Perfect Marriage, Perfect Prison: A Psycho-Social Study of Manipulation and Coercive Control in B. A. Paris's Behind Closed Doors

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***Abstract*— B. A. Paris's Behind Closed Doors is a story about the manipulation and coercive control that basically form the core of the book. This paper claims that Jack exercises control by organized psychological manipulation, pretending, emotional exploiting, and sadistically dominating rather than by physical violence. It applies a psycho-social approach that covers the concepts of Evan Stark's coercive control, Erich Fromm's sadistic love, and Alfred Adler's compensatory behavior to support this claim. The analysis shows how Jack's tactics break Grace's autonomy and transform the appearance of a perfect marriage to a situation of psychological entrapment. It also shows that Paris depicts manipulation thematically and employs specific narrative strategies to disclose the unsettling psychological realities of coercive control. The study concludes that the novel portrays the deep impact of manipulation on autonomy, identity, and survival. These results stress the novel's significance as a literary reflection on the hidden patterns of coercive control.**

***Index Terms*— B. A. Paris; Behind Closed Doors; Coercive Control; Manipulation; Psycho-Social Study.**

I. INTRODUCTION

Fictional characters are usually influenced by extremes of human nature, and manipulation as one of those extremes, defines the protagonist of *Behind Closed Doors*. Jack, the husband who is controlling, is an instance of the sadistic manipulation by means of psychological domination, facade, and premeditated cruelty. The story follows the characters' psychological descent, literally mapping the way the desire for power and obsession poison their ability for real love and blurs the lines that separate affection from control. According to Yassine (2023), symbolic and emotional codes are often used by fiction to depict manipulation, and Paris is using these narrative means to disclose the disturbing psychological truths of control and coercion. Therefore, she demonstrates how control over others can be extremely harmful when it is in a direct way or even when it is performed in a subtle manner, that is without the victim realizing it.

II. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The APA Dictionary of Psychology defines manipulation as "behavior designed to exploit, control, or otherwise influence others to one's advantage" ("manipulation"). Evan Stark's idea of coercive control shows how abusers isolate victims, cut their access to resources, and exploit their emotional weaknesses to reinforce their position (Stark, 2007). In the meantime, Erich Fromm's *Escape from Freedom* (2013) describes sadistic love as the desire to dominate and fuse with another through control and cruelty, which masks inner emptiness (P. 141). Also, Alfred Adler (2013), asserts that feelings of inferiority in childhood can lead to overcompensation, resulting in destructive dominance over others (P. 70–75). Collectively, these concepts consider manipulation not as a singular act but as a systematic strategy of control, rooted in psychological insecurity, social performance, and domination over the other.

III. MANIPULATION IN BEHIND CLOSED DOORS: CONTROL DISGUISED AS CARE

A major way Jack manipulates Grace is by disguising psychological control as caring and loving in the novel. Jack isolates Grace from sources of personal independence, particularly her career and finance, in order to dominate her life. A clear example of this is when Jack persuades Grace to abandon her job as a buyer for Harrods (P. 17, 30–31). While he considers this request as thoughtful, claiming he does not want to come home to an exhausted wife, it is a calculated move to cut her ties to the outside world and disempower her. Jack limits Grace's choices to escape the relationship by impairing her ability to earn money. This reflects what Adams et al. (2008) describe as economic abuse which is defined as behaviors that "control a woman's ability to acquire, use, and maintain economic resources, thus threatening her economic security and potential for self-sufficiency" (P. 564). The situation turns threatening in a broad sense when Jack is fully aware that Grace is responsible for paying for her sister Millie's education. This, therefore, makes his behavior a deliberate assault on her freedom as well as her ethical obligations.

