeal (Ochberg, 2006, p. 145).

Adolescence is marked by substantial physical changes, particularly concerning sexuality and the initiation of romantic relationships. While these experiences can be exciting, they also pose risks and come

with legal implications, especially regarding adult relationships. "Falling in love" is a crucial adolescent event, involving sexual attraction and intimacy, paralleling John Bowlby's concept of close attachment. Adolescents need stability and security in order to explore their identities in the face of the challenges and dangers that mark this period of transformation (O'Shaughnessy et al., 2023, p.p. 84-85).

In *Secure Base Parent-Child Attachment and Healthy Human Development* (1988), John Bowlby describes attachment behaviour as a behaviour that promotes proximity to a more capable person who can help one navigate the world. His theory attempts to explain the long-lasting attachments that children and others form, as well as the changing nature of attachment behaviours. The concept of a behavioural system is central to this theory, describing the necessary conditions for healthy attachment, and the negative effects when these conditions are not met, which can lead to pathological or traumatic attachments by individuals meant to provide security (pp. 26-29).

Unhealthy attachments are based on fear that traps people in harmful relationships that hinder them from growing. Even when they know better, the fear of leaving can be overwhelming. These harmful relationships create trauma bonds, a term coined by psychologist, Patrick Carnes, in which victims rely on their abusers to meet their emotional needs, thus keeping the cycle of abuse going. This dynamic is seen in situations like marital violence and cults, and teenagers are especially at risk because of their developing identities and dependence on authority figures, which makes them vulnerable to exploitation (Lester, 2025, p.127).

A common problem among adolescents is the sexual harassment and exploitation of developing youth by adults. These teens and millions of their contemporaries are exploring the world, experiencing its wealth and pleasures, and also its dangers and obstacles. These young people may not have the wisdom, the emotional, intellectual, and experience resources to deal with difficulties such as sexual exploitation and harassment. They may not exercise sound judgment when faced with sexual approaches from their superiors, teachers, coaches, or mentors (Drobac, 2016, p.3). Harassment involves dominating people, either physically or psychologically, by annoying, threatening, demeaning, or unfairly exploiting their sexuality or gender stereotypes (Drobac, p.18).

Reports of sexual abuse by educators are increasingly reported in the media, supported by research indicating that most child sexual abuse occurs in institutions such as schools. However, data on this issue is scarce (Henschel & Grant, 2018).Charol Shakeshaft notes that educators spending more time with students, such as coaches, are more vulnerable to such allegations. Many school districts fail to report these incidents to law enforcement (Drobac, 2016, p19). The sexual abuse of adolescent girls by teachers is especially complicated and damaging, occurring within a relationship of authority and trust, and influencing the psychological responses of victims. Most perpetrators are male educators, especially classroom teachers or coaches, with female students being the predominant victims, usually in middle and high school. A key component of abusive relationships involves the victim’s emotional attachment to their abuser, often observed in adolescent girls sexually abused by educators. These victims may voice feelings of love or loyalty instead of fear, reflecting a phenomenon akin to Stockholm syndrome, where victims develop

positive emotions toward their abusers. Understanding this psychological dynamic is critical to understanding why victims have difficulty resisting or reporting abuse, as well as the enduring impact of such experiences (Shakeshaft, 2004).Trauma bonding is the profound emotional link that may form between a victim and their perpetrator. Instances characterized by recurrent patterns of manipulation and maltreatment might hinder survivors from leaving the abusive relationship and compel them to stay inside it (Kumar,2025,p.268).

During the #MeToo movement, when the women shared their experiences of sexual abuse, Kate Russell (1985) showed her solidarity through her narrative work *My Dark Vanessa* (2020). The novel tells the story of Vanessa Wye, an underage pupil whom her English literature teacher, Jacob Strane, sexually exploits. Kate writes the novel for her doctoral studies; it deals with subjects such as memory, victimization, and forbidden relationships, similar to Nabokov's work, *Lolita* (1997) (Owens, 2020). The narrative extends between (2000-2017), using a discrete time sequence to show the long-time impacts of trauma and the complexities of human psychology. Russell depends on her real experiences of abusive relationships. At the beginning, she kept her sources, but later on, she declared the origin as a reaction to the allegations that accused her of stealing it (Petersen, 2020).

