

# Repressed Art, Expressed in Paint: Trauma and Art Therapy in *The Silent Patient*

OPEN ACCESS

Volume: 12

Special Issue: 3

Month: April

Year: 2025

E-ISSN: 2582-0397

P-ISSN: 2321-788X

Citation:

Sathya Priya, R., and G. Vinothkumar. “Repressed Art, Expressed in Paint: Trauma and Art Therapy in *The Silent Patient*.” *Shanlax International Journal of Arts, Science and Humanities*, vol. 12, no. S3, 2025, pp. 158–62

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.34293/sijash.v12iS3-Apr.9078>

**R. Sathya Priya**

*II MA English Literature, Department of English and Foreign Languages  
Bharathiar University, Coimbatore*

**Dr. G. Vinothkumar**

*Assistant Professor, Department of English and Foreign Languages  
Bharathiar University, Coimbatore*

## Abstract

*Trauma Studies, an interdisciplinary field arising in the 1990s, explores the psychological, cultural and literary dimensions of trauma, specifically its resistance to language and meaning. Drawing on Freudian psychoanalysis and Cathy Caruth’s trauma Theory, this paper navigates the depiction of trauma in The Silent Patient (2019) by Alex Michaelides. Caruth argues that trauma is not fully experienced at the moment of its situations but reappears through fractured remembrances, flashbacks, and involuntary expressions. Applying this theory, the paper analyses the protagonist, Alicia Berenson, whose muteness following her husband’s murder reflects the indescribability of trauma. Alicia’s silence, expressions, and fractured recollections align with Caruth’s proposition, demonstrating trauma’s dislocation of consciousness and narrative experiences. Also, the paper explores the remedial eventuality of art therapy in trauma recovery, representing Cathy Malchiodi’s work on expressive trauma remedy. Alicia’s self-portrait, Alceste, renders as a non-verbal evidence of her trauma, mirroring the mythological figure’s immolation and betrayal. The novel’s ambiguous ending reinforces the paradox of trauma where survivors strive to articulate their suffering but remain locked in silence. Through a literary analysis of The Silent Patient, this paper emphasizes how trauma fractures identity and language, and highlights the necessity of indispensable forms of expression for healing.*

**Keywords:** Art Therapy, Fragmentation, Memories, Silence, Sufferings and Trauma.

## Trauma Studies

Trauma Studies is a growing subject within cultural studies that examines the effects of traumatic experiences on individuals and society by investigating their psychological, cultural, and literary significance. It unites psychological ideas with poststructuralism, postcolonialism, and various other sociocultural theories. Trauma Studies rooted in the 1990s, utilising Freudian philosophy to expand a conceptual framework for trauma that portrays an extreme experience which summons language constraints and even destroys meaning entirely. Trauma proves that pain is indescribable. The viewpoint on psychological trauma is that it interferes with language and the inability to convey suffering. The first work on

psychological trauma was *Studies on Hysteria* (1895), written by Sigmund Freud and Joseph Breuer. It discusses that hysteria is a physical disorder and instead suggests that it is a psychological disorder that arises from traumatic events. Freud's theory of the unconscious mind was established by this book, which also had a major effect on the growth of psychoanalysis and psychotherapy as well as the way mental health disorders are acknowledged and treated. The research concentrated on conditions like Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), which is a mental health condition that arises from traumatic events or stressful situations, including participation in them or witnessing them, and Developmental Trauma (in children). This category includes children who have experienced chronic and complex negative experiences with their parents, impacting their emotional stability (mental health), and relationships. Additionally, it provides trauma related to war, terrorism, etc.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience; Trauma, Narrative, History* (1996) shapes Freud's trauma theories to investigate the borders of language and history in representing trauma. She foundational trauma theory assumes that trauma is not completely experienced at the moment of its incident but rebounds belatedly through intrusive, fragmented repetitions such as dreams, flashbacks, or actions that uncover a gap between the event and its conscious recollection. This delay shows immediate processing impossible, leading to traumatic reiteration, where victims unconsciously recall aspects of the experience, and a perplexed tension in which survivors both know and cannot grasp what happened, as the event avoids conscious memory. Trauma leaves a hidden wound. Trauma causes paradox where the survivor aims to understand their past but cannot, and traumatic narratives balance between death and survival. Testimony, often fractured or incomplete, becomes a partial pathway to comprehension, yet its gaps demand an ethical responsibility from listeners, analysts, therapists, or historians to interpret without imposing closure. Caruth further emphasizes trauma's transhistorical and collective dimensions, arguing that individual and shared traumas intertwine through disturbances in memory and consciousness, shaping generational identity and collective narratives. This unspeakable quality, rooted in trauma's psychological rupture, challenges literal representation and traditional narrative structures, manifesting instead through indirect, lingering traces of past suffering.

