

# Memory, Silence and Trauma in Alex Michaelides's *The Silent Patient*

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Article Detail:	Abstract
<p>Received: 11 Jul 2025; Received in revised form: 09 Aug 2025; Accepted: 12 Aug 2025; Available online: 15 Aug 2025</p> <p>©2025 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (<a href="https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/">https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/</a>).</p> <p><b>Keywords—</b> Trauma, Memory, Silence, Psychoanalysis, Mental Health.</p>	<p>The paper will explore the complex interplay between Memory, Trauma and Silence in Alex Michaelides' <i>The Silent Patient</i>. The novel revolves around Alicia Benerson, a celebrated artist who looks like someone who has it all – an extremely successful career, a caring husband and an ideal life. But this dreamy life quickly comes crashing down when Alicia becomes mysteriously mute after allegedly murdering her husband. Theo Faber, a psychotherapist is determined to uncover the truth behind her silence. This haunting silence becomes a central focus of the narrative as the reader is left to ponder the reasons behind Alicia's refusal to speak. Drawing from the Trauma theory, particularly insights from Scholars like Cathy Caruth and Judith Herman, the paper explores how traumatic experiences have an effect on the memory and affect the process of self-expression as well as Identity. The silence of Alicia Benerson in the novel serves as a very powerful form of communication as it conveys to the readers the depth of Alicia's trauma and the complexity of the psychological turmoil taking place inside her. Through an analysis of Alicia's diary entries and her artwork, the paper uncovers how nonverbal forms of communication become crucial outlets when speech fails. Furthermore, the fractured structure of the narrative itself shows how navigating through Traumatic experiences can be. Additionally, this paper also shows how psychotherapist Theo Fabers's personal experience of childhood trauma and his role as a healer shapes the narrative. The novel also challenges conventional forms of psychological healing of those who have undergone traumatic experiences and the paper aims to highlight this aspect of mental health healing, the complexity of which is presented in the novel beautifully. In conclusion, <i>The Silent Patient</i> provides a compelling narrative that invites readers to reconsider the intersections between memory, silence, and trauma. This paper demonstrates the same through a textual analysis and aims to create a better understanding about mental health.</p>

## I. INTRODUCTION

The Silent Patient written by Alex Michaelides was published in the year 2019. It garnered a lot of attention due to how the author has dealt with the themes of trauma, silence and memory. The protagonist of the novel, Alicia Benerson becomes mute after allegedly murdering her husband and trying to kill herself. The novel is narrated through the lens of the psychotherapist, Theo Faber is the primary person who has taken it upon himself to ensure that Alicia Benerson speaks about her ordeal. This research aims to do a psychoanalytic exploration using trauma theories of Cathy Caruth and Judith Herman. Cathy Caruth's theory of trauma highlights the complexity of the same by showing how trauma disrupts the normal flow of memory and consciousness often manifesting in fragmented memories and narratives. Caruth describes trauma as a "break in the mind's experience of time where the traumatic experience is not fully processed the time it occurs and returns in the forms of flashbacks and nightmares. This Research will employ the Trauma theory as put forth by Judith Herman. Herman has emphasised about the recovery process after a traumatic experience. Her seminal work in the field, "Trauma and Recovery" has outlined a comprehensive model for trauma healing and recovery. Herman has given a five staged approach to healing trauma in her book which includes – a healing relationship, remembrance and mourning, reconnection, commonality. Her model underscores that a good therapeutic relationship is extremely important for proper healing of the survivors. Herman was also the first one to address the concept of "complex trauma" which she referred to as the constant and pervasive exposure to traumatic events such as domestic violence and child abuse (Keane and Najavits 513).

In the book "The Silent Patient" Alicia Benerson's recovery takes place at a facility for patients who suffer from psychological disorders. Theo Faber is the psychotherapist who has taken it upon himself to find the reason why Alicia is silent for so long. Till the end of the book, the reader is made to believe that Theo Faber has the best interests of Alicia in mind and is doing all that he is doing to help her in the recovery process. Later on, the reader is extremely surprised by the ending of the novel which ends with

Theo Faber killing Alicia and ending is arrested by the police for his crime.

