

# Postmortem Voice and Gendered Violence in *The Lovely Bones*

by Alice Sebold

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## Abstract

This paper analyses gendered violence through posthumous narratives. Alice Sebold's "The Lovely Bones" is the story of a young girl who was raped and murdered by her neighbour. The afterlife narratives uncover and break the silence of sexual violence and exposes societal complexities. It examines how afterlife gives the space to voice out her story and reflect her emotions and unresolved trauma. It also sheds light on how society fails to address sexual violence against women and lack of justice. She gets the freedom to narrate her story without any limitations of social customs, while she is in her own heaven. It breaks the taboo of discussing gendered violence. This paper also addresses the impact of sexual violence and its effect on families and communities. This narrative not only breaks silence about gendered violence but also stresses the need for awareness and change in society.

**Keywords:** Gendered violence, social injustice, trauma, afterlife narrative, awareness

*The Lovely Bones*, a novel written by American writer Alice Sebold, is based on a tragic real-life incident that happened around the 1970s. On December 6, 1973, 14-year-old Susie Salmon, the protagonist of the novel, is raped and killed. Susie, the eldest in her family, is portrayed as a kind and gentle girl. George Harvey, her neighbour, rapes her while she is walking across the cornfield on her

way home from school. By identifying the true killer and bringing justice to the death of the young girl, Susie, the author turns the horrible event into something optimistic and redeeming. This research highlights how *The Lovely Bones* exposes the inaction of sexual abuse through her afterlife narrative, the shortcomings of the legal system, and the tenacity of survivors and their families by analysing and examining the novel's themes, characters, and narrative style.

This study examines how the author uses Susie's murder as a narrative tool to break the silence about gendered violence happening around the world. It explores themes of gendered violence and trauma. The author wants to share the voice of the young girl by giving life after her death, through her work. She creates a personal haven for Susie, which shows her creativity. This novel is narrated from Susie's point of view, from beyond the grave.

The postmortem narrative also known as afterlife narrative is present throughout the novel because everything that happens appears absurd and impossible in actual life. Many critics view this approach as a useful and powerful tool for addressing major issues in the real world, yet some other critics and authors believe that it provides an escape from reality and a sense of relief. The novel begins by describing Susie's experience when she enters heaven for the first time. The idea of an individual having a personal heaven is unheard of, making it seem supernatural and impossible. "When I first entered heaven I thought everyone saw what I saw. That in everyone's heaven there were soccer goalposts in the distance and lumbering women throwing shot put and javelin." (Sebold 16) This line serves as evidence that the heaven described here differs from the idea of heaven people have in mind.

Susie's afterlife voice serves as a powerful device that breaks the silence of gendered violence. Many victims of rape and murder cannot talk about their experiences because of social shame or because they do not survive the attack. Susie's voice serves as a testament to innumerable actual victims whose stories go untold because of legal failures and societal indifferences. Susie observes her family members struggling and is also worried about the slow progress of the investigation. The author

enables the readers by giving her a voice after death to witness Susie's agony her need for justice and need for closure. Susie's struggle silences her but through her afterlife narration, she conveys emotional weight to highlight the horror behind gender violence.

According to the Council of Europe, the term 'gender-based violence' describes any violence committed against an individual or group of individuals due to their actual or perceived sex, gender, sexual orientation, and/or gender identity. The Youth Power organisation states that most commonly, a woman's acquaintance is the one who commits violence against women and girls. Gendered violence includes sexual violence, child abuse, intimate partner violence, date rape, honour killing, femicide, child marriage, and human trafficking. The World Health Organisation estimates that approximately one-third of women worldwide have experienced sexual violence at some point in their lives.

Speaking of sexual violence is taboo in many countries, and victims are deterred from coming forward out of fear of embarrassment, disgrace, and rejection. Because of this low standard, survivors are under pressure to keep silent rather than fight for justice. This silence is beneficial for the offenders to carry out their crimes. Gendered violence is still a major problem around the world, often made worse by systemic failures in law enforcement and societal standards that allow perpetrators to evade punishment. In this novel, the victims are silenced by death because Harvey murders every single person he rapes. The passage below demonstrates how Harvey can continue this rape and murder without getting caught for a long period.

The architecture of my murderer's life, the bodies of the girls he'd left behind, began to reveal itself to me now that my sister was in that house. I stood in heaven. I called their names:

Jackie Meyer. Delaware, 1967. Thirteen.

