

# Alicia Berenson's Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in Alex Michaelides' *The Silent Patient*

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**Abstract:** This study examines the psychiatric symptoms called Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) experienced by Alicia Berenson in *The Silent Patient* by Alex Michaelides. This study aims to describe the symptoms and causes of Alicia Berenson who experienced Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). In this study, the writer applies a theory of the psychology of literature by Wellek and Warren and the theory of PTSD by Carlson & Ruzek. This study uses a psychological approach. The method used is descriptive qualitative. There are several *PTSD* symptoms found in Alicia's characters i.e. reliving trauma through flashbacks, negative self-view, aggressive behavior toward oneself or others, impulsive behavior, social isolation, emotional regulation, and difficult with relationship. The causes of Alicia's PTSD are car accident at the young age, verbal abuse, sexual abuse, child abuse and betrayed by her husband.

**Keywords:** *complex PTSD, psychology of literature*

## INTRODUCTION

Literary works are human expressions in the form of experiences, ideas, and feelings. Expressed with language as a tool and then poured into the form of writing. According to Wellek and Warren (1977: 3,14) in *The Theory of Literature*, literature is a creative activity, a work of art, created by the author using language as a medium for his creativity.

Each author will go through a different creative process. Requires encouragement to bring up ideas from within the author. These emerging ideas will later become literary works such as poetry, short stories, novels, and manuscripts drama. The creative process includes all stages, starting with the subconscious impulse that works up to the last revision made by the author (Wellek and Warren, 1977: 25).

Like Alex Michaelides, in his literary work *The Silent Patient*. In the process of creating *The Silent Patient*, Michaelides is inspired by a love story from Greek mythology alcleitis which is eventually poured into the story in *The Silent Patient* in a modern version. Make the writer interest in the review and use it as study material in this study.

*The Silent Patient* is a psychological thriller novel that tells stories of murder. Alicia Berenson is a painter who has repeatedly experienced traumatic events over a long period of time. Childhood trauma Alicia has been feeling since she was ten. As a result of what her family did, Alicia is traumatized and has a psychological disorder called PTSD, which ultimately forced her to undergo treatment at The Grove, a psychiatric hospital in North London.

The scope of this study is symptoms and causes of PTSD in Alex Michaelides' *The Silent Patient*. The limitation of this study is to describe the symptoms and the causes of PTSD that experienced by Alicia Berenson

## Review of Related Literature

### 1. Psychology and Literature

Literature is the expression of what is being watched by people in daily life, and what is contemplated and felt about the interesting aspect of life (Hudson, 1955: 10). Psychology helps to clarify some literary problems, and literature presents insights into psychology.

The psychologist's manner of conceiving and representing the personality is supported by the intuitive representations made by novelists, dramatists, and other creative writers. (Cohen, 1971: 348, 351). Psychology explains and describes the basic thing that helps humans live. (Guerin, 1979:12).

According to Wellek and Warren (1977: 81) Psychology of literature has four meanings. There are:

1. Psychology of the author. The presence of the psychological interpretation of the biographies of the author. Because each author has his own signature in creating his literary work.
2. The study of the creative process. The process of the author creating a work of literature. Usually, involve the stages that all creative process goes through respecting the particular variations in the style of each author.
3. The study of the types and psychological laws applied to literary works. A study of the research where literary works are

studied with the laws of psychology.

4. The study of the impact of literature on the readers. The study focused on the reader. Where literature can affect the psychological side of the reader.

From the four meanings above psychology of literature, the researcher will use the study of the types and psychological laws applied to literary works. The third selection of the third is because it is related to the study to be studied which is *The Silent Patient*.

## 2. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

According to Carlson and Ruzek (2013) in *Effect of Traumatic Experiences*, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is a specific mental disorder that arises due to a traumatic event that is often experienced by someone. Someone who often experiences traumatic events will show several symptoms. The symptoms that appear depend on the number of previous traumatic experiences.