This research sheds light on the complex experiences of adolescents and their inner psychological impacts through their survival-healing journey. Kate Elizabeth Russell's autofictional work *My Dark Vanessa* (2020) shows the failures of educational institutions in protecting minors. In addition to that, this fictional story serves as a resource for investigating and presenting subjective realities.

١.2 Statement of the Problem

Despite extensive scholarship on *My Dark Vanessa* (2020), a systematic psychological analysis of Vanessa Wye's emotional attachment to her abuser remains underexplored. This attachment, led to Stockholm Syndrome, complicates victimhood and impacts reporting, legal responses, and recovery trajectories. The study addresses the lack of a Stockholm Syndrome-focused perspective in existing literature and emphasizes how literary fiction can reveal psychological complexities often overlooked by empirical studies. By framing Russell's novel within theories of Stockholm syndrome, Trauma Bonding, Attachment theory, and Child Abused. The research aims to offer a deeper understanding of Vanessa's enduring attachment to Strane.

١.3 Questions of the Study

The narrative *My Dark Vanessa* (2020) serves as a literary case study for better understanding of Stockholm Syndrome in educational abuse settings. The selected narrative work's timeline structure exemplifies the enduring nature of traumatic bonds as well as the difficulties associated with Stockholm Syndrome recovery. The research questions several aspects such as :

Q1: How is Vanessa Wye portrayed as a real-life victim of Stockholm syndrome؟

Q2: How is Trauma Bounding reflected in the novel?

Q3: How is unhealthy attachment led to sexual harassment and child abuse?

١.4 Aims and Objectives

Adolescent vulnerabilities, such as insecurity, attachment disorders, poor supervision by educational institutions, social isolation, and a strong need for affirmation, enable abusers to exploit adolescent. Abusers utilize techniques such as love bombing, intermittent reinforcement, cognitive distortion, and seclusion to establish painful attachments. The study sheds light on the link between victims' vulnerabilities and Stockholm Syndrome, which manifests in behavioural symptoms such as defending the abuser, denying victimhood, and self-blame. This paper aims to:

- To present a timeline of adolescent sexual abuse and grooming that leads to disordered attachment and trauma bonding caused by Stockholm syndrome.
- To provide protection for adolescents to avoid harassment or sexual exploitation in educational institutions and ensure their rights.
- To investigate the attachment patterns that contribute to the exploitation of adolescents.
- To highlight the psychological interaction of the heroine of the narrative (Vanessa Wye) in Kate Elizabeth Russell's novel *My Dark Vanessa* (2020) and the development of her character in her romantic experience with her teacher, Jacob Strane, as a distinct model of Stockholm syndrome.

١,٥ Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, multidisciplinary methodology that combines textual analysis of Kate Elizabeth Russell's autofictional book *My Dark Vanessa* (2020) with psychoanalytical literary criticism. It analyzes significant episodes in the novel to explore psychological processes, including grooming, cognitive dissonance, and protective behaviours toward the abuser, using frameworks like Stockholm Syndrome, attachment theory, and trauma bonding. The research treats the novel's dual-timeline structure as a reflection of the effects of trauma on memory and identity, highlighting how these psychological processes are correctly portrayed in the work. By capturing elements of abuse experiences that clinical data frequently ignores, the methodology presents literary fiction as a useful source of psychological evidence.

١,٦ Significant of the Study

A systematic psychoanalytical analysis of Vanessa Wye's emotional attachment to her abuser remains underexplored, despite the extensive scholarship on *My Dark Vanessa* (2020). This attachment, which is similar to Stockholm Syndrome, complicates victimhood and affects reporting, legal responses, and recovery trajectories. The study emphasizes the potential of literary fiction to uncover psychological complexities that are frequently disregarded by empirical studies and addresses the absence of a Stockholm Syndrome-focused perspective in the existing literature. The research endeavours to provide a more profound understanding of Vanessa's enduring attachment to Strane by situating Russell's novel within the theories of Stockholm syndrome, attachment, trauma bounding and sexual abused.