A chair knocked over, its underside facing the room. Lying curled toward it, she wore a striped T-shirt and nothing else. Near her head, a small pool of blood.

Flora Hernandez. Delaware, 1963. Eight.

He'd only wanted to touch her, but she screamed. A small girl for her age. Her left sock and shoe were found later. The body, unrecovered. The bones lay in the earthen basement of an old apartment house.

Leah Fox. Delaware, 1969. Twelve.

On a slipcovered couch under a highway on-ramp, he killed her, very quietly. He fell asleep on top of her, lulled by the sound of cars rushing above them. Not until ten hours later, when a vagrant knocked on the small shack Mr. Harvey had built out of discarded doors – did he begin to pack himself and Leah Fox's body up.

Sophie Cichetti, Pennsylvania, 1960. Forty-nine.

A landlady, she had divided her upstairs apartment into two by erecting a Sheetrock wall. He liked the half-circle window this created, and the rent was cheap. But she talked too much about her son and insisted on reading him poems from a book of sonnets. He made love to her on her side of the divided room, smashed her skull in when she started to talk, and brought her body to the bank of a creek nearby.

Leidia Johnson. 1960. Six.

Buck's County, Pennsylvania. He dug an arched cave inside a hill near the quarry and waited. She was the youngest one.

Wendy Richter. Connecticut, 1971. Thirteen.

She was waiting for her father outside a bar. He raped her in the bushes and then strangled her. That time, as he grew conscious, coming up out of the stupor that often clung on, he heard noises. He turned the dead girl's face toward his, and as the voices grew closer he bit down on her ear. "Sorry, man," he heard two drunk men say as they walked into the nearby bushes to take a leak. (Sebold 181, 182)

Lindsey breaks into Harvey's house to find evidence of her sister's murder. When Harvey arrives, Susie calls for help in heaven by calling out Harvey's other victims to protect her sister from

danger. The above line denotes that most of his victims are innocent young girls. Harvey's ability to go unnoticed for years illustrates how society has failed to identify and stop that predatory behaviour. And the law enforcement fails to hold him accountable for his actions.

Jack and Susie's sister Lindsey suspect Harvey to be the murderer. Even though no one believes him, his love for Susie drives him to make all the efforts to prove George Harvey is the murderer. "We need you to stop making calls about George Harvey." "But..." "I need you to stop. There is nothing, no matter how much we stretch it, to connect him to Susie's death. Howling dogs and bridal tents are not evidence." "I know he did it," my father said." (Sebold 133) After this incident, Harvey feels threatened and flees from Norristown and continues to kill women and girls. He makes up a story that he is a widower to lure his victim. "He had a thousand lines to give them: "I used to bring my children here." "This is where I met my wife." He knew to ground whatever he said in connection to some imagined family, and then the woman would smile at him." (Sebold 175) The police try hard to find him, but they fail because he acts as an innocent neighbour who builds dollhouses for a living. Harvey has the habit of collecting things from his victims.

"A wedding ring, a letter sealed in an envelope, the heel of a shoe, a pair of glasses, an eraser in the shape of a cartoon character, a small bottle of perfume, a plastic bracelet, my Pennsylvania keystone charm, his mother's amber pendant. He would take them out at night long after he was certain that no newsboy or neighbour would knock on his door. He would count them like the beads on a rosary." (Sebold 128, 129)

He gets his urge to murder and kills the neighbourhood pets to control it. Also, he keeps the bones of the animals in his crawlspace where he kills Susie. "He had killed animals, taking lesser lives to keep from killing a child." (Sebold 131) Eight years after the death of Susie, the police confirm that George Harvey was the one who murdered Susie. Even after knowing that, the police are not able to find the perpetrator. Throughout the novel, he escapes the consequences of his actions. However,

eventually, Harvey gets struck by a broken icicle and falls to his death. His death symbolises karmic retribution as if nature itself is enacting justice.

This novel artistically mirrors social problems, and this paper highlights one of the major societal problems. Gendered violence is often silenced by societal norms. The victim suffers silently, and the perpetrator roams freely, committing more crimes. This society fails to bring perpetrators to justice. Also, it makes the readers think about how every single victim who got raped and murdered would be looking down from heaven, wanting justice to be served. Susie's afterlife narration represents the voices of millions of victims who are forced to be silent, and the necessity for society to listen to the survivors.

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