Journal of University of Human Development
Volume 12 No. 4(2026); DOI: 10.21928/juhd.v12n4y2026.pp52-56
Regular research paper: Received 19 October 2025; Accepted 14 December 2025; Published 15 October 2026
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Jack's control over the situation is not only through his actions but also the manner in which he changes the words of his language to mask control as love, which makes his abuse less visible. For instance, he sees his demand as modest when he says it is “perhaps selfish of me to ask” (Paris, 2016, P. 17). The phrase here makes the person feel guilty, since it depicts Jack as thoughtful and at the same time implies that Grace would be unreasonable or unkind if she refused. This method is similar to what Evan Stark describes as one of the signs of coercive control, where “like hostages, victims of coercive control are frequently deprived of money, food, access to communication or transportation, and other survival resources even as they are cut off from family, friends, and other supports” (P. 5). Jack gradually isolates Grace from financial independence, her sister Millie, and her social life, always under the guise of romantic devotion. Even during a dinner party, Grace lies saying that she does not miss her job, while this is the moment which painfully illustrates how Jack has begun dismantling her autonomy piece by piece. The true nature of Jack's demand—that Grace quit her job—is a deliberate strategy for control, not an expression of intimacy; his chilling confession, “I need you to be my wife, but in name only. You are not my reward, Grace, Millie is,” (p.87), reveals how each step, including undermining her independence, is part of an intended plan to isolate her.

Grace's confusion and fear are results of Jack's emotional withdrawal and his calculated absence, which are among the methods he use to dominate her. When they are at a hotel in Thailand, Jack disappears and leaves Grace alone in a foreign environment. This move is an early manipulation tactic to scare and disturb her. Grace’s desperate message “Jack, please phone me back... I need to know where you are” (Paris, 2016, P. 62) is a clear indication of her growing powerlessness and a sign of her gradual entrapment. Here, Jack is actually testing her reaction in the unfamiliar place and hence, covertly asserting his dominance by making her feel dependent on him. Besides that, the event also symbolizes the moment when the couple's relationship power changes: although Grace trusted Jack to be kind to her, his deliberate disappearance is the first stage of a darker control pattern which the author unfolds with the progress of the narrative.

Jack’s decision to vanish for four days, besides Grace’s increasingly distressed messages, is an act of deliberate psychological control. It places her in a vulnerable, anxious state in which she doubts herself, her situation, and even makes excuses for him thinking that he must have turned off his phone and maybe he is just in a meeting (P. 64). Jack cunningly exerts control over her mind as he withholds communication and information. In a moment of increasing desperation and confusion, Grace says “Even if you didn’t want to answer your phone you could have phoned me, you must have got all my messages” (P. 221). In this speech, Grace starts to realize that Jack’s silence is a choice rather than an accident. When she emphasizes on ‘you must have got all my messages’ she begins to notice that he is controlling the communication deliberately. As she starts to grasp Jack’s emotional distance and manipulative behavior, she reflects on growing understanding that his neglect is deliberate.

Jack’s strategy of control is not only to keep physical and emotional distance. He also tries to create situations where she is forced to choose. These situations are not simple. In fact, they are quite complex and coercive. They only further restrict Grace's independence and control. There is an important moment when Grace is presented with a cruel choice: to visit her beloved younger sister Millie, who desperately depends on her, or to go to Thailand with Jack. Even in his physical absence, Grace is trapped in a no-win situation where she is under the unrelenting pressure of Jack's expectations and the threat of their consequences. Through this manipulation tactic Grace is isolated from the surroundings emotionally and feels that she has to gain Jack’s approval and care for Millie’s condition. Moreover, Jack controls her feelings and thoughts from a distance and his dominance is not affected by his absence. The scene reveals how abusers can maintain control by making victims have no freedom of choice and thus lose their autonomy:

> Listen to me, Grace, and listen carefully. If you want to go and see Millie, you can. You can get out of the car now and take a taxi to the hospital. But I’m going on to the airport and if you choose to go to the hospital, you won’t be coming to Thailand with me. It’s as simple as that” (P. 68).

