

# The Portrayal of Psychological Trauma in Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express*: An Analytical Study

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**Mr. H. Haniel Tony**

*BA English Literature*

*Rathinam College of Arts and Science, Coimbatore*

**Mrs. R. Soundarya**

*Assistant Professor English*

*Rathinam College of Arts and Science, Coimbatore*

## Abstract

*Agatha Christie's Murder on the Orient Express is often celebrated for its clever plot twists and detective intrigue, but beneath the surface lies a profound exploration of human suffering and trauma. This study looks at how past experiences of loss, violence, and injustice shape the characters' thoughts, emotions, and actions. By examining their psychological struggles, the research shows that trauma not only motivates the characters' decisions but also influences the moral questions the novel raises about justice, revenge, and empathy. Through Christie's storytelling, readers witness how deeply personal pain can ripple outward, affecting choices and relationships in unexpected ways. Understanding these psychological layers allows for a richer reading experience and highlights the timeless connection between trauma and human behaviour.*

**Keywords:** Psychological Trauma, Morality, Character Development, Justice.

Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express* is widely recognized as a masterclass in detective fiction, yet beyond the intricate plotting and suspense lies a profound exploration of human psychology, particularly the enduring effects of trauma. The novel centers around the murder of Samuel Ratchett aboard the luxurious train, the Orient Express, and the subsequent investigation led by the meticulous detective Hercule Poirot. While the story initially presents itself as a traditional whodunit, the deeper currents reveal how past tragedies shape the moral and emotional landscapes of the characters involved. Trauma, both individual and collective, serves as a driving force behind the narrative, influencing decisions, shaping motivations, and redefining notions of justice. The novel opens a dialogue on how unresolved grief and personal loss can manifest in extreme actions, challenging readers to consider the ethical ambiguities that arise when ordinary people are confronted with extraordinary pain.

The Armstrong family tragedy is central to understanding the psychological framework of the novel. Daisy Armstrong, a young girl, is kidnapped and murdered, and the aftermath devastates her

family. The trauma experienced by her mother, grandmother Linda Arden, and other individuals connected to the family forms a psychological web that motivates the novel's climactic events. Linda Arden, a character whose presence is subtly revealed through the investigation, embodies the long-term effects of profound loss. Her grief, compounded by the violent disruption of her family, becomes the psychological catalyst for orchestrating the murder of Ratchett, who is later revealed to be the criminal Cassetti, responsible for Daisy's death. Christie's portrayal of Arden demonstrates how trauma can generate both calculated reasoning and morally complex decision-making, presenting a character whose actions defy simple classification as either right or wrong. Scholars such as Aliffia Yasmine (2023) have emphasized that Arden's quest for revenge illustrates a direct response to trauma, aligning with psychological theories of re-experiencing and hyperarousal, where individuals are compelled to confront past injustices through action, sometimes extreme or socially unacceptable.

Other characters aboard the train also reflect trauma's subtle yet profound influence. Hector McQueen, Ratchett's secretary, grapples with conflicting loyalties as he uncovers the truth about his employer. McQueen's internal struggle exemplifies the concept of moral injury, a psychological phenomenon wherein individuals are forced to act against their ethical beliefs, often under circumstances beyond their control. His hesitation and eventual participation in the murder plot are not merely narrative devices but rather insights into how trauma and guilt can intertwine, leading ordinary individuals toward morally ambiguous actions. Similarly, Greta Ohlsson, a Swedish missionary, participates in the collective act of vengeance, motivated by personal connections to the Armstrong tragedy. Her involvement illustrates the ripple effect of trauma, where a single act of violence propagates emotional and psychological consequences across a network of individuals. Christie's writing, through subtle characterization and interactions, captures the pervasive nature of trauma and its capacity to shape collective behavior.