This paper intends to dive deep into the manifestation of Trauma of both Alicia Benerson as well as Theo Faber using Trauma Theory as given by Judith Herman and Cathy Caruth. It will also analyse how silence and memory play out in the novel. This kind of an analysis will help in unfolding nuances and intricacies of the characters and help to further understand them. There are also various non verbal forms of communication used by Alicia Benerson that are very crucial in understanding the trauma she went through and her mental state. This paper aims to shed light on that as well. The paper will also shed light on mental health and the complexity of mental health healing.

## II. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- How does trauma affect memory and identity in *The Silent Patient*, as illustrated through Alicia Benerson's character?
- In what ways does Alicia's silence serve as a form of communication, and what does it reveal about the depth of her trauma?
- How do nonverbal forms of communication, such as Alicia's diary entries and artwork, function as outlets for expressing trauma when speech fails?
- How does Theo Faber's personal experience of childhood trauma influence his role as a psychotherapist and his approach to treating Alicia?
- How does *The Silent Patient* challenge conventional forms of psychological healing, and what does it suggest about the complexity of trauma recovery?

## RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- To analyze the impact of trauma on memory and identity in *The Silent Patient*, using Cathy Caruth's and Judith Herman's trauma theories.
- To explore the significance of Alicia's silence as a form of communication and its role in conveying the depth of her psychological

turmoil.

- To investigate the role of nonverbal communication, such as Alicia's diary and artwork, in expressing trauma when traditional forms of speech are inadequate.
- To examine Theo Faber's personal trauma and its influence on his professional role as a psychotherapist, particularly in his treatment of Alicia.
- To critique conventional forms of psychological healing as depicted in *The Silent Patient* and highlight the novel's emphasis on the complexity of trauma recovery.

### III. LITERATURE REVIEW

- In an article titled, "Beyond words: a psychoanalytic inquiry into silence and trauma in the novel *The Silent Patient* by Alex Michaelides" by Fakiha Arain, the author highlights through a psychoanalytic inquiry that the silence of Alicia Benerson leads to the self discovery of Alicia. The author emphasises the transformative power of silence. The author says that the unspoken experiences of Alicia shape her identity as a person and also her personal narrative about her tragedy. She becomes a judge of her own actions. Arain also interprets the work in a feminist way. She says that Alicia's choice to stay silent transcends victimhood, showing her internal conflict and resistance against patriarchal oppression.
- In a journal article titled, "Traumatic Childhood and Adult Personality in Michaelides' *The Silent Patient*" the paper critiques how the early traumatic childhood experiences of Alicia lead her to silence and the inability to process the positive memories and only focusing on the negative ones. The paper argues that the silence serves as a coping mechanism for her trauma which ultimately hinders her personal growth and an evolution into a positive individual. The study highlighted the immense impact of childhood abuse on adult personality development.
- John Marzillier in the journal article titled, "The silent past and the invisible present. Memory, trauma and representation in psychotherapy" discusses how memory, trauma and silence interact in therapeutic contexts. The paper highlights that in silent patients, implicit memories and emotional traumas may manifest through various non verbal cues that the patient may exhibit from time to time. Thus a good therapeutic relationship is extremely important for proper healing of such silent patients. The paper emphasizes that understanding these dynamics can help therapists navigate the complexities of trauma and attachment, ultimately facilitating healing and transformation in the patient's narrative.
- In a journal article titled, " Alicia Benerson's complex post traumatic stress disorder in Alex Michaelides' *The Silent Patient*" the paper discusses Alicia Benerson's experience of trauma and its manifestation through silence. Her complex PTSD symptoms including reliving the traumatic experience as well social isolation highlight how traumatic memories can lead to emotional withdrawal and silence. The paper says that Alicia's silence serves as a coping mechanism ultimately illustrating the profound impact that memory of trauma can have on the psychological state.
- A book chapter titled, "The Aftermath of Silencing the Trauma" explores the relationship between silence, memory, and trauma through the case of a 70-year-old female patient who remained silent about her rape for decades. Her tinnitus and hallucinations are linked to her unaddressed trauma, illustrating how silence can perpetuate feelings of powerlessness. The therapeutic alliance established during psychotherapy allowed her to disclose her hidden trauma, facilitating the integration of fragmented memories into her personal history, thereby highlighting the importance of addressing silence in trauma recovery.