١.7 Literature Review

My Dark Vanessa (2020) explores the complex psychological relationship between fifteen-year-old Vanessa Wye and her charismatic yet manipulative English teacher Jacob Strane. Kate Elizabeth Russell’s debut novel deals with issues of consent and the devastating effects of abuse, providing a modern take on

classic narratives such as Lolita. The novel captures the intense emotions of adolescence and the darker aspects of predatory relationships, making it a subject of critical analysis from a variety of scholarly angles:

In *A Psychological Trauma Caused by Sexual Abused of Vanessa's Experience as the main Character in the Novel My Dark Vanessa by Kate Elizabeth Russell* (2021) Olivia Purba ,explained the psychological trauma which caused by the sexual abuse of Vanessa, as well as its relation to other intrinsic elements. Farimatul Furada also anatomized this novel in her thesis *The Portrayal of Sexual Abused in Kate Elizabeth's my Dark Vanessa: A Radical Feminist Perspective* (2021). In her examination of the novel, the investigator analyzes various forms of sexual assault experienced by Vanessa and other victims. Utilizing feminist literary criticism, she draws upon the theories of Kate Millet and Kathrin Patricelli to explore the confrontations with sexual exploitation depicted in the narrative.

In *Trauma and Intertextuality in Kate Elizabeth Russell's My Dark Vanessa and Vladimir Nabokov's Lolita an arlical by Mila Bikić* (2022), she analyzed the intertextual connections between the two novels, focusing on their views on trauma and sexual abuse. The examination of narrative strategies reveals that while both works address similar themes, they significantly differ in their portrayal of trauma, with My Dark Vanessa presenting a psychiatric perspective.

Also Kate Bodnar in her article named *Aspects of Analyzing Trauma Fiction by Observing Lolita's Impact on the 21st Century Novel, My Dark Vanessa*. (2023) examined how trauma influences the narrator's memories, resulting in a fractured and unintentionally unreliable narrative. While Azkannadiyah Elsyarevah, in her Thesis *The Main Character's Unresolved Identity Crisis and Impact on Intimacy in My Dark Vanessa* (2025), tackled the unresolved identity crisis of the main character and its implications for forming intimate relationships. It highlighted how adolescent identity struggles lead to difficulties in emotional closeness during adulthood, framed through Erik Erikson's psychosocial theory, particularly the stages of identity vs. role confusion and intimacy vs. isolation.

Zyeda Marium Zara in her essay *Memory and Reality: Trauma Exploration of My Dark Vanessa by Kate Elizabeth Russell* (2025), analyzed Kate Elizabeth Russell's novel, *My Dark Vanessa*, using Alan McKee's textual analysis method to explore how sexual trauma affects memory and reality. It focuses on Vanessa's relationship with her English teacher, Jacob Strane, and employs Cathy Caruth's theories on trauma to argue that victims of sexual assault frequently reconstruct their memories and alter their perceptions of reality.

Ambivalence, Genre, and Narrative Activism: Learning from the Backlash to Kate Elizabeth Russell's My Dark Vanessa is another study by Catherine Brist (2025). This article considered the limitations of narrative activism in the context of digital movements like (MeToo), using the critical reception of Kate Elizabeth Russell's My Dark Vanessa as a case study. This paper argued that Vanessa's representations of ambivalence illustrate the importance of approaching survivor narratives with expansive reading practices.

The present study builds upon and extends this body of scholarship by bringing Stockholm Syndrome to the center of the analysis, offering a theoretically grounded account of the mechanisms through which

Strane's abuse produces Vanessa's attachment, and reading this dynamic against the backdrop of Stockholm syndrome ,Trauma theory, Attachment Theory.

١,٨ Adolescents' love and Stockholm Syndrome:

Attachment in first love among adolescent females can sometimes evolve into a harmful bond, known as Stockholm syndrome, particularly when exploitation occurs. The case of Vanessa Way, a 15-year-old girl who moves to Browick High School and lives in a boarding school, illustrates this phenomenon. Following five months of separation from her best friend, Jenny, Vanessa faces challenges in her social life, prompting her mother to encourage her to build new friendships. Vanessa's attachment insecurity from her parents correlates with loneliness among her peers and at school during her adolescence Nelson (2025). Indicates that attachment anxiety exacerbates responses to perceived slights when parents fail to address the needs of adolescents, which in turn contributes to feelings of loneliness (p. 8). Vanessa faces difficulties with her mother's interference in her relationships with her peers, as she disapproves of her sole relationship with Jenny "Focusing on a single person isn't the healthiest, that's all I'm saying" (Nelson, p.11). The atmosphere of the school is the primary source of loneliness. This concept includes loneliness that is not solely caused by the absence of positive friendships but also by the presence of negative friendships, which result in feelings of exclusion. Peers and friendships are crucial in the explanation of loneliness in adolescents (Nelson. p.75). Vanessa suffers from loneliness and isolation both at home and at school, and this caught the attention of her American literature teacher.