The psychological dimensions of the characters are complemented by the novel's exploration of justice. Traditionally, justice in detective fiction is portrayed as an orderly restoration of societal norms, often achieved through the capture or exposure of a criminal. However, in *Murder on the Orient Express*, Christie challenges this conventional framework by positioning trauma-driven vengeance as a form of justice. The murder of Ratchett, executed collectively by individuals whose lives were devastated by his actions, blurs the line between legal justice and moral rectitude. The ethical complexity presented here underscores the humanization of crime and punishment, highlighting the ways in which trauma can reshape perceptions of right and wrong. Romadhoni (2021) notes that the novel's characters act in accordance with deeply ingrained psychological imperatives, suggesting that the pursuit of justice can be inextricably linked to the need to heal or respond to personal suffering.

Christie's narrative technique further emphasizes the psychological depth of her characters. The confined setting of the Orient Express, isolated by snowdrifts in the Yugoslavian mountains, serves as a metaphorical pressure cooker, intensifying interactions and exposing hidden emotions. Within this enclosed environment, trauma becomes both a personal and shared experience, compelling characters to confront the consequences of past actions while navigating moral dilemmas. By embedding trauma within the plot's fabric, Christie ensures that readers are not merely observers of a mystery but participants in the ethical and emotional calculations of the characters. The novel's suspense, therefore, is not only derived from uncovering the perpetrator but also from understanding the intricate psychological motivations that drive human behaviour.

The novel also reflects broader themes regarding the universality of trauma. While the Armstrong family tragedy initiates the central conflict, Christie's portrayal suggests that trauma is a pervasive and shaping force in human life. Every passenger on the train carries a story, a

history, and vulnerabilities shaped by past experiences, whether directly related to the central crime or not. Trauma is depicted not merely as a personal burden but as a connective tissue binding disparate lives together in complex and morally charged ways. Gogoi (2017) argues that Christie's work exemplifies the interaction between nature and nurture in human behavior, positing that past experiences, social pressures, and individual psychological resilience converge to produce actions that defy simplistic moral categorization.

In Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express*, trauma emerges as a central force that shapes the thoughts, emotions, and behaviours of the characters, often blurring the line between morality and justice. Linda Arden, the grandmother of the tragic Daisy Armstrong, demonstrates how profound grief can transform into a calculated quest for retribution. The murder of her granddaughter and the ensuing collapse of her family leave deep emotional scars, compelling her to orchestrate Ratchett's death with careful precision. Christie portrays Arden not simply as a vengeful figure, but as someone whose grief is so intense that it redefines her sense of justice, allowing readers to understand the psychological motivations behind acts that might otherwise seem indefensible. This depiction aligns with studies of trauma, which suggest that unresolved emotional pain can lead individuals to seek closure or justice through unconventional, even extreme, means (Romadhoni 2021). Arden's actions highlight the moral complexity of the novel, inviting readers to empathize with her pain while grappling with the ethical implications of her choices.

Hector McQueen, Ratchett's secretary, presents a different dimension of trauma, one tied to guilt and the tension between loyalty and ethical responsibility. As he learns about Ratchett's true identity as Cassetti, the man who destroyed the Armstrong family, McQueen faces a moral dilemma that tests his conscience. He experiences what modern psychology would identify as moral injury, where one is forced to navigate actions that conflict with deeply held ethical principles (Kapoor 2022). McQueen's hesitation, anxiety, and eventual involvement in Ratchett's murder illustrate how trauma extends beyond immediate victims, affecting those who are indirectly connected to the original act of violence. Christie carefully shows that his participation is not rooted in malice but in the psychological weight of shared suffering and the desire to restore some sense of justice. McQueen's struggle reinforces the novel's exploration of how trauma can distort conventional ideas of right and wrong, making readers question whether moral codes can fully encompass human responses to profound loss and injustice.