The sufferers who have gone through traumatic experiences will generally remember their traumatic experiences. The traumatic events that they have experienced mentally, emotionally, and physically. The sufferers will continue to remember, the images of traumatic events that have occurred, feel anxious or uneasy, and physically feel the trauma sensations they experienced again. They feel they are in danger, experience feelings of panic, want to run away from past events, easy to get angry, and want to attack others.

Symptoms that arise due to traumatic events make it difficult for sufferers to live their lives. PTSD sufferers tend not to know how to survive the trauma. They often find it difficult to understand what is really happening to them. They tend to stay away from friends and family who do not seem to understand. They

do not know what to do to get well. The following are some of the symptoms of PTSD (Carlson and Ruzek, 2013).

## 3. Symptoms of PTSD

They find it difficult to sleep and concentrate because they are always anxious and restless. Patients usually cannot control these symptoms or stop them (Carlson and Ruzek, 2013).

- a) Reliving the trauma through flashbacks, this symptom can arise when sometimes see, feel, or smell something that will remind you of the events that make the sufferer afraid, and sad.
- b) Negative self-view, is a problem that can arise because a person feels not a good person, unable to positively assess himself. This is because due to the trauma experienced, a person will feel bad, meaningless, stupid, unskilled, evil, and others.
- c) Aggressive behavior towards self or others, is a problem that can occur as a result of the frustration of not being able to control the symptoms of complex PTSD. Therefore, the person tends to attack others or can hurt themselves.
- d) Impulsive behavior, is the behavior of a person who often performs an action without thinking about the consequences of what they did.
- e) Social Isolation is the problem that occurs when a person no longer believes in others, then they will create their own space for themselves that makes them isolated.
- f) Emotion regulation is a problem that usually arises because of the patient's inability to hold back

emotions, often feels offended, and easily feels angry.

- g) Difficulty with relationships is a condition in which the sufferer has difficulty establishing relationships, either with family or others.

## **METHOD**

This research includes qualitative research, to describe in that the researcher is interested in the process, meaning, and understanding gained through words or pictures (Creswell: 1994: 145). The method used is a descriptive method, which aims to describe clearly the object being discussed by collecting basic descriptive information needed to understand the object. The object that used in the study is *The Silent Patient* by Alex Michaelides. The source data in this study is *The Silent Patient* by Alex Michaelides' published by Celadon Books in 2019. The main data is sentences through the character related to the study of complex PTSD in the novel. The supporting data is a reference psychology that includes complex PTSD as a tool to examine the symptoms of complex PTSD experienced by Alicia Berenson.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **1. Symptoms of PTSD**

#### **1.1 Reliving the Trauma Through Flashbacks**

Reliving the Trauma Through Flashbacks is a symptom of PTSD that can arise when someone sometimes sees, feels, or smells something that will remind them of the traumatic events. This symptom can allow the sufferer to feel afraid and sad. As in the following quote:

“Somewhere, in the back of my mind, was a vague feeling of familiarity, a nagging sense of

déjà vu. I couldn't quite place. And then the memory came back to me: I saw myself when very young, sitting under the branches of the willow tree in our garden in Cambridge. I'd spend hours hiding there. I may not have been a happy child”  
(Michaelides, 2019:158).

The quote is taken from Alicia's diary, written on the twenty-sixth of July on Alicia's birthday. When Alicia celebrates her birthday with her husband. She feels good but the fun does not last long as she recalls her dark childhood. Patients who experience traumatic events often experience excessive fear. Memories of traumatic events in the past make Alicia recall the trauma that she experienced both physical and verbal then make Alicia feel uncomfortable, or even sick. Therefore, Alicia tends to avoid memories or events from the events that cause her trauma. PTSD is a mental disorder that specifically arises due to traumatic experiences (Carlson and Ruzek:2013).

#### **1.2 Negative Self-View**

A Negative Self-View is a symptom that makes a person feel like they are not good people and cannot judge themselves positively. This is due to the trauma experience, a person will feel bad, meaningless, stupid, unskilled, and others. Sufferers constantly blame themselves when they cannot do something right. This symptom also appears in Alicia's behavior, as in the following quote:

“I don't want to admit the truth to myself-that a huge part of my life

is missing. That I've denied I want children, pretending I have no interest in them, and that all I care about is my art. And it's not true. It's just an excuse – the truth is I'm scared to have kids. I am not be trusted with them” (Michaelides, 2019:150).