During Mr. Strane's first class he interacts with his pupils by asking questions and is particularly interested in Vanessa's naive responses. To win her affection, he shows empathy for her separation from her friend Jenny "So you suffered a betrayal," (Russell, 2020 P.22), encouraging her poetic aspirations "I'd like to read some of your work." and compliments her appearance "That's a nice dress," … "I like your style." (P.23). Vanessa is portrayed as socially isolated and immature, struggling to make friends due to her early school experiences, this enables Strane to exploit her. Pandey and Pattanaik (2025) state that grooming, in psychological terms, is a method of gradual manipulation wherein one person systematically acquires another's confidence, reduces their resistance, and achieves control. There are usually observable steps to grooming, including choosing a target, obtaining access, trusting, forming dependence, desensitizing boundaries, and finally, controlling (p.122). Strane uses grooming and manipulating to control Vanessa while she joins to improve her poetry-writing skills. He suggests to her several books to read by Sylvia Plath, Emily Dickinson, and Edna St Vincent Millay. Each time he presents her a book, he asks for her honest opinion and provides her his own, "That reminded me of you" (Russel, 2020, p. 32) and "Just like you" (Russell, 2020, p. 33), despite the difficulty of the ideas and content. Nevertheless, she tries to read them. At first, Vanessa does not understand his book recommendations, but later she understands that this is his way of leading her to self-discovery. She asks herself if his behaviour is a flirt because sometimes he approaches her, touches her hair or her hands and gives her a strange look. She notices that he is watching her. Charm is the first step in academic grooming, which is calculated kindness, flattery and

idealization. The manipulator presents himself as extremely compassionate or supportive. This stage is comparable to what psychologists refer to as “love bombing,” which is a deluge of praise and attention aimed at lowering psychological defenses. Charm in the classroom may manifest as excessive compliments on a student’s intelligence or abilities; offering mentorship or involvement in exclusive research projects; providing personalized attention under the guise of “academic concern”; and fostering a feeling of belonging by saying things like, “You are not like the others” (Pandey & Pattanaik, 2025, p.123). Vanessa feels uncomfortable with Mr. Strane’s repeated touches on her leg, but she craves his attention because of her developed dependency on him. Her silence prompts him to use intermittent reinforcement, to try to shift his attention from her to quietly encourage her to approach him. Strane’s presence boosts Vanessa’s self-confidence; she mainly spends time with him and lacks any other social support or encouragement. His neglect diminishes her, despite her lack of love or sexual attraction towards him; yet, his absence disturbs her. Kappor (2026) illustrates that intermittent reinforcement is a behavioural strategy that fluctuates between abuse and kindness, resulting in a psychologically potent kind of gaslighting. This process cultivates trauma bonding, as victims sustain emotional connections and experience confusion. Based on operant training, intermittent reinforcement demonstrates that irregular incentives maintain behaviour more effectively than consistent rewards or penalties. As a result, victims discover it difficult to exit the relationship, since intermittent displays of love or apologies intensify their dependence and anxiety, triggering their sensitivity to cycles of danger and reprieve (p.22).

As a member and supervisor of the Creative Writing Club, Mr. Strane uses grooming and manipulating to control Vanessa while she joins to improve her poetry-writing skills. He suggests she read several books by Sylvia Plath, Emily Dickinson, and Edna St Vincent Millay. Each time he presents her a book, he asks for her honest opinion and provides her his own, "That reminded me of you" (Russel, 2020, p. 32) and “Just like you" (Russell, 2020, p. 33), despite the difficulty of the ideas and content. Nevertheless, she exerts herself to read them. At first, Vanessa does not get his book recommendations, but she eventually comes to see them as his way of guiding her toward self-discovery. She wonders if she should interpret his behaviour as flirting since he sometimes approaches her, touches her hair or hands, and gives her an unusual look. She notices that he is observing her .