The speech reveals Jack’s influence over Grace’s mind. Essentially, his words function as an ultimatum rather than a discussion; he sees himself as the only one who can make the decision and diminishes Grace’s power by giving her a fake choice. The façade of the offer ("you can go and see Millie") is shortly discarded as the real outcome is hinted ("you won’t be coming to Thailand"), which, in the context of Jack’s established abuse, implies exclusion, punishment, and loss of autonomy. With his final phrase "It’s as simple as that," he extends the menace, avoids any chance for negotiation and completely takes control of the situation. Jack uses a manipulative emotional strategy that is very meticulously planned to gain dominance; he knows exactly how much Millie means to Grace and he uses her love as the leverage. The expression “switching off the ignition” right before giving the ultimatum, shows that he has control not only over the physical but also over the psychological realms. His words (“Listen to me, Grace, and listen carefully”) are used to mask the unpleasant nature of the threat. Jack is the one who can say the most peaceful things and, simultaneously, show his most heartless intentions. Fromm deeply characterizes this kind of personality which grows by making another person part of themselves and thus they obtain the power they lack as a separate self (Fromm, 2013, P. 142).

When Jack removes all pretenses of charm and openly acknowledges his authority over Grace, his psychological manipulations take a crucial turn. This point in the story is a turning point, as it is the moment when Jack reveals his true intentions to control not only Grace but also her sister, Millie, who is vulnerable (Paris, 2016, P. 73–74). The scene shows how serious his psychological abuse is as Grace’s guess that Jack might be losing his job — and her attempt to find a solution — is rapidly dismantled. On the other hand, he coldly tells her that he has already planned her entrapment (P. 73). His gesture of ridiculing her by showing her passport is a sign that she is completely deprived of her agency (P. 74), highlighting themes of isolation, coercive control, and disempowerment. Hence, the novel is shifting from concealed manipulation to

overt domination, while Grace's insight is depicting a movement from concern about the marriage to psychological entrapment of a deep nature.

Jack's fury in a subtle way becomes more and more frightening, especially after he says, "You should have chosen Millie, you really should have" (P. 73). It is a mystifying but a heavy phrase as it goes straight to the most delicate part of Grace's emotional world - her absolute love for Millie. At this point of time, by mentioning Millie, Jack turns Grace's love for her sister into his weapon and suggests that Grace has disappointed Millie while he is the only one who holds the key to Millie's future. This is how Jack starts unveiling his longtime dominance over Grace. Millie is not just part of Grace's life, she has, as a matter of fact, become a means of manipulation. The fear intensifies when Jack says, "Do you realise what you've done, do you realise that you've sold your soul to me? And Millie's, for that matter" (P. 73). This chilling assertion stems from Grace's earlier decision to accompany Jack to Thailand instead of going with Millie. Jack twists the story and makes it a point that Grace has betrayed her sister by the act of choosing him, not her. By orchestrating this awful decision and dictating the result, Jack makes it look like he is the one who holds the key to Millie's future at the moment. His reach is not just extended to Grace but to the person who is most vulnerable in her life. He wants not only to dominate Grace but to possess whoever she cherishes, hereby creating a cage of emotional and moral debt to be sure that she will submit to him entirely.

Not yet ready to accept the reality and still holding on to the hope that it might be a bitter joke or a temporary rage, Grace attempts to leave: "I'm going back to London." Yet, Jack lets her reach just to the door before stopping her by reminding her of his dominance through her passport. Presenting her passport, he mocks, "Aren't you forgetting something?... You can't go anywhere without it" (P. 74). This instance is significant as the passport— normally a tool of freedom and mobility—is turned into a means of trapping by Jack. He is actually stopping her from leaving when he is the one who keeps her travel document. The point in time also portrays the extent of power Jack has over Grace's decisions, directions, and even her feeling of self-determination. Thus, Jack's controlling behaviour is both literal and figurative. Jack now controls her freedom of movement, and the passport becomes a physical manifestation of his dominance. By dangling it in front of her, Jack reduces Grace to someone who is trapped and powerless, no longer a partner but a prisoner. In this scene, Jack's emotional control, calm tone, and calculated threats illustrate how psychological abuse operates not through shouting, but through manipulation, entrapment, and the denial of any real choice. Grace's dawning realization of her situation, choking back sobs, feeling panic rise, is not just fear for herself, but for Millie, who is now a target.