As in the quote above, a Negative Self-View symptom can make sufferers feel unwanted or want something because they always see themselves as low. Alicia always feels that she is a woman who cannot have children. She never feel that she deserved to be a good mother to her future child. Alicia believes that she can be a murderer and tries to kill her child, like what Alicia's mother did to her when she is a child. The painful feeling can not be removed from Alicia's mind. Every day, she has to live with all the negative feelings.

### **1.3 Aggressive Behavior Towards Oneself or Others**

Aggressive Behavior is a behavioral act intended to harm oneself or others. This symptom can arise due to weakness or failure to achieve a goal. This symptom is also reflected in Alicia's behavior. as in the following quote:

“Alicia has dragged off me, releasing her choke hold—and I gasped for breath. She writhed and kicked and fought like a creature possessed. She didn't seem human, more like a wild animal; something

monstrous”(Michaelides, 2019:98,99).

From the quote above is taken, when Alicia already at The Groove. Alicia is thirty-nine years old at the time. She had been at The Groove since she is thirty-three. Alicia can no longer distinguish between safe and insecure because she is constantly concerned and perplexed. Memories of the past always haunted Alicia, as if the traumatic events had never disappeared from her life.

The deep wounds make Alicia's inner state unstable because her psychological condition is abnormal. Alicia's inner side had been damaged her soul have long been restless as a result of traumatic experiences in her past. Make her aggressive, wild, and vicious because she feels the people around her are not friendly.

### **1.4 Impulsive Behavior**

Impulsive Behavior is a symptom when a person performs an action without thinking about the consequences of what is done. This symptom is also seen in Alicia's behavior, as in the following quote:

“When she was first admitted, Alicia slashed her wrists twice and self-harmed with whatever she could get her hands on. She was kept on two-on-one observation for the first six months—meaning two nurses watched over her at all times—which was eventually relaxed to one-on-one” (Michaelides, 2019:55).

The quote is taken while Alicia is at the Grove. Alicia's first arrival is tinged with a suicide scene. Alicia cut her arm with any object she could get. Alicia feels that she does not need help; she prefers death as the answer to the pain she is experiencing. The pain of her husband and the pain of her family.

### **1.5 Social Isolation**

Social Isolation symptoms can arise when a person no longer has trust in others, so he or she will create their own world or space for themselves, which makes them isolated. The social impacts experienced by the sufferers include limiting and withdrawing from social relationships, avoiding existing social relations, increasing conflict in dealing with others, and decreasing involvement in the community environment. This symptom also appears in Alicia's behavior. As in the following quote:

“She refuses to visit me in my office, so I went to see her room. During the sessions, she simply sat on her bed and stared out of the window. She refuses to speak, of course. She refused to even look at me” (Michaelides, 2019:47).

As in the quote above, Lazarus Diomedes—clinical director of the Grove. Says Alicia seems to want to be alone or even does not want to have contact with other people. The Grove parties regularly hold therapy sessions as one of the methods of healing for all their patients. But unfortunately, that method did not work for Alicia, instead of coming and seeing the therapist. Alicia prefers to stay in the room isolating herself from others.

### **1.6 Emotion Regulation**

Emotion Regulation is a symptom that makes the sufferer often feel, among others, the presence of mixed feelings such as anger, shame, sadness, shock, guilt, and helpless. This symptom also appears in Alicia's behavior, as in the following quote:

“Suddenly I caught sight of a homeless man, sitting by me on the pavement, staring at me. I felt a sudden sadness and revulsion. For some reason. I couldn't stop thinking about the homeless man. Apart from pity, there was another feeling, unnamable somehow—a kind of fear” (Michaelides, 2019:80).