### IV. METHODOLOGY

This research paper will employ a qualitative literary analysis methodology. This approach is well-suited

for analyzing textual elements, themes, and character psychology in literature. It will involve a close reading of the text to uncover deeper meanings. This research will be grounded in trauma theory particularly the works of Cathy Caruth and Judith Herman and use their theories on trauma for examination and analysis of the text.

## V. ANALYSIS

### Trauma's impact on Memory and Identity

Cathy Caruth's Trauma theory emphasizes that traumatic events are usually not fully processed when they occur. Instead they return from time to time through fragmented memories and thoughts. She also says that the victims experience a collapse of identity in the event of a trauma (Rehman 92). In the book we can see that when Theo Faber narrates about the extra marital affairs of his wife, as readers we feel that all these things are happening in the present side by side as he is treating Alicia Benerson but only towards the end of the book we realise that all that he was narrating about his wife's extra marital affairs had actually taken place in the past. Thus his trauma about the extra marital affairs of his wife also appears fragmented throughout the novel. Alicia's character we also see has undergone a lot of trauma through various phases of her life – her mother's death at a very young age, her father's abandonment when he declares that he wishes Alicia had died instead of her mother, her husband's betrayal affect her a lot. She feels that she is unloved, there is no one who she can call her own and it leaves her fragmented. Her inability to articulate her trauma properly refers to the fragmented memory and the collapse of her identity that Caruth describes. Alicia's diary entries also show that she found it very difficult to articulate her memories which is evident through her diary entries. She writes, "I can't remember what happened. I can't remember. I can't remember" (Michaeldias 148). This repetition points to her fragmented memories and her inability to construct a coherent narrative of her trauma.

Judith Herman's idea about trauma further supports this analysis. She argues that trauma disrupts a survivor's identity of the self, leading to a fragmented identity (Pederson 343). Theo Faber, her psychotherapist observes, "Her Silence was a

fortress, a place of safety" (Michaeldias 89). She thus used silence as a coping mechanism. Her silence was not an absence of speech but a deliberate attempt to hide her overwhelming pain of trauma. This again proves Judith Herman's assertions that survivors of trauma often prioritise safety in the aftermath of any traumatic event.

### Silence as a powerful form of communication

Alicia's silence serves a powerful form of communication that depicts the extent of her trauma. It is indicative of the psychological turmoil that is going on inside her. When she refuses to speak, her silence speaks volumes about her inner world. This aligns with Caruth's theory about trauma that trauma often resists verbal communication forcing the survivors to depict their trauma through non verbal means.

Theo Faber reflects "her silence was louder than any words she could have spoken" (Michaeldias 45). It reflects the communicative power of Alicia's silence. This silence in the novel challenges the reader to look beyond the silence to understand the psychological pain of Alicia. It also shows that when trauma gets very profound it cannot be expressed.

### Non Verbal forms of Communication : Alicia's Diary entry and Artwork

When speech fails Alicia's diary entries reveal a lot about her struggles and her inability to express a lot of things. In her diary entries as well there are certain things that she struggles to express. In her first diary entry "no crazy thoughts allowed" (Michaeldias 3). It shows that there is a lot going on inside her apart from what she writes in the diary as well. Her diary serves as the most important thing in her recovery journey that helps Theo understand about her situation. As a reader we also observe that her writing is fragmented as well as incoherent. Alicia writes in one of her diary entries "I feel like I am drowning in a sea of memories. But I can't grasp any of them. They slip through my fingers like water" (Michaeldias 156). This actually aligns with Cathy Caruth's theory of trauma. The writing of Alicia is as fragmented as her traumatic memories.