Greta Ohlsson, the Swedish missionary, exemplifies the role of collective trauma in shaping human behavior. Unlike Arden and McQueen, whose actions are closely tied to personal grief, Ohlsson's involvement in the murder stems from her connection to a larger community of shared suffering. The tragedy of the Armstrong family has created bonds between individuals who feel compelled to act together in the pursuit of what they perceive as justice. Her participation demonstrates how trauma can unite people in common purpose, even when that purpose conflicts with legal or societal norms (Yasmine 2023). Christie portrays Ohlsson as quietly determined, reflecting the subtle yet powerful ways in which collective pain can influence decisions and behaviors. Through her, the narrative explores the ripple effect of trauma, showing how individual suffering can grow into a shared moral force, compelling actions that are ethically complicated yet emotionally understandable.

Even minor characters, such as Mary Debenham and Antonio Foscarelli, illustrate how trauma spreads beyond its immediate victims. Mary, although less directly affected by the Armstrong tragedy, becomes involved through her connections with others, while Foscarelli feels an ethical obligation that draws him into the collective act of vengeance. These characters reveal the pervasive impact of trauma, demonstrating that its consequences often extend through social networks, influencing behavior and moral reasoning in ways that are not immediately visible. Christie

emphasizes that trauma is not confined to a single individual's experience; it can ripple outward, shaping decisions, alliances, and ethical judgments across a broader group. By doing so, she paints a vivid picture of how human suffering can generate both empathy and morally complex actions.

The confined setting of the Orient Express enhances the psychological intensity of the narrative, functioning almost as a pressure cooker that magnifies the effects of shared grief and ethical tension. Within this enclosed space, trauma becomes both personal and communal, influencing every decision and interaction. Christie uses this setting to explore not only the manifestations of trauma in individual characters but also its capacity to create ethical ambiguity. By embedding psychological realism into the story, she elevates the detective narrative, allowing readers to see characters as fully human, shaped by their pasts and the weight of their experiences (Romadhoni 2021; Kapoor 2022).

The moral dilemmas faced by the characters underscore the novel's central theme: trauma complicates traditional notions of justice. While the murder of Ratchett is undeniably a violation of law, the motivations behind it are deeply rooted in grief, guilt, and collective suffering. Christie humanizes each participant, showing how trauma can drive people to act in ways that challenge conventional ethics. Through the experiences of Arden, McQueen, Ohlsson, and others, the novel explores how personal and shared trauma influences thought, emotion, and behavior, ultimately raising questions about empathy, morality, and the human capacity for both justice and vengeance. In portraying trauma in this nuanced way, Christie demonstrates that understanding human behavior requires more than legal or societal judgment; it demands consideration of the psychological forces that shape choices and actions in profound, sometimes morally ambiguous, ways.

The interplay between trauma and morality in *Murder on the Orient Express* also invites reflection on the human capacity for empathy. While the act of murder is morally indefensible in legal terms, the narrative encourages readers to understand, if not condone, the motives of the perpetrators. Christie's nuanced exploration of trauma fosters empathy, revealing how pain and suffering shape human choices. This empathetic engagement aligns with contemporary psychological understanding of trauma, which emphasizes that individuals' behaviours often reflect responses to circumstances rather than inherent moral failings. In this way, the novel transcends the conventions of detective fiction, using the mystery framework to illuminate profound truths about human psychology.

In conclusion, Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express* presents a compelling exploration of psychological trauma and its influence on human behavior. Through characters whose lives are indelibly shaped by loss, violence, and injustice, the novel examines how trauma can motivate actions, challenge moral frameworks, and foster both individual and collective responses to injustice. Christie's careful blending of psychological insight with detective narrative elevates the novel beyond conventional mystery fiction, offering readers an opportunity to consider the ethical, emotional, and social dimensions of trauma. The narrative illustrates that justice is not always a matter of law but is often deeply intertwined with human emotion and the need for reparation. By emphasizing the psychological realism of her characters, Christie enriches the reader's understanding of human behaviour, demonstrating how trauma continues to shape moral and ethical choices in profound and unpredictable ways.

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