From the quote above, Alicia is thirty-three years old. The injuries caused by her family make Alicia traumatize. Sometimes bad memories that she wants to forget would appear out of nowhere. Start when Alicia sees a homeless man sitting on the pavement not too far from her. A homeless man looks at Alicia his trouser is tied with thread, his skin is covered with wounds, and his face is covered with rashes. The look of a homeless man makes Alicia sad and she imagines what it must have been like to be homeless as a child. The memories that make Alicia remember her past.

### **1.7 Difficulty with Relationships**

People with PTSD find it difficult to trust others because they feel unable to

approach anyone. Where this problem also exists in Alicia's behavior, due to her childhood trauma and then repeat again. Makes Alicia difficult to build relationships with others. Alicia becomes more silent without wanting to express what she feels or what she is think. As in the following quote below:

“Alicia stood still as he spoke, to her. But she neither nodded nor shook her head nor gave any indication of having heard him” (Michaelides, 2019: 50).

Alicia looks like a silent patient who does not express herself and does not respond anything. Make anyone who wants to try to interact with her give up. Because we do not understand what Alicia really wants.

## **2. Causes of complex PTSD Experienced by Alicia Berenson in *The Silent Patient***

### **2.1 Car Accident at the Young Age**

The growth and development of a child are very dependent on the child's childhood story. Children who have finds memories of their childhood can help develop their character, memory, and emotions. Unfortunately, Alica does not get enough in her childhood. This can be seen in the following quote:

“In the file, Alicia's next of kin was listed as her aunt—Lydia Rose— who brought her up, following the death of Alicia's mother in a car accident. Alicia had also been in the car crash but survived. That trauma must have

affected the little girl profoundly” (Michaelides, 2019:57).

The traumatic events that attack a person suddenly often come from everyday experiences. The event can be in the aftermath of a disaster or a tragic and extraordinary event. Like Alicia, a survivor of a tragic accident that traumatizes her. Once a person has experienced trauma, it may be difficult for him or her to believe that their life can ever be the same again as before the event or event occurred.

### **2.2 Sexual Abuse**

Another cause of Alicia's PTSD is sexual abuse by her brother-in-law—Max Berenson. This certainly makes Alicia's psychological condition more depressing. As in the quote below:

“Max grabbed my arm hard and pulled me toward him. I lost my balance and fell onto him. He raised his fist and I thought he was going to punch me. Before I could react, he kissed me. I tried to pull away but he wouldn't let me. I felt his rough lips all over mine, and his tongue pushing its way into my mouth. Instinct took over. I bit his tongue as hard as I could. Max cried out and shoved me away” (Michaelides, 2019:155).

The quote comes from Alicia's diary. Max Berenson is Gabriel's older brother, and Gabriel gives high respect to him. The treatment that Max did for Alicia is not

commendable. The treatment makes Alicia's psychological condition depressed. Alicia wants to tell what really happens to Gabriel about the harassment by Max but this actually makes Alicia feel afraid. Alicia feels that reporting the harassment to Gabriel would make Gabriel sad and disappointed with what Max has done to her.

### 2.3 Verbal Abuse

Verbal abuse is abuse that is done verbally or abuse that does not involve physical. But it needs to be realized that the impact that occurs due to verbal abuse is more dangerous because this will have an impact on the mind of someone who experiences it. In Alicia's childhood, she often got verbal abuse from her family. This makes Alicia's soul hurt, a wound that will be remembered for the rest of her life. The pain will remain in her heart and leave a deep trauma. As in the following quote:

“Why did she have to die? Why did it have to be her? Why didn't Alicia die instead?” (Michaelides, 2019:314).

“Just as Admetus had physically condemned Alcestis to die, so had Vernon Rose psychically condemned his daughter to death. Admetus must have loved Alcestis, on some level, but there was no love in Vernon Rose, just hate. He had committed psychic infanticide—and Alicia knew it. ‘He killed me,’ she said. ‘Dad just killed me’ (Michaelides, 2019:315).