Despite Vanessa's discomfort with Mr. Strane's repeated touches on her leg, she yearns for his attention due to her cultivated dependence on him. Her silence prompts him to use intermittent reinforcement, attempting to divert his attention from her to motivate her quietly to approach him. Internal discipline controls awareness rather than emotional repression. According to Goleman (1998), self-regulation is the capacity to control disruptive emotions and impulses, which Vanessa was continuously unable to do under stressful circumstances (AbdulSahib, 2025, p.1450). Strane's presence enhances Vanessa's self-confidence; she mostly associates with him and lacks further social support or encouragement. His neglect diminishes her, despite her lack of love or sexual attraction towards him; yet, his absence disturbs her. Kappor (2026) illustrates that intermittent reinforcement is a behavioural strategy that fluctuates between abuse and kindness, resulting in a psychologically potent kind of gaslighting. This

process cultivates trauma bonding, as victims sustain emotional connections and experience confusion. Based on operant training, intermittent reinforcement demonstrates that irregular incentives maintain behaviour more effectively than consistent rewards or penalties. As a result, victims discover it difficult to exit the relationship, since intermittent displays of love or apologies intensify their dependence and anxiety, triggering their sensitivity to cycles of danger and reprieve (p.22).

Ochberg and Soski in their book *Victims of Terrorism* conclude that victims of the Stockholm Syndrome often report that pleasant interactions with the subject are the most common symptom. Rather than being determined by particular, positive actions performed by the perpetrators, the absence of negative events like beatings, rapes, or physical abuse discourages positive interaction. The few wounded captives who have shown symptoms of the syndrome have managed to justify their mistreatment. The second common experience shared by victims of Stockholm Syndrome is that they rationalize the abductor's use of force as a necessary measure to control the situation. They notice the human element in their captors and begin to identify with it (1982, p.157). The same thing with Strane and Vanessa, they frequently meet in his office, with most students observing their relationship but choosing to ignore it. Vanessa secretly receives a copy of Fiona Apple's novel Lolita from Strane, who advises her to keep it hidden. “Let me know what you think of it… and if anyone catches you with it, you didn’t get it from me.” (Russell, 2020, p.62). Vanessa gets excited about keeping a secret and in the attempt to attract Strane’s attention with her appearance. With admiration for him, she wants to make him comfortable. Their secret meetings become more frequent, allowing for physical intimacy, with Vanessa consenting to his advances in the hope of building trust while being careful not to show any signs of discomfort. “I know I can’t show even a hint of distress. If I do, he might decide I can’t handle any more kisses. ” (p.71). The results concerning romantic relationships are in line with the Societal Stockholm Syndrome hypothesis, which states that women are conditioned to keep their emotions open for other men and that males are conditioned to start love. While men place a premium on physical beauty, women are encouraged to think that love has the power to convert unattractive spouses into perfect ones. When it comes to love and infatuation, young women often feel it more intensely. Additionally, women may mistake men's aggressive behaviour for devotion, and the research shows that as love becomes stronger, power in partnerships weakens. Women who endure more violence in dating relationships often remain longer and report greater love. Additionally, women are typically held accountable for maintaining the emotional health of the relationship (Graham, 1994, p.141). This dynamic signifies that Vanessa is under Strane's control, as she complies with his requests out of concern for his feelings and takes the responsibility of their relationship. After Christmas break, Vanessa concludes that Strane wants her to comprehend that the novel's plot largely reflects her relationship with him. Vanessa accepts Strane's invitation to spend the night at his house. She is insistent about attending, despite her fear. Strane informs her that she is responsible for the entire situation. “You’re in charge here, Vanessa. You decide what we do” (Russel, 2020, p.77). Unwelcome behaviour is defined as conduct that was neither requested or invited by the student and was deemed unwanted or insulting. The age of the student, the nature of the activity, and other pertinent circumstances all influence whether a pupil was

capable of accepting sexual conduct. A student's consent to the behaviour or reluctance to complain does not necessarily imply that the activity was acceptable. Arguably, society prohibits sex with minors because they lack the legal capacity to consent (Drobac, 2016, p.19).