Earlier in the narrative, Jack repeatedly hints that a housekeeper will be present at their new home, an idea that Grace clings to as a small lifeline (P 43, 44). She believes that another adult in the house would provide company, witness Jack's behavior , and potentially offer help if something went wrong. Jack reinforces this illusion during their time in Thailand, allowing Grace to assume that the house will not be entirely isolated. As a result, the existence of a housekeeper becomes one of the few hopes Grace carries with her into the marriage.

Grace narrates the time when Jack leans towards her, a small smile playing at the corner of his mouth, whispering "There is no housekeeper" (P. 76). This scene demonstrates Jack's indirect threat: he does not need to raise his voice or use explicit violence. Instead, he exerts control and creates fear through the calm, single chilling line. The gesture of leaning in often suggests closeness, tenderness, and secrecy between lovers or confidants. However, it is now a deliberate softness, a proximity from which Grace cannot retreat without further danger. The description of the "small smile" carries the most weight. The pun indicates a kind of smile which is not fixed or fake, but something light, agile, and playing that reflects Jack's satisfaction with the moment. Interestingly, this smile is neither a grin, nor a smirk, nor a leer; but an understatement which paradoxically intensifies the anxiety of the moment. This indirect threat is then embodied in the whispered line itself, which is a subtle but very effective psychological manipulation. The sentence "There is no housekeeper" might be simple but its consequences are huge. No shouting, no blaming; just a rejection of hope. It erases the idea of help from the outside, a possible witness, or relief in the future step by step. To whisper is to be involved in a conspiracy, to have a secret signal; it can be a lover's murmur, a confession, or a threat hidden as a secret. Here, it is power masked as closeness. Jack whispers to make it more evident that this is a private world with its own rules, its own silences, and no ways out to escape. The planned muting of Grace's expectations without explicit aggression is an example of the insidious nature of Jack's manipulation throughout the novel.

However, Jack's calculated cruelty has many dimensions, and it is not limited to these quite menaces. B. A. Paris also shows how this discreet manipulation escalates to overt psychological assaults that aims to strip Grace of any sense of stability or credibility. In a disturbing scene in *Behind Closed Doors*, Jack admits to Grace that he has engineered a scenario in public to make her seem insane to isolate and discredit her. Standing inches from her face, Jack chillingly boasts of "killing two birds with one stone" publicly humiliating Grace while affirming his intellectual dominance by warning he is always "one step ahead" (P. 95). He then escalates his control with a deadly threat while cynically invoking her sister, by reminding Grace that Millie will soon be in his hands — the true target of his plans — and that any resistance from Grace will expose Millie to his cruelty. This moment showcases the brutal precision of coercive control as manipulation and fear replace physical violence which erodes Grace's capacity to choose and isolates her from the world. Even her family bonds, which normally would offer strength and support, becomes an instrument through which she is made to comply.

IV. FACADE AND DECEPTION

The theme of facade and deception is the predominant element in *Behind Closed Doors* where the characters show a wrong image to hide the evil and darker side of the truth. Paris adopts a story in which the illusion of a perfect marriage is maintained, even when control and abuse are hiding under the facade. The clear example is the time when Grace leaves a

voicemail full of fake concern, desperate, partly to continue the pretense in front of Mr. Ho at reception. She says, “Not that I’m not being well looked after... because I am,” which is a sign that she attempts to make her marriage sound calm and normal even though her panic is increasing. The endeavor to create an image mirrors the façade that characterizes the whole conception of her relationship with Jack, the outward appearance of a normal marriage being a cover for a manipulative, controlling reality. Grace is aware that Mr. Ho is listening and says, “Please give me a ring, Jack, it’s awful being stuck here not knowing what’s happening” (P. 221). This highlights Grace's complicity in maintaining the illusion, forced by fear, uncertainty, or social pressure. Meanwhile, Jack's absence, silence, and calculated withdrawal reinforce that the loving husband image is a deception.

Jack's relationship with Grace comprises psychological abuse and manipulation, all veiled beneath a friendly demeanor. Jack exercises control in dehumanizing ways and often denies Grace simple needs or affection . This is evident when Grace reflects:

> I stared at him over the divide between us. In our other life, before we’d got married, he would have rung for the hostess himself. Where had the perfect gentleman I’d thought him to be gone? Had it all been a facade, had he covered his true self with a cloak of geniality and good humour to impress me? (P. 71).