Cathy Caruth's trauma theory can be applied to analyse the protagonist, Alicia Berenson in the novel *The Silent Patient* (2019) by Alex Michaelides. The central character Alicia Berenson who becomes mute after allegedly murdering her husband, instead re-enacted through her art and silence, reflecting Caruth's idea that trauma is experienced belatedly and often beyond linguistic articulation. Furthermore, it focuses on the fragmented nature of traumatic experiences, emphasizing how trauma resists direct representation and often manifests through repetition, silence, and involuntary expressions. This framework will examine how Alicia's silence and artistic expressions align with the characteristics of trauma, revealing the novel's exploration of the psychological and narrative consequences of unresolved trauma.

### **Art Therapy**

Art therapy is a form of mental health treatment that uses the therapeutic possibility of art-making and creative skill to encourage emotional exploration, self-awareness, and healing, eventually supporting individuals to work through unresolved conflicts, trauma, and relational challenges. Art therapy offers a distinctive and beneficial method for individuals suffering from trauma, allowing them to non-verbally explore and process traumatic experiences through creative expression, especially when words are hard to find. Art therapy provides countless advantages for individuals with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). When combined with psychotherapy,

art therapy has been proven to be effective in reducing trauma symptoms. It presents a distinctive way to access and process traumatic memories, permitting individuals to construct a sense of their experiences and form accurate trauma narratives. These benefits are mainly notable in long-term art therapy interventions, making it a valuable treatment approach for PTSD. These may be reflected in the work of Trauma and Expressive Arts Therapy: *Brain, Body and Imagination in the Healing Process*, written by Cathy Malchiodi, where the book aims to educate and encourage the application of expressive arts therapy and art therapy in the direction of treatment of trauma in children and adults.

### **Spotlights on Alex Michaelides and his Works**

*The Silent Patient* (2019) is a psychological thriller, written by British-Cypriot author and screenwriter Alex Michaelides. It is a New York Times and Sunday Times bestseller. Alex Michaelides went to the Northgate Clinic Adolescent unit, a mental health service for adolescents experiencing complex mental illness. This experience laid down as a material and inspiration for his debut novel *The Silent Patient*. He received the Goodreads Choice Award for Best Mystery and Thriller of 2019 for this novel. His other work is *The Maidens* (2021) which is a psychological thriller set at Cambridge University, following a therapist who investigates a murder at her alma mater, potentially involving a fascinating professor and a group of young women known as “The Maidens”. *The Fury* (2024) is also another work written by Alex, follows Lana Farrar, a reclusive ex-movie star, and her friends on a trip to her private Greek island, which turns deadly when a murder occurs amidst a storm, with the unreliable narrator, Elliot Chase, attempting to reveal the truth. His works primarily explore the major themes of Trauma, Mental Health, and Human Psychology, probing into the complexities of the human psyche and the psychological effects of traumatic events. *The Silent Patient*, the novel was written by Alex Michaelides. Alicia Berenson, an artist and Gabriel Berenson, a photographer, both are living a peaceful life. The story begins with the gun shoot and the neighbour Barbie came to Alicia’s house and she murdered her husband, Gabriel. The police investigate Barbie, she said what happened in that time. Alicia did not tell anything about the murder and also after the death of her husband she didn’t speak anything and kept silent for the past six years. Theo Faber, a psychotherapist, enters into the case of Alicia and wants to know the secret of murder her husband and he asks something about the murder. Later, she reveals her truth in her paintings.

### **Discussion**

There is something on my mind I want to talk to you about ‘. The way he said it made me instantly nervous. I braced myself, fearing the worst. ‘ Go on’ (Michaelides, 135)

This quotation is taken from Alicia’s diary, which was written on the twenty- sixth of July on Alicia’s birthday. When Alicia was celebrating her birthday and felt too good with her husband. That fun did not last long as she recalled her dark childhood. The trauma is not completely held at the moment it happens but comes back later in the form of flashbacks, nightmares, or behaviours. Alicia has experienced trauma both forms of physical and mental. The disruption of memories repeatedly troubles the person in unpredictable ways. This also brings the traumatic repetition unconsciously and reliving that.

The following day, she lay in bed in a private room at the hospital. The police questioned her in the presence of her solicitor. Alicia remained silent throughout the interview. Her lips were pale, bloodless; they fluttered occasionally but formed no words, made no sounds. She answered no questions. (Michaelides, 09)

This quotation sketches how Alicia remained silent when the police officer investigated her. Despite being answered, she didn't utter a single word. Additionally, the quotation gives that she wants to speak, as her lips tremble, but she completely remains quiet and doesn't say anything to anyone. It links with the unclaimed experiences because trauma is not grasped into conscious understanding, it comes back in fragmented ways. It suggests that trauma leads to disrupting the direct articulation and representation.