Vanessa expresses her fear of becoming pregnant when Strane asks her if she minds having sex with him, but he reassures her that she will not get pregnant because he had a vasectomy. She stifles her fear and disgust and wants to return home because she thinks it would be selfish of her to refuse. He pushes himself on her while she cries; assuring her that she must endure it because it will pass. Even if she believes he is pressuring her, Vanessa makes it a point to be resilient by always claiming she is all right. The victim of Stockholm syndrome exhibits intense gratitude for minor kindnesses from the abuser, often perceiving them in ways that may go unrecognized by observers. She tends to deny, minimize, or rationalize the abuser's violent behavior, suppressing her own anger towards the abuse. These cognitive distortions enable her to form a bond with the abuser, leading to a distorted perception of both him and the abusive situations. Furthermore, the victim struggles to discern reality, exhibiting hyperactive vigilance to the abuser's needs while neglecting her own. To maintain harmony, she attempts to anticipate what may soothe or provoke the abuser, causing a disconnection from her feelings and needs (Jackson, 2007, p.691). Strane is clearly a pedophile, as depicted in various chapters of the novel, as well as a narcissist. According to Shahida, a psychology expert and researcher who specialized in narcissism and psychopathy, the six stages of trauma bonding experienced by survivors of a narcissistic person are idealization or love bombing that produces dependency, cognitive dissonance followed by psychological manipulation, intermittent reinforcement, devaluation or hypercriticism, identity erosion and dangerous adaptation, which produces learned helplessness. Strane uses all of the previously mentioned dynamics; this justifies Vanessa's erosion of identity and her feelings of jealousy and anger against Strane when she finds Mrs. Thompson's texting to him and her warning about Vanessa (Shahida, 2023).

Vanessa and Strane's relationship persists amid growing rumors, first noticed by Jenny. During a confrontation, Jenny encourages Vanessa to report Strane to the Browick administration after witnessing inappropriate behavior, but Vanessa angrily denies it, reflecting signs of Stockholm Syndrome in her reaction “Why would I want to get him fired?” (Russell, 2020, p.137). A group of students, led by Jenny, compiles a list alleging an illicit relationship between Strane and Vanessa. Jenny's father sends the list to the headmaster. Mrs. Giles attempts to investigate, summoning Vanessa, but she denies the allegations. However, Strane asks Vanessa to deny it and stand by her position. “I already told Mrs. Giles none of this is true, but it’s more important that you deny it “Are you going to be able to do that?” “We’ll get through this”(Russell, 2020, p.140). According to Carver as a clinical psychologist, Stockholm Syndrome creates a dysfunctional bond between victims and their abusers, leading them to support their abusers even after the relationship has ended. Victims may perceive the abuser's positive traits despite previous mental and physical abuse. This phenomenon relates to "cognitive dissonance", where individuals alter their beliefs to alleviate discomfort from conflicting thoughts. When faced with opposing cognitions, people often deny the unpleasant reality of their situation, opting instead to modify their beliefs or attitudes to restore

harmony among their thoughts (2014, p.vi). Ms. Giles confronts Vanessa, who refutes all accusations and shields Strane from any claims that would result in his termination. Vanessa attributes the responsibility to herself, asserting that the rumours are based on her fantasies and Strane is innocent. "I lied, it was all lies. Mr. Strane, none of it was true" (Russell.2020, p.145). According to Frank Ochberg (2006), experts in the field of kidnapping and hostage-taking acknowledge a phenomenon in which captors and hostages can form emotional connections that transcend mere survival instincts. Anna Freud alluded to a comparable connection as "identification with the aggressor" In her work *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defence*. Nevertheless, it was evident from interviews with hostages that this attachment, which is the result of the captors' subtle acts of compassion, elicits a profound, primordial gratitude that is comparable to an infant's need for fundamental survival. This emotional connection can result in attachment from both parties, which can present challenges for rescue efforts. This is because both the captor and the hostage may harbour mistrust of external authorities. The Stockholm syndrome is defined by three conditions: positive emotions emanating from the captive to the captor, reciprocated emotions, and shared negative emotions toward the authorities responsible for managing the crisis. Ochberg emphasizes that their work defined the underlying concept, despite the fact that the term "Stockholm syndrome" became widely known (p.145). Ms. Giles arranges a meeting with Vanessa's parents and Mr. Strane, leading to Vanessa's forced exit from school and a requirement to apologize to her classmates. Subsequently, Vanessa visits Strane's home to gauge his stance, feeling neglected by his lack of support. Her attempt to provoke him reveals his cold welcome, while he tries to appeal to her through compassion "If you've decided you want to ruin me I can't stop you. But I hope you understand what will happen if you do (Russell.2020, p.150) The abuser frequently resorts to manipulation to achieve his desires, often aiming to upset or confuse his partner. Signs of manipulation include abrupt mood changes that leave the partner feeling off balance, denial of obvious behavior, and blaming the partner for difficulties. This manipulation can be as damaging as overt abuse, especially when both occur simultaneously. Many abusive men maintain a charming public persona while treating women and children poorly in private, often holding their partner responsible for anything that goes wrong (Bancroft,2003,pp.66-71). Strane uses intimidation tactics with Vanessa when he feels she is trying to threaten him. He calmly convinces her that if she decides to reveal their affair, she will lose her reputation, her pictures will be in every newspaper, and the scandal will haunt her for the rest of her life. Graham et al. (1994) explain in *Loving to Survive* that in situations of abuse, victims often deny their feelings of danger, terror, and rage, turning instead to their environments and internal motivations for explanations of their behavior. They may view their compliance and hyper-vigilance to the abuser's needs as evidence of strong positive feelings, leading to a distorted bond that intensifies with the degree of physiological arousal they experience. Victims who perceive their efforts to please the abuser as significant may find it extremely challenging to leave when provided the opportunity, as they have repressed their anger and the violent nature of the abuser. Instead, they experience intense "push-pull" dynamics: an attraction to the abuser fuelled by survival instincts, which creates a false sense of hope and mutual bonding, and an aversion driven by the threat the abuser poses to their survival (p.39). Vanessa and Strane strategize for the