In this scenario, Grace's inner doubt illustrates the conflict between the affection Jack once had for her and the current frostiness he displays, suggesting that his past warmth was a calculated act to earn her trust and render her obedient. His actions exemplify coercive control—a strategy of manipulating and emotional torment employed by abusers to subjugate rather than to attack. Denying care is a means to establish power which robs Grace of her agency and makes her psychologically dependent. Her description of the physical rift, further emphasizes the widening emotional and psychological chasm between them. It also serves as a pictorial representation of the way an abuser pretends to be intimate with the victim and then control her by force.

V. POWER AND DOMINANCE

Grace's internal change, which is caused by Jack's manipulation, is actually more significant than his manipulation itself. It is quite different from her previous experiences because the moment she recognizes that her personal stories have been used as her controlled means, she gets into a deeper isolation - no memory, confession, or family connection seems to be safe anymore. The damage which is caused to the mind of the victim is what Stark points out here when they start feeling that not even their inner world has been spared. This realization deepens the psychological wounding as it leads Grace to believe that even her private past is not safe anymore. She voices this loss of internal safety when she reflects:

> He is so clever, so very clever. Everything I have ever told him, he has used against me. I wish I’d never told him of my parents’ horror when Millie was born. Or how they were counting the days until I fulfilled my promise of having Millie to live with me so that they could finally move to New Zealand. It allowed him to play on their dread that I would somehow renege on the promise I’d made and that they would end up having to look after Millie themselves (P. 82).

Grace's words explain the extent of Jack's manipulative behavior: he manipulated her confessions to isolate her and break her feeling of safety. This kind of behavior aligns with what Erich Fromm (2013) sees as coercive control and antisocial tendencies in an abusive relationship. Fromm (2013) refers to sadistic patterns, where one partner wants to control and dominate the other partner to escape their own feelings of helplessness. According to this view, sadism comes from a deep need to have total control over another and to be able to turn that person into an object without any will. The supreme form of this control is the power to hurt, which, for the abuser, is a way of proving that he has the most absolute power (P. 141).

Jack's manipulation in the above scenario is clear in the way he collects Grace's most personal confessions, not because he feels empathy or wants to connect, but in order to later employ them as his tools of control. This malicious tactic of emotionally hurting someone is typical of the relational style of antisocial behavior. Jack hides his controlling power behind the mask of caring attention. This deliberate charm enables him to be seen as a loving husband while at the same time he is breaking down Grace's independence and invading her psychological space. It is obvious that he is utterly devoid of empathy when he turns Grace's memories of family grief into his tools of psychological domination without showing even a trace of regret or consideration to the deep hurt he is causing. Above and beyond physical conquest, it is this control over Grace's secret world, her thoughts, memories, and loyalties that Jack uses to keep power. In this respect, Stark states that “like assaults, coercive control undermines a victim’s physical and psychological integrity” (2007, P. 5). Grace’s vulnerabilities which Jack has so carefully and brilliantly exploited are the revelation of coercive control being the actual instrument of his dominance and psychological abuse.

Jack’s desire to manipulate Grace on a whim is not something he has newly developed as an adult. It is basically a development of his mental conditioning from the time he was a child, when he learned that emotional power is obtained by scaring and making others weak. Jack himself reveals the origin of this worldview when he recounts:

> There was once a young boy who lived in a country far, far away from here with his mother and father. When he was very young, the boy feared the strong and powerful father, and loved the mother. But when he saw that the mother was weak and useless and unable to protect him from the father, the boy began to despise her, and rejoiced in the look of terror in her eyes as the father dragged her down to the cellar to be locked in with the rats (Paris, 2016, P. 84).