'Yeah. And Alicia whispered something to me - I'll never forget it. "He killed me," she said. "Dad just - killed me"(Michaelides, 272)

Alicia's father, Vernon is a caring and lovable man who is in love with Eva. He marries her and loves her even with her illness. When Eva passed away, he wished Alicia died instead of her mother's death. She hears her father's words but her father is not aware of his words. This thing hurts her in the way of psychologically but not in physically. So, Alicia feels that her presence is of no value to her father and she belong anywhere and anymore. These words became a hidden wound in her heart.

I felt uniquely qualified to help Alicia Berenson. I'm a forensic psychologist, and used to working with some of the most damaged, vulnerable members of society. And something about Alicia's story resonated with me personally - I felt a profound empathy with her right from the start. (Michaelides,15)

Theo Faber, the forensic psychotherapist wants to help Alicia Berenson and he works with some of the vulnerable members of society. He said something is attractive in Alicia's story and also Theo feels empathy with Alicia right from the start. This shows the ethical considerations of the listener that they have to link the fragments but Theo also mentioned that he had a link with Alicia's story. Because he had a connection with the murder of Gabriel's death.

'I don't want to die, he said.

Then there was silence. Everything stopped. Inside my body, every cell deflated; wilting cells, like dead petals falling from a flower. Jasmine flowers floating to the ground. Can I smell jasmine somewhere? Yes, yes, sweet jasmine - on the window sill perhaps....(Michaelides, 324)

Theo asked Gabriel whether his soul or his wife's soul is important. Alicia literally begged Theo to not kill her husband but Gabriel did not show love towards her wife. He came forward to save himself. These words created a wound in the heart of Alicia and threw back the entire trauma in one incident. It hit Alicia so hard and felt numb.

The dead don't talk (Michaelides, 325)

I saw it now. I would never be safe. Never be loved. All my hopes, dashed - all my dreams, shattered - leaving nothing, nothing. That's what Gabriel did to me. (Michaelides, 326)

The pain of the sufferings inside Alicia which equals death. After this, she killed her husband. It indicates that trauma has a dual paradox: survivors desire to understand their past but cannot, and traumatic narratives balance between death and survival.

Alcestis is the heroine of a Greek myth. A love story of the saddest kind. Alcestis willingly sacrifices her life for her husband, Admetus, dying in his place when no one else will. An unsettling myth of self-sacrifice, it was unclear how it related to Alicia's situation. (Michaelides,11)

The above lines are explained about Alicia's painting. A self-portrait, still she is standing with a completely blank canvas and an expression. Finally, she named it, Alcestis. But why does she name her portrait Alcestis? She doesn't die like Alcestis, only Alicia's husband dies but she's still alive. Here, Alicia wants to say that her father Vernon kills her with his words and her husband Gabriel kills her with his lies. Both of them are betrayed just like Alcestis did and she is betrayed by the people who are supposed to hold her. She chooses silence more than words. So, she chooses herself to save. Alicia titles her portrait as Alcestis because she wants to speak with her thoughts.

She wants to communicate with someone who can see through her. Both, Alicia and Alcestis are victims who suffer from their beloved one. There is no medicine to cure their wounds. Whenever Alicia paints, she feels better and she speaks with her actions and her silence. After a long period, she gave a communication through the art. It deals with the gap between the trauma that happened and the response from the individual who suffers from trauma.

### **Summation**

The summation gives that the trauma gives a pain which equals death with revolves around plenty of fragmented sufferings, which cannot be experienced at the time of occurrence as Cathy said. This can also get altered through Art. The Silent Patient ends with a thought -provoking climax. Readers can get the mystery behind the death of Gabriel but the writer did not give any end. The readers can interpret the story from various angles. One of the interpretations is that Alicia spoke with her art about her trauma, so she could be taken to an art therapy for her mental wellness. Because it gives the survivor to move on with their actual life.

### **References**

1. Michaelides, Alex. The Silent Patient, Typeset at The Spartan Press, 2019
2. Caruth, Cathy. Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996
3. Trauma Studies Explained by Kalyani Vallath. 26 Nov. 2019, [theoryclasses.blogspot.com/2019/11/trauma-studies-explained-by-kalyani.html?m=1](http://theoryclasses.blogspot.com/2019/11/trauma-studies-explained-by-kalyani.html?m=1)
4. Wikipedia contributors. “Art Therapy.” Wikipedia, 7 Feb. 2025, [en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Art\\_therapy](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Art_therapy)
5. “Cathy Malchiodi.” Wikipedia, 23 July 2023, [en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cathy\\_Malchiodi](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cathy_Malchiodi)