The last painting that Alicia drew was that of Alcestis. Alcestis was the heroine of the Greek myth and her love story was one of the saddest. Alcestis willingly sacrifices her life for her husband, dying



for him when no one else will. The story of Alcestis had a lot of resemblance in Alicia's life and it was Alcestis' painting that she drew towards the end which conveyed a lot of meaning to the observer about the kind of situation that she was in. Theo refers to the painting as a "cry for help, a desperate attempt to communicate what she could not say in words" (Michaeldias 210). This again aligns well with what Judith Herman has to say about Trauma that survivors cling onto creative expressions for venting out their traumatic experiences. There

was one more painting of Alicia that she drew at The Grove where she drew Theo coming out of the facility with Alicia in arms while the building was on fire. It is as if she knew what was coming when she recognized who Theo actually was and she portrayed that trauma through her paintings.

Thus, the non verbal forms of her communication like her paintings and diary entries served as forms of her expressions.

#### **Theo Faber's Personal trauma and his role as a Healer**

Theo Faber's personal traumatic experiences during his childhood shape him as a psychotherapist. We see that he is not able to fully get over the trauma that he experienced in his childhood and it comes back to haunt him later on. As readers we feel that he has got over his past traumas only to realise that he actually has not and maybe has in fact got worse with age as we see him committing a murder towards the end. His unresolved traumas complicate his ability to help Alicia so much so that the boundaries between patient and healer is blurred completely as his treatment of Alicia is drawing to a close.

Theo reflects, "I saw myself in her. Her silence mirrored my own childhood, the years I spent in my room, unable to speak" (Michaeldias 75). This highlights that he was able to identify with Alicia's trauma. Theo's trauma influenced his role as a psychotherapist to Alicia. He projected his own personal experiences onto her. This shows the counter- interference of trauma.

#### **Challenging conventional forms of psychological healing**

The novel challenges the conventional forms of psychological healing by highlighting the complexity

of trauma recovery. Theo's failure to fully understand Alicia's trauma and get it intermixed with his shows the limitations of psychological and trauma healing. Also in this scenario, the patient and the psychotherapist were known to each other but only it was both of them who knew this. This definitely affected the healing process.

Theo admits, "I thought I could save her but in the end I couldn't even save myself" (Michaeldias 320). This shows the inadequacy of his therapeutic methods and his own unresolved trauma that came to the fore while treating Alicia. This novel thus suggests that healing from trauma requires more than just professional intervention.

## **VI. CONCLUSION**

Alex Michaelides' *The Silent Patient* offers a profound exploration of trauma, memory, and the complexities of psychological healing. Through the lens of trauma theory, particularly the insights of Cathy Caruth and Judith Herman, this paper has examined how traumatic experiences fragment memory, disrupt identity, and challenge conventional forms of self-expression. Alicia Berenson's silence, far from being a mere absence of speech, emerges as a powerful form of communication that conveys the depth of her psychological turmoil and the ineffability of her trauma. Her diary entries and artwork serve as crucial outlets for expressing what words cannot, highlighting the role of nonverbal communication in processing and articulating pain.

Theo Faber's character further complicates the narrative, as his personal experience of childhood trauma blurs the line between healer and patient. His obsession with Alicia's case and his failure to fully understand her trauma underscore the limitations of traditional therapeutic approaches. The novel challenges the notion that professional intervention alone can facilitate healing, emphasizing instead the importance of empathy, self-awareness, and the acknowledgment of one's own pain in the recovery process.

Ultimately, *The Silent Patient* is not just a psychological thriller but a poignant commentary on the enduring impact of trauma and the complexities of healing. By analyzing the novel through the framework of trauma theory, this paper has

illuminated the ways in which trauma reshapes memory, identity, and self-expression. Alicia's silence and Theo's flawed attempts at healing serve as reminders of the profound challenges faced by trauma survivors and those who seek to help them. The novel invites readers to look beyond surface-level explanations and consider the deeper psychological and emotional dimensions of trauma, offering a nuanced perspective on the journey toward recovery. In conclusion, *The Silent Patient* not only captivates with its gripping narrative but also provokes important questions about the nature of trauma and the possibilities for healing. By engaging with the novel's themes and characters, this research contributes to a broader understanding of trauma literature and its relevance to real-world psychological struggles. It underscores the need for compassionate and holistic approaches to trauma recovery, recognizing that healing is as complex and multifaceted as the human psyche itself.

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