Jack's story shows how he lacks empathy and the ability to be cruel at an early age. His story is a thinly-veiled autobiography. As a child, he witnesses abuse and begins to enjoy the fear in his mother’s eyes. This marks the beginning of a sadistic pleasure in the suffering of others. The boy starts from a position of fear and inferiority in relation to the powerful father. Adler argued that feelings of inferiority are a natural part of human experience, especially in early childhood, “Every child becomes conscious of his inability to cope single-handed

with the challenges of existence. This feeling of inferiority is the driving force, the starting point from which every childish striving originates" (2013, P. 70). The boy's shifting emotions, from love for the mother to despising her weakness can be seen as a compensation for his own helplessness. By aligning emotionally with the father's power, through rejoicing in the mother's terror, he momentarily alleviates his own sense of inferiority. In this respect, Adler further explains, "When the feeling of inferiority is intensified… the danger arises that in his striving for compensation he will be satisfied not with a simple restoration of the balance of power; he will demand an over-compensation, will seek an overbalance of the scales" (P. 75). This directly echoes Jack's reaction in the novel and explains his shift from love to contempt for his mother and his sadistic identification with his father reflect a compensatory strategy to free himself from helplessness through a premature, distorted alignment with power. Adler's idea of "social interest", the sense of belonging and concern for others, is absent in this scenario. The boy's emotional shift signals a growing disconnection from empathy and communal feeling, replaced by a budding identification with power and domination. Adler explains that children who experience early inferiority or emotional deprivation often develop a hostile attitude toward the world. Thus, "Instead of interesting themselves in an adjustment to their fellows, they are continually preoccupied with themselves, and with the impression which they make on others" (P. 69). This is how Jack's anti-social behavior; callousness, emotional detachment, and disregard for others' suffering, is rooted in unresolved childhood trauma. Eventually, Jack's capacity for violence and his fascination with fear become inextricably intertwined:

> One night, when the boy was about thirteen years old, the mother managed to escape from the basement while the father was working outside in the allotment. But the boy knew that if she left, he would never hear the sound of her fear again so he hit her, to stop her from leaving. And when she screamed, he hit her again. And again. And the more she screamed, the more he hit her and he found he couldn't stop, even when she fell to the ground. And, as he looked down at her smashed and bloodied face, he thought she had never looked more beautiful (Paris, 2016, P. 85).

The sentence 'he would never hear the sound of her fear again' reveals the true psychological impetus for the boy's viciousness. His bond with fear is not an accident, but foundational; fear is how he mainly regulates his internal world. For him, the mother's terror has become the only source of emotional validation. The sound of her fear gives him a sense of control that allows him to forget about his own helplessness. Her attempted escape threatens to remove the one stimulus that renders him feel powerful. This results in a desperate attempt to maintain that equilibrium. He obtains pleasure from the mother's pain and submission, seeing her as "never looked more beautiful" in that moment. This directly relates to Fromm's definition of sadistic love, which is the desire to dominate, control and fuse with another through violence. Fromm's idea about employing control to overcome inner emptiness portrays the emotional intensity and eroticization of power in the scene where the young Jack repeatedly beats his mother. After striking her again and again, he looks upon her 'smashed and bloodied face' and thinks that 'she had never looked more beautiful'. The passage mirrors Fromm's analysis of individuals who fear separateness and thus seek fusion through domination, even to the point of destruction. In this regard Fromm (2013) states that, "The pleasure in the complete domination over another person (or other animate objects) is the very essence of the sadistic drive" (P. 141). Here, Jack's will for domination becomes a means to escape inner emptiness and achieve a destructive form of emotional fusion.

CONCLUSION

Manipulation in B.A. Paris's *Behind Closed Doors* is not just a narrative device but the chief means by which the novel deals with power, freedom, and survival. Through Jack, Paris illustrates the gradual form of coercive control in which psychological domination, mockery, and sadism replace direct violence making the victimization both unnoticeable and highly injurious. Conceptual models of Stark, Fromm, and Adler deepen this investigation by locating Jack's behavior within the frameworks of coercive control, sadomasochistic love, and domination through compensation.

Eventually, *Behind Closed Doors* is a manipulative tactics drama that ends up showing the devastating impacts of manipulation while allowing for a symbolic account of defiance. As such, the book can be read not only as a psychological thriller but also as a serious commentary on the abuse cycle, the susceptibility of autonomy, and the strength of survival.

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