meeting, where Vanessa will apologize to the students and school administration regarding the rumors. Strane reassures her that they have not done anything wrong but admits that the apology is necessary to protect him and clear his name. He supports her emotionally to help her face the situation. “I’m not going to tell … I don’t want to. I never will” (Russell, 2020p.151). Hostages and battered women often adopt the viewpoints of their abusers due to power imbalances and isolation from supportive perspectives. Repeated reinforcement from their captors instills a fear of authority intervention, which both groups perceive as potentially harmful. Battered women may resent the involvement of family and police, believing it could provoke further violence, while hostages worry that police actions could lead to fatal confrontations, ultimately feeling that their captors have better intentions than law enforcement (Yllo & Bograd,1988,p.225). The next day, Vanessa's mother packs her belongings and finds pictures of her with Strane. She becomes furious, confirming that she was certain of their affair. Vanessa keeps denying everything in spite of her mother's rage and demands for a confession. “Why are you protecting him? He hurt you,” (Russell.2020, p.154). The interplay of "Stockholm Syndrome" and "cognitive dissonance" results in victims believing their abusive relationship is essential for survival, often leading to mental collapse if it ends. Their investment in the relationship influences their self-esteem and emotional health, causing them to perceive family and friends as threats. As these loved ones protest the relationship's abusive nature, the victim defensively clings to their partner. Both psychological phenomena arise involuntarily as coping mechanisms in a hostile environment. Ultimately, the victim's adaptation reflects a struggle for survival (Carver.2014.p.viii).

Vanessa transfers to a public school to seek independence while feeling estranged from her parents. She builds new friendships and engages with older men but cannot move past her feelings for Strane. After impulsively driving to his house, they have a confrontation where she accuses him of abandoning her. Following their argument, they drink beer and become sexually involved, leading Vanessa to grapple with conflicting emotions about the encounter and its implications “Is he raping me?” (Russell.2020, p.213). Judith Herman, in her book *Trauma and Recovery*, demonstrates the emotional side of abused women. The emotional dynamics of a woman involved with an abuser often begin with the misinterpretation of possessive attention as passionate love. Initially flattered, she may eventually excuse the abuser's domineering behavior due to fear and care for him. To resist emotional dependence, she must develop an independent perspective, countering the abuser's belief system, while avoiding empathy and suppressing affection. Despite the batterer's manipulative promises that sacrifices will end the violence, many women feel compelled to return to their abuser due to the emotional ties linked to their self-esteem and values surrounding relationships (pp. 82-83).