From the quote above, we can see that Vernon prefers to lose Alicia over his wife. Parents who often use verbal abuse often do not realize what they do to their children. Parents assume that what they do is a form of behavior that needs to be so their child is disciplined. This is wrong, Vernon is a father who has supposed to be a protector of Alicia. But instead of being a protector Vernon wants his daughter to die. The fact that Alicia is still alive from the car accident. Make Vernon angry and regretful, according to him Alicia has to die, not his wife. But in fact, Vernon has already killed Alicia not Alicia's body but Alicia's soul.

### 2.4 Child Abuse

Alicia does not know what affection is because her childhood is full of bad memories. She does not remember when she feels affection because her days always fill with heartbreaking stories. In her memory, only her father loves his wife more than his child. As in the following quote:

“He was a mean bastard. The only person he ever cared about was auntie Eva”

“Uncle Vernon wasn't a good man, you see. No, not at all.

Vernon was going on about how much he loved Eva – how he couldn't live without her. ‘My girl,’ he kept saying, ‘my poor girl, my Eva... Why did she have to die?’ (Michaelides, 2019:314).

The quote comes from Paul Rose—Alicia's cousin who lives with her as a child. That proves that Alicia's presence is



unwanted by anyone. Get verbal abuse, and feel unwanted by your own parents. That words make Alicia's soul scream, struggling with her family who is expected to give her happiness. But the happiness has goes away from her. Alicia feels alone, her soul is wound, and no one cares about her. The wound continues to swell, making her mental condition threaten.

### **2.5 Betrayed by Husband**

Cheating is behavior that violates relationship commitments, which ultimately hurts the trust that is built in a romantic relationship. Disappointed and angry as a result of being cheated on can have an impact that can make the sufferer feel depressed, experience trust issues, lack of confidence, low self-esteem, blame themselves, feel helpless, experience anxiety, and experience PTSD. Alicia experiences it, as in the following quote;

“You see, Alicia? I knew Gabriel was a coward— fucking my wife behind my back. He destroyed the only happiness I've ever had” (Michaelides, 2019:377).

From the quote above, Theo tells Alicia that Gabriel has been having an affair with his wife. The affair had been going on for quite a while. Gabriel's affair makes Alicia feel that she is a bad woman. For the second time, Alicia feels abandoned, by her father who loves her mother more, and now her beloved husband who is having an affair with Theo's wife. The affair commit by Gabriel is one of the causes Alicia experience of PTSD.

## **CONCLUSION**

Through the analysis of *The Silent Patient* can conclude that; this novel tells the story of Alicia Berenson's experience complex PTSD. Can be known from the story of Alicia Berenson's past, and the traumatic experienced feels by Alicia. Experience traumatic childhood, tragic accidents, and verbal abuse committed by her family members. Because of these traumatic experiences, Alicia's psychological condition is damaged, and identify as having complex PTSD.

Some of the symptoms of PTSD are relieving the trauma through flashbacks shown in Alicia's behavior, who hates the color yellow because it reminds her of the car accident she and her mother had, negative self-view shown in the behavior of Alicia, who thinks that she does not deserve to be a good mother for her child, aggressive behavior toward oneself or others demonstrated in Alicia's behavior that aggressively attacks anyone who bothers her, impulsive behavior shown in Alicia's behavior, which immediately reacted by committing suicide without thinking about the consequences she would receive, social isolation shown in Alicia's behavior who always likes to be alone and does not want to join or interact with other patients while at the Grove, emotional regulation shown in the behavior of Alicia who experienced mood swings quickly when she sees something sad, and difficulty with relationships shown in Alicia's behavior which is difficult to communicate, making it difficult for someone to establish a relationship with her.

The symptoms of complex PTSD are not only seen when Alicia is at The Grove. These symptoms are already noticeable when Alicia is young. The symptoms experienced by

Alicia are the result of traumatic events that occur continuously over a long period of time. Several causes that make Alicia experience PTSD are a car accident at a young age, verbal abuse by her family members, sexual abuse by her brother-in-law, child abuse by her father who always blames Alicia for his wife's death, and betrayal by her husband. According to the conclusions of the silent patient research, it can be concluded that Alicia experienced PTSD, which later became complex PTSD due to repeated verbal abuse over a long period of time.

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