Graham (1994) mentions that studies on Stockholm Syndrome indicate three consistent factors: chronic interpersonal trauma, lack of a sense of self leading to confusion, and dependency on the abuser's love for survival. Victims high on one factor typically score high on all three, indicating that chronic trauma leads to confusion and a loss of identity, coupled with physiological arousal. If victims display compliance and hypervigilance, any kindness from the abuser may be misinterpreted as love, reinforcing their belief that

their survival depends on the abuser's affection (p.138). Vanessa's relationship with Strane is characterized by her attempts to justify his actions as expressions of love, despite the reality that Strane's motivations are largely driven by his sexual attraction to young girls, including Vanessa. Their dynamic exemplifies the deep conflicts between her perception of love and his pedophilic. “But he is careful and he is good and he loves me and I want this. I still feel torn in two when he pushes inside, will probably always feel this way, but I want it. I have to” (Russell.2020, p.214). Cognitive distortions play a crucial role, as victims convince themselves they must assist the abuser, view the abuser as a victim, believe their love could change the abuser, and seek to protect him despite the threat he poses. These misinterpretations provide victims with a perceived sense of control in an otherwise life-threatening circumstance, while the actual feelings of terror and anger remain suppressed due to fears for their survival (Graham, 2006, p.40). Vanessa is attempting to deny any abuse from Strane, as her distorted perceptions prevent her from recognizing his abusive behavior as anything other than love.

After enrolling at university, Vanessa meets Professor Henry and feels a strong attraction to him, comparing him to Strane, her former teacher who raped her in school. During their meetings, she confides in Henry, and he confronts Strane after discovering the truth. Vanessa completes her university education and takes a job as a hotel receptionist, after a disagreement with Henry, who claims Strane harassed her. She later learns from Taylor's Facebook post that Strane has multiple accusations against him. Strane reaches out to Vanessa, asking for her support against the rumors. Despite her difficult relationship with him, which reflects her pattern of attraction to older men, Vanessa struggles with admitting the abusive nature of their past. She continues to be influenced by Strane even after his suicide, insisting on his innocence and rejecting allegations against him, which reveals her internal conflict. Vanessa also seeks therapy from Ruby during this time. “I just really need it to be a love story (Russell, 2020, p.269). Symonds outlines four stages of victimization leading to Stockholm Syndrome in victims of violent crimes. The first stage is disbelief and denial. The second involves the emergence of psychological mechanisms, including traumatic psychological infantilism and pathological transference. The third stage features traumatic depression and posttraumatic stress disorders after release. Finally, the trauma is resolved and integrated into the victim's future. Victims often experience a state called "frozen fright", characterized by dissociation while focusing energy on survival and superficial compliance, leading to an altered perception of the abuser as a "good guy", despite the life-threatening context (Yllo & Bograd, p.222). The novel ends with a scene on a beach where Vanessa walks as an independent person for the first time, free from her emotional attachment to Strane. Vanessa's identity had always been bound to him, even after she matured and broke away from him, but his death declared her freedom forever .

Conclusion

This present research demonstrates the development of Stockholm syndrome in the literary context, providing a psychologically precise analysis of the sexual abuse of the adolescents by the educators. Through a systematic analysis of the abuser's grooming strategies and their effects on the victim's psychological development. The research has shown the conditions identified in Stockholm Syndrome. The

dynamics that the perpetrator used, including threats and experienced kindness within a context of power imbalance, progressive isolation, and intermittent reinforcement, are not only present in the novel but are also rendered in many literary works. The study argues that literary autofiction, offers a unique window into the psychological realities of abuse survivors that clinical methods cannot access. *My Dark Vanessa* is a vital resource for literary scholars, clinicians, educators, and policymakers concerned with institutional sexual abuse. Vanessa's complex attachment to her abuser, Strane, is presented not as an irrational response but as a predictable psychological fallout from prolonged manipulation of a vulnerable adolescent. Her history of insecure attachment, social isolation, and a profound desire for validation made her a perfect target for this kind of abuse. Vanessa's denial of victimhood, her defense of Strane against consequences, her hostility toward those who try to help her, her self-blame, and her insistence that her relationship with Strane was one of love are all consistent with established symptoms of Stockholm Syndrome and traumatic bonding. The novel carefully details these psychological mechanisms, illustrating them with a clarity that underscores rather than romanticizes the realities of abuse. Ultimately, Vanessa's story challenges societal definitions of victimhood, suggesting that some survivors' most significant injury is not in the harm they suffered, but in the distortion of love they were made to accept.

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